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Category: Short Story

Eyes of Indifference

I trace my fingers over the transparent window panes of glass, my nails clanging against its balmy surface as I brush my hand over my reflection. Flushed cheeks. Unkempt hair. Watery blue eyes. Pressing my sweaty palms against the glass, I push, nudging the window open. But, the window fails to even budge, its stubborn panes glaring at me from between the curtains, motionless. I groan, shoving my arm up against its surface, my bare feet squeaking along the dusty floor as I throw my thin figure against the glass.

The shutters swing open, crashing into the outside wall. Light bursts into the room, cascading down over the empty shelves as the fragrant scent of flowers overwhelm the musty reek of the confining walls. I smile, swaying my legs over the ledge, resting my dangling feet on top of the budding branches brimming with cherry blossoms.

The sun flares just above the horizon; the streaks of sunrise still etched beyond the clouds, illuminating a faint but familiar silhouette in the distance. The cottage! Crooked, but simplistic; decrepit, but fascinating, decrepit; awkward, but pretty, awkward; old but wise. It stands towards the edge of the village, its misshapen windows embedded with dewy spiderwebs peering over the surrounding foliage. A crown of vines rests below its tottering overhang. Its shingles splinter off; its once-sturdy pillars quivering as flakes and chips trickle toward its ragged doormat. Dust glazes the furniture like a thin sheet of frost.

I always walk there every day at dawn before the village arises. My stumbling footsteps always clatter against the pavement, quickening near the cottage, and my eyes widen until my face brightens into a wrinkling, glistening smile. I finger the cottage's hidden jewels, squeezing into its hidden nooks, scampering around and searching under rotting chairs, behind cloaked vines, beneath fading couches.

Rabbit holes.
Shards of broken mirrors.
Crow feathers.
Delicate spider webs sprouting behind closed doors.

Yet, the villagers would whisper. "It's such an eyesore, tear it down. It's useless," they would mumble as they stole wood from the doors to build and feed their fires in the winter. They would tear the petals of star jasmine that cloth the cottage chimney after they spit at its gate. They would scratch its wooden walls, slicing and cutting holes until all the cottage had left were scars. Gashes.

Sometimes when darkness drapes across the sky, when only a thin sliver of light nestles itself along the crude folds, the loud guffaws of men trampling over the cottage's delicate balcony echo like ripples throughout the village. Sometimes, under the moonlight, I notice the cottage's windows gaze towards me, water drizzling along the crevices from its ledge. In those moments, I clench my fingers, jabbing my jagged nails into my sweaty palms, watching as the villagers pick up pebbles. I watch as they chuck sticks and stones towards the delicate windows. One bounces off. Another flies toward the glass. And another and another and—
"Please stop," I murmur, my open mouth frozen as the men's jeers drown out my thrumming heart. Exhilarated shrieks melt together and smother the crashing of stones breaking through the glass, the snapping of broken furniture, my pleas, ignored.

Another one. Two. Three, four five. The stones puncture the window into web-like cracks of shattered glass.

Moonlight surges through the fractures, exposing the cottage's decaying wounds and shredded furniture. Dust wafts up like smoke.

Exhaling in short bursts, my vision blurs as tears and sweat pool over my lashes, fusing the moonlight with ominous flickers. I shudder, spider-like shivers creep up my spine up into my head where they scurry around trapped, as if in a cage. Their abdomens spit their threads onto my wispy lashes, weaving their black, hypnotizing strings that lace across my vision until I blink. They fade. My head throbs. Dazed.

I sigh, hurling myself into the corner of my bedroom, wrapping my slender arms around my legs, squeezing them against my chest until red streaks crease along my calves. I rest my cheek against my knees. My eyelids tug closer and closer together, but all I can see are red flashes of a furnace, a fire sprinting up the tattered pillars of the cottage as its flames roar over its windows until smoke swallows it all. "I'll do something next time," I promise the cottage. And then it all disappears as I fall asleep.

My eyes shut.

From that day on, I drape my window in ghastly dark curtains that ooze over the open frame, shielding even the summer sun. I enshroud myself in darkness, leaving only the remnants of a glow through the light of a burning candle. I stack books upon books, cluttering the empty shelves. I pour myself over their words, their yellow, cracked pages that drift up in flames when held too close to the kindling fire. I play with dolls and trivial toys; their colorful mechanisms dull me to sleep.

I still faintly remember the cottage, but it appears more of a child's imaginary place, like an immature fantasy. I did not care for it. I could not care for it. But I still want to see it.

I hesitate to swing aside the sinister black curtains. In the past, when I saw the crinkles of the curtain, the only things I heard were quiet pleas and my empty promises. I never answered. The voices faded over time, but my hands still feel clammy as I rub the dark fabric in between my fingers.

I lift the corner of one of its thick folds and scream when I notice a repulsive little creature stretching its eight, flimsy legs on the dusty, soiled ledge. I close my eyes, trembling, as I slam my finger onto its feeble body. It flinches, its crooked legs still twitching in distorted movements. I squash its body again but this time with my open palm. Crushing it. As if it was nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

It stops stirring. I smile, blazing relief travels up from my chest, drying the clear drops of sweat seeping from my forehead and warming my shivering hands. I flick the mangled black mess into a corner of the ledge, but it remains still stain the white paint, leaving a puddle of black and red. I rip away at the remnants of its meager home from the window sill, but it refuses, its threads still clinging to my fingers and the glass. Dust engulfs the surface. I could no longer view a clear reflection of myself. As I raise my eyes towards the dimming sunset, I gasp.

The once-familiar shadow no longer teetered on the outskirts of the village. Instead, there stands a smoking pile of ashes and a stack of fresh, chopped wood: the skeleton structure for a new house.

They had burned it.

We had burned it.