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Lost

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My feet are swinging off of the side of the bridge. I kick off a ratty shoe, watching it arch in the air. It hits the water, dissolving under the foam. The other one follows. I want to do that with all of my body parts. The head, the arms, the swinging legs. Let me drop them off, one by one. I will settle at the bottom of the lake. Lost.

There are cars passing by, a dull roar in my ears. I hope they don't notice me. I held on as long as I could to this life, but I have had enough. I am done. My face has been coated in plaster for too long. Now it is cracking and peeling. I don't want anyone to see what's underneath.

I unsling my backpack from around my shoulders, worn and ripping so much that it hardly holds anything anymore, and drop it. I watch the fabric lift in the wind as it falls, flapping like the gown of a dancer, pirouetting to its end in the water. It leaves behind a wave. The water ripples for a while after, and I wait for it to stop. I look around one last time. The leaves on the trees are red and gold, the branches extended to wish me goodbye. I stand. What do I have left to anchor me here?

I lean forwards, tipping slightly. On my toes now. I am up higher than I've ever been. I have lived forever in this miserable place. I'm seventeen now. It seems like it's been longer. I've seen what the world has to offer me. I've seen and despised it all. I have seen death, and pain, God, so much pain. I feel sick with loathing. Sick with hatred.

My naked feet slide on the edge of the metal bridge. I let them. I slip off.

I fall forwards. I drop. The trees are burning. The sky is falling. Wind pushes on my limbs, trying to keep me up, begging me not to collide with the lake, but it is too weak. Screams

are keeping me conscious. They are everywhere. They are coming from the earth, my rapidly approaching destination, my mouth. My hair is too long and all over my face, stabbing my eyes. My breath is gone. My heart has left my body. I hope it had a parachute. It might be saved from this fate, then.

I hit the surface.

It happens that fast. My head goes sideways on impact. I am in agony for a second, as soon as I hit. I *feel* things inside of me breaking. The screams have stopped. I lose my thoughts. I bob up on top of the water and try to take in a painful breath. I find them again. How am I alive? My head can barely move with the pain. I am looking in the direction of the bridge. The sun is there, shaming me, blinding me, reflecting off of that hunk of metal I jumped from. It looks as tall as the clouds from where I am. Birds are flapping the sunlight away for fleeting seconds, flying over me, casting shadows on my face. They are cawing, screeching passionate war cries, hunting for fish.

I feel things touching my legs and my bare feet. Through the physical pain, I move my arms to swim away from whatever is lurking beneath me, but the waves I've caused are coming. One barrels towards me like a train. I need to escape. I thrash and cough on water, but it's impossible to stay afloat. I am forced under. To see where I'm going, I open my eyes. There are no fish. There is only a man. He stares at me, wide eyed and curious. I rise to the top and spit out lake water. I am terrified and frustrated, but the waves are still coming. I am pulled back beneath the surface. I can't keep my eyes closed, so I see him again. He is closer now,

somehow. I frantically push myself backwards with all of my strength, but I am only propelled a few feet. I need to get out.

Air explodes from my lips in my attempts to move, bubbles clambering on top of each other to get to the surface. I stop. It hurts my eyes to keep them open like this. I squint through the water. He has caught up to me. His hair is floating in a crown above his head, a dark black creature with a thousand limbs, colored to match his eyes. I am afraid. He lifts a hand and I flinch away, clawing for the top of the water. Instead of hurting me, he pushes me up. I gasp for air. I sink back down, my arms failing me.

We are alone, him and I. Not even seaweed keeps us company. He stares at me, and I stare back. I am still sinking. My hair splays out in front of my face and I shut my eyes. They ache! I can't keep them open any longer. I kick, expecting a surge of pain, but it does not hurt as much as I thought it would. I kick again and again until I feel air on my face.

With my nose and eyes just barely above the water, I see a large rock in my path. I lunge for it and hang, too weak to pull my legs from the lake. I rest with most of my body below the surface. I am gasping, eyes teary, everything hurting. I still feel like I can't breathe.

The water moves around me and my grip tightens on the rock. The man's head emerges beside mine, too close for comfort. He moves back a little when he sees the fear in my face.

I rest my head on the cold surface and will the pain to stop. I watch as he grabs on next to me, his hair pushed back from his face. I am struck suddenly by the beauty of his features. Angular jaw bone, soft eyebrows, thin lips...

“Who are you?” I ask. It is difficult to speak. I feel like I am choking on blood. I let my eyelids fall again, cutting off my vision. I hear him speaking, splashing the water as he talks. His voice is rough and low. It reminds me of the waves that have ebbed, the ones that stole me under and tried to drown me.

“My name is Fein. I was walking by when I saw you jump in here. I swam out to see if you were alright.”

My first thought is *what an odd name*. But then I wonder, *how could he have reached me in time to be there as I sunk?* The lake is expansive and deep. I suppose he could have made it if he were already in the water. But why would he lie? And, if he were in the water before he saw me fall, *why would he be swimming in the middle of the lake all alone?* I open my eyes. He is right there, and I can see his dark pupils because he is so close, too close, emerging like a fish from the shadowy depths. I jump at his sudden proximity, anxiety verging on terror. My lungs do not appreciate it. They stab me over and over again. I wince each time.

“Why did you do it?” He asks. I am distracted by this question.

My response is muffled by the rock, and though it is only a whisper, it grates on my throat.

“Jump?”

He can somehow hear me, and his nod sets me free. I am aware that I am clinging to a rock in the middle of a lake. I am aware that I am suffering. I am aware of him, Fein, his interest in me, and the fact that his story doesn't add up. But I begin to cry. And shaking makes the stabbing worse, but I cannot stop. I am getting weaker by the second.

I can see my mom's face, broken, self-pitying. I remember her voice. I remember the way her coffin was closed, because the burns were so bad. They called the house fire accidental, but they were wrong. I knew her. I *knew* her. She had left me with a father that didn't care, who lived on the other side of the world, who never sent me so much as a birthday card, and who didn't notice that his daughter had not shown up to come live with him after his ex-wife died. She had told me that I would grow to love him, the day before it happened. She had told me I was going to visit him soon, and had sent me off to school. I had walked home to find my things out on the street, unscathed, and both my mother and the house up in flames. It had been so long, too long since I first contemplated jumping. I hate her. I hate everything. I tell this to Fein. I cannot see him through the tears. I let out loud, hacking sobs. I take in shallow breaths. The tears stop coming, but the physical pain intensifies. I scrub at my eyes with one hand, the other fisting the rock. My feet are slipping on algae covered footholds, trying to keep air in my lungs, trying to calm down. He touches my shoulder and I slip further, my neck half submerged.

I look at Fein and see that he is floating, hardly moving, hardly doing anything at all. There is a sort of pity in his eyes, I think. Pity and something else. My own eyes are too tired and burning to tell.

"I can't do this" I croak. He nods, but his hand is still on my shoulder. My nose is going under the water.

He touches my face with soft human fingers. "You're drowning" he says, but his voice is familiar this time, and I think it might be mine. I try to shake my head, but I am running out of air. I look

at him before I go under. My body feels heavy. My mind is lagging. I kick with my feet, but they fall like cement blocks. Please let me propel myself to the surface, let me breathe. I see the sky, the blurs of white clouds, can hear the gulls through the distortion of the lake. But then I see his hand around my throat, bigger than I thought it was, see his face, a dead one, impassive, a shark's. His eyes are all black. He is growing teeth, huge, dangerous teeth. I do not care anymore. I feel my body lurch into a descent. I feel the tug of water through the spaces between my fingers and toes. My eyes give out for good. We dive. We plummet. I dissolve.