Queen of the Meadows

In the early autumn sun, a breath of wind rustled through the wild grass, bending the tall blades. The field was vast, rolling on and on over bumps, through crevasses, enveloping what seemed to be the whole earth. Meadowlarks bobbed and weaved on the fence next to the dirt road. Birch dappled the expanse, and under them, rabbits hopped about in their late afternoon routine. The grass tipped down under the breeze so that each stem was like a peasant bowing before its queen.

She danced through the tall grass with her violin, the tips tickling her stomach through her sundress and her elbow as it swooped down with the bow. A joyous melody spilled from her fingers and washed away the creeping cold of the changing season.

The song said, “No, summer will be forever and ever,” and everyone let themselves believe it. For she was so persuasive with her golden-red hair sprawled across her shoulders and around her head like the willow trees at the pond. Her eyes were so green that the slumping late-summer leaves wanted to snap back in salute, to convince her they would be strong for her sake. The wild grass seemed to whisper among themselves, gossiping, jealous of those ahead that were able to feel the brush of her hair. How they wished to have longer necks in hopes they could reach her if the breeze blew them the right way.

Every day the birch would stand a bit straighter when they saw her run down the dirt road to the rusty, splotched-red gate. Every day the meadow welcomed its queen’s spectacle with more admiration than the last. Every day the girl jumped and twirled with the vivaciousness of youth. Every day this was and it seemed that every day it would be for eternity.

One afternoon, enthusiastic chirps from the meadowlarks signaled that she would be coming. All watched the road in giddy anticipation. What came was not the pitter-patter of a child’s feet but heavy and sluggish footsteps. At the bend by the bushes, two men appeared, one in dark blue coveralls with a cap and the other in a brown tweed suit brandishing a clipboard.

They strutted with irritating entitlement up to the gate before the Blue Man produced a pack of cigarettes and offered the Brown Man a smoke. The grass wilted in disgust as the miasma filled the air. Meanwhile, the girl peeked from behind the bush at the bend, holding her violin and her bow by the neck.

She must not have been very careful to stay out of sight because the meadowlarks spotted her and started to squawk. The Blue Man jumped in fright, then started muttering as the Brown Man chuckled through his cigarette.

The two mysterious men stood there talking and smoking for a while, leaving when the sun began to hide behind the birches. The girl did not play that day. The grass whispered and gossiped this time not about how they wanted to touch her but if they would ever have the chance. And because of the spurious rumors of the grass, all in the meadow were disquieted.

The morning brought gloom and drear. The birds had no songs to sing, nor the rabbits a dry place to repose. Nor the grass wind to dance, or the birch sun to rejoice in. They wished for the girl to come and break the clouds and let the sun shine again. Time dragged on and what finally came was not the girl but the groan of engines and the murmur of grizzly mouths. Around the bend came three trucks full of men in blue coveralls and dirty faces brandishing their digging tools.

All watched in confusion as the intruders drew closer while the birch scolded the grass for speaking such an atrocity into existence while the birds squawked in terror.

The men moved like machines around the truck, unloading their tools with coded efficiency, talking roughly among themselves. The field was quiet and still, suddenly realizing how close the end seemed to feel, dreading what might be their fate. Back and forth from the trucks the men went, setting a tool down in a pile on the ground and then going back for another like a conveyor belt of bodies. Soon they got back in the trucks and drove off, leaving collections of their shovels and picks to fuel the meadow's nightmares. The rain stopped.

Urgent chirps sounded from the meadowlarks as the girl came running around the bend and down the dirt path, splashing through puddles while holding her violin high above her head. When she looked up, her smile was murdered by the mound of tools that lay just outside the fence. Frozen, she gazed at the mound. The field watched as she turned back and ran, sobbing between huffs and wiping away tears as she went.

Everything suddenly seemed to happen at a lightning pace when the girl returned with her father, grasping his hand, dragging him forth frantically. She stumbled up to the mountain of metal, asking her father what it meant. He grew very silent. The kind of silence that makes one deaf, the kind that says far too much.

All knew what this silence meant but were too afraid to believe it. The father took the girl up in a big hug and walked back down the road. She buried her head in his shoulder, trembling. They suddenly saw how small she seemed, how fragile.

The days went by and the girl did not come back but the men did. Boots kicked shovels down hard into the earth, while machines plowed methodically. For many days the meadow was a din of engines, voices, and cigarette smoke that choked away its viridity. How they cried for the girl, called for her as they slowly turned to nothing.

When she returned, the last birch stood like a shell-shocked soldier, its long branches barely protecting the last blades of grass. The men had left for the day and the solitary patch wept soundlessly. The field was no more. A flat and lifeless plane of dirt. Empty, bitter, meaningless.

The girl stood at the gate. She looked like the ghost of what she had been. Paler than before with dark accents under her sunken eyes. Her clothes were disheveled, and her hair fell limp and awry. Her head hung low as she walked towards the last of the meadow but she could not hold herself before erupting into a heart-wrenching howl that made all that listened cower. Their queen was no more.

She collapsed under the birch, the grass catching her fall and embracing her one last time. All was reticent like a funeral had just commenced.

Impossibly long months passed. The girl gazed at the expanse, almost feeling the grass and the sun, the smile of the birch, and the accompaniment of the meadowlarks. She couldn’t cry. How she wished she could die as easily as to be cut from the ground. For though she felt nothing she was afraid of pain.

She didn’t notice him slinking up the road, clutching his newsboy cap in front of him like a mouse. He crept as if she was a wounded beast, cautious, and when she looked up he flinched noticeably.

“Yes?”

The sadness in her voice surprised him.

He was quick to right himself, adjusting his tweed jacket and reviving a businessman swagger, the condescending kind that masked his unease.

“Right… um, do you live here?” He asked gently.

“I do.” She said with a rasp that gave away she cried more than she wanted to let on. “Who are you?”

“I…” He paused, unsure of why he was unsure, “I own this land.”

“No, you don’t.”

So plain, so actual, suddenly he felt he could believe it too.

“Well, I bought it, you see? I’m afraid that legally it is mine unless you have some reason it isn’t.” He tried to sound soothing but it came out more sternly than he intended. He was never good with children.

“I was here first.”

Now her eyes were wide and unfocused. Staring off at something past his shoulder. She spoke so inanimately, like the drone of an engine, flat, monotone. She was completely still. One hand tethered to the fence; the other clenched.

“I… was here first.” She nodded in agreement with herself. “Leave.”

He did. He did because he knew she would not. He did because he realized now that it was he who had wounded the beast.

It was a gibbous moon, and it illuminated the fence and the road, and the bushes at the bend with an eerie bleach. The shadows did not feel as at home tonight. She walked in only a nightgown yet no shivers dared disturb her. Even the moonlight turned down its head as she walked solemnly, silently to the gate. Oh, to the night she seemed not human! A ghost, a diaphanous being so delicate one broke itself to not break her.

 The moon watched in fascination as she opened the gate with a screech that horribly intruded the air. She felt the cold mud on her feet as she began a prance. The air whipped around her as she twirled and dipped silently, dirt spattering her gown from white to brown, and then from brown to black. With each leap, she freed herself, with each plie came a magnificent feeling of letting go.

Then she was falling. Falling down and down into the soil. She smiled and closed her eyes, her chest jouncing in exertion. The dirt encased her like a new skin, damp, and refreshing. She felt her flesh become the grass she once played in, her bones becoming the birch that fended the rain. Her sigh of relief; at last… at last! It was the breath of wind that hushed through the grass. Her hair, the sun that shone so bright and warm. And then, from beneath, came the welcome of Her Majesty back home.