

*Nocte Vigilare*

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I have grown tired of seeing your guilt-bludgeoned face among the graves. Tired of seeing your skeleton trying to escape, and the skin under your eyes dragging. Somehow, you are still alive.

I must admit, I am intrigued by your commitment. Every Sunday, of every week, for three years, you stand trembling above a single gravestone. It was quite the spectacle among the residents for the first six months, but no one seems too interested anymore. The grave must hold a lover, a brother, a friend: someone you thought you couldn't live without. Tradition says those with mourners among the living should remain constrained to their grave. That is me, for the moment. So, it is peculiar that none of the spirits here had ever laid eyes on this soul that you mourned. It was as though the body had never been buried in the first place, that perhaps this person had not even lost their life. Or perhaps they chose to haunt their place of death, or the monster that caused it. Three-hundred and twelve visits to my cemetery and not a single sound had left your mouth, but it seems today marks the end of your civil silence.

A bottle falls from your fingers to rest in the grass. Your words are slurred, as if written by a small child. 'Show me my brother.' You point a shaking finger at me. Good God, there is no way you can possibly know I am here.

I stare.

Ah wait.

I am mistaken.

It seems you are pointing through me. To the notorious gravestone gnome. Far too much attitude and far too little clothing for my taste, yet still a rather comical edition to our drab quarters. He has locked eyes with you, in a staring competition of sorts. Neither of you blink. You stumble toward him. A strange tension has risen in the competitive silence, but it is lost soon enough. The contents of your stomach are emptied onto the soil before you.

Charming really.

'I said show me, you stupid little man!' You wipe your dripping chin. 'Show me that he's dead!' You stumble forward. 'I have to see him.' I want to catch you and tell you that the pathetic garden ornament will not show you your brother. I want to hold you and

apologise for your loss, but I am the deceased and you are the living. I will only be cold air on your skin.

‘You and your stupid little shorts and your stupid hat and stupid beard and stupid, stupid, stupid face! Don’t lie to me.’ You slip in bile as you lurch forward at the taunting gnome. You grip it, smearing vomit across its horridly blushed cheeks.

‘Don’t fucking lie to me!’ You fling the small ceramic man clumsily at my gravestone, leaving it in pieces below me. Succumbing to the haze of alcohol stalking you like a predator, you slump to the ground. Good riddance. You sure are a mess tonight.

I watch you in your torpor, curled up tight like a baby. Your breathing is slow, and I can see your back rise and fall. An occasional hiccup interrupts the motion of your body, jolting your stomach. Mumbled syllables spill from your mouth and your eyebrows furrow as though you’re dreaming of an argument.

You remind me of my brother. Younger than I was by thirteen years, he was only seven when I died. Far too young to comprehend such a complex idea as death. When my mother use to visit me, she would always cry about her little Eddie and my father. She told me how she had refused to let Eddie see my body. Thought it would be much too horrid for him to witness. Father had called her foolish. Told her that it was the only way a child would understand. She had spat on his shoes and screamed at him until she had won. And just like that, Mother’s sweet little Eddie could no longer go to church on Sundays. Too many people. Too many pitiful stares. Too many times did, ‘We’re so sorry for your loss,’ echo through the room. Too often did a stranger’s awkward hand rest on Eddie’s little shoulder. He would scream at home and throw himself at walls whenever they would talk about me.

When Eddie died, he was still convinced that I was alive. Mother had become sick in the months before his death. Something had begun to eat at her brain. She forgot her own name and Eddie was no longer someone that she cared for. Undone by her neglect and the barrage of screams, he killed himself in a fit of rage. Left his own bloodied corpse on the bathroom tiles, forced Mother to face what she had caused.

I do not know what became of Father and Mother stopped visiting when dementia stole me from her memory too. I do not blame my mother at all, but I know my father was right. Eddie needed proof and it didn’t matter how young he was. My family should not have lived like that. So, I do not want to see you buried in this cemetery alongside your brother if it is the result of your guilt.

I refuse.

‘Why do you desire to help this stranger so desperately?’

The gnome is staring.

Unbelievable. The gnome speaks. How awful. What in the world am I supposed to say?

‘Ah, do not search long for your answer. I already know. I promise you, he will not face the same fate as your own brother. But what I cannot promise you is the ease of granting such a request. You must enter the deceased body and lay still for this stranger to grieve. However, you must know what it was to die in his body. It is not pleasant.’

A hand-painted eye waits for my answer. I must do what is right.

‘I do not care for pleasantries and ease. I must help this man. I cannot let him die by his own hands. I will do whatever he needs to believe the truth.’

The gnome is no longer. Instead, there is an empty darkness.

A guttural scream pours from my mouth. My left arm snaps at a violent angle. And something sharp pierces my right cheek. Excruciating. But this is not my body. There is shouting and laughter surrounding me. I am hit in the ribs by what feels like a boot. They kick again. Again. Again. Something cuts bluntly into my chest. A rock. It drags down, scraping my bone and tearing my skin. My screams are no longer audible. My mouth is agape and my head is pounding. This feels familiar. That light feeling in your head, but the weight in your toes. They kick again. Again.

Again.

Again.

And the pain is finally over.

The darkness seeps away and I am lain on the grass.

You rise. You scream. You crawl toward me like a madman. Mucus and saliva cling to your skin before dripping down onto my corpse. His corpse. Maybe this was not the answer. This is too much. You stare into our sunken eyes – blackened by time and chewed by life. Why won’t you let go, even now that your fingers are beginning to sink into our flesh? You’ll have to spend days trying to remove the smell of decaying human from underneath your fingernails.

Just let go.

I should not have done this.

I am sorry. I’m so sorry. Please stop crying.

Please just put this rotten corpse down and close your eyes.

This will be rooted in your memory for an eternity; don’t do this to yourself.

I want to scream at you and tell you to run. That this isn't really your brother, and it is just a sinister nightmare. But I cannot. Your brother's body is mine for the time being and the deceased has nothing to say to those with pulse. Perhaps my mother had been right. Maybe nothing could have saved Eddie, not even the truth.

I am so utterly desperate to escape this body; to be back above my grave, alone and unimportant. I cannot stand to be the body that you mourn any longer.

You look up into the night sky as if addressing the planets. 'Thank you,' The words are clumsy as they slip onto the grass like slugs.

No longer am I trapped inside your brother's body. I am myself again. You kneel on the ground before falling in a heap. Pulling your knees to your chest, as hot tears dampen the soil, you lay.

I will watch you until the sun has risen.

I will make sure you are safe.