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The Void Within

I rode down the continuous dirt road that stretched along the country side to the steady rhythm of my horse's relentless hooves clomping along further towards my inevitable destination. Slow-going yet relentless, my horse needed little steering nor direction for she had been down this road enough to have it seared into her primitive mind. Her body and mane, completely white, contrasted with the dim and darkening landscape that surrounded us. For daylight had slipped away and as in the convergence of nighttime and darkness. Where the rolling countryside hills looked as if they were a stretching sea of black mass and only the occasional silhouette of trees could be made out in front of the soon-to-be black night sky.

I usually would never ride at this time of evening, for fear of God knows what. Probably for fear of just that: the unknown. In the dark you're vulnerable to just about anything that can see, smell, or hear you. And you only have about two-fifths of your senses about you. You very well can't see in the dark, your sense of smell is about as useless for a human as tits on a bull, taste isn't worth mentioning, and feel is only useful when you need it most, and that's when whatever is attacking you is already upon you. Your only true sense worth anything to you in complete darkness, is your hearing. Perhaps this is why humans, since the discovery of fire need (more than desire) light. That is why we have it wherever possible, for the fear of the unknown that lurks. in the shadows and concealment of darkness. Perhaps this is why I preferred the lamp-

lit streets of city life over the moon glazed landscapes of country life that my brother preferred in contrast.

Ah, my brother. I tried throughout this ride to not think of him, though he was the reason I ride and the reason I am away from my comfortably lit streets and convenient compactness of human necessity. He is the reason I ride to his country villa at this inconvenient and nonsensical time of what is now closer to night. I would have waited until morning, but as soon as I had been told what had happened, I hopped on my horse without a moment of hesitation and second guessing. I knew the hour would be late for it is a long ride from town to my brother's estate, but an even longer ride from the town morgue.

As I even thought of the morgue, an image of bloodied and torn skin flashed across my mind, and the smell of rotting flesh and oil paint lingered in my nostrils. I quickly thought of something else, anything else. The lump in my throat returned but I suppressed it with a large gulp and deep breathes.

I looked around me and though I could hardly make out my surroundings, I knew where I was. Memories of better times soon flooded my mind as I recalled not three months ago I had traveled this very road, not alone with nobody but my horse to keep me company but with my brother Thomas who would pick me up from town in a luxurious buggy he had painted himself. It was a brilliant and shining gold and black buggy, something someone of royalty would drive. A thing of beauty that turned all the heads of the shabby rural town folk. Thomas didn't care though, "If I'm going to pick up my little brother, it will be in style. Damn them and their looks for all I care". Of course, he'd never say such things around them.

My brother, the middle child of three, was 8 years older than I, though you wouldn't have guessed it. He was of small frame with sharp features and piercing blue eyes. He was born small and his demeanor reflected that. He was quiet, so quiet that if you didn't know him, you'd be lucky to get a word from him. I was an exception however. Ever since I was a small child my brother treated me well, never once put me down or took advantage of me. When I was a baby he used to change my diapers and clean up all my messes. Father used to say he was a better mother than my own and doted on me for relief he wasn't the smallest in the family anymore. That connection lasted throughout my childhood and teen years and finally adulthood. He was an aspiring artist and known throughout Europe for his capturing of realism and vivid color. Many a time he'd paint me in his pictures and we bonded over the time he'd have me model in a controlled set. His seriousness and attention to detail could be felt through his concentration and fine movements of brush stroke.

My brother through his work soon gained popularity through his work and was working for the wealthy in Europe doing portraits and church paintings. It wasn't long until he started accumulating a large amount of wealth. My brother however, was a man of simplicity and spent only what he needed. Due to his quiet nature and serious attitude towards art, he had little to no time for women. He lived in a homely studio where he worked constantly and hardly ever left, which was a problem for he started to get up there in years.

It wasn't until Thomas was hired to paint a portrait of a young lady of aristocratic wealth was his eyes finally pruned off of his work and onto the figure he was painting. The young lady was a bit younger than him, bright in nature with eyes of ocean green and blue. Thomas was inspired so inspired by her beauty that he poured his heart out onto her portrait. The portrait was finished she was taken aback in the beauty that captured her, the passion in every feature and the

colors that exfoliated it all. Her name was Elizabeth and she fell in love not only with the painting, but with the painter. The two were absolutely engulfed with one another and completely in love. Three months later they were married. Thomas bought her a house in the country to accommodate the wealthy lifestyle she was used to. Made of the finest hard wood and masonry that complimented each other in every way to the point the architecture was art itself. The mansion, though he called it a villa, was upon a great hill that upon its majesty overlooked a beautiful pond. And overlooking the pond off its shore in serene landscape, a Thomas's art studio that he had specially built to capture the setting sun's golden rays to capture the perfect golden lighting for his paintings.

In the studio was where he spent most of his time, and the room was filled with paints of the highest grade, chemicals to remove the paint, and brushes that were meticulously organized and cleaned in the corner on a shelf. Though it was his workplace Elizabeth hung about him constantly, watching him work, modeling for him, never once did she complain or sulk but supported him and indulged in his work.

Thomas however felt that he did not buy her enough things to keep her happy and was constantly worried she was becoming bored of her life with him. Whenever he could he bought her, jewelry, clothes, and shoes. All she accepted but constantly assured him of her happiness without the luxuries. He never believed her though.

Often I would visit them and witnessed this but never interfered in any way. It was his wife, his money, he should do as he please. I remember his greatest present to her though. I was visiting for Elizabeth's 28th birthday when Thomas after eating cake and singing happy birthday brought out a beautiful chestnut brown pony that he had kept hidden among some trees by the pond. Elizabeth who loved horses cried and accepted the horse whole heartedly and took up

riding across the 50 acres that they owned. She was absolutely loved the horse whom they called Chestnut, but Elizabeth wanted more than a horse to take care of in her life. Elizabeth had never brought up children to Thomas before but after Chestnut Elizabeth knew she wanted more.

A month later Elizabeth announced she was pregnant, Thomas wrote to me about it in ecstatic joy at the thought of a child in their lives. The months flew by and occasionally I'd take the trip to check in on them and each time Elizabeth grew and grew. And with every passing visit she never looked in pain or discomfort, but with a motherly glow that emitted pride. This inspired Thomas like no other, and every month he painted a new portrait of her figure. Each one more beautiful than the last.

It was on the eighth month that Thomas did not paint her figure. I visited them to check up on things when Thomas invited me to his studio. Upon entering I gazed upon a six by three painting of Elizabeth, shrouded in color as flowers surrounded her pale beautiful figure. Her face bright and glowing was a thing of myth as she held a swaddle with nothing painted inside.

"That's where my child will go," reading my mind, "painted in all its glory and to be hung above the fire place for all to gaze upon with envy". His eyes sparkled, and his smile gleamed of pure joy.

"I- I am speechless... by far it is your greatest work, which is to not be taken lightly", I put my arm around his shoulder, "I am proud of you Thomas." We both stared at his masterpiece quietly for some time. If I were to know what was to happen next, I would have never left.

A week later Elizabeth went into early labor, the baby was turned around however, and the umbilical cord wrapped around its neck. The pain and suffering Elizabeth was unbearable

and in an attempt to perform a caesarian section, she bled out and died. As for the baby, a boy, it was dead before it left her body. I was far away on a trip by the time I heard the news. When I came back as soon as I could, Elizabeth and the baby were buried not too far from the pond.

When I arrived at the country villa, I was not sure what to expect of my brother. When I arrived, a great change had seemingly swept over the whole countryside. Clouds covered the sky casting a dull gray over everything. Flowers refused to bloom, grass turned a sickly brown. Animals were seemingly depressed and wouldn't eat. My brother when I found him was in a much similar state. Holed up in his studio, I found him staring at the great painting of his late wife. He did not stir when I called for him but sat, emotionless as if a painting himself. His back was turned to me, but I could tell from his straggly hair and unkept clothes he was in bad condition. When I touched his shoulder he finally looked at me with eyes sunken deep, beard grown and unkept, with lines that seemed to be carved upon his face.

“Thomas... I'm so...so sorry. I should have b-been... I should have never left.”

Tears welled up in my eyes for the condition of my brother was too much for me to bear.

“I cannot blame you nor anyone for what has happened”, he said with a voice as soulless as if he were made of stone, “I am missing a part of me brother. A piece has been taken from within me that has left nothing but a hole.”

“You are grieving Thomas, it's perfectly normal, you must stay strong, I *need* you to stay strong”. I hugged his stiff almost lifeless body. I felt no warmth, no comfort, as if he were a corpse, propped up to look animate.

“The hole is almost alive inside me brother, it grows and swallows up what will I have left in my body. I can feel it grow. I am afraid if you were to look inside me you'd see nothing

but black void” He turned to look me in the eyes, “I can feel nothing but that of the void inside me”.

I stayed with him for a month, feeding him, clothing him, and taking care of his needs. The painting sat unfinished in his studio the entirety I was there. Thomas improved, or so I thought. I got him into a routine where he could take care of himself without my help. Eventually I had to go back to work and decided that Thomas was well enough to function alone. Though he never regained his spark. He wrote for a while, then after three months he stopped. I began to worry and decided that I would visit that weekend. The next day I received a letter notifying me of his death.

I finally rode my horse up the hill towards Thomas’s country villa. There was no moon and the sky was cloud covered to obscure any light of stars to shine through. I tried to catch any glimpse of a silhouette of the house as we climbed steeper. As we edged nearer the smell of ash filled the air. As the smell reached my nostrils my heart sank. I had to pull a lantern from my pack and light it to see for my own eyes. The reports were true, burned to the ground with nothing but a few pillars and masonry that served as the base. Everything from the ground around the house was charred a deep black, the stones, singed and hot to the touch. He had burned down the house he had bought for her. And with it their memories.

I suddenly felt the chill and uneasiness of the surrounding night around me. The crickets chirped relentlessly as a relentless shrill all around. I found myself paralyzed, sitting as perfectly still as possible as to try and hear anything besides the shrill of the army of crickets. My hearing was being taken from me, giving up my one sense to use to my defense. If it weren’t for the lantern I would’ve gotten back on my horse out of fear and ridden back. But I knew I had to face

the nightmare that lay at the bottom of that hill. I needed to play out the night my brother decided to take his own life.

Finally freeing myself from paralysis I walked through the ash and rubble, where memories of a better time flooded my mind of the memories made in this house. I crossed through the fiery abyss and started down the hill, the lantern's soft glow leading my way. A sudden yip of coyotes far away made my heart jump out of my own chest before continuing thumping like a drum that could be heard in my ears. The shrill ringing of the crickets added to the beating of the drum started an orchestra of pure anxiety that triggered every instinct in my body to flee. But I could not, the guilt of my brother's death was upon my shoulders. I needed to suffer as he did. I continued hesitantly as the sounds of coyotes tormented my ears and the images of ripping flesh returned once more.

An anger began to boil up inside me for the animals that desecrated the body of my brother. I began to curse the foul, cowardly, beasts. No sooner did I curse them a great black shadow trotted towards me with ferocious stomping and snorting. The beast came straight for me as I hurdled myself out of its way, fear froze me to my core as the great shadow came upon me. I closed my eyes. I held my breath. I waited for death.

After my breathing calmed for I realized I had not died, I heard the loud breathing of the beast above me. As I opened my eyes, and raised the lantern gripped tightly in my hand slowly to the beast. Examining closer the beast no beast at all but a horse, and upon seeing the star upon its nose I recognized it immediately as Chestnut. Upon getting up and greeting the old friend I examined her closely. Apart from being skinnier than I last saw her, her mane, her fur, and even her tail which previously was a beautiful sleek chestnut brown, her whole body and fur was stiff,

matted and covered in black paint. Her mane stiff as a board, flapped like a black splintered board. Upon her belly words written in white read, "The Void Consumes".

My mind reeling I was starting to piece together the final hours of my grief stricken brother turned mad. I knew what was waiting for me next was there in his studio. Reluctantly I walked towards the building shrouded in darkness. The faint smell of oil paint grew stronger and stronger. Upon entering the floor was splattered with black oil paint. A trail seemed to lead to the easel where Thomas did all his work. Upon the easel was the painting of Elizabeth and their dead child. This time it was finished. Finished but altered. Altered from its beauty of light and color and demented in a nightmarish fashion. The flowers in the background once blooming and beautiful now were dead and decayed upon Elizabeth's feet. Her once beautiful face full of light and motherly love, now removed leaving only the flesh beneath it, muscles and all, decaying before my very eyes, with maggots feeding upon her flesh. Her once pale skin now completely black with her notoriously ocean blue green eyes, two black pits. In her arms where the once empty swaddle lay, now filled with what could only be described as demon from hell, who was bloodied in great horrific detail that's eyes looked up at its mother with two perfectly black sockets.

My head spinning I sprinted out of the studio to the edge of the lake and vomited up my lunch I had earlier that day, I sobbed. And through my tears, with what little glow allowed, I looked upon my vomit and saw that it was black. I leaped back in horror to find that I had only imagined it, yet it seemed so real. I looked up and saw two faint objects in the darkness. I raised my lantern to find the two tombstones of Elizabeth and her dead child.

It was here they said they found Thomas's body. In between both graves. The autopsy showed he had covered himself in a quart of black oil paint before thrusting a knife into his own

stomach and disemboweling himself. With blood and black paint he wrote on the tombstones,
“NOT EMPTY”.