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**Scotland’s Backyard**

The darkness engulfs all that it lays its long, skeletal hands on; they are shadowy midnight black, with sharp pointy fingernails. As objects continue to be submerged by the power of one simple touch, it reaches you, sending shivers down your spine, and you’re frozen like an icicle, as the warm, crimson red blood comes to a halt, replaced with chilly, icy, cold venom. It’s venturing inside of you, and you’re able to see its face now, raw and boney with sunken eyes. Unexpectedly, you can feel your heart still fighting, pounding hard through your chest, as it attempts to break the breath free that has become trapped inside of you. There is nothing you can do except trust the soft and comforting voices in front of you, because you’ve become one of the three blind mice, who cannot see anything but the darkness.

 Blinded by the obscurely perceived night, you continue to tread step-by-step through the cold, cracked and ever changing surface that seems to be never ending. Just like the mice, you are forced to accept the irrevocable darkness as a normal way of this world. At this very moment of complete expectation, you begin to see massive shapes forming in the distance. As you navigate closer and closer to the massive shapes, they begin to take formation created by the shimmering golden light. The snow-white lampposts and centuries old windows are the host for these shimmering rays of light. After being consumed by the darkness in a manner that a tormentor consumes his unsuspecting victim, the wondrous glimmers of hope have finally risen.

 In the short distance, a building begins to emerge from the miniscule clearance within the mixture of oak and pine trees. As I come around the bend, the one object that cannot be destroyed by the darkness is the Dalkeith Palace, which highlights the entire area with its booming presence. It immediately captures my interest, and I continue to venture further on towards it, curious to discover its secrets. Two creamy black doors with golden rounded knobs mark the center; it is a five story structure supported by multicolored bricks, consisting of autumn leaf brown, mellow white, and charcoal grey hues. The middle right side of the palace slightly protrudes outward in a dome shape. Its top roofing is composed neatly of rectangular sheets of metal; whereas, shimmering, silvery black shingles cover the sides, completed with twenty-nine sparkling white chimneys with their golden pipes.

As I reach the entrance, I begin to notice the vast number of windows that cover its surface from head to toe; when counted one-by-one, there are two hundred and twenty-two, and at least one hundred and ten are divided into twelve squares. I’m permitted to enter now, and as I walk up the six steps surrounded by a black railing, I take a moment to gaze up at the four Victorian-style pillars, spattered with green moss, spread evenly between the giant doors. After arriving at the main entrance, I continue to follow my companions to our destination of rest. Upon arrival to the bed that I will lay in for the night, I close my eyes and take a deep breath, hoping for a brighter tomorrow.

 I awake the next morning in the cold, damp, dreary palace, which brings up the fear that I never reached my destination, since this building without any proper lighting brings back the frightening images of the journey that lead to this palace. Attempting to shake my woes, I sprint towards the three-hundred-year-old window shutters with their cherry finish. There I unlock them. With one swift pull of the shutters, I embrace the awakening world. The morning’s warmth melting the snow away, the birds singing in cadence with one another who almost seem to say “Here we are, good morning.” With this opening montage in my sight, I feel a presence of serenity and hope in what might unfold.

Amongst the mystical glowing sunrays, I too begin to awaken to the periwinkle, cloudless sky, which envelopes the newly uncovered canopies of trees creating a soft stir in the air with their autumn glow of green, yellow, and orange leaves and trunks that seem to be cut from pure gold. I feel compelled to sway to the musical sounds of the trees and the calling of the birds. While dancing together, we witness the sun’s rays illuminating the once somber palace.

 Detaching myself from the safe haven of the palace, I begin to explore the remainder of the grounds, abandoning the trails, and venturing into the maze of trees. When I reach an extremely large clearance, an orangery, an abandoned greenhouse, stands with the company of a silver birch and an English elm, in front of the River South Esk. As I approach the orangery, the fragrance of the lush plants and trees overwhelms my senses with a sweet, pungent fire that my nose cannot stop inhaling. The orangery is unveiling itself piece-by-piece as I saunter to the edifice, making it possible to take in the details.

The Victorian-style conservatory has twelve pillars with ornate designs that are partially covered with soft, moist, green moss. As the setting sun creates a silhouette, it becomes more apparent how fragile the magnificent structure really is, and yet at the same moment symbolizes the idea of true peace, which makes time feel surreal. Peace is fragile and temporary, and yet the structure seems infinite, as if it can last forever. In this unstable world, humans will never know the feeling of everlasting serenity.

 Slowly, I can hear my flowing memories trickling past this heavenly conservatory. Unknowingly, my feet begin to take their first steps down memory lane. Upon arriving at the edge of the riverbank, I walk on the raw earth, feeling the ground sink slightly under my curious feet. There is nothing else for me to do but to vividly recall the memories of the bright spring day when I walked along a creek hand-in-hand with my grandfather. I am relieved to see him in my mind along the river’s edge, paintbrush in hand, with a blank canvas awaiting him. Which made me sprint toward his image for a full embrace, and as our bodies connect my senses go off like a wildfire, my nose ingests his unique scent that makes my heart flutter, and as my hand finds its way across his shoulder blade and down his arm my fingers gel with his smooth, gentle, and warm skin.

 Then as my eyes took their direction to intake his face I was overjoyed to see the peaceful smile he always carried. But his face holds many features: his thick glasses that show his confident, crystal blue eyes and his bulbous nose, which are tied together with his thin smiling lips and wrinkles of wisdom and age outlining his cheeks. My unconscious mind wants to leap into his heavenly embrace for all time, even as my conscious mind knows that we are earthly divided. While observing the shimmering water, my eyes glow with the past of my childhood and somehow surprisingly connect to this foreign place. My thoughts melt as I hear the cry of the ducks: I look around realizing, I was engrossed in my memories, and there is only the quiet, rippling sounds of the water next to me.

 Absorbing the true surroundings that I was physically standing in, I take a bold leap forward with my left foot and proceed on the last stretch of my journey. As I arrive at the steps that lead to the entrance of the Dalkeith Palace, and my path is coming to a close through what seemed to be a fairytale adventure, I can say with much confidence that I am not Alice falling down a hole. I am not Snow White whistling with her seven dwarfs, or Cinderella, who stepped into her fairytale ending by losing a glass slipper. Just as the three blind mice have to accept their world of darkness, I must admit that this place is not of a fantasy. Instead, to witness the beauty for yourself, you must venture to the beautiful lands of Scotland.