

## *Dirt with Dirt*

Behind the retreat house was a small garden; rose vines and ivy crawling up tresses, a fish pond laced with lilies, tall granite statues of Mary and St. Francis of Assisi, and rocks for you to sit and pray. At least the priest who ran the place had said such a place was behind the big white mansion. But when I went back there clutching my Confirmation letters and rosary, December had nearly choked the life out of the place. The pond was iced over and cloudy, the flowers had all but gone. The trees had shed their leaves and caged around me like black rib bones, trapping me inside the forest's belly. I didn't breathe a word. The silence felt safer. I sat by the pond, closed my eyes.

*Why is it a sin?*

*Because it's just not how He wants us to love. We weren't made to blend seed with seed, or ground with ground.*

*What do you mean?*

*A man is the seed, and when planted in a woman, who is the ground, life comes about. Trees grow to the sky and give people shelter and air and protection and beautiful love is made. But a seed with a seed is just that. Nothing grows from it, both seeds rot and decay in wait for the ground to hold them. And ground with ground? It just makes more dirt. It dirties the world He made for us.*

*But...what about love?*

*What about it?*

I put my forehead against my knees, hot tears skidding down my cheeks as the Confirmation leader's voice ricocheted back and forth in my head like a pinball. It was about time I'd escaped. Back inside, the counselors with orange t-shirt and cheery grins were trying to get us all to Confession, and the leader's eyes were imploring me to apologize to God for kissing my girlfriend. For giving her that bracelet and holding hand in school. For loving her.

I'd read it, heard it, been shown it all before, *A man shall not lie with another man for it is an abomination, Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve, Keep marriage sacred.* But this one about ground and seed and dirt was new. And even though it hadn't come from the Bible I loved with my life or from the mouths of a preacher posed like an eagle at the front of my church, or being recited by the congregation around me, these gentler words plagued me worse than anything.

Because I'd spent this weekend so far completely enthralled by it all. Until now, I was saving up everything to tell her as soon as I got back; about the music we sang and how amazing it was to just pray in a blue-lighted room for two hours, how I felt like God could hear me and He even answered back, and I wanted to tell her especially how much I missed hearing her voice buzz through my phone speaker telling me goodnight. I hadn't been allowed to bring my phone because of the retreat rules. I hadn't been told I wasn't allowed to bring my heart either.

Now I looked down at the hands that had held hers and I saw dirt caking under my nails, spreading up my fingers and painting them black. I opened and closed the lips that had kissed her and I felt like my mouth fill with mud that this place had put there.

*But...what about love?*

*What about it? That's not love. That's an illusion spun by the devil to waste good ground and good seeds given by God. A dirty, sinful thing indeed.*

I'd left the chapel after that. But now I was looking up at the bleached sky and I was talking straight at Him and raising my shaking hands to the sun, proclaiming, I love her, I love her, I love her and it's the purest thing I've ever felt. Because how could her feathery fingers laced with mine scum up the earth? How could disappearing into her arms and letting her hold me bring the devil to laughter and God to tears? How could it be that our decision to protect each other and help each other and love each other be an abomination? My God, ever since her lips touched mine everything is more beautiful. Ever since we danced together under those cheap green string lights in my bedroom and listened to that skipping Chopin record for two hours I've felt every living thing-- from the cold moss under my shoes, to the birds singing me awake, to the whisper of the pine needles brushing against each other-- I've felt their beating hearts and Your presence in each of them. She's set my world living again, she hasn't set anything aflame other than my cheeks when she rests those eyes on me or those lips by my ear as she whispers, *I will never let you go.*

In this garden I see more dirt crusted along the crucifix than in the memories I have with her. In my God, in the God who said, *Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law,* I see the true filth in the words of my Confirmation leader. I look my hands and it is not dirt that springs from them, but life that takes root in all that I touch now. Because of the love we share we are growing and growing together like the vines sprawling up the fence, intertwining and curling into a single being; blooming fresh as a rose and living just as we were meant to.