

Free Tanvi Tandon

Blood trickles down her wrists. She has added a new painting to her ever-growing art gallery. This might be her best piece yet- the scars intersect to form a web; representing her involuted, tangled thoughts. There is but one difference between the web and her confused train of thoughts- she is not catching prey. She *is* the prey. She doesn't like thinking too much: it drives her crazy. Not to say that she isn't crazy already.

Most people are bound by themselves, their limitations. But not her, she is bound by the rules. Eat when the bell rings. Sleep when the bell rings. Cry when the bell rings. Smile when the bell rings. A living corpse, that's what she is.

It's terrifying how little changes in this room. Metal walls that close in on her, leaving nothing but darkness and the putrescent smell of her wounds. Every day, she is met with the same scene: her bare feet are cold under the touch of the marble floor and she awakens to the Man. He is a tall, looming figure with the aura of a savage, a barbarian. He takes one step closer, and she takes two back. He tells her she's not right in the head, tells her she needs help, that she's dreaming: none of it is real, she's crazy.

A familiar, frightening hand touches her head. It is not gentle. The hand shoves her into the murky water- she feels the life leave her lungs and she is transported to another place, a better place. Sun shining upon her, she prances around the meadow, the wet grass tickling her feet, the flowers are in full bloom and she is warm. She is okay. Then, cold hands seize her. From the corner of her eye (as if an otherworldly experience) she watches a sharp metal prick her skin; her vision goes cloudy and she no longer knows what is real and what is not. And then everything ends. She plunges into darkness.

When she wakes up the clock reads 9. Time for medicine. The pale blue pills with 'Abilify' carved onto the top are kept on the side table as a reminder of her illness but all they remind her of is better days, with blue skies, kind eyes and gentle hands. Days where she was treated like a person. Days where she could see the world, days where she wasn't suffocating. She longs for sunshine, for rain...for freedom. She wants to be who she used to be before the Man dragged her here. Before they told her who to be, how to be and that she was nothing more than her disorder. She wants to escape. She *will* escape.

She gets off her soft, white sheets and creeps towards the metal door, making sure to be silent. The door is unlocked in a swift motion and she sets off in the hallway; careful and cautious, yet hasty and hurried. And then she's running- her bare feet hit the cold marble floor and she brings her arms forward to gather speed: she hears the shuffling of feet, the clatter of guns and senses the incoming storm. Just once, she thinks, she just wants to see the world outside her cage once. She can see the fence staring right at her, challenging her to jump- take a leap of faith. She pushes her feet back, ready to pounce at it- when, when

she sees *him*. The Man is here (always a step ahead of her). She's never dared to look up, always too scared. But today, she feels different. She might be scared but she won't let anyone take this away from her. So, she looks up.

Her vision blurs. The Man looks so similar to another she used to know- she recalls another memory of better days and feels bile crawl up her throat. Her palms shake and she is struck. Their eyes are the same. She remembers blue wasn't her favourite colour for skies, but for his eyes- crystal clear and honest. But she remembers something else too: seeing his eyes wide open, his body completely still, not a single movement. *The Man isn't real*. It's always been a figment of her imagination, her illness. The footsteps are coming closer now, this is her only chance to make it out. If she wants to see the sun again- bask in its warmth, feel the heat prickle her skin- she has to do it.

She runs through the Man and feels exhilarating sweetness overtake her. Hauling herself over the rusted fence, she jumps. There are cuts on her hands and legs and her blue patient's gown is covered in dust and cobwebs. But none of that matters. She is on the other side- the sun's rays are shining upon her and for the first time in years, she smells sweet, fresh air and not antiseptic. In her bleak, dreary room she had lost any concept of time but now she can see broad daylight stretching over the blue sky (blue, like his eyes used to be). She's alive. *She's free*.

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