Through the Door

Sample Version

Oscar Lenore
Condemnation, why?
Because my duty was always to beauty;
That was my crime.
— Depeche Mode, *Condemnation*
Chapter 1

Once opened, never again to be closed.

These were the words on the door in front of me. I had closed my eyes and opened them to this. The door was plain white, set into an even plainer white wall. Nothing remarkable about either of them. I’d closed my eyes to my ceiling and opened them to this.

I stepped closer to the door. My hand touched the knob, almost turning it before pulling it away. I didn’t even know where it went. Why open a door that I couldn’t close if I didn’t even know what was behind it? Some muffled sounds seemed to make their way through, almost familiar, although I couldn’t distinguish them.

Perhaps something might turn up if I follow the wall. Turning to my left, I took a few steps, seeing nothing change. The wall stretched as far as the eye could see before and above me with no interruptions. Still I moved on, hoping for any clue as to what might lay inside. Step after step after step, I grew bored. Maybe the other side offers a better look. I turned once more, only to find myself no further from the door than when I had started.

I froze for a moment, wondering if I had gone insane. I certainly hadn’t felt as if I were treading the same ground over and over again. I passed the door, trying the other way. Looking back after a few steps, I found myself still that same short distance from the door. There was only one way left, away from the wall entirely. Walking backwards this time, keeping it in my sight, I attempted to retreat. Still, I was unable to move more than a few feet away. I was treading the same spot over and over again, the door staying the same distance from me.

How...?

My assessment of the entrance became even more cautious. If something dangerous lay in wait there, there was nowhere out here to escape to, and I wouldn’t be able to shut that door for a barrier.

For now, it would remain closed.
Chapter 2

I was here again, in front of that door. I’d thought I wouldn’t see it again—it had only appeared once, and it had been months since then. Truthfully, I wished that the first time had been the last, and that the decision was over. That would be easier than having to make the same decision again and again, knowing each time that if I went with the other option, there would be no going back; yes, it would be easier to say that the door was closed, and that was that.

There was the muffled sound of shouting through the door—not clear enough for me to pick out what it was over or even to pick out the specific voice, but clear enough to set me on edge, to make me feel my heart like a stone in my chest. I hated that tone of voice. Why would I want to go through that door when it meant getting closer to the source of it? Why would I want to tremble more, to become so sick from terror that I’d wish to throw up in desperate hopes of it easing the nausea that permeated my body?

Hopelessly, I tried again to get away from the door; it was of no use. The voice remained at the edge of my perception.

I just wanted to wake up.

The next best thing was dulling this dream, I thought, kneeling down and curling over myself with my hands pressed against my ears. I would have screamed to cover the sound if it weren’t for the fear that whoever was shouting would hear and come running out that door to find me.

It wasn’t enough. Though the sound was even less distinct, there was no going back from the knowledge of what it was, what those vague distant sounds meant.

*It would be nice to know how to forget.*

Of course, it would be better yet to stop being so weak. That voice wasn’t yelling at me, didn’t even know that I was here. It was so ridiculous to shut down from something that couldn’t hurt. Even if it were right in front of me, even if it were picking me apart, so what? Would it leave a bruise, would it cut my skin, would it break my bones? There was no reason, no reason at all, to feel this way.

And yet I did.

I wished that behind this door there was another me I could slip into, one who stayed calm in situations like this. I wanted to be somebody else, a trade I’d make in a heartbeat.

I lifted my eyes to look at that door as if to pray to it. Something had slipped out from it while I’d been in this state. A little stuffed bear, its sweater fraying and its fur worn. I
recognized this bear. I once was unable to sleep without it. I held it close to my chest in my then tiny arms every night, my way of making sure it would never disappear, that I would always have its comfort.

I picked it up, running my fingers over it, turning it over and examining it. I hadn’t seen it in years, and yet here it was, something whose location I had no way of knowing, and yet which still lingered inside of me.

Why was it here? Why had it been there?
Chapter 3

The stuffed bear wasn’t here this time. I almost laughed at myself for the pang of sadness and loss I felt at the blank, unoccupied white before me—I would have laughed if it didn’t hurt so ridiculously much. I’d had something constant for a moment, only to lose it again.

Stop feeling so upset over a stupid stuffed bear. Despite the years, there was still a child in me, someone who cried over lost stuffed animals. If only I could exorcise it from myself, then all would be okay; then I would be who I was supposed to be. Instead I was tempted to go where I didn’t need to go, and where I didn’t know what awaited me, for just a chance to get that bear back, to see it again.

I stared at that damned door. Only my third time in front of it, and already I was quite tired of the sight of it. Maybe I could just enter, surrendering to the question—giving in to the answer that could never be taken back rather than the answer that may have to be repeated endlessly.

And that bear. I could see it again, too—or at least I hoped so. It was really quite stupid to want that thing again so desperately, but there was nothing else to spark my interest in this blank whiteness—and, on top of that, it was a tether to uncomplicated childhood joy, something I could no longer feel but could still smile at its remembered simulation.

I approached the door, my hand uncertainly grabbing the knob. The fact was that at some point I would probably give in and enter, overcome by the inability to stand the isolation out here, and so I might as well get it over with. Slowly, I pulled the door open, eyes intent to see what was behind it.

There was only impenetrable darkness. Not even the longest night of winter was this dark, not even when under a new moon. This was pure black; if something lay beyond, I would have to pass through it first.

Well, if I’ve already opened the door, I may as well go further in. Gone was the shouting of earlier; I was met only with a silence that felt as if it would swallow me whole. Once I had entered, there was nothing to give me a sense of direction besides the light of the door’s opening behind me. For better or for worse, things had retreated more to their homes inside this dream-world.

Time was lost to me as I moved forward with nothing to mark it. Gradually, I heard the edges of other sounds, too indistinct to interpret the words, only tone—the hushed voices typically reserved for infants. There was the noise of an infant crying. Nothing came in
response; the cries grew louder. Some grumbled discontent, followed by attempted soothing. The smell of baby food; scent, too, had now appeared. A dull gray light began to take precedence, enough to make out vague silhouettes, flashes of two people, likely mother and father to the crying infant, not yet anywhere to be seen. I reached my hands out, but touched nothing.

I stumbled into memory, a dream within a dream. Here I was, at one end of my first bedroom, watching myself at the other end. That self I saw was still an infant, napping in his crib. Gradually, he stirred awake.

*I know how this plays out.*

He grabbed at the bars of his crib, pulling himself up until he stood. Others began to enter his room; first, my brother, who called some words out that I didn’t yet understand, and thus didn’t commit to memory. The child pulled himself up along the crib’s bars, encouraged by having someone watch him. Then there were my parents, entering the room and sitting down to watch; it must have been their voices which I had heard earlier. Excited at his audience, my younger self, pulled himself to the top of the crib’s walls, proud of his strength, the same pride of a man who has climbed mountains. He looked around him, checking for approval of his accomplishment, and then he fell, crashing to the floor.

Everything faded to darkness again—that was where my earliest memory, that dream, had ended. A strange thing to recall, but that was how it had happened. Still I moved on, catching brief glimpses of things I vaguely remembered: puppets on a television screen, round and salty crackers, a bowl of milk and cereal, stuffed animals.

That stuffed bear. There it was, under a small bed only large enough for a toddler. There I was, around three years old, searching for it on that bed and finding nothing. *That shouting I heard before—* The child-me began to cry, unable to find the bear that comforted him so much when he drifted off to sleep. Loud, stomping footsteps hurriedly approached, as more quiet and soft ones followed behind. I glanced around me, finding myself right by the bedroom door. Hurriedly, I moved to a corner of the room as the door burst open violently and my father strode in, up towards my younger self.

“What’s going on?” he asked, barely contained rage in his voice.

“Beary,” the child answered, still unaware of the signs that someone would soon boil over. My mother hurried over, searching all over the bed before looking under it, picking up the bear. Before she could hand it to the child, my father ripped it from her hands, throwing it at him.
“We came here,” he yelled, “for a stuffed bear? Take the thing and stop crying.” The child stared in shock, not knowing what he had done wrong. My mother just stood there, watching my father yell, saying nothing. The two left the room. I was alone with myself.

The shouting I had heard from outside of the door must have been this, then. Somehow, this moment had flared up inside of this mind-world, burst outside itself with such ferocity that I was unable to ignore it. Just one moment, less than a minute... It was a memory I knew well, the oldest story of my actual life which I could recall. Terrified by the father I loved, offered no rescue by the mother I loved. Yes; that moment had certainly been a mistake. There was no use dwelling on it. I allowed it to fade from my vision with no protest.

The area I passed through was now much lighter, less obscured by black nothingness. There was my mother, encouraging me as I shaped letters with my mouth. Running around with the kids next door, chasing after each other and then sharing a snack of cheese crackers my mother had brought us. Running to my father when he walked in the door, back home from work, feeling his warm arms wrap around me. They were hazy as I watched them, existing in that unreality of early childhood. I strained my eyes to see closer sometimes, and only succeeded in making the images fall apart.

I passed through door after door, drifting again and again through my first home, slowly watching myself grow older. Another door; this one was different, with a small windowpane in the middle. I opened it, finding myself in my Kindergarten classroom. My younger self sat there, silent as the other children talked on around him. Sometimes he would open his mouth only to find someone else already talking, and soon close it once again. He frowned, unable to figure out how to communicate with the others.

I was glad that he couldn’t see me, couldn’t ask how things were after he had grown up, for I would have to explain that I still couldn’t figure out the dynamics of conversation, that if I were to be placed, with all that I had learned, where he was now, I would be no better at knowing when to speak and what to say. I turned my face away from him, looking up to find myself in the middle of the street.

It wasn’t a street I recognized—neither any of the shops that lined it or, nor any of the buildings rising up in the distance gave me any clue as to where I could be. I walked along, looking for anything that could tell me was: a map marking my position in this (yet unknown) city, a bus stop, a train station, or perhaps a shop with guidebooks; I had no luck. I still hadn’t seen even one familiar landmark. There was a park ahead. A woman sat on a bench, alone.
Having had no luck by looking for anything which could indicate my location, I decided to approach her to ask.

“Excuse me,” I began, once I’d reached the bench, “what city is this? And where in it am I?” It was an embarrassing question to ask—she would definitely think I was stupid not to know even what city I was in—but there was no way out of it.

She made no response, and didn’t even look up at me. Maybe she didn’t hear, maybe I was too quiet. I repeated the question, but she still didn’t take even the slightest notice of me. Maybe I’ve done something really wrong. Giving up on getting an answer to her, I walked over to the park pond to check my reflection. There didn’t seem to be anything wrong with it, at least not anything more strange or off-putting than normally, but perhaps that alone was too far for her. Or maybe there was something wrong with me which I was too ignorant to notice. I bent down closer, trying to get a better look at my image. Still nothing seemed noticeable to me.

Drawing back, I looked for someone else I could ask. A family sat nearby, under the shade of a small circle of trees. I approached, hoping my hesitation would convey my reluctance and regret at disturbing them. “Sorry,” I asked, “but what city is this?” They, too, were silent. None of them lifted their heads towards me. Was this some purposeful ignorance of me? But then, why had they seemed not to take any notice of me at all? If they wanted to ignore me, wouldn’t they need to take notice of me first before deciding to cast me away from their attention? Had they seen me or known of me before and decided already not to interact with me in any way?

I could feel my heart beating heavier in my chest, as if it were about to drag me down by its own weight. I needed to rest somewhere, but I didn’t even know where to find a place where I could be alone, without anyone being able to observe my embarrassment. I returned to the pond, wondering if appearing different would change anything. Really, maybe there was something detestable about my appearance. I took its water in my own hands, bringing it to my own face and scrubbing off the makeup as a wild guess. I scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed until my face felt bruised under my fingers, until finally it looked reasonably clear.

I’d already been seen too much at this park; it was better if I moved on to somewhere else before trying to ask anyone again. I took the road to the right, finding a small plaza. Here was as good a place as any to ask. “Hello?” I said, approaching someone standing in front of a statue of a man I didn’t recognize. No response. I asked again, a bit louder. Still nothing. I moved on to the next person, and the next, still getting nothing.
Had everyone in this strange city conspired to ignore me? Had they brought me here without memory to watch me run about in confusion, all so they could laugh at it? Beyond my sight, out of my range of hearing, were people watching a camera feed of me, chuckling every time I tried to get the attention of someone new, every time I made some new wild guess as to why I was met with no response?

Was there something I could do to surprise them, something they would have no choice but to look up to see, even just as a startle response, so I could know for sure? But then, wouldn’t they just laugh harder at the extremes I’d gone to? What if they were just doing this to see how far they could push me? What if they wanted some excuse to say I was awful?

I would have to avoid really acting out. Falling down with an exaggerated motion, I howled out as if in unimaginable pain. Still no one looked over, even as I lay on the ground screaming for help. Completely oblivious to my presence, a man walked towards me.

*I’m right in his path. Will he step over me?* The man made no effort to move as if I weren’t there at all. I held my breath, waiting to see if he would trip on my and give up the game.

His boot passed right through my stomach. I felt nothing, no physical sensation at all—it seemed he didn’t either. I didn’t know what to think. Standing up, I tried to touch anyone nearby; each time, my hand went right through their shoulder.

Did I imagine all of these people? But then, why did they move as if perfectly real? Why, when one picked up a stray bag, casting it in a recycling bin, did it not fall right through her hand? Why, when a boy reached his hand up to touch the leaves on the tree above him did they rustle in response?

*Am I imagining myself?* I remembered the pond from earlier, my hands bringing the water to my face. Had I deluded myself into thinking I had really done that, too afraid to confront the truth? I walked to the nearest building, gingerly touching the wall. The brick was rough under my fingers, and I swore I could feel tiny grains of it crumbling off under my touch. I pressed my palms against it now, wondering if I could push them through. Nothing happened, except that I could feel the bricks’ rough texture scratching my skin. I started to bang my fists against the wall, trying to break through, only scraping my skin and causing it to bleed.

“Fuck!” I shouted. What was wrong? Was I not trying hard enough to dissolve my own delusions? But then why did my skin hurt so much where I’d torn it on the bricks? I slammed my head against the wall in frustration; now my forehead, too, bled, and my neck groaned at the impact. Were all of the people around me projections meant to taunt me? Whenever they caused anything to move, was this just as much an illusion as the cleverest stage magician’s tricks? Or
was I some ghost, doomed to wander a world unrecognized and unrecognizing? Was the sadness
I always felt longing for a life I’d lost long ago? Or perhaps I was just insane.

*I’ve had these thoughts before.* Yes—there was a before, a me who really existed but
wondered if, somehow, he didn’t. When was that? Why?

I had to remember who I was, where I was before.

*Dreaming.* Yes, I was dreaming. I had been in my kindergarten classroom, watching my
younger self fail to connect with those around him—and then I was here, in this hell of my
imagination. If I closed my eyes again, would I find myself again back there? No longer two
dreams deep, but only one?

Or, most merciful of all, would I wake up?

I shut my eyes. I caught momentary glimpses of other classrooms, ones I had been in
before, feeling just as alone, before the dream faded and I awoke.
Chapter 7

The child faded into the background. My parents no longer noticed him, turning their gazes to me. I couldn’t escape them though distancing myself from the boy this time, allowing him to endure all the ways they trampled over him accidentally.

“You’re growing up. It’s time you venture from the home a bit,” my father said, pointing out the window. There was a large forest surrounding the house.

Am I wrong to feel so relieved at this? I wanted to be on my own, recoiling at the thought of enduring their proximity further. But wasn’t that cold and ungrateful to the very people who had been so kind as to house me? Didn’t they love me, after all? This opportunity was great not because it allowed me to get away from them, but because it was a chance for me to measure up to the man they’d raised me to be.

“Come on,” my mother said with a smile, opening the door and leading me out of the house. The boy rushed out—I thought of shutting him in, to keep things simpler, as, after all, my parents were the ones leading me here, and he could only get in the way—but he had gotten out before I could do so, and I couldn’t put him back now.

We walked through the woods, my parents ahead of us. They led from the house to some future, some way and some place I would make my home. The path was clear; though occasionally my leg brushed against thorns, that was all. Wherever my parents led, the trees cleared out of my way.

I was distracted by a tugging on my arm from the child. He pointed off in another direction; there was a slim path—present, but difficult. Vines, hanging from the branches, strung themselves across the way. The path itself was narrow and rough, hardly the wide, smooth thing before me.

I wouldn’t trust the boy to navigate it on his own. But if I went that way... it would be difficult, but not dangerous. And then, if my parents went this way, it would be so easy. So simple, to get to where the child led me, to what I felt in my heart drawn to.

Timidly, without the excited confidence of the boy next to me, I called out to my parents, gesturing in the direction the boy wished to go. It was an odd route, and I might be hurt, but I knew what it led to, and that was my goal. They frowned, shaking their heads.

“This way is safer,” my mother said. “And what you want... you won’t be able to go back from it once you get there. Not now.”
My father was wordless. I didn’t know which I feared the most, between this and his rage. There was a quiet terror in this, an apprehension of what lay under that untelling surface. Wordlessly, they moved on. I followed, giving an apologetic frown to the boy.

He still pointed desperately in that direction. “Maybe later,” I whispered. As we walked, he grew more frantic, continuing to point to our left. He tugged harder on my arm, bruising it with his small fingers. I wanted to go that way too. But...

I made a tentative step in that direction.

“I wouldn’t go that way if I were you.” There was a rare harshness in my mother’s voice as she said this.

I could feel myself tremble, but forced myself to speak. “I’m going this way whether you want me to or not. I would like you to join me.” It was true. As much as they had hurt me... they had only meant to help me. And I knew this was because they wanted the best for me, too. Because they feared I might be hurt. But if they would journey that way with me, clearing the path ahead just as they did now, I would be much safer.

“You are still,” my mother said in a low voice, “in our domain. And I would suggest you not go that way, as long as you want to be able to remain here.”

I was silent for a moment. Did she mean...? She couldn’t, but—what else could that signify?

“Are you saying,” I asked slowly, after collecting my thoughts, “that I will no longer be welcome in the family?”

She winced at the directness. Stepping back a bit, she softened her voice, acting meek again. “That’s a question you would have to ask your father.” His inexpressive back remained turned to us, oblivious to the conversation.

Briefly, my lips trembled, the question on my tongue behind them, but I never asked it. I swallowed the question, choked on it. I could never admit it.

We moved on, the boy sliding into dejected silence. He said nothing, only dragging his feet. He might seem, to one who didn’t pay attention, to have accepted this way, to have acquiesced to whatever fate this would lead to. A strange movement of his in the corner of my eye drew my attention. He licked at his own skin as if to clean it, glaring at me when he caught me staring. Something in his eyes told me that if I observed him more closely, something would—I couldn’t say, exactly, except that I felt it drew me towards something irreversible.

I couldn’t take my eyes off, however. There was something in me that strained to know what it meant, what the child’s winces were for.
I considered our journey so far. There was a certain hardness that this path required of me. Not that it was necessarily difficult, being so easily set out before me by my parents, but—it calloused me, the soles of my feet growing tough, the palms of my hands losing their softness whenever they moved a branch out of the way. If the boy’s hand, locked in mine, tugged against it now, there was no guarantee that I would feel it, so numb to the touch my hand had become. I was supposed to appreciate this, the way it strengthened me as a man.

Wasn’t that why he wanted to get out of here? The boy chafed against me, his hand red in mine. I dropped it, shaken by the look of pain on his face. He was much less adept at hiding his emotions than I had become. And yet I could so clearly see his embarrassment. There was such an obvious shame he felt, that it had been noticed.

I hated to see him so timid already, so easily frightened. “It’s okay,” I whispered, myself too afraid that my parents would overhear. “We’ll go there later, alright? Once we’re out of here.” He nodded, quiet. It didn’t change the situation now, how horrible this was for him. But what could I do?

We moved on, but he walked slower and slower. I could see him struggling to keep up. I slowed down myself, keeping my parents in my sight, hoping they wouldn’t disappear and leave us here alone. As I approached the child, something came into definition, what he had been afraid that I would see. Too frightened by my mother’s reaction, my own self had become horribly frightening, as if the truth had to remain with this suffering young boy.

Thorns wrapped around his legs, obstructing his movement. They cut into his bare arms too, and I watched how he tried to lap up his own blood before resigning. He’d been able to hide it until how, but now it ran down his body unceasingly. I looked at my own hands, seeing the thorns growing out of the palm. Had I…?

If I hadn’t been more careful, would my own flesh, whatever it had become, have dug into that child’s weak skin? Would I have destroyed the boy in some way, ruined the one part of me who truly lived, who was not just some ghost damned to stay walking about in human form? I could see the thorns now snaking up my own body, but hardly scratching it, so tough had my skin become, numb to all sensation. Even the breezes which played through her did nothing to catch my attention, when they had been so pleasant to me before.

I tried to walk right in front of the child as we continued, doing what I could to mitigate the damage. Still I could hear him crying out in pain, my efforts unable to stop every new thorn that climbed up. I knew to ask for respite was useless, and it was no use for my parents to look at
the boy. I should have abandoned him long ago, I knew that was what they thought. I should have shed his quick-hearted emotions and passions in this adulthood.

I saw the thorns and agitated my body against them, letting them dig deeper into my skin. With some strange feeling—relief or fear or both—I recognized the stinging feeling as they dug into me, making me bleed and flaking my skin off until it once again had something of its old sensitivity—although, held in their sharp clutches as I was, it was mainly a sensitivity to pain. I couldn’t help but yelp as they stabbed deeper into my flesh, blood and tears mingling on the ground beneath me.

This was the last recourse I had, the last hope I could cling to of getting that parental kindness, or at least forgiveness if I strayed, too tormented by this path. They turned around with disgruntled expressions, my father casting his eyes over me briefly before removing them, the same way one surveys a pile of worms. My mother saw his indifference and took on a softer expression, approaching me.

In that soft, loveless tone, she spoke. “Your father and I are very worried about you. You hang back because you’re still letting yourself think of… that other path.” She hesitated on those words, loathe to name the issue. “But we just want what’s best for you. That way… it’s not safe.” I strained to speak, to use my voice that came so difficult to me to tell her that it would be much more safe if they were by my side, but she continued on. “At least not right now. You need more time to be sure.” The boy clung closely behind me, unable to express himself. I had always been sure, because he always had been. He, untampered with by the world, holding in himself infinite potential futures, was quite certain. But they had known him then. If that were not enough to convince them of my long incompatibility with this place…

“You’re letting those thorns hurt you. We’ve brought you this way to strengthen you against them, to stop you from feeling that pain! We know it hurts, but you’ll get through it when you stop with this.” She backed up a bit, ready to start of again, before turning around and speaking with a barely-contained hardness in her voice. “And,” she said, “if you continue to have these problems, we will need to keep you even closer to prevent you from getting yourself hurt and us not being there with you.”

I was utterly defeated; not even this suffering had drawn any sympathies. Still my father loomed silent and inscrutable in the distance. After a short distance (which nevertheless felt impossibly long, as I watched the boy continue into a deeper pain), we came to a fork in the path before us.
Passing some resources to me—food, water, tools that might be useful to me—my parents waved me off, taking the other path. This was but a preparation for when I would depart more fully, no longer sustained by their grace. We walked until they were out of sight, and then I paused to look at the boy. He bled all over, exhausted and near collapse. He panted, his lungs pulling shallowly at the air, as afraid of pushing against the thorns if he breathed more deeply. We were at a critical point, past which he might become subsumed by his own pain, so hostile was this land to him.

I could alter, somewhat. Harden my skin. But there was myself in my purest form, untouched. He could not change like that, so much more fundamentally and wholly himself. For his own sake, we had to make a departure, as hard as it would be.

I looked at him, giving a meaningful nod. He knew more strongly where we needed to go. We slipped to the left, finding ourselves in a stretch of woods that was hard to navigate. The only thing clear was the way back—not yet so far away that we could not go back unchanged. But that was the whole problem. The trees grew thicker, and sometimes the vines hanging between them were so frequent that I had to take the knife I had been given and cut through them.

I watched the boy’s breaths slow and grow more deep as we walked further, relaxing from the shallow, panicked breaths of before. Encouraged, I pushed on, even as the way we took became more confusing. Occasionally, we passed others, also headed in a similar direction. Our paths never intersected for long, but we always smiled to see these others, at this fleeting relief of our loneliness.

There was a fear growing inside me that something might happen if we pushed forward. My mother’s words echoed like a drumbeat in my head. Would I be unable to return to my parents? I couldn’t last long out here without them. I had no food, no water of my own, and no way of procuring such things.

I could die.

But I couldn’t go back there without pushing onward first, without seeing what the boy wanted. I knew if would kill him, if we continued that way, and then—what was the point for me? I hardly lived—my body was hardly and more than an empty vessel—but he had such force in him, was still somehow so connected to this world despite everything, and I could not allow my one solid tether to this life to snap.
We paused to eat and drink. The sound of footsteps drew closer, caught our attention. Another man approached, his eyes shining with interest. “Are you going that way, too?” he asked.

I nodded. “I… think so.”

He smiled, sliding down to sit next to us. “It’s hard, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. … Yeah.” I stared at the leaves on the ground before me, their color a dull brown. “It could have been easy, you know? If–”

“Mhm.” He smiled sadly. “I can’t… I don’t even have food. And I can’t go back.”

Wordlessly, I passed him some of my food. Several sandwiches, a canteen of water. I couldn’t give him somewhere to return to. But I could give him this, paltry as it was.

“Thanks,” he said. “Really. I was getting hungry.” Of course he was. We sat there silently for a while longer, not having much to say but appreciating that we had found someone to travel with. Standing up, we continued walking.

I stumbled, tripping over a root. So many roots crossed this forest floor. It was hard, difficult to navigate, and so I found myself laying on the ground, my gaze meeting nothing but dirt. The boy tugged at my arm, begging me to push on, but I didn’t want to move. I was so tired. I could just rest here...

A hand grabbed at my forearm, pulling gently. I grabbed back, my own hand grabbing onto this other man’s arm as he pulled me up. “You can’t stop now,” he said, softly. I nodded. We stumbled on, finding our way through the trees.

We drew upon a clearing with a pond at it center. The boy rushed forward, his excitement uncontainable. Dipping his hands in it, he smiled at how easily it washed the blood away, dipping gently into his skin to soothe it. I followed after him, watching as my own skin softened under its influence. I knew that this would make it hurt so much more to return—but I wanted, while I could, to have this for myself.

We drank from the water, feeling our bodies absorb it. There was something calming about it, and we submerged ourselves into the pond, letting it wash over us. The stubble on my face washed away, my hair grew longer, flowing with the soft rippling of the water around. The boy, too, had longer hair, which he ran his fingers through with a laugh when we came up to breathe.

I looked down at myself, seeing how even my clothing had changed, jeans exchanged for a dress, its lace embracing me so naturally. The boy, too, had found his outfit similarly changed, now in a blouse and skirt. He beamed, and I did too. I could tell that he wanted to go further, but
this was yet impossible for us. The vines surrounding this clearing, except for where we had entered, were so thick that my knife was unable to pierce them.

They would have been easy for my parents to cut through, with their resources.

We had to return. This wasn’t yet a world I could survive on my own. Others like us stood beyond those vines, but we could not reach them. I looked around for the man we had walked with to here.

I could not see him. Whether he had moved on or simply gone—I had no way of knowing. I hoped it was the former, that perhaps he had found some way through those vines and discovered a new home in that other world—it felt like an other world to me, trapped here as it was.

I hoped he was alright. But I had to go back. Whether it was cowardly or wise, I would not endure the difficulty that awaited if I pushed on alone except for the boy. Whispering my apologies, I began the way back, enjoying while I could how free of thorns this place was.

It wasn’t long, of course, before I could feel them prickling at my skin again. The boy cried with every step; I picked him up, feeling him drift off to an uneasy sleep in my arms. It was strange, without his tugging at my arm, but there was nothing else for him to do but slide into dormancy. For a brief moment, he had been free—he had been revitalized. I had to hope that this would be enough. I carried him along this path, feeling directionless. My skin toughened again, but not as much as it had before.

Eventually, I found myself once again in front of that house, led here by the path. My old clothes were gone, and here I was, standing in this dress. I had no choice but to go in this way, my mother’s threat whispering itself in my ears. *What if I lose everything? But maybe... they'll see how much better this suits me, and come around. Won't they?* I wanted to believe they would.

My hand shaking as it turned the knob, I opened the door. My parents stared at me, taken aback, but they said nothing. Not wanting to broach the topic, I slid off to my room. The boy still slept.

I took a moment to sit down, looking at myself. My skin was crossed over with scars, dully aching, the feeling a heavy throb under my skin. Some were fresh, some—old, almost as old as I was. Had it really taken me so long to notice them? I hadn’t noticed the thorns clawing at me until I had seen how the boy cried at them, realizing how numb I had become to them, or—perhaps this was my imagination, a childish exaggeration of something normal.

Or perhaps I scarred easily. Perhaps my own body was simply weak.
Stop making everything up. There aren’t even scars. You see them because you want to, and that’s all.
Chapter 8

There was a slight discoloration on my arm. Not a bruise, but healthy either. Still, it didn’t hurt. I ignored it, staying where I was—a cold seat on a moving train. I scrambled to take everything in, lost and confused in this new place. It was unfamiliar to me, and the boy was nowhere to be found. Where it was going, I didn’t know. The voice on the speakers announced something—likely an upcoming stop—but I couldn’t make out what it was. Yet everyone else seemed to understand, looking up just to look back down with the same blank look, or readying themselves to get off, inching closer to the doors.

The train rumbled to a stop, another unintelligible sound from the speakers accompanying the stop. Some, getting off together or parting ways, spoke to each other. I couldn’t understand them either. Everything I heard was as if through water, almost recognizable, but never recognized. A few more people got on to replace those who’d left, and the train jerked to a start again. I felt some pain shoot up my arm.

The discoloration had grown. I touched it delicately, wincing immediately. The skin there was softer, too, more delicate to the touch than usual, and my finger left a slight indentation where it had been. I frowned, looking up for any maps. There was one directly across from me, marked with different lines and stop. No matter how hard I strained my eyes, the words remained out of focus.

Another announcement, another stop. The skin of my arm grew a sicklier purple color as I became accustomed to the rhythm of the train, its stops and starts, the people filing out and new ones filing in. Only a few others remained from when I first found myself here.

The pain now was duller, more spread out. I touched the original site—now so small in comparison to the discoloration that spread halfway up my arm—and found it completely numb. Only when I got closer to the edge, approached normal skin, did I feel any sensation. I pressed down harder on the numb skin, expecting to feel pain. Instead it peeled away, leaving only air where that part of my arm once was, as if it had never been there at all.

I held my hand over that area, not wanting anyone to see. I waited for an announcement again, the slowing of the train, to speak. “Is there a hospital near this stop?” I tried to ask. My tongue was stuck, as if the words were foreign to it. They may as well have been. I tried again, driving myself nearly to tears, finally forcing the words from my mouth. A few people glanced in my direction, neither saying anything nor making a gesture in response. My whole arm had gone purple, pieces of it disappearing as it brushed against anything it touched.
Maybe there’s just not a hospital near here. I’ll try again at the next stop. And so I waited, silent. Whatever sickness this was had begun to spread down the side of my body, which began to give way to that familiar numbness. The train slowed, and I got on my feet, stepping towards the door. Yet the stop came quickly, throwing me off my balance with a pain in my leg that stung. I didn’t need to look to know that it had reached there too. As hard as I tried to stand up again, I was always brought down, my leg trembling against itself. Looking up, the train had started up again. Nobody looked at me.

I was a fair distance from the door, but perhaps I could crawl my way towards it. With my one good arm, I dragged myself along the floor, still unnoticed. Every time one side brushed against the floor, I hissed in pain, feeling more of myself disappear.

Another stop. I could see a platform across a gap, a gap too large for me to cross. “Help,” I cried out, with a tongue nearly consumed by the sickness. There was no response, only legs wordlessly stepping over me. “Help!” I yelled, seeing a few glances in my direction; they seemed confused, with no sign of recognizing what I said. I tried to point towards my destination, but the doors snapped closed.

The crowd in the train was thinner now, the next stop further away than the rest. Nobody got on, and I felt as if everyone were leaving towards somewhere important, somewhere I should be, but I couldn’t join them. Any speech of mine was now unintelligible even to me, my jaw hardly opening for the pain whenever it moved. At each stop, more people left, as more of myself faded away. I let out a scream as a final effort, before it was soon swallowed up. My tongue was no longer.

Only scraps of me lay on the floor of the train.

I was soon alone. The train kept moving, throwing me about every corner, never stopping again. I tried to gather my body into myself, wasting away so quickly. Nobody came to help, and I had no way to help myself. My arm was gone, my leg, that entire half of my body gone. The edges of what remained crumbled away, leaving not even dust behind. I was powerless to stop it or do anything, watching only as I disappeared, the eyes last to go.