

Ophelia

The sun streams through the trees and the sky above is clear. The glade is so still that the brook's bubbling expands in the air. The gentle hum of water rushing over stones... dragging deeper, farther, stronger. The breeze filters through her hair and the light is warm upon her face. She sees nothing but the flowers. *Rosemary*. There was a time. Yes, there was a time. He loved her. Once.

Pansies. She is tired of thinking. There are too many thoughts. Too many that she cannot think of. Her father had always known. He knew just what to do. But he is gone. She laughs. She can't say why. Maybe because it doesn't matter. Nothing is left anymore.

Fennel. She was foolish. Did the truth ever form on his lips? Perhaps promises are only illusions. Perhaps they were right to have warned her. Nothing but a trifle. Only that? His touch felt warm, so *real*. Ophelia stoops to pick a daisy and she sings:

*When I was young he told me so,
But now I'm older and I know
When I was just a little girl,
I gave my heart in for a pearl*

It is a beautiful day. There was a time. Yes, there was a time when things were beautiful. The flowers smell sweet. She inhales deeply, urging the fragrance to seep into her being. She wants to belong to the forest, to melt with the earth, be one with the flowers. The flowers are beautiful. Still beautiful. Even now.

"It means nothing," Laertes said. "He is playing with you."

"But he told me..."

"Playing, Ophelia," Laertes interrupted. "You are his toy. Don't believe him."

"But Hamlet gave me..."

"He says he loves you... now." Laertes held her face between his hands. He held her. "It won't last. Don't let him upset you, Ophelia."

She resisted his words, but she had no choice. She would follow. He was right. They were always right. She was a child and knew not.

"Do you promise, Ophelia?"

He knew best. She nodded. "I will obey you."

The voices grow stronger. She hears them and she listens. She wants to forget, but she listens. *Rue*. Too late now. Too late for tears. Or sadness. She smiles, and her smile is too wide. He is gone. They are gone. *I will obey*. Obey who?

She searches for violets, but none appear. She can picture them in her mind: purple and sprightly, full of bright sunshine, petals silky and small. *Where are they?* They used to be hers. She picked them with her father, gathered them in great bunches in the meadow near their house and set them on the kitchen table. Violets were always her favourite. But there are none here. Not in this forest. Perhaps they grew once and no one tended to them. Perhaps they burst through the earth, youthful and green, and then they lost their strength and fell back to their source... alone, forgotten. *I loved you... once*.

She was writing a letter to her brother. She had promised she would write and tell him everything, all that had transpired. There was a sound at the door and she turned. Hamlet. Her heart fluttered despite her strict admonishment of its activity. It meant nothing. He was playing with her.

Hamlet came closer. There was something in his eyes... she didn't know what, but it scared her. There was a frenzy that did not belong to the Hamlet she knew, the Hamlet she had known. His skin almost glowed in the dim room and all at once it was very close, very close to hers.

He held her wrist in his grasp. He held her. He was looking for something. What? What was he trying to find in her eyes? He searched them intensely, until he broke away. The sigh that escaped pierced his being. It pierced hers too. Somehow, despite what they said, it found a way in.

His eyes stayed inside her own until he had left the room. He was gone.

Orchids. So regal and long, stretched out across the branches. She wanders farther. The flowers she strings in her hair. Now the beauty is hers, she *is* beauty. She sings again, the melody lingering and light:

*There are things I recall from so long ago,
Words that were spoken, smiles we bestowed
I laugh when I think of the way we are now,
There are few things more foolish than silly old vows*

The willow tree leans in toward the water. She tilts her head to look at it, until it is just right. The leaves are grey and misty: they sail across the surface of the stream and twist and turn in its path. She wants to touch the great, old tree: to reach into its roots and feel its strength and might.

"I think these are yours." Her voice was soft. She wasn't sure, not anymore. There was something in him that wasn't him at all.

"No," he said firmly. "I gave you nothing."

"But you did," she protested. "You gave all this to me. Don't you remember?"

He shook his head. "Are you lying to me, Ophelia?"

Her eyes widened and the alarm appeared quickly on her face. "No, Hamlet. Of course not."

He laughed, but she didn't know why. Maybe it was because nothing mattered. Not anymore. He looked at her again with those eyes, those eyes that saw and yet were empty. She shivered. There were some things that could not be unseen.

"I loved you... once."

The willow is twisted and gnarled. She runs her fingers along its surface. Rough and uneven. She reaches for a branch and holds on. It holds her. Suddenly the branch is severed. It falls slowly. *She* falls slowly. At least it feels slow.

The water is icy. So cold. But she is happy when it greets her. She wants to belong to the forest, to melt with the earth, be one with the flowers... to slip into the stream. Her gown billows outward, like the breeze that blows through her. She smiles.

I loved you... once.