

Nightrise

By

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If she hadn't done it, it would have been okay.

But she had.

She had used her strength to thwart his plans.

She shouldn't have done it.

Now he would have to face it alone.

It was over quickly, it shouldn't have happened that way.

She should have let him...let *nature* take them through their relationship together, leading them to where they must inevitably part, where he would step back and let her go to her own destiny.

He had explained it so carefully to her, what else was he supposed to do? He had sighed at the look of blank terror in her eyes and begun the explanation again, telling her tenderly everything that he was going to do to prepare her, like a surgeon explaining a procedure to a trusting patient.

But she was not trusting. Nor was she patient. She should have waited, it would have been perfect, but even as he had advanced the thin blade towards her cheek she had jerked her head, not back as he had expected and allowed for, but forwards, impaling herself deliberately through the centre of her forehead. Her eyes had widened just a tiny bit and then she was gone.

What a waste. What a premature...

Now he sat in the semi-dark, his clenched fist jerking on his knee, his feet tapping out a complex rhythm on the lino, staring over at the limp figure spread-eagled on the table. Why

had she done it? Why had she ruined his plans? They could have had a beautiful time together, could have had fun.

Didn't she know he loved her?

His fury exploded. He lunged towards the table, falling on her, beating the soft, yielding flesh of her naked, lifeless body until he was spent. His breath came in raw, rasping whoops as he stared at her, thick saliva dribbling from the corners of his mouth, hating the way she flopped sideways. She didn't care what he was doing. Her face was set in an ugly grimace, like a doll would keep on smiling when you stamp on its stupid plastic head.

What did she take him for?

They had met just tonight, and right away he had known he loved her. It was clear by the tightening of his balls when he looked at her, by the way his head pulsed, and the sweat had broken out on his palms. This was true love, he had read all about it in books and about her and what she would do, on the toilet wall in the pub. She had smiled at him as she served his drink, and he knew then that she loved him too. She had even brushed his palm as she had given him change.

Inviting.

Well *he* had invited *her* in the end.

He had waited until the pub closed, and then he had met her coming out the back door, startling her by putting a hand over her mouth and shoving her up against the cold stone wall. She had struggled, but he had held his blade up so that the light from the street glinted on it; silver blue. So pretty. Immediately she saw its beauty and grew still, and he nodded, breathing hard with exertion and satisfaction and love.

She had come back to his place quite happily after that, which proved she was as attracted to him as he was to her – that she loved him just as much. It was only after he had asked her sweetly to undress that she grew reluctant. She must be a virgin, he had thought tenderly. So shy, bless her, so uncertain of her beauty that she felt she had to cover it up with her hands.

Now look at her. Lying there on the table, her hands tied above her head and secured underneath, tied to the table legs. All frozen smiles of teeth, of gum and tongue. Coy looks, but you try to get near any of the bitches and they close their legs faster than you could...

He'd thought this one was different though. She had lain down with hardly any need for the steel at all, and the small cut on her throat wasn't life-threatening. It had bled a little more than he'd expected though, that would have to be cleaned up. She had remained quiet throughout the whole process of being tied, but when he had started to explain what fun they would have, there had been that foolishness...he sighed.

If she hadn't done it, it would have been okay.

There was no point worrying about it now. Practicality intruded – he would have to take her nevertheless.

Outside. The alley. Where the hungry thing was.

Night rose in the alley.

It didn't fall.

It rose with a black heaviness.

He knew it was there, he never went into that place unless he had to. Unless he fell in love...

In all the years he had lived at this place he had never seen anyone else there either, not the winos he had come to expect from the other hell-shade places he found himself at night, no dogs snouted at gutters. He knew why. There was something in that alley. It had a voracious appetite and, unless it was kept fed, it would come after him. Perhaps it was Hunger itself that lurked in the inky black.

He hadn't seen it, not ever. But can you see hunger? You can see its effect ... distended bellies, drooling mouths, sunken, bruised eyes and green-grey cheeks.

But he felt it every night-rise. Digging deep into his mind, making its demands.

He had always returned to his flat with a greasy sweat lining his collar and running down his sides, with heart thudding, and a powerful trembling taking control of his limbs, but he'd always made it back.

Now he had to go again, and this time he was sure he wouldn't be so lucky, not now.

She shouldn't have done it.

For a second he hated her for it, but as he looked down at her, his love resurfaced and he touched her gently, only slapping her slack face when she didn't smile more gently at him and thank him for his understanding.

Ah, but she couldn't, could she?

She had used her strength to thwart his plans.

The blade still protruded from her forehead and he gripped the handle, glad now that she had died quickly and there was little more blood after the nick at her throat. Pulling hard he felt the blade slide free easily, and he wiped it on her hair before preparing her for her final journey. A couple of black plastic bags would be enough, he knew. No-one ever found his lost loves. The Hunger saw to that.

Now he would have to face it alone.

Except now he suddenly found himself unable to venture into that place. He stopped at the entrance and felt his skin prickle at the thought of taking a single step into the blackness. His bundle slipped in his arms but he hadn't moved. He remembered the feeling of acid warmth that had spread down the inside of his chilled thighs...still he couldn't go into the alley.

Breathing hard, eyes bulging, he dropped his love on the pavement and the black bag slithered to the ground in an ugly heap at his feet, all angles and hollows, soft bumps and awkward shapes.

He backed away, knowing full well why this time had been different and needing to get away from the urgency of stark terror. There had been no sound to drive him, no shadows moving down there, no alley stench of rot and corruption...but he knew that if he didn't get away it would get him...he had offered it death instead of life, and he knew that there would be no second chances. The hunger fed on fresh kills, no vulture or hyena with an appetite for carrion.

Two weeks passed before he fell in love again, it had taken him that long to get over his last heartbreak.

He saw the girl as she stepped off the bus, and as her long blonde hair gleamed in the headlights of passing cars he realised that all his feelings for his previous women had been

shallow pretences. This girl, her lush figure wrapped in a heavy winter coat, was the real thing. His one, true love.

No-one was waiting to meet her from the bus and even less time to fall into step a short distance behind her. She glanced back once or twice, her steps quickening, heels clacking on the wet tarmac as she hurried across the road to the wide, brightly lit pavement.

But he knew she was his, it was going to be a matter of moments, no more. Three people tramped home through the thin drizzle, heads low, minds turned inward...no attention paid to the girl and her devoted follower. But nevertheless the girl seemed to relax when she saw the other night people, and slowed her pace to remain close.

But these were city people. They moved through the world with the single purpose of getting from one minute to the next in their own lives...others were bit players, extras on their stage, not worth wasting lines on.

He closed in behind her. He could almost hear her breathing now. He called a bright "hello!" to detract from the so-far silent stealth of his approach. She turned, and within a second he had grabbed her arm, his back to the few remaining walkers within earshot.

Her eyes wide with terror, she had pulled away, her mouth open to scream before she saw the knife he held close to her face. Silence. It always worked. He put one arm around her shoulder like an old friend, the blade pressed against her side as he walked her the short distance to his flat.

Within an hour of her arrival at his home, she was wrapped, held lovingly in his arms and waiting at the entrance to the alley.

Most importantly, she was alive...

And here he was, ready to present his offering. He took a deep breath and stepped forwards. The blackness folded itself around him, drawing him deeper into its throat, brushing velvet fingers across his cool, sweating face. He tried to welcome that sensual touch, but he felt his knees buckle, his scalp prickle. His chest was hammering hard under the strain of his fear and the burden he carried, and he shifted his grip on the unwieldy bags as he felt them slip.

"Not real, not real," he chanted under his breath, taking another shaky step.

"How can it be real? I'm a cra-hazy person...I'm a freak, a murderer, a madman..."

He chanted this over and over to himself under his breath, finding the strength to move further and further onwards, searching out the place where he had left countless other women before this one.

The logic of his litany was not lost on him, and he knew that in this dark place he was as close to sane as he would ever be, of *course* he was a murderer. A dangerous lunatic who had created the alley-monster to justify his hunger for violence. Text-book stuff.

This was his territory after all, this cold, cold alleyway. This theatre of darkness and death, this nightmare corridor that seethed and whispered around him. So, nothing to fear then, from this place and he breathed more easily, walking taller now and almost smiling as he found his way unerringly along the uneven passage.

As he walked he found himself growing colder, despite the effort of carrying the slippery black bags. And was it his imagination or was the alley getting longer? He was sure he should have reached the end by now, and the ground suddenly seemed less easy to navigate. He began to stumble on ridges and stones where none had been before, because there had *been* no 'before' here.

His heart seemed to expand inside his ribcage, pushing up until his throat clenched. He stared into the blackness, knowing that now he had no idea how far he had come along the alley, he had lost all sense of belonging. He found himself doubting his earlier self-assurances, that this was his own territory, a horror house of his own making...what if there really *was* something down here? What if Hunger *were* a thing...an alley beast...tangible...living...here...

The alley itself moved around him, a great black maw that craved nourishment and demanded the life he brought so that it could grow, and grow and...

And it *had* grown. The alley had grown. The Hunger had grown. He had nurtured...

Before, he had felt as if a casually stretched arm would allow him to brush the walls with his chilled fingertips, but now it was as if he were standing in a huge cavern that stretched away on all sides, maybe as far as the gates of Hell itself.

How? How did an emptiness grow fat?

A whimper caught in his taut throat and he gripped the woman tighter. The bundle twitched slightly in his arms. Once, then again, more violently. A third time and no matter how tightly he grasped her he was unable to hold her any longer. She thudded to the ground at his feet.

At once, still wrapped in her black plastic she wrestled against the bonds that held her, her feet kicking a hole in the bag and allowing one high-heeled shoe to rip across his leg. He hissed at the sudden, unexpected pain and kicked back, connecting with something soft. She grunted, and her legs scissored wildly, spinning her around in a circle as she struggled. He knew that if she escaped he would never be allowed to follow suit, and he dropped across her, pinning her to the ground.

He lay there for a moment, breathing hard, wondering what would happen now. Before he had always brought them here unconscious, and just known, somehow, that he had pleased the alley, the Hunger. His love for the brides always kept them alive, he knew that, except that one who had... *She shouldn't have done it...* angered the Alley's hunger. Left the Hunger's alley unsatisfied.

It wouldn't happen again, he couldn't let it. And now he had made up for his negligence, the beast should once more be appeased.

His captive struggled desperately beneath him and he found her head in the darkness, bringing it down hard on the ground to stun her. Instantly the movement ceased and he stood carefully, relieved that he had fulfilled his duty and could now leave.

But which way? In the scuffle with the woman he had lost his bearings and now it was no longer a matter of simply turning one hundred and eighty degrees and running for his life. He stared around him in a panic, hoping to find tiny glow somewhere in the distance to give him a goal.

And there it was...with a cry of relief he started towards the red speck in the distance, tripping, sliding, tumbling in his desperate rush to be free of this place.

Then he stopped in confusion. The red speck had become two. Set what seemed to be an impossible distance apart in an alley of this size...and as he sank to his knees in realisation, they moved.

Eyes.

Dear God they were eyes and they were fixed on him...

He scrambled backwards, somehow finding his feet again, and turned to run the other way, but something caught at him and shoved hard, sending him stumbling to his knees again, the skin abrading on the rough ground. He felt a warm rush of air howling past his head, and somehow words formed in the deepest part of his mind, the part the alley had always inhabited.

“AGAIN...AGAIN YOU BRING ME DEATH?”

“No!” he squealed, hearing the terrified whistling of his own puny voice in the heaving, gale-torn alley.

“She’s alive, I brought her alive...”

“YOU LIE! SMELL THE DEATH!!”

He was picked up and dragged bodily, feeling the claws sinking into his flesh to the bone. Blood ran down his arms and legs, muscle peeling away, flaps of skin hanging loose as he was hurled bodily through the air. He landed hard on squeaking, rustling plastic. Red light flared down and, fighting back the nausea and pain, he peeled back the plastic from the woman’s face.

Wide blue eyes stared back at him. Glassy, lifeless. He saw the light reflecting off the sticky pool of blood that seeped from under her blonde hair, matting it in clumps above her left ear.

His love, gone. As he moved to cradle her head he felt his own injuries screaming, the exposed muscle tissue slick with his own blood and he almost passed out with the agony of simple movement.

A bright white hope blasted through him even as he bit back a scream. Maybe the terrible injuries inflicted on him were his payment for once more cheating this alley of the life it needed to sustain it. Maybe he had paid, learned his lesson and would be free to go. After all, the alley needed him...

He dropped the dead woman, Straightening up, he took a deep breath and turned to walk away.

He had taken two steps when he felt the claw on his shoulder.

No-one ever found his body either.

THE END

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