

Mortua Infantem

The rain fell heavily that day. Battering relentlessly on the windowsills, rattling the frames. Cold air slithered in through the cracks, drawn in by the scent of grief. Potent and alluring. It crept across the room, filling the sheets and settling into the bed. If it were not for the slow rise and fall of her chest, you would think that the woman it resided beside was dead. She lay like a corpse, pale and stiff, with a glassy-eyed gaze.

“Evie,” A soft voice called out. The door groaned as an amber light seeped out through the opening slit, allowing a petite figure to slip in. “Evelyn I-- You let the fire go out! Why didn’t you call for me?” Her sister hurried across the room and began to desperately poke at the dying embers in the blackened fireplace. “You’re going to get sick if you keep acting like this.” Evelyn said nothing. She remained unmoving as if she were asleep. After a few moments, the fire reluctantly sparked back to life. Her sister then approached the bed, pulling out a sheet from a chest that lay at the foot of it. She threw it on top of the blanket, still tinged with a red that wouldn’t quite wash out. She grimaced. Upon adjusting the covers, a ball of cloth fell to the floor. “Evie, don’t you think it’s time to get rid of these? I know you’re still- I understand that it hasn’t been that long but--” She felt the soft clothes between her fingers, her jaw tightened at the thought of the tiny figure that would have filled them. In a second, Evelyn shrieked. Scrambling across the bed and snatching it away with such volatility that her sister stumbled back. Evelyn clutched the small clothes tightly to her chest, whimpering as she shrunk back into the bed. “I’m sorry, Evie. I just don’t know how to help with this.” Her sister’s voice trailed off, and she hurried out of the room, leaving the quivering woman alone once again.

That rot-eaten door remained shut for quite some time, trapping the dark inside with it. The other residents of the house steered clear of it as if they were afraid that they could catch something just by looking at it. Still, there was no escape from her manic mutterings and melancholy wails. They echoed through the floorboards above, crawled under the door and poured out from the keyhole. Apart from her sister, no one dared to disturb her. So, it was quite unexpected when Agatha, the reclusive widow of the house, appeared at the door. She knocked only once and, when there was no reply, opened it slowly. Evelyn didn’t turn over at the sound of her entrance, didn’t even flinch when the tall figure sat down at the end of the bed.

“I know your loss,” The woman’s voice was flat and precise. Unbothered by the lack of a response, she continued. “It doesn’t seem fair, does it? The way our God, a creator of life, can snatch it away from us so easily.” She eyed the collection of infant items tucked in the covers. “But is it really God who gives them life? Is it God who builds another being from his own flesh and blood? No, my dear, it is us. So, what right does he have to destroy them?” She watched Evelyn’s reactions carefully as she began to whimper, her face covered by dark, matted hair. “But what if you had the chance to spit in his face as he has done in ours? Take back what was stolen. Regain what you have lost.” The whimpering stopped. “My dear, would you like your child back?” And then, for the first time since that day, Evelyn spoke. In a voice no louder than a strained whisper.

“How?”

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Number 9, Fendrich Street. That was the address scrawled on the scrap of paper clutched within Evelyn’s frail hands. Despite being given explicitly detailed directions, she had quite a lot of trouble finding it. Especially since it was not actually found between houses 8 and 10. It was tucked away as a basement room a few houses down. In fact, it had been quite the feat for Evelyn to reach the street at all. Her legs could barely hold her up. An onlooker would assume she was a victim of the plague, stumbling around like a wounded doe. The street itself was flooded; it was impossible to walk through without the murky sludge seeping in through the worn-out parts of her shoes. The stench seared at her nostrils and seemed to cling to the knotted wisps of hair poking out from her bonnet, a miserable attempt to hide the mess that would not brush out. The mud was slick on the cobbled steps to the house. It took a tremendous amount of effort not to slip. The door at the bottom wasn’t a door at all but a thick sheet soaking up the filth at the bottom. Evelyn checked the address once, then again and a third time. She questioned whether to simply enter or not, considering there was no way to knock.

“Hello?” She called out, hesitating before the entrance. “I was told that someone here could help me with my—” The words got caught in her throat. “My child.” A tut came from behind the sheet.

“Yes, I could smell it from the street.” The remark was followed by the appearance of a short, well-rounded woman. She was draped from head to toe in white fabrics. Well, Evelyn assumed that’s what they had once been. They were stained so heavily with filth that it was hard to tell.

“Smell it?”

“Your grief, my dear.”

“Agatha gave me the address; I was told to ask for...” She looked down at the note again, looking at the name scrawled down. It was strange, filled with letters that didn’t make sense together and characters she had never seen before. “I’m sorry, I’m not entirely sure how to pronounce your name.”

“Not to worry. It is not a name meant to be uttered out loud.” She didn’t explain further, and Evelyn knew better than to push it. The woman stepped aside, allowing her to enter the house. It was dark, incredibly dark. The few lit candles barely created enough light to illuminate the woman’s features. Despite her figure looking quite young, her face was carved deep with wrinkles. “You are here after the death of your son, are you not?”

“Y-Yes.” She bit hard on the inside of her cheek, trying to keep it together. “I was told there was a way to get him back. That you could do it.”

“Did you bring what is required?” Evelyn nodded and hesitantly pulled out a small paper package from her dress. The woman took it quickly and unwrapped it, revealing a pile of folded baby clothes. The woman muttered something quietly and placed the clothes on

a rot-eaten table. She then bent down at Evelyn's feet and scooped up a handful of mud from the floor. Between her fingers, she began to mould it. The dirt ran down her hands and into her sleeves as she worked. After a moment, she opened her hands to reveal the shape. It resembled a foetus. The woman carefully placed it onto the pile of clothes, wrapping it into a bundle. She turned to Evelyn. "Your hand, my dear." She obeyed. The woman flicked one of the many rings she wore, allowing a small, curved blade to spring out.

"What are you doing?" Evelyn recoiled, but the woman didn't seem at all startled.

"The child is a part of you, born of your blood. And so, it must be again." She reached out and gently gripped her wrist. Evelyn didn't fight it. She couldn't help but flinch as the woman made a small incision on her index finger, whispering several incomprehensible words. She then brought the cut to her lips and allowed the crimson to stain before bending over and placing a kiss on the fabric bundle. Evelyn watched in silence, her nails digging into her palms. The woman then took one of the few candles in the room and set the bundle alight. The flames consumed it in an instant, illuminating the room with a vivid orange for just a few seconds before disappearing into nothing. Evelyn peered over; the fabric was blackened but had held together. There was silence. Then, a small cry. Her eyes widened, the singed clothes began to fall apart, and a small hand pushed its way out. Evelyn cried out, scooping the bundle into her arms and unwrapping it to see her darling baby boy. He was beautiful. She bawled and bawled, cradling the child in her arms.

"Thank you." She sobbed. "Thank you. Thank you." It was impossible. But it was wonderful. He was wonderful.

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Despite her new-found happiness, the others did not take the strange existence of the child so joyfully. When Evelyn returned that night with a healthy baby boy, insisting that a miracle had occurred, the house was filled with whispers. Accusations. Who did this child belong to? For it could not be hers. Whilst her sister was also sceptical, she could not deny that it had brought a new sense of life to her dearest Evie. She was eating again, her skin glowing with warmth. The fireplace never went out. No longer would the walls echo with those melancholy wails. There was nothing but happy coos and high-pitched laughter. And then the noises stopped. It was subtle, but Evelyn could sense something was wrong. A mother's instinct, perhaps.

The woman did not seem surprised when Evelyn showed up at her door once again. She welcomed her in, offering her a warm broth and allowing her to describe what was wrong. The baby did not make a single noise. Not a cough or a cry. The woman remained nonchalant, merely waving a hand at the issue.

"Is the solution not simple, my dear? He has lost his voice, so you must give him some of yours." She brandished her hand, flicking the ring open once again. This time, she encouraged Evelyn to open her mouth and made a small cut on her tongue. When the

blood began to run, Evelyn kissed her son's forehead and watched as the deep red soaked into his skin. A few moments later, he began to coo and babble. Her face lit up in delight.

"Incredible." She gasped. There was a sudden noticeable rasp in her voice. Her throat felt raw. It was uncomfortable, but if that was the price to hear her baby laugh, then she could live with it. And so, she took him home. But that was not the last of her troubles. Again and again, the child would fall ill. And every time he did, Evelyn returned to number 9 to bleed for him. Over time, it began to take its toll on her. Every ail that she took from her child began to manifest within herself. The older he grew, the stronger his ailments became. Until the day came when Evelyn could not cope any longer. She barely even had the strength to hold her boy. And so, she returned to that filthy basement.

"I don't understand," She cried out to the woman. "Why can't he just be healthy? How much more of myself must I lose for him?" The woman did not even turn her head, staring into the candle beside her.

"We were not born with the power to create life, my dear. We give it. Babies are not born out of nothing." She blinked in confusion, and the woman continued. "Have you not been giving to him all this time? He was born from the blood you offered, healed from the blood you willingly sacrificed. Is it now too much of him to ask for the rest?"

"The rest?" She looked down at the arms cradling her child. Her limbs didn't even look as if they belonged to her anymore; frail bones covered by a thin veil of skin.

"We cannot live as half of ourselves; we must be whole. That is a law of life." The woman sounded so incredibly unbothered by the whole ordeal that Evelyn felt as if she had missed something. Like the horrific truth of the situation had been obvious. She stumbled back in terror.

"It's unnatural," She muttered in disgust. "What you're doing. These rituals. All of it has been in darkness." The sheer scale of what she had done seemed to flood in. The old widow's words echoed in the back of her mind. *But what if you had the chance to spit in his face as he has done in ours?* She looked down at the baby in her arms. Was this even her child? Was this a child at all? As the thoughts entered her mind, the baby's features began to melt and change. Distorting until she could not recognise him and then back again into his original face. "What is this?" Tears dripped from her chin, soaking into the stained white fabric that covered the child. "This ritual. How can it be undone?" The woman eyed her for a moment, pondering the question. Then, she smiled softly, flicking her tongue out between her lips.

"You must devour him," Evelyn stared at her in shock. "You must take back every single part of yourself that was given away. Consume the flesh, muscle and bone. Leave not a single drop of blood."

"That's demonic." She cried out.

"It is the only way." Evelyn turned on her heels, hobbling towards the exit only for her legs to buckle, sending her crashing to the floor. She lay sprawled in the mud, sobbing into the wailing bundle in her arms. The child gazed up at her with red-stained cheeks, coughing and crying.

"My boy," She whispered. He blinked with not a glimmer of recognition in his eyes and continued to bawl. Her stomach twisted, the pain in her chest felt unbearable. "I'm sorry."

A cold gust blew in from the sheet in the doorway, sending the candles dancing and flickering. Then, all at once, they went out.