

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

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Announcing the winner of our third annual summer contest

Lotus by Jared Salzano

I followed them to the pond. The trail that led to it was long and overgrown. We came to a stream and I watched where Tommy stepped. The soles of my feet were raw from walking, but Tommy and Mike went through it like nothing. The flowers didn't look like I had expected them to look. The petals were scarce and narrow. Tommy just walked right in and started pulling them out.

"Wait," I said.

"Do we have to cook them or something?" said Mike.

"No you don't cook them," said Tommy. He was filling his arm with blossoms.

"So you just eat them?" said Mike.

"Yeah you just eat them, what else?" He came out of the pond and dropped them on the ground. He put one into his mouth.

"How many are we supposed to eat?" said Mike.

"They taste like shit," said Tommy.

I rolled up my pant-legs and went to the edge of the pond. I saw a few that looked like the ones I've seen in paintings of the Buddha.

"How many do you eat?" said Mike.

I cut one just below the flower with my thumb-nail. I held it in my open palm. The petals were waxy. Most flowers you see have dirt on them, but this one was perfect. The petals looked like glowing chalk. They were mostly pink, but towards the center they were pure white and there was the yellow sun in the middle. I didn't want to eat it. I sat down on the bank.

"I think I feel it," said Mike.

"Well, it doesn't work that fast," said Tommy, "so you're lying." Tommy went back into the pond.

"Well then I'm enjoying some kind of placebo," said Mike.

"You're dumb," said Tommy. He slapped the water. Some of the droplets fell onto my face. "Did you eat three yet?" he said. He slapped the water at me. "Hey."

I opened my eyes.

"Did you eat three?" he said.

"No, I didn't eat any."

"Then what the hell are you doing?"

"I'm just looking at it."

"You're what?"

"He's stoned," said Mike.

"I said I'm just looking at it."

"You're not even holding it," said Tommy.

I looked down to see that it had fallen out of my hand. I picked it up. There was sand on it. I tried to wipe the sand off, but I got it dirtier. I got up and went over to the pond and dipped it in the water, but it didn't look the same.

"It's clean enough," Tommy said, "just eat it."

"No, I don't need to eat it."

"What?"

"I don't need to."

"We came all this way and you're afraid to eat the lotus."

"I'm not afraid of anything."