

WHITE LILY

By Tuesday Moon

Chapter One

Backwards Redemption

The season ticks from summer into fall, which will become winter, then spring, then summer all over again. The gray magnolias heed the change as usual. Bumpy pods sprout in the place of flowers, ripening to display blood red seeds. This year's batch of leaves stiffens and rustles. In winter they will be sent away. Some leaves are already falling off, wandering through air that lingers of nectar and pollen. Wherever you look during these coming months, I'm sure you'll always see at least one leaf floating in the wind.

The leaves falling on the ground weave a carpet that covers the forest, to be replaced by one of snow in winter. Others fall to this lake. Reflections climbing out of the water mirror them, and the lake's surface divides the leaves from their copies as they land on it. Every leaf adds to the dense layer of foliage covering this lake. If I didn't already know it by heart, I wouldn't be able to tell where the water stops and the shore begins. In the gaps in this leafage, reflected stars dance on the water. Their ball is serenaded by the sounds of the night. Crickets are loudest in early fall and wolves howl in the distance.

The wind carrying the leaves picks up. In an instant it becomes a wild beast that rips fistfuls off trees and howls like those wolves. A larger leaf barrels towards me. It enters through my neck and banks down to shoot out of my shoulder on the opposite side. Another spirals through my arm, then my chest, and exits out of my other arm. The movements send shivers running through my body while the leaves feel nothing. I break out of my trance. I feel the night pour into me.

I look to my left. The leaves are carrying on tumbling through the darkness, as if I was never there. That's because to those leaves, this wind, and most everything else it seems, I'm not.

A ghost is what I am. When I was alive, my brothers and sisters would tell stories of them to scare each other. My parents would tell me ones with lessons and morals. Those stories spoke of the living, but I never heard any from the perspective of the ghosts. How they had no hope of escaping their existence and were forced to wait. For centuries.

Before those leaves flew into me I was waiting, hovering above my lake, as still as the mist hanging upon its surface. I've been floating here for a really long time. I don't know how long. It could've been just a few days since I last moved, or it could've been years. Not that it matters to me anyway, since there's nothing to wait for and no reason to wait. I'm just waiting. I can't do anything else.

I have seen many centuries given to me by the universe, and I can see that the time I have left has no end. I have all the time in the world. I could do anything, if I was allowed. Whatever I try to touch passes through my fingers and assails me with that tingling sensation. Having never left, I'm confined to this lake. Everyone used to say how beautiful my voice was. Now my words are silent.

But apparently a few can see and hear ghosts. That's the most I can get in terms of interacting with others. When I was alive I heard of these chosen ones. They were outed as witches and hanged. I've met only one since becoming a ghost. I wish I had never talked to her... She was hanged as well.

Every night of mine is the same as every other night. I might be waiting in a different spot and the seasons may change things, but the change is the same year after year. Everything is and has always been the same. It will be the same for the next night. I can never escape this afterlife of endless repetition, nor should I bring others into it.

It's fine though... I'm fine with watching the world pass by while I remain still, as I was just doing. As I have always been doing.

Today will be a special day at least. In the midst of fall's browning leaves, flocks of cranes will fly across my lake and over the mountain range in the south. I don't know where they are going, but their passing mixes up the churning of the seasons. I must have seen them fly a thousand times by now. I wonder what it would be like to fly across the world like those birds. I've never left this lake, and surrounding trees prevent me seeing anything beyond it too. All I get is the sky.

There's still a few more hours until they fly though. I might as well move from my post. There's something I want to check up on in the meantime. I have a lot of meantime.

I depart from where I was hovering, next to the tree that stands in the center of this lake all alone. It's managed to survive on a tiny patch of land that pokes above the water. I like that tree.

The wind guides me to a secluded corner of the lake. It's died down from howling but is still fierce. Bobbing in the water here is a white lily. My white lily. When I died my family released it into the lake from the boardwalk. That's on the other side of the lake, so it meandered here over many years. I've kept an eye on it for its entire journey.

Releasing a lily into water is our village's tradition whenever someone dies. Each one represents someone's life. When I died my lily joined many others. Afterwards, one for each of my

family members joined mine over the years. People used to come to take care of this place. They would clear the area of weeds, keep water out of the lilies... Eventually they stopped coming, and all the lilies sunk to the bottom of the lake, weighed down by the elements. Mine is the only one that's survived. It's seen better days. The tips of its petals are shriveled and mold eats away at it from below. The wind doesn't seem to phase it, but the petals get browner each time I check. Despite everything, it's still afloat after all these years. I don't know how it's survived this long, but I'm glad it has.

There are a lot of things I don't know. I don't know why only I became a ghost and no one else did. I don't know why people stopped with the traditions so that my lily has become the only one left. I will never be able to answer those questions. All I can do is not think about them or else they will eat away at me forever like the mold eats at my lily. It's better to not think about these things.

My train of thought is interrupted by a rustling in the bushes nearby. The face of a speckled rabbit has appeared in between some branches. Its brown coat is in the process of being shed for a white one for winter. The rabbit has made a few tentative hops through the leaves and is now staying still, testing the air. It finally jumps out of the bush and crunches on the leaf strewn ground. It jumps again. One sporadic hop at a time, It makes its way towards the lake. At the shore it stops before the water can lap at its feet.

The rabbit turns its gaze up to pierce my chest. Is it pointing at me or the sky beyond? I move to the right. It's head begins to follow me until it lurches to the side as if a blast of wind slammed into it. It then twists and contorts, fighting for control of its own body. Muddled whispers

surround the lake. The rabbit's pupils dilate, signifying it has succumbed to the influence. The whispers stop. Invisible strings pull its head back, so that it doesn't look towards me.

The rabbit looks down, fixing its eyes that now radiate hatred on the water. It shambles towards the lake, and the lower half of its body disappears under the surface. Each step scatters discarded leaves, carving a path of destruction. The rabbit's heading right for my lily.

The otherwise peaceful water is disturbed. Spreading ripples overtake every corner. Countless pieces of foliage bob up and down in the waves. Only the rabbit's head extends above the water when it reaches my lily. The rabbit grabs onto a petal with its mouth. Strange. A rabbit would never want it. Lilies are poisonous to them.

The lily is dragged to shore. Oceans run off the petals back to the lake. Once stagnant pools in its crevices send falls of water crashing on the ground. Further and further the rabbit brings my lily.

The rabbit enters a small clearing the trees haven't touched. It opens its mouth, ready to take a bite of the lily, but catches itself. It freezes in place, then starts twitching. It takes a step back. Twitching turns into shaking until it's being tossed around the clearing. The sounds coming from it aren't of a rabbit. It chokes and gasps and expels whatever force was possessing it. The rabbit relaxes, sitting still so it can catch its breath.

My lily is unharmed and the rabbit didn't poison itself. It stumbles as it gets up to go back into the forest. It's in a daze, but safe.

A wolf bursts from the trees to remedy that fact. Its unfurled jaw sinks into the rabbit's flesh. Blood splatters across the ground as teeth crush through flesh and bone. The wolf and rabbit

tumble into the line of trees on the other side of the clearing. One more crunch and the rabbit is dead. It couldn't even fight back. The wolf drags its catch into the forest, leaving as quickly as it came. It doesn't even look back.

That happened fast. Maybe we could have been friends. I barely got to know you before you were taken from me.

My white lily is now out of reach, and stained red with blood. Some of it has already dried in the sun. Ah, the sun. It's not night anymore. A growing beam of sunlight appears right at that moment to illuminate the lake. It becomes golden with light.

Ripples appear below me and spread outwards. Turning around, I get met with a deafening honk that flips me upside down. The bloodied dress I died with and my hair don't fall down though, as if they were frozen. I guess it's a strange quirk of being a ghost.

I right myself. Standing in front of me is a crane. The black feathers on its belly create a silhouette of its form against the forest. It turns around and waddles for a second before taking off, joining countless numbers of cranes flying overhead. I tune myself into their sounds. Cranes trumpet, caw, and squawk as they fly past. The sky is filled with black stars in a sea of white. More cranes fill the sky. They almost blot out the sun with their numbers.

The few minutes pass and the noise fades into the background. Most of the cranes are now over the mountains. Well, that was nice. It will be a year until they fly again. In the spring they fly back a different way. Time to wait some more. Maybe I will wait in the same spot I did last time.

The sound of the cranes come back. No more birds are appearing in the sky but the sound gets louder. It's coming from past the boardwalk. No, it's not the sound of birds, it's the crying of a person.

The person stumbles towards the lake from the path leading into the forest. His hand is tethered to a young boy who looks to be about my age when I died: thirteen or so. Is that his kid? The man's tears fall into a lily he is holding to his chest. Soft pats turn into tapping as they go up the boardwalk and kneel on the edge. The lily falls into the water and the sobbing gets louder. He holds his hands to his face to cover his tears. Mumbles escape him. I can hear a name resonating through the words.

“An...”

The boy isn't crying, but his face is red and quivering. He looks out across the lake. His eyes stop dead in their tracks when they fall on me. Can he see me too? His mouth is wide in astonishment. No... He shouldn't. Animals are fine if they see me, but humans could be killed. I can't let him look. I fly to the tree in the center of the lake and hide behind it. The boy doesn't say anything.

I stay long enough for the stars to appear again in the sky. Poking out from the tree, the parent and the boy are gone. How could that boy see me? Is he also a ghost seer? Whatever, it would be best if I never saw him again. He could die by talking to me.

Well, that was an eventful day. It will be a while before something like that happens again.