

Limbo

by Megan Jackson

Linoleum is cold, dead like me. My bare feet wriggle as I'm left in the lobby in a paper gown by the man I suspect is Death. his coat is night black against the slack white of the hospital. He returns with a box.

"Times were, you'd have a truck, but people don't really send gifts anymore. I'm sorry." He opens up the box, handing it over to me, "You'll get a lot of flowers, maybe a teddy bear, hope that no one pours beer on your grave, you don't want your one connection to the world to get soggy."

He turns away and leaves, but a new person takes his place. This man is in jeans and a thin white t-shirt. He has a cigarette in his mouth and it isn't until he bites down that I realize it's candy.

"What death did you have?"

"Tumor."

"You can come up with something better."

"Why would I do that?"

"You could be here a while, I've gone through about seven stories."

"How long have you been here?"

His head tilts as I stare, so I change my question.

"Why a hospital? I mean, we're already dead."

"It's a neutral place, heaven or hell depending on your perspective."

"What is it to you?"

"Limbo," he smiles, "As low as you can go. Is your name Sally?"

"Yes."

"I'm Remington, so what do you think we'll be reincarnated as?"

"We? I'm not getting reincarnated, I'm dead."

"You're one of those people..."

He smiles, turning to me and taking something, a box of chocolates, out of the box that Death gave me. He takes a chocolate, rolling it in his fingers and pressing it to his lips. "Mm... strawberry."

He turns around, and strangely, I follow him.

Remington knows Limbo like he's been here forever, which may be true. His pack of candy cigarettes sticks out of his back pocket, but he doesn't have anything else with him. I listen to him ramble, but he stops to look at me. "Here's your room." he lifts a candy to his mouth.

I go in and set the box down. When I come up, I see him staring at it. His eyes are blue green and glazed. He snaps back and meets my eyes, his irises tremble in place.

"How did you die?" I ask.

He stares at me, working over a new story in his head.

"I was a lawyer."

"Bull."

"I was defending this murderess."

"That's crap."

He sighs, "I never--"

"I don't care."

His eyes flick away, "I can't wait to live, to be reincarnated."

"I don't believe in that."

He frowns, "You should talk to Death."

"About what?"

He smiles, savoring the irony that's about the pass over his lips, "Life."

Remington walks me to Death's door, still talking about Limbo and reincarnation, "Some people breeze in and out easily."

"Why haven't you left yet?"

"No one told me how."

He glances down, and then knocks on the door for me. The door opens, and Death appears. His hair is red and scruffy, with a small, unlit but crumpled cigarette sticking in between his pale lips. There are fine wrinkles around coal eyes, and he mildly reminds me of Remington. I look to where he had been, but the young man is gone.

"What are you here for?" he asks gruffly.

"What is anyone here for?" I smile, liking this man for not being friendly.

His eyes light up and he takes the cigarette away, "Now that's the answer I was looking for."

His room is the same size as mine, and Spartan. He has a couch, a table, and a chair. There's an electric kettle plugged into the corner, and the table is set with a small pack of cigarettes, two teacups and a pile of pamphlets that look like they've never been read.

He starts to fiddle with the kettle and I decide to sit down in the chair.

"Couch, sweetheart."

I see his back is still turned away from me, but I move to the couch anyways. He's lit up his cigarette.

"I expected something more--"

"Lavish, I know. But I don't want to make myself comfortable here."

"Why?"

"You get crazy here, after a while."

He stamps his cigarette out on the flat and cold floor, looking back at me.

"When will I leave?" I ask, not particularly caring.

"Whenever you want to, I suppose, I'm not keeping you here."

"Then why hasn't Remington left?"

He stares at me for a second, his head tilting, then smiles as if he has a secret, "I don't know."

"Where will he go after this?"

He gets up and shrugs off his black coat. He drapes it over the arm of the couch and sits in the chair. The hem of the coat is touching my hand, more reassuring than you'd think a simple garment would be. "Wherever he wants." He picks up a cup and sips from it. I'm pretty sure it's empty, his slurps are exaggerated and loud, obviously faked.

I get up and look at him, "Well, thanks."

"Why are you so worried about Remington? Don't you want to get back to the living as soon as possible?" He leans forward and puts his hands on his knees.

"I don't care."

He quirks a smile, "Sally, I like you. If I ever die, I'll leave you in my will."

"You are Death though." I'm confused.

He chuckles, "I suppose so, I suppose so."

I leave after that, and I'm pretty sure this isn't the conversation Remington wanted me to have.

I go back to my room, Remington is in my box. He doesn't notice me at first, intent on the inside of the cardboard container. The contents, flowers and beer bottles, are all over the bedroom floor. There shouldn't be anything in the box, yet Remington is in there and moving as if he's trying to find something buried in a ton of stuff. I move back, deciding to leave him alone, but he suddenly puts everything back in the box and looks at me.

"Just making sure it works," he smiles.

I move away, not saying a word. He's still in my room when I leave, wondering if I should leave Limbo soon. How long does it take to get to crazy?

When I come back, Remington is gone. So is the box. The bed is made and the floor is clean. I realize there aren't any windows in the hospital. I go out into the hallway and find the stairs, heading downwards.

I go all the way to the basement. There is no lobby. I can't find it. I run back up, going to floor, two, three and four and five. There is no one. I've gone up and down so many times, my leaves fall on the last steps at the basement.

The basement is just the stairwell, just an end. The stairs just stop.

Remington has my box, but he brings the candy. His smile is forced, and the chocolate tastes bitter. He's still eating his cigarettes and watching me as I eat the chocolates one by one.

"Is everything okay?" I finally ask, when the box is empty.

"Death is gone."

I grip the edges of the box, breaking the container.
"Where?"

He looks like he's rolling another story around in his head, and I can't take it anymore.

"How'd you really die?"

He pales, and doesn't say anything.

I just set the tray down, and leave.

The basement is still the same, the lobby is still nonexistent. If I could leave at any time, why can't I find a door out?

Remington still lies to me.

"I was a soldier."

"I was a father."

"I was a politician."

It's all piling up, and Death isn't around to talk to. I can't talk to anyone else here. They just stare at me like I'm crazy, then go back to wandering around. I wonder if they're looking for the door out too.

I don't even know why I'm looking for a way out, I don't really care about going anyways, I just want to find the door.

"Why are you so desperate to go back to the living world?"
I asked Remington one time.

He looked at me and said, "Because this isn't living, it isn't dying, it's not anything."
I want to find the door, for him.

I find the box in my room again. Remington is with it. He's crying, holding something to his face. I can't tell what it is, he's covering it from my sight.

I go over and see what it is. The coat, the black fabric is scratching at his skin.

"Remi—"

He pulls his head up sharply, throwing the box at me. "It's yours, take it!"

"What happened to yours?" I drop it, not wanting to touch it.

"I never had one," he looks haunted, and I wonder if he ever lived or died at all.

"It's not mine anymore, it's yours."

He pulls me tight against him, then stops.

"Get in the box."

"What?"

"Get in."

His hands are cold through my paper gown, I shiver and close my eyes. It feels like dying again. He whispers once more, "Get in the box."

"I won't fit."

"You will."

He pushes me away and sets up the box. It's true, it is a lot bigger than I thought. He picks me up, and suddenly I'm tiny again. I clutch his shoulders as he lowers me, and I notice that he had put on the black coat. I want to say something, but he makes me let go.

I look up defenselessly as he closes the box, plunging me into the darkness. I only see black, feel cold, and I don't think I'm even in the box anymore. I hold onto the picture of Remington in my head until he, along with any other memories I've had, disappear.