

REMEMBERING TOMORROW

SPECULATIVE STORIES OF
THE PAST & THE POSSIBLE

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THE BLACKEST DRESS

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Master Threadmaker wore the same dress on her deathbed as that which she received upon entering the temple as a young woman, and it was nearly as green as she then had been. Spring green. Threadmakers across the land traveled to their master's bedside to hold her hands in theirs. Black hands. The hands of all threadmakers were dyed black, a sign of their most sacred craft. Black hands that if not growing, harvesting, grinding, dipping, or spinning, were held together in prayer—prayers of pity—for their thread would be used only by the grieving.

And so never by them.

For to be a threadmaker was to be cloistered from pain. Companionships were with other threadmakers, also cloistered, also clothed in spring. When one amongst them was laid to rest beneath roots of mulberry (as Master Threadmaker knew she soon would be) there was no grief, for to be buried in green was

to have lived a life of tranquility.

No grief meant no wounds to mend.

Master Threadmaker's dress bore only one single scar—a line of black across her breast—but she never said who the mend had been for until her final breath.

“It is for the wearer of the blackest dress.”



Her dress was the blackest of all the dresses and so she was treated with the deepest sympathy by all who saw her. Some even stopped and bowed their heads. Hers, the dresswearer held high, as someone of her status was obliged to do. Whilst within, the black dye from the black thread bled into her blood, into her tears, so that she saw the world only as black. Black mountains in the distance beyond the city, black waters, black spires, sky black as night no matter the chimes of the bell. Even the sun shone an eerie black light over all.

That her once green dress was nearly black meant that she had mourned the most of any person alive. For every mend there had been a rip. The funerary rip. The wearer of the blackest dress had been to so many funerals that she was funereal. Her losses clung to her body wherever she went like a dress of leeches. They collared her neck like a choker. Covered the length of her arms and draped over her wrists. Licked at her ankles from her mended hem.

Yet there was no changing into a new dress, for to wear green was to be green. No absconding to another city, for she was known by all, as all dresswearers were. No hiding behind

a forged smile even, for if ever she displayed any sentiment but solemnity the same ones who bowed their heads would cast up looks of disapproval. Smiling while mourning was improper. Graceless. It was also suspicious. As was the question of how she had acquired so many mends. *Was she that doomed? Or that dangerous?*

Speculations abounded.

Disease had eaten the bodies of her loved ones. *No, she had poisoned them!* Her seminary had caught fire. *Because she had set it!* The earth had cracked open and swallowed her whole estate. *Because she was a witch!*

The truth was much worse.

The wearer of the blackest dress had long stopped loving. For everyone she ever loved would leave, their parting gift more grief for people to gawk at.

Leastwise the leeches sucked out her will to care. Her will, her hope, her spirit . . . until all that remained was their black thread bodies; each stitch a tooth, needling her skin. At times she felt so sucked dry that she had not even the energy to undress and would sleep on top of the sheets like she was already laid out in a casket.



The ceremonial spool is the size of a shin bone. Unwound, the unbroken thread would stretch from one side of the capital to the other. To finish a spool is to reach an unheard-of dead end. For anyone who walks a path of that much sorrow would surely choose to step off of it. Only one dresswearer has ever sought another.



By the time she arrived at the Temple of the Threadmakers, her dress was almost completely black with the mending of a thousand funerary rips. Grief threaded through her veins and knotted around her heart, binding the broken pieces together so that somehow it still pumped, though she often wished it did not. Like the spool-worth of thread embroidered into her dress, her heartache stretched from one side of the city to the other.

The wearer of the blackest dress was assigned a personal threadmaker to craft her a new spool.

“Is there no spool already made?” she inquired, holding her head high, as someone of her status was obliged to do. The thread leeches sucked.

“Tah! Each spool we craft with prayers personal to each dresswearer. We must make yours anew.”

Her threadmaker had the pleasant plumpness of youth despite seeming of similar age as the dresswearer herself—middle of the path.

“When shall I return?”

“You, shall stay.”

The threadmaker beckoned her inside with black hands. Only her hands were black. Her dress was entirely green.

The wearer of the blackest dress felt abnormal, abominable, beside someone with a dress so pristine, so unscarred. Yet it was not her place to argue with a threadmaker.

The temple smelled of mulberries and the sweet, earthy waste of silkworms. Every surface was black. Black lacquered

walls. Black beams and door screens. Black silk curtains fluttering before each open window. Black floors of nightwood, polished to a mirror sheen by the footfalls of twenty-seven generations of threadmakers.

“People think everything is black here because it’s a threadmaker temple, that we’re dark and mysterious,” her threadmaker remarked, “but it’s really because we get black handprints on everything!” She giggled. Like a child.

As they walked the halls around the dyer’s courtyard, they passed other pure-green threadmakers. The wearer of the blackest dress was sure that they were wondering how she came to have so many mends, but none asked. They only bowed their heads. Her neck muscles ached.

Suddenly, the dresswearer was stopped in her tracks by *white*. Her threadmaker had led them into a light-filled room overlooking the gardens.

“Yours, long as you stay with us,” she beamed.

“It is white.”

Her threadmaker practically hooted. “You’re sharp-eyed as a hawk at suppertime, you are!”

“I only meant—” The wearer of the blackest dress ruffled.

“Tah! Most guests think black is somber.”

With that, she left.

She seemed to understand the wearer of the blackest dress’ desire to be alone, to lie on the bed and pretend that she’d arrived at her dead end.



The ceremonial spool is kept in a chest of nightwood, borne by those mourners who walk behind the casket in the funeral procession. Caskets of their own which carry the sacred symbol of their grief.



The sound of laughter woke her. Threadmakers in the hallway outside her door. Others laughed in the gardens beyond the flutter of curtain. They sounded like sparrows in a bush.

The wearer of the blackest dress shut the window before leaving the unsettling white room.

She walked the crypt-black halls in her black dress as would a ghost. A ghost covered in ghosts.

Down one corridor she found her threadmaker, skipping along, swinging a basket.

“I’m off to the gardens to gather breakfast for our silkies. Join me!” She took a bun out of the basket and offered it, as if that settled that.

The wearer of the blackest dress walked through the black gardens under the black sun, eating the jam bun that tasted like pinkberries but looked like blackberries, as her threadmaker pointed out black-petaled flowers and black-shelled insects and stopped more than once to look up at the black leaves of the black trees. In truth, the threadmaker saw a rainbow of hues, but her blood had also not been poisoned with the color of mourning.

When they reached the mulberry grove, threadmaker handed dresswearer the basket to hold. Then, together, they

harvested only the finest young leaves. All the while, the threadmaker chattered like a bird at the first thaw of spring so that, by the time they arrived back at the temple, the wearer of the blackest dress had learned her favored flower, favored tree, favored melody, favored fruit, favored meal, favored chant, and her name (which she said was not her favored name but it wasn’t the worst name she’d ever heard, so she supposed she didn’t mind it): Hanaan.

It struck the dresswearer once again how much younger than she the threadmaker acted. No seriousness or reserve. No pretense. (*How many had only acted her companion to try and learn the secrets of her silk scars?*)

She kept expecting Hanaan to inquire about her blackest dress, but they returned without so much as a suggestion of speculation. The threadmaker did not even ask her name. Undoubtedly, it was already known by her, as it was known by all.



The ceremonial spool is made of silk freely offered. It is said that the threadmakers can speak the language of the silk moth. It is said that they can teach them how to exit their cocoons without breaking their single silk strand, so that they need not be boiled with wings unfurled.

The thread is meant to mend loss, not to make it.



The silkery was dark but airy. Threadmakers sat on black

cushions before black trays. Some trays were filled with leaves and wiggling white caterpillars, others with shimmering cocoons. The threadmakers spoke in soft, fluttering whispers.

“What are they saying to them?” the wearer of the blackest dress asked, whispering herself.

“If you come into this world gently, we will be gentle with you.”

She watched as the silk moths were coaxed out of their cocoons with minimal damage to the silk. Their sacred work sacrificed no lives.

“These are ours,” Hanaan said as she placed handfuls of the fresh mulberry leaves softly into their tray of worms. And there were *thousands* of them. Tiny as grains of rice.

As they fed, they recited. Prayers of pity. “May theses leaves grow the sacred thread that will close the wounds opened by grief.”

“How long will it take for them to spin their cocoons?” the wearer of the blackest dress inquired once last leaf had been offered with last prayer.

“Are you in a hurry to go somewhere?” Knowing the answer, Hanaan did not wait for it. “Come, we will collect the dye ingredients while we wait for our silkies to grow! Master Threadmaker says that hardworking hands make for carefree contemplations.”

They went back out into the bright gardens, though this time they walked away from the neat rows of mulberry trees towards the edge of the gardens where the forest grew lush. They collected branches of nightwood, thick enough to be running

with sap but thin enough to cut. “May the limbs offered by this tree close the wounds opened by grief,” they prayed.

The char beetle collection was more of an adventure. The wearer of the blackest dress had to peel back bark of logs, lift up stones, scrape and dig, crouch in the most undignified way! The dirt under her fingernails made her feel accomplished. Before now her only accomplishment had been carrying her grief with such grace.

“May this shell sacrificed close the wounds opened by grief.”



The ceremonial spool is made of lathed nightwood. The same wood that is carved into ceremonial knife and ceremonial needle. The same wood that lights the fires that boil the silk, that boil the dye. That makes the racks that dry the thread. That make the casket that holds it.



The wearer of the blackest dress woke at daybreak. The window was open again. There was a light streaming into her white room, a light that was a soft grey instead of black. It illumed the wall opposite the bed, a wall painted with a fluttering of moths flying through a moonlit scene.

It struck her that she had not really paid attention to the contents of her room before now: the scribe bench up against the open window, the clear vessel of clear water on it, the ornamental side table which held a vase of fresh flowers—a single petal resting at its enamel base. The only black (besides her

dress) was a brush with nightwood handle, long and pointed, arranged neatly beside a bottle of nightwood ink.

The day was spent in a similar manner to the day before—the harvesting of young mulberry leaves, the feeding of their silkworms, the collecting ingredients for the dye. Prayers of pity. They repeated this routine for several days until one afternoon, as they were finishing feeding their silkies, Hanaan finally declared: “Come, we will begin to prepare the dye.”

The dyers courtyard was also black, though this was no surprise. A long nightwood table ran down one side of it. On it, a hundred obsidian mortar and pestles. In the middle of the courtyard, great vats bubbled black vapors. The dye looked like the wearer of the blackest dress imagined her blood to look. Against the other wall were nightwood drying racks. Rack upon rack upon rack of silk thread, fluttering in the breeze like ribbons of torn spiderwebs.

The wearer of the blackest dress was given a black smock, floor-length and tied closed at the wrist. Hanaan donned a matching smock. All of the threadmakers at their sacred craft wore them to protect their pristine green dresses. The woman in the blackest dress looked as if she were already wearing one before she even slipped it on. For once she blended in.

Ghost covered in ghosts.

Around her, threadmakers dipped moonlight-white silk into vats and pulled it out new moon black.

She spent the following days learning how to prepare the dye by hand: steeping the branches of nightwood until its sap was drawn out, syrupy as black mold on a corpse;

shade-drying the sap; grinding it into powder; crushing char beetle shells to dust; mixing powder and dust with oil until it formed a paste, viscid as tar and dark as starless sky. Through it all they offered the prayers of pity. “May the thread blackened with this dye close the wounds opened by grief.”

The wearer of the blackest dress felt gratified to see her hands becoming stained. Somehow it felt like she was actually *doing* something with her grief.

“Your hands are so black, a bat will think you their lover,” one of the other threadmakers jested.

Everyone laughed. Unabashed, like giggling children.

The sound hurt her ears. It made her feel Other. She went back to mixing the paste, resolved to stop staring so openly at her hands.

“Your spinning is so slow, your silkworms will have great-great-grandchildren before you harvest any more,” Hanaan shot back, playfully.

The wearer of the blackest dress had always thought the threadmakers must be somber, spinning their shadow silk in reverent silence. She was fast learning that she could not have been more mistaken.

“Your spinning is so swift your silkworms will have to come out of their wombs with wings the size of gnats.”

Her smile surprised her.

She had forgotten what it felt like to smile. The forgetting lived in her heart, so swathed in black thread that it knew only how to beat heartache through her veins. The forgetting was an

accident. The remembering tasted like mulberry honey, sweet and nurturing. She tasted it in her tight muscles and stiff joints.

“Better gnats than obese geese.”

The wearer of the blackest dress laughed.



The ceremonial spool is wrapped in lore. According to legend there was a queen so overcome by the loss of her king that she tore her dress at his funeral. Yet she did not replace it with a new one. She mended the rip with black thread and wore her grief as a badge of undying love. She became known as The Queen Who Would Not Veil Her Grief.

The first dresswearer.



“Our silkies are spinning!” Hanaan’s voice squealed through the door. The birds were only just beginning their twittering.

The wearer of the blackest dress leapt out of bed and soon dresswearer and threadmaker were racing down the crypt-black corridors. Hanaan hurtled first into the hushed silkery and over to their trays. Ribs ramming against the boning of her bodice, the wearer of the blackest dress followed. Together, they watched sticky white threads come out of the top of the silkworm’s heads as they spun their cocoons around themselves. Around and around. It looked as though they were dancing. The two women watched until every divided section of tray was occupied.

“Now what do we do?” asked the wearer of the blackest dress.

Hanaan leapt up and pulled her out of the silkery and through the temple, scattering threadmakers as they flew past. Her hand was callused and clammy but the touch still made the wearer of the blackest dress want to weep.

They burst outdoors where Hanaan released her hand, stripped off her greenest dress, and stood naked in the sun.

The wearer of the blackest dress was about to look away when— “Join me!” her threadmaker extolled. Then she ran, her silk dress fluttering behind her like a green flag of purity.

The sunlight shone on Hanaan’s skin, lilac instead of black.

Overcome with remembering, the wearer of the blackest dress shed it from her body like a molted snakeskin—it was not her place to argue with a threadmaker, after all. She draped the sloughed silk carefully over the branch of a mulberry tree. The leeches hung limp and impotent. Hanaan was beside her again, flushed and giddy. She took up her hand once more and ran them through the orchard. Never had the wearer of the blackest dress felt more free from it. Down—

Without warning, Hanaan dropped.

Down onto the dirt beneath which so many loved ones had already been buried.

The wearer of the blackest dress felt her skin tighten as if she were still shroud in it. With no boning to keep her stiff and steady, her naked body began to tremble. She should not have let her threadmaker be so careless! She should not have let herself be so carefree! Now she would have to finish crafting her