

When the Dying Girl Dies Last – Zoe, Year 8, VIC

I was a dying girl for a long time. It sounds bad when I say it like that, but it's fine. I was diagnosed when I was very young, and I learned to accept it. I didn't like pity. I didn't want it at all, so I never told anyone in my village. The only person who knew was my mother, and she took that secret to her grave. I didn't talk to people. I had a rule in my life. Don't make friends. I'd die before I turn 21, so why would I hurt people by befriending them then leaving?

I was good at following the rule. Only one person ever tempted me to break it. Her name was Laylia Blue. She was the only one who ever tried to be my friend. I was so tempted to talk to her. She was incredible. I would admire her from afar, for she was bright, vibrant, kind, and perfect. Incredible.

Until she died.

I think I was one of the first to hear the screams.

"Help! Help, Please! HELP!" The voice was desperate, and what's more, not unfamiliar. It was the voice of Laylia's friend, Zina. I whipped my head around, as did everyone else in the square when they heard the desperate cries.

Zina and Laylia were both beloved in the town. They were best friends and were often seen hanging wherever was interesting. Up trees, in forests, around cliffs. No one ever paid them any mind. Earlier in the day I'd seen the two of them wandering off in the direction of their favourite cliff. Now, only Zina was returning. She ran forward and collapsed in her mother's arms, still sobbing.

"L-Lay-Laylia, she-she's hurt!" This immediately sent me into fight or flight mode as I felt a shot of adrenaline pierce my heart and spread through my veins. A man stepped forward.

"Laylia? What happened?" I recognised Laylia's features on this man, the same mahogany brown hair, the same round face shape. This was clearly her father.

"She-she fell! Off of Meridith's Cliff! And she's not saying anything!"

I felt the place go completely silent for a few seconds. This was a rare moment, since the bustling square almost always had some sort of noise occupying it. And it was silent for a reason.

The tale of Meridith's cliff goes back a long time. There was once a beautiful lady named Meridith, who was born to a wealthy family, but fell in love with a stable boy named Oscar at age 17. Although they kept their relationship a secret, it lasted many glorious years, up until the time when Meridith was to be married. She begged her parents to allow her to marry

Oscar, her first and only true love. But they denied her. So, the two broke the long-standing set rules and kissed on the cliff, then ran away to be together.

That's what they tell the kids. Most of us know the real story.

The story of how a poor stable boy and a young, naïve wealthy girl fell so deeply in love that they decided that they would rather die than be without the other. And so, they did. For Meridith's cliff did not get its name because that is where she and her love shared their first kiss. It is because that is where they shared their last. Still hand in hand, both stepped off the cliff at the same time. They say when they found their bodies they were laying together as though they were sleeping. A tale of a love never to be. A tale of two lovers who were destined to die.

People say the cliff is haunted by Meridith's ghost. They say that she adopts lost souls, giving them a home in her family, the family she was never able to have by blood so she shall have in soul form. They say that she also takes with her the spirits of those who cannot be with those they love, so that they may be welcomed into her family, and made to feel happy, appreciated, and loved.

"Take me to her! I need to save my daughter!" yelled the man, Laylia's father, beginning to run in the direction of the cliff. I felt my legs move on their own as I began to run amongst the crowd, following them to the cliff. Unfortunately, I am not a very fast runner, so I was soon behind everyone.

I arrived at the cliff minutes after everyone else, and saw the town pulling a huge, square wooden plank up from over the side of the cliff. On it was a male townsman, standing slouched and looking defeated. Lying next to him was a girl with brown hair and all-too familiar blue eyes. However, her head was not normally covered in red, and her eyes didn't usually look so dull and lifeless. My eyes fixated on the slow drip, drip of red at the corner of the plank.

As my eyes focused on that slow stream that ran from Laylia's head to the edge of the board, I felt a strange numbness come over me. It was like all the talking, the crying, all other sounds were gone from the world. Nothing else mattered. The only thing keeping me in my body were the constant, painful shots of adrenaline that stabbed through me every few seconds.

As soon as the wood was finally stable on the cliff edge, Laylia's father ran forward, wrapping his arms around the girl, shaking her, begging for her to give any indication that she had an ounce of life left in her. But she simply swayed like a ragdoll in his arms, not moving, not blinking, not speaking, not breathing. The sound that followed was something that echoed throughout the crowd, a sound that would haunt many for weeks. The desperate cries of a man who lost everything that mattered to him. His screams were so raw, so filled with pain that I almost couldn't bear to listen.

I was no stranger to death. I was dying, after all. I would welcome death when it came. What I hadn't thought of was that it might not come for me first. Instead, it came for the kind, thoughtful girl who always tried to be nice to me. I think it took the wrong girl.

My eyes slowly drifted from the stream of red to Laylia's eyes. Most of the time when I looked at her eyes, I prayed that she wouldn't turn to look into mine, but for once I wished she would. She lay sprawled out, her hair fanned around her, and her head tilted to one side. She had a peaceful look on her face and if you couldn't see the shining blood that covered her head you might think she was sleeping. It was odd, the way she looked. My mother always used to say that no one looks good in death. I thought that had been proven to me, seeing the bulging eyes of my mother's corpse, lying dead with a knife pressed firmly into her chest, yet here was a different example. I thought death was when everyone got to see the ugliest parts of you, but here was Laylia. Even in death I could only describe her with one word. Beautiful. Dead as the Lady Meridith and her love, yes. Dead, but beautiful.

I stood there, frozen, not moving, just staring at the corpse of the girl who I always thought would outlive me. It hurt, deep down, to see her like that. The girl so confident and happy, always smiling with her friends, looking so small, so weak, so alone. Just like how she was leaving us. Alone. Leaving her friends, leaving her father, leaving her town, leaving me. She left us all to become a part of Lady Meridith's family, where she would remain forevermore, wandering among the loveless and the unwanted. But she was not unloved and unwanted. She was not a lost soul who needed to be collected and she was not some sad, pining individual who bared the pain of love never to be shared. Emptiness consumes me as I think about how many people cared about her.

She didn't deserve this. I was the unloved one. I'm the one who was supposed to die young, not her. It should have been me.

And now, years later as my eyes close for the last time, I mourn the fact that now I will see her. My mindset still remains the same. I still believe that I should have been the one to die back then. Because as I feel my throat close as my breathing stops, I know her life would've been worth so much more. For once I wish I weren't going to see her. Even if it means I would be alone forever, at least she would live the life she deserves. Because she deserves it.