

Alone

Writing Challenge

Write a story inspired by a picture and word prompt.



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Another siren blared past, red and blue light strobing and stabbing at Lorelei's tightly shut eyes as she tried to squeeze out the noise and clamour. She hated this town; the press of people, the constant background inane babble of many voices, and her constant feeling of being on edge. She knew she had to get out for her own sanity's sake, but where? As far as she could tell, one place was very much like another. Wall to wall people, endless hour after hour of chatter and stress. A year ago she'd fallen for one of the holiday packages advertising an escape to your own private getaway at a mountain retreat. Glossy pictures of pristine mountains, and vistas devoid of people had a strong appeal. When she got there after a claustrophobic seven hours in a flying tin-can, she found herself trapped by bad weather in a run-down hotel with a gaggle of loud Americans, and a handful of drunken Australian and Kiwi Millennials. She had stayed in her room pretty much the whole two weeks. No, there was nowhere where the grubby paws of humanity weren't fouling everything beautiful and destroying the most precious thing in the universe – peace and quiet.

Lorelei's feet took her to the small park. Here at least she could put a little distance between herself and other people. Even if it was only a few metres, it still felt better. At the centre of the park was a statue. A dancing satyr, small pan flute lifted as if in joyous song. Like Mister Tumnis maybe? No, he had an umbrella. Lorelei sighed and sat at the foot of the statue. At least the statue was quiet. No thoughts to shout into the world. No opinions to share. Just an expression of simple joy. To run away to Narnia would have been nice.

The last light of the sinking sun faded from the tops of the trees leaving a gentle purple torn to shreds by stark buzzing artificial light focused into the branches from an array of spotlights. Lorelei shook herself, and rose to her feet.

“Can you spare us a pound?”

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Lorelei glanced at the man sitting on the park bench, a hat at his feet. His craggy features were softened by a week's growth of whiskers and a rumpled coat and trousers.

"Sure." Lorelei mumbled and rummaged a couple of coins from her bag.

"Thank you miss. You have a good night."

"I will. You too." automatic answers.

Lorelei flung herself onto the couch and pulled the cushion over her face. Even here there was the constant babble of many voices. A meaningless hubbub from those around her. How did everyone else manage? They must just be able to tune them out somehow. Sometimes Lorelei had almost managed it, and been able to push the miasma into the background but then a clear voice and phrase would make itself known and her protective wall would crumble releasing the torrent of chatter again.

She'd tried sensory deprivation but the tanks were obviously not that well sound insulated because the formless clamour of voices continued only slightly abated.

The one small glimmer of success Lorelei had experienced was through yoga and meditation. She had found herself adrift amongst the voices and they had become just a soft pillowy presence rather than the jarring scratching irritation they were most of the time.

It was harder to get into the meditative state tonight. Her eyelids flickered, and mind kept bringing up endless lists of things that vied for her attention; emails, tasks that needed completion, wellness messages at work - like how "other people were essential for wellness", hah! Lorelei pushed the thoughts aside and welcomed the formless blankness. Slowly the calmness settled about her and the voices and thoughts ceased intruding. Deeper and deeper she descended into the folds of darkness around her. Now that she came to notice it, there was a strange tension even here. It was almost as if the entire of reality was spread over a thin skin but it was stretch taught. Away in the distance Lorelei could feel a softness and easing of the tension. Somewhere slightly to the right. She tried to focus on it to work out what it was, but immediately felt herself rising out of the meditative state. There was nothing she could do to stop it and she emerged to be met by the clamour again. But the feeling remained - a softness. It seemed to come from a South-Easterly direction. As she rolled up her yoga mat she could feel the pull of the soft place, constant from the one direction, almost as if something were calling her.

All week Lorelei could feel the tension around her. It was everywhere and nowhere. She wondered if she was coming down with something. Whatever it was, it made her feel grumpy and unsettled. To make matters worse, the noise was more invasive. At times she could barely think straight, her own thoughts being drowned out by the din of formless voices. In the background, like a warm ray of sunshine reaching through a hole in a storm-cloud wracked sky the feeling of the soft place stayed constant.

A cold gray Saturday saw Lorelei riding the train across town. She sat with her eyes closed, feeling the direction of the pull towards the soft place. On her lap was spread a street map with some freshly drawn lines running from the railway line. A second train in a different direction, a few more marks on her map, and she had it. The soft place was in the city. Where the lines intersected was one of the many small city parks. She circled the area with her pen and tried to remember anything about the place. It was a corner of the city she'd seldom had reason to visit so she decided she'd never been there before.

The afternoon was wearing on as she stepped onto the platform. Here the warmth of the soft place beckoned. In the direction of the soft place it was almost as if everything was relaxed. Quite different from the perception of strained space everywhere else. Lorelei walked past the dull brick shops, the tension in her face easing slowly as she approached the park gate.

An ancient megalith jutted from a flowerbed, its rugged surface inscribed with barely discernible swirling petroglyphs. Another stood a few metres away in the centre of a fish pond. Lorelei shrugged her shoulders, a previously unknown weight beginning to drop away. She smiled and sat watching the fish. Their effortless gliding to and fro was mesmerising. Their fins seemed to trail blurry eddies and whorls. Lorelei suddenly started, her mind registering what she was seeing. The petroglyphs on the rock reflected in the water were glowing a faint blue. Beside her the standing stone in the flower bed was also aglow with spirals and sweeping lines picked out in faint blue. The edges of the stones, the petals of the flowers, the fish, the edge of the pond; all were streaked as if being viewed through oil-smeared glasses. Lorelei reached for a fallen leaf resting against her boot, its edges streaked and rimmed with the faintest line of ember red. Around her hand smearing and distortion bent and warped the leaf. Alarmed, Lorelei stood up. Too suddenly. The world

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flared and distorted. She stumbled against the standing stone in the flower bed and settled to her knees, head pressed against the rough stone, its coldness steadying her reeling senses. Slowly she opened her eyes. Up close, the smell of damp moss filled her nostrils and lungs, bringing her back to her senses. That would teach her to stand up so suddenly.

Shock, then elation buffeted her. Where was the din of voices? The silence was complete. A crow cawed nearby, its voice unchallenged by the human-made chatter that had banged at Lorelei's attention forever. She turned around, back to the standing stone. There was no fish pond around the second stone or the other standing stones. There was no path, no city gates, no city. No sounds of traffic, no sirens, only the sound of a light wind in the leaves, the cawing of crows, and the late afternoon winter song of a thrush.

Carefully she stood up. A grassy slope rolled out in front of her towards the golden glow of the low sun. The flanks of a forest crested a hill to the west and a copse of trees almost touched the standing stones to the east. The air was sweet and clean. Lorelei took a deep lungful and held it. No-where could she see any signs of another person. She was alone. A tear came to her eye. She wiped the tear with a tentative finger and looked at the droplet on her fingertip, the sun refracted a tiny rainbow across her skin. With this revelation there was no holding back and the flood gate opened, releasing years, decades of tension and stress.

Could she go back? Lorelei would test this soon enough, but in the meantime she luxuriated in the sun, adsorbing the peace of the place, and soaking in the unspoiled view. If she couldn't go back, she was sure she could make it work.



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