

In The Land

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Please note, this work includes content related to death and depression.

It was my lips that started to crack first. It happened while Robert was away for business, as he often was. A tiny piece from a shingle on the roof had fallen and hit the grass below it. When it fell, my lower lip started to bleed. I put my fingers to my mouth and felt the small crack, then the subsequent warmth of blood that spilled from it. The same lips Robert kissed the day prior.

I could still hear his drawling voice, “Elizabeth, I’ll be in Richmond for a while, my train leaves early tomorrow morning. I don’t want to wake you, so I’ll sleep in my study tonight, I love you.”

His voice was melodic. It had a low, rumbling lilt to it; it charmed me. It charmed everyone. He was a charming man; his wit was quick, and his ego was large. He took decent care of me, and I did think of him fondly. We got married in June of 1947, young and naïve. Thirteen years later, I never saw less of him. Weeks were spent alone; I couldn’t recall the last time Robert was home back then. He would sometimes return on Saturday or Sunday, bathed in the scent of a perfume I didn’t own. He would plant a chaste kiss on my lips and bury himself in work until the next weekend.

When it started, I would crawl into our bed at night and sob into his pillow as though my tears would stain and guilt him into faithfulness. Yelling at him would only get me so far; I quickly realized ignoring it was all I could do to keep myself from choking him or smothering him with a pillow. Years

later, his feeble excuses and excessive business trips didn’t hold the same weight they once did. Though thoroughly disappointed, I had become complacent. I still loved my husband, but with him rarely around, I had learned to find peace living alone.

Our house was at the edge of a small neighborhood, surrounded by meticulously trimmed shrubbery and trees. Oh, it was a beautiful house! Large and dramatic, but not overwhelmingly so. It was an old plantation house. An 1800s beauty of precisely crafted wooden elements and large windows. It stood proud in our small neighborhood and warded off unwelcome guests. Robert and I took care of the house, and while I maintained most of the housekeeping, he would do his share at home. I didn’t mind being a homemaker most of the time. The house kept me busy. It was old and decrepit, but with everything it’s seen, it’s gained a sort of wisdom. When I sighed, it creaked and groaned under my feet, and when I fell asleep, I could feel it staring at me with watchful eyes. I kept the vegetable garden well-nourished and the yard presentable. The more I took care of the house, the more control I felt I had over it. I provided its care, and the chores gave me the sanity Robert’s excursions had fractured.

It was Sunday, the day the shingle fell, and I was tending to the garden after church. My lip was still split, and I had used a damp handkerchief to dab the blood away. The weeks leading up were dreary. A

sepia tint blanketed the sky, and despite the rain, my vegetables began to suffer from the lack of sunlight. I did my best to keep them from spoiling, picking the ones that could be picked and praying that the rest would grow well enough for me to pick them when the time came. Between assessing vegetables, I would blot the blood from my lip. My back ached, and I stood up to go inside before it started raining again.

“Elizabeth!” I turn around.

“William,” I nod politely.

“Alone again this weekend? I swear that deadbeat husband of yours is gonna be the death of me,” he said as he opened my front door, ushering me inside before stepping in himself.

“Please, I don’t want to ask you again to stop talking about Robert that way.”

“Well, someone needs to say it,” he plucked a grape tomato out of my basket, threw it up into the air, and caught it in his mouth, “You’re too good to him.”

“If that’s all you’re going to talk about, then I think it’s best you get out of my house.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. I’m sorry, okay. You know how I just hate to see such a wonderful lady being treated like that.”

“I really don’t have the patience for this today. Either stay for dinner and behave, or go home. You’re a handsome boy, and I’m sure your parents won’t be thrilled that you’re spending evenings with me instead of a sweet girl your own age.” I said, chopping the vegetables on the counter.

“You flatter me,” his fingers carded through his light hair and gave me a sly smile, “but you know I’d rather be here with you than anywhere else, my dear Elizabeth.”

I rolled my eyes, “I’ll cook you dinner, you don’t need to butter me up.”

“Don’t be coy, you know how I feel about you. When was the last time Robert touched you?”

I put down my knife, took a deep breath, and

looked him in the eyes, “I’m a married woman, William. Besides, you’re what, nineteen? Don’t talk about things you know nothing about.”

“Twenty-two actually—”

I cut him off, “Just be quiet until I finish making dinner.”

He listened to me that time, and I was pleasantly surprised. He had a habit of saying too much. William was a promising young man who lived a few houses down. After graduating, he moved back in with his parents to save money. He was freshly out of college and too perceptive for his own good. He reminded me of Robert when he was younger: dashing, charming, full of life, and spilling to the brim with youthful conviction. But there was something about him that was so distinctly William. Maybe it was his brazenness or his calculating eyes.

I set a plate of food down in front of William and myself, then bowed my head to pray.

God don’t let me sin in the ways I’m tempted.

I woke up the next morning with a headache, a dull pounding in my skull. I begrudgingly made my bed. When I stepped into the bathroom, I cleared my throat and felt a mouthful of warm liquid. I spat into the sink, and rather than saliva or mucus, an alarming amount of blood came out of my mouth and made a home in the basin. A foul mixture of thin liquid and congealed clots was harder to rinse down than I thought. The clots caught in the drain and the water ran gray, concocting a putrid soup of blood and stale tap water. I plugged my nose and did my best not to vomit. My mouth tasted metallic and sticky. I abandoned the bathroom sink in favor of the one in the kitchen. I ran downstairs and put my mouth under the faucet to rid myself of the taste. The nearest doctor wasn’t close by any means, and besides feeling weak with the remnants of a headache, I felt fine. Perhaps it was my punishment for last night’s thoughts.

I didn’t want to think about it too much, so I ate my breakfast silently and went outside to check on

the garden. It was still overcast, raining at intervals, and I grew increasingly concerned for the state of my vegetables. They were barely hanging on, the lack of sunlight becoming apparent. I was hopeless, there was nothing I could do but hope the sun would return soon.

As I fixed lunch later that day, I could feel the breeze from outside even as I was in the kitchen. The walls were thinning, and sometimes they would lightly shake and sway with the wind. Like brittle fingernails, I feared too much pressure would cause them to cave in. I did my best to control the frail house and covered the space with an old sheet that I'd taped to the wall.

For the first time in a while, I felt truly lonely. It was chilly in the house despite the radiators being on, and the rain became an ever-present dreary mist, casting its shadow outside. My skin was graying, and the blue of my veins overshadowed the usual pink undertones. The house that was once an ally was turning its back on me. Lamps would fall and shatter, and the water was becoming less and less drinkable by the day, rapidly turning stagnant. My body felt weak and when I fell asleep, I was terrified I wouldn't wake up. I longed for the sun to at least come out and warm my cold skin. I bled easily, anemic and faint. I used almost every bandage in the house. I couldn't remember the last time I was so upset with Robert. I had stopped hoping for his return and caring about his presence a long time ago, but with the house in disarray and my body getting weaker by the day, the loneliness was too much to bear. I hated him for never being home. I hated him for wanting to have his cake and eat it too. I hated that he wasn't going to be there as I withered away with that godforsaken house. He would never see what his absence left me with. Black spots grew up and down the walls, and like a swarm they continued to infest.

William had checked on me a few times since the last time we had dinner together, but I brushed

him off every time. I was in no state to be seen, and I was afraid that my rage towards Robert would lead me to do something sinful with William, who was becoming more tantalizing by the day. But I couldn't push him away anymore, I was too starved of companionship and just wanted someone to share a meal with.

"Delicious as always, Elizabeth," William said as he took our empty plates to the sink to wash them.

"Thank you. A meal always tastes better when it's shared."

"I wish you didn't have to eat alone all the time, it's a shame you won't let me keep you company."

"Quit being sincere, it doesn't suit you," I said.

"Quit deflecting, it's getting tiring." I sat still for a moment, unsure of what to say next.

"Do you have any idea how much better of a lover I would be than him? Why do you even put up with him cheating and lying to you all the time? Seriously, we could get a house together. I'm already looking for a place of my own, so I'll just take you with me. No more living in this decrepit house."

I sighed, annoyed, half at him for his frivolous proposition and half at myself for considering it, "Listen, William. You're young, you have a whole life ahead of you... and quite frankly, that's not how things work. I made a vow to Robert, whether you like it or not. And I can't abandon this house, it's the only thing I have left."

He dried his hands, grabbed the chair closest to him, pulled it close to me, and sat down, "Look, I know I'm young and stupid—"

"You're not stupid."

"Let me finish," he said, "I'm not as experienced in life as you are, I know that. But I promise I can take care of you better than anyone else... shit. You don't even need to marry me or be with me, just leave this place... it's making you sick."

So he noticed. He noticed the house falling apart, and he noticed my subsequent rot. I guess I wasn't exactly hiding it, but I hadn't realized until

then just how obvious it was. I was on the edge of something I wasn't allowed to fear. I stood up, grabbed William by the collar, and kissed him hard. I couldn't hold myself back anymore; I could smell my decay through my clothes. The bricks of the house were crumbling apart. The wall shielding the kitchen from the garden was as thin as my skin had become. The flowers had died, and the vegetables rotted away even as their roots were planted firmly in the ground. The soil was inhospitable, hard, dry, and gray. Dead water flowed through the pipes; no matter how long the faucet ran, it was dull and poisonous.

"Just for tonight... only for now," I whispered.

I led him to my bedroom, and though the wallpaper was peeling and the window was chipped, William didn't seem to mind. As we made love, I felt like a person for the first time in a long time.

It was dark by the time all was said and done, and he lay in my arms while I stroked his hair.

"You look so pale, you should be getting more sun," William said as if the sun still shined.

"The sun hasn't been out for weeks, trust me, I would if I could."

William stared at me like I grew another head, "what are you on about? It rained maybe twice in the past few weeks. Are you feeling alright? I think it would do you some good to go somewhere else for a while and—"

"I don't understand, I feel like I'm dying... I haven't seen the sun in so long I just—"

"Elizabeth," the way he spoke grounded me, "calm down. There's something wrong with this house, it's poisoning you... I don't know what it is, but I know you know something's wrong too. There's mold all over the walls, this place is rotting."

"God, what's that smell? Am I going crazy? I clean every day, but something's off, William."

"You aren't crazy, Elizabeth... I really think getting out of here for a bit would do you some good."

He was right, but my mind kept going back

to Robert. He was gone all the time, but this trip was abnormally long even for him. The walls were crawling with black, and the smell of decay grew stronger by the day. Robert's study in the basement was never left alone for this long, and its emptiness irked me in a way I couldn't describe.

"His study..." I trailed off. My stomach dropped.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I need to go to Robert's study... in the basement."

"Okay?" He said as if it was a question.

I stepped out of bed and slipped on my bathrobe. William followed suit, he put his boxers and undershirt back on, following me out the door and downstairs. The smell got stronger as we descended to the basement, and I swallowed down the bile that rose into my throat. By the time my hand was on the doorknob to the study, William was covering his nose with his shirt and wincing from the stench. I pushed the door open and gagged.

"Holy shit. Oh my God..." William spoke the words I couldn't.

There he was, slumped over his desk. His head cracked and bloody, flies buzzed around his body, and the chandelier that once hung over his desk was in pieces on the floor, shards of glass from the crystals embedded in his head. The black spores had crawled up and contaminated the ceiling, eroding away the beams that had held the chandelier in place. That goddamned house killed Robert before it killed me.

I sank to my knees, too stunned to cry and too weak to stand. The smell was rancid, pungent, and horrible. I leaned forward and vomited, a sob wracking my body, and when I finished heaving, I felt William's arms picking me up.

"Elizabeth..." he started, "I'm so sorry."

I was surprised he even had words, that he hadn't just run away when he saw Robert's lifeless body split open and rotting. The only thing I could do now was run. William was right, this house was

going to kill me next... and soon.

“We have to go...” I started, but William was already ahead of me, leading me upstairs and outside.

“We’ll find somewhere to go, you and me. You won’t have to worry about this anymore,” he said.

With William holding me upright, I walked away from the house with nothing but the clothes on my back. Though the sky was bathed in the nighttime darkness, I could clearly see the stars, and I was hopeful that I would be able to see the sun again in the morning.