

Heartscape

I have lived within these four white walls my entire life. I can tell you the number of bumps underneath the paint because I went through each wall starting from the floor all the way to the ceiling, mentally dividing up each wall into thin segments, tallying up each small bump I encountered. That took about half the day. On each wall, there is a window in the center. If you divided up each wall into nine equal squares and numbered them from left to right, the window would be in square number five. Covering each window is a white plastic screen that I can pull sideways to the left to open, but most of the time I leave them closed.

Behind the window closest to the charred blackened scab on the marble white floors, I see two girls in the kitchen of a skyrise. One is small, five feet, wearing her hair down. She is sitting on a bar stool behind the kitchen sink while the other girl, five foot five, wearing a ponytail is across from her, washing her hands. Words are exchanged, and the girl with the ponytail leaves the kitchen and returns with a box of kleenex. The girl with her hair down uses them. This interaction is the first I've seen between them in days. The girl with the ponytail is rarely home. She leaves the apartment around 9 a.m. every day and comes back around 9 p.m., carrying a huge backpack. The best friend, the girl with her hair down, locks herself in her room and only comes out to eat and talk to her other roommates. There are two other girls that live with them, but they are also rarely seen in the kitchen space.

I pull the white plastic screen to the right, having seen enough. I know how the story ends. The girl with the ponytail and the best friend never speak again. I know because the girl with the ponytail is me. My eyes land on the black scab on the floor below the window. Its ragged edges like a festering wound consume the pristine floor. No matter how much I scrape or

mop or scrub, the scab will not go away; its presence is like a petulant child wanting a candy bar and won't take "no" for an answer.

My feet turn 90° to face the wall opposite the door. I pull the screen open, and I'm greeted with the same familiar scene. A girl with a ponytail and a boy with blond hair sit on top of a stone rectangular picnic table. The boy is lying on his back with the back of his right-hand hovering above his blue eyes. The girl is sitting upright, cross-legged facing the boy with her phone camera in her right hand. The boy squints up at her, a soft smile playing on his lips. She looks quickly away and down at her phone, still freshly in love with rose-tinted lenses. Little did she know, she would be heartbroken and jaded for years.

I slide the screen shut with a slam. I feel a wet droplet slide down my cheek; its path is like the fissure that begins below the window I just shut to the center of the room. Where the fissure ends, a white chasm begins, its depths I don't know. I have sat on the edge with my feet dangling above the darkness, the opening like the jaws of a great white shark. *Would I disappear forever if I jumped? Would my existence have mattered?* The cold draft would tickle my toes as I would slowly inch my bottom closer and closer off the edge. When the cold no longer only tickled my toes but traveled up my thighs and caressed my behind, my breath would come out in short bursts, and I would scramble backwards. The chains connected to the shackles around my ankles would shriek against the floor, and I would lay cheek pressed against the barren floor for hours afterwards.

I turn my attention to the last wall, opposite the one with the black scab. The chains clink together as I drag my feet to the window. My hand hovers over the handle for a few seconds before I clench and unclench my fist and drag the screen to the left. A toddler in a bowl cut is laying on the bed. In front of her is an adult man holding a porcelain doll. The object blurs in my

sight and reappears in fragments against the toddler's left leg. My hand shakily grasps the handle and slides the screen shut, the sound like the closure of a coffin. *If parents don't love their children, who will?*

Trickles of deep crimson flow from underneath the window ledge. I immerse my finger in one of the streams. The liquid is warm and welcoming, and I press my stained finger against the white wall. Leaving a mark of my own sends a jolt of adrenaline through me. I bring my face near the ledge and watch the little red beads find their way to the floor. I open my mouth and capture one on my tongue. My taste buds blossom with a metallic tang, and my eyes roll back.

I press my entire hand against the wall, now entirely drenched in red. I can feel the faint vibrations from the other side, the thumps like fists against the plaster.

“Grace
Grace
Grace
Grace
Grace
Grace
Grace
Grace.”

I shrink down and away from the wall. They've come again. The shackles chafe my skin, as I feel the familiar tug from the chasm.

“Come down
Come down
Come down
Come down
Come down
Come down
Come down
Come down

Come down
Come down

Come down
Come down .”

Their voices were like the incessant chirping of crickets. I shake my head, trying to dislodge them. Dragging myself to the far corner of the room, I huddle with my legs propped up in a fetal position. The chains make an upside down “V” shape, and from this position look like railroad tracks. I feel a slight tug on them and glance at the chasm before shifting my attention to the harsh gating of the door against the hinges.

“Let us in
Let us in
Let us in
Let us in
Let us in
Let us in
Let us in.”

Tears stream down my face, as I feel my throat slowly close. *Save me.* The words remain stuck inside, something solid pressing them down. *Someone, save me.* I feel my inner self yearning to come out, like a child reaching for the stars, only to be chained and dragged down by an invisible force I have no control over.

“LET US IN
LET US IN
LET US IN
LET US IN
LET US IN
LET US IN
LET US IN

LET US IN LET US IN
LET US IN LET US IN LET US IN.”

“NO,” my inner voice screams, and I instinctively cover up my ears, even though that doesn’t drown out the voices. Nothing ever does. My eyes land on the chasm again. I’ve been so tired for so long. *What would a reprieve look like?*

My pinky toe makes contact with the cold surface, then my ring, middle, pointer, and lastly my big toe. Each step towards the chasm sent jolts of ice through the base of my foot until my toes hang off the ledge, and I stare down the endless pit. Like a blackhole, no light escapes it.

“YES YES
YES YES
YES
YES YES
YES YES YES.”

A draft of cool air tickles my curtain of curly brown hair shielding my face. They dance like reeds in the wind. Taking a deep breath, I lift one leg and close my eyes. I imagine myself laying on a lawn of grass, basking in the sunlight.

“Grace,” the voice cuts through all the chatter in my head. It’s like the sound of a dew drop falling into a pond, creating ripples in the water.

“Grace.”

My head turns towards the direction of the door, and I notice a soft glow emanating from a man. His face is tan and the wrinkles at the outer edge of his eyes crease with his smile. The glow follows him as he steps towards me, his robes the color of parchment swaying with him.

He stretches out his hand, "Come, child."

From deep within, I feel a warmth that spreads throughout my entire body. Each step I take towards him is no longer like ice but the soft embrace of baby grass.

Tears well up in my eyes as I stretch out my arms to him. I bury myself in his arms, feeling like a newborn cradled in a mother's arms. He carries me in his arms, and I feel myself gently rocking against him with each step he takes towards the outside world.

I sense the light of day from the reddish hue behind my eyelids and open them. We are on a hill. The blue glistening ocean is to our left, and the lush green forest is to our right.

I glance behind him and see my imprisonment from the outside. The walls, while mostly white on the inside, are scarred and blackened on the outside. My heart clenches, and I look away.

"Look again."

I shake my head, not wanting to physically see all the hurt I've experienced.

"Trust me."

I pause, taking in the warm embrace and feel myself relax in his arms. My instincts are telling me he would never harm me, and he would do everything he could to protect me.

Choosing to trust, I glance behind him again and my eyes widen. The exterior walls are now white. A few seconds later, I see the entire structure crumble to the ground and disappear.

I blink, "What just happened?"

He chuckles and uses his index finger to point at my chest.

“You have a new heart now.”

I inhaled deeply. As I did, a new spirit filled me, giving new life to an empty shell. It was like my soul found its way back into my body. No longer was it I who lived but the spirit who dwelled within me.

I look up at the man still holding me, and a tenderness explodes against my chest. His brown shoulder length hair frames his face as he smiles down at me. My eyes drift towards my ankles, following his.

The shackles that I have always lived with fall off. The grime and dirt that has always covered me slides off, revealing peach skin underneath. It was like someone scrubbed every inch of my body clean.

“You’re free now.”

I close my eyes as fresh tears flow down my face.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “What could I ever do to repay you?”

“Nothing,” he smiles and gently tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear, “it’s a free gift.”

“But-”

He puts an index finger against my lips, and I fall silent.

His gaze turns serious and pierces my soul. “Follow me.”

I close my eyes, and a tear slides down my cheek.

“I will.”

We stay like this until the sun sets, and I fall into a dreamless, peaceful sleep.