

Bleeding Hearts

By James Strong

The crumble of clean sheets preludes the creaking of the old wooden floor beneath my feet. I rise and step into the familiar darkness of my room. Flashes of car lights pass through the half-blinded window. I listen to the wind rush past in the wake of the automobile, and like a phantom, it vanishes into the night. The stale air of my domicile smells of iron and candle smoke. The drab walls of the hallway echo the sound of the grandfather clock under the crack of my door. My weary eyes glance at it just in time to watch a candlelight pass by. No doubt, my Lady, retiring to her own chamber.

I shiver, the stale air's chill envelops my nude figure. Without thought, I reach up to my neck to feel fresh markings upon my collarbone, tokens of her love. Petty annoyance rose as I stood out of bed. If she wanted to partake of my flesh, she should have awakened me. I wanted to feel the thrill of my life dripping between my fingers and the velvet smooth song of her voice as she danced with my life along a razor's edge. That domain of lust and fear was the only place I ever felt alive in. As I dressed myself in the soft light of the electric lamp, my sluggish and stiff movements reminded me of a corpse. In a way, I had been one for some time. Not like her, though, she was immortal, regal, *beautiful*. I detest her with every fiber of my being.

To maintain her beauty, my Lady must feed, and so I must provide lest those unfortunate enough to cross her path become her prey. I was happy to take their place. I enjoyed the thrill of the hunt, to be wanted- nay, *needed* by her. But my feeble body could not sate her appetite; I was a fool to think one man could fill a void within someone so black and great. No doubt the

remains of her latest rendezvous awaited me in the washroom. To which my chosen attire, a uniform in black, was best suited to deal with.

The manor, an extravagant townhome in an older part of the city, had that same stale air to it as the one I awoke to in my own room. Its interior was clear of dust and blemish, due to my thankless attempts at maintaining its dignity. I was livestock, but had no intention of living in the same conditions as one. It was my own little acceptable rebellion. My lady enjoyed her cleanliness, and I held onto what little scrap of humanity I still had. The manor still had this drab greyness to it that was an ever-present reminder that it was not a home.

Even as I recall that brisk Autumn morning, I cannot remember the time between my awakening and the march to the basement. My memory returns to me as I reach the final step down to that dark cellar room. Flies rush towards the light of the open door, whipping around me as I enter. I feel the crunch of cement and dried blood beneath my shoes as I step towards the solitary source of light in that dungeon, a hanging lightbulb.

Slumped in a porcelain tub was the blood-bathed, fly-infested corpse of my Lady's most recent victim. I gag and cover my nose and mouth. Her smell is putrid, pure rot with a hint of something sweet to further exacerbate my nausea. I hold a cloth up to my nose and approach the remains. The interior of the tub is pure filth, a dozen thin layers of previous occupants' flesh, blood, hair, and nails, make the final resting place of that poor woman. Before I step out to work, I reach out and turn her face away. I try not to look at her, but I see her arched nose and pale green eyes. Her name tried to return to my mind, but I forced it back down.

I never look at their faces. Not since the first time I had been charged with seeing my Lady's "guests" to the door. The first time I did so, my lady escorted me down to the cellar. She was taller than me then, and held my arm so gently. She told me,

“You have the makings of a proper gentleman.”

I felt so... proud. My parents were harbor rats from the Emerald Isle, and I was treated the same as them, despite being born in the city as they arrived. I had been called all manner of slurs, names, had rocks thrown at me, and had been treated worse than a rabid dog. Even by my own father, who saw me as the symbol of everything he hated about his life, himself, and everyone around him. I felt so proud, I was a young gentleman. I was better than him. Such notions of pride vanished as my Lady had us walk down the stairs at the back of the hallway.

Even back then, when I was younger, I felt the cellar was from the darkest pits of hell. As she brought me over to the bathtub in the back, I felt myself begin to heave from the rank stench of death. I remember the moment of seeing who was inside the tub so vividly. It was both my father and my mother; their bodies lay over one another in such a manner that it was as if they had melded into one grotesque shape. I wanted to scream, but I held my tongue. My lady had taught me that gentlemen would never exclaim loudly. A polite and quiet tone must be held at all times. I turned to her as she brought her pale and cold fingers around my face. They reminded me of icicles, so fragile and deadly. She smiled softly and whispered, “There shall be none before us. I am your only true love, and thou shall be mine and mine alone.”

Terrified as I was, I agreed. There was no one else for me in the world but my Lady. The heartless monster that stood before me was also the object of my obsessions. I had sought her out for her beguiling beauty, and I had become her lover as I had wished. For you see, beneath my fear and my anguish, I felt pure hatred and adoration for her. I am far worse a monster than my lady Elizabeth could ever have hoped to be.

The most recent victim looked to be my age, a woman on the cusp of her adulthood, fated to be forever young. She would never know what it would be to grow old, to attend to academia,

to marry, to love. One of countless others who met a similar end. My lady preferred women; she said they tasted better with caviar.

The victim could have been any number of women I had spoken to in that speakeasy in Brooklyn. I tried to forget their names, but their faces I would always remember. It is why I covered their bodies with cloth; the burden of their memory was one I selfishly could not hope to carry.

Per my Lady's instructions, I laid the guest upon a metal cot and carried her over to the blast furnace. Heat rose as I stoked the flames, and an air of vile warmth clashed with the stale chill of the room. The foul smell of burnt flesh assaulted my nostrils, and the damning weight upon my shoulders pushed me to the floor. I clawed at my hair, pulling out a handful as I let out a squeak of guilt-ridden agony. I knew that body that was in there. She was a woman, a person with hopes to go to a women's college in the upper state. She was going on a trip to Paris to see her aunts and uncles in a month, a trip her family could barely afford, but hoped to do so that she could see the world outside of the cramped, grey labyrinth of the city, and now she was set to be a pile of ashes locked away in a monster's den. I had been the one who spoke with her all those nights ago. I dreamed of running away with her to France, to get as far away from this accursed town as possible. Even though I didn't love her, she was still someone I had hoped, even for the briefest of moments, to learn to love. As terrible as my Lady was, I will always be worse than her.

The time spent waiting for the ashes was always the worst. I paced around, and I went through the same plots of murder that I had dreamed of each time before. I would kill her. I would kill that monster who bore the name Elizabeth. I would finally retrieve the box of stakes and chalk I hid within the floorboards. To rush to her chambers and lift the lid from her tomb, to

rend her beating heart from her chest and offer it to the heavens for mine own salvation. Redemption, vengeance, a balance of the karmic scales. The world is set right. Though doing so would mean I'd have to face what I had done, and carry the burden of my sins for all time to come. I'd rather burn in the hell that awaited me, for admitting I had- nay, still loved my lady Elizabeth, despite everything she had done, was too shameful to even fancy. It's never easy to kill someone you love.

I always went out at night. Years in service to my Lady had fashioned my life to that of a night owl. The city was similar in that way. I had heard that it was a place that never slept, which made it a paradise for someone like me. Countless bars, theaters, shows, movies, restaurants, the list goes on and on.

As a member of the socialite class, my Lady and I had been invited to all manner of these places thanks to her connections. I had dined in the finest of restaurants and partaken in the sweetest of wines with a woman men would kill for. But, in my experience, nothing beats imported beer at a hidden bar, packed shoulder to shoulder with all manner of lowlives and common folk. You can take the rat out of the harbor, but you can't take the harbor out of the rat.

It was in those places I felt as though I could avoid the watchful eye of my Lady. Every night after she has guests over, she rests. Beauty sleep, she called it. Her cruelty knew no limit. But in human places like the speakeasy, I could forget how both she and I were mere shapes of people, inhuman creatures. Drowned in the smell of smoke, the noise of chatter and brass bands, and the haze of the early light, I could feel alive. But not on that night.

I always sat in the eighth seat away from the bar, a habit I had picked up because usually there were open spots around that seat. As I enjoyed my evening, conversing with the occasional passerby about the most mundane of topics, I couldn't help but recall the events of the morning.

Every time I saw a guest out, I thought about it. But something about that morning stung more than the others. At a certain point, I quit talking and focused on my thoughts. I wasn't sure why it had hurt more, but no amount of liquor could quell the dull invisible weight that rested on my head. I sat slumped, staring at my distorted reflection in the hardwood. What a hideous sight.

"Excuse me, are you well, sir?" A velvety, warm woman's voice called out to me.

I didn't move and mumbled a half-hearted response.

"I'm fine, yeah."

She sat in the empty seat to my right, and I glanced to get a look at her. She was dressed more plainly than most of the people who were there. Black hair cut short to her shoulders, and pale skin. A distinct look, one that made her stand out despite her rather practical choice of attire: a long dress and a worker's jacket. Her accent was distinct, European for certain, but not one I was familiar with.

"Where are you from?" I asked, lifting my head from my hands.

"Romania." She said as she paid for her drink, turning to look at me.

"Never met someone from there before. What are you doing here? Is it a pastime in your country to bother strangers while they drink?" I said, as I squinted with suspicion. I had heard stories from my Lady. That country was akin to the Garden of Eden for her ilk.

"Only lonely men with no one to chat with." The Romanian woman smiled, but it was a fake smile. I've done the same kind of smile a thousand times.

"Well. I'm quite taken. Just trying to enjoy my night." I returned the fake grin to her.

“I don’t see a ring on your finger.” Her grin that time was genuine, smug even. I instinctively covered my hand, but it was too late. I sighed and shook my head.

“Well, you see my Lady is... inclined to the female persuasion. I merely stay with her for appearances' sake.” Not entirely a lie, not entirely the truth. The most effective of descriptions, but one that I had worn into the ground by overuse.

“Why do you commit yourself to someone who does not love you?” She asked.

I paused, the band in the background of our quiet conversation reached its crescendo, only to be met with great applause by the rest of the room.

“She loves me in her own way, even if I hate her,” I said, my voice barely audible over the cheers of the crowd. The Romanian’s face shifted to an expression I didn’t quite understand. Perhaps it was pity, disgust? Neither was quite right. Though, as I recall the moment, perhaps it was some manner of sympathy.

“My name is Natalia,” She said as she reached into her coat.

“I’m Lloyd, but I don’t think-” I tried to respond before Natlia subtly pulled a pocket pistol from her coat and pushed it against my side. Using our closeness to conceal her weapon.

“I know who you are.” She glared, whispering sharply as she checked my jacket for a weapon that wasn’t there. I didn’t care to push her away. A gunshot to the stomach was the least I deserved. I just looked at her, blank, apathetic. She hadn’t shot me immediately, which meant there was still a game of questions to be played.

“And who is that?” I asked, taking a final sip of my bitter beer.

“You’re the butler of that *thing* in the old manor. A thrall of the Vampyr, the only thrall, surprisingly. And you shall be my means of vengeance.” She whispered. Her eyes quickly scanned the settling crowd before she whispered again.

“Outside.” As she began to stand, I followed suit, wrapping my arm with hers as she continued to press the pistol into my side, hidden by her jacket. We stepped out into the quiet Brooklyn streets, the sound of sirens and laughter in the distance as a cold breeze greeted us. She guided our walk, taking the lead, something I was quite used to. She guided me to an alleyway a block away before she stepped away from me. She kept the gun close to her, and I put my hands up less out of a desire for safety and more for formality's sake.

“Might I ask, why do you wish to kill my Lady?”

“That monster charmed my darling sister to do her dirty work back when she haunted my homeland. But when my sister attempted to flee home, your Lady devoured her as she had a thousand other victims. My mother was so grief-stricken she took her own life, and my father became so obsessed with hunting that thing down that I practically lost him, too. You’re lucky I found you first, for if my father had, he would have killed you on the spot.” Natlia answered. She tightened her grip on the pistol, and for a moment, I hoped she’d just shoot me dead right then and there.

“He’d be right to do so,” I said.

That caught her off guard. She flinched, her expression softening and her pale blue eyes going wide with some manner of shock. But she suppressed her shock and steadied her aim, something I noted as rather professional, admirable even.

“No games. No tricks. You will take me to the manor now. I know the Vampyr feasted last night, and you are the only one around to guard her resting place. Let me into the house and show me where it is where she rests. So that I might end all our suffering.”

“And if I don’t, you’ll kill me?” I asked.

“No. Your mistress is more likely to kill you than I am.” Natlia said before she holstered her gun back into her jacket. She was good, too good. I sighed, annoyed at her insistence on letting me off the hook.

“No.” I balled my fists and glared at her.

She looked expectantly. I remember thinking angrily about how she should have just killed me then and there. Hot anger boiled in my chest, and like a man possessed, I began to speak.

“The only person who gets to kill her is me. She murdered my parents and forced me into this monkey suit for her own amusement. I’m gonna make sure she feels every ounce of agony I have felt in my years of service.”

Even now, I’m not sure if I believe in what I said. Some part of me thinks that I had finally had enough, and when given a chance to do what I should have done, I took it. The other part of me knows that I was lying, not just to Natalia but to myself.

The Romanian woman’s lips were drawn tight. We stood there, staring at each other, lost in one another’s eyes. I wonder if she saw anything in mine. She had to have, because to my surprise, she reached into her jacket again and tossed something to me.

“Then take this.”

In my hands landed a knife carved of birch wood. Far more intricate than the ones I had made over the years in the manor. At its hilt, a crucifix dangled at the even of a rosary woven around the hilt. Such an object would have been seen as a great heresy within the house of the Lady. But it was my hope, my own little sin. A crime against the sanguine goddess whom I paid tribute to. I was an ungrateful worshipper, butler, lover. I dared to hope a creature, immortal and infallible as her, was worthy of death's iron grasp.

I pocketed the stake and turned, homeward bound.

Iron and candle smoke washed over me as I stepped back into the manor of Elizabeth. I stormed up the stairs and into the upper hallway, not bothering to close the front door behind me. Faint moonlight guided me as it shone through the curtains. A wave of silent rage followed my every step; I attempted not to lose courage as I had many times before. I stormed to the end of the long hallway and faced the great portrait of Elizabeth, with pale skin, long auburn hair, and brown eyes, a shade of deep maroon. She was gorgeous.

I tore the painting from the wall, its shredded remains crumpled to the floor as I pried on the door that had been hidden behind it. With a great heave, I pulled it open; the condensed air within stung my eyes and nose. The room was pitch black, sequestered away in a part of the manor where the bright eye of God could not witness the debauchery within.

With a mighty step, I walked in. First came the scent of blood, the air so thick I felt as though I was walking through it. Then came the smell of summer flowers, a choice set of perfumes I had come to associate with her.

A stone-lidded coffin rested like an altar in the center of the room. All manner of carved runes and scenes of battle, rituals, and stories lay around its side. I let out the first breath I had taken since I had entered Elizabeth's chamber. I approached the lid and, with such force as I did not know myself capable of, I thrust it off, exposing the slumbering body of my Lady Elizabeth.

She slept still as a corpse, but with all the beauty of a marble statue. Even in my fury, I marveled at her before producing the stake from my jacket. As I began to bring it out and above her, her eyes suddenly shot open, and she looked at me.

I let the stake slip from my fingers and held my hands up as she rose to grab me. I expected to be torn to fine ribbons, and what little blood remained within me drained. But instead, I felt the familiar sensation of her cold fingers around my shoulders as she pulled me into a loving embrace.

“My love, what are you doing? Are you well?” Her words were poisonous. My blood quivered, and my fingers ached.

“Oh my precious Lloyd, speak to me, what troubles you?”

My anger vanished with each concerned whisper. She rose from her coffin, her eyes glanced down to the accursed stake at my feet, to which she proceeded to look back at me. I had expected anger or fear, but she looked concerned, concerned *for me*. I felt as if I needed to retch.

“I...” Words failed me. She put a finger to my lips to silence me.

“Tell me who put you up to this?”

I did not answer. I had not the heart to tell her that I loathed her so much to stoop to murder. Suddenly, she turned her head down the hall. I followed suit, though I had heard nothing; she had heard something. My first was Natlia, which, to my horror, was all but confirmed.

“There’s only one. She’s waiting outside. I smell her hatred and hear her heart quake with fear.”

Elizabeth’s tongue snaked from her lips, showing a faint glint of her elongated canines.

“I am still not at my full strength from feeding.” She said as she stepped away from me.

“But if you can lure the woman inside, I will ambush her. Do this, and I shall forgive you insolence and half-hearted attempt at betrayal.” Her voice was more stern, distant, and without emotion, a reminder as to what she truly was.

In a blur of motion, I reached down and grabbed the stake. Elizabeth turned around in surprise at my sudden movement. Or perhaps she could smell the avarice coursing through my veins. I don't remember how many times I stabbed her, a dozen, a hundred, truly, it did not matter. One was enough, but as I said, I wanted it to hurt. It did.

By the time I was finished, a great hole rested in her chest where her heart had once been. Her alabaster white fingers clawed at the hole as she gasped for air. Slowly, we slumped to the ground, her wrapped in my arms as I looked at her with tears in my eyes.

She looked at me, at first with such anger I had never known, before her expression softened and she blinked, a single tear washed down her face. Her skin greyed and grew flaky, like ash. Her hands were no longer cold, merely numb, as she whispered her final words to me.

“I love you, Lloyd...”

Her body broke into a thousand pieces within my arms. What remained of her stained across my suit. As I sat there, I felt a great pit open in my chest, as if I had been who had my heart stabbed. I looked at the bloodstained crucifix still in my hand, and gripped it tightly.

I didn't hear Natalia's footsteps as she entered the empty room that was once my Lady's chamber. She looked around before her gaze landed on me. She had a stake in one hand and her pistol in the other. As she looked me up and down, she stepped forward and pressed the gun to my head.

“Thrall. Repent for your sins or perish with your Lady.” She said, almost hopeful in her tone. She genuinely thought I was worthy of such a thing.

Slowly, and gently, I lowered the barrel of the gun from my head to my heart.

“I don't want redemption. I want judgment. And don't make it quick, I want it to hurt.”

Natlia sighed sadly and frowned. “Very well. You shall feel pain.”

She stepped back and put the pistol back into her pocket. She walked to the door and looked back at me with that same sympathy she had shown before. I sat there, dumbstruck, stunned, tears flowing freely.

“I’ll be outside waiting for you. Don’t even think about running.” She said,

I had asked her to make it hurt, and it did. Though I did not show it, I could feel my heart ache, and it still does to this day. The mark of my love, my obsession, my ire, and my nightmare, Elizabeth still makes me bleed to this day.