

1,200 words

Kazuya on the River Bed

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There was a river a short walk from the house. Past the treeline, about a fifteen-minute walk just behind the house. I'd only been there once during the day. The man I lived with always told me it was too dangerous to go off, wandering there alone, back when I still regarded him as father. I'd play in the river, splashing water in his face as he pretended to drown me. His wife sat with a towel underneath her, laughing at our antics, trying to get through the rest of her book. There was some magic that existed in that river. A part of us lives within the water amongst the fish.

I think I always knew I didn't belong.

The way they'd smiled when I showed them my drawings, The corners of their mouths, and the look in their eyes told me. In some small way, I had disappointed them.

Love is contractual, written in some text buried within a memory. A contract of expectations lined with purpose. I'll love you as long as... the rest of those words seem to almost fill themselves out. He stopped calling me by my name long before his wife got pregnant. In some small way, I think she mourned me like I was dying. Like she was learning to let go. So, I guess, in some ways, I learned to mourn myself. I didn't know how to quantify the feeling, but I felt heavier. I could almost sink into the floor.

I woke up one morning and saw the smallest growth underneath some of my hair. As I brushed it away, I could feel some bark growing from my forehead. A small tip of a horn growing on either side of my hairline. I locked myself in my room. I didn't know what else to do. My parents would come by and ask me if I wanted to eat, and like a prisoner, I asked them to leave it by the door. I had started to feel intense pains in my legs, uncontrollable shaking, and sweating in my sleep. There were these vivid dreams I had of grazing wide open plains. My legs

had begun to bend inwards at the joints, my feet had slowly become hooves, and the intense pain of my toes dying off caused me to scream in agony during the night. They finally barged in one night. He pulled away the bed sheet, and I knew what he saw. I didn't need to hear him say it to know.

He screamed, "Monster!"

I ran, limping and unable to use my legs properly, to the only place I knew to go; back to the river where I still imagined some piece of me was left behind. As I sat by the river, I cried. Like a stabbing pain in my chest, a rock being cracked open with a knife.

"Why are you crying?" She asked. She looked about my age with dark blue hair soaked from the water. Her torso was about all I could see, but she stood close enough to me to where she didn't have to stand. I sniveled and wiped my face with my sleeve.

"I'm a monster. Nobody loves me."

"Says who?"

"My parents."

"Your parents are stupid."

I crawled toward the river. Till I could get my feet into the water, and the girl smiled.

"Why are you out here then?"

Her body lowered until only her head was left, "Cause my parents are stupid too. Sometimes, I can see a light through the trees at night, and I like wondering. What are they doing?"

"It's probably nothing interesting."

"I know, but I still like thinking about it."

We didn't talk much after that. We just stayed in each other's company until we knew we had to go back. I struggled to find the courage until the girl said, "If it happens again, you can always come back."

Then, it became effortless to stand. She didn't judge me by how I looked or seemed, to the point where I wondered if, in some small way. We were the same.

I wish that at least just once, I had watched her swim home, back into the river.

The following morning, the horns were gone, and my legs were fine. My parents could barely look at me, but I ignored them. I would run down to the river often. Usually at night while they slept. Wandered the forest during the day sometimes and searched for a flower. The same color as her hair. It took hours to find the perfect flower, but I knew I had seen one before. When she wasn't there, I would leave them by the river. To let her know I was. Eventually, that spot beneath the tree where I found my first flower had spawned a garden of them, all surrounding this one tree.

When the winter came, I would hardly see her. I never failed to leave her a flower. Eventually, a pile of blue orchids made its way into the water. When spring came, I went there after school and saw her sitting on the river bed.

The first time I had seen her feet.

I sat beside her, but I could not muster up the words to say to her, and she could barely speak. She reached for my hand, and I felt myself cry. Why, why would I cry? She looked frail, and the light I saw in her felt like it was dimming. I stood up, and she tried to reach me, but I shrugged her away. I left her there, by the river. I could still hear her sobbing as I exited the forest.

I would visit every now and then and watch from the treeline as, each day, a new blue orchid sat on the river bed. Finally, it grew into a mountain, and I still could not find it in me to reach her. The wind pulled the orchids into the water, and I scrambled to keep them from going in. I looked down and in the water, I could see my reflection. I saw the horns, and my neck was covered in fur. I could feel my legs were inverted, and my toes were now hooves.

I knew she would never return to see me. I knew it from the way the water had a sickly sweet smell. I thought at that moment, as tears ran down my face, that maybe the only thing left for me was the river. So I pushed myself in, walking, then paddling slowly with my arms. I thought about the time she asked me to join her in the water. How I told her that I didn't think my legs were meant to swim and how she told me that all I needed was to float. I think maybe what I wanted was to baptize myself in this river to wash myself of what I was. I hoped that there was still some peace of mine that lived amongst the fish.