The Darkness

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She stepped out onto her second-floor balcony and shut the glass door behind her. The wind was relatively calm tonight, but it made its presence known and tossed her long auburn hair back. She tightened her black robe around her thin waist. It wasn’t that cold outside, but the last thing she needed was for the wind to blow her robe open while she was outside. Not that anyone should be out this late, she reasoned, but she wouldn’t want to risk it anyway.

She walked over to the edge of the balcony and rested her elbows against the hard concrete rail. Leaning over the rail always made her worry that she would somehow lose her balance and fall off, but for some reason tonight she didn’t care—it was probably the wine talking. She took another sip out of her glass and watched as the waves from the gulf gently rolled toward her, then away from her, along the coastline.

The beach was probably the only thing that kept her here; there was really nothing else here that she couldn’t have access to anywhere else. If she was really being honest with herself, it sometimes felt like there was more for her out there, wherever that was, than there was down here where she was currently.
You could always leave, you know, she told herself. You’re not really stuck here; you choose to come back here.

So it was most likely the beach that kept her from leaving forever. To her, water seemed to possess a mystical power which allowed her—water had always been a female—to cast a spell over the human race in order to always keep people near her. Maybe the oceans were just as lonely as Michelle had always been.

Oh, now don’t you start up any of that talk, Ellie Grace, she could hear her mother’s incessant nagging in the back of her mind. It won’t do you any good, you hear?

Her mother had been dead a few years now, and she still couldn’t get rid of her.

Her parents had named her Michelle Grace Lawler, but they, along with the rest of her family, had always referred to her as Ellie Grace. The two-name system was just another one of those Southern quirks; her brother was John Michael, her mother was Emma Lee, her father was Joe Paul, her twin cousins were Anna Lynn and Sara Marie—frankly she couldn’t think of a member of her family who wasn’t referred to by their first and middle name.

She hated it when her family called her Ellie Grace. She didn’t hate the Southern quality of the name—though, admittedly, to her it was entirely too stereotypically Southern—or even the
separate, full names themselves. Michelle Grace almost sounded regal, like she should belong to what her mother would have called a “proper” family. Ellie Grace, though, sounded more like the name of the waitress who would be working the late shift at a rundown diner. The type who was perpetually eight months pregnant, who would be caught smoking out back during her breaks and complaining about how none of the fathers of her children ever seemed to stick around. Michelle didn’t think that anyone who had high hopes for their children would ever call them Ellie Grace; at best, her parents might have hoped she would someday be something respectable like a librarian or a bank teller. They had only ever expected she would choose a career where she would be quiet and submissive. It must have been a shock to them, then, when she told them she was going off to college to study business. They had certainly seemed confused when she broke the news.

“College?” her father laughed. “What are you ever gonna learn there that you can’t learn by doin’ something?”

Her mother was no better. “What do you want to go off to college for anyway? Don’t you wanna be with that nice Jack Johnson instead? He’s going places. He’ll take care of you.”

She couldn’t blame her parents for not being supportive. No member of her family had ever been educated after high
school, so the extent of their knowledge about college was that it was what the “proper” families' kids went to. All they knew was that once she left to study elsewhere, she would no longer be with them. She realized that that was one of the better qualities of the South that most people who claimed that the South was an awful place to live were unaware of; family is one of the most important things there is to most Southerners because a lot of people don’t really have anything else. Her parents had wanted Michelle to stay with them, but she had felt that she was destined for something greater. Besides, if she stayed, they would just want her to get married and pop out a bunch of kids, as her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother before her had. Now at the ripe old age of twenty-eight, she’d be “too old for marryin’” as her mother would have said.

Her career had kept her occupied, though. Who needed a man when there was real work to be done? She had studied intensively throughout school, managed to get an entry-level position as soon as she graduated, and quickly climbed the corporate ladder. She was the youngest vice president the company had ever had, and she was only one of the very few females who had ever obtained a high-level position in the company’s history. Mostly, the work entailed paperwork and some
decision-making—nothing she couldn’t handle. Michelle had
acquired a reputation for getting things done regardless of the
difficulty of the job. She could hire and fire people without a
second thought; she assumed she was so good at her work because
she didn’t take anything personally. If someone needed to criticize
her output, she knew it was only business, and if she needed to
decide who to fire, she didn’t need to learn every person’s life story
before she made the decision as to who would go. The best
workers stayed, and the worst workers went, and that was simply
how it had to be. If she thought too much about what she was
doing, whose families she was putting through financial stress,
whose dreams she was ruining, who may not be able to pay their
bills next month, then nothing would ever get done. It was only
business after all.

She was good at her job, but it never quite fulfilled her the
way she had once hoped it would. Michelle never came home from
work fully satisfied with her career choice. She had thought about
quitting when her boss had informed her of a possible transfer.

“We have an opening for an executive position in our
Southeastern region. You’re from there, aren’t you? You’ve already
demonstrated your ability to be a successful leader, and you
should be right at home there, if you’re willing to accept the
position, of course.”

Without hesitation, she had agreed. She’d be back living just a few miles away from where she grew up.

_The reason I haven’t been happy here is because I’m away from the beach_, she had reasoned. _That beach was always my beach, anyway. I never should have left it._

The moonlight reflected off the black water. There was a heavy weight in Michelle’s stomach reminding her that she was avoiding thinking of something. She’d been unhappy for months now, though she still wasn’t sure why. Reminiscing over the events of her life, though, she couldn’t remember a time when she had ever been truly happy. When she was younger, Michelle felt that she had never belonged in her family. She shared the same genes with them but possessed a different soul. When she got older, she went to college looking for answers, and she had convinced herself she had found them in a degree. However, at her high school reunion a few months ago—why had she ever agreed to go to that?—the realization of her own discontent with her life, both past and present, had unexpectedly hit her.

It had been ten years, but the high school gym hadn’t changed at all. From the looks of things, most of the people there hadn’t changed much either. The jocks and the preps had, for the
most part, maintained their physique. The band kids had toned down their craziness some, as age tends to do to the wild spirit of youth, and overall, everyone appeared, well, *normal*. It was depressing really; Hollywood was always spewing out stories of how the popular people in high school are never able to relive their glory days and are forever doomed to talking about how great they used to be. The nerds and the losers in high school, as natural underdogs, go to the reunion and everyone learns of their glowing successes post-high school; they’re millionaires or have had a total physical transformation or something spectacular has happened to them. Apparently, though, Hollywood stories did not apply to the South as no one seemed to be any different than they were when Michelle had first known them; *I guess nothing ever really changes in the South.*

Michelle had been standing near the punch bowl when she noticed Kathy Stewart walking toward her. Kathy had been the prom queen and had always possessed far too much constant enthusiasm for Michelle’s liking. She had always been a Southern belle in the making, with her long blonde hair and unearthly bright blue eyes. Kathy had a thick accent that Michelle supposed she exaggerated to fit her persona. Kathy had looked over at Michelle and waved. Michelle reluctantly waved back. *Please don’t let her*
come talk to me, please don’t let her come talk to me, please—

“Hey, Michelle! How are you, honey?”

“I’m...fine, Kathy. How are you?”

“Well I’m just great, sweetheart! How do you like everything so far?”

“It’s nice.”

Kathy seemed pleased. “Oh, I’m glad you like it. We girls tried to put something real nice together.”

“Yeah, it’s nice.”

“So, uh...” Kathy looked to be a little unsure of what to say next. “You married?”

“Nope.” Michelle held up her left hand to show that there was indeed no ring to be found.

“Oh...well, any kids?”

“No.”

“Aww, that’s a shame. Don’t you want any?”

“I don’t really like kids.”

“But they’re so precious! I’ve got three myself: Jackie, Mary, and Katelyn: all girls!”

Michelle couldn’t help but think it sounded like she was listing off trophies that she had won. In a way, Michelle realized, she was.
“So, uh, are you, uh...” Kathy was again stumbling over her words. Michelle liked it that way. However, she knew that the sooner she gave Kathy some information she could use to talk to her friends about Michelle, the sooner she would leave her alone.

“I do have a job. I’m the vice president of a company. It’s...well you’ve probably never heard of it. So I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah. I don’t really keep up with that sort of thing anyway.” Kathy flipped her blonde hair back like she was brushing off the very notion of being involved with anything that could be considered unladylike.

“You know, though, Michelle, there is something I wanna ask you, if you wouldn’t be offended, of course.”

“It’s pretty hard to offend me.”

“Well,” Michelle could tell that Kathy was uncomfortable. She lowered her voice, “Are you, you know, one of those types of people? I mean, not that there would be anything wrong with that,” she quickly added.

“Those types?”

“You know. One of those types who,” she lowered her voice again, “likes other girls.”

“You mean a lesbian?”
“Well, well yes. Are you?”

For a brief moment, Michelle wondered how Kathy would have responded if she said yes. She could picture Kathy going back to all her friends and gossiping about how she had always known Michelle was “one of those types.” Instead, however, she decided to tell her the truth.

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.” This obviously disappointed Kathy. Michelle knew, though, that Kathy was intending to go back to her friends and them that Michelle had lied to her. She found she was all right with that.

“Yeah, I’ve never really cared for women. They have a tendency to nag too often and like to play emotional guessing games with people.”

“But...but then why aren’t you married? You’re twenty-eight now. Oughtn’t you be thinking about settling down with a man?”

“A lot of men are jerks who only want to sleep with you, or they’re too intimidated by a strong woman to ever think of asking her out.”

Kathy paused and took a moment to think before responding to Michelle. “So...you don’t like kids, you don’t like
women, and you don’t like men. Honey, who do you like? What do you like?"

Michelle didn’t have an answer for her then. Staring out at the gulf below her, she found she didn’t have an answer to the question now. Her whole life Michelle had thought that the South was what made her unhappy or that maybe it was her family she didn’t like. But she had willingly returned to the South when offered the opportunity. She hadn’t been happy away from the South, and she had convinced herself it was the beach she missed. Of course it wasn’t that. The South couldn’t make her depressed just like the beach couldn’t keep her content. The place was not the issue. Ultimately, the South was what it was, just as any place is what it is. Every place has its oddities as well as its favorable attributes. Bigger cities generally have more crimes; smaller towns generally have fewer attractions to keep people busy. No matter where a person lives, there will always be something negative that can be said about the place or its inhabitants. To Michelle’s dismay, she realized that the South was not the problem; she was. There was something wrong with her, with her view of the world, not with the world itself.

You’ve always known a voice seemed to whisper, haunting the back of her mind, you’ve always known there was something
wrong with you. No! No, that couldn’t be right. It must be something else. It had to be something else. You know it’s not. You know it’s you. You might as well face it now rather than continuing to hide from it.

The black water matched the black sky. Everything was so dark outside. Her robe was black, her wine was black, even her hair seemed black in this light. The darkness felt as though it was enveloping her, the way it always should have. The word “depression” passed through her mind, but depression was something that only sick people or celebrities who had done something particularly offensive suffered from. As a normal, functioning member of society, she could not have it.

She could hear her mother scolding her. I won’t have any cryin’ in this house, Ellie Grace. Ain’t no need to cry over nothin’. You ain’t some poor starvin’ baby in Africa, now, are you? God, the dead woman just couldn’t leave her alone, could she?

You don’t like kids, you don’t like women, you don’t like men. Honey, what do you like?

Nothing. The correct answer was nothing. She didn’t like herself, her family, her life…anything. The weight in her stomach was simultaneously lifted and sunk lower. The depression was truth, and the old saying was a lie; the truth shall not set you free.
It damn sure didn’t do a thing for Oedipus. But hey, at least she hadn’t slept with her mother, anyway, or her father, for that matter. *And you’re not one of those starvin’ babies in Africa either.*

That didn’t seem to make the truth any easier to handle, though. It consumed her like the darkness of the night that surrounded her. She knew it was time, but she didn’t know for what. The glass was no longer half-full or half-empty; rather, it had fallen and shattered into a million pieces on the ground. Quite literally, in fact, as she noticed that her wine glass was no longer in her hands. But the glass wasn’t the only thing that had slipped through her fingers unnoticed. She thought of her family, whom she had abandoned to search for something to fill the hole she had within herself. She had detached herself from anyone who had ever tried to care for her, and she had prevented herself from ever growing too attached to anyone. Her career had never mattered to her, because she had never mattered to herself. She thought of her life, and all the misery she had endured—most of which she had put herself through—she thought of all the people she had hurt with her own selfishness, she thought of the grief she had caused, she thought of her life which she had ruined, and finally, after much hesitation, she allowed the darkness to take her into the night.