

The True You

by

Rachel Kellis

I dreamed that in this city painted in grey on the highest points of the buildings there are gargoyles with hands for wings. They scream their rage at not being free and it's all I can do not to break the hands that hold them.

~

On Friday evenings there's always a crowd of people around him. Typically, police broke up groups larger than fifteen. For whatever reason, though, they left him alone.

He tells stories and parables to the larger crowds. If the crowd is smaller, he'll tell fortunes. Everyone wants his fortunes because they're always true. It's the reason I've never asked him for one. Except for today.

Today I ask him to tell my fortune.

~

There's a boy who lives on the streets. He's tall and thin and lanky, and when he smiles it says that he's done something delightfully wicked.

People also say he's a prophet.

And others say that he was the son of the devil.

~

He slips into the crowds on weekdays—becomes just another kid on the streets. He has no regular spot where he sits to give audience; I have to find him if I want my fortune told.

I find him sitting in an abandoned bit of the city, in a fountain that still miraculously works. He's cross-legged under the spray, hands folded in his lap. His eyes are closed against the water, but when he hears my footsteps on the pavement he opens them.

My wish floats across the empty space between us and lands in his folded hands. I find that I can't breathe.

“All you will do is run after a mirage,” he says, and he smiles gently.

~

I heard someone say once that his name was Nathaniel. Others would crack evil grins and say, “nah, it’s Damien.”

General opinion on the streets and in the city was that he didn’t have a name.

All lies, of course. His name was Jeremiah.

I know this because I asked him.

~

It was a month before I got the courage to see him after he gave me my fortune.

He greeted me as the Mirage Chaser and I couldn’t help but smile.

He asked me to sit beside him on the broken stone wall and tell him a secret.

I leaned in close and told him that I didn’t believe in the fortune he’d given me.

~

My disbelief didn’t faze him. He said that belief wasn’t necessary.

Things tend to happen, whether you believe in them or not.

~

These hands that cradle me and hold me and rip me with their broken fingernails. They hurt and they are hurt. They look for someone to hold.

But I don’t think that someone is me.

~

Time doesn’t exist in this city.

~

The dreams I have at night are frightening.

A boy with hands growing out of his back, grasping and grabbing, ripping and tearing.

Jeremiah believes in dreams. He says that they are reflections of what we want, our deepest desires. He says that they show us the things we can't see.

~

In the early morning, the city is painted a dark grey and he waits for me on the corner. His eyes are bloodshot and calm and the hands are ripping through his shirt. And in the pit of my stomach I feel the terror.

I wake in my bed moments later. The city is painted a dark grey, and Jeremiah waits for me on the corner. His eyes are smiling and pleasant and the wrinkles in his clothing are still.

But when he offers it, I still don't take his hand.

~

He waits for me outside my apartment building sometimes.

I look out my window and see him. He perches on the stone wall on the other side of the street like a stone gargoyle and tells stories to the children. They giggle and gasp and when the hands burst from his back they clap.

The mirage is slowing down. It's coming at me instead of me running toward it.

I watch from my window, and he looks up at me and smiles.

I notice now that when he smiles at me, his teeth are cracked.

~

The police always left Jeremiah alone. I think they know that he owns this city more than they do.

~

In my dreams the hands lie broken and twisted on the ground and he weeps over their mangled fingers.

~

Jeremiah told me that he lied about my fortune. I won't run after the mirage. The mirage will run after me.

~

Jeremiah believes in dreams.

But I don't.

~

It's time to wake up.