

## Cherry Hill

I literally stumbled on you one day. You were lying on your back, staring at the sun like it was the most beautiful thing on Earth. Or not-Earth, possibly.

"Sorry. I didn't expect anyone to be up there," I said. "At least not a madman who's staining perfectly good pants with grass," I wanted to add.

"Ah it's quite all right, I didn't expect to be alone for long."

You hadn't yet gotten up, or assumed a somewhat upright position, any polite gesture someone else would have made already. I wanted to stamp on you, just to see if you were real. Instead I asked, "Do you come to this hill often?"

"This is Cherry Hill, my friend."

"Okay... so what?"

"If you don't know the name of the ground you're standing on, how can you know where you really are?" You looked at me with earnest eyes, maybe that's what prodded me to actually try and give you an honest answer. What a blunder.

"Well, I came up here, I climbed for a good hour, I... I see my home from here, and there on the other side I can see the godforsaken land they call town, where I can't even set a foot in. I'm pretty sure I know where I am."

"God didn't forsake anything, men did. And they forsook everything with it, happiness, mercy, reason, sanity..."

I cut you off. "That's not the point."

"How do you know what the point is? Do you see it?"

"You can't see the point, it doesn't work that way."

"Well, apparently you see everything with your eyes, right up to where you are, so how could I know?"

You weren't even angry, you just laid back down and closed your eyes, humming happily to the sound of the breeze. I was speechless. I sat by your side and you didn't say anything either, only a slight drop in your voice showed me maybe it was what you had wanted all along.

I glanced around, gaze grazing grass and weeds and then more grass. I didn't see any cherry trees, or an indication that there once were any.

"Why do they call it that, d'you think?"

"Ah, I don't 'think', little man, I know."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope." Your eyes twinkled in the bright light and for a second there, I thought you really had the answer. Whether it was the case or you came up with it on the spot, I'll never know.

"Once upon a time, two mighty warriors approached the land from both sides, took everything that stood in their path and named it theirs. The two of them met on this very hill, the last acres left to be conquered, and they battled for it with all they had. From one last hit they both died in a spray of blood, red blots falling like cherries in the bright summer afternoon. Anyway, that's how the inhabitants described it. And 'Cherry Hill' sounds way nicer than 'Murder Mound', you gotta give them that."

I was fidgeting. The day was too hot, the sun was too bright, I needed to get home. What was I doing here?

I had already smeared my hands with grass and I was scrubbing them nervously when you patted the earth next to you, "Come on, lay down for a while. You're making me antsy." I couldn't. I had stuff to do.

"I have stuff to do."

"Stuff? What stuff?"

"Useful... work, and reading, and stuff." Brilliant. Great job.

"And what use is that to anyone?"

"None," I sighed, defeated.

"Exactly." You closed your eyes again and said, in an even tone, "Or you can just go, I won't mind."

There's nothing you don't want unless you can't have it. I should have left. I didn't.

One day you came by, and I almost didn't recognize you. Your thin frame was fluttering in the wind like a frail sail, your pale skin glowed under the evening light in an unnatural way. Like an angel but not quite there, because you weren't dead yet.

"What the hell happened to you ?"

"How about you stop freaking out and help me up there ?" you huffed, extending a hand. I grabbed it and didn't let go, holding onto it like a lifeline. I could feel the mad beating underneath the skin of your wrist. I wanted to crawl inside your palms, enter the warm and pulsating current, find those gnomes that were clogging up your arteries, or whatever it was that you had.

"I don't have *gnomes*, that sounds like a nasty sexually transmitted disease."

I hadn't realised I had said all of this out loud.

"You sure did."

Were you able to read my thoughts ?

"No I'm not, you're saying all of it out loud, cut it out ! May I remind you that I'm the one who's ill over there, therefore should be the one spewing his heart's content like his brain's gripped by the fever ?"

Oh. Right.

"Right," you mumbled.

"What do you have ?"

"I don't know, just... life."

"Life ? You can't be sick with life."

"Not with life per se, but... That's just the cost of living, I guess."

I didn't understand any of this.

You went on. "Are you happy ?" What ?

"What ?"

"You heard me."

I thought back, about home, about sad parents crying in their respective bedrooms and fighting over diner plates. About the future, that in most days made me feel like a blind person lumbering in a black tunnel. About bullying classmates, aching knees and bloody noses. I thought about you, forever out of reach. Cherry Hill.

"I am now. Here."

Your faint smile was enough of an apology. "Then that's your price."

"And what's yours ?"

"I enjoyed every day to its fullest. I always knew this would happen, only not when they would come knocking on my door, and..." you trailed off and stopped to cough up a lung, or so it seemed. "Time's up," you wheezed.

"It can't be."

"Do you own the clock ?"

"I don't see everything with my eyes anymore, you know that."

"Then what do you feel ?" It sounded like a cheesy line, but as I was holding your hand, feeling the pulse already weaker than five minutes ago, I not only felt. I knew. I didn't say anything. You sang instead.

*"Love and pain, they are only words,*

*Did they exist at all if no one heard ?*

*In June's sun and the cold of May,*

*On Cherry Hill is where we'll stay."*

We watched the sunset, and as the last rays of light gently fell on my face and seemed to mirror your words, the darkness that followed looked too much like an ending.

You walked away, a skeleton shambling along towards the shadows. I watched the town, the cloud of shimmering lights like one observes an enemy. I wanted to burn the whole place down. If all that was left to be standing on were ashes, maybe I would be welcome again. As of now I could only watch you disappear, wondering when you would be back.

You never did come back.

Next summer I returned, and you weren't there, only the yellowing strands of grass where we used to sit for hours, laughing and singing. A yellow patch on dirty earth as a reminder that this wasn't all a dream. I stared at the empty spot and suddenly I realised what it cost to breathe. Honestly, it felt like dying. Rain came pouring down and melted with weak tears, dug deep rivulets in the ground that looked like the ropes you had intertwined around my heart. I stood tall and sang under my breath. I finished the song you had begun, oh so long ago already.

*"Love and pain, I felt them all,  
Real as they were, they were my own.  
Under June's sky and cold with me  
On Cherry Hill, forever you'll be."*