

Last Day of the Season

On the last day of the ski season, Audrey Rose climbed into one of the pines near the Mardi Gras tree, a tree on the mountain where girls throw their bras and panties, and colored beads. She took a bunch of beads, took her top off and scrambled as high as she could. As the lift went by, she threw beads to the skiers and boarders yelling ‘Rebirth.’ The boys cheered and whistled. A few skied down wanting more, but she said ‘I’m so sorry, but I’m otherwise occupied.’ Ski Patrol yelled at her, but she wouldn’t budge. Mike and his friends waved to her and invited her to dinner, a place they had fed her many times by now. Still she waited.

Until the man with grey eyes came. He got down on one knee. ‘Milady, the court requests your grace and presence.’

‘Mi’lord’ she replied, ‘I shall oblige.’

Audrey Rose scrambled down, jumping the last five feet into snow. She stood under him and looked into his eyes.

“Your eyes look like rain, like the storms of Africa.” She was afraid they might snow.

“Have you been to Africa?”

“No. But they look like I imagine.”

“You’re a strange bird.” The way he said it, as if she were a bird that might fly away.

Audrey Rose’s wings felt cracked and hollow. She didn’t like that word. Strange. She felt the lobsters snapping their claws inside her until he smiled. She reached her arms around his neck. “Yes, your eyes look like clouds about to burst.”

“Hop on.”

Audrey Rose jumped on his back, felt the softness of his fleece against her breasts. He was sturdy under her, skis gliding through the snow. Celtic music swirled inside her head.

A butterfly flew by.

“Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“It was a butterfly. They carry hope, so if you touch their wings, they die. Wouldn’t you like to carry something like that on your skin?”

“Right now I’m just happy carrying you on my skin.”

“Mi’lord, really. They say a perfectly formed butterfly is rare.”

“Not so rare or beautiful as you.” His words sang to her. She knew what the words wanted, but for today, the words were enough.

When they reached Gondola Square, she jumped off. He wrapped his fleece around her. The fleece smelled like him, yet had no smell. It existed and was as he existed and was.

He stayed in the penthouse at The Grand, the hotel that took up half the landscape of the small town. Long hallways, cowboy furnishings and poor dead deer sacrificed for the antlers, chopped from their heads, then hung casually from the ceiling with bulbs glorifying their stagnancy. There were several bedrooms, beds made and one, sheets rumpled, clothes spilling out of a suitcase. She knew it was his space even without the clothes. Already felt him creeping inside her.

He ordered steaks and wine. They sat at a wooden table, with chairs for ten around it. Audrey Rose insisted they each eat at the head of the table. Audrey Rose ate the steak with her hands, as she ate all her food. She liked to touch the things that were going inside her. He smiled and shook his head. She licked her fingers. She crawled across the table to him, sucked the grease from his lips.

He carried her into the bathroom. He took off his clothes, clothes that felt like her faded memories. Clothes that held tales of money and power. Clothes she would never own. Her clothes came off easily, lay crumpled on the floor. They showered together, a tropical rainstorm filled with hibiscus, pink, red and yellow. Parrots and vines hung above her, snakes crawled across the ground to find cool places to hide. She twirled and twirled. When he could catch her, he kissed her softly.

In bed she moved down to his toes, where she sucked and licked. His toes were clean even in the in-between spaces. His toenails were short and smooth. She waited for him inside her, but he flipped her over and entered the only space she had never let a man. It hurt. It hurt her so badly she wanted to cry. But she was silent.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded because she didn't want to be alone. She only wanted to curl into his warm den, to feel his skin against her, rest her head against his feet. She clenched her fists tightly against her heart, but he didn't notice. He didn't notice when the tears came. He didn't notice when the blood came, either.

She went to the place where she had hope, a place filled with butterflies, but this time she had no wings.

He gathered her to him, moved his snake tongue around her mouth. She opened her eyes and saw snow and hail in his. Just a moment, if it was even there at all. When he fell asleep, she crawled back down to his toes, trying to rest in his scent, but there was none.

In the morning he said “Before you love, you must learn how to walk over snow — and leave no footprint.” He said Tennessee Williams had written that.

“Tell me more.”

“I’ll send you more. Surprises for you, from me.”

When she got home, Audrey Rose carved those words into the mud with a stick, over and over again. Words and letters overlapping. It took away some of the pain. Her tears dried up.

She waited for surprises.