

The Broken Manor
By James Shawe

Before they even left Whittleborough, the darkening grey skies warned of rain. A few miles out of town, rain came, and it brought the chilling winds with it. In Eleanor's arms, her babe fussed, the harsh winds turning the child's soft cheeks red and dry. Her husband Abram wrapped his coat around them both, holding them tightly, but even in the carriage the winds were harsh and biting.

As Eleanor was about to speak up, the coachman shouted back. "There's a manor up ahead, we need to hide from the storm." The wind picked up, stealing the coachman's hat, carrying it off into the woods. "Gods damn us." He said bitterly.

"God never damns us, child." Reverend Farven raised his voice over the storm. *A quiet man*, Eleanor thought, *but he never misses a chance to speak about God, even in a storm.*

Abram moved closer to the front of the wagon. "How far is the next town? Willwreath, isn't it?" The winds answered with a thrusting gale. The horses lurched for balance and steadied themselves again.

"It doesn't matter how far it is," the coachman shouted. "My boys won't make it another half mile." He snapped the reins, pulling them towards the manor. "We stop."

It was dark around the manor, as if night had fallen early. Eleanor could see the manor was bright white once, but now great masses of greenish-purple lichen covered the exterior of the manor. Charcoal black trees hunched over the roof, digging into the stone with their wooden fingers. The manor was broken everywhere she could see. It had fought the battle with nature, and nature won.

“Come, dear,” Abram said close to her. “Get yourself and Thomas inside.” He walked her through a door that opened to an old kitchen. It was dry inside, despite the massive hole in the ceiling where a tree had fallen, its roots spread over the walls like dark veins.

“Do you think it’ll fall in more?” Eleanor asked, walking around the tree where it hung. “No, probably not.” She decided before Abram answered. It looked sturdier the more she looked at it.

“Ah, there’s still coals in the furnace,” Abram said relieved. He lit a match, trying to get the coals to catch. After some shifting and a few more matches, the furnace came to life. Now that’s lucky,” he said, triumphant.

“Lucky? Tell that to the storm,” Eleanor teased. She sat by the furnace, back against a wall. She realized little Thomas had fallen asleep now that they were out of the storm.

“Luck comes and goes,” Abram shrugged. “That’s what they say. The storm will leave, and we’ll be lucky again.”

Eleanor watched her husband as he stood by the furnace, the flames danced on his face, making his rain-soaked beard seem to glow and dim, glow and dim. *He always keeps us safe and warm, doesn’t he?* She thought, looking down at Thomas. She loved watching him sleep, so quiet and small. *Sleep, little love, sleep the storm away.*

The door to the outside opened, and Reverend Farven entered. He walked to the furnace, nodding to Abram. “And so, we have fire. God is The Flame; we will have a calm night.” Eleanor smirked, but kept her remark to herself. *Any chance he gets,* she thought.

They all watched the flames whip and crackle in silence, they could hear the wind outside growing more vicious. *It's a calming sound*, Eleanor thought, *when you're safe from it*. Reverend Farver spoke suddenly. "Do you know this place?"

"No," Abram answered. "It's warm though, that's what matters." Reverend Farver looked at Eleanor for an answer, she smiled and shook her head.

"Ah, it's one place of tragedy among the many the world has," Reverend Farver said solemnly. "A husband and a wife. Much like you two. They were quite devout. They tried many, many times to have a child..." The words became distant, and her vision blurred.

Eleanor felt tired then, a heavy tiredness that fell like the tree above them, crashing and crushing. She heard crying, a soft cry with hidden whispers, beckoning her. She walked through beautiful halls of stone and wood, married in their magnificence. There was a painting of a man and a woman. Husband and wife, she knew. Another painting next to it, a pregnant wife, and a smiling husband. She tried to walk past it, but the painting kept her there, stuck. The wife's stomach got larger, and Eleanor felt pressure below her chest. The husband's face got darker, angrier, and then she felt pain on her cheeks, as if she were melting.

Eleanor jolted awake, breathing heavily. She looked around, her eyes darting, but it was pitch black and freezing. *Why is it so cold?* The furnace had gone out. She felt Thomas pushing against her, whining. "You must be hungry, little love," she said, trying to calm herself. "I was asleep so long, and you had nothing to eat." Eleanor lowered her shirt, and Thomas sucked on her nipple eagerly, as if she hadn't fed him hours ago. His small face felt so cold against her breast.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you warm. I’ll keep you warm. It’s just dark and cold,” she said to calm them both. “It’s just dark and cold. They’ll be back soon.”

Eleanor heard shuffling outside the kitchen door. Then there was sniffing around the base of the door, a searching and hungry sound. *Where’s Abram? Where, where is he?* The door began shaking, hinges creaking under the force of whatever was on the other side. *I can’t, I can’t...*

“Abram!” Eleanor shouted, her voice carrying far, echoing. The fire came back alive in the furnace. It was warm and bright again. Reverend Farver rushed through the kitchen door, followed by Abram, who was holding a sleeping Thomas. Then she saw there was nothing in her lap. Her chest and clothes were covered in wet dirt.

Oh, oh God, Eleanor thought. What was I holding? What was feeding on me?