

Return By Zacharia H.

The harsh gate creaked open with the sound of thousands of souls leaving their bodies. Ashley let the sharp wind grab her hair and whip it around her face as she walked out of the rundown jail for the first time in 20 years. A pang of guilt hit her side. Wow. 20 years. Within herself she suddenly realized the time that was lost. Nothing waited for her. The sea of life had moved on leaving her, a large stone, behind on the riverbed. Her officer, a robust man named Archer, followed her outside.

“So what will you do now?” he pondered aloud to her. He could tell that she had no idea what to do, as they all did. No one would come for them, leaving them to their own devices. She would eventually get herself together, they usually did.

“I’ll need some time,” she said slowly letting her hands fall to her side.

“Hopefully not back here. You didn’t come here for nothing, you hear me?” Ashley looked up at the man, a small tear forming at her right eye.

“You alright?” Archer asked, perturbed by the look of pain on her face. She walked down the walkway of the jail with her items taken from her years ago. She took a moment to collect herself before answering.

“Yes, yes I think I am,” she stated before swiftly walking down the way and onto the path.

With a last forlong glance at her captor for the last vicennial she set out. She didn’t exactly know where to go, but knew wherever it was, she needed to go there. Around her was nothing as far as she could see, only barren rock and dead trees. Her only grasp to reality was the road next to her and the path that she followed. She didn’t exactly know where she was, but it didn’t matter to her. The destination led her way. The minutes turned to hours, the hours to days. But it didn’t matter. Through the day and night she marched forward, never hungry, never thirsty. Only the thought of who she was and what she had become.

Often times she would think back to her past, oh how it spited her. By now it had just become the faint footsteps of a squirrel looking for a place to hide in the night. But the footsteps might have been rather loud to the nearby ants. The memories of friends she never had, the times with loved ones she never met. The people who had never loved her. She rolled her eyes in disgust. Oh the people that brought her down, the people who brought her down! Telling her that she could never amount to anything, telling her that she was worthless! She stopped on her road to nowhere for a moment, as tears fell from her quivering face. All these things, and this was what she amounted to. A failure. A jailed lunatic who could never do anything. She started to laugh, the way you would laugh at the insurmountable disadvantage you would have against a pro boxer. Soon her laughter grew louder and louder until everything suddenly stopped. She dragged herself onward and continued walking, getting ever closer to her destination.

The day of the court trial was always foggy. She didn’t choose to think much about it. But after a few days she thought back to it. The loud room, filled with loud people. The gavel falling onto the table. The final verdict, guilty. A crime she couldn’t even remember. Funny, the thing ruined her life and she couldn’t even remember the thing.

Soon, she slowed down. She felt an odd sense of welcoming. As her walk slowed to a crawl, she looked up at the road ahead. Oh, the beauty! Such beauty was unnatural. A snowy town on Christmas day, families happy in their homes. The beauty of the scene took Ashley away, leaving her not to wonder how it was possible. She started to run at the town, hoping for a bit of the happiness, but fell every few steps. Time after time after time she tried to reach the perfect little city but failed. But she felt it. Every step she got closer and closer to her goal. Soon, within inches, she could feel the chill of the town and the warmth of the lit chimneys. The scrapes and bruises couldn’t stop her now.

Finally, she planted a defiant foot into the snow. She had done it. She arrived at her destination. But something was off. She knew this place. They knew about her too, the residents, but not in the same way. As she walked from house to house, looking into their windows she felt something oddly unnatural, something that she couldn’t put a finger on. It was

like the feeling of a small spider climbing up your leg, going unnoticed. She couldn't quite put a finger on it and continued walking through the town. Soon her answer was met when she saw a little boy, only the age of four or so, walk into his father's house. Looking at the ground on which he had just walked she saw nothing. The snow left no footprints. Looking behind herself she saw a wake of prints but none for the boy.

Her pace sped up as she went from house to house looking, searching, looking, until she got to the last one. Inside she saw a family with their daughter. They were around the fire, together with each other. She suddenly burst into tears as she entered the house. Suddenly, she was that young girl, her parents around her. Hugging her, she felt love! True love! The warmth she felt with them, never felt before. The warmth rushing over her while a feeling of euphoria took over. Finally, she was at peace. Warmth, and love. But there was a nagging feeling that maybe, maybe the fire wasn't that warm at all.