

## Daphne

I.

The house doesn't feel like mine. Not since he came. But the Garden does. The land, the air, the pure skies and ebony soil. I understand the dead. I'm jealous of them, I suppose. They become flowers and trees and fungus and dust on tongues. How lovely would it be, to be free like that. But I don't intend it for a long while. I don't think about all this in the short term.

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II.

He has a beautiful name. He used to come here when we were small with his father, an old family friend, but since then he's become tall and brutish. His golden hair simmers in the light and glares in the darkness. It was just a bit longer than it should be, than what was 'proper.'

Last night I sat up until the witching hour and only fell asleep when I grew lightheaded from fatigue. I felt him awake near me, felt him in the air from down the hall. He came here only in the summers, but it has been years.

I felt him near, and I couldn't sleep. So, I watched the moon until my eyes blurred and I felt tears fall without my consent. Tonight, I think I will do the same.

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III.

He asked me today, ‘How is it that you’re nineteen and still a virgin?’ I was still in the little stone pool, swimming up and down its length. He lay on his front in the grass. A little red radio played a sweet and impending tune I’m sure I’ve heard before. I didn’t know how to answer his question, so I made a vague noise and pretended not to hear him. He asked again and told me none of the girls back home were virgins. I told him I had no interest. I told him I wanted to stay a virgin forever. He laughed at me. ‘No one can stay virgin forever.’

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IV.

He found me in the library today. He walked in and stalled when he saw me sitting in the window, a tenderized book cradled in my lap.

He paused just inside the door then wandered to the piano, lifted its lid, closed it, sighed loudly, looked anywhere but me. Left. That was all.

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V.

I went to the garden this afternoon. The house seems to me lately like a palette of stone pressing into my breasts. They feel heavy beneath his opal-eyed gaze. I keep my neck bent; face hidden. I can’t stay there anymore. He knows where to find me if I do.

There is a little place I know behind the house. The trees arch above me, dancing excitedly when stroked by the breeze. Light pours through them like water, landing in droplets on my eyelashes, inner wrists, thighs. It feels like bathing. I don't know how else to say it. Gently, oh so gently I feel flowers rest their perfume upon my neck and hair. I feel the breeze like gossamer over me and I become suddenly tired. The moon was my bedfellow, keeping me awake at night. I can't sleep in the dark anymore.

But here it is bright and clear and crisp, and the grass is soft as honey coated lips and I can't feel anything near me I do not want.

It is here that I forgot him. I took the little red radio with me, turning it low. A nightingale sang a lullaby that accompanied the static croon flitting through the tin speakers. And slowly, oh so slowly, I drifted far and away.

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VI.

Tonight was the first time I thought he may hurt me.

Laying amid empty bottles and saturated in August air, he asked if my father had really died in the river out back.

I told him yes. A few years ago. I can still hear his ghost splashing about. It comforts me when I hear him, but only in the daylight.

'An orphan,' his lips were bright red and unraveled.

He wavered as he stood and asked me to dance. I kept to my seat. He scoffed and grasped my arm, pulling me up and saying, 'Oh, be a good host. Be a good, little host.'

I shook my head, but he held me, arms like lead. I peered, hazy, into the distance as he nuzzled my neck, the stiff outline of an erection pressing against my hip.

He breathed me in.

‘A virgin,’ he whispered. ‘A virgin.’

One of his arms slid down my back as if it had gone limp. I felt it coast down my body before circling back upward, slithering beneath the hem of my dress. I tried to push him off. He laughed. I struck him across the face.

Then he stood still, looking archaic and inanimate. I could feel my hand beginning to pulse with the beat of my heart and I couldn’t breathe.

We were statuesque.

He became suddenly gruff, grabbing both my wrists in one hand and dragging me down the hall toward the bedrooms. I was sure I screamed, I needed someone to hear, someone to know. I did not choose this.

Only the fireflies and stars could hear me, and they were kept away by these stone walls and this man of scalding gold pulling me further and further from the world.

When we came upon my door, he flung it wide, and I departed from myself. I dug my teeth into his arm. He dropped my wrists and I tried to run but he grabbed me by the waist and threw me into the bedroom. I hit the ground and pushed myself backward. He did not follow.

No, he stood in the doorway, high above me, jaw fluttering like wings.

‘Daphne,’ he said. ‘Dream sweet.’

He closed the door. The lock clicked.

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VII.

I climbed out the window when the sun began to rise and went to my garden.

In the night a congregation of irises formed at the base of a small laurel tree. They seemed as if they were smiling, matronly faces draped in deeply coloured hoods. Modest and gentle.

The air was fragrant, and the stubbornness of the evening clutched at the ground, the beams of daylight woke the birds and their songs. My lips lifted hearing them, my chest began to twist, and my cheeks began to pinch and ache.

I spent the day making daisy chains, threading through strands of my hair and ignoring my empty stomach. The sun set and I returned to my window. I did not sleep.

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VIII.

He knocked on my door. I did not answer.

He tried the handle. It did not budge.

He called my name. I did not recognize it.

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IX.

These are my last words.

I do not pray to men. I will not beg the high gods, they are not of this earth.

I will not hand over my body nor my soul. I will not leave any other world but my own.

To anyone who wishes to know, to anyone privy to my truth, I will tell you. He found me.

He spotted me amongst my trees, my flowers, my breeze, my very *name*. He saw me like an animal and chased me for sport.

I ran from him. Through the foliage I tore and did not think of anything but the wind in my hair and the fire in my lungs and my heart leaping towards my tongue. I felt him come closer, closer, his breath hot on my neck. His unclean fingers trying to grip my hair, flaming in the midday light.

Not my body, not my soul, he cannot have me.

There was the river ahead. My father. I felt as though I called to him. And I felt as though he answered. The rapids carried my body, hands passing me from one to another, and deposited me on the far shore. I heard a yelp and turned for a moment to see him on the other side. I watched as he stood, his eyes flicking along the shore for a place to cross. He could not.

His eyes found mine and he called my name. He yelled at me. Awful things. Things he felt he was entitled to say.

I turned away.

I brought you with me today. I brought you because something within me said I must. So here is my last declaration.

There is a laurel tree. She has grown tall, taller than I will ever be. I will climb to her high branches, and with the rope from my robe I will hang, pale like a leaf in winter.

And you will not have me.

I will become the trees, the flowers, the fungi. I am in the wind, I tower in the trees, I'm crying with the sky, and I rage with the wind.

You will never escape me.

That is my will.

That is my word.

Remember me.

~~ Daphne

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