

We went out, Ogata and I, into the captivating night. No one but the wind made a noise as we slipped through his window onto the roof; and only I made a noise, breathing out, as we lowered ourselves to the ground. I looked below me to find an accusatory glare meet my eyes followed by a subsequent shrug as Ogata realized that nobody woke up.

Once off the roof we found ourselves on Ogata's large, unadorned porch, made of some sort of heavy wood. The clouds blocked the moon, making everything like the porch, covered in a thick coat of dark varnish. A ripple of embarrassment made its way between the both of us when we realized, simultaneously, that we had forgotten to bring a flashlight.

"I can't see a thing, Faron," the outline that was Ogata said to me, but also to the expanse around us, enveloping us. I nodded, though he couldn't see it, as I looked up to the blotted, black and blue sky.

"We never really think these things over, do we?" I didn't even address Ogata in what I said, because it wasn't really meant for him. I was talking to the darkness. For It and he had become one as I heard Ogata's footsteps wander away and the shadow that had formerly taken his place fled from view.

"I think we'll be fine," I heard from the night, so I followed Ogata's voice off of the porch, onto the wet grass of his lawn, and out onto the hard pavement of the sidewalk in front of his house. I heard booming thuds in the street beyond me. The roar of distant thunder strikes seemed to be emanating from the asphalt, meters in front of me. I stepped into the street. At once I was blinded as a million streetlights came alight in a sudden efflorescence, with the intensity of a distant star. Then I realized that this brilliancy was actually a dull glow, and that relativity meant everything.

Ogata was the thunder. "There we are, I knew motion, or sound, or something turned them on." He quit stamping his feet on the pavement and came to stand beside me. Our eyes followed the path of lights. The two glowing lines never met each other as they extended away from us in both directions, and we could see over the rise of the hill that this was true until the line turned into points, and, eventually, they both faded away, in a unanimous display of affection.

We turned left. Neither of us knew why, but we chose to go downhill, even though that would

mean an awful uphill climb when we decided to come home, it must have been the immediacy of it.

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The farther down the hill we ventured the fewer houses we saw. At first the houses were planted side by side, like a commercial forest, their Christmas lights, mixed with the dull glow of the old, groggy street lamps, created a fuzzy glow that inundated the street with a yellow flood, interspersed with greens and reds. A wall of technicolor spirit with the occasional glimpse of a deer, or a snowman; I was disoriented.

I was spinning. My feeling turned from wonder to terror in a blink of an eye as the lights kept glaring at me, glaring through me. The street lights seemed to be glowing bright again and a dull hum was ricocheting off the pavement from everywhere. Everything that had seemed so wonderful from far away seemed too close in on me, spinning and mocking; I saw them now as grotesques. I fell to the ground. I was crying. I was suffocating.

Ogata tried to help. He kneeled over me but his face was mixed in with the figures of the decorations and his concerned voice also ricocheted off the pavement. I thought I was going to die, but right when I seemed closest to surrendering, the streetlights cut off and everything sat still again.

We sat on the road for a while. When it seemed right, we got up and continued down the road. The houses continued to thin out beside us, and Ogata, everything from the previous encounter but my heightened heart-rate forgotten, turned to me as we walked. “ Every time I come out here I feel different,” he looked nervous as he spoke. “I don’t know.”

“I feel like we’ve entered a different world entirely.” I murmured as we rounded a corner. Here there were no more houses. Trees lined up like tired infantry on either side of the street. The moon whispered from its hidden position behind a bank of clouds, giving everything a new, blue spirit. The infantry responded to this new order with an applause of chattering leaves that moved from the front of the ranks to the back in a wave. The breeze made my hair stand up.

We marched on, the blue spirit made it feel more like floating though. We floated past tree after tree, each one bowing as we went, for what seemed like miles. Ogata’s eyes were filled with a new gleam, one that seemed to say that he was exactly where he wanted to be. When he looked at me I felt the same.

After floating for a slow, hazy minute he began to talk, but it didn’t sound like Ogata’s voice asking me, “ So what do you plan to do about Léonie?”

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“I don’t know. What is there to do?” It took another soporific moment for my mouth to form the words, and when I did my voice didn’t sound like my own either. It sounded deep and hollow like an oak barrel, as if the forest was actually what was speaking and I was merely a conduit.

He thought for an eternity; the trees stopped bowing and instead stood still, waiting, as I did, for his answer. His voice was both far away and right next to me as he answered, deliberately “ I could help, but you have to have your own idea of where you want to go.”

Then, without warning, the trees stopped bowing as a new wave of blue swept over the night. The bottom dropped out. We were now merely walking. I still couldn’t see the stars. Ogata’s eyes had returned to their normal, walnut-colored depth, though I noticed that, if I focused, I could still see that only the corners held onto that mischievous gleam.

I didn’t know what to say in response, though I knew that I needed to say something. But, right as I was about to embarrass myself with some attempt at humor, Ogata ran excitedly to the edge of the trees.

“Follow me!” He shouted over his shoulder, the gleam returning to his eyes. As I hurried to try to keep up with him he disappeared into the tree line, a macabre dividing of ranks the only thing suggesting that he had even existed. I looked behind me and saw that I could hardly make out where we started down the road, and that the stars were still hidden behind the blue spirit like a veil. I had no where else to go but into the opening in front of me, a cave of dark blue and brown that waited like an eager mouth, unless I wanted to be alone; I never wanted to be alone.

Inside of the treeline I felt like I was floating again, only much slower, with deliberate foot-falls like a tired dancer. The forest around me seemed to circle in an equally slow waltz. 1-2-3, 1-2-3. I was dancing with the world around me, spinning and stepping, a promenade with the earth. As we danced I seemed to notice more about the trees than I ever had before. They weren’t the soldiers I thought they were, but, rather, worried mothers, or nervous children, or somewhere in between becoming one or the other. I could feel a heaviness in the forest that, I could tell, hadn’t always been there. It felt like I was dancing with one, big hot-air balloon filled with enough stones that it could hover, but not fly as it longed to. I longed to get rid of this weight, but I could barely lift a pebble.

Then, almost as soon as I entered, I was out of the trees on the outskirts of a cul-de-sac. Ogata

stood in the middle looking up. I followed his gaze upwards and saw why he was staring. The stars shown like a million floating angels, their wings fluttering slowly and warmly like candle flames. The blue was now gone from the world around us, remaining only in the sky where it waltzed with the stars. 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Ogata seemed to be swaying along with it, mesmerized, I was worried that the beautiful light might bring about a similar episode as before, so I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of the night.

The stars' waltz was played by the biggest band in the world. The leaves in the trees rustled in sway as crickets and cicadas called like horns. In the distance the movements of cars and the barks of dogs as they chased away the other animals who scurried through the woods could be heard faintly against the sounds of what was nearby. The electricity of the homes around us made itself known by a soft hum that brought all the pieces of the band together into one cohesive sound, the entire world in a note. I added my own part as I started humming, as insignificant as it was I could hear the band respond to it, and build themselves around it. I became part of it- the entire world in a note.

I opened my eyes expecting to see the stars still dancing, still swaying, but, when I opened them, everything had fallen still. Ogata's eyes snapped down from where they had been occupied with the heavens. I met him in the center of the cul-de-sac; we walked on in silence for a while, then Ogata started whistling. Somehow his whistle seemed to carry with it the melody of the band I had been a part of moments before- I knew he had heard it too, but I said nothing.

The dormant houses we walked past on this new road seemed to be keeping secrets, and I was trying to think of what kind of people lived within them, what they did, how they lived, whether they were happy. Every house seemed to hold little clues, a tire swing, an unpainted shutter, but I couldn't really be sure from appearances what they held inside. I wanted to ring every door bell and ask whomever answered it if they were happy, but I knew no one would answer truthfully, so I just had to take the toys in the yards, the opened garage doors, at face value. I could never truly know.

Ogata wasn't concerned about the lives of strangers. " So what do you plan to do about Léonie?" he asked me again, the gleam in his eyes remaining like an ember glowing gold.

"It all depends on her, I guess." I answered, trying to sound as ambiguous as possible, longing

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to return to the waltz.

"How so?" He caught on to my attempt to drop the subject. I didn't have an answer to this new question; I didn't even know what I had meant.

"I mean, I guess, it just has to do with what she decides to do." I just started talking. My head

had nothing to say anymore, so my heart was allowed full reign over my words in awful, complicated fortitude. “ She is the one that has to make up her mind. There are plenty of other people out there for her, she just has to pick which one is best.”

Ogata didn't like my answer. “ You can't give her up like that, to fate. If you stay idly on the outskirts someone else is going to win. You can't win a tug of war by just holding the rope, you have to pull.”

I almost started crying. The thought that someone could see something in such black and white scared me. Léonie wasn't something to be “won”, and if I saw her as that I didn't deserve her at all- not saying that I did anyway. I imagined her thinking of me in the same way, as an object, and, though still awful, that seemed a lot more realistic. I was much easier to simplify, take down to black and white. She was too much of a story, a history, to be diluted in any way; like a strong drink, even if I could it would take away the point.

“ No! This isn't a tug of war!” I shouted to the night. The stars seemed to shiver and the homes groaned at my outburst, I couldn't tell if they agreed with me. We were still walking, but I felt like running. Past the highway I could faintly hear in the distance, past the foot hills and forests that surrounded me, I wanted to run to the top of the tallest mountain I could find and sit there, alone. Ogata could stay here without me, the rope too.

“I'm sorry.” Ogata melted away the feeling in two words. He still believed what he had said to be true, I could hear that, but I could also hear a genuine note. I stopped there and looked at him, trying to see what had made me so angry, but all I could focus on instead was a tree that stood behind him. It reached like a giant hand to the sky, as if it were trying to pull itself up but found nothing to hold onto.

“I'm so tired” Ogata yawned. I nodded in agreement, and we turned back to go the way we had come. But something happened when we turned around. Nothing seemed familiar. Neither of us could

figure out how to get back to Ogata's house. I checked my phone “2:14” the cold, white letters read.

We had been walking for about four hours. I hadn't realized how tired I was until that moment, and I was almost tempted to lay down and sleep in the middle of the road. Ogata seemed to feel the same way, his eyes half closing. I followed him into a small stand of trees that grew in an empty lot between two houses, the reaching tree standing across the road, still struggling for a handhold.

The floor of the tree stand was littered with dry leaves and pine needles. About ten yards in from the road we came upon a clearing. It wasn't very big, but we could see the stars through a small opening in the canopy, so we decided to lay down here. "Goodnight, Faron" I could almost hear come from somewhere, but, seemingly instantaneously, I was asleep.