

The Stranger

Sprawling out on my pink sheets, I stare at them in disgust and frustration. *I despise this color. Why does mom always buy everything in pink?* Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a pink ribbon laying on the floor, peeking out from my closet. *What is this doing here?* My chest heaves with quickening breaths. I clench my fists. Stomping to the closet, I pick up the bow and chuck it across my room. "Why does mom keep all of my old stuff," I yell.

"Janus, I'm trying to study. Can you please tone it down a little?" my sister hollers. I walk across the hall, into her room, and chuck the pink bow at her.

"SHUT UP," I yell, my voice strains, and tears form in my eyes. I run back to my room in a fury, my steps thudding with each heavy step. I collapse onto my ugly, pink bed. "I'm sorry," I whisper my apologies to her. I want to be louder but I don't want to talk to her. "Why am I like this? Why am I so angry? I want to stop but I can't-" my voice cracks as I continue to whisper through tears to myself.

BAM! The closet door opens abruptly. A man, tall and lanky, topples into my room. His hair, dark brown with a blond streak, is in a messy bun. Dirt covers his face.

"Ouch, that hurt," he says as he sits up. He looks up and greets me, "Hi."

I'm speechless; a random, filthy man (who for some reason has hair just like mine) just fell out of my closet. *Where in the world did he come from?*

"Sorry for the unannounced visit, but you need to come with me," he announces, grabbing my arm. I feel frozen. I think of running but my feet refuse to move. He pulls me to the closet.

“For your safety, please keep your hands, arms, and legs within the vehicle,” he announces in a monotonous voice, chuckling before chucking me. I soar through the closet wall and everything goes black.

The Stranger is Not a Stranger

I awake in a house built into nature. Sequoia trees melt into the house; the walls and ceiling are made out of wood, and the grass beneath me is lush, succulent, and sweet. Elevated above the ground, the view consists of miles of other trees in its surroundings. The startling rustling woke me, and came from beyond the trees. In fear, I jump up to my feet and raise my arms and hands in a fist. The man that abducted me emerges through the forest wall. Vibrant green leaves and sticks in his hair. He holds a bottle with a crimson liquid.

“Well good morning, sleepyhead,” the man says with a smile as he moved toward me. I flinch away. He chuckles before saying, “You're skittish. Guess you haven't come out yet. Well, don't worry. You'll come out to be a fine man.” He points to himself. A large grin stretches across his face, revealing his pearly white teeth.

My hands shake as sweat beads from my forehead. *How did I not notice this stranger is me?* Billions of questions race through my mind. *How do I have a beard in the future? What is future me doing here?* I feel lightheaded. My knees feel weak. The world is spinning, then the world turned black.

Returning to my Childhood

The man is sitting next to me. "Hey kid, sorry I scared you. If there's a weird aftertaste in your mouth, it's the healing potion. How are you feeling, kid?" He asks.

"I'm confused, but good," I reply.

Older Janus smiles as he turned to face me. "Where are we?" I ask.

"Wait, you still don't get it?" Older Janus says.

"Get what?" I respond

"You're in the world of your childhood self," Older Janus reply.

I look back at him, my eyes widen. "WHAT? Just-just no, I don't even want to think about that old feminine body and those girlish thoughts. Why am I here?"

Older Janus turns to face my swollen, red eyes. He gets to his feet, "When I first met my future me, I wanted to forget that we were ever a little girl. I intended to throw out everything related to femininity and anything possessing the wrong gender's memories and sentiments, sufferings. But when I grew older, I remembered this mind, this universe with young female Janus's ideas and emotions trapped in this world. Then I remember how I attempted to forget about the younger female me—and how this place would soon wither and diminish into nothing more than dust if I allow these memories to fade, that's why everything is overgrown and crumbling in this world currently-"

I draw my legs close to my chest, tucking my face into my lap.

"-because you wanted to forget about your female self when you eventually converted to male and- Janus? Are you all right?"

I feel nauseous. My cheeks burned. Hot tears welled up in my eyes. I want to kick and scream but I shout instead, "Ju-Jus-Just SHUT UP JANUS! I KNOW IT'S ALL TRUE BUT JUST STOP TALKING ABOUT IT." I see older Janus moving and leaning toward my small, balled-up body, I yell even louder, "GET AWAY FROM ME!"

"Janus," Older Janus scolds. "Breathe and follow me: In on one, two, three, four; hold it, out on one two three four," he repeats himself until I am calm. "Try that next time you feel emotional," he beams at me.

After the mindfulness session, Older Janus helps me to my feet and says, "Follow me, kiddo."

The Murals

Together, Older Janus and I walk through the trees surrounding the lawn. As we walk over a worn bridge, I glance over the edge, seeing a raging river rushing beneath. Noticing Older Janus striding away, I hurry back to him. I finally see our destination in the distance: a small wooden cottage decorated with climbing ivy and small flowers.

"Come on, we're almost there," he walks faster, hurrying with excitement.

To the left of the cottage, there is a rock wall with a wooden door. The door, cracked and filthy, has spider webs draping from the stone door frame. Older Janus opens the door.

"Little ones first," he motions with a flourish of his hand.

I enter the space through a room branching into a small shaped tunnel. Tiny windows along the curved edge light the room. A flash of color in the tunnel catches my eye. Walking to the tunnel, I admire the colorful, abstract murals adorning the walls. A blue line lightly covered in a layer of pink fades to only blue with crimson splatters near the blue.

"What are these paintings for?" I ask Older Janus.

Older Janus smiles. "Think about it," Older Janus says.

I roll my eyes. The deeper I walk into the tunnel, the more crimson streaks cover the artwork.

"I have no idea. What do they mean?" Older Janus walks into the tunnel with me, staring ahead while he speaks, "Think of this as a timeline, the pink covering eventually disappears, doesn't it? Just like how you discovered yourself. The red splatters represent your constant eruptions of anger and other feelings you are holding in. Further, into the wall, more and more red splatters appear as you keep lashing out at the people you love. This is all because you haven't told anybody about the true trans you." His eyes meet mine.

"But, why is it in my female world?" I ask.

"There's the million dollar question," Older Janus's grin widens. "It's here because being female is always a part of you. The process, the life of pretending to be female, is a part of the story that produced the male Janus," says older Janus. "You don't need to forget the other you to come out," he bends down to one knee and placing his hand on my shoulder. "You don't have to forget the first you for the true you to come out. You simply must allow yourself to be YOU. I need you to come out and tell your parents, 'I'm trans,' okay?" He playfully punches my shoulder, "You got it, just tell them. **What are you waiting for?**"

I nod my head. Saliva builds in the back of my throat. I try not to cry, but I can't hold them back. Tears sting my eyes, streaming down my cheeks. I'm not sure why I'm crying, but I know hearing the truth heals but hurts all at once.

Coming Out of the Closet

We hurry back over the bridge, where the rushing river has become a small creek. Older Janus doesn't even stop to question it. The full moon shines, a spotlight of clarity in the dark night. As Older Janus and I head back through the open fields, I can't help but notice the beauty of this place, a place I once hated with all of my being.

As we walk into the closet and through the wall, the closet shakes, and trembles, transporting me back home. I hug Older Janus.

“Thank you,” I say, I let go of him and open the closet door. I step into my room feeling transformed. The air feels different- crisper and fresher. Even I feel different: I feel more free and more me.