

The White Place

A Dream, Remembered

By BLGardner ~ 2026

I had heard of it long before I ever set out to find it - a place high in the mountains, spoken of in the kind of hushed, almost reverent tones people use for things they aren't entirely sure are real. They said the people there were easy, unhurried, that joy wasn't something they chased but simply lived in. I don't know exactly when I decided to go. I just know that one day I was walking.

The trail was well-worn, traveled enough that I wasn't alone on it. Others moved around me - some slow, leaning into push carts loaded with their lives, others hurrying past like they were late for something. I kept my own pace, steady and unhurried, the kind of walking that doesn't count the miles.

The mountains rose around me, and the air thinned, and still I walked. Then, before I saw anything, I heard it. Voices - a lot of them. Singing. Cheering. The kind of commotion that comes from people who aren't performing happiness but actually feeling it. I came around a bend and there were the gates, tall as they were wide, woven like chain-link but somehow not industrial, not cold. And beyond them - people, everywhere, spilling across open ground in the clean mountain light.

I passed through the gates and was welcomed like I was expected. Someone asked if I was tired, and I laughed and said yes, and hungry too. They took me to where the food was - no tables, no ceremony, just food being passed around and people wandering as they ate, talking, laughing, utterly at ease. After I ate they showed me somewhere to rest. I didn't argue. I laid down and slept.

When I woke, I walked.

The women - all of them wore white. Robes, mostly, loose and clean. Some wore white like swimmers, like they'd come in from the water. The men wore wraps, simple, fitted, something vaguely Roman about the whole of it. Nobody seemed to be trying to look any particular way. They just looked like themselves, comfortable in their skin and in this place.

I found a small building and wandered inside. Some people were sleeping. Others were gathered around games I didn't recognize, laughing at the results. A woman approached me - beautiful in the way that makes you stand still for a second - and asked if I'd like to take a walk.

We walked. She showed me the paths between things, the rhythms of the place. And then, after a while, she asked me if I had come to help with the others.

I didn't know what she meant. The others?

She explained it carefully, like she'd explained it before and it still troubled her. Outside the fence, at night, creatures came out of the woods. They were vicious things. If you were caught outside the gates after dark, they would take you - drag you off into the trees. Sometimes people didn't come back.

I told her I hadn't known. That if I could help, I would - but that wasn't why I came. I came because I heard this was a peaceful place. A place without weight or worry. I came because I wanted a long, quiet life, and this sounded like somewhere a man could have one.

She nodded, and we kept walking.

She took me to the pool eventually, and it was something to see. The water was impossibly clear - cleaner than chlorine, cleaner than anything I'd swum in - and full of people, all of them loose and easy and happy in it. The air above it was perfect. Everything here, I was beginning to understand, was perfect in a way that didn't announce itself, just settled over you quietly.

I was a little shy about it, truth be told. Took off what I could bear to and kept the rest. She dove in ahead of me and simply vanished beneath the surface, gone like a fish. I stood there a moment, then dove in after her.

Nothing could have prepared me for it.

Moving through the water was effortless - not just easy but weightless, like the water was made for me and I for it. I covered distances I couldn't have covered in any pool I'd ever known, fast and fluid, without ever reaching for breath. I swam long past the point of wanting to stop, and even then kept going just to feel it a little longer.

I surfaced eventually, alongside something half-floating in the water - smooth-sided and contoured, almost automotive in shape, but not a car. I'd barely had time to wonder what it was when I stopped wondering, because she surfaced right in front of me.

She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

She wore red - the only red I'd seen in this whole white place, a one-piece suit the color of a flag. She had a small mark below the left corner of her mouth, barely a mole, almost a freckle, and somehow that small imperfect thing made her more beautiful, not less. I reached out and held her by the waist, the most natural thing in the world, and she looked at me and smiled.

You can kiss me, she said.

I started to lean in. And then something stopped me. I pulled back.

No, I said. I can't.

She said okay, easy as breathing, and slipped back beneath the water and was gone.

My mind called me a fool for the next half hour. Maybe longer. But it just hadn't felt right, and I've never been any good at doing things that don't feel right.

I swam on, and eventually surfaced in the middle of a crowd so dense I could barely find the edge of the pool. But nobody pushed, nobody jostled. People made room without being asked, aware of each other in the gentle, easy way of a place where nobody's in a hurry and nobody's afraid.

I climbed out and sat for a while in the warmth, which was exactly warm enough - not too much, not too little - and thought about the fact that a place like this actually existed.

I was leaning against a tree later, a low platform beside me, watching nothing in particular, when people began to drift over and settle nearby. A woman stepped forward - not to perform, just to move - and began to turn. Slowly. Arms following, not leading. Others cleared space around her without a word.

Then she came to me. Turned, and sat herself gently in my lap, settled back against my chest, and began to sing. Something soft and unhurried. When she finished the whole crowd broke into cheers and clapping, easy and warm.

She rolled off my lap onto the platform beside me, smooth as water, propped her head on her hand, and looked at me.

How was that?

I was about to answer when her stomach gave a long, rolling rumble. She pressed a hand to it, laughing.

Too many dates, I guess.

We talked for a long time after that. I can't tell you now what we talked about - her face took up most of my memory, I suppose - but I remember it was light and genuine and I felt, sitting there against that tree, more at ease than I had felt in longer than I could say.

Later, as the day softened, I wandered toward the far edge of the place, where the fence met the sky. The ground fell away sharply just beyond the wire, and I realized, standing there, that I couldn't see where it ended.

The night side of the place was overcast - not threatening, just thick with cloud. I asked the person beside me if it was always this cloudy at night.

Yes, they said. Always.

Just then a break opened in the clouds below us - below us - and through it I could see lights. A town, maybe a city, impossibly far down, glittering faintly like something at the bottom of a very deep, very still lake. We weren't on a mountaintop. We were above the clouds. The whole place hung somewhere between the earth and the sky, and nobody seemed to find this remarkable.

That's Greece, the person said simply, and looked away.

I stood there a while longer, watching the lights through the gap until the clouds closed back over them. Then I turned and walked back.

A commotion stirred at the far edge of the village - if you could call it that. It wasn't really a village. It just was.

People were lining the wide dirt path, the kind of path that's been walked so long it's become as solid as stone. And coming down it, a long way off still, was a group of men - large, broad, clearly road-worn. Whispers moved through the crowd: they'd been traveling a long time. They came to help with the creatures.

The cheering rose as they passed.

I joined the crowd trailing behind them and followed to the far edge of the place, where the fence met the tree line and the shadows were already beginning to gather. People were streaming in from outside - some from a long way off, coming in through the still-open gate as the light faded. Night came fast here, faster than I expected, dropping like a curtain.

The last of them came through. The gate still stood open.

And then I heard it.

Something moving in the woods. Not wind. Not animals. Something deliberate.

I was already moving before I thought about it - running for the gate, grabbing it, pulling it shut. My hands found the latch. In the darkness beyond the fence, at the edge of where the trees became solid black, I saw one of them - dragging something behind it, something limp, disappearing between the trunks.

I got the latch closed.

And then I woke up.

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I've had this dream before. But this time I remembered.