
I Am Become Tree

Fiction • Hailey Pierce

One thousand and sixty-four tally marks scored on a wall.

One thousand and sixty-four tally marks etched into the basement wall. Shavings of the woodgrain dust the floor underneath, a miniature mountain range of sawdust scratched and shaped by broken fingernails, jagged pieces of broken buttons, and a rusty nail wrenched free from the bed frame.

I squash the dusty trail under my hand and drag three fingers through the mess: three parallel, serpentine lines waving and curving, three rivers, three valleys, three veins. The line in the middle is bulkier, burlier than the others, blunted by the nub of my middle finger. I lost the tip three hundred and seven tally marks ago. It had swelled with infection, a sponge fit to burst, but I took a knife to it before it erupted.

He didn't allow cutlery after that.

I lean down, drag my nose through the sawdust, and inhale, inhale, inhale. I suck the smell from it, and I fight the reflex to cough up the dust of my canvas. It's almost like I can feel the wood coating my lungs, like Cheeto dust on fingertips. If I eat my lungs, would they taste like trees?

I sit up and scrub at my eyes with the heel of my palm. It pushes the grit into my eyelids, and I can feel the veins strain vermilion blood,

bloodshot, white shot through with roots of red. But I see only see black pressure, black fuzziness pockmarked by silver stars, the kind of art every person carries in their pupils. I push my hands harder into my eyes, and it hurts, but I like the stars. I like the night sky of eyelids and the silver, the silver gray of my own stars encouraged by hands pressed too-hard into eyeballs. I like it. Black and silver, but black and gray and black and bray and glack and grack, and blay and and

and and black

and white pictures hand above a mantelpiece where a fire blazes orange and bright. The flames are hungry and hot and they roar with the desire to devour.

I watch from under the desk as I watch him rip down book after book from the shelves, leather-bound first editions and Merriam Websters and shabby journals handwritten by seven generations of our family's patriarchs, all flung like chickens into boiling water, a quick death in a blaze of heat.

Did I say hot? I meant cold. It's a cold kind of fire. Colder than the villa during the thick of winter, colder than the time Josiah dared me to stand on the icy lake with nothing but my skin. Colder than when I plummeted into the water. Colder than when I woke up in Mama's arms. When I woke up and everything was different and everything was okay and there were no more books in the fireplace and Mama was still alive telling me to stay awake, to wake up wake up wake up wake-upwakeupwakeupWAKEUP WAKE

Up on the housetop reindeer paws. Out jumps good old Santa Claus. Down through the chimney with lots of toys, all for the little ones Christmas joy. Ho ho ho ho ho

"How many times have I told you not to sled down the hill without someone watching you?"

Mama?

"You're supposed to bail before you hit the tree, honeybee."

Her voice sounds distant, but I feel her hands holding my cheeks, warm palms covered calluses but still softer than the feathers in my pillow. Her thumb brushes against my cheekbone, a small swipe against the gash in my cheek where I tumbled into the tree. She smears the blood away.

She shouldn't touch my blood. She shouldn't touch someone like me. But I can't remember the last time someone held me like this, touched me like I was worthy even a fraction of love. But I see her, I see her smile. It's a broken bow that's been strung by too many arrows in her life. But she's smiling at me. This is the last time I'll ever see her smile like this.

Mama smiled at me. She loved me. When I couldn't read the books

in the library, she still loved me. She would put me in her lap and trace the sentences with her finger even though she knew I couldn't puzzle the letters together. She would trace the words with the same hands that stitched my clothes together and wiped my tears away. The same hands that tried to pry the books from Father's hands as he hurled them into the fire.

I didn't know what was angrier: the fire, Father, or me as I hid under the table. Father hated me. But she loved me.

Mama loved me. She smiled at me. She smiled at me and she loved me. She loved me.

She.

Loved.

Me.

I look down at the pile of sawdust on the ground, blinking away the fire and the books and Father and Mama. tears puddle from my eyes, the droplets swirling with the brown of the wood. I let them fall freely as I shape the shavings into one mountain, tall and proud and brown as the grain of the wall.

Beside me, I pick up a tooth that once hung on the top of my mouth. Pinching it between my forefinger and thumb, I shave a diagonal line into the four tallies at the end of the list.

One thousand and sixty-five tally marks scored on a wall. Shavings of woodgrain dust the floor underneath. Dust the floor. The floor. Dust on the floor. Dust to floor.

Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

Ring around the rosie, a pocketful of posies. Posies. Rosies. Red. Blood on my cheek from a tree. A thumb brushes over it. Whose thumb? Her thumb. Her? Soft and sweet. Soft and sweet and soft and sweet and

one thousand and sixty-five tally marks scored on a wall.