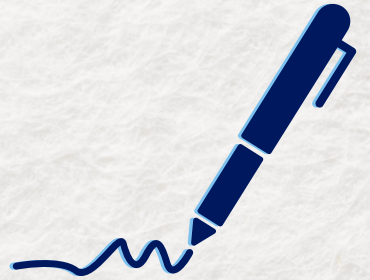


# In Between

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Age: 16



“This road never ends. It probably goes all around the world.”

How many times had Ben watched this film? Well, he'd lost count a long time ago.

Pupils dilating, he kept his eyes glued on the screen, as a man blearily blundered about the road, staggering about as though he'd just awakened from a great slumber. He coughed, and the camera panned towards a great stretch of golden, wheat fields...Or it might have all been dead grass. Ben was no agriculture expert. The opening scene stretched on, like the stalks of wheat waving in the honey-coloured American sun. Ben remained frozen as per usual, his posture stooped over as his TV spluttered with every sign of ageing decay. Yet the film flickered on, as the blond man stumbled to the ground, trembling a little. In a moment's time, he'd fall asleep, right there in the middle of the road that went all around the world, as if he had been laid upon a mattress smothered with warm blankets and pillows. It was quite a devastating film. Ben got that distinct sense in his hollow bones whenever he laid eyes on the opening scene.

When had he first seen the film? He didn't understand it at first; Actually, he struggled to fathom it even now. Ben had always preferred the more simple, fun cartoons, not the slow, dragging films that portrayed muddled, subtle messages that were hard to grasp. As a teenager, he'd yawned at this film, complaining that it was too boring for his taste. Yet, it was the boy, Mike, who had introduced it to him. He'd urged him to keep watching in order to make sense of its plodding visuals and strange characters.

Ben had never heard anyone talk about movies so passionately in his life. He gazed at the next scene impassively, as Mike lingered about the crevices of his mind like a stubborn ghost. Once more, Ben saw his brown hair that faded into sea-blue, and his clothes that always seemed too loose for his skinny frame. Chronic nervousness had permanently blanched his face into the colour of white sands, and his inky eyes threatened to pull others into an abyss deeper than the Mariana Trench.

He'd been a foil to Ben's teenage self. With messily chopped hair that had been impulsively dyed scarlet, he burned just as ferociously as the sun, with its flames devouring itself whole. He'd always been patient for nothing, strode down the streets with the brightness of a blazing home and never hesitated to smoulder anyone who came close.



When pitted against each other, which was more likely to win? Who was more likely to drown or set the other aglow? In this particular case, fire had overcome water. Ben couldn't remember how they'd met, but he remembered when he'd parted ways with the boy. When his fire had overpowered and torn through everything in sight.

Now, the flame had died out.

Ben kept his eyes trained on his flickering TV screen. Restlessly running a hand through hair as black as a burnt candle wick, he watched the blond man's back as he wobbled through the bustling American city.

He blinked, his vision momentarily shrouded in darkness the colour of his old friend's eyes. When his sight returned, a loud gasp escaped his throat. It was Mike, right in the middle of the film.

Swaying slightly but walking with all the confidence he could muster, he came right up to the screen, knocking on it lightly. The sound echoed throughout the darkened room.

"Ben?" He asked softly. Mike's voice washed over him like waves crashing onto a white beach. "It's you, right?"

Ben stared at his old friend with wild, frightened eyes, shaking violently. "What-What the hell...?"

Mike faced him rather demurely, clad in the same clothes the blond man had been wearing earlier. The same worn denim jacket, beige trousers that seemed too large for his skinny frame...

"Remember my dream?" Mike smiled, the abyss in his eyes widening its deadly embrace. "I wanted to make it into a film one day. And... Here I am!"

Mike laughed, and the sound was undeniably his. Ben reeled away from the screen, his heart tripping over its own beat. "There...There you are, man."

He grinned cheerily, the braces on his teeth shining like pearls. "Yeah. Here I am."

He coughed, rubbing his nose in the exact way the blond man had. "Listen, will...Will you help me out, Ben?"

"Wh-What do you want?" Ben asked, laughing nervously. He half-believed he was asleep, or maybe hallucinating. Maybe he'd missed his friend that much. "I'll....I'll do anything."



Fragments of that day pierced his mind once more; The glinting blade, screaming teenagers who'd played at being adults; And the smothering of scarlet blood on his own hands.

Forgiveness. He'd been thirsting for it ever since.

"Anything?" His old friend's grin grew wider. "Wow, that's...Alright, then. Well, I-We kind of need someone else to be the other guy. See, there he goes."

Mike pointed towards the deuteragonist striding down the streets, before turning to Ben again. "C'mon. It'll be fun. Like the old days, dude."

Ben gazed into his friend's hollow eyes from behind the glass of the TV. For a moment, he braved the inky pit, fighting against the streams of seawater dragging him towards the end.

In the end, water overcame fire. Ben felt himself sinking into the void of his old friend's eyes.

As if floating through a trance, Ben stumbled towards the screen, reaching for the screen. His friend smiled fondly, extending his hand outwards. For a moment, he felt a fizz of electricity, before his fingers brushed against Mike's cold ones. Then, his world plunged into darkness, as the abyss swallowed him whole.

In the end, water overcame fire. Before a flickering TV, Ben's half-drowned body lay motionless on the ground.

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After receiving reports of a missing person last night, police found the body of Ben Williams in his apartment at around 10.59pm. He was declared dead upon arrival, and police discovered evidence of illicit drugs in his room. It is highly likely that Williams had suffered an overdose.

