

The Perpetrator, The Bystander, The Earth

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TW: Violence against women

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This is the story of how I lost you. And how you lost yourself.

On an island that dares not have a name, Elara sleeps soundly. Surrounded by the sounds of the jungle. The warm wet air. The cool ocean breeze. She is, in a way, an endangered species. A spectacle made of me, of you, of us. She is everything that your world has left. And everything I long for. Both my most precious belonging, and an extension of *myself*.

Elara wakes to the sound of soft waves crashing on the sand, just thirty of forty feet from her head. The soft canvas matt where her body rests greets her kindly. She opens her eyes and finds the small shack where she has spent her life. The sea weathered wood floor, and waterproof tent like roof. This is her shelter. She needs no more, she wants no more. She cooks by fire. She is a grazer, an earthling. A beautiful piece of the jungle. A welcomed inhabitant.

She is the most beautiful thing most have ever seen. Small but not slight. Long curly black hair and sun kissed olive skin. Large and loving eyes. She exudes a warmth, a light. The trees, the monkeys, the oceans, the crickets... they all bow to her. She is one of them, and the best part of all is, *she knows it*.

Dear reader, know that she is one of you! She is both my child and *me*. She is a creature of the land. A being made of the same materials as you! As me! I wish you

understood how powerful this is. I wish you understood our connection. But let's not get ahead of ourselves...

She wakes, stretches her arms and rolls around, testing her body. Testing her comfort. Sitting up, she greets the world. She feels a renewed sense of awe each morning for the glory of it all. I love this about her. No, *I love her*. She rises, feeling every movement to the fullest. The sandy wood against her feet, the stiffness in her yawning joints. The youth in her step. She finds herself in her breath, bringing her awareness to this new day.

She owns no clock, radio, phone, or television. She has no age. The only time she knows is *now*. The world is her entertainment. The sound of the jungle is her music. She sings, she dances, she sways, she marches to the beat of her own heart. The birds call out to her and she answers. The oceans clean her, play with her, love her. She catches fish and gives them thanks for how they serve her. She needs not go far. She has everything. She is right where she should be. She is exactly who she is meant to be, *and she knows it*.

Once, she had a mother. Once, they lived and loved and fought and felt and cried and danced and gave thanks together. Even after her mother's death, she is in perfect communion with the woman who birthed her. She thinks of her each day. She knows that she is still here with her. Her body sinks into me, and her spirit rests in Elara's heart. We are all one, *and she knows it*.

She eats the fruits and roots of the forest for breakfast. Sitting at her small table, she eats off a banana leaf. Her hands bring the food to her mouth. Needing nothing but herself and her home that feeds her. When satisfied, she eats no more.. Standing in the open door frame, no door to swing open, she takes in the view each morning. Behind the

large green fronds of the jungle lies the beach, a secluded cove far from all roads. She can just take in the shining blue water as it crashes rhythmically on the sand. It is a small beach, not a particularly eye-catching cove. Thirty, maybe forty feet of sand that fades into jungle. Rocks and shells cover the sand, tiny creatures always moving and grooving at their own pace. In their own time.

Elara is a creature of habit, of cycles. Each morning she rises from sleep. She eats the fruits of her finding, she stands in the doorway and takes in the view. Then, as a lover of the jungle she goes out and *breathes with me*. Or shall I say, *breathes with trees*. Sometimes she climbs, sometimes she lies on the ground looking up through leaves, but today she simply places her hand on the body of the tree. Greeting her, and the tree greets back. Without any formal education she knows that her survival depends on these trees. On the life that they give all beings. She takes a deep breath in and with all her might, thanks the tree for her kindness. Sometimes, this brings tears to her eyes. Sometimes, the trees cry back. The trees feel her coming and they rejoice. A glorious communion of connection.

She races to the ocean, throwing off her clothes and jumps in. Letting the soft current carry her. The ocean envelops her freedom, her vulnerability, her trust. The creatures of the ocean watch her with joy. She is one of them, *and she knows it*. Maybe catching fish, maybe not. She could spend all day in the water. It is her favorite place. Her true home, where she truly belongs.

Once in awhile humans will stumble in her path. A boat will saunter into her harbor. Hikers will make their way to the shore. They see her, they turn away even though their heart tells them to inspect her in all of her wholeness. They are drawn to this creature, but they turn away. Ever afraid of connection.

She knows not where she is. She is intelligent, she can map the sky and connect with all beings. Her knowledge of her home is her map. The trees and creatures that roam them are her friends and her family. She has named them. She needs not go anywhere. She doesn't have any concept of *anywhere*. She knows only *here*.

Hardly ever does she receive more than a few visitors in a week or even a month. But today, my earthlings, she has four visitors. You and I, of course. But the others? Oh my, that is where our story really begins. That is where I leave you. Remember Elara. Keep her wholeness in your heart. As for me, I'm sure I will see you again. Once you know what you know.

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The windswept sea sprays my face and my long brown hair whips around painfully into my eyes. I swat it away, keeping my eyes on the horizon. On the large expanse where ocean meets sky.

“How could they let me go out on my own?” I think to myself angrily. We are supposed to be on *family* vacation. I do what they want every single year. The one time I suggest an activity, all they want to do is lie around on the beach all day like we have been doing this whole time!

“Clara, relax. We just don't want to go boating today! That's all, it's not personal.” Mom had said. In anger I said it was fine, and hastily went out and rented a boat by myself. And now, I have forgotten the sunscreen, water, and food. All I have is my sensitive, sunburnt self, and this damn boat.

Boating has always made me happy. Ever since I was a little girl, my dad has taken us out on the water, off of Cape Cod. And once I was old enough, he taught me how to drive on the water. But now look at me. An angry twenty-seven year old who just

got out of a long relationship and wanted to drive off into the sea and forget all about it. But no. They wouldn't allow me this courtesy. So I struck out on my own: alone, tired, and feeling misunderstood. I don't know where I belong in this world. And here I am wandering about the sea on my own, listlessly approaching a quarter-life crisis.

Tears start to well up in my eyes and in this moment, I notice a small cove up ahead to my right. I see beautiful trees and a small beach with no one on it. *Amazing*, I think. I didn't believe there was any land still around that wasn't developed. Suddenly, I come to that sweet and sour realization of adulthood, that I can do whatever the hell I want to. That I can eat ice cream for dinner and there is no one there to tell me not to or warn me about the stomach ache I'll receive later. That now, I'm driving the boat and I can take it where I want. The sun beats down on me and If I want to go rest under some trees on a private secluded beach, Why not, right?

I pull into the small cove and anchor myself. It has no dock so I'll have to swim out and in, but that doesn't bother me. I'm a strong swimmer. I jump in the ocean and stride passionately towards the shore. Within a few minutes, I'm washed up on the beach, shocked by my own actions. I'm not this girl, who feels comfortable all on my own out in the wilderness. Who makes rash choices like renting a boat and sailing off somewhere she's not familiar with. Who is this person? Where does she belong? This honestly feels like an out of body experience.

I find a shade at the very start of the tree line, just where the jungle begins. Lying down, I look up through the branches. Casual rays of light filter through the large leaves. The sounds of birds and insects hum in my ears. The ground is soft and mossy as I sink into it. In only a small bathing suit, I'm shocked at how at peace and comfortable I am. The negative thoughts that filled my mind on the boat seem to slowly float off. I didn't

realize how much the heat had zapped my energy until this moment, and without a second thought, I slowly begin to drift away into sleep.

Crash, slash, thump, thump, thump...

Foreign sounds wake me from my nap. Not the birds or the trees, but an intruder. I look behind me, and find a tall and muscular man slashing his way through the jungle. He has a short beard and a hard expression. Almost like a Viking. I had never seen anyone so sturdy before. He doesn't seem to notice me. In fact, he seems to be only aware of his own thoughts, having no respect for anything around him. If a frond gets in his way, he simply slices it with his long knife. The kind you see in movies like Indiana Jones. Before I know it, he is thumping and slashing his way through the jungle and out of my view.

A little bit spooked by this large intruder, I begin to collect my thoughts and decide it might be best to swim out to my boat and go back to the resort. After all, I have no idea how long I have been asleep and I don't want my family to get worried. I take one last look around the jungle, as if I'm taking a picture in my head. I have loved doing this ever since I was a little girl. I would take pictures in my mind and store them away. Always remembering.

That's when I see her.

Stark naked on the beach, glistening in the sun. She brushed her long hair down her back. A mixture of emotions flood through me, from shock, to embarrassment, to awe and wonder. I catch myself beginning to stare, and just as I am about to turn away, we make eye contact. It's a fleeting moment in time, but never in my life have I experienced anything so simple yet so intense. It feels like she can peer right down into my soul. And in a flash, she smiles slightly and walks casually back into the jungle.

Still picturing her large brown eyes, I am frozen in time. *What just happened?* I think to myself. I have a longing deep in my heart to know this person, this creature. I feel so oddly connected to her. But why? I don't *know* her. I have this one experience of her and yet it is so odd. So unlike any experience I have had out in the concrete jungle.

Just then, frozen in my thoughts, do I hear it. A crash and a scream, coming from somewhere to my right. I hear more shuffling, and before I realize it I'm running through the forest as if I have animal instincts. As if I am meant to be here. As if my life outside of this moment does not exist. I pass tree after tree until I find the source of the noise. Just 20 or so feet away, there they are.

As I arrive and hide slightly behind a nearby tree, the Viking-like man takes the handle of his large knife, and bangs the beautiful girl over her head with it. I feel a pang in my gut. *Oh god, oh god, what do I do!* She falls to the ground and clutched the point of impact on her head. Her eyes, dazed. Her face, what once was made of peace is now the image of fear. I cover my mouth to keep from screaming. He picks her up and throws her down onto the ground. She tries to scurry away from him, but he is too strong. Too determined, too greedy. She scratches and claws at him. Whimpers and cries but he is merciless.

I am frozen. I know what is happening. I know what will happen. But what can I do? My feet are stuck to the ground. My knees won't budge. My mind screams at me to run, to hit him over the head with a rock, to do something, anything to stop this heinous attack. But I can't find the words. I can't find the action. Where am I? Who am I? What is happening? I have lost all sense of self. All sense of reality.

Just then, the intruder, the villain, the enemy, the coward, the monster... He raises his fist up in the air, ready to swing down on her head one final blow. To put her

out for good. To end her fight back. To surrender her to him. Right as he is about the swing with all his force, her eyes once more catch mine. Us both, frozen in the middle of this hot jungle. She sheds one final tear and her eyes cry out for me to help her. It's a split second that lasts a lifetime. We see each other. We feel each other. How can I continue doing nothing? Why am I not screaming? Crying? Running? DO SOMETHING CLARA! My own voice fills my head as I try and grasp onto reality. But my body does nothing.

Finally in a violent stroke she exits consciousness when his fist finds her temple. I seem to exit consciousness with her. I am here but not really. I watch as he finally has his way with her. But behind my eyes there is only empty space. Where once there was a girl named Clara, there is only a shell of a human being. Of an animal who has betrayed her kind. My mind goes black and blue and white and red and yellow. There is no sense of direction, as my world turns upside down.

I feel myself running. I don't remember starting to run. I don't remember where I am. Suddenly I am back at the beach. I fall over, sick to my stomach. The sun is much lower now and I have only one goal. Find the boat, go home. I don't know what will happen if I ever get home. I don't know who I will be. But I must escape this nightmare.

The wind begins to howl. The trees blow from side to side, as if they are angry too. Are hurting for what has just happened. I thrash through the waves, eyes fixated on my little boat. The mourning currents toss me around. The whole world seems to be shaken. As if everything around me is in pain. I nearly drown in all the trauma.

Somehow, I make it back. I make it home. Possibly alive, possibly dead. Who knows. The only thing I see, the only thing I know, is the picture I took of her eyes in my mind. Surely I will never escape her gaze.

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This is the story of how I lost you. And how you lost yourself.

So my dear reader, I am back. My heart breaks more and more, but I promised I would return, now that you know what you know. And I have a question: Who are you in this story? The Earth child, the intruder, the observer? The answer may shock you, reader. And I'm sorry for that. But *you are all three*.

For generations I have watched you defile this place that is your home. That is your provider, your mother. For generations I have seen you turn away from the horrors you commit against yourself, against your home. *Against me*. You objectify me, obliterate me, and take advantage of me. In turn, you objectify yourself, obliterate yourself, and take advantage of yourself, too. Babies in cages, bullets in bodies, toxins in our oceans and our air. Fire is catching all over my body and water buries life on land. You have forgotten who I am. *I am Earth*. You are made of me and I am made up of you. We are not two things, but one.

I have watched as you turn away from the pain, from the sorrow, and from the shame you are causing. We are all perpetrators and bystanders of evil. But deep down, we are also beautiful pieces of Earth. Belonging to the land. Belonging to each other. So I guess the question is not *who are you?* But rather, *who will you choose to be?* The perpetrator, the bystander, the Earth? For our sake, I hope you choose wisely.