

Tattooed for Death

I have finally run out of time. Today, I lose everything. Today I am going to die.

I wandered slowly through the village, trying to prolong my time there. Nothing had ever changed here; yet today everything seemed so different. The village usually sang with the sound of laughter as people wandered the streets talking and joking. Today it seemed like a skeleton – empty and quiet. There was no noise except for the scuffle of feet as those of us who had been tattooed for that day made our way to the ‘slaughter house’. I wanted to shout out and curse those who had made it necessary for me to be here. To demand that the Masters stop this pain but I was too scared of disturbing the silence.

Finally, I could stall no longer and made my way up to the front door. The chill of the turnstile burned my wrist as I waited for it to scan my tattoo. It seemed like hours before it let out the same shrill beep that everyone before me had heard and that many more would come to hear. I was too scared to turn around and check how many people were behind me. I couldn’t bear to see their pain. I could barely handle my own. I felt like I was drowning, losing myself to the emotions that surrounded me. Once long ago tattoos were a fun thing, something that teenagers got as an act of rebellion. I couldn’t imagine anyone wanting one though. Dark and ugly, the edges puckered up as if they hadn’t had time to heal. They represented death.

As I entered my eyes were immediately drawn to a man sitting in the middle of the room. His face was covered in wrinkles yet still somehow managed to look youthful. It was the laughter and joy in his eyes that drew my attention to him. It was a stark contrast to the coldness of the building. Everything was uniform. Cold and empty. Sitting there in the middle of so much sadness he stood out like a lighthouse in the middle of a storm. I couldn’t understand how he could be so happy knowing that he was going to die and no one would even notice. He looked

up at me then as if he had sensed me staring at him. As I watched, I saw his face scrunch up in sympathy and knew that he must be able to see the war raging behind my eyes. I didn't want his sympathy; I had always known that my life would lead here on this day. I wasn't ready though. Nothing could have prepared me for how much it would hurt. I couldn't stand the fact that I was leaving my family; that I would never see them again; that I would miss so much of their lives... it was too much to bear. At this moment, in the depth of my despair, he spoke.

"Peace be with you my child," he said. Peace? The last thing I was feeling was peace! Here I was, finally staring into the abyss which although I had known was coming I had never accepted. Death had become a predefined lottery, the date of it etched on your hand as soon as you were born. An arbitrary date, chosen by the Masters... and my fate had been an early one. Many years ago, the Masters lost one of their brothers. It left them broken, they were in tatters. In an attempt to stop death from stealing anyone else unexpectedly they discovered a way to sketch the date of your death onto your skin so that you would forever know how long your life would be. That way no one else would get hurt. If only that was true. Death always hurt. How could it not? Especially when you had barely started living.

I took a seat across from the old man. The chair I sat in was an old armchair made from a well-worn blue material that had obviously seen many people through their last days. The thought made me feel comforted, like I was being protected by those who had sat there before me.

"Why are you harbouring such emotions child? Today is the day that you will be free!" Free? How could I be free from anything if I'm dead?

"I don't understand...free from what?" It took him a while to answer. I could almost see the sentences forming in his mind as he tried to find the correct words to explain.

“Today, everyone here will be free from this world. Able to discover another one, a better one. A world where we will meet those who died before us, I will get to see my wife again.” As he talked about his family a smile appeared on his face, it was like seeing the sun on a rainy day. “You are too young to remember the teachings. There used to be books about people that had reached this world, about what you could find there.” If I hadn’t been able to see the honesty in his eyes then I wouldn’t have believed him. Simply putting put his statement down to the ramblings of an old man. But he truly believed his words. He believed there was another life, after death. “I can see you questioning me. No one believes without proof anymore. So here is the book I was speaking of, once you have read it answer me this; if there is no life after death what is the point in life?”

The book he gave me was old, the spine was falling apart having been opened time after time. It was obviously well loved. I don’t know how long I sat there reading, time had no meaning in that place, where the only light came from the flickering bulbs above us, but I read that book from cover to cover. Somewhere in the middle I realised that he hadn’t been lying. There really was a world after this one. When my time came, I went with a smile on my face knowing that the meaning of life was to find this place after death. That one day I would see my family again.