

**AN EXPLORATION OF LOSS, OR RATHER, THE WAY THINGS GLOW IN
THE DARK**

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I knew that people grew to resemble their landscapes. I had seen too many dry, separated people in the desert, and waterlogged, unpredictable people by the ocean. I had seen people trying to barricade me with noise and hurried exchanges in the city and people trying to avoid my notice in the snowy countryside.

You see, I have aided many people through the years. However, I have been given a bad name by Grief, though we are not the same thing. I heal. He hurts. It is my belief that people fear me because they fear the process of letting go. It is not unusual to be afraid of this. Everyone I have ever met has been.

The girl I found this August, however, was unlike any I had seen before. To start, she was different than most people I found in Colorado. Yes, she was bright and colorful, but she was not as lofty as the peaks, cold as the snow, or sweet as the winter sunlight. No, she was not the mountains. She was bright and intense like a mural, pieces of her interlocking to create a bigger picture. Upon closer examination, however, I could see the way that she was melting at the edges like little droplets of misplaced spray paint.

I found her in the RiNo district, surrounded by spray paint fumes. She was leaning against a brick wall painted with eyes. They looked like they were crying.

It didn't take me long to find the pain, lodged between her ribcage and her lungs. I pried it from inside her and placed it in a jar. She curled up around the place that it had been, as if she were protecting the hollow in her chest. It was funny how people seemed to almost miss the pain. I knew that the space would fill, though. It always did.

I should have left after I had removed the pain. But for some reason, I didn't. I followed her as she stood up, and I followed her as the sun laid down behind the snowy peaks in the distance, and I followed her as she danced around the street lights and into the mural cladded alleyways. I followed her as she ran her hands along the walls and hummed to herself.

I should have pulled myself away. But I could see her soul shining through the cracks in her skin, and it was like she was the lighthouse and I was the boat on the stormy sea. I sought it out and moved ever closer. Soon, the sun had completely gone, and I was left with her in the streets.

Though the sky was dark, the city wasn't. Cars sped along the street, washing out everything in bright, white light. Street lamps flickered, seeming to cast more shadow than light, though perhaps that is what made the light so apparent. Every once in awhile, a door would open, either to a restaurant or pub or party, and snippets of conversation would fall out, stumbling over their feet in their haste to leave.

I could see her watching the people in the city as she moved past them, almost as if she longed to join them. I felt the pain in my hand grow heavier. Perhaps it was loneliness that I had removed from her.

She wined through the spaced between the gap-toothed landscape, moving farther away from the busy, bright main streets and into the darker, quieter side alleys. I could tell that she was in her element now from the way that she seemed to dance through the darkness with the absolute grace of someone who knows their territory. As she plunged farther into the darkness, she seemed to brighten even more, her color blooming in the absence of the light.

And always, I followed her. She had moved through dozens of streets before she finally stopped to catch her breath. It was near a large mural of a cyborg with purple skin and golden gears, and she seemed to match its sad, hopeful look. I felt her pain grow hot in my hand.

And then, she spoke.

Looking straight at me, she said, “that’s mine.”

I stood stock still. No one had ever noticed me, let alone spoke to me. I was Healing, as ethereal and insubstantial as Death itself. But there she was, standing defiantly with feet spread apart.

“It’s mine,” she repeated. “I need that.”

And suddenly it occurred to me that grief and pain were as much a part of a person as lungs and limbs. I nodded and moved in to replace it in the cavity in her chest.

“No.” She held out her hand to stop me. “I can do it.” She took the pain in her cupped hands and tucked it into her chest. Once it was secure, she looked up at me again. “Thank you.”

I smiled then, and she returned it. Then, turning on her heel, she melted into the shadows again.

This time, I didn’t follow.