

Lost

Part Four: Free

Julie had been asleep too long. How long for sure, she would never know but what she did know is that a horrible empty feeling was currently occupying her stomach. She felt sick to the bone, as if she was rotting from the inside out, a diabolical black sickness, one that can never be cured but grows insidiously until it consumes every cell in your body, every thought in your mind. The sickness had spread and Julie was on her last legs but from some place deep within, a surge of determination pushed her to open her eyes. Sand clung to her eyelashes and the bright sky above her was a blur.

It was too quiet, even the cool waves that washed up her legs and then slowly back again were silent as if waiting in anticipation. It was like the whole world was holding its breath, waiting. Julie could just about make out the man in the hat, standing inconspicuously on top of the mound. Julie could nearly make out his features and saw that he was wearing a black suit like he was in the most generic situation. Even that ever-present breeze had ceased. Everything was at a pause.

Julie lay, watching the figure for a moment until at last he turned his back and disappeared down the bank. Julie rolled over and sat up. She saw that her body was free of bruises and cuts, as if the sea had washed away her pain as it had done her uncleanness. She wore an elegant pale nightdress, replacing the ripped clothes she had previously worn and the detail didn't even seem to frighten her. She looked back at the point at which the man in the hat had just disappeared. Was he really something to be terrified of or was he a kind heart? Was he watching over her? For a moment, Julie became one with the world, became at peace. She sat there, her too waiting. Nothing else mattered at that time.

In the distance, the sound of birdsong broke the dead silence. Julie heard a footstep and turned. The little boy was standing on the sand, not a stone's throw away. He gestured to her and ran off along the beach, his small bare feet leaving no trace in the golden sand.

Julie rose angelically and pursued him with confidence. There was no longer a sense of desperation. She was going to follow him and catch him.

The boy soon turned off the beach and Julie found herself stepping between sparse trees. There were random stone statues that lay in ruins on the ground. They had perished in their loneliness. Julie reached a point where the trees became denser and before she had time to think it, she knew it.

She was back in the forest but this time, she was unafraid. The boy, still in sight, gestured again to her and ran on. The sound of birds chirping indifferently echoed around the forest.

The man in the hat. He stood in the trees a little in front. She couldn't see the boy anywhere but ran forward towards the man. He took a step forward and started away from her. Julie felt the need to yell to him but somehow words just didn't come out. She hurried ahead with a burning determination and began to make out the boy's figure ahead, he was there and so was the man in the hat. They were together.

Then Julie stopped dead in her tracks. She had come to a small dry stone wall and in front of her was a small church, towering above her, surrounding it a large and for the most part dense graveyard. She stopped because she knew this church; somewhere at the back of her mind she knew it. From this point on, she followed her feet. They moved as if someone had completely taken control of her body and she was just a lost soul feebly attached to an unwanting host.

Julie's feet carried her over the small gate in the wall and towards the church. Where was the boy? The sound of birds had died quickly and it was again silent. Her feet carried her towards the church and just as she began to dread what was in the church, she found herself walking straight passed it and towards one grave. Then she knew.

James Redman 2005-2012 R.I.P. The gravestone was untouched, it stood out in the ancient graveyard for which time had not been so fulfilling. But the grave, in front of which Julie stood, was suspended in time. As if the rock beat its own earthly heartbeat. On the grave lay several bunches of flowers, dead and shrivelled, deprived of all that makes them be. Even the colour had bled the flowers dry to the grey of ash.

Julia could not stand to look at it. She turned her head to the side and

saw, a few paces away, a beautiful patch of garden in which beautiful flowers of all colours occupied. A large silver birch tree stood tall, keeping careful watch over the patch.

Julia cleared the distance between and reached a hand out to touch them. She ran her fingers through the soft petals of the flowers and closed her hand around the stem of a bunch and pulled gently. As soon as the stem tore and the flowers were exposed to the world they died instantly, melting in her hands to a wilted black. Their only protection was in the garden, safe from the darkness of the world. Julie grabbed hold of another, near the back, a yellow tulip, its flowers still closed up and ignorant. When Julie broke it and took it in her soft hand, the flower opened up magnificently, exposing its beautiful insides.

Astounded, Julia carried the flower carefully towards the grave, as one might carry the most precious object one could ever imagine. But out of the shade of the silver birch, the light from the sun shone down on the beautiful flower and it too died. The smallest gust of wind carried the ashes from Julie's hand and into the sky.

She slumped down to a sitting position and cradled her head in her hands. There was a footstep and Julie looked up to see, standing next to the church building, the man in the black hat and suit. He took a cautious step forward, waited and then proceeded towards Julie. Although Julie could strangely not make out the age of the man, not even by a decade, she could see that his face was aged, by endless time, pain or overwhelming happiness. Small scars ran across his left cheek.

As he grew closer and closer to Julie, her eyes closed, she was ready. If it was her time to go, she was ready. She only hoped that it would be painless.

The footsteps grew louder until Julie could feel him standing beside her and she waited. After a few long seconds, she opened her eyes. In his right hand he held a bunch of flowers limply, just as beautiful as those in the garden. He held them out to Julie, who frowned at him with confusion but took them thankfully. She laid them carefully on the grave in the place of the blackened ones. Julie felt the shape in the pocket of her nightdress and took out the small goats eyes. A tear dripped down her face.

Julie hurried down the hallway with a handful of brightly coloured helium balloons in one hand and a wad of blue tack in the other. She glanced in the living room quickly as she went by then stopped and doubled back. A bowl of cheese puffs had tipped from the neatly laid out food table and spread across the floor.

‘Mummy!’ James called, skipping into the living room.

‘Not now honey, Mummy’s incredibly busy.’ She went to put the balloons down but then realised they were filled with helium so went into the hallway, opened the door and started tacking the balloons to the front door. James followed her into the hallway.

‘Mummy when can I open my presents?’ Julie rolled her eyes slightly and sighed.

‘Later, when everyone gets here.’

‘Well can I open my cards now pleaseeee?’ he begged. Julie finished tacking the balloons to the door and shut it.

‘Yes in a minute. They’re in the letter box, just let me tidy up first and find the candles-’

‘But why can’t I just open them nowwww?’ Julie sighed.

‘Fine, okay. If I get them will you just leave me alone for a bit.’ James nodded.

Julie opened the door and walked across the driveway to the wooden gate that separated the front garden from the footpath. There was another load of balloons tied to the gate that floated a little above. Julie opened the wooden gate and opened the letterbox on the other side. She took a handful of coloured envelopes and hurried back to the house. She half-thrust them at James and went back to tidying the floor.

It was a little under two minutes later when James returned.

‘I’m bored mummy.’

‘Well play with some of your new toys or something.’ She snapped. James wandered out of the room.

Soon the floor was tidy and, hoover in hand, Julie exited the living room to return it to its cupboard. Her foot slipped on something hard and she stumbled to keep her balance. James was sitting on the floor in the hallway with a handful of coloured marbles.

‘For God’s sake James, go and play outside with them.’

James sniffled a little but then took up the marbles and wandered out of the front door onto the drive. He sat down again and flicked a marble absently. He was bored. There was a hum of traffic from the road and James looked over, watching the cars go by every few seconds. He took a marble in his hand and observed it carefully. He placed it on the tarmac drive and flicked it towards the other, which had landed a foot or so away from the gate. He watched with enthusiasm as the marble rolled towards the other one and with a tiny 'tink' that could not be heard over the cars, knocked into the first one. The first marble set in motion, rolling onto the footpath and hitting a small slope, where it rolled toward the road. James jumped to his feet and hurried after it. The marble picked up speed, rolling passed the double yellow line at the edge of the road. James ran after it and straight into the path of an oncoming car.

Julie heard the noise and sprinted out of the house. When she reached the unconscious James, in his left hand, he held two large marbles.

Julie wiped the tear from her face and reached into her gown. She took out the two marbles from the handkerchief, reminiscent of goat's eyes. Tears splashed off the marbles, making tiny 'tink' sounds so quiet that they couldn't be heard by the human ear. Julie turned to the man in the hat and suit but he had completely disappeared. Julie looked down at the beautiful flowers laid out on the grave and smiled.