

His Son

On June first 1824, I gave birth to what seemed to be a normal male infant. Nothing that I could recollect during my eight and quarter month pregnancy gave me the forewarning of what I would soon bring into this unsuspecting world. I ate what my doctor prescribed to the letter, keeping both the child and myself well nourished. I stuffed down whatever protests I could conjure when my world was forced into the confinement of our parlor's largest blue velvet chair. The doctor's instructions were dealt with efficiently to avoid turbulence, and when my infant's introduction to the world finally occurred, I could no longer find disappointment in my prior situation.

The child itself bore skin as white as a pan of boiling cream. Its eyes captured a gentle delicacy from the exact hue of a winter sunset. He smelled of linen and copper, but that was to be expected straight from birth. Everything about his presence was expressed as a feeble newborn.

When my husband, Philip, first held the babe in his oversized arms, all was as it should between an infant son and his doting father. Philip circled his giant's fingers around his son's blonde locks and exclaimed that, oh! It's just like his. The babe pinched its soft mouth until the sweet line of his lips turned into an "s" from his bubbling giggles. I smiled politely at the babe's prattle for I, too, saw some of my composition molded into the child. My sharp, angular jawbone. The delicate and yet strong curve of his neck to the spine. And those eyes were mine. Let Philip claim the hair all he desired.

"Philip, you've had your time. Now return him to me so that I might feed him and put him to bed." My husband obliged my simple wishes, placing his son into my preferred arms. The child blinked as he held onto my bosom, as beautiful as any babe with irises reflecting the weakness of us all. I cooed loving words to his intelligent ears, and the boy brightened a considerable amount, more than when he was in his father's embrace, I noted.

Behind the curtain of this new life, both for the infant and myself (no longer the me I had been but now the new me stepping into the role as caring mother) something was disturbingly amiss. The perfect familial scene blurred first around my husband leading back to the babe resting in my arms. I could not dismiss the odd shimmer, for I could feel a great barrage against the inside of my chest as if tiny fists were pounding with a great furiosity at a crevasse so deep within my own being that even my thoughts could not begin to peel away those cankerous layers. Then, there was a pressure so knowing, so insistent that I believed a thatch of prying fingers were conducting a constrictive grip to my soul. The whole event was horribly invasive, as if whatever was attacking my being wanted to know who I was before I could ever figure the solution to the puzzle myself.

Startled, I stood up rapidly from the despised blue chair, holding the babe out. His baby's feet dangled precariously in midair, and I stared at his miniscule hands as if *they* were the intruders that dug their way past my defenses and into the tender idea where the old me reluctantly resided. Still the person I had been until this very moment.

"Oy! Darling, what is the matter?" Philip's long strong body was already at my side, his glass green irises flashing. He reflexively put himself protectively under his son's outstretched body in case I might drop the child. Partially stunned and a bit hurt at Philip's lack of confidence in my mothering ability, I dragged the babe back to my abdomen as if to reconnect our bond. To go back to when I could feel every heartbeat, every muscle that twitched, every thought that could have been made. I cradled the child as if Philip were the unconscious threat, not me.

"I am quite alright, dear. I only had a small start. Lower your hackles before you make the babe cower." At this I glanced down at Philip's son. What face was he bearing? What mask did the infant procure upon my unexplained actions? I needn't have worried. The child was in fair

condition, smiling as if the whole world were upon his shoulders and he loved the weight of each mountain and skyline. I sighed in relief, catching the child's scent of milky exhaustion.

"You had frightened me, love. If something like that were to happen again, I am not sure what path I would have taken. Are you still sure you would be alright when I depart?"

"Of course I shall." I forced my face to tighten into a stiff grin. "You employed Bertha for just this reason. She is a pleasant enough girl."

I reflected on my words. Bertha was to be the child's Governess when he grew into the age to need one. For now, she was to aid me when Philip left to attend his lands and therefore his tenants. This endeavor would take a far longer time than what we desired, but it needed to be done to keep order and peace (and what words could I use to keep him from his duties?) Bertha, combined with the newborn child, would keep me company, but even with the light of human presence a darkness consumed the back of my senses.

"Do not fear, my darling, we will both be in one piece when you will return."

Fear he did not, for before Philip left he named his son a title meaning 'with courage.' Then my darling took a small company from the neighboring valley of residents three or so miles away, a few horses, and my heart with him to his many estates. I could still smell the roasted chestnuts and burnt sugar aroma that clung to him, even with a good lavender soap scrubbing. No dead woman ever felt as lifeless as I the moment Philip's cart passed over the last hill of our land. I watched and watched the black dot representing my husband fall behind a cluster of trees. Massive oaks that grew alongside the deadly ravine. I wished for Philip's safety, hoping the rushing waters did not swallow him whole as I saw it do that day.

A week melted away, but it might as well have been thirteen lifetimes. Nothing went as it should. I recall those first strange moments of uncertainty began with the Governess. Bertha would bring a trolley of rich blueberry scones absconded with sweet cream. Her attitude was demure, and yet endearing. So when she paused over the herb filled teacups, I believed that she was only being shy. The pause would stretch, a sugar spoon hovered above the steaming liquid, held by the girl's rapidly paling fingertips. My babe would be huddled in my berobed arms, but Bertha's undivided attention would be set solely upon my own person, her gaze unfocused. I could make out her golden irises, deep and endless in their sparkling, unabashed terror. Trickle of sweat glittered upon her brow, and the once faded creases between her eyes deepened. I became truly distressed.

"My heavens, whatever is the matter, Bertha?" I snapped, despite my intentions of questioning her kindly. At my brashness, and therefore breaking whatever spell was dastardly cast into the Governess's bones, the brunette would hurriedly dash the sugar cubes into my proffered blue teacup, spill a few drops of milk into my tea, and give an embarrassed, lopsided grin. Her right eye squinted as it always did when she smiled.

"Please forgive me, Mistress. I only remembered something frightening, something terribly malicious, but for the life of me, I can only recollect the feeling."

I could feel the line of my soft lips pull down in puzzlement, trying to decode the girl's complicated response. She would slightly shake her head and take my child to his crib, leaving my being in a horrid state of befuddled confusion.

Night upon night, the Governess repeated these exact bizarre actions with slight variations. Sometimes, she would accidentally dash the breakfast tea upon its silver tray, needing to mop up the spilt amber liquid with her woven handkerchief. The water for my bathing tub would mysteriously be as frigid as a January day when moments prior, Bertha had discussed with me that the water was sufficiently heated. Other times led to severely burnt bunt cakes and meat pastries, mistakes that were far below her proper cooking skill. All odd, and annoying inconveniences, yet what scared me more was when I once caught her muttering indistinct verses with a feverish hiss.

All the while, the child would cling tighter and tighter to the folds of my starched gray dress in-between my bosom, refusing to allow Bertha to touch him.

“I apologize, Missus, but I have been feeling awfully exhausted as of late. Perhaps I am afflicted with an illness?” Bertha offered as she sat upon a chair dressed with our finest silk laces.

“Oh, my dear, please take the rest of the night to heal. Do not argue with me. I see how your jaw is tightening. I need you, my girl, and you must be healthy to attend this child, no matter the cost.”

After a pregnant pause Bertha agreed, leaving the night’s tidings to me, and retired to her modest chambers. Once I attended to the last of the evening’s chores, I tucked the babe into his red velvet dressings, cupping his chubby left cheek in my left hand. The wedding ring Philip adorned my finger with nearly five years prior glimmered enchantingly against the child’s porcelain skin. But something was inherently wrong. The babe was holding utterly still and staring at me so intensely, almost as if he was blaming a massive grievance upon my very soul. His light brown eyes flashed and there, goodness, their color briefly flickered red.

I pulled my hand away with haste, clasp the appendage to my chest. My knuckles burned as if wasps had plunged their tiny stingers betwix the joints. The infant grinned gayly, showing the raw pink gums of his black mouth. It was then that I felt an immense severing of...truly, I am still unsure. All I can akin the feeling to was that a molten hot knife slid through my breastbone, and yet I was physically untouched. This is the only method of explanation. Shaking my head, I cured myself of the unwarranted stupor, and faced the babe.

“Pleasant dreams, child.” I blew out the flickering flames of the white wax candle stick next to the babe’s cradle, and closed the door upon his angelic face framed by moonlight from the open bay window.

The following morning, Bertha died.

I located her on the floor next to where the babe soundly slumbered. The woman lay twisted like a crumpled, dried out spider. Her legs were unnaturally bent to her belly, and arms folded to her chest like twisted twigs. The plain clothing she wore was sodden, and almost seemed to have grown dark brown mold. I shouted at the girl, pleading for her to awaken, and knowing that the time to aide the poor thing had long past.

Bertha had clawed out her own throat. Her broken nails were stuffed with the tender flesh from her supple neck, congealing into a knot of scabbed ooze. Tracks from her fingers left from the tip of her pointed chin to her overly protruding collar bone. Strips of skin and muscle piled next to her like peelings from a russet potato. I am sure I saw the girl’s spine peeking from the mess of rotting carnage.

“Oh Bertha. Bertha,” I moaned, unsure at what action to take next. Besides the babe, I was completely alone in this mansion in the middle of my husband’s unpopulated estate. The closet cluster of population was too far away to take by foot all whilst with the child. I desired for Philip’s strong arms to comfort the uncontrolled sobs breaking my body to pieces. Even more, I yearned for the self control and confidence I used to possess before I was married. Free and bold. Not this whimpering mess of a woman and mother.

A childish giggle bled through the stagnant room. It bounced from wall to wall until the sound found the one who produced it. My mouth fell open. The child. He giggled and giggled, shining brighter than a sunny day without clouds, focused on Bertha.

Cautiously, I followed the direction of Bertha’s dead stare, the final sight she witnessed before bleeding life onto our best woven rug, staining the white unicorn within the threads ebony.

The boy.

Exactly one day passed. During that horrid day, I uncovered the earth in our humble garden of vegetables and vibrant flowers to plant Bertha's corpse. The woman's head almost snapped from her shoulders, so ruined was her body. All the while, I recounted the babe's enchanting laughter and how joyous he was for the death of his Governess. What would I tell her older brother, the only family of whom she spoke of? They did not seem close, but it was prudent to tell *someone*. Still, I did nothing, as of then. I decided the best course of action was to attend the child until Philip returned. Then, I would relay all, and my husband would take care of the final details concerning the Governess's death.

And so the months passed. With each ticking of the forlorn clock, I grew more fearful of the creature I birthed. The encompassing darkness of the night always carried the thunder of the disembodied child's footsteps through the parlor room, down the halls, and at last settling in the boy's chambers only to begin anew. My decorative china hanging from hooks on the wall, painted with the likeness of Philip and myself, would crash to the floor in result of these tantrums. In most cases, they would shatter to the point that repairing them would be futile. Display cases of Philip's rifles clattered and collapsed upon themselves. Thank heavens none of the weapons were loaded.

Joining the cacophony would be screeches of terrible, terrible cackling so close to that of a haunting banshee. Peel after peel tore through my poor ears as dishes fell, weapons tumbled, windows opened and slammed closed, and the marching hammered at the ceiling. I hid under the soft cover of my marital bed, shoving my shaking hands over my ears and hugging my knees tightly to my chest. I rocked back and forth, back and forth until the crest of dawn rescued me from purgatory.

Blessed mornings consisted of cleaning away the night's madness, chucking broken blades of glass and wood, and righting what was wrong. I was fearful to feed the babe lest he drive me into Bertha's particular state of madness, but I would then imagine Philip and his expression when he half believed I was an unfit mother the day the babe was born. A war raged in my gut until one side ultimately won. The child was fed, and when he finished with his selfish drinking, I thrust the creature away to his damnable crib. I spent less and less time with him to rid myself of his influence, but his contact with me through whatever spirits he associated with only grew.

The terrors eventually seeped into the safety of the day. Whispers and doubts rained from the ceiling, slapping me repeatedly. Over and over and over. I began to day dream of death, never truly believing in the teaching of the Bible I read three times a day with small, laughable Sunday services I held for myself. I hoped that death would be an oblivion. That my mind would be torn from my continuously beaten body and cleansed with a cool blanket of being unborn. I desired the chill of expiration like I needed my lover's hands. The babe, his relentless and harsh administrations to my mental capabilities when the sun was high, drove me closer to the polished silver knives I kept in the kitchen's right cabinet day by day.

All the while, the creature would lay unmoving in his bed of comfort. Grasping his pudgy toes with infant hands. But I could see through him. The absence of the usual sight of a rug before the cradle would always remind me, no, confirm that this child was certainly not of my own blood. That he wanted me as dead as Bertha. This alone lent me enough conviction to live. To beat the beast at his own defiled game. He would hold no control.

Three months slithered away since Bertha was murdered. Yes, I wholly believe the Governess's life was forcibly stripped from her. Those months of hideous torture peeled the slivers of doubt from my mind.

I was strong. I could handle this creature's hellish tricks and deviations. Philip could not. One glance at the infant, and my husband would protect the child until his very demise. I ascertained that despite the pain that of losing the infant would entail for Philip, I would rather the

pain take him than the creature in the cradle. A daring plan formed, taking root into the strings of my body.

On an afternoon full of fingers of the sun striking against light blues and whites of the open sky, I gathered the bundle containing the evil creature to my strained chest. It pawed at me, its face buckled and red as if he were holding his breathe. I did not fuss and coo at the child as I once would have done before the death of Bertha. Ending the child's life did not require what was left of my love and adoration.

Reasoning with myself over and over once more that slicing the child's mortal thread would save the lives of Philip and myself, I strode forward. I could not bare the thought of my husband submitting to the babe's thrall and becoming another corpse akin to poor Bertha's. Hearing muffled infant screams, I noticed that I had been pressing the child so tightly to my chest, that I had almost suffocated the thing. Though the end result would have been the same, my method in mind was the higher of two roads. I intended to cleanse the beast.

I planned to throw the evil creature into the ravine beyond the mansion. To purge the maliciousness burning in the thing's terrible veins.

When I reached the crashing turquoise waters cutting through rock as yellow as eggnog, I almost became dizzy with how far the drop truly was, guessing the distance around seven yards or so down. My mouth drained of saliva and my tongue stuck uncomfortably to the roof of my mouth. It must be done.

"Farewell, you damned beast."

I held the babe arm's length in front of my being and expected the creature to perform his role of a heavenly angel to protect himself from such a vicious and sure death. I was wrong. This was no child. I carried an infant shaped like a dripping slug. Rolls of rotting gray skin slopped off of him in curtains from his wriggling, writhing body. His teeth were crumbling black nubs, drooling from bulbous cheeks. There were no eyes to speak of, only carved out sockets to cancerous gangrene infection. The pure odor of all the carnage radiating off of him in waves was enough to cease my heart of I let it. Disgusting. Wretched. A chill wrapped my bones like a jacket.

"I hate you," I told my son as I flung him down to the ravine.

"No!"

That was Philip. I looked up to find my husband, fully expecting him to bare witness to the child's demise at my side. To my terror, I was completely incorrect. Events had not played out as I had lived them!

I was hanging by my fingertips off of the ravine's ledge! My heart leapt, my teeth chattered, and I was left nonplused. The gravel under my nails slipped, yet I stayed put with feet kicking at the rock's wall. Philip was peering over, holding the hellish child oh so close.

"Sweetheart, my love, grab my hand!" Philip extended his giant's hand gnarled with labor. The same hand of which took mine when we wed only five years prior. I loved and hated that hand. I struggled to take it once more.

However, I caught the cunning eye of the babe, his child. It smiled a grin of pure innocence. The grin of a murderer who got away with his crime. It clutched at Philip's shirt as if in utter victory.

And so, I let go of the edge.