

QUICK READS

Lonely

A short story by Anna Kravtsova



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Part One

The girl woke up in the autumn forest. There were leaves everywhere. She tried to stand, but her body hurt all over, like she'd been lying there for a long time. She slowly got to her feet and looked around. There was nothing but trees. Leaves were falling all around her, crisp and golden.

Where am I? Who am I? Where should I go?

She couldn't remember anything... except that someone was waiting for her in a small house somewhere in the forest. But where? She knew that she had to go there, to find someone. She looked at her watch... it was 12:35.

She turned left and started walking, but it seemed like the forest was trying to trick her. Maybe she was walking in circles... everything in the forest was so similar.

Where am I? she asked herself, looking up at the sky. It was blue and clean; cold, white clouds floated above her. She kept walking; the clouds stayed directly above her head. They were so white. She went further and further into the forest. It started to get colder. The wind became stronger. She wanted to hide somewhere, but there was nowhere to shelter. So she just kept walking, shivering from the cold.

She was completely lost. She stopped and looked up at the sky once more. The clouds were still there, now they looked so soft and so warm. She wanted to reach out and hug them. Then she looked at the sun. It was strange... the sun didn't blind her eyes. It was made of paper. Paper rays shone in the sky and moved with the wind. The sun was made of paper, but it was the liveliest thing in the forest. She started moving again.

She kept walking until the scenery started to change. The sky became dark. The full silver moon was shining in the darkness. The forest sang a noisy song, branches swayed and creaked. The orange leaves became scarce and the trees darker, but under the naked trees, she could see something... there were teddy bears... hundreds of them. Then she heard a kid's voice.

‘Maria! Maria! Maria, are you listening?’

A chill ran down the girl's spine. ‘*Is my name Maria?*’ she thought. The front of her head started to hurt, like she had eaten ice cream too fast.

‘Who are you?’ she shouted into the dark forest. But no one answered.

Part Two

The silver moon shone in the sky; the moon knew everything about this place. But the moon was quiet, keeping its secret.

Teddy bears were everywhere: blue ones, red ones, brown ones; they were all the colors of the rainbow. She noticed one old teddy with buttons for eyes. The teddy was so familiar; she picked him up.

‘Take him if you want to.’ It was the kid's voice again. ‘He's yours.’

She hugged the teddy and kept walking. The forest ended, now there were just a few trees around. The ground squelched

under her feet. Water dripped from the trees into dark puddles beneath. She could see her breath crystallizing in the air.

It became hard to walk. She took two more steps and got stuck. She couldn't pull her feet out of the mire. The swamp was slowly sucking her in. She dropped the teddy and tried to free herself, but she couldn't move. Each movement created a vacuum in the sludge which meant that she became even more stuck. She realized that she needed help, but she knew that no one was there. She was alone. Her heart started beating faster.

'I don't want to die here,' shouted the girl. She started to cry. The tears fell silently into the deadly swamp that was slowly trying to swallow her.

When the putrid water reached her neck, she closed her eyes. She gave up and started to cry. Her body plunged deeper into the swamp. The black water filled her nose then pressed against her eyelids. For her, it was the end, the deadly end. Death hugged her and didn't want to leave. Its bony hands touched her hands. It said, 'come with me'.

Suddenly it stopped. She was no longer sinking. The moonlight shone gently on her closed eyelids once more. Someone had her by the hand and was pulling her out of the endless deep.

She was laid down on the soggy ground. She was alive. She cleared her throat and sat up. She wiped her eyes clean of the sticky mud and looked around... but no one was there.

'What is going on?' she shouted, shivering from fear. *Who saved me?* She looked around once again. She was on the other side of the swamp. A few crooked trees stared down at

her. Then she noticed a sign lying in the yellow grass near her outstretched foot. It was so dirty and slimy that she couldn't read a single letter. She took some leaves from the ground and rubbed it until she could just make out what was written there: City Cemetery.

The girl shivered. She stood up and looked around her. There seemed to be no way back through the forest. The deadly swamp surrounded her, but there was a path ahead. There was only one way that she could go... through the cemetery.

She followed the stony path. There were just dark leafless trees on either side of her, but after a while, she noticed things hidden in the grass... they were gravestones. At first there were only a few, but as she went further along the path, more gravestones loomed out of the darkness. Some of them were covered with ivy, others were cracked and threatened to collapse at the slightest touch.

Mist surrounded her legs and the tombstones. It gave the place a sinister and mysterious atmosphere. A raven croaked, making the girl cry out in shock. The raven stared at her with its black eyes and then flew away through the mist.

Suddenly a memory shot through her mind like a flash of lightning... *I've been here before!* She closed her eyes and focused on the fleeting image that had just passed through her brain. There were people. They were all dressed in black. They were crying. A man in a black suit was saying something. She tried to listen to what he was saying but she couldn't quite hear it.

She opened her eyes again and saw something strange: there was a new tombstone in the graveyard. It was black and

shiny. There was no ivy curling around it and no cracks or mould. *But how did it get there?* She walked over to the tombstone and read the inscription:

We will miss you

The girl wondered who the grave was for. There was no fresh soil near the grave. *Is there a body in there or not?* Then a hand touched her arm.

Part Three

She turned to see a boy, about her age, looking back at her.

‘Who are you?’ she asked. She didn’t feel afraid, in fact, she suddenly felt safe. The boy didn’t say anything; he just stared at her with bright green eyes. He wasn’t smiling, but he seemed happy... calm. ‘Did you pull me from the swamp back there?’

‘Yes,’ said the boy. He looked down at his hands. They were as white and clean as marble. Actually, the girl noticed, everything about him was clean. She looked down at her own filthy hands and clothes.

‘How are you so clean?’ asked the girl.

The boy shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ he said, examining his hands again. ‘I think I might be...’ But a huge clap of thunder drowned out his last word.

‘You might be what?’ asked the girl, but the boy wasn’t listening.

‘We should leave this place... it’s not safe in a storm.’ The boy grabbed the girl’s arm and pulled her off the path and into some bushes.

‘Where are we?’ asked the girl when they were safely out of the storm. A bolt of lightning streaked across the grey sky.

‘I’m not sure,’ said the boy, frowning. ‘It’s a... strange place.’

‘Yes, it is,’ said the girl, looking at her watch; it still read 12:35. ‘What time is it?’

‘No idea, but I know that it’s running out,’ said the boy, looking up at the black clouds gathering above them.

‘Don’t say that,’ said the girl. She took the boy’s hand in her own and was instantly surprised at how cold it was; it was like touching a block of ice.

‘Sorry.’ The boy took his hand away. ‘You probably shouldn’t touch me.’

‘But why not?’ asked the girl, confused. But before the boy could answer, another bolt of lightning arced across the sky and down to the ground near where they were hiding. It hit the black tombstone, sending sparks and smoke into the air. Then, just as suddenly as it had arrived, the storm went away. The black clouds disappeared and the moon peered down at them again.

‘That was close,’ said the girl, looking up at the clear night sky. She stood up and started walking over to the smoking tombstone.

‘Don’t go there!’ shouted the boy, scrambling to his feet, but slipping on the wet grass and falling back into the wet bushes. It was too late... the girl was already looking at the black tombstone. A look of terror spread across her face. Now, the inscription had changed. The lightning had etched something new on the tombstone:

We will miss you, Maria

Part Four

The girl put her hands to her face and started to weep. ‘Where am I? What’s going on?’ she screamed. The boy ran from the bushes and put his arms around her.

‘Please don’t cry,’ the boy whispered in the girl’s ear.

‘Is my name Maria?’

The boy hesitated for a moment. ‘Yes... yes, it is,’ he said, finally.

‘And what’s your name? Do you know?’

‘Yes, my name’s Peter.’

The girl stopped crying. ‘Why is my gravestone here? Am I dead?’ she asked.

‘No, you are not dead, Maria,’ the boy’s voice changed. It became softer... higher.

‘Peter? What’s happening?’ asked Maria.

‘Maria! Maria!’ The voice was no longer Peter’s, it was a woman’s voice... a voice that Maria knew well... it was her mother.

A gust of wind suddenly picked Maria up and threw her into the air. She soared higher and higher towards the silver moon. She looked down, but Peter had gone. The moon changed colour; it became yellow. She closed her eyes against the cold wind. The drip of the rain on the leaves far below became louder... and louder...

She opened her eyes.

‘She’s awake!’

Maria looked around her. She was in a white room with a yellow light. There were flowers everywhere. She looked down; there was a drip in her arm. She looked at the people in the room. *Was Peter here?* A young girl, her sister, stood at the end of the bed, clutching a teddy with buttons for eyes. Her mother smiled at her and took her hand.

‘Maria. Are you OK? Can you hear me?’

‘Yes, I can hear you,’ said Maria. ‘What happened?’

‘You had an accident,’ said a man. He was dressed in white and he was wearing glasses.

‘This is the doctor, darling,’ said her mother. ‘You were going to have lunch with Grandma, do you remember?’

Maria thought about the house in the forest. ‘Yes, I think so.’

12:35.

‘You crossed the road next to the forest and a car came around the bend in the road,’ her mother continued, ‘you didn’t have time to see it. Luckily a young boy saw what was happening...’

‘A young boy?’ asked Maria, sitting up in bed.

‘Yes... not from here,’ said her mother, sadly, ‘just a boy walking in the forest with his friends.’

‘What happened?’

‘He pushed you out of the way of the car, but you hit your head on the road...’

‘You’ve been unconscious for a couple of days,’ said the doctor. ‘We nearly lost you once. Your heart stopped beating for a couple of minutes, but you’re a fighter.’

The swamp.

‘And what about the boy? What about Peter?’ cried Maria, desperately.

‘I’m afraid he didn’t survive,’ said the doctor, looking down at his hands.

Maria put her hands to her face and started to cry.

‘But, Maria...’ said her sister, putting the teddy on the pillow, ‘how did you know his name was Peter?’