

Viola

Viola held the ring in her hand and turned it over slowly. It glistened on her palm, catching the sun so that it sent a sparkling prism of light into the horizon. The messenger was gone, disappearing over the hill with little effort to disguise his disgust and irritation.

She was alone.

Her earlier conversation with Olivia flashed through her briefly. Was the ring symbolic of something that had happened during their encounter? Olivia's pale face appeared before her eyes: skin so white and pure it was like porcelain. Untouched beneath the veil that hid her beauty from the world.

Viola attempted to recall her own words. She had done as Orsino had ordered, and yet her petition was fruitless... Unless this ring communicated some drastic alteration in Olivia's fancy! Perhaps Olivia had sent it as an indication that she could love him after all. That she *would* love him after all. Orsino's eyes would alight with joy: the passion of his unrequited love returned at last; his tears transformed and turned to cheer and celebration.

He would thank Cesario, of course. Viola frowned. And then what?

She let the ring fall from her fingers and it lay half-hidden in the grass. When he looked at her, he *really* looked at her. She remembered how it felt to be beneath his gaze. It was nice to be noticed... to be *someone* again, in a way she hadn't been since... well, since the accident.

"Tell her that I love her," he had said. "Do whatever necessary to persuade her, but don't come back until she understands. Until she listens." Viola wanted to please him, to prove right the faith he'd placed in her. But the future was shrouded in mist. *Her* future. Did she have one anymore? She wondered what it would include, if there was anything else that would or could ever bring her happiness if she had to lose him too.

Viola was tired of losing.

She closed her eyes, just for a moment, and it all returned. *Shouting. Screaming. Desperate cries for help. The people were pleading, but the storm had no mercy. Wind ripped through their shelter and water churned around their feet. Sebastian spoke over the thunder. "Go, Viola! Go!" They embraced, but the memory was dim. "I'll be alright. Go. Now!" He sent her into safety and she turned only once before he was obscured from her vision. More lightning. Waves. Rain. So much rain.*

She picked up the ring once more and held it towards the light. As it connected with the sun, the realization struck her. At first it felt like relief, to know that he was still hers. Or if not,

that at least he wasn't anyone else's. But the direness of the problem grew until the sheer weight of it overwhelmed her.

"She loves me," Viola whispered. The words tumbled out and then faded away. No one heard them. "She loves me."

There was nowhere near for Viola to check her reflection, but she pressed her hand against her cheek. "She loves *me*." Her voice trembled, and anxiety pulsed within her. "I am the man." Everything now seemed regrettable. Plans extended much further and much straighter within the imagination. In reality, they shattered easily. Plans were not enough. Life intervened. Where to go now? Viola gazed around her surroundings, at the empty expanse of land and the wide, blue horizon.

There was no way out.

Icy lashes of withering waves, rain that pounded in her ears. Bodies huddled close together but they could not keep out the cold. Where was Sebastian? When was he coming? A crooked line was etched across the sky.

Viola closed her hand tightly, and she could feel the shape of the ring pressing hard against her palm. The path before her was unclear.

Maybe he wasn't.