

## GIFT OF THE CROSSROADS

By **Sharkchild**

As soon as I shouted into the vicinity of my home, the outlandish noises in the kitchen ceased. It was nothing more than the slight scuffle of feet, but it was disturbing beyond the sudden sinking of my heart. My breath became short and my hands trembled. I feared that whatever had made the sound had gone into hiding in the negative spaces of my home, and, in keeping that fear manageable, I hoped it would stay hidden; I had no desire to find it and only wished it to be intelligent enough to leave before I could ever arrive upon it with my investigating eyes.

When I made my way in silence toward the direction of the disturbance, I listened for even the faintest of sounds—the smallest of breaths—but there was nothing. And when I made the turn into the kitchen, I found no stranger or animal but a piece of fabric that looked like it was nothing more than the scrap of some abandoned craft. The material of intrusion lay on the floor about the size of a folded napkin. An earthy color of yellow defined its appearance while several small white threads protruded from all of its sides where it appeared to have once been joined to a larger entity.

I had never been into quilting, or sewing, nor had I any clothes that would match with such a peculiar fragment of textile. Whatever had made the sounds had left this frugal gift. I picked up the fabric and found it to be unusually coarse and rigid, like a dry and grimy rag; even those threads reaching outward retained their positions against my touch and probing.

In curiosity, I placed the fabric under water from the sink faucet in an effort to distinguish more details regarding the material's structure. I wanted to know if it would absorb the liquid and loosen to a more malleable form, or repel the fluid and maintain its current state. Both of my notions were inconveniently shattered as I watched a bizarreness unfold. As soon as the water hit this material, the water swirled atop the surface in a shallow whirlpool before continuing downward in the pull of gravity. It looked as if the water—upon the instant of its descending contact—was transplanted from the grip of this dimension, altering in a fragmented pattern of brief surrealism.

I let the water pour for several minutes as I watched in staggering disbelief. I ran my finger gently across the fabric to feel for the incongruities which could cause such a mysterious display, but there was only the insignificant roughness I had previously discovered. There were no patterns or deficiencies or outright abnormalities to give any reasonable explanation of the happening.

Though I could have experimented much longer with the fabric, I could not dwell upon it any longer. I had a proposal to write up and so learning more about the phenomenal thing had to wait. The next day was the beginning of the weekend and my son's homecoming, so no mischievous cloth was going to inhibit my completing the proposal ahead of his arrival.

When I went to rest the piece of fabric upon the kitchen table, I found a stiff thread that had not previously been there stuck to my finger. I thought nothing of it even though the new thread had sprung from the fabric's surface, not from any of the sides where the other threads were. In my ignorance of the fabric's wicked attributes, I yanked it hard away from my hand, annoyed at

what I thought to be some simple form of static electricity or random stickiness; I did not expect the resilient anchor of a tiny root. The thread came free, but so did a piece of my flesh. The fabric fell lightly atop the table with a small part of my skin left atop the newly sprung thread's end. My finger began to throb and bleed relentlessly.

I was given an untypical wound considering the miniscule carnage of the incident. It was different than a cut from a knife or a harsh abrasion; the thread seemed to have dug and clung to a vein, causing me to rupture it when I tore the root free. All I could do was clean and dress the wound accordingly. My only hope was that some extremity of the thread had not found a dwelling within my finger. The thought of such a tragedy sickened me.

After calming down, I finally began to work on my proposal.

I cherished only two things: my son and my work. Without them, I would have been a solitary manifold of sorrow, unworthiness, and delusional trauma. My work gave me meaning while keeping me busy and my son kept me busy while giving me meaning, each giving its own substance to my otherwise ordinary life.

The anger in living, however, was there like any other average being, caused by the strange yet unavoidable weights of troublesome life-hazards. It had started with the divorce and only grew worse as I lost full custody of my son; it could not have been expressed with the full extent of all passion how much I adored and loved him. Had my lying ex-wife told the truth in court, he might never have been taken from me. Instead, backstabbed and downtrodden, I came away with my son on rare weekends—a pitiful famine of what comfort, teaching, and love I could have given him.

After a slow series of several hours, and a fatigued mind, I left my project completed and entered the kitchen to hydrate not only my body, but my mind. I drank a glass of water and then began to boil a pot of it in preparation for tea. I turned to look upon the piece of fabric, expecting—out of peculiar imaginings to find it missing, collected again by the clandestine noisemaker, but it was there just as it had fallen: threads extended, coarseness exposed. I decided then, upon looking at the alien thing, that I did not want to look at it anymore, or ever again. There was no reason for me to keep it when it was nothing but an evil nuisance.

The giant, dense lid of the trash bin opened easy enough out back. I pushed the lid completely around so it fell behind the large container. In a hand protected by a flock-lined latex glove, I held the fabric over the opening, letting out a sigh of relief before releasing all of my fingers in one motion.

But the fabric did not fall.

I shook my hand vigorously, and still it did not fall.

An uncanny terror suddenly besieged me while rage and disgust exasperated between the grinding of my teeth. In panic, I attempted to take off the glove, praying that the material had only attached itself to the latex, but the process ended with the glove unable to fall from the ends of my fingers, hanging inside out while enveloping the piece of fabric. I recalled the tiny root that had been lodged in my finger previously and shuttered with horror.

I did not want to repeat my last experience with the thread, so I decided to cut the attachments off instead. In the tool shed, I found a pair of rusty

pruners. With metal blades in my hand, I returned to the trash bin and held my hand over it once more, this time using the pruners to clip the nasty threads between my fingers and the hanging glove. The horrid material fell away from me.

However, had I known what I was doing, I would have just ripped the insidious cloth away and suffered through the pain once more—for when the glove and fabric fell to the bottom of the trash, five tiny stubs of thread remained protruding from my fingers.

At this point, I began to wonder who the horrible weaver of such material was and who, by the name of all that was sinister, had left it for me.

Feeling more than troubled, I pried at the threads, but could not loosen them; the threads were so short that I could not attain the necessary grip. Even with the use of pliers, I could not pull them. Deep into the night I continued to plot against the threads, tearing and clawing at them, but getting no closer at removing them.

After exhaustion, emotional and physical, I gave up on my trivial strategies. I retrieved again the pruners of my previous usage; I pressed my hand flat against the kitchen table, palm up, and cut each of the very surfaces of the fingers off. A chunk of thread and flesh fell from each severing. Adrenaline voided the pain and allowed a contentness to consume me.

Shortly thereafter, with bandages covering each of my fingers' ends, I collapsed upon my bed, falling instantly to sleep.

The doorbell rang and I found myself staggering into the frailty of consciousness. I hurriedly shook myself into alertness and ran to open the door. My son stood there waiting with his blue and yellow backpack, stuffed to capacity with belongings. We said our hellos and I gave him a huge hug before we moved inside. I guided him in with my bandaged hand upon his shoulder.

We did not get far before I realized that my hand was stuck. My son also noticed that I my hand was strangely placed and became awkward. In a slight scuttle, he tried to get away.

Something then triggered within me—a culminated volcano of insanity erupted under the knowledge of the abominable threads still being there. The menace of the impious fabric had at that moment devoured all control I had ever had in life. I disregarded my son and any love I felt towards him. I left the bounds of care and qualities of fatherhood. All that made me human fled my wholly presence when I placed my free hand upon my son to hold him steady and then ripped my attached hand from his back.

My son screamed a fowl plea, but it was not pain that caused it. He could feel the vibrations sent through the cursed threads attached between us as they extended under my tow. Instead of coming loose, the threads elongated, and as they did so, my hand—then my arm—began to unravel as if I was some poorly sewn toy. Flesh uncurled and blood fell like rain. My body in its entirety had been manipulated into a construction of thread, and it took me the loss of my entire hand and forearm's skin, muscles, and tendons before I realized what was happening and stopped my motion. The skeletal remains of my hand fell limp.

I was then the one that screamed, harshly and absurdly, crying out for some form of reverence to save me from the despair and monstrous suffering. And yet, even amongst my sudden misery and panic, I at once understood the

sudden look upon my son's face as he turned to see me; I knew his intentions. I turned my scream to him, pleading with him, begging with him, not to run away from me—but he did. His own panic tore a nightmare through his mind, causing him to flee the grotesqueness of my state. As he ran, so the threads followed, taking more of my skin and inners with him—my elbow, my bicep, parts of my shoulder and neck. In utter oblivion of affliction, I grabbed the threads with my other hand, stopping the horrible unwinding.

It then became my son's flesh that gave way. When I grabbed the threads, they briefly became taut, transferring the tension to the roots on my son. With the stress and his forward motion, a heap of his flesh pulled away and became further extensions to the thread. He fell to the floor.

Losing blood by the second, I crumpled to the ground myself. A crimson pool expanded about me as I quickly slid into unconsciousness. The shallow, helpless screams of my son echoed along with me into the darkness.

I awoke to the clapping and giggling of a small creature prancing around me in my home. Its face was smooth and contained no eyes, ears, or nose. The mouth upon it ran thin, but curled and gnarled in a haunting smile. As clothing, it wore a gray tunic and strange brown shoes.

The creature came to me in my arousing. It placed its mouth against my ear and whispered to me extraordinary and unforgettable things. It explained my place at the crossroads of worlds; where some beings felt pain and others experienced pleasure; where some beings saw light and others found darkness. I learned of things benign and malevolent, and things uncouth and terrific. I learned of the device it left for me and my success in using it. And then, lastly, just before it vanished, it whispered in glee of the reward I had been given—the gift that I so deserved. From that moment on, I only heard its laugh trail away into the distances of infinity.

Blood stuck to me everywhere, my shirt was gone, and where the flesh and tissue that had been ripped from me once were, was the same yellow fabric I had found abandoned in my kitchen, sewn around my arm and hand until it met real skin upon my shoulder and neck. It was only a covering for I could not sense the arm or hand that was there; they were gone.

I turned to look for my son, but I could not see him. I called out to my son, but I could not hear him. My son was nowhere to be found.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I mourned for him, and as I grew weaker and weaker in my sadness, I fell deeper and deeper into silence until I could hear the beating of my heart. It pattered slowly and heavily, consistent and insistent. I listened to it for a long while, focusing solely on its sweet percussion, and in time, I noticed the beating of a second heart within me, and my sorrows passed away. This heart beat softer, lighter; this heart was my gift.

“Do not cry, my son. Do not cry. They too know what love is. The pain is but their greeting, it will not last forever.”