

Verdant

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Anna did not know the value of money or time. On a warm afternoon, when left alone in between the grapevines and vegetable crops, Anna plucked all the firmest red tomatoes and ate them. Afterwards, her mouth stung with a certain sweetness and her hands were tarnished with red. She received a stern finger in her face, a loud talking-to, “You do not know the value of time and money!” and then was sent to bed with no dinner.

Tucked into her bed with her window open, Anna listened to the humming song of the summer night. Limp cobwebs drifted across her ceiling, and a lizard scuttled into a crack somewhere. Her parents laughed outside as their wine glasses collided. A gentle wind whispered into her room and lifted Anna’s curtains into supernatural configurations.

Anna crossed her arms in the dark. *What was the value of time and money?* The next morning, she was determined to find answers.

“Why is it bad that I ate the tomatoes?”
“My tomatoes,” her father leaned over an unruly cucumber plant. His knees deep in the soil and his fingernails were outlined in black. When he squinted at his beloved plants, his freckles travelled across his brow. “I was going to sell those for a solid profit. You have wasted my time and my money.”

Anna sauntered out of the warm dirt with a frown. Amber butterflies followed in her wake, stopping to kiss the shuffling greenery. *What to do for the rest of the day?*
Boredom leads her across harsh yellow grass and through the path of many jumping grasshoppers. Across the property, there was a hill that reached Anna’s knees. A fluctuating blanket of ants trickling into the grass. Anna squatted over one of the trails and placed her finger through a line of the poor little creatures. Their panic was satisfying, but soon enough, they travelled over her finger and returned to swimming through the turf. Suddenly, Anna knew precisely what she would do next.

Anna also did not know much about drowning. She carried her towel under her arm as she marched past her parents. The girl stomped on the empty, country road. The next farm was littered with sheep, which she strode through, narrowly avoiding piles of manure. Across the farm, through a cornfield and into a small valley, Anna found her destination; it was a large pond the colour of her father's fresh grown kale. She tossed her towel aside into the stringy grass and dipped her feet in the water. Excitement pinched her, and she quickly jumped into the murky green.

Anna had swum twice before in her life, and after a few minutes, her limbs strained to keep her head above water. She gripped the rocky edge, allowing the disappointment to sink in. Around the floating girl, empty fields of jaundice grass and billowing walls of corn were brisk and filled with life. Birds twittered and chased each other across the sky, playing little games that Anna wished she could be a part of.

Nearby the pond, a path wound its way between the fields. It was a backroad, used only by locals. A rhythmic crunching approached, and Anna turned her head. They were footsteps on gravel, made by a skinny figure rounding the corner towards the pond. He carried a towel under his bare arm. He wore a t-shirt with a faded logo that said 'NYC'. His flip flops were broken. Anna knew the boy, and his name was Ivan. He came from a few farms down, and he was twelve years old. Being twice her age made him more fascinating than an anthill.

Ivan stopped in his tracks when he saw the floating girl, announcing a dirty word to his pretty surroundings.

"Can I swim?" In the tranquillity, his gruff voice stood out. Dust settled behind him.

"Only if you'll be my friend."

Ivan's nose crinkled up to his eyebrows. He removed his broken sandals and his NYC t-shirt, exposing to Anna numerous black and green bruises decked across his ribcage and shoulders. He emptied his pockets and placed his belongings in a pile on the rocks. Anna surveyed as he swam across the pond, back and forth. His bony arms nimbly sliced through the beryl liquid, his bruises passed through Anna's vision once again.

“How did you hurt yourself?”

He stopped swimming. “I didn’t. I fell,” Ivan was combative with the water as he grabbed for the edge. “I fell down the stairs. Down the stairs at home.”

“Wow.”

“My house wants to hurt me sometimes.”

“That’s weird,” and it was. The way Ivan said things was bizarre. Anna wondered if it was another concept that she would never understand. *Why must it be so confusing?*

“Ivan?”

“Hm?” The balmy weather had taken the spotlight. A dribble of water slithered between Anna’s brows, and she did not know whether it was sweat or pond water.

“What is the value of time and money?” She disrupted the glassy surface by kicking her feet, working up a knoll of angry ripples. Ivan flinched.

“When you have a job. Or something. I don’t know.”

“Do you have a job?”

“No. Sometimes I prune Old Man Tomas’s cherry trees,” the boy pushed off the edge and let the water carry him on his back. His collarbones projected from the horizon of the pond like little fish coming to the surface. When Ivan spoke, it looked like a whole colony was gasping for air.

“He has lots of money.”

“Who?”

“Old Man Tomas. He gambles with my father and the Old Man wins lots of money.” Ivan’s face basked in the blaring sun. Anna saw the clouds reflecting in his brown eyes, and they reminded her of milk swirling in her father’s coffee. When Anna asked her next question, Ivan sat straight, sending a surge of waves in all directions.

“Ivan, what’s gambling?”

She wondered if he would berate her for her stupidity. She lacks knowledge of everything; she will never understand the world. Instead, Ivan swam up to edge and slipped his shiny arm over to his pile of belongings. He swam back, and his palm emerged with two coins in it.

“Gambling is taking a chance. If I flip this coin, and it lands on heads, you can keep it,” he swiped his hair out of his eyes and held the brown coin against the crevice of his thumbnail, “If it lands on heads, it is favourable to you.” Anna nodded as the coin rotated in the air before splashing unfavourably in a pool of water on Ivan’s palm.

“And now, I keep the coin, and I have more money than you.” It made sense. Anna splashed water at Ivan, furrowing her little brows.

“That’s not fair!” She opened and closed her mouth many times before resorting to a speechless pout. Ivan’s taut, pale skin shattered into a dimpled smile.

“It isn’t fair. One side you win, the other you don’t. Luck isn’t fair. Luck is the opposite of fair,” Ivan flipped the coin, and the water swallowed it. He dove down, and his black bruises arched on his back. He resurfaced quickly. “Old Man Tomas uses his luck to maintain his cherry trees. Some people want jewelry. Some people want bottles. Some want more money.” He sounded like her mother Anna noticed, but she understood every word. Not once did she get distracted and let his words fade away.

“What are you going to do with your luck?” Anna felt her fingertips beginning to wrinkle. She was suddenly aware of the subaqueous grass teasing with the tender arches of her feet. Ivan took her question to the sky as his eyes became full of the swirling clouds once again.

“I’m going to move. Somewhere. To New York.”

“Why?”

“Big lights. Skyscrapers. Business. Money. Lots and lots of money.”

Their verdant surroundings suddenly seemed meagre and unremarkable, hiding in the shadow of Ivan’s magnificent city. Anna could see the towers, the lights and life swirling in his eyes the same way the clouds did.

The following silence was comforting. Anna let her toes interlace with the underwater grass. She glanced down at her hands, they looked soft and dulcet under the green glare of the water. The stains from her tomato-eating were no longer a striking red, they had faded to a quiet orange. Ivan's next words made her jump.

“What are you going to do with yours?”

“With what?”

“Your luck.” It was a complicated question. Anna did not know her correct answer. However, she did still have one thing on her mind.

“I'm gonna swim.”