

Episode 12 — Mothers of the Hollow Road



The man's name was Gerald. He'd been driving the shortcut for three years—the bypass made it longer, and he was tired, and the old road was empty. He liked empty. His shift at the plant ended at eleven. By midnight he was on the stretch between townships, nothing but dark fields and the occasional stand of pine.

She was on the shoulder just past the four-kilometer marker.

A woman in dark clothes, standing still, hands covering her face. Not hitchhiking. Not signaling. Just there, weeping in the headlights like she'd been planted there.

Gerald's first instinct was to keep driving. His second was to stop. He was tired but not that tired. He pulled over, hazard lights blinking orange across dead grass.

The woman didn't move. Didn't acknowledge the car. Her shoulders shook with the kind of crying that had been going on for a long time—not fresh grief but the relentless kind, the kind that lives in the body.

He got out. Cold night. Stars, if you looked up, but he didn't. He looked at her.

“Ma'am? Are you alright?”

She didn't answer.

He moved closer. “Do you need help? A phone?”

Still nothing. Just that terrible steady weeping. Gerald had seen his mother cry like that. After the funeral. For weeks. Before she stopped everything and became something else.

He touched her shoulder.

She turned.

The face that met his was his mother's face—her swollen eyes, her collapsed expression, the exact geometry of her grief. His mother who had been dead for two years. His mother whose funeral he had attended. Whose grave he had driven past two months ago on Mother's Day.

He stepped back.

The face changed. It was there and not there. Became someone else—an old man's face, weathered and destroyed by loss. Then another face. Then another. A child's face, twisted with the kind of pain children shouldn't know. Then no face at all, just smooth wet skin where features should have been, as if something was wearing a mask of flesh and the mask was too tight, was trying on different shapes and discarding them, cycling through every version of sorrow it had ever worn.

Gerald got back in his car. His hands were shaking. He drove.

The woman—the thing—did not follow. It simply stood on the shoulder, swaying slightly, its blank face turning to track his taillights as they receded.

He made it home. His wife was asleep. He sat at the kitchen table. There was nothing to think about. Nothing to do. Nothing to be. He had touched something and it had answered by showing him something true about the world, and he could not unknow it.

By morning he had become a surface. Breathing. Functioning. Hollow.

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Ace heard the story three times in three different tellings. Once from the dispatcher who'd checked on Gerald when his wife called the station because her husband had stopped being her husband. Once from a bartender in the first town who knew the officer involved. Once from an old woman at a diner who said her grandson had picked up a hitchhiker on that road six months ago and had come home wrong, had remained wrong, and she'd found out later that others had too.

All the stories had the same shape: a woman on the shoulder. Dark clothes. Weeping. Those who stopped for her didn't come back the same.

Ace drove the road in daylight first, going slow, looking. Forty kilometers of mostly empty asphalt, two lanes each way, wide shoulders of dead grass and wildflowers dying off as spring turned toward summer. A few farmhouses set back from the road. Strips of forest. The road itself was well-maintained but little used since the bypass was built. Except at night. Except when people wanted shortcuts.

She drove it three times during the day. Nothing.

At 1:47 AM, she pulled over on the shoulder between kilometer markers fourteen and fifteen, killed the engine, and waited in the dark.

She didn't have to wait long.

The entity stood up from a ditch somewhere, or manifested, or rose from the road itself. Ace couldn't track the exact moment of arrival. One moment the shoulder was empty. The next, it was there.

Woman-shaped. Robed in dark clothes that looked expensive once, expensive and old. Hands hanging at its sides. Head bowed. Even from inside the car, Ace could sense the quality of the weeping—not performed, not pretended, but something genuinely anguished, a grief so absolute it had become a physical property, like gravity.

The entity stood for a long moment, just standing, not moving toward the car. Then its head rose, and its face began to shift, cycling through shapes like a slideshow on too-fast speed. None of them held. None of them were faces at all, really—just impressions of faces, sketches of sorrow, the shape of mourning seen from the outside.

Ace watched.

The entity's face went through a sequence: a young mother. An old man. A child, distorted by pain. A woman in a wedding dress with makeup running. A soldier. A drunk. It couldn't settle. The face that worked was no face at all—just wet, smooth skin where features should be, unmarked and absolute in its wrongness.

Then it did something that might have been looking at Ace through the car window. It did something that might have been recognition.

It took a step toward the vehicle.

Ace got out.

The darkness was complete away from the headlights. The stars barely qualified as light. The road was nothing but the faint asphalt stripe and the entity, which seemed to generate its own absence of illumination—a darker place in an already dark world.

Ace approached on foot.

The moment she was five meters away, something opened in her chest.

Not physical. Something underneath the physical. A chamber that had been sealed and suddenly was not. It had been sealed for a long time. It had needed to stay sealed. Now, this close to the entity, it was opening.

Her mother's face. Not the entity's version—the real one, the one she had carried and discarded and carried again. Her mother's actual voice saying her name, and that name was a name she'd been before, a child, someone loved, someone who could be disappointed. The apartment they'd lived in together when she was still young enough to not know better. The sound of her mother sleeping in the next room. The understanding that everything ended, that people left, that sometimes they didn't come back, that sometimes they died, and you kept going, and there was nothing else to do but keep going.

The entity opened its faceless head toward her.

Ace closed the distance.

She was weeping—not tears on her cheeks but something deeper, a kind of weeping that happened in the marrow—but she didn't slow. She didn't hesitate. She had learned long ago that hesitation in the face of something absolute was just another way to fail.

The entity tried to wrap around her.

It wasn't flesh. It was something like density—a compression of grief itself, given temporary form. It came at her and tried to press something face-like against her face, and it was the most intimate kind of violence, closer than touching, some kind of absolute unmaking pressed directly against her skin and bone.

Her blades came up green in the darkness.

Emerald light spilled across the road. She could see the entity's structure now—not solid, but patterned, layered, like sediment of sorrow compressed and compressed until it had form. It had a shape. The shape was a woman mourning. But underneath the shape was the actual thing: a knot, a clenching, a denseness at the core, something that had fed on grief until it had accumulated into this.

She cut.

The entity's form rippled. It tried to pull back from the blade, but she was inside its radius now. She kept cutting, moving faster than thought, the emerald light trailing. One blade found the core—a place of such concentrated darkness that even her glowing steel seemed to dim in the moment before impact.

She drove it home.

The entity came apart.

Not suddenly. It unraveled like something that had been held in a fist for far too long. The woman-shape dispersed into something less formed. The darkness lost coherence. Grief without object, anguish without source. It came apart and kept coming apart until it was just the dark again, just the road, just the night.

Ace stood on the shoulder, breathing.

Her blades went dark.

She could still feel the chambers inside her that had opened, but they were closing again, sealing themselves up. Not healing. Just shutting down. Just becoming surfaces again. In a minute she would be functional. In an hour, she would be fine.

She looked down the road. Nothing moved. Nothing wept. The darkness was just darkness.

There were people in the region who had been touched by the entity before it died. Gerald, sitting at his kitchen table, his wife trying to reach him across a distance of a few feet and a thousand empty miles. Others like him. The woman who'd picked up a hitchhiker and had come home wrong. A teenager who'd stopped to help someone on the shoulder and hadn't come back to himself. They would remain as they were. The grief that the entity had extracted from them was not stored inside the entity itself—it was gone, consumed, transformed into the entity's fuel. You could not return what had been digested.

There was nothing to be done about that.

Ace got back in her car. The engine caught. The headlights cut the darkness. She turned around and drove back toward the first town, and then beyond it, toward wherever the road would take her next.

Behind her, the stretch of asphalt where she'd killed the thing fell quiet. The stars wheeled overhead. The wind moved through the grass. The darkness, having been pressed back, didn't press back. It just waited. The road was empty. The road would be empty for a long time.

And eventually, someone would take the shortcut at night again, and they would drive it slowly, and they would not see a woman weeping on the shoulder, and they would not understand what they had avoided. They would go home to their families and they would be whole, and they would never know how close they had come to becoming something that looked like them but wasn't, some echo wearing the outside shape of a person but with nothing alive underneath.

They would live. That would have to be enough.

It would be enough.

Ace drove on into the dark, alone, the way she drove everywhere. The road behind her was healing already, forgetting already, becoming just a road again. The world had a way of moving on. It always did. The dead stayed dead. The hollowed stayed hollowed. And the living—those who hadn't been touched, who'd never stopped to help a woman on a dark shoulder—they just kept driving, kept living, kept being whole, and they never even knew to be grateful.

The night kept its secrets. The road kept moving. And Ace kept driving, because there was always another thing, always another hunt, always another darkness wearing a shape that needed to be stopped.

She had her blades. She had her car. She had the knowledge that she would keep going.

That was enough. It had to be.

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