

lily of the valley

She loved so many things in life to the point where it was hard to keep track of all of the activities that brought her joy. She loved to laugh, to read, to write. She loved her family, her friends and her dog. She loved to blend into the background and use her senses: she witnessed a girl walking side by side with her grandmother who wasn't really there, smelled the sweet scent of a flower exchanged from a clueless man to a mischievous woman, overheard the ramblings of a grumpy dying man on a trip to the hospital, tasted her favourite delectable dessert, and felt the soft fur of her teacup Yorkie. People always told her she had such a vivid imagination, for it was almost impossible to know the details of strangers' lives, most of whom she had only encountered from afar. She believed otherwise, however, because some part of her knew that her depictions were more fact than fiction. Usually, she was good at telling the difference between the two, seeing as above all else, the thing she loved the most in life was dreaming.

Her daily routine was centred around this fact to ensure that she was able to dream at night for as long as possible. She would wake up, write down as many dreams that she could remember in her dream diary, have breakfast, read a book, have lunch, go for a walk with her dog, have dinner and get ready for bed so she could do the same thing again tomorrow. The event that she looked forward to the most each day was going back to sleep so she could escape to a whole new world. Reality was bleak when compared to the extravagant world inside her mind where she could be whoever she wanted, do whatever made her heart beat faster, and go wherever she desired without the weight of her worries to hold her back. She lived to dream and dreamed to live. And though it occurred while she was sleeping, dreaming was the only thing that truly made her feel awake.

Generally, she was a very happy person. Optimism and joy are what made up the majority of her personality and she always managed to find a bright side to everything. It was because of this that the small, white, bulb-shaped flowers always appeared in her dreams. She learned that they were called *lily-of-the-valleys* and symbolized happiness, joy and rebirth - most of which represented her entirely. Every time she gazed at the flowers, it was a bittersweet experience. Though they were beautiful and symbolized the happiness and joy she felt within her dreams, they were also a constant reminder that she was dreaming, that nothing she saw was real and that the only place this world existed was within the confines of her mind.

The *lily-of-the-valleys* did have their benefits when she needed reassurance that what she was experiencing was a dream. Nightmares were the only downside of dreaming although they didn't scare her as much as they intrigued her. She liked to live out the nightmare to see how it ended, regardless of how much it terrified her, because she was curious as to where it would leave her in the end. Some would call it morbid curiosity but in reality, she just wanted answers. She knew that amidst the seemingly random and chaotic nature of her dreams, there lay an ounce of truth about herself within them. When she



found herself too panicked to continue, she looked for the flowers to calm her down, as she could find peace in the fact that she would wake up soon enough, far away from the horrors her mind made up. Afterwards, she would research the meaning behind what she just experienced in order to discover what her *dreams* were trying to tell her about *reality*.

Other times, the *lily-of-the-valleys* were a painful wake-up call in blissful dreams she hoped she'd never awaken from. Recently, for example, she dreamt that she could fly and it was the most exhilarating experience of her life. As she soared above the big and beautiful world, everything seemed so small and insignificant. Her face lit up as she approached a flock of geese and flew alongside them in V-formation. She laughed as they honked in alarm before reluctantly welcoming her to join them. For once she felt like this is where she belonged - among a family of winged creatures who understood what it was to be free and travel the world. If there was reincarnation after death, a bird is what she'd want to be. But, as all dreams do, her moment of flight and thrill came to an end as she glided closer to land and saw a field of the white, bulb-shaped flowers that she loved but hated so much. Though she knew this signified the end of her journey, the feeling of freedom is one she could get lost in forever and indeed that is exactly what her dream meant: the desire to be free.

When she wasn't doing anything dream-related, she was busy taking care of her Yorkie or worrying about what she wanted to do with her life. She was already at the expected amateur working age and her life still hadn't amounted to anything so far. The only thing that made her happy, that she was passionate about, and that gave her a sense of purpose was dreaming - and not much of a career could be made out of that. Regardless, she kept dreaming, even after everyone closest to her told her otherwise, for it was the only life she wanted to live that she truly loved.



It was dark and it was cold and she tried to shiver but couldn't move. Her limbs felt heavy and the air felt thick. Breathing was a struggle in itself. She had previously relied on all five of her senses to keep her grounded but now all she had was one. Her hearing was heightened at the loss of the other feelings so the only thing she could do was listen and wait. She waited and waited, suspended in silence, until finally there was something to listen to. It was soft at first and barely audible but soon she was able to discern the sound of voices echoing from ear to ear. Although she wasn't able to clearly make out what they were saying, she recognized the low murmur and shape of their words. It almost sounded as if they were calling out to her from afar. After realizing the voices were distinctly familiar to her, she felt a strong surge of warmth originating from her hands to the rest of her body. It thawed the coldness she had felt earlier and for a moment, she thought she had the strength to move but the feeling passed as quickly as it had come. Before long, the hum of voices faded and along with them, her warmth. The cold returned and she was left stranded in darkness, listening only to the sound of silence.





She opened her eyes and sat up, her heart pounding loudly in her chest. There was a faint ringing in her ears that only ceased after she had fully woken up, as if her ears were still recovering from being overused within her dream. It was strange because she felt like she had had that same dream before, only she couldn't remember when. When she tried thinking back to the dream, the memory of it began to dissolve as if being seized from her mind before she was able to grasp it. The only solid thought that formed in her subconscious - no matter how much she tried to compress it - was that there had been no *lily-of-the-valleys* to indicate that it was a dream throughout the entire experience. However, the only senses she had were hearing and feeling - it was impossible to see a flower regardless. And yet the thought still lingered and festered in the back of her mind, even after weeks had passed, along with a nagging feeling of unease that refused to go away.

It had been a few weeks of dreams about animals, food and strange fantasy worlds before the next memorable dream appeared. In all of that time, she had done nothing but the usual: eat, sleep, take care of her dog and dream. It had gotten to the point where the line between dreams and reality became blurred and it was hard to tell the difference between the two. Her only way of separating them was with the flowers and even those were unreliable at times, constantly flickering in and out of existence - in both worlds.



She stared in shock at the scene displayed before her. A pale and brittle woman with bandages wrapped around her head lay stationary on a hospital bed, hooked up to a variety of machines and monitors by her bedside. As she moved closer to the woman, she saw the patient's eyes moving back and forth rapidly beneath her eyelids. Disturbed by what she saw, she averted her gaze and focused her attention on the room itself. The layout was vaguely familiar to her and she was struck by a flash of *deja vu* that quickly vanished upon a nurse's arrival into the room. The nurse didn't utter a word the entire time so she took it upon herself to look over the nurse's shoulder and read the patient's status. *Coma* was the only word she was able to identify before the nurse left her alone with the sleeping woman.

She moved closer to the woman once more but stopped dead in place upon seeing her own body lying there as the patient, motionless. In fact, it had been her all along but she just refused to see it. She began to hyperventilate as her senses overwhelmed her: she inhaled the antiseptic smell of the hospital room, listened to the incessant hissing and beeping of the machines, felt the cold tiles below her, tasted her panic-stricken tears, and watched as the patient - her - chest rose up and came down, all the while thinking about how much she hated hospital gowns. As it became too much for her to handle, she willed herself to wake up, as she knew this must be a nightmare. She desperately searched for the *lily-of-the-valleys* but they were nowhere to be seen.

All of a sudden, she felt something cold snake around her wrist and grab ahold of her. She screamed when she realized it was the patient's hand who in turn pulled her closer and sat up in the bed with her eyes still shut. Afraid to move, she held her breath, filled with

trepidation. Just as she began to slowly pull her hand back, her mirror image tightened her grip until they were face to face with one another. She shook in fear until, without warning, the patient opened her eyes and let out an ear-piercing shriek. Everything went white and instantaneously, she woke up.

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For a while after that, she was in a daze, not able to fully comprehend what she had just experienced. She stumbled downstairs and picked up her dog to cradle her in her arms for comfort. As she wandered around the house with her Yorkie in her hands, her thoughts went back to the nightmare she'd just had. She shivered just thinking about it but the more she tried to recall every detail, the faster they seemed to disappear. Her thoughts were interrupted by the creaking of her front door opening ever so slowly. Her dog leaped out of her hands and began to growl at whoever or whatever was making its way through the entrance. She tried calling her Yorkie back but she refused to budge so she gave up and tiptoed across the floor, hidden behind a wall but still able to see the invader.

From afar, it looked like a featureless man wearing all black and holding something bright in his hand. Instinctively assuming it was a weapon, she gasped and knocked over a painting on the wall to distract him while rushing over to swoop her dog off the ground and run as far and as fast as she could. Bolting through the back door, she glanced behind her to see the man chasing after her at full speed. The pounding rhythm of her legs and her heart matched each other's pace as she ran even faster. Despite her best efforts, he was catching up to her and as she looked back for the last time, she saw that it wasn't a weapon he was holding in his hand, it was a white, bulb-shaped flowered hospital gown.

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She woke with a start, sweat dripping down her face and her back. Her heart was still beating erratically so she took a few deep breaths to calm herself down. After her demeanour normalized, she hurried downstairs to make sure everything was where it was supposed to be. Reassured that this was indeed reality, she sighed in relief and bent down to pet her Yorkie. Before the dream departed from her mind, she wrote down everything she remembered and researched the meaning of being chased. She found out that it meant she was trying to avoid the truth, though she didn't yet know what truth she was evading.

The next few nights she was hesitant to fall asleep but she quickly faced her fears, eager to return to the dream world. For the most part, her dreams were relatively normal although the dream she once had about being deprived of her senses with only the warmth of familiar voices to keep her company reoccurred more frequently than ever before. On top of that, the *lily-of-the-valleys* were emerging in reality in places they'd previously never been. First, for sale at the grocery store. Then, in her neighbour's garden. And today, within a novel she was reading - gradually getting closer and closer to her, almost as if they were trying to tell her that *reality* had become a *dream*.

That evening, after kissing her Yorkie goodnight, she fell asleep for the last time. In her dreams, she was a bird, just like she'd always wanted. As she flew alongside other



flocks across oceans, mountains, cities and towns, she felt so happy to be alive, wanting to live like this forever. It was a dream come true that she could experience this feeling of freedom once more and she wished it would never end. Indeed, she was granted her wish, as this *dream* had become her *reality*. Unable to believe it at first, she searched far and wide for a *lily-of-the-valley* but never found one. Even though they had been unreliable in the past, she believed this time they were telling her the truth. A part of her was saddened by the fact that she'd never get to see the flowers again but her spirits lifted after realizing that they would always be with her - she represented everything they stood for after all: happiness, joy and even rebirth with her new life as a bird.



The nurse was kind enough to stay with her even after he had pulled the plug so she would have company in her final moments. She had been in a coma as a result of a head injury for over two years and her family knew that living off of the life support was no way to live at all. Everything she had experienced during this time was a dream; her mind had created an alternate, happier reality than the one she had actually been living in to keep her alive longer than she was supposed to. There were only brief snippets of reality that appeared in her dreams: the reoccurring voices were those speaking to her in real life and the coma nightmare was a real memory of the hospital room she currently occupied - except for the part where she woke up. Her teacup Yorkie was her sole companion in the very lonely dream world she lived in and the *lily-of-the-valleys* were her guides between what she thought were her dreams and reality. The flowers had also been placed by her bedside in real life since the beginning of her hospital stay but hadn't fully bloomed until today - the day of her death.

As soon as she had taken her last breath in real life, her eyes had closed for the last time in her dream world, symbolizing the end but also the beginning of her rebirth as a bird, hence the blooming of the *lily-of-the-valley* on the same day. She was happier in her dreams than she ever had been in real life, so much so that no matter what they tried, she refused to wake up, undoubtedly wishing to sleep - and dream - forever. Her wishes did come true and she was all the better for it. And though they thought that holding on to her and keeping her alive was saving her, in reality, it was the one thing holding her back, preventing her from growing her wings to fly. Thankfully, in the end, they loved her enough to let her go, for it was only then that she was genuinely happy, joyful and free - just like a *lily-of-the-valley*.

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