Josephine the Dragon and the Isle of You

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The moments go quicker the closer they are to being over, Josephine noticed during a night of reminiscing over old photographs. There's a book full of pictures in her lap, each page decorated with photos of her family. She had to find the best few, the ones that spoke the kindest praise, told the funniest stories. Whispered of the good nights and shoved the bad nights beneath an old rug in her mind. Josephine could never picture a life without Hailey, so she lived in those photos instead. They had to be perfect for Hailey.

Josephine greedily looked over each photo as if it were precious. She thumbed over one of Hailey during golden hour, when the sun began to kiss the horizon and everything was drenched in honey. In the photo, Hailey picked weeds faster than they could ever hope to grow, a pile of them getting ever larger in the wicker basket at her side. It could go on forever, the feud between the hand that picked them and the dandelions that grew in the front yard. Hailey had a way of making things feel eternal.

"Momma told me I'd get a cent for every weed I picked," she trilled, southern twang dancing in the air. She was so young. "How many are you going to pick, then?" Josephine had asked.

"All of them," the young girl said giddily.

"All of them? That's at least a thousand. Can you even count to that?"

"I'll learn how to when I'm countin' my money."

Josephine hummed in amusement, watching her sister stomp through the grass.

Grass is an invasive species, their mother had once said. Smothering the clover and honeysuckle, a damned green monster that we're stuck with. It made sense now, her contempt for the evergrowing, persistent plant. But back then, it was simply one of

those odd things that older people say, falling unto young ears not yet deaf but just as unlistening.

"How long are you going to stay out here?" Josephine asked.

"Until it's dinner time," Hailey said. "We can fry up some of these dandelions, can't we? Or make jelly?"

"We can make whatever you want," Josephine said. It was a mistake to plant the idea of 'anything' into a kid's mind, but Josephine couldn't refuse Hailey's gummy smile, or the way her short blonde hair fell into her eyes. Her blinking eyes were so full of life, then, even when annoyance flitted across her features. The frustrated slap of her hand against her forehead as she tried to push the strands from her brows, or the silly way she paused to pull up her hand-me-down socks every few steps.

Josephine tumbled out of the memory, trying to once again focus on the photobook in hand. The album was worn and frayed, holding onto the memory of touch as tightly as Josephine held onto it. The fabric-bound spine was stained with glue residue from repairs, pages wrinkled from the dampness of spring and tears. The photo album was supposed to be an artifact for Hailey to look back on when she was older and embarrassed, not the reminder of her absence that it had become. She leafed through the frail sheets, examining the photos rubber-cemented onto them. One of the family, grinning as they stood in front of a live evergreen wrapped in LEDs and garnished with tinsel. Another of just Josephine herself, milking a cow for the first time. Another of a grumpy Hailey shoveling hay into a wooden trough, a hungry horse impatiently snorting behind her. Another with Hailey, Josephine hidden behind the lens of the camera. Another, and another, and another.

She sighed, discontented with the progress she'd been making through the book. Every second she paused, searching through the depths of the photos, searching for any sign or reason as to why what happened had happened. But there were no signs. It was as sudden as it was quick. It was as unfair as it was inexplicable. She closed the book gently, leaving it on the corner of the glass coffee

table that was still smeared with Hailey's fingerprints and the wax of her crayons.

She trudged to the kitchen, hand running through once-shaved hair growing into a greasy buzzcut. In solidarity she had shaved her hair. It felt foolish to miss it when such greater things were missing. It curled at the nape of her neck, tickling the shell of her ear as she began to rub at her temples. The fluorescent light of the kitchen was nothing like the warmth of the photos. This spring wasn't like last spring.

Josephine pulled a small jar of dandelion jelly from the cabinet and stuck her finger into it. Her mother would've scolded her. Her sister would've asked for some. But nobody was around to do either of those things, so she sucked on her finger and reveled in the taste of honey and lemon all alone. The uniquely earthy hint from the dandelion came in waves, sometimes rich, other times more delicate. All the time it reminded her of Hailey, though.

She sat on the marble counter, clean save for a few take-out containers and one moldy container of 'My condolences!' muffins from a kind but nosy neighbor. Josephine sighed, her sticky lips parting in defeat. Perhaps one day it would hurt less, or she would get stronger.

She thought back to another photo, one taken right before they'd found out. Hailey was smiling, one of her last real smiles, tucked in her bed with princess covers and silk pillowcases for her hair. The symptoms had started rearing their heads by then, tired and fearsome and written off as the flu.

"Isle of you," Hailey said, playing with Josephine's long hair. It was a place they made up, one they went to when they played. It just so happened to sound like 'I love you.'

"Isle of you too," Josephine said, leaning back as Hailey pretended she was a hairstylist at a high-end salon. Hairbrushes littered the star-studded blankets, hair ties hiding away in the fabric's folds. They laughed, speaking their secret tongue.

"Does it look good?" Josephine asked.

"Well, it sure looks," Hailey said, leaning back defeated. "It's all tangled."

"Here," Josephine said, reaching for the brush. Her manicured nails were painted a deep purple. She began dragging the brush through her hair, snagging on the bits that braided together.

"Can we play something else?" Hailey said.

"Of course," Josephine said. "What do you wanna play?"

"Dragons," Hailey said. "You're the dragon, I'm the princess. You have to kidnap me because everyone loves me and if they catch me, they get rich. But then you have to fly away because everyone is going to come after you next. "

"How am I going to fly?"

Hailey smiled, lifting her arms in the air and wiggling her fingers. It was the universal sign for 'pick me up!' and Josephine obliged. She would always oblige. She carefully grabbed her sister beneath her arms, lifting her into the sky. The bedroom's ceiling light shone behind her head, illuminating her golden hair with a beautiful glow. It was a halo adorning an angel's head, Hailey's smile bright as a thousand suns. Josephine the dragon flew around the house, leaping from step to step down the stairs with a giggling Hailey in her arms.

Josephine climbed those stairs now, fingertips collecting dust as they ran up the bannister. The house had been empty for a few days. It would stay empty for a while, save Josephine and her grief. She had nothing but a funeral to leave the house for, now that there was nobody to take to the park. She reached the top step, listening for the familiar creak that always sounded when someone tread on the time-warped wood.

It was a comforting sound, a reminder of Hailey and how she would try her best to sneak around during the night, only to be

tattled on by the top step. Josephine entered the first door on the right, Hailey's old bedroom. It stayed the same even after she began changing. When her hair grew thin and fell out, the silk pillowcase stayed on the thick pillows. As more and more blankets joined the bed to cover her chilled bones, the princess comforter remained on top, bright, pink, and covered in castles and unicorns. The walls were still pink. The window panes still warped with age. The ceiling fan's blades still painted the colors of the rainbow. Nothing and everything had changed, all at once and never at all. Time went so fast it stood still, warped by that disgustingly poetic lens of grief.

Josephine sat on the edge of the bed, feeling the comforter drag on her fingertips. She sat where she sat hundreds of times and imagined the moment she had imagined hundreds of times.

"Am I sick?" Hailey asked, voice uncharacteristically small. They sat outside on the top step of the porch, letting spring's gentle showers wash away their fears of the future. What they said now didn't scare either of them. They could be whatever they wanted, here on the Isle of You. They could be healthy, or sick, and it wouldn't matter one bit.

"Yes," Josephine said, because she could never lie to Hailey.

"Are you sick, too?"

Josephine thought for a moment. "Yes." And she was. She was homesick, already missing what wasn't yet gone. "But not in the same way."

"Not like me?"

"No,' Josephine said. "Not like you."

They sat together in silence, playing no games, picking no dandelions. Instead they looked out into the front lawn, watching a small family of rabbits hop through the invasive grass. Invasive, like the mutation in Hailey's lungs. The mass that kept growing in secret while Hailey coughed and wheezed. Her chest pains and death rattle, the grass of hurt growing inside her heart's garden,

smothering her own clover and honeysuckle. It was like their mother knew, knew this grass was like a cancer, killing anything that dared lay roots in the Isle of You.

Josephine turned to look out the window, despite its warped nature, and feasted upon the view. Golden hour once again, it always seemed to be golden hour. A kindness or a taunt, she couldn't remember, but regardless she saw it clearly from up here.

A thousand dandelions, growing untamed and unpicked, waving in the gentle breeze, carrying florets across the lawn in an act of defiance. Rabbits eating the seeds, distributing them all over, growing more and more and more. Invasive all the same, but golden and beautiful and just like her hair. Josephine thought of all the money Hailey could make, picking these dandelions that grew wild and free. A thousand tiny pinpricks of yellow in a sky of green, waiting for somebody to find them.

Josephine cried. She cried until the corners of her eyes were raw from rubbing, sobbed like a child who had never experienced grief before. She spent the last remaining days of her youth planning a funeral. She chose the casket, the cemetery, the shade of concealer and the nail polish they used to decorate what remained of Hailey. Bright yellow nails, and a princess dress. Josephine felt like a dragon, watching over the young girl in her tower.

There was a slideshow at the funeral, full of photographs picked from Josephine's photobook. They were grainy from enlargement and flickering out of an old projector, a relic of a happier past. They were a poor excuse for the warmth of Hailey's laughter, but they held her smile all the same. Josephine's bouquet for the simple gravestone was made of dandelions and grass, plain and unbecoming but so full of love you could smell the sweetness of the jelly, the softness of her hair, and the feeling of a photograph, heavy in your hand.