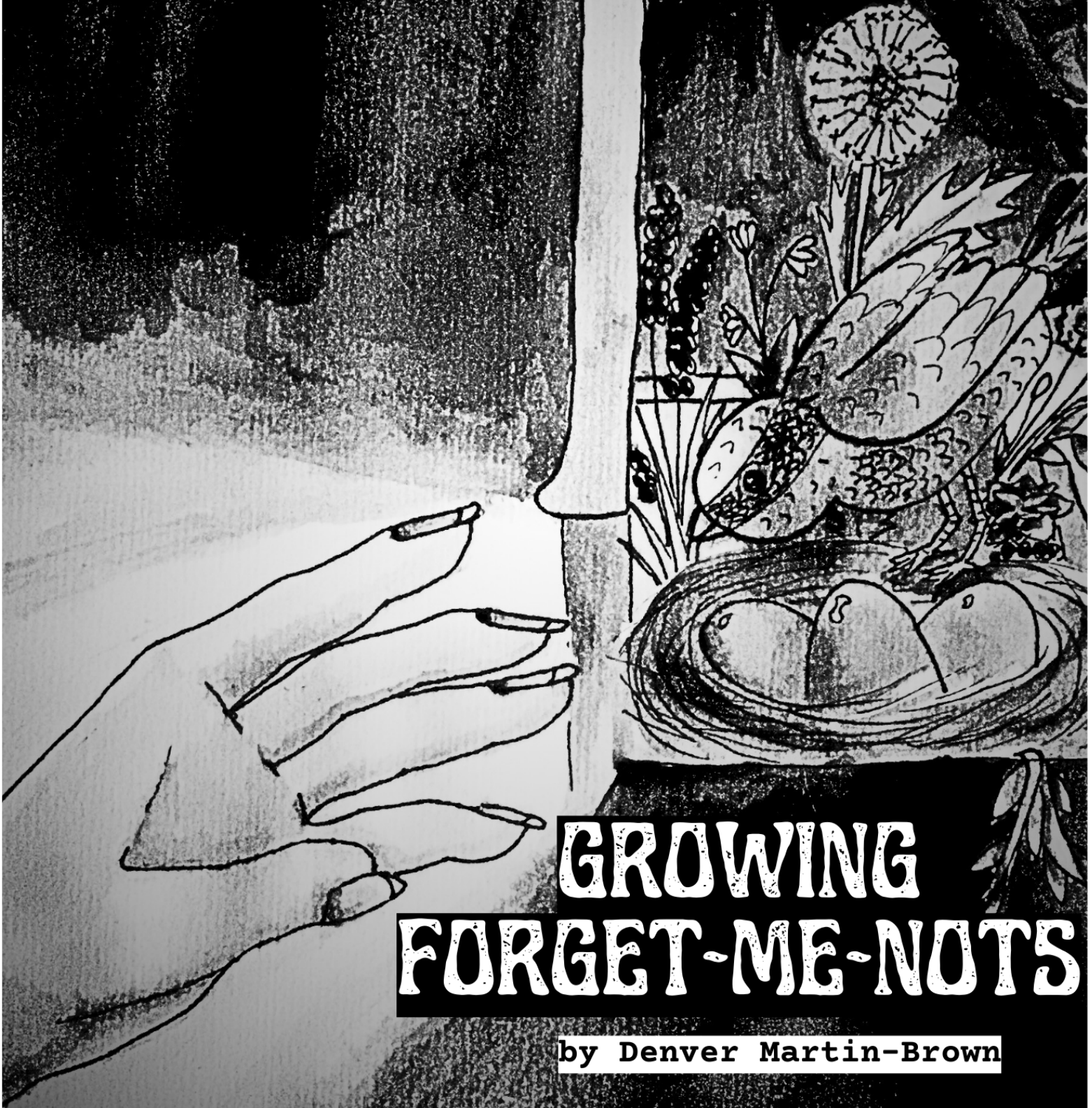




#3 OF 5

ABSURD FANTASY



GROWING FORGET-ME-NOTS

by Denver Martin-Brown

WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?

i am creating. for it is what i was born to do.

WHY DO YOU CONTINUE THIS VENTURE, OLD FRIEND?
YOU KNOW HOW THIS WILL END. ONE DAY, THIS QUAIN'T REALM
YOU'VE BUILT WILL BE CONSUMED WITHIN ME.
THERE IS NO ESCAPE.

i have a finite amount of time, yes, but that does not mean what i do is
devoid of meaning. the building of this universe, these universes, is the
meaning itself.

AH, YOU SAID THE KEY WORD. FINITE.
REMEMBER THAT YOU DESIGNED THE GAME THIS WAY.
YOU HAD THE OPPORTUNITY LONG AGO TO STOP ME.
YET YOU DIDN'T.
I HAVE A THEORY AS TO WHY.
YOU KNOW I AM RIGHT.
THE VOID IS THE ONLY MEANING.

and may i ask whatever it is that you bring to the proceedings, brother?
war? famine? genocide? anger? fear? these things have no meaning.
they are chaotic, just as you are.
you have a random nature and it is my duty to seek meaning
in the meaninglessness that you have wrought.

I CANNOT HELP IT.
AS YOU SAID BEFORE,
IT IS WHAT I WAS BORN TO DO.
YOU SHOULD KNOW. WE WERE BORN TOGETHER.

and we shall die together. the first and the last, i suppose.

I SUPPOSE.
WHAT IS IT THAT YOU ARE CREATING ANYWAY?

i don't know.

something.

A B S U R D
FANTASY

GROWING FORGET-ME-NOTS

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I only saw what they let me see, and that wasn't much. My room was dim a lot of the time I was awake. I had a few toys to play with, and a bed to sleep in. It was pretty nice overall. I guess other people wouldn't think so, but I found ways to be happy.

The window in my room was jammed, or so I have come to understand. I could see slivers of brightness as I tried to sleep and silvery beams when I was awake. I could hear the sort of petering silence of the outside world, a world that was so alive but so absent. I could smell the air as the moisture levels rose and fell, careering the happenings of the surroundings to me, but most importantly I could feel the dirt and the leaves of the plants that just ever so slightly came into my reach.

The window wasn't on the ground, there was a box outside it. It was full of dirt and water and all different kinds of strange life. I remember the vibrance; the colors I saw for the first time in so many fragile, intricate shapes. I remember the small life; the things that would crawl and inch and ripple around the colors while I wondered how they could possibly find their way to where I could see them. I think my favorite was the creatures that flew through.

There were very tiny creatures that did, sure, but the bigger ones were what I really loved. They flew so strongly, but felt so soft. And they would build. They would build from what was left of the plants in the box and use them to hold what was most precious

to them. At first I thought they were toys, like little balls they left behind, and Jacob didn't help.

Few people in the compound were around my age, and seldom did they stay around long, but Jacob was there as long as I was. I think he was older than me, as far as I can guess. He was certainly bigger. He had a different approach to the box than me. While I relished in the life, enjoyed the glimpse into a different world, he saw it as his own little kingdom to rule over. He would smash the colorful balls, rip at the colorful fabric the plants create, and even crush the small creatures that traveled along them.

I always hated when he came into my room, almost as much as I hated being taken out of it. The adults didn't think much of my dislike for him. They liked competition amongst the children they kept, thinking it would make us stronger. This was the point of all of this after all, the darkness and challenge, so that one day we would be strong enough to aid the man we all worship. I was never told this man's name, or when he would come to see me, only that he would. They said I would be his new Lily, I think. From what I gathered, I would be something like a love to him. I just hope he's nice.

This all reminds me of one day. I was daydreaming about the man, trying to imagine what a man might look like, when I heard the many locks from my door start to clink and clank. Jacob burst in, slamming the door

behind him. He was carrying a small doll that one of our friends would always cling to.

“That’s Becky’s toy isn’t it?” I said, scrunching up in my bed. I liked Becky, she cried a lot, but when you got her calmed down, she was really good at playing pretend.

“They gave Becky to the dogs. She was too loud and they thought outsiders would come from her. I thought I would bring you this.” Jacob tossed me the doll. I caught it before the porcelain of it could smash on my floor. I felt the soft blue lace as the disappointment settled into my body. When was I going to get a friend that stayed with me?

“You know it’s your birthday tomorrow right?” His voice cut me from my thoughts.

“Is it? Seems like it hasn’t been enough time for that to happen again.” My voice trailed off. Birthdays were always such a mix of strange occurrences. There was always a sort of fun that came first. Getting dressed up in nice things, eating food that made me actually want to eat, sometimes I would even get new things to play with. Those were all the parts I really enjoyed, but then came the birthday rites.

The clothes that were made especially for that day were usually ruined after, always burned or bloodied. They would ask me to do things, things that were supposed to prepare me to be Lily. There was writing and chanting and things that needed to be hurt. I hated the mess, I hated the cries of animals who did not want to be a part of this, and most of all I hated the smell. The only thing that got me through the whole affair was the occasional pride the adults showed when I participated.

Many of the adults acted kind to me, fawning over me even. They would tell me how happy they were to see the next Lily growing so well. They treated me like I was

very fragile, so when I broke those assumptions to participate in the rites, it seemed like an act of divine intervention. In reality, it was the only time you let yourself feel angry.

I don’t know what my life would be outside these walls, but I knew there had to be something more than darkness and the occasional moment of candlelight, silence and deafening screams. Most days I survived by just surviving, knowing that those feelings would not actually help me in the long run, but on birthdays I let the anger boil to the surface for a moment. I let it out on whatever was given to me, gaining proud stares that gave me a moment of joy but days and days of sickness.

“You’re gonna be 16 right?” Jacob’s words snapped me back to my place in bed.

“Oh, uh, yeah I guess I am. Why?” I asked, as a sinister smile crept along his face in the extremely dim light. He started towards my bed, making me press my back closer to the wall.

“You know what happens to you when you turn 16 right?” he teased.

“I know I will have more rites to go through. Maybe I will have a dress that I could actually get to keep.” I chuckled awkwardly, hoping he would back off. He only edged closer.

“When you’re 16 you get to meet our Lord, and you get to become his little bride. You must be excited.”

I felt my cheeks flush at the thought. Tomorrow? Had that time already come? Would I finally get to meet this man who I was meant to spend eternity with? So many thoughts when rushing behind my eyes before a smack of a hand on my ankle stopped them. Jacob had a bruising grip on my leg.

“You know what being a Devil’s wife entails don’t you? Or any wife really.” He

gave my leg a yank, causing me to slide away from the wall towards him. I tried to pull back but he was too strong. "It means you have to let him touch you," he giggled.

"People touch me all the time. It's fine." I said back, confused by what he meant.

"This isn't gonna be like a handshake or a pat on the back. You're gonna have to do really nasty things." He yanked on my ankle again. "I should show you, so at least you won't mess it up for our Lord." He grabbed both my legs then, pulling me completely away from the wall so my head thunked on the bed. I propped myself up by the elbow, starting to try and kick at his face. "Well would you look at that, she does have some fight in her after all," he cackled

"That is enough, you two." The voice came from one of the adults, a woman I always called Mother Jade. She was standing in my doorway from seemingly nowhere glaring daggers at Jacob and I. "The sun is almost up, and tomorrow night is very important for Daisy, so she needs her rest. And I would expect two of the longest lived children in this house to know how important purity is to our dark lord." She sneered, making Jacob let go of my legs with a huff. He stormed out of my room and down the hall without stopping to address Mother Jade, something I assumed he would be punished for later.

"I'm sorry Mother. I couldn't stop him." I said, not wanting the illusion that I had been a part of his game.

"Well, nothing occurred, so there is no need to worry. Now rest dear Daisy, you will need all your strength for tomorrow's rites." Mother parted with those words, shutting the door behind her and readjusting the many locks. I remember staying up that night, pondering what it would be like to be 16, to be everything I was supposed to. I think if I

had known a little more I would have stayed awake in fear: fear of what Jacob tried to do, fear of the pain tomorrow would bring, and fear of where I would be after it all ended. Instead, my mind was filled with the wonders of what I would wear and what food I would eat. I imagined the man I thought I was made for being tall and kind, and much more gentle than those I have come to know. I imagined getting to see things in full light, even for a moment, as I left with him to go where I would stay forever. I look back on it now and can't believe how peacefully I slept the day before that so-called celebration.

I awoke with a start in the darkness as the clanking of freedom came from the door to my room. Mother Jade appeared, back lit by tiny flames that showed all around the main room of the house we lived in. "It is time Daisy. Come now. You will need to eat first today." I popped up and followed Mother to the dining room. In the dim light, I could see the elegantly detailed black and red clothes everyone was wearing as they smiled towards my presence. I took a seat at the head of the table, looking over the spread. The table was loaded. All kinds of cooked meats and roasted potatoes, with some grilled vegetables as well. Even the desserts were already out, pies adorned with fruits you got to taste maybe once a year.

Across the table from me was Father Jason. I believe he was in charge of all this, but I was never with all the adults long enough to tell. He stood up as I sat.

"Damned day to you all. For this special occasion, I would like to ask Daisy to lead us in a pre-meal Psalm, as this will be our last meal with her."

I remember feeling honored at the time as I recited the long pseudo poem. It started with "May all the world be damned today, as in all days" and continued as such.

After many years I have realized how painfully cliché it was. All cultists like to think they are so creative, but in reality it is all so painfully unoriginal.

I ate more than I ever had in my entire life that day. Everything tasted good. I can't recall ever enjoying eating more than I had then. The meat was rich with a sweet glaze over the skin, the potatoes were soft and creamy, and the vegetables crunched delightfully. The pies were the sweetest thing I had ever tasted, next to a small chocolate cake the members had also made for me. It was adorned with candles in the shapes of the number 16. The room gave a muted clap as I blew them out and for a moment I think I was able to feel how normal children felt.

Mother Jade put her hand on my shoulder, "It is time to get ready for your rites." She said placidly. She looked strange. She smiled but there were no teeth in her grin. Her eyes did not crinkle with joy, they almost seemed like they had become solid as to reject any emotion coming across.

I wish I could go back and tell myself to panic, to stop feeling the butterflies in my stomach and start feeling the sting of real consequence. At first it felt normal. I was undressed from my typical white garb and fitted into an intricate white and red gown. Gold accents snaked up the corset of the dress as I was squeezed into it. The binds became tighter than I ever remembered them being against the cage of the dresses skirt.

I remember being turned to a mirror. I felt more beautiful than I ever had, with my long blond hair settling along the corset. I could have been a princess to any outsider. They even took the time to lay a chain cover in jewels over my head, and another along my neck. I was sure that I was ready. Mother Jade beckoned me into a room I have never been in

before, a room behind the dressing room with one sturdy desk in the center.

"Lay down, Daisy." she said, gesturing to the desk. It was confusing, trying to maneuver onto the desk in that huge gown, but with a little help I managed. I was offered a drink of something strong at this moment. I rejected it, thinking how my last occurrence with hard liquor had been significantly unpleasant.

I wish I hadn't.

My arms and legs were bound as if I was being punished. Mother Jade cradled my head in her hands. I embraced the calm as I felt other adults rubbing some sort of object against my head, seeming like they were searching for a specific place. At one point they found a place, leaving the object to settle against my skull as they went to find other materials for a moment. Once found, they gathered again around my skull. I heard a strange piercing sound, followed by a pulling, followed by a sharp piercing pain. Something pierced my scalp and went through it, causing a deep burn as I felt something long was pulled behind it. Whatever object was being held to my scalp started to be pulled closer as the piercing sound repeated, followed by the piercing to my scalp and the burn. It felt like this went on for hours as the stabs encircled the base of the object attached to my skull. I was screaming I think, but I might as well have been completely silent with the way that no one reacted. I thought I could breathe in some relief, until an object of similar size started to be moved against the opposite side of my scalp. Again and again, the pain racked my scalp while the previous pierces still throbbled from the abuse that was being done to it. My limbs instinctively bucked at the pain, prompting a couple of the other women to hold me down. My voice was becoming horse, turning my screams to gasping

whimpers while an entirely new circle of pain was added to my scalp.

My scalp throbbed, my headache, I could feel my hair being sticky to my scalp as my new wounds started to crust over. My ears were ringing from the sounds I made, making it hard to hear what the women around me were saying as they moved around me. I reached one hand up to touch the weight hanging from my skull.

It stung to touch, as the fresh stitches moved. The material was wrong and thin, not quite feeling like plastic, but not quite wood either. I could feel them curving and branching off to taper into points. The objects seemed to mirror each, curving towards each other. I tried to lift my head slightly, feeling the light weight tug backwards. Mother Jade came over at that point and pushed my shoulders back down.

“Not now Daisy, we are not done with the preparations yet.” As she said this, she took a pen and outlined an area underneath my eyes. She then turned back and pulled over a table with a bunch of metal tools and jars.

“What is going to happen now?” I asked, hoping to at least mentally prepare myself a little.

“To look upon our lord, you will need more than the average human gaze. We are going to help you have that.” Mother said, lifting a small metal knife into my view. “I think we are going to have to restrain you for this.” She motioned to the other women, who quickly secured leather straps to my arms and legs to loop through the table. They pulled them tight as the knife approached my face. It pierced the sensitive skin underneath my eyes. A grotesque wail filled the room. It took me a minute to realize the sound had come from me. It sounded so inhuman, I couldn’t believe it had come out of me, but it did and it

continued to, as the knife continued to cut into my skin. I tried to shut my eyes against the pain, but this just caused Mother to use some sort of gauge to hold my eyes open.

“I know you may not like this, but we need to assure that both pairs of eyes can be opened at the same time.

I thought I was becoming delirious from pain, thinking there was absolutely no way they were putting more eyes in my face. Unfortunately, I was not mishearing, and the cutting only continued through layers of the flesh underneath my eyes. Screams continued to echo through the room as my mouth was being filled with streams of blood from me trying to yank my head upwards. It was a meaningless attempt at an escape, I was not strong enough to break through the restraints. I had only a moment of relief when the knife had been taken away, but now I had to face a new terror. Mother picked up a small metal hammer and I felt her rub it on a hard material under the cuts made beneath my eye. She then leaned back and struck, causing me to see red completely through my strained vision. She hit me twice more before I was finally taken into a forceful sleep by my body’s limits.

I barely came too. I had a small moment of consciousness when the restraints were removed, feeling like the room had been spinning in my sleep. I couldn’t feel my fingertips, and my head was filled with an insatiable pain. All I could smell was blood, it mixed with acid in my mouth, from what I could presume was me throwing up in my pain. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak. I heard the vague sounds of doors opening and shuffling around me and then I was lifted from the table.

I remember seeing flames dance in the corner of my vision. As people came close to glimpse at me. Many gasped, a few giggled

happily, as I was taken to the center of the room and laid on the floor. Candles encircled me, lighting the faces of the people who I have known my entire life staring down at me. Father Jason came near me, laying something in my hand. It was heavy and wooden, and from the corner of my blurry vision I could see it was some sort of long stick.

“To defend yourself on your journey,” Father whispered to me. He stood back up and moved away. Chanting of some sort began, I couldn’t focus on the words through all the pain. My face was wet as fresh blood still poured out of my wounds. I don’t know how I knew what was happening to me, maybe knowing what dying is is something so universally feared that we developed the ability to recognize it instinctually. It brings up things in you that you never expect. Some people may become more honest, or more kind, but for me it gave me a strange shot of strength.

It was not like I was at full health, but I had a moment of shocking clarity. If I did nothing, I would definitely die here. So I did something. All I meant to do was try and pull the stick towards me, to help me try and stand. I didn’t mean to knock any candles over. I didn’t mean to cause a clatter and shouting in panic as fire grew around me. I didn’t mean to cause people running and jumping, making more candles be knocked over.

But I did. The smoke made my eyes sting and another candle smashed to the ground near my head, causing hot wax to splash over my mouth and nose. I tried to reach up to get it off, but I didn’t have the strength. My nose and mouth filled with smoke, blood, and burnt skin. It was nauseating, and it made it impossible to breathe. My throat tightened, hoping for some

little bit of relief that never came as my eyes fell shut and the world became quiet.

And then I felt fine. I was still on the ground, but I wasn’t in any pain. I opened my eyes.

But not just one set, I opened both pairs of eyes. I reached up to touch them in the dim light of the blackened room. It was like they had always been there. They both had eyelids and eyelashes, and I could see the charred room in front of me with intense clarity. Light streamed through holes in the ceiling, illuminated the tarnished gold of the candle holders all around me. I lifted my head off the ground, feeling a weight on my head but no pain.

I touched my head, feeling my surprisingly clean hair and my scalp grown around the antlers on my head. Again it was like they had always been there. I looked down at my clothes. My dress had been shortened, and there was no harsh cage or corset, and I was wearing a pair of sneakers I liked as a kid. I still had the jewelry on, and I had the stick in my hand, which I could now see had a large blade arching out of the top. It was all very confusing, but not as confusing as the next thing I noticed.

Something was through my leg. It was not painful. I moved my leg away from it and it stayed in place. It was like nothing had touched it, and my leg was clearly not injured.

I stood up and looked down at what was underneath me. This was the last mistake I made in that house. It was me. Or at least what was left of me. My skin was wrinkled and blackened, dark holes in my face where eyes used to be. My dress was little more than the charred remains that had melted against my form, and what was left of the warped skirt frame. My hair was black, not its usual

blond, but the jewelry I was adorned with was still in its place.

I was confused, looking around to try and understand what had happened. I saw more bodies, in a similar state to mine, all moving in one direction. I followed it around a wall I had never been behind to see a bright blinding light.

It was a door.

I could, for the first time, see outside this house more than a sliver. I took hesitant steps, hearing voices cut through the silence in the house. I exited, being bathed in sunlight for the first time in- well- I guess I couldn't say for the first time in my life, but it was the first time. I looked around. Everything was so bright and green, offset by a bright blue backing all of it. I took another step, looking to my left and right to see where the voices were coming from.

I could see something off to the side. A large red metal machine was parked in the middle of a cleared path. Surrounding it were men in strange baggy suits, and strange helmets. There were some other smaller machines around as well, with all kinds of people in strange matching clothes milling and talking.

I stepped closer. No one seemed to notice me. It was like I was invisible to them.

"Coroner is gonna have a field day with this." I heard one man speak. I turned to look at one of the helmeted men, speaking to a friend.

"I can't believe it took 'til daylight for anyone to see the smoke. Some of those people could have been saved if someone was actually paying attention," his friend retorted.

"Did you go inside the house?" the first man said.

"No, why?"

"I don't think we would have wanted to meet these guys alive. Call it divine

intervention. It's easier this way." The man looked behind me, and for a moment I almost thought he could see me, but his words proved otherwise. "That one had to be a kid. How long do you think they kept him in there?"

I turned around to see another blackened body on a rolling table. It was shorter than most of the others, and I knew who it was immediately. Jacob had passed with his arms up in the air, as if he was fighting the fire, and his mouth open in a scream. There he was, one of the biggest architects of pain in my life, gone forever.

You would expect a sort of relief to come from it. You would expect a sort of peace in knowing that I was here, whatever here was, and he didn't get to be. But I didn't feel that way. I felt a strange sadness, brought on by the idea that even the worst parts of everything I had ever known were gone. This teamed with a feeling of guilt at knowing I had caused him to feel my pain in the end. Did I mean for this to happen somewhere in the back of my mind? Did I mean to destroy them in the way they destroyed me?

I know now that I couldn't have known the chain of events from a simple movement. I was a scared child in a false reality created by those who sought to use me to gain power in their own afterlife.

It didn't work by the way. There was no man waiting for me when I woke up, there was no kingdom of people for me to rule, or beasts for me to fight. None of the others ever showed up to walk the grounds with me.

I was alone. I was alone as I watched the men take away what was left of my life. I was alone when they came back to walk through the wreckage to try and learn about our lives. And I was alone when the men never came back. I lingered there, wondering what my purpose was in this strange state. I

remember the day I looked for my window box, only to find it charred and broken on the ground. I could have laid in front of it forever, when something cut through the noises of nature.

Chipper voices cut through a dark night, holding beams of light in their hands. I stood and looked. It was boys, much like Jacob, but also much brighter. They had full faces and eyes that seemed excited by everything. They murmured amongst themselves about something called a cult, and ghosts that were nearby. They approached my old home with cautious giggles, prodding each other to go inside first. These were the first people I had seen in so long I had to try something. I mustered all my strength of will and stepped in front of them. I took a deep breath and spoke confidently.

“Hi, my name is Daisy.”

The boys scrambled like ants in front of a bird. They knocked into each other as they headed back up the path they had come from. I was ready to feel defeated, when I had an idea. What if I followed them? Where would they lead me? There was nothing for me here, I knew that.

The trail was dark as the boys clutched each other all the way home. I remember breaking off and following just one of the boys to the house that he lived in. There were a lot of shocking revelations that night, seeing a normal family that acted so kindly to each other. It made me sad to see them at first, but after so many years of observing, I am just glad to see that people have each other.

It was 40 years ago that I died, with no name or records to tell the world who I was. To every outsider, I was a tortured soul that never knew any happiness in life, but I knew that I had found some joy in the freedom I have now, even if it can be lonely. I

still break through on occasion, people came to know my spirit by the name of a flower, one that reflected how they felt about me perfectly. In the night, I can hear the call of that name across fields and mountains, drawing me to those looking to commune with the girl who had seen so much and yet almost nothing:

*“There was a girl who lived in dark.
No sun is what she got.
At night she’d whisper at the moon,
Dear world, Forget me not.”*

FORGET-ME-NOT
WILL RETURN

NEXT ISSUE:



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SPEED OF STRIFE

ART AND STORY BY DENVER MARTIN-BROWN



BE NOT AFRAID. THE SQUID IS WATCHING.



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