

## The Woman in White

The darkened graveyard holds its breath when she takes her first steps.

Every night is the same: Beginning with a silence so thick one could walk across it, the dirt she lies in stirs from beneath. A pale hand, white as moonlight and cold as snow, grows like mold below her crumbling headstone. A thin arm follows, covered in the rags of a wedding dress. A second hand after that, then a head, a near-featureless face, smooth as the surface of a lake save for a slash of a mouth. Her torso comes next, soil and maggots cascading from her newly exposed chest cavity. The white of her ribs glint in the moonlight, her bones grinding together roughly as she moves. She pushes herself up out of her grave and begins to walk.

She doesn't remember her name. Maybe she never had one at all. She doesn't remember her family, any loved ones, or who she was. The only clarity in her degraded mind is her destination. Of that, she is certain. As she walks the empty paths, her feet silent on the gravel and cobblestones she treads upon, her lips move in an inaudible mantra. One phrase, repeated over and over again like a prayer.

*I love you*

Once, though, she was a beautiful young woman, betrothed to a handsome young man. As all stories of their nature go, the pair were madly in love. He was the most desired bachelor of their little village, whose name is lost to time. He had women and men clinging to his arm, begging for even the slightest bit of his attention, but he only had eyes for her. His woman in white. They had been childhood best friends; they were each others' first love. After fifteen years he proposed to her under the drooping branches of the willow tree where they first shared a kiss that spoke of forever. She said yes, promising to love him until she could love no more. And he swore to her he would love her even beyond that.

But alas, their ending is not a happy one.

Being engaged to her handsome young man, the woman became the enemy of nearly everyone in the village. Each wanted her happiness for their own. The hatred started small, with seemingly random inconveniences. As time passed though, things only grew worse. No one dared to do anything to her directly; that didn't stop the townspeople from committing their atrocities in the dead of night. She would wake to find her dresses slashed and dirtied, her shoes stuffed with mud, her animals set free to roam the streets. No matter how many times she told her beloved that they needed to leave, he insisted he would speak to the people on her behalf. Whether or not he did, she never knew. But even if he did, nothing helped.

When her beloved cat went missing for a week only to turn up at her doorstep with its eyes gouged out and patches of fur torn roughly from its body, the young woman decided enough was enough. She went to see the old woman who lived on the edge of town, hoping she could put a stop to the torture.

Whatever you may think you know about this tale, dear reader, I urge you to refrain from those assumptions. They will only lead you down roads too often traveled, and though roads often traveled are the preferred paths of the woman in white, the darkened, uneven paths are the ones we travel now. The old woman who lived on the edge of town wasn't a wicked witch, or an evil stepmother hellbent on ruining the young woman's life. She was her biological mother, and they loved each other very much.

The beautiful woman knocked on her mother's door, and once it was open, she threw herself into her mother's arms, recounting all of the abuse she had suffered at the hands of the villagers.

Leading her inside and shutting the door behind them, her mother asked, "What would you have me do?"

The young woman shrugged, brushing a tear from her pristine cheek. "I know not what you could do to help. Perhaps you cannot. But..." She sighed.

"What is it?" her mother prompted.

"If only I didn't care so much," the young woman said. She glanced out the window overlooking a flourishing garden. "If I didn't care what the villagers think of me, or my engagement, or how they treat me, life would be much easier."

The old woman took her daughter's soft, unlined hands into her own aged ones, looked her in the eye, and proposed a solution to the pain and suffering she felt. There would be no convincing the villagers to cease their wickedness with kind words and pleading expressions. If the pain they caused was the root of the problem, why not just remove the root?

"If you aren't able to feel the pain they cause you," the old woman said, "they can never bother you again."

"How can I stop feeling that pain?" the young woman asked. "They've all been so cruel, it seems like pain is all I can feel."

The woman's mother squeezed her hands briefly. "Look inside yourself, my child. Everything you need to move forward is within you."

Feeling inspired but still unsure of what exactly she had to do, the beautiful young woman left her mother's house and set off for her own.

Days passed. The wedding grew closer, the attacks growing more frequent. The woman hadn't heeded her mother's advice, instead letting the pain spiral out of control. It consumed her every waking thought and feeling until she woke up one day and realized that all she felt was fear and hurt. When her lover kissed her, she became so paranoid that they would be seen, even in the safety of their homes, that she began to distance herself from him.

Her handsome young man asked her what was wrong, but she didn't know how else to express it to him. One can only say something so many times before words become meaningless.

The villagers wouldn't go so far as to cause her physical harm, the woman knew. But one night, she woke long before the sun rose in a fright. Five people stood at the end of her bed in a semicircle, all wearing masks made of cut cloth, all holding various weapons. All staring straight at her. Not a one moved—not even the woman, who sat frozen in fear. They just watched her. She didn't know how long they were there, but after what felt like an eternity, she blinked and they were gone.

The next morning the young woman checked the lock on her door. It was still latched tight. No curtains were out of place, and all of her belongings remained where they had been the night before. There was no sign of entry other than her, but she knew she hadn't been alone last night. The young woman knew she had to take her mother's advice. She couldn't let it rule her life anymore. Whether those people were figments of her imagination or really there, she was

done being afraid of them. She was done being hurt by them. She still didn't know quite what to do, but whatever happened, she knew she could deal with it.

So on the day before she was to be married, she laid out her gown on top of her bed in preparation, double-checked the locks on the doors and windows, pulled the curtains shut, gathered candles and arranged them in a circle around her on the floor, and prayed.

She didn't pray to any god: Even if she knew of one, her mother's advice was clear. Everything she needed to do was inside of her already. She just had to figure it out. The lit candles flickered around her, throwing harsh shadows on her face and the walls. The young woman sat down, closed her eyes, and dove deep into herself. It took some searching, but she found the source of her pain, where it came from. At least, where she thought it came from. Deep within her, in the darkest recesses of her subconscious, there lay a box. It was not labeled, nor did it have markings of any kind, but it glowed a deep red. Radiating in waves from it was all of the hurt and fear she had felt over the years. Most of it was caused by the villagers' treatment of her. The rest of it she couldn't identify. But she deduced it had to be the same emotion because of how strong it was.

She stood there for a time, staring at that box, before kneeling in front of it and tearing it apart with her hands. It was made of no physical material, but destroying it took longer than she thought it would. And it hurt, too. Not the kind of pain she had been experiencing—this pain was physical. It felt like she tore a hole straight through her chest in destroying the box. But once it lay in small enough pieces before her, so small she knew there was no putting them back together, she felt she could finally breathe.

She opened her eyes to a dark room. The sun had set some time ago, and her candles had almost burnt out. The young woman rose slowly, moving to unlock her front door. A cool breeze blew around her as she stepped outside, rustling her skirts and lifting her sweaty hair. She tilted her face to the sky, inhaling as deeply as her lungs would allow.

The morning of the wedding was a peaceful one. The beautiful young woman had her mother come over to help her into her dress. Her mother took one look at her daughter's face and said, "You followed my advice?"

"I did," the young woman said. "I don't feel that pain anymore. I've almost forgotten what it felt like, actually."

She chewed on her bottom lip as her mother laced up the back of the dress. “Something doesn’t feel quite right though.”

Her mother pulled the laces tight, then smoothed her daughter’s hair. “My sweet thing, you’ve lived with that fear and pain for many years now. It may feel strange to not have those feelings present anymore, but it is a feeling you shall get used to.”

With a smile, she left to help prepare for the day. The young woman continued to get ready by herself. Some time later, a knock came at her door, and her fiance’s voice floated through the wood.

“I’ve been sent to get you. It’s almost time for the ceremony. Are you ready?”

She opened the door, one hand holding her skirts up, and was met with her husband-to-be staring at her awe-struck.

“Wow,” he whispered. His gaze dragged up and down her body, lingering on her eyes, her breasts, her hips. He licked his lips. “You look gorgeous.”

Something wasn’t right. She didn’t know what to say. Obviously she should compliment him too, or answer his earlier question. Smile, take his arm, walk out of the house and down the path to their willow tree where their families would be waiting. But she didn’t have any inclination to do any of those things.

She must have been staring at him, as he lowered an eyebrow in confusion. “Darling, are you all right?”

“Quite.” She met his eyes, feeling a little lost and nothing more. “Come along, we will be late if we dawdle any longer.”

The ceremony came and went without a hitch. The lovely couple were married, and no one from the village came to object. They kept the event as small as possible, away from jealous eyes, and it worked in their favor. They returned to the young man’s house, which would soon become hers too. But throughout the ceremony, the young woman realized that something was very wrong. She didn’t feel anything. No excitement, no worry, no stress or joy or even love.

By the time night fell and the pair climbed into bed to consummate their marriage, the young woman realized just what had happened. In getting rid of the pain and fear the villagers caused her, somehow she removed all of her emotions entirely. The negatives were so intertwined with the positives that removing the root tore out the whole plant. As her husband

entered her, pushing between her legs and kissing her neck, she knew something had to be done. She had to reach her feelings somehow.

He finished soon enough, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear and kissing her lips one last time before falling into the release of sleep beside her. When she was certain he slept deeply, she rose, still naked and tingling with the aftershocks of sex, and fetched one of his hunting knives from the wall by the door.

The pain was unlike anything she had experienced before. The young woman carved into her chest, desperate to reach any feeling that had left her, digging around in the cavity with her other hand. She did not cry out, but from her lips poured that same mantra she still whispers today, spoken to remind or convince herself, she didn't know.

*I love you*

That was how he found her the next morning, lying in wait for the love to come back. She was buried in her wedding dress, for she never saw the morning sun as a new bride.

Every night, when the moon is full, the woman in white can be seen walking the path from the old graveyard to the house of her lover, the house where she died, in the hope of finding the love that she lost on the eve of her wedding. Her face, empty as she was when she died save for the one thing she held onto in her final moments. Her mantra, her lifeline in death.

True to his word, her lover never loved another after her. His heart belonged to her only.