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Lethe's Looking-Glass

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She's crying again and I hate her for it. "You're stronger than this," I hiss at my red-eyed twin. She replies with tears. Silently cursing her, I press my body against the counter, leaning down so my forehead rests against the mirror. Shutting my eyes dissolves her face into nothing. I wish I could shut my mind as easily and obliterate her forever.

"Wow, someone forgot to take their Prozac this morning," my sarcastic inner critic comments in response. I am about to tell this voice where to put its sentiments when the mirror vanishes and I find myself falling through ink. It fills my eyes, my nose, my throat. I'm drowning in a sea of invisible sand. The shock of finding myself hurling though the dark innards of my mirror plus the absence of oxygen quickly equals a lack of consciousness.

I wake in a fog, the variety that materializes on cold December days just before sunrise. Mornings like this always make me wish I could be a squirrel because then I would be in deep hibernation until spring instead of dragging my lead self out of a warm bed to wait for a bus in the cold depression of clouds. Lucky squirrels.

"Stop being jealous of small-brained, short-lived mammals and figure out where you are," I silently admonish myself. I glance down and see only gravel. My peripheral vision vaguely traces the dark silhouettes of withered trees. I expect to hear a crow or at least a seagull, but the barren landscape seems to have vanquished even these ubiquitous scavengers. The fog quickly penetrates my wonderfully absorbent cotton sweatshirt. The clammy, clingingeness of the damp shirt is made even more enjoyable by the almost arctic climate. It is almost a relief to see a figure moving towards me through the fog.

"Where the hell am I?" I shout as soon as she is within conversational distance. It's not much of a greeting, but gray icy mist doesn't exactly fill my being with joy. Her gray eyes flicker with something that vaguely resembles amusement.
"You must see this place to know what it is." A sibylline answer to my curse flavored inquiry. Just what I was looking for.

She is disturbingly calm and anemic. She could obviously use a blood transfusion or at least more leafy, green vegetables in her diet. She is a portrait that's been through the washing machine a few too many times. All her colors have been leached away, leaving various concentrations of pale ash to form her eyes, face and almost white blond hair. A dark gray cloak envelops her thin form, obscuring the rest of her.

"Well, I see it's a fog shrouded wasteland apparently devoid of life which I reached by falling through a mirror. Based on these observations I can only conclude that I've spent far too much time watching anime and been turned into a character in an allegory as punishment. I'm not saying I don't deserve this, but if the author of this bizarre piece could get to the point before I die of either hypothermia or boredom I would really appreciate it."

"Sarcasm isn't going to help you find your way. I suggest you pay more attention to your surroundings." She gestures to her right.

My eyes instinctively follow this helpful hint and its accompanying hand sign. In response, the fog oddly lifts to reveal a small pool of water. It is a perfect mirror of silver gray. The mist should be thicker around the water, not thinner, I think. Maybe that crack about being in an allegory was closer to the truth than I thought. Clearly, I am in a place where trivia such as logic and scientific laws no longer apply.

"What is this place?"

The too high voice responds, "Lethe."

Of course, Lethe. I always knew I was headed for the Greek underworld.

"Nice to meet you. Persephone, queen of the dead I presume? A little far from Hades, aren't we?" My attempt at humor does not go over well.

"My name is Mara, actually." She seems slightly offended.

Of all the Greek myths I could have stumbled into I had to pick this one. Lethe, the spring where the dead drink to forget their previous lives. But where is the three-headed dog? Crap, I always knew my fascination with Greek mythology would be my downfall. That nonsensical thought makes as much sense as this place. Only a few conclusions are possible, either I am dead and the Greeks were right all along, or I'm dreaming, or I've finally lost it. I lean towards the latter of these three options.

Mara's cold laugh breaks through my thoughts. "The answer is none of the above. You are here because you issued an invitation and I graciously accepted. Wish hard enough for forgetfulness and it's not too hard to find this place."

"Well thanks, but I think this place is disorienting enough without deleting all my memories. This doesn't strike me as a good place to be helpless in."

"You're already helpless; there is no escaping once you come here. Isn't this what you've wished for? To forget?"

"No. Why would I want to forget who I am?"

That hideous laugh again. She squats down and runs her skeletal hand over the water; this creates a small channel for a moment, then swirling ripples.

"Look and remember why you wish to forget."

More like look if you ever want this story to end. Whatever, there isn't anything else to do. I lean over and stare into the gray. The ripples coalesce into a mirror; I see my face first and then bits of my life dance across its surface.

I sit in my living room on an old brown couch and listen to the chattering engine of my Dad's pickup. In the past, my brother and I would scream, "Dad's home," and rush to the garage to welcome him. But this time he is departing, not arriving; he won't ever come home again. I can still hear the hollow thunk and the rustle of the brown paper bag as he packed up his hand lotion and shaving cream. I do not cry. It isn't worth crying over, they said. Nothing is really changing because no one is really leaving. It's selfish to cry over a non-event. But I still hear the garage door open and close and the truck pulling away.

Ripples, a new mirror, scene two.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING, SIR!?"

My step-dad screams like an ancient Roman in the Coliseum; he wants blood. He throws my brother against the wall, pins him there and keeps yelling. My brother is fear personified. His face
is wrinkled and taut with it. His blue eyes are wide and his body ridged with it. He clasps his hands together and draws himself in for protection like a turtle without a shell. Every molecule of him asks, “What did I do?” He tries to tuck his face away from the shouts but that just makes my step-dad scream louder, push harder. His striped shirt tears, unable to support him and the scene plays on. I stand by, gorgonized into a solitary audience.

Ripples again, a new mirror, scene three.

My step-dad grips my leg so I can’t get away. He tickles the bottoms of my feet. I’m in agony in seconds. My foot cramps into knots and burns. I instinctively try to kick myself free from this hot iron; I am not in control of my body. Even if I was, what chance does an eleven year old girl have against a fifty year old man twice her weight? I beg him to stop. My eyes tear, I can barely breathe for the fire in my feet. His hand moves up my leg.

Ripples, a new mirror, scene four.

“Stop it!” I scream. Unable to bear the cataract of memories from eight to sixteen pouring into my mind after a just a few water projected home movies, I seize a handful of Lethe’s gravel and squeeze it with all my might. The sharp rocks dig into my skin, binding me to the present reality. Pain abolishes the innumerable scenes for one precious moment.

“I’m sorry I had to do that.” Pity, disgust and amusement dance in her voice.

Like hell she is. So sorry to exploit me, just like all of them. I fling the handful of gravel at her. She takes it all in the face and laughs.

“Oh no, my darling; it’s not that easy.” A thin trickle of blood runs down her face. She catches the drops on her tongue. But the cut is on my cheek and it’s my mouth that tastes like metal.

“We are one, you and I.”
I shake my head.
Her voice is softer now.

“I’m sorry, but it’s true. They all fight at first, but in the end I always win. You see, I can not live without consuming something alive and I must survive.” She contorts her ashen face into a hungry caricature of a smile.

“Just drink and you won’t feel a thing when I devour you,” she promises soothingly, like a mother humming a lullaby. “You’ll forget and then you will cease to be. Isn’t that what you want anyway? You’ve never had the strength to endure this; you’ve just pretended all these years. It can all end now, no more nightmares, no more memories, no more false facades of smiles while you scream inside. I’ll see to it that you don’t suffer anymore.”

Lethargy overtakes me. I’m so tired of fighting the Hydra of memory, of yelling at the girl in the mirror and screaming at the sarcastic critic in my head. Tired of the cheerful receptionist persona I create to hide from the world. I’m almost nothing; why not take this final step and blot out my worthless existence? What a relief to succumb at last, to let all the demons rush in and tear me to pieces. I’m so numb by now that it feels warm.

A sudden blast of wind cuts through the numbness and fog, it is so piercingly cold I feel naked; a shudder goes through me and I spill the water with a groan. As the wind caresses my hair, I feel a sudden burst of life fill me.

A silent whisper, soft as an embrace and strong as diamond, “Daughter, live!”

“No!” I stare into her lifeless eyes and defy her. “No.”

I am terrified because someone wants me to live. Terrified and comforted. Neither emotion makes sense. Drowning in a pool of memory, I have been thrust up from the bottom long enough to snatch a mouthful of air; my escape is suddenly clear. Somehow, I know that I must embrace Mara; it’s the only thing that can save us both.

I wrap my arms around her and find myself in a skeleton’s grip. Screams fill my ears, mine and hers as we merge into one. There is a horrible crack and she becomes a thousand shards of mirror which rush into me. I spit blood onto the gravel. I try to breathe but my throat has been transmuted into a swollen river of liquid iron. My heart pulsates erratically; life is gushing out of all the holes gouged into me. There are too many wounds. I’m caught in the undertow of a red ocean which
quickly deepens to black.

I awake; someone is cradling me on a hillside surrounded by grass bright with its youth. The air smells of buds and water. The dawn horizon is a bash where lavender and rose salsa with tangerine and gold; these brash publicists of the sun mingle with the more restrained navy profiles of mountains and the deep emerald outlines of evergreens. The river below mirrors all the color-filled steps of their dance. Mara and Lethe have vanished though my heart is still on adrenaline’s treadmill for a few breathless seconds. It’s as if I have stepped from a pitch black room into full sunlight; the vivid shock of spring and sunrise forces my overwhelmed eyes to close. I drift towards sleep.

“Drink.” The voice of the wind speaks again.

A cup is pressed to my lips; I take a small sip and recoil from the bitter taste of red wine. I attempt something like a shake of my head which must look comical given the state I’m in.

“Drink; you need this,” the voice urges.

I don’t have the strength to fight. I sip slowly. The bitter tang of the wine fades as its warmth fills me. Still nestled in his arms I am almost completely limp.

He hands me bread.

“Eat.”

I sit up enough to tear off a piece. If I focus on the brown of the bread I can bear to keep my eyes open. A gnawing hunger seasons the food. I taste every grain of salt and the nutty earthiness of every kernel of wheat. At some point, I must see him since he is so close. But later, I will not be able to describe him. All that exists in my memory is a vague impression of tan skin and a beauty that makes all my words seem like the ramblings of a monkey with a broken pencil trying to explain physics.

“Who are you?” I ask.

I feel him smile. “I will be telling you all your life. You are mine now, not Mara’s.”

“Why did all this happen?”

His embrace tightens slightly. “The time for that answer has not yet come.”

None of this makes any sense at all. I have tumbled through a mirror, wound up in Hades with a vampire, died in a hail of glass shards and been reborn in a spring wilderness. All I know for sure is that I live and I am held. This is strangely comforting.

“So I have to go back then?”

“Yes.”

“Please come with me?”

“I never left and I never will.”

I lean against him. As the warmth and light of the sunrise fill me, I curl up in its rays like a cat and sleep.

I wake up in my room with a start and give a sharp gasp as a jagged edge nicks my palm. I jolt into a sitting position and gaze down. A small fragment of broken mirror terminates with a drop of my blood; my breath tastes of bread and wine.