

The town Esther hails from is small, minute, and frequently the sort that claims its resident indefinitely. Though only vaguely important to this story in context, it is where all things start. Naturally, we all must begin from somewhere, musn't we?

Our tale begins with a woman, though in truth, calling her 'being' will suffice, as humans suffer a conscience; a sense of humanity that is implied in the word alone. Pearl, the matriarch of this little town, hails from there as well. She has no trade, she is a 'mother' in title and blood bonds alone. Matriarch Pearl touts herself a storyteller of sorts, though for the truth, I would not hold my breath, dear reader.

Pearl believes so vividly in her own truth, and with such persistence she does. Her fortune is derived from those fables, that fiction - works curated with half-truths. Pearl cares not for artistic pursuit or love for art in its purest form, but rather the power held over the empty, rudimentary, rapid shallows that no other would prize. She provides no real meat to the table, no true substance among her suspension of belief, if only one is gullible enough to listen with earnest abandon. She breaks no bread, she lives on the very fumes she emits.

Standing behind Pearl is a girl looking out of sorts. Esther is meek and dirty under the matriarch's thumb. Her clothes are recycled and ill-fitting in comparison to Pearl's always freshly bought wardrobe, and she doesn't meet others eyes, no, she looks down at her shoes, too large and falling apart in strips. Esther is not her highest triumph, but a tool at her disposal, a commodity she uses; she is coin and favor to the matriarch, and the leash she keeps is short. Esther does not stray far, as she is constantly hovered over and put in her place, so much so that she grows accustomed to the feeling of the whites of passerby's eyes. In her peripheral, she can recognize their shapes, but can never recall their names. There is no pity for Esther, only acceptance. Sometimes there are those who turn the rumor mill, who attempt contact with her merely to feed their frenzy over her unfortunate lot in life. There exists no one to save her.

As Esther gets older, the lack of her own autonomy is impressed upon her at every turn. She dwarfs in comparison to others whims, playing the part that was written for her with no variety, and little adlibbing. She is favored even less than the woven tapestry often gifted from the grandmothers in her small town, and perhaps it is no stretch. Esther is merely swept under the rug-- even her contributing kin are wary of her damage. There is little argument over where she might, could, belong. Perhaps there is too much or too little a sacrifice to speak of when the child is but a pawn. Despite all this, Esther endeavors to depart from this stigma, to further surpass her mother in merits of character, in drive, and most of all kindness. She strives to show the transparency the likes of which Pearl did not offer those around them. In these steps forward with open hands, Esther finds her footsteps often falter, unsteady, as she stares down a hammer. She looms in suspension each time, a dagger at her back. Esther learns soon in her lifetime that not a bone of love exists within Pearl.

Pearl is ichor, gutted and dripping, she is but a thin, faltering body that looks of rigor. For those who cross the Matriarch's path there is the taste of bile hovering thick in the air. Palpable fear does not require the supernatural, nor gore, as it hides and thrives in humanity alone. Esther first cries, then cowers, with such fear, her security dropping through her stomach as easily as a pair of untied, dangling boots falling. The life that she lives defies what others might assume is standard from the outside, but

rotting within. As she ages, Esther's fear turns to acceptance, then apathy: soon emptiness. She begins with her own flame that flickers with uncertainty as she finds her own footing, though futile thing it is. With her stalling dreams and days wasted to Pearl, with her stalling and misdirection, Esther slowly, yet surely fears challenge. She strives only for the things that provide her comfort, then fearing them just the same. The world grows sharp to her and of such cold temperament that will do little in budging to her every push.

Esther finds that pushing against the cold exhausts all thought and function, all rhyme and reason, the sharp cold soon penetrating her to the very bone. Her heart suffers for it.