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HCOM 330 Short Story  
Final Draft "The Clearing"

I don't remember many things, nowadays, but I remember her. The girl.

I remember...

Voices murmuring, slowly growing louder. I was drifting, breathing with the spring life of my clearing. Once, only the largest tree had been mine; I was more defined then, closer to what I had been. It's been so long though, even before the girl; I can hardly remember a time when the clearing was not my breath and body. One day, I think, when I bother to put in the effort, my sense of Self will probably deteriorate completely, disperse like the last tendrils of mist in the morning sun. Then it will just be the clearing, living and dying every year, with only the memory of the girl to breathe with it. It will be her clearing then, until she forgets too.

The girl once asked, "Doesn't it bother you?"

I paused, "I think...once it did." Remembering was hard.

She was quiet for a while after that.

I remember, her dark eyes widening, mouth parting just slightly; warm afternoon sunlight dappling the new, soft grasses; wildflowers peaking through. On the trees, bright leaves reach for the sun, as if in celebration. It was spring; the clearing breathed life. The boy with her was still talking, boasting to suddenly deaf ears. *Wonder*, I thought, pulling up the half remembered ideas, *Awe*. The boy was talking, gesturing, looking inward and smiling at himself, but the girl, she looked at the clearing, still, quiet, *wondering*. And she *breathed*.

The boy snaps his fingers in front of her face. She flinches, blinks.

“Hm?” Her dark eyes slide reluctantly back to the boy, her shoulders curling inward and away from him. The corners of his lips are turned down, his eyes tight.

He huffs out a breath, “*Joey said* you were a space case.”

She frowns, dark eyebrows pulling in, arms loosely crossing in front of her. Her hunched form fits awkwardly with the boasting boy, who stands carelessly expansive, one hand propped on his hip to match his irritation. They are like two puzzle pieces that don’t quite fit; she seems to know it, he doesn’t.

“Whatever. I was *saying*, we call this Deadman’s Tree,” he gestures to the largest tree.

“Why?” The girl asks; she’s looking at the tree, frown slowly smoothing out, shoulders uncurling as she leans forward. *Curiosity*, I think, examining the sudden light in her eyes.

“My Dad says it's because they lynched somebody here, a long time ago.” He points up at the largest branch, stretching out over the clearing, the girl’s eyes follow his gesture, “They hung him up right here.” She stares. I stare back.

“They say the clearing’s bad luck.” He smirks, “*Hang around* too long and death will follow you home. Of course, *I* don’t believe that.”

The girl scans the clearing, eyes coming back to rest on the tree. I feel her exhalation, a release of tension. She fits here, in the clearing. Her edges smoothing into place as they don’t with the too jagged-loud boy.

The boy nudges her; immediately, her body goes taut once more. “So?” the boy demands.

I can see her eyebrows scrunch up, her head tilt to the side, a forcible uncurling of her shoulders. She takes a breath, lets it out, “It just...” Her eyes, impossibly, seem to flick to me, “It feels alive.”

He snorts, *dismissive*, I think, shakes his head, “Of course it does. It’s spring.” He grabs her hand, tugging, “C’mon, I wanna show you where we go cliff diving in summer.”

I remember how her dark eyes lingered, as the boy tugged her out of the clearing, on the largest tree. *My tree*, where I began. I remember how her sharp gaze seemed to trace the outline of my Self, seemed to search for something--intent, brows furrowed, mouth pressed in a contemplative line. I remember.

A rustle of leaves, crunch of grass scorched dry by summer sun. A slim shape steps into the clearing as I slowly gather myself by my tree, an abstract curiosity pooling in my being.

It’s a girl, blinking rapidly against the sudden, harsh sunlight. Sweat drips down her creamy brown skin; she reaches up with one thin arm and wipes her forehead, letting her hand linger to create shade for her dark eyes.

With a vague sort of surprise I realize I recognize her. It’s the girl. The one with the lingering eyes. Unconsciously, I coalesce more, my surprise momentarily making me sharper than I’ve been in a while. The girl’s still shaded eyes move unerringly to trace my Self; she moves again, feet softly crunching forward in the hot stillness.

She reaches the shade of my tree and lowers her hand, taking the last few steps to place it against the rough bark of my tree’s trunk. This close and this focused, I can see a pattern of bruises on her upper arms. She seems...thinner than she should be. Perhaps. It’s been so long since I’ve thought about these things I can’t be sure. Her dark eyes, framed by dark dark circles, quietly seem to observe me. Suddenly, I am sure she can see me.

“Hello,” she says. And it is, startling, to be addressed after so long. “I thought I saw you, last time. Is this your tree?”

I drift closer to the girl. This is strange and new. Feelings long calm and buried rise languidly through my being. She sees me. She sees me and spoke to me. In one greeting and two sentences she has made me more human than I’ve been in a very long time.

She doesn’t seem to mind the lack of response, just sinks down to rest her back against my tree. She sighs, and brings her knees up to wrap her arms around them. She’s looking at me sideways now, resting her head on her arms.

“I had to get away,” she says. “We used to live in a big city, my mom and me. But then she got married to Jack and we moved out here.” There is a sour twist to her mouth, a hidden bite in the way she snaps out *Jack*. “He says...” she starts, stops, her fingers twitch against the bruises on her upper arms.

Abruptly, she sits up, asks, “am I annoying you?” Her gaze is intense, unwavering. I feel out the word *desperation* in my mind.

“No.” The word is out before I can even consider that my mouth has long since disintegrated, that I have no voice box or throat or tongue. It hangs in the air between us, like a strange cobweb.

The corners of her mouth tilt up. “Okay,” she says. “Okay.”

I am her silent guard as she stretches herself out on the ground, letting the drone of the cicadas pull her eyelids closed.

The trees are painted in brilliant red, orange, yellow and brown. In the clearing, only my tree is green now. The wind blows and a few more leaves drop to the ground, I feel them flutter flip down down down. The girl steps forward onto this temporary, half-finished carpet.

She smiles at me, tired as always. And as always, quietly makes her way to her place beneath my tree. I think it's been awhile since she was last here, before the trees' upholstery began to shift. *Upholstery*. Sometimes I am surprised at what I do remember. It's been happening since the girl first came back in the summer.

I drift closer, condensing as I focus on her. Sometimes she talks, about her life and what she does with her friends. Usually though, she is mostly quiet, restful. I think today will be another quiet day.

"School started," she says. "I haven't had time to come here." Her voice sounds heavy with weariness.

I feel out the concept. "School...I remember, school."

"That's too bad," she smiles; momentarily, her tired eyes twinkle.

She reaches up to brush her hair out of her eyes, and the long sleeve she is wearing falls back and something catches my attention. I focus further; she must notice my intensity, because she looks at me and then back towards her arm. Her humor flickers out. She brings her other hand up, fingers lingering around her wrist before carefully pulling her sleeve back, exposing the inside of her forearm.

"My secrets," she says, gravely, eyes tracing the neat row of precise cuts on her arm.

I brush my essence over them and she shivers, but when she lays down she doesn't pull her sleeve back down.

“What’s it like? For you?” the girl asks, breath puffing out in small clouds. She’s resting on the lowest branch of my tree, bundled up in puffy clothing and avoiding the snow covered ground she’d stamped through to get here.

I consider her question. What *is* it like?

“Like...memories, fading. Like breathing.”

She stares up through the branches at the cold winter sky; touches the yellowing bruise surrounding her left eye. “That sounds, nice,” she says.

The songbirds are singing new life songs, wildflowers peaking through quickly fading snow illuminated by bright morning sun when the girl returns for the last time.

I feel her enter the clearing, wavering with her newness. She coalesces by our tree, and I reach out to wrap around her Self.

Her uncertainty reverberates; already I know she is forgetting. We are like memories, fading. I feel her settle, accept her homecoming. She breathes; together, we breathe spring life with our clearing.

There are no words between us anymore, and somehow I feel an unbearable loss. But this too, fades.