

On the Other Side

Out on the icy sea, off the shore of the sleepy coast town, the island was always calling. No one had ever forbidden the town people to visit it. Every single villager was plagued by discomfort yet a hypnotising urge to take a boat to the opposite shore. Still, only few dared to go. The ones that went usually never returned. Those few who did, brought a rotting emptiness with them. They left their soul on the island, only returning as a decaying shell.

Growing up, Billie believed the tales the children whispered to each other on the playground when no adults were. The island was the afterlife. It was where the deceased go wander for all eternity. Those that stay back – grieving loved ones – would hear the island's calls following them into their dreams. Until eventually, they would take the trip over the waves to find their relatives. But the island was not what one would imagine heaven to be. It twisted and changed the minds of living souls, capturing them so that they stayed forever, wandering through the dense forest alongside the spirits. Or, if they managed to escape, their body only served as a vessel, taken over by a spirit that desperately wanted to live. But possession does not bring one back to life. The ghosts were now dead people walking in a human frame, nowhere near happier than they were on the island.

Billie had never understood the reason why people took the risk of going. Trading one's human essence for the chance to see a passed loved one once again seemed like an irrational decision that only hopeless desperation could get a person to make. It seemed crazy. Too dangerous to even try. Until Riley died.

The closest thing a human could experience to dying before death itself was witnessing the one that one loved the most die first. All at once, the life was sucked out of oneself. Everything that brought joy appeared dull and pointless. What was supposed to hurt was a minor inconvenience. If one knew what the most agonising feeling in the world felt like, a knife right to the heart would be a needle prick.

Riley had been in his life the first Monday in March. He had come over after school to copy his math homework – and help Billie with History in return. He had stolen the snacks from the pantry that Billie's mum had bought just a few hours ago. They had laughed together about a silly video Fletcher had sent them instead of actually focussing on their work. They had thrown popcorn at each other.

On Tuesday, he had been gone. An accident. One wrong step and – just like that – he was dead. It had been months now since it had happened. Many people had visited Billie in an attempt to bring life back into him. Suddenly, everyone was a grief expert because they had lost their

grandma or third cousin or goldfish. Those who had not, assured him they “could not imagine what he must feel like”. He had never understood how this was supposed to comfort him but it did not really matter anyways. After all, even those that had tried could not give him back what Riley had taken with him. And each night, Billie had lain staring at the ceiling and wondered whether he had to leave to get it back.

It was not an easy task getting to the island. No official ferries ever went there since the profit for delivering people to their inevitable demise was not large enough. Rumours said some had swum there in the past. Judging from the monstrous waves and the freezing temperatures of the water, they were nothing more than that – rumours. But after digging around some more, Billie found a group of men that had acquired a boat to drive people there for a ridiculous amount of money. Billie paid them in cash down to the last cent. He would replace it before his father even noticed the money was gone.

It was a cold morning. The sky was grey as ash when Billie hopped on the small motorboat with a guy in his mid-twenties. He did not ask questions. Everyone knew that there was only one reason for Billie to make his way to the island. So, the man simply nodded at him and pointed him towards the bench where Billie sat down, wrapping his arms around himself.

But that was no help. Even his puffy jacket could not keep out the piercing cold air that was tearing at his cheeks and hair as they sped over the ocean. Maybe, it was mother nature’s last attempt to shake awake that dead part of Billie which he was on his way to reanimate. But the numbness remained.

In the distance, the island appeared in the thick fog. It was a small patch of land of which most was covered in a close-knit forest. Big pine trees reached for the sky with their crooked arms. The pebbles of the beach were as grey as the heavy clouds that hid away the sun. Although Billie wondered if the sun ever shone in this place.

The dock that they came to a halt at was nothing more than two brittle boards that got hit by waves every few moments. It was apparent that the men had built it themselves but it sufficed to get Billie on shore safely, even if he hesitated to trust the boards with his whole weight at first.

“So, uh, I will come back in two hours to pick you up here.” the stranger explained. “But if you show up late, I will assume you are, well, staying. So, be on time!”

Billie nodded, his throat drying up at the implication. Until now, he had never been sure if it was true that so few people returned from the island. The words lay on his tongue. “I changed my mind” was right there. But Billie swallowed them and watched as the man rotated his boat and was gulped up by the fog.

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Billie turned to the forest that started only a few steps away from him. When picturing the island, it had been entirely filled with the spooky howling of the ghosts occupying it. The silence he was facing now was so much worse. It sucked in any sound that was made. Billie wondered if his voice would even make a sound if he tried to speak. But he was too scared to try it out.

His first steps were shaky. He felt like the ground below him was quicksand, absorbing his shoes with every movement. Maybe this was why no one ever returned. The island swallowed them whole. But as he studied how deep his feet had sunken in already, he realised that it was just his knees shaking violently that made him feel so unstable. With a deep breath, he ordered them to stop and bravely stomped over to the first pine trees he saw before diving completely into the gloomy woods.

It was an aimless walking between stumps and branches. As soon as he entered the forest, Billie realised he had never thought about what he would do once he got to the island. And with such horribly loud silence surrounding him, the questions on his mind seemed even louder. Of course, he hoped to see Riley but how does one find a ghost? Would Riley know that he was there? Would Billie even be able to see him? Or would he have to materialise in front of him first? His thoughts were screaming at him in regret of not thinking this through. But Billie never once thought of turning around and waiting for his ride at the docks.

The forest was alive, no matter how quiet it was. Billie felt watched from every possible angle, yet he could not even see an orb as he spun around to scan the area. A sweet smell of dew and moist earth called him even deeper into the forest.

He trusted his instincts when taking turns. Every whisper at the back of his mind was followed because it could be his intuition leading him to Riley. Or, it was Riley himself, whispering directions to his location right into Billie's head. Eventually, Billie came to a halt nonetheless. He paused as fear crept up his body. He had completely lost his sense of direction. But his perseverance paid off. In the distance, a human shape sat under a tree.

For a moment, time and space and Billie froze. Before coming here, a part of him had been laughing at him. For believing in an old folk tale. For believing that he could see Riley again. For believing in ghosts. But now, there was one sitting there. He could clearly see it. Crossed legged, it had sunken back against a tree, the head in the nape of its neck as if it was watching the leaves above it dance in the soft breeze.

Billie sprinted towards the shape. A smile grew on his face as, for the first time in months, he felt relief. The shape was his silver lining. Even if it was not Riley himself, maybe the spirit could point him into the right direction.

As he got closer, an uneasy feeling replaced the soft lightness of relief. And just as fast as he made his way over, his legs carried him away from the shape again as the realisation hit him. He should have listened as soon as the uneasiness had hit but he noticed his fatal mistake way too late. That shape was not a ghost but a corpse.

Somewhere in the forest, when he was certain the body was far behind him, Billie dropped down to his knees. At this point, he had not only lost his sense of direction but sense of time as well. Billie had come here to find Riley. Instead, the truth hit him twice as hard as his death had. In the folk tale, people's insanity led them to wander around the island like a spirit forever. But, as he now realised, they were not just *like* the spirits. They decided to become one themselves. And it was not because they found their loved ones. It was because they did not.

Riley was gone for good. He had left and there was no way to get him back.

His forehead was pressed against the cold moss on the ground as he sobbed and screamed, filling the silence with agony, with pain. At home, he had held his tears back. His sobs had stayed muffled by a pillow. Because he had gotten pity in buckets and it had only made everything worse. Every person that looked at him with big eyes and a frown had reminded him of his loss.

Right now, he stopped holding back. He was releasing every last tear, sob and scream that he had stored up. They echoed back from every direction, making it sound like the trees were mimicking him mockingly. He released it all. Until all he felt was emptiness again. But it came with something else. A tingle. A tiny spark.

As Billie lifted his head up from the ground, the wind was brushing over his damp forehead. Riley was gone for good. But Billie was not. He still had a chance to return from this empty loneliness. The spark inside of him was proof of that. And with that, Riley whispered directions to him once again, as Billie got up and walked straight ahead.

Staying was not an option and time was flying. He had to find the exit out of the forest, find the grey pebbles and hopefully return back to the spot he had been dropped off at before the boat returned. There was a chance it was too late already – the boat would not wait for him – but he had to try. Because Riley was gone for good. He had left and there was no way to get him back. But he had not taken Billie with him. Riley had left Billie on this planet to finish this life for the both of them off the island. He owed it to Riley to keep wandering amongst the living, not the dead.

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yet no one had ever spoken about it before Billie's return. Now, it was in everybody's mouth. Because the first true survivor had returned. He had brought a warm liveliness with him.