

DAHLIA'S DECISION

By Josiah Olson

The can clinked softly as she shook it, then hissed as she sprayed its contents onto the wall. Pink came alive and crept down the image. With an involuntary 'hmm' Dahlia contemplated her handiwork.

It was her favorite flower, the one for which she was named, depicted in yellows, whites, reds and pinks. Several years ago she had taken to the art of spray painting, but the only image she had ever painted was that same flower. Although they all looked similar, each one was different. The colors always changed, and their shape tended to blossom or wither depending on her mood. Today's dahlia was more vivid than most of the others, more hopeful and happy, but at the same time it seemed too young, too naïve, too likely to be picked by some romantic.

Dahlia turned away, disappointed as an artist always is with their work. She vowed the next one would be better, yet she knew she would say the same next time as well. She unzipped her backpack and dropped the can in with the others. Dahlia held as much color in her hair as she did in her backpack; each strand a different hue, although currently all were held above her head in a loose bun, a sort of blended rainbow. Her face was unforgettable for the dozen rings that pierced her leathered skin; three in each ear, two through her nose, one on her lower lip, and three more lining her left eyebrow. A half dozen others hid in places harder to find; her bellybutton, tongue, the back of her neck, and both nipples.

Taking a seat on the front steps of the abandoned house, Dahlia took her bagged lunch from her backpack. She held the sandwich in her maimed hand, staring for the millionth time at the gap where her digits should have been. Dahlia had been born short a ring finger and pinky on her right hand. *Derek wasn't. Derek has two whole hands, and both of my parents too.* Dahlia's parents were kind, but like all parents they had a favorite child. The difference was that her parents weren't discreet at all about it; they gave Derek a car when he left for college, she got a prescription for birth control. Derek got praised for the success of his rock band, his good sense of humor, and how well trained his dog was. Dahlia only got scolded for everything she ever did, it would seem her parents had become completely blind to any successes of hers. *I don't need them, I don't need anyone,* she reminded herself.

As she bit into the peanut butter and honey sandwich (a staple in her diet) she heard a sound come from the house behind. She whirled around and saw the front door to the house open where before it had been shut. *Or was it open the whole time?* Dahlia couldn't quite remember. The rest of the sandwich disappeared quickly into her mouth, and she walked towards the door as it slipped down her throat. For all she tried she couldn't see anything in the darkness of the house, but an unsettling sound reached her from the depths of the room. It was like the fluttering of thin wings. *Bats maybe?* And a cold breeze drifted from the open door and sent shivers across her bare arms. It was July outside, but in the house it could have been January.

"Come... Stay awhile. Wish awhile." called a voice from within.

In perfect synch with the words a lamp was lit and Dahlia saw who had spoken. She was a handsome woman in her early forties, dark curly hair flowing thick down her body, so thick

that it seemed it may in fact be her body; for Dahlia saw no torso through the hair. The face that peeked through was a kind face; black lipstick upon her bottom lip and white along the top, eyes that glowed green with knowledge, and a pointed nose that gave her a professional, stern look. Thin fingers on pale hands rested on the table before her, shuffling a deck of cards methodically. The woman's eyes weren't on the cards however, they smiled at Dahlia.

"Dearie, why don't you take a seat?" the woman pointed her nose to the open chair on the other side of the table.

Dahlia made no such move, something about finding a lady alone in an abandoned house felt just ever-so-slightly strange. In the flickering oil light Dahlia could make out doors on both sides of the expansive hall; five to the left and five to the right. Two of the doors to her right were locked and bolted, but all the others stood wide open, gaping mouths that breathed quietly, in and out, cold dead air. From the two locked doors Dahlia was sure she heard a faint, desperate pounding.

"You have a wish to make I believe..." continued the lady, bringing Dahlia back to her unusual situation. "Please, sit."

"So you're a genie?" asked Dahlia, playing along. "I see the lamp... Does it get a little cramped in there? Maybe a little lonely?"

The lady laughed a childish laugh, but didn't respond to the jest.

"I get three wishes then, right?" continued Dahlia, resting both hands on the chair.

"Only one." whispered the lady, holding out a choice of cards before her. They weren't regular playing cards, and they weren't tarot either, in fact they weren't any type of card Dahlia had ever seen before. The drawings on them seemed childish, but what they depicted caught her and wouldn't let go. On one was a sketch of Dahlia with a graduation cap floating in the air above her, on her face was a happiness that she hadn't known for years. The next card showed Dahlia wrapped in the arms of both of her parents, her father was pinching her cheek and they were all laughing. Dahlia gulped down the dry air of the room when she saw the third card. It showed her sitting on a porch in a rocking chair, a fragile child tucked close to her breast. The tears came then. Dahlia had always been strong, but this reminder of the baby she almost had flooded over the meager walls she had built.

"What is this trick?" she asked the lady, stepping back in horror. "How do you know all of this?"

The lady smiled her kind smile once more, showing no teeth. "It is no trick. I am merely a servant." She stretched her arms out so that the cards were nearly touching Dahlia. "Just take what you wish and you will receive, Dahlia."

Curious, she reached a trembling hand to the deck and took the card with her baby.

With the speed of lightening, the woman reached an arm across the table and took Dahlia's maimed hand in her own. Her mouth opened, and a thousand sharp teeth wrapped around the middle finger, tearing it free as easily as tearing grass from the ground. Dahlia screamed and clutched her bloody hand to her chest. Immediately the woman's skin fell to the ground like a blanket slipping from the shoulders of a lover. Underneath was a creature of white

light, so bright that Dahlia became blind, only aware of the unending, all-seeing light that surrounded her and the pain that pulsed in her hand. Then she heard the clinking of chains as they wrapped her arms and legs in shackles. Dahlia flailed, twisted, and fought as hard as she could, but the chains were invisible, intangible. Even so, the cold of steel was unmistakable, and the way they pulled her was as real as anything.

“I AM AWAKE ONCE AGAIN! I CAN FEEL! I CAN SEE! BUT ALCYONE, MY LOVER, WHERE HAVE YOU GONE?” boomed a voice that sounded like the roaring of a lion. The voice shook the entire house and made Dahlia’s feet buckle beneath its weight. The chains, ever persistent, dragged her along the floor until they finally stopped upon what felt like a rough patch of ice.

“HERE I AM!” shouted the woman, her own voice nearly a roar now as well. “MY LOVE, WE ARE REUNITED ONCE AGAIN!”

Dahlia rose to her feet and felt blindly in the emptiness. A door slammed shut and was bolted from the outside, the eternal light was replaced by infinite blackness. Screaming until her throat was bloody and sore, Dahlia slammed her fists against the door. All of her ached, and she could no longer tell herself from the darkness, there was no sense of touch in her body at all. It was as if she had disintegrated, but there was no way to see if in fact she had.

In the hall outside Dahlia could hear the two lovers busy in the task of making love. Their sighs and whispers were torment to Dahlia’s misery. Time slipped and fell apart like a ceramic bowl shattering upon the floor. Not even breathing seemed to follow a rhythm anymore, rather Dahlia felt as if she had become a part of some infinite stillness.

An eternity passed, and Dahlia grew hungry, but the hunger didn’t kill her. She grew thirsty, but the thirst didn’t kill her. She grew old and broken, but even age had lost its grip on her. When she had enough energy she would pound on the door and scream, but there was nobody there to hear her. Anyways her voice seemed to be made of dust and smoke, the words crumbling as they fell from her lips, even she couldn’t hear the words that she shouted.

After what must have been years... or maybe a minute, the lover’s sighs of pleasure turned to sobs of grief.

“It is time.” whispered the woman.

“Until we meet again.” growled the other, and the sobbing faded off into silence.

A moment later Dahlia heard footsteps, and then the shuffling of cards.

“Come... Stay awhile. Wish awhile.” said the woman.

The footsteps drew nearer.

“Dearie, why don’t you take a seat?”

More footsteps, more shuffling.

“You have a wish to make I believe... Please, sit.”

“So you’re a genie?” It was a voice that eternity had stolen, it was Dahlia’s voice. “I see the lamp... Does it get a little cramped in there? Maybe a little lonely?”

The woman laughed.

“I get three wishes then, right?”

Dahlia pounded at the door in vain. She already knew that the other wouldn't hear her.

“Only one.”

Everything grew silent for a long time, then; “What is this trick? How do you know all of this?”

“It is no trick. I am merely a servant.” Dahlia mouthed the words along as she heard them again. “Just take what you wish and you will receive, Dahlia.”

After another long silence she heard the crunch of a finger, the shouts of pain, the booming voices of the lovers, the clanging of chains, and then the slam of the door beside her own. The lovers were together once again, and their happiness was like a stake in Dahlia's heart.

Another eternity passed, and then the whole affair repeated itself, identical each time. And again, and again, and again and again and again. Dahlia no longer shouted when they came, she no longer cried when they wished, and she no longer pounded at the rough oak door when they were pulled screaming into their own room to rest for eternity.

But the next one was different. Everything was the same until the cards were fanned out. In the silence Dahlia imagined what was happening in the hall. She saw the selection of cards, and the trembling hand reaching forward and taking one. She prepared herself for the tearing of a finger, but it took a moment too long, and then another. Something was different this time.

“I don't want to change anything.” said the voice. “I've made a million mistakes, but... If I look back, if I ever let myself regret, then I am lost.”

The chair squealed, and the footsteps left the room.

The woman said nothing, she only sobbed and cried in distress.

Dahlia felt something she no longer had believed existed; hope. She felt the chains slip from her hands and feet, the door before her swung open, letting in a world of light that Dahlia was sure she had only dreamed of.

In the hall the woman lay with her head resting on her arms, her whole body shuddering with each sob. The doors in the hall had all been opened, and from each one a ghost crept out. They were pale, and looked like no more than dust in the light. Dahlia looked to the girl who was leaving the hall. She was identical to her own shade in all ways except her hands; only one finger remained on her left hand, and her right was nothing but a knob of flesh. Despite that, she was a beautiful woman, with purpose in her step and joy in her heart. *She is perfect.*

Dahlia took in a deep breath of warm air and let it out, and like all of the other ghosts across the hall, she drifted off into the wind with a smile on her lips and a dream in her head. A dream of the future.

In her dream she saw the one-fingered girl with a man beside her, and a baby on her lap. They sat together on an oversized rocking chair, humming a lullaby to their child. Time slipped and she saw the one-fingered girl at graduation, tossing her cap in the air among her friends.

Then she saw the one-fingered girl at her childhood home, her parents standing over her. Then they embraced their daughter, and she saw tears glistening on her father's cheeks, and pride in his eyes.

It was a beautiful dream, and it went on and on and on, and when finally it reached its bittersweet ending it simply began all over again.

Josiah Olson is a storyteller and musician. Although his work varies greatly in genre and content, the thread that runs through them all is the focus on humanity. The connections, conflicts, and moments that make life what it is and the experiences that shape us most. Josiah aims to ask the tough questions, and to open up discussion of topics that are too often ignored. He lives in Moorhead, MN where he studies psychology & Spanish at MSUM.