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The Willow

Lauren Handely

Wispy willows wind through thorny trails, thick with thistle, with the exception of one that encroaches on the lakeshore. The leaves of this sole invader droop low, and stroke the water's surface. It's as if their own weight had become too burdensome for the branches they cling to.

Beneath this tree rests a woman, hunched over, with long hair that slumps past her chest. It mimics the willow leaves, as it too reaches downward for the water. However, the strands of black opt for a different target, a leatherbound book that the woman clutches with both hands.

The ancient leather is wounded in many places, its internals are not much better. The pages, thoroughly soaked, cling to one another, as if their lives depend on their closeness. From their corners, water still drips, steadily like a watch tick.

The woman gazes downward. Her damp lashes, one still cradling a lone tear, are like a drop of morning dew, sleeping amongst the grass. She traces invisible lines in the cover, passing over the faded title of the book.

Most of the distinguishing marks had long since worn off, leaving only the imprints of wear and time to identify it. In this way it is not dissimilar to a child's first stuffed bear, aging only in deterioration, as the child grows.

It would be less of a shame, if the book had been only a toy bear, and not the woman's diary. Fabric could be put out to dry, paper not so much. There would be no saving the drowned memories, now forever sealed inside the mess of fused paper. A single mistake has erased over a decade of her life. The words of her former self would never again see the light of day.

The woman had hoped to keep them for eternity, and she knew one day her own mind would fail her. The paper would hold onto the parts of her past that threatened to slip through the cracks in her head.

Wordlessly, she rises to her feet. Her willow hair blows back in the wind with the motion. Her gaze passes from the beloved book to out across the water. The scent of decaying plant life and aquatic creatures worms its way into her awareness.

The ocean was always the most romantic of the family of water. There was only the scent of salt that blew in across the endless blue. However, this is not the case for his younger sibling.

The lake reeks of death, and his unkempt shores yield not shells, but bloated carp and tangles of algae. Even still, the willow leaves come to lie gently on his skin, trusting in the reservoir of decay.

The woman clutches the journal close to her chest, close enough it could feel her heartbeat. Then she takes it into one hand, and hurls it as far as her frail arm allows. For a moment she expects it to skip like a stone, perhaps held afloat momentarily by beloved memories, but it does not. It sinks, suddenly and silently, below the surface.

The willow shivers, night air agitating the sleepy leaves. The woman feels the same chill run through her. Night air moves in, as she watches the remaining daylight begin to bleed out into dusk.