

# Home

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2<sup>nd</sup> place winner of the 2021 PSII Fiction Contest.

Mildew decided that it didn't happen fast enough. She wiggled her fingers, and from the corner of her eyes she could see them move. Her lungs rattled with each breath while intermittently exhaling blood—but she's still breathing. "Well, this sucks." Though even if she could somehow reach her phone and call, help would never come in time. All that was left was to wait and reflect on these last torturous moments. *What could I have done differently? Was there any avoiding it?* Her fatal mistake was hesitating, but even if she had known, would Mildew have been able to escape?

No, they would have gotten her even if she ran.

Blood began to drip out her nose and into the hem of her tattered pink dress. The warmth trapped in her oven of a rabbit hood couldn't compete with the coldness that crept up her body; she realized she was shaking. She tried harder and harder to breathe, and she could feel her pulse weakening. Only a few minutes left now.

Mildew tried to lift her head, but she was too weak, so instead she raised her eyes to gaze at the sky one more time. It's a beautiful soft blue, with specks of white clouds that passed through here and there. The sunshine wasn't too harsh. It was warm as if the sun was giving her one more hug. Nice weather overall, good view.

Really, she thought, I'm pretty lucky. She got pretty far in life, after all, accomplished a lot, met some people she liked. She wasn't particularly proud of anything; she certainly wasn't a great person. But she had fun, though she sure was going to miss her friends. She wondered if they were going to be okay without her.

The sky started to fade to a comforting grey; all her surroundings begin to shift into black and white. A vignette appears. Darkness seeping in around the edges with friendly open arms welcoming her, she felt like she was home again; she felt happy. Her vision blurs as her pupils dilate. Her chest barely rose with her last inhale, and her heart stopped at that last breath.

She fell asleep and woke up at the same time.

*A door opens, and it is Mildew's mom who is on the other side. "Welcome home!" she greets her, "we've been waiting so long for you."*

*"Home," thought Mildew; "I'm home."*

*Mildew's mom stepped aside to let her in, an angelically sugary scent blossoms inside her nose upon entrance. The smell had hit her brain too hard, causing her to feel woozy. Mildew looks around as her mother disappears into the kitchen. She sees her dad sitting on the worn-out merlot loveseat. She looks over at her mom, who's pulling something out of the oven.*

*Mildew thought she was dreaming.*

*Her attention was snapped back by her mother's call:*

*"Sit down Mil, it's ready!" her father gets up and sits down at the dinner table. Mildew sat next to him. Three plates of pie were placed on the table, the ambrosial scent of the pies was stronger than ever. Her mom took a seat next to her, lovingly pulling Mildew's hat off.*

*Mildew was, indeed, dreaming.*

*Mildew got up and excused herself from the table.*

*Her mother smiles. "Of course," she says. "Come home soon!"*  
*She quickly headed to her room, a bright light radiating from the door, but she kept her eyes open. She took a step into the light and it shone brighter. She realized it was all a manifestation of the last thing she wanted.*  
*Yes, Mildew was dreaming.*

The sky wasn't blue or gray anymore either, nor is anything else. It was all an endless pure white in every direction she looked. She looked down at herself and saw her body had been somewhat resurrected, no bruises, no scrapes—if anything, she was a bit cleaner. She felt everything.

"Hmmm," she sung and was relieved to hear her voice loud and clear.

Mildew couldn't think of anything else to do, so she moved forward. The ground was perfectly flat and white, and there was no particularly visible horizon no matter where she turned. Her heels made a light patter on the floor, but she heard no other sound nor any trace of an echo.

Mildew walked on for what felt like a kilometer or two before seeing something in the distance. She walked closer only to see a figure, a person sitting down. Their skin illuminated against the white backdrop, and their hair was long with a natural glow to it.

When she got close enough to see their face, she smiled, and said, "Y'know, hell is a lot less colorful than I imagined."

The other, who has been staring blankly at the ground, jumped in shock, her head whipping to the direction of the voice she just heard. "Mil?"

Osakabe was happy to see her but was in no rush, she got to her feet in a dignified manner as Mildew barreled towards her. She hugs Mildew far tighter than is comfortable.

"Hey, stop, that hurts!" Mildew struggles against Osakabe to no avail. Osakabe just chuckled and declared, "You're fine, you can't die twice."

Osakabe put a slender hand on the back of Mildew's head, pulling her closer to press a kiss on her forehead. Finally, Osaka's grip loosened enough for Mildew to regain mobility, although she was still held securely against Osakabe. Figuring she was not going to be let down, she relaxed.

"I missed you so much Mil." The hand on the back of Mildew's head moved to her back, and Osakabe rests her head on Mildew's chest.

"Though I was kinda hoping I wouldn't be seeing you anytime soon."

Mildew rolled her eyes. "Well, thanks. I could say the same for you."

Osaka just sighs, the half-smiles on their faces mirror each other and reflect melancholy.

"Who got you?"

Mildew almost asked what she meant, but when she glanced down and saw the look in Osaka's eyes, she understood.

Mildew shook her head, "You'd like the truth even less." She has the gall to giggle.

Osakabe's posture became sullen. "Then don't tell me, I don't want to know." It was all over anyways, knowing won't do any good. It would just serve to make the rest of her time more miserable, craving revenge and never being able to do anything about it.

"I'll tell you something though." Osaka locked eyes with Mildew. "They got me fair and square, I wasn't tricked. We fought, and I gave it my all, unfortunately they were stronger. That's all there is. So you don't have to worry about that."

"Who said I was worried?" Mil huffs, but Osaka could see the change in her posture, a minute of relaxation in her face.

Mildew leaned down to press their foreheads together. Silence enveloped them when neither was talking, and the space around them felt incredibly desolate. Many die every day, so why were Osakabe and Mildew the only ones standing here? Osakabe had always been more of a mourner than Mildew,

"Why only us?" Mildew asked quietly.

She had to say it. But maybe nothing made a difference, considering their situation. Osaka's arms loosened around her, and Mildew slowly descended onto the floor.

"I don't know." Osaka answered in a resigned tone, giving the impression that she knew where Mildew is going. "But we have all the time in the universe to wonder." Mildew touches the bridge of her nose where she was punched. It's normal, just as it was fifteen minutes ago. Or twenty."

"How long has it been since I died?" Osaka asked.

"Almost two years."

"Oh..." Osakabe took in the information while sitting down on the ground. She chuckled to herself. "I can't decide if that's shorter or longer than what I thought. You can't tell the time here at all, there isn't a way to."

"So you've been here the entire time?"

"Yup. Walked back and forth and left and right, as far as possible, and it's all exactly the same. There's nothing here." Osakabe sounds angry and defeated at the same time, this wasn't really like her. "You don't get hungry or thirsty, which is good considering there's no food. You never get older, your hair never grows or anything like that. There's nothing."

"Except... you're here now." Osakabe looked down at her, her smile had no meaning.

"So you're saying not only am I trapped in a smooth white box for the rest of eternity, but I'm also with you?" Mildew glowered at her. Osakabe's sad smile melts to a grin, baring more teeth. A long arm darts out and snatches Mil's wrist, yanking her with a neck breaking speed. Mildew falls onto Osaka's lap and was trapped yet again by an embrace.

"That's right, you're gonna have to live with it. Or die with it."

"Exist in sustained limbo with it." Mildew suggests.

"Yeah, exactly."

Mildew sighed and relaxed her back against Osaka chest. Maybe it's not real.

Maybe she was just a figment of her imagination. Maybe she's not dead yet, and she's just caught in this strange make-believe world. Was this really hell? If Osaka was right, then there's nothing for them to do. With Osaka here by her side, it didn't feel like hell at all. But Osakabe had been alone here for so long...

"What do you make of it then? This place I mean."

Osaka tutted and looked thoughtfully upwards. "Well, I've had almost two years to consider it, and I think it's something like purgatory."

"Purgatory?"

"All I could do from the second I died until now was think about my life and all the things I've ever done. And as time keeps passing, the memories don't start fading, they get clearer. Now you're here, but nothing has really changed beyond that. We just get to sit and remember together." Osakabe finished.

"We're probably stuck here until that changes," said Osaka in a pensive manner,

"I'm guessing it won't count if I just yell 'I'm sorry!' into oblivion."

Mildew snickers. "Probably not, but you could try."

"I don't think the others won't get caught here either when the time comes, they were all softies at the core."

"True. Niklit cried for you, you know."

"Damn." Osaka tsks. "Well now you've given me one regret. Try some more."

"Europeia drank all your sports drinks. Like, seven hours after you died."

"The fuck, no shame. They'll be down here eventually and I'll show her 10% of my power." Mildew bursts out laughing at that.

Osakabe closes her hand around Mildew and rests her chin on her shoulder.

"Maybe I should've read some of those old bibles my parents kept around."

Mildew looked down, "But I still think it's all just for people who are desperate for reassurance of an afterlife."

Osaka giggled, and said in a faux solemn voice, "You dare to blaspheme in purgatory?"

"I'm daring god to come smite us faster."

"Such a daredevil!" Mildew mused

"The key word is devil."

"Oh ho! Clever, clever."

"Hey, what if you're wrong? What if this is the place where souls stay before they're reincarnated?" Mildew voiced her concern.

"Then Jesus Christ needs to pick up the pace with the soul processing. I wanna be a house cat or a cute dog." Osaka remarked

"I think a giraffe would fit you better."

"Hey, is that an insult?"

"I would never!"

"Well now you're just lying."

Mildew and Osakabe continued their badinage, as if there wasn't a two year gap in it. They'd both met their ends, yet somehow it felt more like a restart.

Mildew hummed, "Maybe it does have something to do with repentance."

“I don’t have any regrets,” she said flatly. “And if I could, I would do it all again.”