

The Tree, the River, and You

The sun shines softly upon your face, enveloping you in its warmth. A small breeze blows, gently rustling your hair. You smell the refreshing scent of morning dew after a cold, long night. The sound of rushing water soothes you, like the background noise during a nap in a long car ride. Half-awake, you lay there and bask in the comfort of your surroundings. It has been a long time since you felt this sort of peace. Suddenly, you jerk awake; you don't remember the last time you felt like this. In fact, you don't quite remember anything except blurry bits and pieces. You sit there for a while, focusing on the bits and pieces that feel like words at the tip of your tongue. Flashes of anger and sadness cross your mind, but nothing more specific than that. The faint memories are like a jet black abyss, and you do not know how deep you want to peer into it. You decide to pursue this endeavor later when you are more mentally prepared.

You look around you. A sea of lush, green grass stretches endlessly into the distance as far as the eye can see. Autumn leaves of green and red fall delicately to your side. A leaf makes a tender landing on your head. You grab it and stare at its weird shape. Comparing it to the leaves around you, you see that every single one of them are uniquely shaped. In amazement and disbelief, you look up. An ageless, titanic tree wraps upwards like a coil, reaching for the stars. Its canopy stretches out majestically, blanketing the sky in shades of red and green. Hanging off its thick branches are an abundance of ripe, red fruits. Now you understand that such magical leaves could only come from an equally magical tree. At the feet of the tree is a river so clear, you can see through it as if looking through glass. The riverbed is littered with shiny stones, sparkling in the daylight.

Throat parched and stomach growling, you stand up. You bend over the edge of

the river and cup your hands to scoop a handful of water to drink. The first sip breathes life into you as you feel the cool water wash down your dry throat. It's the most invigorating, thirst-killing water you have ever had. After many more big gulps of water, you set your sight on the fruits above. There are some low-hanging branches with fruits, and given the winding shape of the tree, you begin scaling the tree with confidence. It's even easier than you thought due to there being plenty of footholds and protrusions. You reach the first branch of fruits, grab a fruit, and immediately bite into it. The juicy texture, saccharine nectar, and sweet aroma is mesmerizing. You sit there, eyes closed, just taking in the entirety of the fruit's heavenly flavor. You quickly devour the rest of the fruit and grab a couple more to bring down. As you prepare for the descent, you look out into the distance. Even from a higher elevation, there is only the endless sea of green in sight. There is no sign of any other living being. It's just the tree, the river, and you. Perhaps the only other thing keeping you company are your faint pieces of memory. Thinking about them again, you reminisce about nothing happy. You pause at a crossroad. Your instincts and curiosity tell you to continue, but your heart tells you it's not worth it. That it's not worth voyaging into the abyss to uncover nothing that loves you.

After finishing the descent, you look around for a place to store your fruits. You circle the tree and discover a hole. It had an opening the size of a small window, inner walls fairly smooth, and a flat floor with a cushion made of blades of grass. You place your fruits on the cushion and it fits like a puzzle piece. You take a step back and realize just how convenient the hole is. There are no other holes whatsoever, and for this hole to be shaped so conveniently, you feel like this is not a coincidence. Regardless, you are satisfied, but now you don't have a goal to keep you busy.

With nothing to do, you wander aimlessly through the sea of grass. Not much

has changed; the sun is still in the same place, the breeze still blows gently, and the river still runs. It feels like time is standing still, waiting for your next move. Eventually, you happen upon a strange bud hiding among the blades of grass. It has tiny brown spots that seem like small signs of withering. You hurry to the river, cup a handful of water, and carefully bring back to water the bud. As soon as you pour the water, it wriggles a little bit, and the brown spots begin to disappear. Looking around meticulously, you realize that there are many more buds just like this one. In excitement, you rush to water as many buds as you can find. The buds you water become healthy and green, and you assume that the next step is to just wait for it to grow. Out of breath, you realize that you are thirsty and hungry again from all the running.

You go for a quick drink of water at the river and head towards your stash of fruits. Halfway there, you hear squeaking and the sound of something ravaging your treasure. You sprint to the tree and to your surprise, furry critters have invaded the stash and are shamelessly indulging themselves with your fruits. They look like rabbits, but with smaller ears and tails as bushy and long as a squirrel's. They all look at you with their round, beady eyes, as if they are the cutest things in the world. Unfortunately, they are, so you decide to forgive them. You cautiously reach out your hand and pet the fluffiest one's snow-colored coat. It squeaks happily and scurries onto your shoulder, snuggling you. The others join in on the attack, and with extreme precision and efficiency, they mercilessly bury you under all their fluff. You laugh and try to grab some off your face in order to breathe, but another one quickly replaces it. Knowing resistance is futile, you simply lay there and accept your fate. Eventually, the fluffs calm down and turn their curiosity towards their unfamiliar surroundings. Some work their way up the tree while others timidly approach the river. Those that did not get their fair share of fruits begin hungrily eating away, and the fluffs at the river go for

a dip after conquering their initial fear. You watch them like a proud parent watching their baby clumsily crawl around for the first time, sticking random objects in their mouth. It is quite the heart-warming sight. The abyss in your heart shrinks a little bit with every fruit the fluffs gobble. Likewise, a blurry memory fades with every plunge in the river. You don't try to stop it, knowing that the only things the abyss has to offer is pain you cannot heal and suffering you cannot prevent. It is something you have already realized by now, but your instincts scream against the complete forgetting of your shrouded past. Regardless, you smile. Interacting with other living beings gives you a sense of relief, knowing that you are no longer completely alone. Suddenly, the fluffs all begin squeaking and look at something behind you. You turn around to see the buds that you watered earlier growing.

These strange buds bloom, and out emerges petals darker than the darkest black. And from them, tennis ball-sized droplets of midnight float upwards, dotting the sky like paint drops on a blank canvas. Gradually, the sky turns into a deep, dark ocean. Once the midnight rain ceases, the flowers shed their petals and reveal the secret within: an orb of glowing, nostalgic light. These orbs of light become twinkling stars in the reflection from the ocean above. Looking up, it's as if you were staring at the night sky. You walk towards an orb of light next to the river bank with the fluffs following close behind, some perching themselves on your head and shoulders. You discover that these orbs radiate heat, so you and the critters sit down next to one to stay warm. Suddenly, a slow, deep rumble echoes overhead. You turn around to see a massive whale, accompanied by creatures too far to distinguish, gracefully leap from the water. The whale bellows and spouts a massive fountain of water, as if to celebrate the ushering of a new world. Your breath is taken from you at the awe-inspiring scene unfolding before you, and the fluffs run around and squeak in excitement.

The whale and its friends continue their swim. You chase after them, like a kid trying to outrun the moon. The fluffs chase after you, curious about your sudden activity. Your legs burn and your lungs gasp desperately for air. But there is nothing as desperate as your heart's desire to climb out of the abyss. The sound of your stomping steps drown out your curiosity's scream. The running motion of your arms fights off your instinct's desires. You reach a point where there are no more orbs of light, and you stop to flop onto the grass panting. The faithful fluffs all jump onto your vulnerable body and snuggle you. You watch the whale and its friends swim off into the distance. Before it disappears, the whale leaps out and bellows one last goodbye. Your mind is crystal clear, and all you focus on is the dazzling night ocean, the adorable fluffs, and the serene atmosphere. At this moment, nothing else matters for you. As your heart stops racing and your breathing evens out, you simply lay there. The same morning breeze is still rustling your hair, the sun is still probably in the same place behind the night ocean, and somewhere in the distance the river is still running. But time is moving now. Or maybe, time has always been moving. Maybe, this entire time, you were the one not moving.

After a while, you get up and prop some half-asleep fluffs on your shoulders and head. You begin to walk back towards the grandiose tree towering in the distance. Tomorrow, you plan to explore more of this world. You want to put fruits in different places to see if different kinds of animals will appear. You plan to water more buds so you have enough light to follow the whale. You plan to explore the riverbed and see if there is anything under the shining stones. You have more you want to do, but you decide that these three will be plenty enough for tomorrow's adventure. The fluffs on your shoulders and head are fast asleep. Jealous, the other fluffs scurry clumsily up your body and you cup your arms for the rest of the fluffs to sleep in. And just like that, you carry a bunch of fast-asleep fluffs back to the tree. You put the fluffs down

gently in a tight group. You lay down next to them and an orb of light for warmth. There is nothing in your mind but a deep appreciation for what's around you. The tree provides shelter and food, the river for fresh water, the fluffs for company and love, and the night ocean for excitement and motivation. Gradually, your eyelids become too heavy and you fall into a deep sleep, exhausted from the long day.

Half-asleep, you recognize the lively scurrying and chittering of the fluffs. Your nose is filled with the sweet aroma of the fruits. You hear splashes which you can only assume are the fluffs up to no good. Opening your eyes, you are greeted by the same, familiar scene of warm sun, gentle breeze, and morning dew. Except, this time you are also greeted by the chubby belly of a fluff trying to climb on top of your head. You sigh and help place it on top of your head. With one giant stretch, you get ready for the promising day ahead of you.

There is not a single thing you understand about this place you awoke in. You do not know where the fluffs came from, nor how gravity is seemingly reversed only for the midnight rain. The shape of the leaves, the aquatic creatures above, the delectable fruits; but there is no need to understand everything. Whether you understand or not, nothing will change. Time will move on, and the importance of that around you will not change. This is because the value of the things you have witnessed in this new world is how you love them and how they love you back. There is so much more to do than attempt to rack your brain over every little thing.

Now, it's the tree, the river, the ruthless fluffs, the night ocean, and you. You are finally moving forward. As your final traces of your memory fade into dark, you wonder. What other mysteries are waiting for you?