



MERCY

A short story by K.S. Stanley

After a horrendous breakup and following the advice of a friend, it was the right time to do some hiking. To get over her ex, get out in the fresh air and be one with nature. If only she'd read the small print...

Mercy

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I wake from the nightmare. The fifth in a row of harrowing nights. You were in it. Uttering those earth-shattering words.

I don't love you anymore...

I'm running through a lush and cold forest. Twigs crack under my naked feet. Cold sharp stones cut into my skin. I'm frightened. I'm being hunted. I stop in my tracks as I see you. Normally, this is when I wake up but this time, you plunge your hand into my chest, ripping my heart from my core. It was still beating, trembling under your fingers.

I knew when I breathed the tension out from my body that I had to do something right then and there to get rid of this feeling. It was like a sickness that had me in its clutch.

"You need a distraction." My friend says after as I retell the details of my nightmare over a coffee. "I think it will do you some good. You need to start forgetting about him and what happened."

"I get what you mean," I say and I can feel myself wanting to protest but she's right, as always. "What type of distraction do you have in mind?"

She pulls something from her jacket pocket. It's a crumbled piece of paper. She unfolds it, ironing out the creases. "A friend of mine gave me this. It's meant to be really good. They highly recommend it if you need to get away and do some soul searching. This has got you written all over."

It's a flyer advertising a hiking retreat up in the woods an hour's drive from here.

I look at her with some caution. "I don't know. This is out of my comfort zone."

"I think it's what you need."

"Well, if I do decide to go...would you come with me?"

She shook her head. "No can do. I'm teaching when they are doing their next retreat." She smiles coyly at me like she always does when she's concocting some sort of plan. "I think you should go..."

"I don't think it's for me. Maybe, for you. I'm too much of an indoor underground person for this."

"That's exactly why I think you should do it. Embrace the unknown. You only live once remember."

I go back to my apartment with her jovial words and advice spinning around my head. The flyer stares at me as I try my best to ignore it. I distract my thoughts with other things like doing chores but it doesn't go away. Eventually, I study the flyer and I ring the enquiry number.

I speak to the coordinator, Gary. He's helpful answering my questions. He says if I wanna go, he'll be there leading the hiking trip. He outlines the general process. It doesn't sound too scary. A group of people meet at the park where it takes place over a weekend. It's all about getting out into the open air and interacting with people, taking part in group activities which really intrigues me. As we chat over the phone, Gary asks if I want to participate and I kindly accept the invitation. I can't back at now. I'm doing this.

Before I know it, I'm pulling up at the park. I see the group by the clearing and I must admit, a glow of excitement and fear shoots through me. Grace was right, this is just what I need.

I walk to the group and introduce myself nervously. I meet Gary. He looks completely different to how I envisioned him on the phone. I thought he would have been older, like the fuzzy Jeff Bridges type. Instead he's a few years older than me with a mountain man beard, snazzy shades and a load of black wild hair lashed

back in a ponytail. In a sarcastic sense, he reminds me of a nineteen seventies hippy.

I meet other members of the group. Tiff and Pedro, a beautiful couple who were introduced to the wonders of hiking a few years ago through a friend. Once they were hooked, they never looked back.

Then there was Valerie and her son, Michael. I never thought hiking would be something a mother and her son could enjoy together. But what did I know?

My absolute favourite person from the group is Jean. She is small, nimble and has the charisma and intelligence of a sleek red fox. She's a grandmother and looks amazing with rainbow streaks going through her silver hair. I notice Jean talks to Gary like he's a little boy who doesn't know anything. It's quite comical in a way.

We start the hiking, exchanging pleasantries and Gary asks us to get to know each other. Jean and I hit it off straight away. She asks me why I decided to go on the hiking trip. I tell her the truth, of course omitting certain details.

"Somebody broke your heart didn't they," she utters.

I stare at her, dumb founded. "Not exactly."

Jean smirks. "I've been around a long-time, love. I know heartbreak when I see it."

We continue the walk. I must admit, my body is getting a workout. The sights of the woods and trees reaching up as tall as giants are wondrous. Nature is truly beautiful. I can see why people become addicted to hiking and the environment this holds. I do truly feel at home, like I've been here before.

Gary disturbs my chats with the others as we come to a clear part that isn't covered by trees. Gary instructs us to make up our tents. I feel ridiculous as I haven't done this before. I looked at some YouTube videos the night before but the

instructions were like a foreign language to me. Jean laughs at my incompetence and Gary offers a helping hand. I notice over my shoulder that Michael is staring at me. It's not a brief glance, his eyes are pressing like he's studying me. It's strange. I see Valerie clock it. She leans over, muttering something to him and he stops looking at me. Valerie smiles back, but it's a nervous smile. She looks... uneasy.

I shake it off and go back to setting up the tent. I tend to overanalyse situations. It's a habit I want to break.

After that, Gary gathers us all together and we spend the rest of the day and evening bonding. We play games, tell each other tales and for the first time, I feel myself forgetting the past couples of months of Hell I'd been enduring. It's such a great day until the night draws in.

I wake up from the nightmare again. I'm drenched in sweat. My chest hurts as it remembers the part where you had ripped out my heart. I run out of my tent to breathe, ducking my head down as that's one of things you do when you have a panic attack. After the worst passes, my breathing resumes and I pull myself to my feet. I notice I'm trembling.

"Guys," I call.

Nobody responds to me. I'd made such a horrible noise when I woke up, surely someone must have heard me. Where is everyone?

I duck into people's tents, calling for Gary and Jean and the others but only the silence responds. A cold slither of worry curls into my stomach and I feel nauseous. I grab Jean's bag, all of her personal belongings like her phone, her purse and had been left, but no Jean herself. But there's something that intrigues me, a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* lies on her sleeping bag. I hadn't studied that book for ages.

From what I can remember, it was intertwining poems about myths such as Daphne and Apollo and many others. Maybe, it was just her late-night reading but it just baffles me.

The only thing that was missing was her mini pickaxe. We all had one as it was used to hitch our tents up.

I check Gary's and the other tents. It was the same thing, they'd left their personal belongings, they all had copies of *Metamorphoses* left on their sleeping bags and their pickaxes were also missing.

What was going on here?

Then out from the trees, I could hear chanting. It is loud and hypnotic but I recognise the people I have spent the day with. It's their voices. This must have been an exercise Gary set up or some sort of party, but why didn't anyone wake me for it?

I pick up my pickaxe and I run towards the chanting, disappearing into the forest. Darkness engulfs me, I run blind and purely rely on their voices to lead me to them. Twigs crack under my naked feet. Cold sharp stones cut into my skin.

I shout and I see them standing in a circle. I approach like a timid wildebeest and my heart plummets.

They are all dressed in cloaks, black cloaks. This wasn't on the agenda, Gary never talked to me about this. My presence makes them stop chanting and every single eye turns towards me. I feel like a fish out of water in my white night dress.

"What's going on here?" I say, my hand clutching my pickaxe is shaking.

Jean glares at me, then she turns to Pedro. "You were meant to knock her out!"

"You fool!" Gary shouted.

"We are to present her when she is sleeping. That is what he wants," Jean cussed.

"What are we going to do now?" Tiff asks fearfully.

"Pedro, grab her," Gary says.

I feel a pair of strong arms wrap around me. I push at Pedro and he bats the pickaxe from my hand. Jean and Gary go back to chanting. I'm a mess. I don't understand what is going on and I can't comprehend what they are saying. They are speaking in tongues, they don't sound human.

Valerie emerges from the circle with Michael in toe. I see tears on her skin. She pulls the cloak from his shoulders and embraces him. It's a soft embrace. After a minute, she pulls away and raises her arm. My heart freezes when I realise what is happening. I scream as they raise their pickaxes. Michael smiles sadly at his mother, he doesn't make a sound as they stab him.

The sounds of violence dissipate and silence returns. I hear twigs break off in the distance, it grows near and I want to faint when I see a figure.

You emerge from the darkness...

At that moment, they all fall to their knees. Except Valerie.

"I knew you were perfect for this," Gary utters.

I look at him, tears are flooding down my face. "Why?"

Michael lies in front of me. His brown hollow eyes stare up at me, blood pours from his neck like red ribbon. I can't look. My hands are shaking. Pedro's arms press painfully on my ribs.

Mud is caked over your face and hands, it's all over you just like you'd just climbed out of the ground. There's something about your energy and the way you hold yourself. Who are you?

"That's a good question," you say.

"Is she the one, my lord? My Orcus?" Jean asks you.

The sheer difference in her voice disturbs me. She sounds weak and frail, not like before where she was tough and fearless. I hate her as she shivers before you in Michael's blood.

You stare at me, a smile spreads slowly across your mouth. "Yes, she's the one." You turn to Valerie, stepping over her dead son. "Your child did a brave thing. He will be rewarded in the Underworld and is sailing with the boatman as we speak." You lean across and plant a deep kiss on her forehead.

Valerie falls to the ground and kisses your feet. Her movement is desperate as if your skin is the oxygen to her survival.

Pedro lets me go and I fall to the ground. I'm shaking. Tears are now falling from my eyes. You touch me, wrapping your arms around my waist. I don't want to admit this but I have missed your touch. You wipe the tears from my cheek and cup my chin in your palm. Your scent intoxicates me.

A whisper slithers up my spine, tattooing my heart.

"Don't cry, my beauty. I've been waiting and searching for so long. Our son Zagreus has been missing his mother very much. The Underworld is not the same without you. Now, we can be together. My dear, my queen. My sweet and beautiful Persephone..."

These were the last words I remember before by your kiss consumes me.

A NOTE FROM THE WRITER

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading my short story, *Mercy*. I hope you enjoyed it.

This was written in a handful of days for a writing competition on Wattpad back in 2018.

The premise they gave was a hiking/camping horror. Your lead character wakes up and everyone in the camping party has vanished, the reason for the vanishing is in their tents.

Sadly, those of us who entered the competition, the results were never posted! *A mystery!*

Now, I'm older. I can see holes or webs where I'd change things but I wanted to preserve this as it was originally created.

It was good writing practice and it was interesting to work from somebody else's prompt.

I'm a huge admirer of Greek mythology and it was great to lace that with in this experiment.

-Kateri x (written in January 2023)

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