

## The Land

I traveled across the barren land for longer than I remembered. I could not even recall how I got there, or why so many others traveled across the land as well. I could only assume we were headed somewhere better. I could only assume we were headed toward somewhere with water, a breeze, vegetation and some sort of decency.

The land was red and dusty with nothing of interest to look at. The sun burned throughout the day and the night gripped you with its chill. I stopped for nothing. If I stopped, I didn't know what would happen. The only people who stopped were those who had fallen. Everyone else moved constantly and I moved constantly too. I didn't want to join those who had fallen.

Many had fallen. Although it was hot, they rarely fell to the heat. Although there was little water, they rarely fell to dehydration. They fell to something worse. They fell to each other.

I never noticed the beginnings of the fights, but I walked past the wreckage often. Sometimes I had to step over the dead bodies. They smelled worse than anything else along the way, but after traveling so long I had gotten used to it. I can't count how many bodies I stepped over and I don't wish to. My only hope was that it would not happen to me.

The fights were strange, if you ever thought about them. We were all trying to get out of that place. Nobody had anything of value, not one of us. I never wondered about it at the time, but I wonder about it now. If the fights were one part strange, they were also one part gruesome. Nobody had a knife. Nobody had a gun. They fought with their hands and they fought until one person fell and another person walked on.

They walked on along with the rest of us and we did nothing but walk on alongside them.

I don't remember how long I had been traveling when I noticed someone walking the other direction. It was the middle of the day. I was hot and tired and thirsty. And in front of me, walking towards me like a fish swimming upstream, was a person who didn't look hot or tired or thirsty at all. In fact, he smiled at me. Confusion washed over me as it took me a minute to realize what a smile was. It had been so long since I'd seen one that I'd forgotten. When I remembered, I grew suspicious. Who walks through a land like this and smiles?

I tried to avoid the person walking the wrong way, but he always seemed to move laterally whichever way I walked. I tried not to make eye contact, but wherever I looked he stared back at me. He stared back and smiled. I could feel the terror building as the gap between us became smaller and smaller. I looked left and right. Nobody else noticed the person walking the wrong way. Nobody else saw his sick smile. Why was he smiling?

Sweat trickled down my forehead. The only way to get away from him would be to turn around. I could turn around and run, but I had been that way and it was only the barren land. Even if it wasn't the barren land I'd have to walk as far as I had and more. I couldn't even remember when I started walking. I had to walk forward. I couldn't avoid him, but maybe he would pass me by and the terror would end.

He was twenty yards away. Ten yards. Five yards.

And then he was there; we stood toe to toe. I tried to move past him, but every way I stepped he stepped in front of me.

"What do you want?" I croaked. My voice sounded foreign to me. The silence scared me into speaking again. "Let me go forward."

“Hello, nice to meet you.” His voice sang to me. For a moment, he sounded like a friend. Maybe I would have a companion to walk out of the barren land with. Maybe it wouldn’t be as bad that way. I started to warm to him and even offered a smile, when he punched me in the gut.

The warmth left me. Bent over, I tried to look up but he kicked my legs out from under me and I toppled. Then he was on top of me. Fist after fist after fist slammed into my face. At first I tried to push him off. My arms were very weak and no match for the man who was not hot or tired or thirsty at all. In fact, it was as if this was his first day in the barren land. After failing to push him off, I tried to kick. I flailed my legs. I flailed and flailed until tears trailed from eyes and exhaustion took over. I wasn’t going to make it, I thought. In a last effort, I let my body go limp. I felt his legs' grip on my torso relax and I slammed my palm up into his nose. In the next moment, I sat up and punched him in the throat. He fell off of me and I struggled to my feet. Clutching his nose, he looked up at me, his smile gone. I could taste my tears, but they tasted like blood. I lifted my leg to kick him and he caught my leg. He pulled me back down. He pushed his hand into my face, ripped my head up by my hair and slammed my head into the ground. My mouth opened and closed, trying to bite his hand but it was futile.

He plunged his fingers into my chest. Oddly, his nails sliced through my chest like daggers. I laid there, appalled, as he plucked my heart out from my chest. I don’t know how, but I saw it all. I saw him grin before taking a bloody bite.

My mouth filled with the taste of copper. A salty copper. The muscle was hard to chew, but it was good. I looked down at the mangled, sad corpse. It was a pity he had to die there, in the barren land, but it was the way it should be. People like him weren’t worth the air they breathed. He would have never made it past the barren land, but I, on the other hand, am strong and magnificent. And I am going to find a place where the days and nights are mild and nobody wants for anything. The place where days pass by easily. The place I will call home.