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THE WHITENING

SHE WOKE UP FACE DOWN ON THE ASPHALT. Her face smoldering like burning charcoals. Her entire body writhed with what felt like erratic smatterings of fiery rain. Her obsidian skin, nearly completely scrapped of her face, remained, in the main, as a shingle of pigmentation in the middle of her forehead and the left side of her lips. A few disfigured blotches were randomly scattered about face. The skin on her body had been similarly grated, and appeared as small, isolated islands of color set amidst a sea of discolored snow.

She was alone, like silence, and everything around her was still. All there was etched into the distance was blackness. Menacing. Angry. Hostile. Blackness. Silent. Still. Unshakable. Blackness. She had no idea who she was, where she was, or how she got there. All she knew was she was alone with the blackness. She felt like a child who had been abandoned by her parents and left alone with a stranger. She was terrified. She imagined all manner of beast, creature and mortal alike, lying in wait with piercing eyes bulging under cover of night.

As she gained clarity, jagged images of painful memories grated her mind, each remembrance raking her nerves raw. She attempted to scream but as each scream climbed its way to the top of her throat, it was dragged down by a new scream. The procession of wails ultimately canceled each other out, leaving the suffering they aimed to cure trapped. The pain became more and more desperate to escape, as if it were stranded inside a burning house. The pain, seemingly curdled into one big amorphous clump, crashing into her mind's frail walls, eventually splintering into factions of horror, fear, self-loathing, and despair. The factions, unable to escape, turned on each other, shoving and trampling in a mad rush to escape the entire affair.

Many of her emotions died in the crush. Some parts of her went numb. Lost forever. Permanently crippling her spirit. The more murky, pitiful sentiments attempted to burrow themselves deep down in her mind. The stronger emotions demanded freedom, threatening to capsize the entire ship, if their needs were not met. The lingering emotions, dulled, disheartened, and scantily breathing, only sought to survive. Through it all, she remained lost in a state of discord that threatened to rip mind from body, heart from mind, and spirit from soul.

She now longed for the simple pain of smoldering burning skin. Her soul was in retrograde: Her gut gnarled. Her head spun. Her entire body felt twisted. A sinking feeling seized hold of her. A seeping nauseousness crept through her body, and miniature stars pirouetted around her mind.

She drifted in and out of consciousness and, again, went dark.

She awakened several hours later feeling relatively calm after a semi-pleasant dream. But as she came to realize her design, a rising desperation raked its way through her nervous system. Now seized by panic, she looked around frantically but was unable to see. The remains of night were still in control of the imprimatur of day.

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Engulfed by hysteria, her trembling head wobbled towards the heavens trying to find the light, the moon, an illuminated planet, or a single star. Anything. But all she saw was blackness and she was afraid. Afraid of it. Afraid of death, afraid she didn't exist, afraid of herself.

She then struggled again to remember where and who she was. But each effort attacked her nervous system as if armed with serrated knives. Each attempt punctured her internal organs like rubber bullets. Each seized her psyche with escalating degrees of violence. It felt as if a foreign entity had ravished her and was now trying to breach through her skin.

And then ... she gave up and the attack momentarily ceased. But only after a precious moment of reprieve, in the distance, she sensed a gathering of shattered, jagged recollections. In the introspection, she felt the horrendous rumbling of a mysterious mass. It rushed towards her, seeming to carry with it death, galloping intrepidly, gaining ground.

When it reached her, it gathered around her body like bulky haberdashery spun from an intricate web of dark clouds. It threatened to interpenetrate her.

She fought tooth-and-nail to keep it at bay. But each effort sipped forcefully on her reserves. She was eventually forced again to retreat into unconsciousness.

She woke up sometime later with a new found but finagled resolve. It was a half-hearted attempt to self-dupe. In an effort to speak real determination into existence, she took a deep breath and whispered to herself, "one devil at a time, lord. One devil at a time." That is, to herself and whatever other concealed power out there vested with the strength to sense through the darkness the desperate sound of her plea. It worked. The words filled her with light. It gave her the life and energy to fight.

So, she pulled herself off the ground and whipped her body into a sitting position. She braced herself: pulled her knees close to her chest, folded her arms tightly around her chins, dug her forehead against her kneecaps and pressed the base of her spine firmly into the ground. The pose she struck in blackness resembled an egg in the infinite darkness of her mother's wound.

She stiffened her jaws, clinched her teeth, and tightened her fist. And then, an epic battle ensued, one for the ages, and it felt like the fate of humanity lie on the line. Like everything she had once known was in play. Like everything she had hoped for and dreamed of was at stake. This was it. It was winner take all.

She advanced and gave way, relented, took a stand, took flight and railed back, waxed and waned. She backtracked and attacked, backed off and she fought, fled then repeated, attacked then retreated, advanced then regrouped, went forward then withdrew. It was all out war.

As the battle got meaner, she got stronger, and meaner, more determined, more resilient, thinner, and leaner. She gradually came to believe she could win this war. But just as she reached the mountain top, just as she approached her moment of truth, she felt in the distance, the black mass. And it carried with it death.

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The mass, despite being much smaller and further away, had indeed become more powerful. It was once made up of intense light, it was now comprised of compressed fire. She could feel the heat. As it approached, it thundered, roared, raged, and scowled with heat. The ground trembled, tossed her out of position, attacked her balance. But she noticed the blackness in the distance remained still, unmoved, and unbothered.

Against the mass, her efforts only pulled back the sling of the catapult on an oppressed and angry god. Her feelings of victory became her enemy. She had given it her all, struggled with all of her might but her energy had served only to feed the blight. The disappointment left her flat. The final spark within her deliquesced. The exhaust from the single particle of fight remaining was swallowed by death. At that moment, the moment foreshadowing acceptance, the vast, still blackness she once feared comforted to her. Its strength and power grounded her. She let go. An overwhelming feeling of compassion swept through her. Then, epiphany. She realized that the blackness loved her; and that it had so all along.

As her body and spirit synchronized to the blackness, the howling mass rushing towards her seemed but a grumpy wind. Her fear subsided. She relaxed her body and accepted space.

The mass of memories carrying death rushed through her skin, flashed through her mind, and burned intensely. But only for a moment. Like a shooting star, burning brightly in the sky, moving quickly, trying to desperately to land, only to evanesce into the darkness. The mass evaporated almost as quickly as it came.

When it fully extinguished, she became inseparable from the night. When she moved, it moved. When she walked, it walked. When she turned, it turned. When it rested, so did she.

It then occurred to her that what she once deemed to be a patchwork skin on her face, the vestiges of a blotted trauma and an utter disgraced, was simply the night surrounding her finding its way home. The patches were not proof of a tragic accident but evidence of a breach being healed.

The memories attempting to overtake her, those intense particles of light that threatened to rip her apart, were not memories at all. They were simply the day dreams of a slumbering night. The people she loved, the places she had gone, the things she had cherished. The entire walking, talking, crush of humanity and the material world that once defined her, were mere figments of her mighty imagination. Blind to her true self, she had become lost and entangled in a labyrinth of her own creation. She had fallen in love with her own inventions. So, she had become all too willing to sacrifice her sovereignty, her Self, the only Self, the Indivisible I. And with this recognition, she dissolved into the night. Because she was the night. And the night was all there ever was.