

## Groomed Innocence

*"Words without experience are meaningless."*

— Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

Annabel could feel his hot breath raking down her neck as she squirmed beneath his virile frame. She was pinned for what felt like an eternity as his aggressive fingers pinched, poked, and pulled at the corners of flesh between her loose summer clothing. Her heart thundered with fear as every inch of her exposed skin was explored for weakness; it beat in her chest like a war drum, thumping more quickly than his digits could travel. He hunted for purchase and with each jab of his intruding hand, her youthful tendons responded with a jolt of attempted escape that made her jerk in hysterical convulsions. It became a rhythmic dance.

The echoes of her world were reduced to nothing but a blur as she concentrated on trying to block out the sensational feedback driving furiously from her nerve endings to the base of her skull. A spike pounding a wedge between the future and the past, interlocking her mind and body into the purgatory of the moment. No hope for escape, no memory of how it began. The saliva in her mouth expired. She helplessly squirmed beneath him, her tongue a shriveled desert cactus scraping against her palate in protest, contrary to the desperate wet scream that built inside her mind. Annabel's only desire was for it to stop, but her body wouldn't make a stand.

The effort and experience were so strong that her breath came in gigantic hitches, filling her lungs. Time seemed to slow and Annabel's face twisted with a mix of emotions, contorted and frozen in time much like Roethke's waltz-watching mother. The air rushed into her chest and forcefully expanded her ribcage. In that moment everything magnified:

She felt each flake of skin rubbed as it became a rash from the sparse, dry grass digging into her lower back, peppered with dirt...

The hot summer sun at its zenith penetrating each of her youthful pores magnified the large drops of sweat emerging on her delicate face...

Her fingertips swelled ever so slightly from banging on the ground in desperate thrashes, each capillary throbbed with remote distress...

His fingers, ever so present, dug into the soft muscles behind her knees as her hips thrust upward in a spasm of what could only be described as pain...

Then the air began to release from her chest. Before she could fully exhale, he dug deeper and the air was stopped abruptly by a frozen diaphragm. Her brain was screaming for acquittal, but his digits controlled even her reflexive senses. Like an orchestra conductor, their movements dictated her response.

At his tactile charge, Annabel took another violent inhale. Hiccuping with lungs already glutted of waste, the breath simply wouldn't fit. Spittle flew from the corners of her mouth and a convulsive giggle screamed from her lips. Then, in the moment of climax, the dance suddenly stopped. As quickly as it came, his fingers trotted away playfully and it was over.

Annabel rolled on the grass, her gasps were punctuated by the full-bodied laughter of a ten-year-old girl. Spent, she lay there for a moment catching her breath and relaxing her tense muscles. In a trance, the summer sun beat down on her battle-weary body. Then, flushed and full of relief, she pushed herself off of the ground and walked slowly to where he waited. Each fall of her feet was accompanied by a deep inhale of recuperation.

Annabel reached the canvas chair where he was stationed and climbed habitually onto his lap. He wrapped his arms around her waist in gentle contrast to the prior trice they'd shared. She succame and felt the world shift slowly back into focus:

Gulls screaming just a few feet above her head, their graceful wings beating the air and keeping them afloat...

The sound of a metal spoon scraping a plastic bowl, sliding the last of Grandma's potato salad out and onto a patiently waiting plate at the picnic table...

Her aunt's high pitched voice ringing in her ears, like an escalator towing her up out of her transfixion and back into the moment...

Thick, coarse hairs from her father's overgrown beard caressing the side of her face as she perched on his lap and time took on its normal pace...

Everything was as it always was and she whispered into her father's ear, "I hate it when you tickle me!" He smiled and laughed absentmindedly at her comment, feeling confident her request was a plea for him to do it again.

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