

The Color Red

Her cheeks were red that December when we lit firecrackers out in the two-toned brown woods. The blue bulbs of Eliza's lips buried the laughter that hung inside her body on a wire clothesline. I observed the shaking of her narrow frame as she promised me chests of golden embers and ringlets of silver to place in our long brown hair. My hands trembled in beautiful agony as the frost bit into the smooth globes of my skin and gnawed at white fingernails.

I hadn't wanted to come at first. I thought it would be too difficult to find a place where we could release small temples of fire over the holy bowels of the earth. When Eliza had told me that morning in school of her plan, I had felt nails drive holes into my already marked skin. The idea of playing with a silent monster that could crawl over flesh with more ease than a spider brought old images back to my mind. The pressure of too many memories forced me to leave class with a sharp tongue. However, the anger gradually abated as hours passed. Eliza would understand. She never would push me to do something that I really didn't want to do. I hoped not anyway. One could never really tell how Eliza's brain worked, but I pushed doubts aside. My reasoning stood that she would forget about such an idea and find another way to celebrate the start of winter vacation. I should have known that Eliza rarely gave up.

She approached me at lunch with a faint shadow of unease, which she tried to cover up with a bemused expression. "Hey, Liesel."

I grunted in acknowledgement, "How was history, Eliza?"

"You know, the Romans were attacking the Greeks again or something like that." Eliza rarely paid attention in class. She instead drew pictures of dreams that she had listened to the night before. Occasionally, I wondered if Eliza was born as a reincarnate of the Oracle from one of the Greek myths that we were learning about. However, when I questioned her about seer blood, she just told me I was crazy and continued to sketch. I doubted she actually knew what the Oracle was considering history class passed through her fingers like water.

"Listen, Lie. I want to do this. I know you think you don't want to--" I choked on a piece of lettuce and gasped, "I thought we dropped this?"

“Never. Liesel, we have to take risks in our lives, and you have been living behind a wall of fear for too long. Meet me behind the school at 3:30 or I’ll tell your parents that you failed your math exam.”

“You wouldn’t—“

“Yes, I would.” Eliza stood up with a flick of her hair and marched off. I closed my eyes and sighed in resignation. I guess my parents would have figured out my math grades at one time or another. It wasn’t like I could hide anything from them. The accident had taken away the privilege of privacy along with other, more important, things. I walked into the bathroom to wash the sweat off my hands. My eyes averted the mirror as they usually did when I entered. However, I couldn’t pretend that I was blind to the scars decorating my entire body. The crude display of mismatched tattoos covered my arms in thin shadows. The ugly shell casings of the day when I left the stove on at too high a temperature crawled like red ants under my clothes. I remembered the musical notes of the sirens drumming the words *gone, gone, gone* through my ears as my head exploded in heat. I had screamed softly in the clouded smoke when I saw my family portrait slowly submit to the teeth of the flame. The doctors said the burns would never fully heal. However, they forgot to tell me that this warning applied to the immaterial as well. Every day for 6 years I had flinched at seeing the color red. My parents whispered harried words behind my back and hid the matches in round bowls with tight lids. I hadn’t stayed home alone for three years after the accident. Eliza knew this. She was the only girl who hadn’t looked away when I returned to school. She gave me the green heart for Valentine’s Day when all the other kids spread around the hot stones of pink love.

While staring at the remnants of that silly mistake when I was 10 years old, I suddenly felt tired. Why did I run from the enemy? Maybe Eliza was right. It was time to look at life with a new face. I left the room with a steady determination that grew as my classmates gave me their usual embarrassed glances. The pounding of *gone, gone, gone* continued to echo in my skull for the rest of the school day.

I smelled the allspice of the woods. Brown branches formed crosses.

When Eliza lit the first firework that afternoon, I could feel the terror break inside me. I swallowed the display of color with a greedy eagerness as the flame broke open and suspended its multi-colored veins in the cold, winter, air. The small bursts of lightning

cracked through my eardrums as the words *gone, gone, gone* split in half like an egg revealing the whole yellow yolk inside. I whistled softly.

“I told you. I knew you would like it.” Eliza exclaimed triumphantly as she looked at me. I nodded, paralyzed in a moment, listening to the high whistle of freedom draw high arching circles.

“You knew. You always know.” I responded, and my voice broke. Eliza laughed a clear, bright, sound that paralleled the hissing of the flame.

“We’ve got one more left in here.” She shook the dark flannel bag that she had stolen the fireworks in. “Are you sure you don’t want to light one? It’s like a rite of passage if you do. All that pent up emotion just flows out.” I hesitated. Eliza held the blue vat of mutiny out toward me, “They’ll never know” she said, and so I reached. My hands brushed the fabric of the bag, which was encrusted with small icicles that resembled small pearls in the darkening day.

“Which one is it?” I asked, trying to match Eliza’s dauntless composure.

She smiled and replied, “Red, I think.” I shivered, remembering the time when the very mention of such a burning color would leave me shut in my bedroom for days trying to forget.

But now, things were different. I had moved on, and the chains that used to bind my hands were released. I said, “Give me the match.” Eliza handed me the plastic box. I pretended that the temperature was the reason my hand wavered as I touched the thin stick of dynamite to the cracker.

“Alright, three, two, one...”

And the sky exploded as I finally let go. Eliza raised her arms and yelled loud guffawing cries that upset the lonely crows hiding in the bare-chested trees. The crawling spiral of energy released hot sparks of moon beams. Eliza continued to run around in a high state of exhilaration as I stared stupidly at the ascending light. Eliza hugged the burly arms of my NorthFace jacket and shouted, “You did it. I knew you could do it. Didn’t I say—?” The breathless expanse of words overcame her, and she just satisfied her happiness by squeezing my hand. I grinned in spite of myself, forgetting the jagged scars that dug needles into my skin whenever I moved my face.

I had come alive again.