

Clarity

I sat alone in the expanse of field, the breeze sifting through my pale curls. I gathered my hair up in one hand and held it at the nape of my neck, enjoying the scent of fresh grass and fall leaves wafting into my nose. A river flowed lazily a few feet away, and wildflowers wavered in the soft wind. Releasing my hair, I rose and walked along the stream.

It wasn't real, this place. It was something far back in my own brain, something that could only be accessed through my mind. I knew that, at least after it was over. Despite this, and although I'd been to the same place countless times, I continued to explore my surroundings. I dipped my hand down into the water; it was cool to the touch.

Everything always seemed too real to be imaginary. I could see the trees swaying, hear the slow ripple of water. A cricket sang a few feet away as I continued to follow the curve of the river, which eventually branched out into a small pond. Cautiously, I submerged my toes into the water, feeling the sodden sand beneath them.

"You shouldn't do that."

I flinched, glancing quickly behind myself at a tall, lanky frame and then turning back to the pond. "Why not?"

"Fish might bite your toes off," he replied, and I knew he was joking.

I turned to fully face the figure now. He was a boy of about nineteen, young-looking but towering over my small physique. His eyes were brown, so dark that they were practically black, and I shrunk back in surprise.

He gave a slight smile. "Sorry if I scared you." His face was placid, gentle, and despite how malicious his eyes had seemed just a moment ago, they were kind now. I turned to walk along the bank of the pond, and he followed behind. "What's your name?"

"Salem," I told him, glancing backward. "What's yours?"

He shook his head, smiling again. He trailed along with me for a couple of minutes in silence, before raising another question. "What are you doing here?"

"Seeking solitude," I replied honestly. "It's empty here."

"It is, isn't it?" He gazed out over the water. "But it's quiet. Peaceful."

"Yeah." We stood together silently for a few seconds. "I've never seen you here before."

"I don't come often." He picked up a flat rock, skipping it across the pond. "Only sometimes when everyone's bugging me."

"I come here a lot," I replied, tossing a stone as well. "A few times a week, actually. I don't plan it."

Nodding, he said, "I know," and then looked down at me from the corner of his eye. "You don't hear voices, do you?"

"No, why?"

"Because I do. That's why *I'm* here, I guess, to get away from the demands in my head."

I glanced up at him. "Is it annoying, hearing voices?"

"Sometimes," he responded. "It's like my conscience has split into five different people yelling at me all at once." He began to follow the border of the pond again. "Usually it's okay, though. They're like naggy siblings. Hey, watch this." He stalked the edge of the water for a moment before plunging his hand in, pulling out a writhing fish.

"How'd you do that?"

He released the fish back into the water. "Luck, mostly. Hit and miss. I thought I was going to get a handful of water."

I grinned at him. "But you didn't."

"I would any other time," he replied. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"What happened to your arm?"

I scrutinized the fading bruise on my bicep with a grimace. "My ex-boyfriend wasn't exactly the nicest person."

"Is that why you're here?"

"I guess so, yeah."

"Do you hate him for what he did to you?"

I pondered that for a moment before replying with, "No."

"No?" The boy seemed surprised.

"No, I pity him."

"Because what he did was weak," he finished for me.

I nodded, my eyes settling on the river. "It gave me a new take on life. Trivial things don't bother me anymore. I see things clearly."

"It gave you clarity," he offered.

"Yeah. And this place gives me clarity, too. But," I gazed down at our reflections in the water, "I wish I hadn't needed disfigurement to see the world transparently." The freckles across my nose didn't distract from the scar on my jawline, or from the scabbed gash next to my right ear. The nameless boy stared over at me.

"You're beautiful, you know," he said. "Even with all of those marks."

"I'm a wreck." He glanced at me skeptically. "So are you, but only inside your head."

He shrugged. "Different kinds of a mess."

"Damaged goods," I offered.

He grinned. "Sure."

The water surged suddenly in front of us, and the grass at our feet rippled in unison. The boy glanced at me and raised an eyebrow, a grim look passing over his face. He must have known what that meant.

Frowning, I said, "I think I have to go."

"I know," he replied, taking a step back. "Maybe I'll come by here more often."

"I hope so," I said, and he gave me a reassuring smile. I was about to say goodbye when the short grass and winding river began to fade from sight and sound, and I vaguely realized that he'd never divulged his name.

I'll ask next time, I told myself as my vision vanished. There were sounds again, but no longer the calming flow of the river. I heard the bubbling of an aquarium, the scratching of pen on paper, the rhythmic whirring of central heating. I could feel the stiff recliner under my back, and the flat pillow behind my head. There were boots on my feet.

My sight returned slowly, and when I came to, my therapist was sitting beside me, tapping her nails to her notebook. She gave me a small smile.

"How was your dream?"

"The same as always," I lied. I wanted to keep the boy a secret for a while. Therapists didn't need to know *everything* that occurred in your head, right?

“I figured.” She sighed in defeat. “Oh, well, we’ll try again next time. There has to be something in your subconscious other than water and fields.”

I smiled. “Sure.”

She patted my arm as we both stood, and opened the door to her office. “Bye, Salem, I’ll see you in a few days.” I nodded in response.

Stepping through the threshold, I looked out the window. Snow was drifting down in small white tufts and I pulled my coat tighter around my torso. When I looked forward again, I noticed a boy sitting in the waiting room, head bowed. He appeared to be sleeping until the secretary’s phone rang. Jolting forward slightly, his face rose, meeting mine. He had a kind mouth, strong chin, ebony hair that settled just over thick eyebrows. And his eyes were brown, so dark that they were practically black.

By Allyson Osborne