

Disease

A brilliant burst of lightning lit up the sitting room for a brief moment, followed by an abrupt crack of thunder that shook the house, jarring him awake from his place on the couch. He sat up and squinted across the darkened space through the window covered partway by dark, burgundy draperies that flowed to the floor like cooled wax. Sheets of water rippled down the glass, distorting the night into a surreal chaos of colors that shifted and moved in the darkness.

He hadn't needed to see the lightning, or smell the wetness hanging in the air, or hear the rhythmic, muffled patter of raindrops on the pitched roof to know it was raining. His bones told him. His body told him. He always knew.

The rain was lessening enough, allowing him to once more hear the crackling of the fire that danced in the hearth before his resting place. He sighed, reluctant to rise from the deep, plush sofa that--as he always put it--held him like the caress of a loving mother. A mother's love is what he felt he needed whenever the pain knifed through him like this, but she who had bore him had passed long ago and would never have been able to muster the compassion to comfort a man in his horrid condition anyway.

Sleep served as a temporary respite from the tormenting agony of a disease that consumed his body and his soul. For now, once again, the time had come for a more artificial means to lessen his misery so he could endure existence if only a little while longer—something he had been telling himself far longer than his memory could recall.

He rose slowly, a tall, thin man of such slightness as to seem no more than a shadow. Only his black evening coat and trousers gave him form, clinging to his emaciated body like a shroud. His skin was a thin sheet of stark white cloth stretched to the point of breaking over his long face, and the dark holes that were his eyes consumed the fire, offering no promise of a reflection in return. Standing there, the haunting figure seemed ready to collapse in a pile of bones at the slightest exertion. Yet somehow he remained on his feet.

His thin, gray lips cracked into a sardonic smile, welcoming the searing pain that shot through his frail body like so much lightning probing through the clouds. The pain was always there, sometimes a nagging reminder at the edge of his thoughts, sometimes a raging demon demanding his full attention ...

as it did now. But somehow he had become used to it after so many years, for what else could he have done when there was no other choice?

He regarded the small fireplace that seemed just able to contain the blaze bouncing and popping with life. The hint of smoke, mixed with the thick humidity in the air, made for an aroma that triggered an unpleasant memory buried deep within his troubled mind of a time deep in his past. He fought to focus on the moment, shutting out the sorrow of the events that cost him his hopes and dreams forever, but it was difficult, sometimes impossible.

At times he sat and watched the fire for hours, endlessly mesmerized by the randomness with which it ebbed and flowed. The flames were ever alive without a care in the world, as he had been long ago. It was during those reflective moments when he contemplated death the most. How many times he had longed to throw himself into the flames and let them surround him, love him, release him. But his desire to live had always triumphed. And for his weakness he cursed himself.

The drumming of raindrops on the house had ceased altogether by the time he stepped out of the room and into the hallway, where a pair of dim lights showed the way to the stairs. The house seemed to sigh as if thankful that the shower had ended so it could finally begin drying off. Its tall, thin master of many years sighed too, but for an entirely different reason.

He made his way into the spacious living room, where a pair of ornate lamps at either end lent the area a soft illumination. Sensitive to light, he preferred things darkened with just enough glow for him to see and appreciate the décor. He moved to the far end of the room to the television set and reached out with a thin, gaunt hand. Slender fingers, not unlike claws, turned the switch, bringing the magic box to life with the blaring sounds of gunfire and screaming police officers.

His eyes narrowed in reflex to the television screen's bright light before slowly opening wider as his pupils constricted enough to make it bearable. For a few minutes he took in the show, a look of tired regret spread across his sunken face. Such a wonderful tool used so frivolously to glamorize death and sorrow. It never ceased to amaze him how these visions hypnotized modern day people. They had such short lives with so many wonders in the world to explore. Death should be the furthest thing from their minds. He chuckled to himself as he realized that death was the *only* thing on his mind. He felt like a hypocrite.

A second sparse figure, hunched with age, approached from a side door. He wore a smart black suit of the kind traditionally worn by a butler, with every crease pressed and every button polished to perfect brilliance. The old man, with only a narrow strip of white hair left along the back of his head, stepped up carrying a silver tray. Upon it rested a tall wine glass of the finest crystal filled only a fraction with a vintage French Bordeaux.

“Pruitt, you’re becoming stealthier by the day,” he spoke. And though his voice rose no further than that of a whisper, it still commanded attention. Reaching out, he took the glass from the tray with gentle care, his smile toward the old man warm and genuine.

“Of course, Sir,” nodded Pruitt, whose eyes lowered just a bit. “I have learned from the best.”

The master of the house grinned briefly and put his free hand on his longtime friend’s shoulder. “You bring a smile to my troubled face while taking better care of me than anyone ever has. What would I do without you, my old friend?”

The seasoned servant lifted his gaze to look into his employer’s dark, haunting eyes and smiled back with appreciation. “You would find another, as you found me when my predecessor passed on.”

He stopped just before the glass touched his thin lips and squeezed his eyes shut in memory of those who had come before Pruitt. All were good people and had taken him under their wings like an orphaned child, caring for and comforting him in the face of his dire physical condition. He had loved them all as he now loved old Pruitt, and he carried the images of their faces deep inside his cold heart.

The glass tilted and the precious wine flowed into his mouth where he held it there, tasting it fully and enjoying its essence for a short while. After a few moments, he kissed the wine glass once more, this time allowing the nectar to flow from his mouth back into the tumbler. How he wished he could swallow the wine for which he held such a fondness. But the cursed disease was a stern mistress who ever denied him even his slightest indulgences.

He squinted once more the bright television screen to see the end of a beer commercial. A busty blonde with far too much makeup smiled as her face faded into view. She read a few quick headlines, stating that they would be covered in detail on the 10 o’clock news in the next hour. She finished her spiel and tried her best to look natural as she bantered with the weatherman, whose cheerful responses looked just as staged.

A wave of nausea washed over him, and his head dropping into his skeletal hand as he swayed to the point of falling over. Moving with a speed that belied his age, Pruitt caught and steadied the sick figure with both hands.

“Thank you, Pruitt,” he nodded in thanks.

“Getting worse, Sir?” The look on the elderly man’s cracked face was one of true concern. It distressed him to see his longtime employer this way.

With a great sigh, he nodded in exasperation while smoothing his head of jet-black hair. He hated for anyone to see him weak like this, even his good friend. “I fear it is time for me to step out and get something for my discomfort, lest I be consumed by it.”

Pruitt’s sagging eyes lowered in sad acknowledgment as he turned to the closet and retrieved a fine coat, hat, and umbrella. He seemed reluctant to bring the items to their waiting owner, and he further hesitated to offer them once there. But he had to; it was his job.

He donned his black derby and matching overcoat, fishing a pair of leather gloves from the pocket and slipping them on. The sharp pain pulsing through his fingers was agonizing, but he simply set his jaw and pulled the gloves on tight. He could always endure it. He had had many years of practice.

“I won’t be too long, Pruitt,” he smiled thinly as if knowing what the old man was thinking behind his woeful eyes. He turned and made his way to the front door and slid the bolt back before pulling on the brass handle. The rich oak door creaked open, allowing the night to exhale its cool breath across him. He glanced back for a brief moment at his loyal Pruitt, who stood watching him in silence. And then he slipped out into the crisp, autumn night.

What little sounds his footsteps made on the sidewalk were nearly drowned out by the rainwater, which dripped off of metal porch roofs, lampposts, and the brown, dying leaves of the white ash trees that lined the avenue. An occasional car rolling down the otherwise empty road plowed through the puddles gathered in the low irregularities of the asphalt, making loud splashes. He continued on with long, measured strides, taking it all in.

The disease had somehow heightened more than just his sensitivity to pain. His sense of smell, his vision, his awareness had all become much more acute. For years he had tried to fathom the dark

irony of how a withering physical illness could in turn bestow upon him such wonderful gifts. Over time, he had given up trying to find the answer. It was just something else he had to accept as part of his lot.

At one point along the way, he turned sharply to the right and crossed the road under the watchful eye of an overhead street lamp. On the other side, he angled back to continue in the direction he had been going. But after only a few steps he stopped and glanced back across the road. There stood old St. Easley Church, tall and proud. The hundred-and-fifty-year-old structure, built in the Gothic Revival style favored at the time, stood well over three stories tall. Long, elegant spires of marble stood guard along the roof, beckoning toward a sky still crowded with low, threatening clouds softly illuminated by the city lights. Like so many who came to pray within the sacred walls, the steeples looked up in hopes of somehow touching the distant kingdom of Heaven.

For several long minutes he stared so fixedly at the place of worship that he failed to notice a soaked bum who nearly stumbled into him before wobbling aimlessly down the sidewalk. His eyes narrowed contemptuously and a slow, burning anger arose in his chest as he considered what the building represented--hope and faith in the One who would welcome them into the bliss of eternity. He had hope and faith once. But the day he had been cursed with his disease was the day God had forsaken him. There was no place in His perfect world for such a walking pestilence. There would be no compassion or understanding from the Almighty--no hope, no salvation, no forgiveness. The day he discovered he had no place in God's eyes was the day he realized God had no place in his. His religion had become a hopeless quest for a quick release from a disease that had no cure. But his weakness to continue existing would mean he would never succumb to his own destruction willingly.

The door to the church opened and out stepped a priest in a tan long coat. He secured the lock and with a final tug on the handle turned to move down the stairs to his car waiting at the curb. The middle-aged man unlocked his car door and started to open it when he stiffened and turned his head to look over his shoulder across the street. His eyes swept the empty sidewalk but only saw a scrap of paper, blown by a stiff breeze, cart wheeling lazily by. The priest shuddered as a chill ran through his bones. He pulled up the collar of his coat and quickly slipped into the front seat of his Buick before starting the engine. It was colder outside than he had thought.

A while later, a tall man in a black overcoat and derby appeared at the transit station. He stopped and surveyed the waiting area. At this time of night business was slow, and only a few people stood about waiting for the train to arrive. Some stood impatiently checking their watches, others chatted quietly among themselves, while still others simply stood with blank faces thinking private thoughts.

A low rumble, growing louder from the north, hailed as a signal for those on the benches to stand and amble forth toward the tracks. Most of them regularly commuted by train and knew right where to stand to be in the exact spot so they could step up into the cars when the train stopped and waste no time in getting to where they were going.

He joined them, seeking a car that had the most people so he could have some company. He sat heavily into a form-fitting plastic bench, his head dropping once more into his hand as dizziness swept over him. Only his neighbor's shoulder prevented him from tipping over into his side. As the spell passed and he sat straight again, he looked over to thank the man, who had quickly moved a couple seats away from what he thought was a drunk.

He exhaled long and slow while fishing a handkerchief out of his coat pocket and dabbing the humidity off his pale brow. It seemed as though the motion not only wiped away the fuzziness in his head but also allowed his body to regain its composure and strength. He gritted his teeth in frustration and stuffed the cloth back into his pocket.

Looking up once more, his gaze fell upon a young woman sitting across from him, her head cocked slightly and her dark, brown eyes watching him with concern. A thin, empathetic smile touched the corners of her full, red lips. She was pretty--not glamorous--but pleasing to the eye. Her long, blond hair parted at the shoulders, causing some of it to flow down across her ample breasts and the rest to spill down her back.

Realizing that he was staring at her, she averted her eyes with a slight blush and began fidgeting with her purse strap. Several times, though, her eyes kept flicking back to his thin, handsome face. But it was his dark and piercing eyes that finally caught and held her attention.

He rose to his feet and stepped over to her before bowing slightly at the waist with a smile. "May I sit with you and talk?"

She gawked up at him for several seconds before blinking and laughing nervously. "P-Please do!" She motioned with a gloved hand toward the empty seat on her right, which he took.

"Thank you," he said charmingly. "You are most kind. Please forgive my little ... episode." He motioned to where he had almost collapsed.

"That's ok!" she replied quickly with an understanding smile. "Are you ill?"

He took in a slow, deep breath before answering. "Yes. I am traveling to the city for treatment now."

She lowered her head with a soft "Oh" in reply.

"And what might such a lovely young lady be doing out at this time of night?" he asked, his full attention on her.

Again she smiled, flashing perfect white teeth. She wasn't used to such handsome men showing any interest in her. It made her feel somewhat giddy. "I'm going home from work. I live near the Civic Center." Her last statement made her wince and look down self consciously as her instincts kicked in. Although he was interesting, she didn't know him, yet she had just told him where she lived. Well, not quite. But he was so nice; it just didn't seem like such a horrible breach of protocol.

He nodded, a frown crossing his pale features as he seemed to contemplate something troubling. The train continued on, rocking and clattering as it plowed on through the night. His eyes were closed tight, his mind wrestling with itself over a myriad of different Hells that had been thrust upon him. He considered the worst of them and shuddered.

Her gloved hand touched his arm and she leaned close with concern. "Feeling bad still, Mr....?"

He opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted as the train bucked loudly and then began to slow, its metal wheels squealing and throwing up small showers of sparks on the cold, iron tracks. Several people rose expectantly, as did she.

With effort, he gained his feet and noticed her gazing up at him in surprise. "Um ... this is my stop, I'm afraid," she said finally.

"It is mine as well," he replied, for a moment showing visible distress as he looked past her out the windows.

They both moved toward the double sliding doors, filing out with the other passengers debarking into the coldness. She moved close to him as if searching his pale, ghostly face for something.

After a few awkward moments, he looked down into her eyes appealing to her. "I am new to this area and was wondering if you could point me in the direction of ...". He stopped and turned away as if embarrassed. "I apologize. I am imposing on you and we have only just met."

Surprising herself, she grabbed his arm and then quickly withdrew her delicate hand as he turned back toward her. "Direction? What are you looking for? I would be glad to help."

"I seek a pharmacy."

A warm smile flooded her smooth cheeks as she brushed a lock of hair from her eye. "There is one not far from here at all. In fact it's on my way."

He raised his thin eyebrows in delight offered his arm gallantly. "Well then, please lead the way, my dear."

With a giggle, she took his forearm and together they walked down the street and chatted as the chilly night swallowed them.

Pruitt sat in the morning darkness in a comfortable easy chair, his worn face blank as he faced the television. It continued to blast him with its cathode rays and fill the room with the enthusiastic sounds that could only be associated with an infomercial. The butler looked up slowly to his right to see that his master had returned and was standing just at the edge of the television's shifting glow. Several moments passed by as he gazed up into those dark pits that held trapped a pair of tortured eyes.

He reached out toward Pruitt, his hand holding a small, white bag stapled shut. "Your usual brand, my friend."

The old man took the bag with a gentle nod and set it on the table beside his chair, his eyes never leaving his employer's face. As they silently regarded one another, silhouetted against the ghosting light of the television, the picture changed. Where the infomercial had been was now a large man in a dark suit and tie sitting at a desk and facing the camera. A graphic at the bottom of the screen showed BREAKING NEWS. The newsman had a disturbed look on his pudgy face.

"This just in. Police have discovered the body of a young woman in the lower district near the corner of 4th and Copper. The body was found behind a Farmers Market by a sanitation worker about half

an hour ago.” The newsman scowled as he looked down at some papers and shuffled them around as if searching for more information.

Pruitt’s eyes began to glisten with moisture as he continued to look up at the dark figure staring silently back at him.

“Although the police have yet to determine the identity of the victim, they have confirmed that the body does indeed have the same type of neck wounds found on several other murdered women over the past two years. And, like before, there was no blood found at the scene. None at all.” A barely-disguised look of horror clouded the newsman’s features as he looked back up at the camera. “We’ll have more on the 6 a.m. news in just under an hour.” The pictured distorted and the infomercial popped back on again in mid-advertisement.

Earlier, his face looked like a skull that had just enough bleach-white skin pulled over it to cover the bone. But now it seemed full and alive, with cheeks that were full of color and warmth. The visible tenseness about him, a product of being on constant edge from discomfort, was gone. No more pain stabbed at his fingers or any other part of his sickened body. It was as if someone had reached down and pulled the cloak of suffering from over his flesh and bones. But not his heart.

He looked down solemnly into Pruitt’s sorrowful blue eyes, where he noticed an expression he had seen hundreds of times before. And each time it touched him to the core of his hollow being. The old caretaker would never let him forget the weight of his existence and those who paid for it.

“Feeling better, Sir?” Pruitt asked softly as wetness welled in his eyes.

“No,” he replied softly in the wan light as he watched the tears now flowing freely down the old man’s cheeks. Not only had the disease taken away his health, his sanity, and his soul, it had also taken away his ability to grieve.

So Pruitt did that for him.

The End