

The Incident

A faint breeze tickled the back of my neck as I looked upon the rows of grapevines which seemed to stretch on to the horizon. I sat down near a small pond next to the log cabin at the apex of a hill and a frog with spots emerged from the water to provide me company. The sky was spectacularly clear and the sun gifted me with warm beams of light which embraced my skin as a mother embraces a child. A group of Goldfinches harmonized with each other in a nearby tree. I longed to live like the Goldfinches, free to fly away from life's troubles, free to sing melodies all day long. I took a deep breath of the crisp air and came to realize the significance of this moment. This was the first time in a long time in which I had enjoyed the luxury of peace and quiet, the first time in a long time that the screams had stopped. I tried not to think about the screams fearing that if I dwelled on them for too long they would return to torture me. Yet no matter how many times I tried, it was never easy to forget the screams and it was impossible to forget the incident.

The sound of a car door slamming shut saved me from my thoughts before they suffocated me. A young woman with long black hair stepped out of the car, she was tall, slender and walked with grace. Her square spectacles added to the aura of wisdom which seemed to surround her, the papers in her hand fluttered in the breeze along with the frills of her blue dress.

The young woman sat next to me on the grass, flashed a warm smile and said, "Well it is nice to finally meet you in person Amber, I'm Doctor Violet Hamilton, your new therapist."

I continued to gaze upon the sun lit vineyard and remarked, “ I was pretty confused at first but now I get why you had me drive all the way out to the countryside for our meeting.”

Violet politely laughed and replied, “well I’m glad you're enjoying the scenery here but how about we move our meeting into the cabin.” I nodded in agreement and followed Violet into the quaint cabin which overlooked the vineyard. As I entered inside I noticed a small stove and a fireplace with a wooden coffee table and two sofas right next to it. A large bookshelf which served as a resting place for a few dust covered and forgotten novels completed the room. I glanced at Violet's face and noticed that she was lost in her own thoughts, in a soft voice she began to explain,

“My father built this cabin from the ground up, it was his pride and joy and in the summer months he would bring me and my two sisters here. We would have picnics, laugh together, gaze upon the stars in the night sky and listen to the songs of the Goldfinches.” She stared out the window as if to recreate those distant memories and added, “ he passed away recently in a car accident, and all I have left to hold onto are memories.”

She tried to hide it but I could tell her eyes were becoming misty and that she was hurting deep inside. I knew all too well about how devastating car accidents can be and cursed at myself for not being able to comfort her. I nearly laughed at the cruel irony in me, the patient, helplessly watching my therapist cry.

Violet wiped her tears away, sheepishly looked at me and said, “I'm sorry Amber, that was improper of me, it’s just that being in this cabin brings back many memories and I thought the rural scenery would have a calming effect on my clients, but maybe this was a mistake...”

“No please... it's ok, this is fine” I insisted.

She continued to apologize a few more times before we sat across from each other on the sofas. My therapist shuffled her papers, adjusted her glasses, and explained, “we will be starting very slowly and I am not going to pressure you to answer any of my questions. All I ask for is honesty.” My hands began to perspire and my anxiety spiked, but I soon found out that it was not the questions which worried me, but the answers I did not have for them.

First she asked, “Amber, what is your favorite color?”

“What an odd question”, I thought to myself, but the truth was that I had not been noticing colors ever since the incident, the whole world seemed dark and grey. To me the world was nothing more than a canvas without paint. It was an ugly truth so I was tempted to provide Violet with a generic answer but decided to respect her request for honesty instead. I mumbled my answer and to my surprise my therapist was unfazed.

“A canvas without paint, although empty for the time being, still has potential to display art”, said Violet.

Violet swiftly moved on to the next question which was, “Amber, what is your favorite food?” Once again I was puzzled and forced to face a frightening reality, I had not been eating much ever since the incident. I could see that my body was suffering as my flesh slowly rotted away without proper nutrition. I often could not recognize the corpse staring back at me in the mirror with cold, dead eyes. I was alive yet I was dead, my grotesque body was nothing more than a vessel which held a spirit that had long been deceased.

I quietly answered, “I don’t really have a favorite food either, everything has been tasting bland since the incident..”

Violet spoke gently and said. “I want to ask you one more thing, do you believe you’re a good person?”

I shook my head, “not since the incident”, I muttered while my eyes welled up with tears.

Violet began to speak with caution and asked, “would you like to tell me about the incident.”

I glared down at the wooden floorboards and hopelessly attempted to suppress the agonizing memories which pierced the depths of my soul with the intensity of a thousand knives. While holding back fiery tears and choking back my cries, I mumbled in a hoarse voice, “maybe one day I’ll tell you... but today... today I just... I just can’t”

“Amber”, Violet said softly as her eyes which were filled with kindness looked into mine which were filled with pain, “whenever that day comes, I’ll be there for you, I promise.”

In the months that followed, the quaint cabin by the vineyard became a sanctuary, an oasis in the midst of a desert. I met with Violet up to three times a week, always at the same cabin. I considered myself incredibly lucky to have found a therapist who I can trust and who lived in the same town as me. “Maybe Fate had finally smiled upon me”, I thought to myself. Our meetings became the best part of my week because Violet was much more than a therapist, she was the closest friend I had in a long time. Together we sifted through memories from my past, memories of a time when life was easier, of a time before the screams, of a time before the incident. Memories like when I was twelve and rescued a dog I found on the side of the road with a broken leg. Those kinds of memories helped convince me that I was good at heart and it made it easier to forgive myself. I also began to hear screams less and less. Violet's methods clearly worked because my situation was improving. She helped me develop a meal plan, taught

me how to meditate and we even practiced yoga. Yet my favorite meetings were the serene evenings, in which we sat outside and silently painted on blank canvases while the sun gently melted into the vineyard covered horizon. The frog from the pond would often come out to join us and I began to notice that its spots were a dark green color. Soon enough, flesh returned to my body, taste returned to my tongue, color returned to my eyes, and warmth returned to my soul. Violet reminded me that there was still beauty in this world, that roses still smelled sweet, that stars still shined, and that the sun would paint the morning sky no matter what.

But the meetings in the quaint cabin by the vineyard also led me to learn more about my therapist than I ever wanted to. Violet confided in me about her struggles with her father's passing and having to help her two younger sisters. The youngest was in high school and the other was in college so the absence of their father ruined their financial stability. Yet even worse, his passing shattered their hearts because of the hundreds of future memories that would never come into existence. In an instant, birthdays, camping trips, wedding dances, and countless "I love you"s were ripped away from the annals of time. Violet said that she felt lost, desperately hoping to find an answer to who deserved the blame. Was it the fault of man or a heartless game played by Fate?

Then came one evening in which we were silently painting the sunset on blank canvases. The air was cool and the birds and critters had quietly disappeared into their homes as the light began to fade away. It was as if they anticipated what was to come. Violet broke the silence and asked me, "Is it ok if I tell you about the night my father was killed?" She must have noticed the shocked look on my face because Violet quickly added, "I don't mean to be weird, it's just that I think talking about it rather than repressing the memory may help me cope."

“Don’t worry Vi”, I said, “go on you can trust me.”

Violet drew a deep breath and began, “It was the tenth anniversary of my mother’s passing, February 26th, that night my father was...”

“Wait !”, I burst out, “what was the date?”

“February 26th, earlier this year” Violet replied confusedly, “why what’s wrong?”

“Sorry, it’s nothing, go on I’m listening”, I said. Yet that date, February 26th, continued to echo in my mind.

Violet proceeded “That night... I think I remember there being a thunderstorm but I’m not sure...”

“There was”, I interjected.

“Well my father was driving back home on Mortem road in his old grey Volvo from the mechanic shop he worked at. Oh God, that old car always made me nervous, I used to joke with him that the car would get him killed one day but I never thought...” Violet began to tear up and her voice began to shake.

“It’s ok Vi, go on”, I urged.

Violet continued, “My sisters and I were waiting for him at home, we knew how much our mother meant to him and wanted to be there for him that night. When we finally heard a knock at the door instead of our father we were met with a police officer who came to tell us the news. He told me the EMTs did everything they could to try and save him.” Violet wiped away the tears which began to stream down her cheek. “He also told me it looked like a hit and run incident and there weren’t any cameras nearby so they had no way to find who was responsible. Well whoever it was, I hope they know how much pain and sorrow they caused.”

Violet could hold back no longer and began to cry. She went on to tell me about how her sisters were devastated and how hard it was for her to stay strong and comfort them.

“My youngest sister was like shattered glass in the days following the accident, she couldn’t bring herself to eat or talk for weeks.” Violet added. She sat back, took a deep breath again and said, “Besides the cabin all I have to remember him by is the wedding ring the police took off his body.” She proceeded to pull out a ring from her purse and showed it to me. It was a small golden ring with a single red ruby on top.

Up until then my heart was beating rapidly, my hairs were standing on end, and my hands were perspiring, yet I desperately held onto the hope that my fears were irrational like a mountain climber holds on to a ledge. But that ring... that ring confirmed my biggest fear and I would have to live with it for the rest of my days.

“I’m sorry Vi but I... I have to go now”, I quickly said. With that I walked out of the quaint cabin by the vineyard, got into my car and drove back to my apartment. Once there, I sat in the dark and cried until my eyes could muster no more tears. “Oh no what have I done, what have I become?”, I asked the empty void. I realized that fate had never smiled upon me, fate was nothing more than a wicked mistress and I was nothing more than a pawn in her twisted games. After silently sitting in my apartment for an hour I came to understand what needed to be done, a decision needed to be made. I contemplated not saying anything at all, I could pretend it was all a bad dream. Yet I knew in my heart that I could not live with myself if I did that because Violet deserved the truth.

The last time I ever saw that quaint cabin by the vineyard was on a Sunday morning. The sun was beginning to rise and the Goldfinches had started to sing. I envied the Goldfinches now

more than ever, “if only I could fly away from my problems”, I longingly thought to myself. I asked Violet if we could sit by the pond and she agreed. The frog who usually inhabited the pond was nowhere in sight this time. I could tell by her facial expression that Violet sensed my unease.

She asked me, “Amber, is there something wrong?”

I figured there was no point in delaying the inevitable so I told her very bluntly, “I’m ready to tell you about the incident now.” Violet immediately sat up straight, fixed her glasses and said, “Ok take your time and tell me as much as you feel comfortable with.”

“Well I used to be an alcoholic”, I began, “and one day my fiance left me for another woman a month before we were to be married.” Violet jotted down notes on a piece of paper as I continued, “Feeling deserted in a world full of shadows led me to a dark time in my life as I attempted to drown my misery in pools of liquor.” It was becoming hard for me to breathe as I told this story and I felt like a pinless grenade, only a matter of time before the inevitable explosion. I took a deep breath and proceeded, “Then came one evening in which I sat in my apartment and felt numb. I was drained from all the nights I cried myself to sleep and had no more tears to shed. So I decided to head to my usual bar, hoping that the sensational burn from the bitter poison would help me feel something. My drinking binge lasted for hours and each sip of liquor masked my sorrow, but the euphoria never lasted. It must have been about midnight when the bartender cut me off and said it was not safe for me to drive, I should have listened but instead I coldly snapped at him to mind his own business.

Violet interjected and said, “do you want a glass of water, you’re starting to look very stressed.”

“I’m fine” I said knowing that was a lie. I wanted to get this over with and so I carried on with the story.

“The air was still and I noticed a few black clouds in the distance as I stumbled out of the bar and crawled into my car. I sat in total silence for a few minutes before I began to sob. The sobs then turned to screams as I lamented my broken aspirations. Once my voice began to crack from the screaming, I started my drive home. I decided to take a shortcut to my apartment and turned into a dark inroad, a street shrouded in complete darkness as if God himself was blind to it, a street called Mortem Road. Violet put her pen down, I pretended not to notice and kept on with the story. “Suddenly I was blinded by a flash of lightning which was followed by a thunder that roared so loud one would think hell was rising up. Rain began to fall rapidly but in my intoxicated state I was oblivious to the danger I was in. My car began swerving from left to right as lighting kept flashing, thunder kept crashing, rain kept falling, and I kept driving faster and faster until suddenly everything went dark.

“Amber... Please don’t tell me this is going where I think it’s going... please”, Violet said in a shaking voice. I was too scared to look at her face and could do nothing except continue my tale.

“I woke up inside my car with a throbbing pain coming from my head. I stepped out and frantically looked around, panic set in when I realized what had happened. In my drunken state I had collided with a much smaller car, an old, gray, Volvo. The rain continued to pour with great intensity as if the heavens were weeping. I jumped with fear when I heard loud moaning coming from the wrecked car. I walked closer and saw a man in the midst of the wreckage, covered in blood and barely alive. As I walked up to him he began to speak to me.”

“What did he say?” asked Violet in a faint voice.

“Help me, please help, don’t leave me to die, I’m begging you”, I answered.

“I was paralyzed with fear as images of jail cells circled in my head. I realized that the only way for me to escape was to do the unthinkable. I held the man’s hand on which he was wearing a ring, a small golden ring with a single red ruby on top. I told him I was sorry and that I had to go, I then watched as the color drained from his face and hope left his eyes. I pulled away and looked in horror at the crimson blood which covered my hands. As I rushed into my minimally damaged car and drove away I could hear his screams of anguish, screams that I would never forget, screams that would torment me for eternity.

I looked up at Violet, her face was pale and her eyes pierced my soul.

“How could you do this, no... tell me you're lying please”, she pleaded with me .

“I'm sorry Violet, but I’m the reason your father is dead.”