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Till Only It Remains

I always used to wonder if I lacked something fundamental that makes you human. If something deep within me that was just off, or never really there in the first place. I searched for it, time and time again, yet it always seemed to elude me. I knew it was there, lurking beneath every fibre of who I was. I read my father's journals lying in the attic — they said it's a sickness of the blood. Not always apparent, yet akin to the mold in the walls of your childhood home, creeping just beneath the paint. It's passed down, father to son, generation to generation. He called it the *Hunger*.

When I met Alice, I suppose I told myself I could outrun it, pretending it wasn't curling around my spine, whispering things in the dead of the night. And I was afraid to tell her. What would she think? I wish I could have apologized; told her how sorry I am, as ridiculous as that would have sounded. But I know how that conversation would have gone.

"I'm not who you think I am," I would have said.

"What do you mean?" she would have replied.

"I'm going to hurt you," I would have said. "It's just a matter of time."

"Not if I hurt you first," she would have said, smiling as she lightly punched my arm. And I would have smiled back.

Alice loved me, truly. I never understood why. Maybe she saw something worth loving, as hard as that is to believe. She used to say I had kind eyes, that I listened better than anyone else. She didn't know that I listened so much because I was afraid to speak — afraid of what might come out.

How could I have had it in me to put what I had with her to an end? Call it fucking selfish if you will. Yes. It's selfish. *It* is a coward. How could I ever have told her what I truly meant? About what was inside me, slowly gnawing its way through my insides till I was just a memory of the person I am now. I suppose she wouldn't have believed me either, but I could feel it getting worse. I used to wake up in the middle of the night in a panic, smelling those wretched flames that marked my skin.

I remember her first night in my apartment, tracing the burns on my chest.

"That looks a lot worse than a chemical burn," she said, gently touching the marks on my chest.

"Battery acid," I said. A lie. She kissed each mark like it meant something.

"A pressure valve just burst, and I was right below it," I continued. I didn't even get the worst of it."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"There were some people I cared about," I said. "And they didn't make it."

She said she was sorry.

"It's okay, I think I'm over it now," I said. "Everything happens for a reason, right?"

"Even so, you didn't deserve that," she said.

Shadow watched us from the corner that night. His amber eyes reflected no light, only depth. He was old. Too old. More than a pet, less than a god. We never questioned it. We never dared. He had been there the night my grandfather burned down the house with half the family inside. He survived. So did my father. So did I. We were the only ones.

My grandfather went mad in the summer of '62. Or at least, that's what my father told me. One day, something just broke in him. My father told me that, too. He stopped speaking, started writing symbols on the walls in black chalk, started muttering things about a hunger that lived in his marrow. Then he lit the house on fire with all of us inside. Walked out covered in soot and didn't even try to run. Just stood there. Smiling. Like he'd finally fed something within him that had been starving for years. They found him in the woods two days later, naked and curled up in a fetal position. He was humming some old song no one could place.

I was a kid back then, and all of a sudden, my father was all I had left. I was never very close to Shadow. He always seemed more of grandpa's dog than ours. Although I don't remember that night, I remember asking my father a months later where everyone else went, and he said they went on a long trip. Somewhere with blossoming trees, where the air smelled a bit fresher and the sun shone a bit brighter — the starkest contrast from the winter we were suffering through. I wondered why they went without me, I remember throwing a fit, screaming and crying because I wanted to be there with them too. My father said they'd come back one day, and I believed him.

A few years later, there came a day when he stopped speaking as much. I was just ten, and wondered if there was something wrong with me. Why else would everyone have left without me all those years ago? Why else would be dad suddenly fall silent, suddenly stop looking at me? Was he mad at me? Ashamed of me? Was it my fault that all this had happened?

I woke up and shouted out “Dad” as loudly as I could. I searched the entire house, but to no avail, constantly calling out his name — louder and louder, and then softer and softer, as the truth dawned on me. He had left the front door wide open, no note in sight. I just saw a smear of something dark — akin to blood — on the floorboards and Shadow sitting there, barking at the door. Shadow rushed outside, but I didn’t follow him.

I just waited for my father on the porch the entire day, my naive heart holding some hope that he’d come back. As time passed, I could feel it more and more. I felt myself changing, all at once, the overwhelming discomfort of it all. It felt like parts of me twisted themselves, morphing into something else. I got up from the porch the next day, and the knife wounds were normalcy. I guess that’s what it means to grow up.

I used to have friends. The kind who texted even after I flaked, who invited me to things I never showed up to. They hung on for a while, longer than I deserved. But eventually, the messages stopped. People get tired of waiting for a ghost to return their calls. I suppose I don’t blame them.

There's a place I went to — an old cabin on the edge of a dead lake. In a strange way, it felt more like home than the house I grew up in. Maybe because it didn't pretend to be anything it wasn't. It was hollow, like me. Quiet, like the kind of silence you learn to live with. It wasn't the happiest of places — far from it — but it let me sit with my grief, and in that way, it was honest. There were no photos on the walls, no memories clinging to furniture. Just dust, rot, and the echo of my thoughts. When I was younger, I used to think the silence there listened better than anyone had ever had. It didn't ask questions. It didn't try to fix me. It just let me be me. Just like Alice did years down the line. It gave me time to think about everything that happened, especially with my father.

I started working nights at a repair shop on 3rd and Oxford — the kind of place full of things that people gave up on, be it old cassettes, busted toasters, space heaters with missing screws. I liked fixing them, I had a knack for that. There was something honest about broken things. You knew what was wrong, and sometimes, you could make them whole again. That's also where I met Alice. I remember she asked me to repair a broken watch her father had given her. It was beyond repair, but she made me realize that perhaps I wasn't. But for all her faith in me, she was wrong.

And for all his faults, my father was right. *They come back, the ones who burn.* My mother, grandma, grandpa — all of them came back. I started seeing them more often since last week. At first, it was just glimpses. The shape of someone sitting at the foot of the bed when I woke up from a nightmare. A burnt hand resting on the edge of the kitchen table. I thought Shadow saw them too. For once, he didn't bark. It was strange; he usually caused a ruckus at the slightest thing,

but this time, he was...calm. *Too* calm, almost. I saw my grandpa pet Shadow, and he just licked his hand.

They didn't say much. Just... watched, for the most part. The first time I realized that grandpa felt more than a mere hallucination — that he was actually there — I called out to him. Yet, all he did was stare at me in silence. Half flesh, half ash — skin charred and flaking, his eyes all wrong. Too bright. Too knowing. My mother sat in the corner of the room sometimes, lips split wide in that same gentle smile she used to wear when brushing my hair before bed. But her jaw was loose, barely hanging on. Her eyes didn't blink.

And then they spoke.

Every now and then, they would say one word, as if they were doomed to repeat it.

“Remember”

I never understood what they meant, but all of them said it. As different as they looked then, they spoke in the same voice, as if they hadn't aged a day.

I tried to hide it from Alice all that I could, for how could I alienate the one person who truly cared for me? But yesterday, I woke up screaming. I was clawing at the sheets, gasping, soaked through. I swore I could still feel my grandfather's fingers pressed around my throat. Burnt. Brittle. Cold. I sat up so fast I knocked the glass of water off the nightstand.

Alice woke up beside me. She was startled, but not afraid.

“Jesus, are you okay?” she whispered, her voice groggy.

“A bad dream,” I said.

“That was more than a bad dream.”

I couldn’t speak. My hands wouldn’t stop shaking. She leaned into me, gently touching my shoulder.

“Babe, are you okay?” she said.

I didn’t respond, for words were so elusive.

“Hey... hey, look at me,” she said.

I did. And I hated myself for it. Because I could already feel it rising again — that quiet pull in my chest. That little voice that said: *It would be so easy. Right now. Right here.*

But then I heard her voice again—calm, firm, unadulterated human—and for a second, it dulled. The Hunger stilled, like an animal confused by light. She had that effect. She could cut through it, even if she didn’t know what it was. I sometimes let myself believe that if anyone could keep me tethered, it was her. Maybe I would be okay.

“You’ve been having these dreams for weeks now,” she said softly. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

I looked away. Of course she knew. She always knew. But I couldn’t tell her the truth. Not fully. Instead, I stood and walked to the bathroom and locked the door. I turned on the light and stared

at myself, but I couldn't look. Even a glimpse was difficult. I switched off the lights so I wouldn't have to.

I splashed water on my face, hoping that would wash it away. Yet as I opened my eyes, I saw my mom behind me. Her jaw unhinged from its rightful place. She just stared into my eyes.

"Remember," she said.

And that's when I felt the ravening; an irresistible, all consuming itch. That word — *ravening* — felt foreign and familiar all at once. Like I was just remembering something, just like they had been urging me to. I understood my father in that moment. I understood his silence. His fear. His decision to leave and not come back. And I remembered what he told me the night before he left.

He had tucked me in and kissed my forehead like everything was normal.

"When you feel the ravening you run," he whispered. "Don't look back."

I had heard soft sobs. That was the first time I heard him cry. Even though I didn't understand back then, I felt it in that bathroom. Sometimes it had come in the form of a thought — small and quiet, like a whisper through a keyhole. *Hurt her. Just a little.* And I shook it off, every time. But it always came back. Louder. Bolder. It was in my blood. The essence of it in my bones. I couldn't get rid of it. It was my destiny — all of it was. When I caught my reflection too long in the mirror, something smiled back *wrong*.

"Babe?" she said, a little louder. "Are you okay?"

I wiped my face.

“Come on, open the door,” she said.

She knocked firmer now.

“You’re scaring me. Please just talk to me.”

I stood up, turned off the light.

“Please,” she begged.

I opened the window slowly, quietly, trying not to cry again. The cold air bit at my skin. I looked back at the door, at the shadow of her feet just beneath it.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, knowing she wouldn’t hear it.

I climbed through the window and ran as fast as I could.

I ran aimlessly, with just the primal need to get *away*. I couldn’t let her see me like this. My legs moved faster than they should’ve, like something was pushing me from inside — like something ancient and restless had risen in my chest and shoved its way into my bones. I didn’t just run, for I surged, my limbs a blur, each stride stronger than the last, carried not by fear but by a force that had been eagerly waiting to move freely. The forest whipped past, the cold cut through my skin, but I didn’t feel any of it. I tore through the trees, over gravel and wet leaves, heart pounding, lungs burning, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. Something was rising in me. A raw, seething power I didn’t understand. Like grief and rage and hunger had all fused into muscle and bone.

I went all the way to the old cabin I once called home, where even the birds don't sing. No one knew about it. I knew it would just be me and *it*.

The door creaked open, it was murky in there — and light was the last thing I wanted. I sat on the dusty floor, knees drawn to my chest. The silence didn't soothe me this time. It drew it in, like a breath, heavy and watchful. I could feel myself fraying at the edges — less like a person, more like a person's shadow. Every breath I took felt wrong, every thought turned sideways.

There was an anger inside me — not loud, not shouting. Just waiting. It twisted under my ribs, a low simmer that felt like hunger. Not the kind you feed. The kind that feeds on you. I scratched my arms till they bled, but it didn't go away. It never did. It wasn't like that day I sat on the porch waiting for my father to come back, it was worse this time.

All of a sudden, I hear the cabin door open.

"You left me" I heard Alice's voice behind me. "You swore you would never leave me."

I froze. How did she get there? No one knew about this place. Not even her.

"Alice, you shouldn't have followed me," I said.

"We're supposed to do everything together," she said. "If you have an issue, you come to me. If I have an issue, I come to you. That's how it works."

"Yes, but..." I said, trailing off. "How did you even find me?"

"Shadow knew where you were, he tracked your scent," she said. "I just followed him."

I looked past her, outside the cabin window. Shadow was sitting by the tree line, eyes locked on me. He wasn't panting, wasn't wagging his tail. Just staring. Still. *Too* still. I'd never noticed how unnatural his eyes looked in the dark — glassy, amber, almost knowing. He shouldn't have fucking led her there.

I couldn't look at her.

"I couldn't risk it," I said.

She came closer.

"Risk what?" she said.

I turned my back on her. I couldn't say it.

She didn't speak. Just placed a hand on my cheek. Warm. Gentle. Human. And for a moment, the thing inside me shrank. It recoiled, just a little.

"I still remember when we first met," she said, softly. "You were standing outside that coffee shop, in the rain, no umbrella, just... existing. You looked so lost. And I don't know why, but I sat down next to you. Why'd I do it? I still don't know. But it worked out. You offered me half your muffin and said nothing else."

I laughed, just a little.

"You didn't even like muffins," she smiled. "But you stayed there with me anyway. That's just who you are. You stay. Through my panic attacks, my dad's cancer, the time I couldn't get out of bed for a week. You never left."

She cupped my face gently, like she was trying to bring me back to the surface.

“So I’m staying,” she said. “Whatever this is, we’ll face it together.”

I wanted that to be enough. *She* was enough; so much more than enough. I didn’t deserve her.

God, I wanted to believe her. I really did.

But there was no fighting it. It was just too late. All the rage came back. All the unfairness. The loneliness. The silence of my father. The flames. The way *everyone and everything* left me. My mother, my grandfather, the classmates who stopped inviting me out, the neighbors who stopped looking me in the eye — all of them vanished into ash, into memory. And now she stood here, trying to save me like I was worth saving. That thing inside me laughed. Not loud — not out here. But I felt it. In the muscles of my arms. In the twitch of my jaw. In the smile I didn’t mean to make.

Then her eyes changed. She felt it, even before the pain.

I looked down and saw her hand pressed against her stomach, blood spilling between her fingers. A kitchen knife I plunged into her stomach. Her mouth trembled like she was trying to speak, but nothing came out.

Her knees buckled as she fell into me. She didn’t even cry out. Just pressed her face to my chest like she was tired, like she still wanted to be held. Her lips moved but didn’t shape any words. I leaned down, and clutched her tight.

“I’m so sorry, my love,” I said. “I didn’t mean to, I don’t know what happened.”

The silence was unbearable.

“Please,” I begged. “Please say something.”

But she wouldn’t.

Her mouth moved again but didn’t shape words. Just a gasp. And then nothing. She looked different, a sadness on her face that was more prominent than pain or shock. Disappointment, as if maybe she didn’t love me anymore.

“I love you,” I said, in desperation, yearning for a response, for forgiveness.

But she didn’t say anything. I clutched her tighter, begging her not to leave me. But I’d already crossed that threshold. There was no undoing this.

I felt her heartbeat slow, her breath becoming soft, shallow. And then nothing. I was alone. Mere silence, except for the soft creak of paws on the wooden floor behind me. I didn’t turn around, but I knew that Shadow had sat down a few feet away. Watching. Not panting. Not blinking. Just waiting. Like he had always been waiting. Like he knew this would happen. *He* had brought her here. *He* had wanted me to go after my father that day. It was *him*.

He was memory incarnate. He endured because he couldn’t let me forget — for the cursed has to remember. And the only way to truly remember...is to lose.

The stars above the lake began to flicker — not like they were blinking, but like they were watching. Like eyes. Thousands of them. Like they'd been waiting for this horrific moment across generations. My mother. My grandfather. My father. Me.

In that dark starry night, I swear I could hear Shadow humming. It was the same song my father told me about — the one my grandfather was humming in the woods all those years ago. Low. Wordless. Ancient. Like it had no beginning, no end. Like it had always existed, buried in the marrow. And as I listened, I felt my hands tremble. Then my chest. Then the ravening began again — deep beneath my skin, behind my eyes. Uninhibited.

I stood slowly. And I don't know why, but I started unbuttoning my shirt. The cold didn't bother me. Nothing did anymore. The slightest sense of guilt washed itself away. And it felt...good.

That's when I knew — perhaps it wasn't the thing in the blood. It was the pain. It was the part of me that said *yes*. The part that raged. The part that wanted. The part that opened the door and let all of it in. I was that darkness and that darkness was me.

I heard Shadow's hum grow louder. Before I knew it, I was humming too.

I remember.