

## Milk

Dusana's second favorite activity was standing on her front porch during the Summer. She would do so exclusively at dawn, while the air was cool and new and the breeze swept the hair on the left side of her face to join the pieces on the right. This air, which always smelled of grass and dew, made her feel a certain sense of lightness and weightlessness; as if it could pick her right up and carry her away. It was so quiet that she believed if this were to ever happen, only the trees would notice.

The silence seemed to follow her everywhere. She grew up on seemingly never-ending farmland with her father—who wasn't exactly a drunk but often drank to forget—and hundreds of cows and horses. She never went near the cows because they smelled like foul dirt, and her father never let her near the horses because he said it reminded him too much of her mother.

Every Sunday at the end of the month he made Dusana ride an hour with him to town so that he could sell the cow's milk for a few extra dollars. This was her least favorite time of the month, and as soon as the 'Market Week' rolled around she spent the other six days moping and dreading it. She hated how hot and sticky it was, and how the stench of the rotting dead animals filled and tainted the air. But above all, she hated the people. The entire ten hours that they would spend there were either spent weaving through people, all of which were at least a foot taller than she, or sitting behind a table as desperate buyers tried to get her dad to lower his already sunken prices. She hated the chaos of it all. When she was even younger she would spend the latter half of the day sitting under the table crying and rocking back and forth, imagining her mother were there with one arm around her waist and the other stroking her cheek. The ghost of her mother's touch acted as a haunting reminder to Dusana that, despite its irrationality, maybe she could've done something to stop her from leaving them.

Her father knew this, so every time they got home from the market, which was usually around nine or ten at night, he'd make it up to her by reading her a storybook and giving her a glass of warm milk. The storybooks weren't much: most of them were from his childhood and were handwritten, so with each month the words faded more and more; which didn't matter since her father had memorized them all. She would sit in his lap in their wooden, creaky rocking chair in the dim candlelight as he read her stories of heroic female knights. Even under ten years old, Dusana loved the stories so much that they *almost* made up for the torture she endured during the rest of the day. The only problem was that she never made it to the end of the story, which she hated and thought her father intended on. She tugged her eyelids with ropes whenever they started drooping to spite him, but she always lost.

Her first favorite summer activity was picking flowers. Not just any, though, but poppies. Not only were poppies Dusana's favorite flower, but they were her favorite thing in the entire world. She always found herself mesmerized by their shape and color: how when they fully bloomed they resembled a bright-red teacup made of the thinnest, softest paper. She also was fond of how they looked in groups. Whenever she saw a field of poppies she grew instantly hypnotized by their uniform shape and color. If there was ever a slight breeze, which was pretty constant, they moved in such perfect unison that they appeared to be a singular entity. Dusana imagined that this was what the Red Sea that she had heard about looked like, though she wasn't entirely sure what that was.

Dusana also enjoyed the poppies that hadn't bloomed yet. Often, she would pluck one out of the ground and would suck on it like a lollipop while she picked the bloomed ones. Over time, she became quite enamored with the taste and sensation of these: how their soft and milky

exterior left a tart,tacky finish on the roof of her mouth. This became such a habit for Dusana that she couldn't start picking flowers with one.

There was one particular poppy field that Dusana always traveled to during the Summer. It was about a four-mile round trip walk through the woods, which she at first found quite boring but eventually grew to love. She enjoyed the sights and sounds of the birds, chipmunks, and rabbits that occupied the forest, and how the sunlight shone through the trees like it was made for her entertainment. The companionless trip never once scared her due to a contradictory mix of naivety, fruitless bravery, and confidence, however, she knew that her father would never let her go alone. So, she always waited until eight in the morning when he would go to the deeper fields to embark on this trip.

On one characteristically quiet and calm Summer morning, Dusana waited for her father to be deep enough in the fields to where she could barely make him out before walking in the opposite direction towards the woods. Once he started to look more like a speck than a person, Dusana hastily and excitedly switched directions and started on the familiar journey towards the field.

The woods appeared as they always had: cool and shady, notwithstanding the spotlights that the sun's beam's produced. The footing, as always, was horrendous. Due to this, and also because of the constant passing of animals from one side to the other, Dusana's eyes were fixated on the ground below. She didn't mind this, though, because it made the trip go by quicker.

Twenty-four minutes later, Dusana arrived at her sanctuary. Right before she exited the woods, she allowed herself, as she always did, to pick her head up and see the red blanket that she approached. As she exited the woods, the poppies, in their grand and vast quantity, instantly

contrasted the pale blue sky above. The air seemed calm and motionless, while the once sunny sky was now replaced with a pale and glaring glow.

Before going on to pick the vibrant poppies before her, Dusana found one closed poppy in the very center of the field— as if it had been dropped down from the heavens for her. From it seeped a translucent, milky cloud stream that started at its tip and divided into eight distinct lines. The liquid wasn't completely dry, but tacky and a bit thick. Dusana plucked it from the ground, smiling, and popped it into her mouth as she went on her way.

About ten minutes had passed when Dusana was about a quarter-mile deep in the field. She only had fifteen pristine and lively poppies in her possession, considering she only picked the very best to bring home. However, as she looked up to survey the field before her, Dusana vaguely noticed a slight indentation in the field of flowers about one hundred meters before her. Curious, she started toward the impression with exceptional eagerness. But, as she got closer and closer to it, her mouth began to open more and more until her jaw was on the floor, and she slowly came to terms with the reality that lay before her.

On the ground in front of her, pressed into the red quilt of poppies was a man that Dusana could not tell was dead or alive. Her heart instantly sank from her chest to her stomach and down to her toes as she let out a hushed gasp. He was dressed in tattered clothes and had blonde, messy hair. But, what was most striking and terrifying were his eyes.

Still open, the man's eyes were bluer than a Summer's sky and they resembled calm lakes. Dusana stared into them so intensely, whether from fear or intrusiveness she wasn't sure. But eventually, her gaze traveled past his cornea, and in his iris, she saw him swimming whilst she drowned, choking and fighting for a single breath. And at once, all of the petals that

surrounded his body joined hands and merged into one, shifting from their once transparent and paper-like consistency into a liquid that Dusana quickly recognized as blood.

Dusana's pupils turned to saucers and immediately she scrambled back as quickly as she could and sprinted with all of her might through the thickening blood and to the woods. Every step was met with more and more resistance until eventually, the viscosity of the blood became unbearable.

Against all odds, Dusana made it back into the woods, where she picked up her speed and didn't even bother to look down at the roots that have deceived her so many times before. Despite her dazed and adrenaline-fueled state, she noticed that the animals were nowhere to be seen and that the air was suffocatingly humid. Suddenly, as if the rays of sunlight peeking through were the wisps at the end of a candle's flame, they transformed into a dual force of solid and gas, and at once what looked like ghosts began charging towards her.

Dusana's body froze but in some way, she kept moving. Her heart, somehow still in her chest, was the only indicator that assured her that she was, in fact, still alive. Still running, she mistakenly turned around to see a congregation of ghosts moving towards her, screaming inaudible nothings that pierced her ears. She quickly glanced down to see that the very ground that she was running on had taken on a royal blue color and in it ten meters down she saw herself drowning once again.

About a quarter-mile away from the woods-end the screeches became louder and louder as the faceless ghosts multiplied from the tens to the hundreds. At one point, they got so loud that they drowned Dusana's ears and turned into thunder, pounding the ground with each and every tree she ran by.

At once one of the voices was distinct from the others: it's calm, gentle lullaby contrasted like black and white against the screeches of the heathens coming towards her. With a certain bravery that only stems from a certain buried confidence, turned around to see that one of the ghost's translucent faces had a shared countenance with her mother. She knew those gentle features, deep smile lines, and sad eyes from anywhere. Caroline halted and began running towards the ghosts,

"Mom, I'm coming, I'm coming! Please don't go away," Caroline's young voice screeched out. At once, all she saw was her mother, and though the other ghosts continued to charge towards her she remained grounded--- their moment slowed down in time.

"No, my baby," her mother intensely yet still softly reassured, "You have to go, you have to forget about me".

Caroline felt a tang of fresh, icy tears cut through her cheeks before hearing her late mother continue:

"Don't let the shadows overtake you like they took me. Run away from them. Run as fast as you can until you reach the sun and please, my love, my sweet angel, never... look... back"

Dusana's lips parted and her mouth filled then overflowed for her stream of tears. Before she could even form a thought, their moment frozen in time had ended, and at once the ghosts that were charging towards Dusana stopped and simultaneously swallowed her mother whole. The ghosts continued to scream how she were there's now, how she wasn't fast enough, how she wasn't brave enough, how she was just like her mother.

Their screaming became so deafening that she had to close her eyes and cover her ears for any chance of making it go away. She screamed at the top of her lungs for them to stop. Screaming, Screaming, until her voice gave out and all that was leaving her mouth were sighs.

Abruptly, Dusana tripped on what felt like a root but stood up, eyes still closed, and tried to continue running. Only, she found herself sprinting into a cotton shirt and a pair of shoulders. Instantly, she opened her eyes to meet her father's warm, hazel ones.

At a loss for words, Dusana just stood there and wept. Her father, even more mystified, began to ask her why she had her eyes closed and hands over her ears. Shakily, yet still afraid to expose her whereabouts to her father, Dusana explained to him that there was something in the woods that she thought was chasing her and that she was so frightened she turned blind and deaf with fear, and that that was why she was running as well. Her father, suspicious yet hesitant, said that he was confused and that he had just seen her walk out of the woods, not run.

Whatever blood was left in Dusana's face left it and she instantaneously grew pale, her countenance shriveling until nothing was left and her face was blank. Fear quickly turned to confusion, at first weighing heavily on her brain before turning to dew on her now clammy palms. Though aware that *something* had to be wrong, a dense fog found its way into her skull and around her brain, suspending her into an inescapable and indescribable hell of both worry and a forced calm. Too young to understand the poppy's influence on her delusional mind, Dusana told her father that he was right and that she was just messing around with him; though, no part of her believed this to be true. He replied by saying that maybe he should stop reading those storybooks to her and that they might be giving her too many fantastical ideas. She quickly and normally replied that the moment he stops reading to her on the rocking chair with a glass of milk will be the moment she stops going to the market with him.

They both chuckled, and he grabbed her hand caringly as they made their way back to the porch. Before silence could take hold between them, her father asked why she was in the woods

and said that she should never go there alone. To which, Dusana replied with such reassurance that she believed it herself to be true, that she just wanted to go for a walk.