

## A Void

When it started, I could endure it. A cutting comment here, a hateful look there. I knocked a glass at dinner and was told I did it on purpose. I forgot to say please and was berated for my ungratefulness.

But they picked up pace, my mother's words, lashing my plump cheeks.

"Little shit."

"Waste of space."

"If it wasn't for you I'd be rich."

"If it wasn't for you I'd be happy."

"If it wasn't for you I'd be beautiful."

Things were thrown. A plate shattering over my feet. Red wine aimed at my face. A hand with painted claws pinching my skin. My baby brother's screams escalated in the background, crying for calm as I ducked and stooped. I started to seek shelters, curling up under the bed with a blanket or squeezing myself between the couch and the window, watching for better weather. My favourite retreat was the wardrobe. I felt far removed from my mother's wrath behind the solid doors and the camouflage of hanging clothes.

It was an unpleasantly warm evening when I first found the void. I was clammy, with damp tendrils of hair on my forehead. My brother was toddling now, and I could hear his stout and sticky little fingers trying to pry open the wardrobe doors. Cool air whispered over my left shoulder. I turned. A deep, glistening slit had opened in the back wall. It shimmered invitingly and I was compelled to crawl in. The opening stretched like skin to accommodate me. Inside was an endless, gleaming silence with silvery womb-wet walls. A relieving and glorious nothingness.

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The void stayed open after that first time. As I got older it was no longer just a retreat. I'd come home from school and crawl straight in, sleep in there to pass a night unscathed. Sometimes, before I slipped away, I thought of my brother left in the firing line and felt a glint of guilt.

When I moved out of the house, I got an apartment of my own. A small place with grey-green lighting and exposed brick along one wall. The void opened there too, beside the bathroom door. A smaller slit, just wide enough to squeeze into. I was pleasantly surprised by its size, felt it mirrored my new freedom. For a while it stayed that way, convenient and unassuming. I could slide in quickly after a shower, when memories tended to flare, and let time pass effortlessly and thoughtlessly.

Occasionally, smaller voids would open. Shallow and tight, but enough for fleeting use in a bar bathroom or fire-escape stairway. I could stretch out the sides and push my face in at a pinch, then take a brief moment in the vacuous calm before returning to reality. At particularly desperate times, like at a restaurant where the dinner conversation turned to reminiscing about childhood, I would place my hand under the table and frantically feel around for a tiny opening. I'd often find one, stick a fingertip in and get a small moment of relief. The first void stayed open in the back of the wardrobe. Waiting and welcoming whenever tradition or forced festivity required me to be at the house.

I saw my brother for the first time in a long time at my mother's funeral. He was trying to make eye contact with me as hard as I was trying not to make it with him. He cornered me at the house where the wake was held. Caught me on the stairs as I tried to creep away. He had the same bud-shaped mouth and pleading gaze, but his cheeks and chin were peppered with grey.

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“You left me,” He said.

I didn't reply. Stared at the floor intently.

“Let me in,” he pleaded.

I lifted my gaze. “I want to show you something.”

He followed me to the wardrobe. Raised an eyebrow in confusion when I gestured for him to enter.

“Keep going,” I urged. “All the way in.”

I shoved him hard. He fell deep. I looked into the void and saw him slipping and scrambling against the slick surface. He shouted my name over and over. I ran out to the bedroom and bundled up a duvet and pillows. Frantic, I thrust them into the void, trying to block the slit like it was a gushing wound. I saw his fingers reaching through a gap. I grabbed a basket of clothes and began filling the holes. The walls of the void suctioned around the scrunched-up shirts and unpaired socks. When it was packed tight, I leaned my back against it and breathed hard, exhausted. I left the house quickly.

After my shower that night, I peeled back the narrow opening of the void in my apartment. Its usual elasticity was gone, and it ripped like a slipped stitch. The inside was covered over with a translucent membrane. I shot back as a face pressed against it, like an overdue baby trapped in its amniotic sac. I heard my brother's muffled cries. I ran, throwing on clothes as I left the apartment. I went to all the past voids I could think of; places I'd sought solace. The fire escape stairwell of the mall; the bottom of the local pool; the supermarket cool room; behind the third

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last shelf at the library. Each one was infected, its entrance swollen with the fleshy bulge, my brother pressed up against it, pleading.

There was one final void to check. I rushed back to the house. I tripped over the remnants of the wake – paper plates with discarded food, framed pictures of my mother before I was born and after I had left. I burst into the wardrobe, hands ahead of me.

The void was sealed over like the others. I hit, I spat, I clenched my fists and screamed as I kicked its new skin. I saw my brother's hands pressed against the inside and placed mine over his. Our foreheads touched.

“Let me in,” I pleaded.