Saccharine

Amber

The sickness spreads quickly, inexorably. It is unstoppable and hungry in nature. Just like nature itself, it knows no bounds. It devours and takes and leaves nothing but a husk where there was once life: a death sentence.

The Forest is dark, perpetually so. A boy trudges through the muck and leaves up to his knees, enduring anything for his dearest sister. The townsfolk spoke of a miracle plant, one that could cure anything, located in this cursed forest. It was his only hope.

The canopy thins. Within a small, open clearing grows a lonely, towering flower—the last of its kind. The boy is quick to pluck it from the soil, the tearing of its roots reminiscent of an adolescent’s cry. The Forest churns at the noise, furious at the boy for disturbing its flesh.

He clutches the plant to his chest, unwilling to let his sister’s saving grace out of his grasp.

He was so close to saving her, just a little longer. He hoped she could wait for him just a little longer.

Vines reach at him from the void-like tree line, thrashing out desperately. The boy flees, flower in tow, towards the overgrowth. The Forest screams angrily, wretchedly, hungrily.

A break in the tree line reveals his homestead, and he cries in relief at the sight. As one last distraught attempt, The Forest shakes in anguish, the ground cracking to swallow the boy whole.
He wrenches open the front door and slams it shut behind him. The Forest releases a deafening scream, like that of a mother losing her child.

“Brother?” His sister lets out a feeble cry laced with fever and pain.

“I’m here,” he replies, rushing to her side, “Please, wait a bit longer.” She nods with a grimace.

The plant is already beginning to weep. He crushes it up, and the mushy remains release a tantalizing, slowly pulsating glow like that of a fading heartbeat.

“Here, eat.” He commands. “Quickly, you’ll feel better soon, I promise.”

Her bites are slow, agony and disgust distinct on her face, but she chews until none remains.

Relief is almost instant. With each bite, the tension slowly leaves her tenuous frame. She releases a sigh, and she slips into an unnatural dormancy. The boy remains stuck to her side, sobbing in relief.

She awakens days later, free from her ailments, but not without a price. With each day that passes, his sister spends more time out in the sun, relaxing in the fields. She doesn’t notice the changes, the boy does.

Her skin takes on an emerald green tint, fingertips growing too long and narrow to be human. The vines on the house bend to her will, snaking around her windowsill at night. She stares longingly at the trees for hours, whispering to them incoherently under her breath.

“Sister?” The boy asks, “I’m worried. Are you sure you’re feeling well?”

She jerks her head away from the window. “I’m fine,” Her eyes glow unnaturally in the candlelight, “I promise.”

The saccharine smile she gives him does nothing to settle the churning in his gut.
The next day, his sister is nowhere to be seen. She isn’t in the pasture with the cattle like normal. Her room, usually tidy, is consumed by vines and thorns.

The window is open.

Calling his sister’s name, he follows the thorny path out the window to The Forest.

With no sign of her, he begins to pick up speed, the soles of his feet pounding the earth faster and faster. His voice grows hoarse, and yet he continues screaming.

There– on the tree line’s edge– stands his sister. She creeps towards the waiting Forest, eyes glassy.

He cries one more desperate plea, but it’s too late. She walks into the underbrush, and The Forest devours her.

The boy had taken from The Forest, so it took something in return.