

DEAN WESLEY SMITH

IN THE SHADE OF THE SLOWBOAT MAN

In the last year. Dean Wesley Smith has sold ten novels. Spiderman: Carnage in New York from Ace/Boulevard is one of the first to appear in print.

He has also sold a large number of short stories. His most recent for F&SF, "Jukebox Gifts" (January, 1995), made the preliminary Nebula ballot.

He returns with a tender tale of love abandoned, but not forgotten.

OVER THE LONG YEARS I HAD grown used to the sweet smell of blood, to the sharp taste of disgust, to the wide-eyed look of lust. But the tight, small room of the nursing home covered me in new sensations like a mad mother covering her sleeping young child tenderly with a blanket before pressing a pillow hard over the face.

I eased the heavy door closed and stood silently for a moments, my clutch purse tight against my chest. One hospital bed, a small metal dresser, and an aluminum walker were all the furniture. The green drapes were slightly open on the window and I silently moved to stand in the beam of silver moonlight cutting the night. I wanted more than anything else to run. But I calmed myself, took a deep breath, and worked to pull in and study my surroundings as I would on any night on any city street.

As with all of the cesspools of humanity the smell was the most overwhelming detail. The odor of human rot filled the building and the room, not so much different from a dead animal beside the road on a hot summer's day. Death and nature doing their work. But in this building in this small room, the natural work was disguised by layer after layer of biting poison antiseptic. I suppose it was meant to clean the smell of death away so as not to disturb the sensitive living who visited from the fresh air outside. But instead of clearing, the two smells combined to form a thick aroma that filled my mouth with disgust.

I blocked the smell and focused my attention on the form in the bed.

John, my dear, sweet Slowboat Man, my husband once, lay under the white sheet of the room's only bed. His frame shrunken from the robust, healthy man I remembered from so many short years ago. He smelled of piss and decay. His face, rough with old skin and white whiskers, seemed to fight an enemy unseen on the battleground of this tiny room. He jerked, then moaned softly, his labored breathing working to pull enough air to get to the next breath.

I moved to him, my ex-husband, my Slowboat Man, and lightly brushed his wrinkled forehead to ease his sleep. I used to do that as we lay together in our featherbed. I would need him to sleep so that I could go out and feed on the

blood of others. He never awoke while I was gone, not once in the twenty years we were together.

Or at least he never told me he had.

I had never asked.

I was hunting the night we met. The spring of 1946, a time of promise and good cheer around the country. The war was won, the evil vanquished, and the living bathed in the feeling of a wonderful future. I had spent the last thirty years before and during the war in St. Louis, but my friends had aged, as always happened, and it was becoming too hard to answer the questions and the looks.

I had moved on many times in the past and I would continue to do so many times in the future. It was my curse for making mortal friends and enjoying the pleasures of the mortal world.

I pleaded to my friends in St. Louis a sick mother in a far away city and booked passage under another name on an old-fashioned Mississippi riverboat named Joe Henry. I had loved the boats when they were working the river the first time and now again loved them as they came back again for the tourists and gambling.

For the first few days I stayed mostly to my small cabin, sleeping on the small bed during the day and reading at night. But on the third day hunger finally drove me into the narrow hallways and lighted party rooms of the huge riverboat.

Many soldiers and sailors filled the boat, most still in uniform and most with woman of their own age holding onto their arms and laughing at their every word.

The boat literally reeked of health and good cheer and I remember that smell drove my hunger.

I supposed events could have turned another way and I might have met Johnny before feeding. But almost immediately upon leaving my cabin I had gotten lucky and found a young sailor standing alone on the lower deck.

I walked up to the rail and pretended to stare out over the black waters of the river and the lights beyond. The air felt alive, full of humidity and insects, thick air that carried the young sailor's scent clearly to me.

He moved closer and struck up a conversation. After a minute I stroked his arm, building his lust and desire while at the same time blocking his mind of my image. I asked him to help me with a problem with the mattress on my bed in my cabin and even though he kept a straight face the smell of sexual lust almost choked me.

Within two minutes he was asleep on my bed and I was feeding drinking light to not hurt him, but getting enough of his blood to fill my immediate hunger.

After I finished I brushed over the marks on his neck with a lick so that no sign would show and then cleaned myself up while letting him rest. Then I

roused

him just enough to walk him up a few decks, where I slipped away, happy that I might repeat the same act numbers of times during this voyage. It was an intoxicating time and I felt better than I had ever remembered feeling in years.

I decided that an after-dinner stroll along the moonlit deck would be nice before returning to my cabin. I moved slowly, drinking in the warmth of the night air, listening to the churning of the paddle wheel, feeling the boat slice through the muddy water of the river.

Johnny leaned against the rail about mid-ship, smoking a pipe. Under the silver moon his Navy officer's white uniform seemed to glow with a light of its own. I started to pass him and realized that I needed to stop, to speak to him, to let him hold me.

He affected me as I imagined I affected my prey when I fed. I was drawn to him with such intensity that resisting didn't seem possible.

I hesitated and he glanced over at me and laughed, a soft laugh as if he could read my every thought, as if he knew that I wanted him with me that instant, without reason, without cause. He just laughed, not at me, but in merriment at the situation, at the delight, at the beauty of the night.

He laughed easily and for the next twenty years I would enjoy that laugh every day.

I turned and he was smiling a smile that I will always remember. I learned over the years that he had the simple ability to smile and light up the darkest place. He had a smile that many a night I would lose myself in while he told me story after story after story. I never tired of that smile and that first exposure to it melted my will. I would be his slave and never care as long as he kept smiling at me.

"Beautiful evening isn't it?" he said, his voice solid and genuine, like his smile.

"Now it is," I said. I had to catch my breath even after something that simple.

Again he laughed and made a motion that I should join him at the rail gazing out over the river and the trees and farmland beyond.

I did, and for twenty years, except to feed on others while he slept, I never left his side.

THE SMELL of the room pulled me from the past and back to my mission of the evening. I looked at his weathered, time-beaten form on the bed and felt sadness and love. A large part of me regretted missing the aging time of his life, of not sharing that time with him, as I had regretted missing the years before I met him. But on both I had had no choice. Or I had felt I had had no choice. I

might have been wrong, but it was the choice I had made.

Since the time I left him I had never found another to be my husband. Actually I never really tried, never really wanted to fill that huge hole in my chest that leaving him had caused.

But now he was dying and now I also had to move on, change cities and friends again. I had always felt regret with each move, yet the regret was controlled by the certainty that the decision was the only right one, that I would make new friends, find new lovers. But this time it was harder. Much harder.

I sat lightly on the side of his bed and he stirred, moaning softly. I again brushed his forehead, easing his pain, giving him a fuller rest, a more peaceful rest. It was the least I could do for him. He deserved so much more.

This time he moaned with contentment and that moan took me back to those lovely nights on the Joe Henry, slowly making our way down the river, nestled in each other's arms. We made love three, sometimes four times a day and spent the rest of the time talking and laughing and just being with each other, as if every moment was the most precious moment we had.

During those wonderful talks I had wanted to tell him of my true nature, but didn't. The very desire to tell him surprised me. In all the years it had not happened before. So I only told him of the twenty years in St. Louis, letting him think that was where I had been raised. As our years together went by that lie became as truth between us and he never questioned me on it.

He was born in San Francisco and wanted to return there where his family had property and some wealth. I told him I was alone in the world, as was the true case, just drifting and looking for a new home. He seemed to admire that about me. But he also knew I was free to move where he wanted.

I had so wanted him to know that.

The day before we were to dock in Vicksburg I mentioned to him that I wished the boat would slow down so that our time together would last. The days and nights since I met him had been truly magical, and in my life that was a very rare occurrence.

He had again laughed at my thought, but in a good way. Then he hugged me. "We will be together for a long time," he had said, "but I will return in a moment."

With that he had dressed and abruptly left the cabin, leaving me surrounded by his things and his wonderful life-odor. After a short time he returned, smiling, standing over me, casting his shadow across my naked form. "Your wish is granted," he had said. "The boat has slowed."

I didn't know how he had managed it, and never really asked what it had cost him. But somehow he had managed to delay the boat into Vicksburg by an extra day. A long wonderful extra day that turned into a wonderful marriage.

From that day forward I called him my Slowboat Man and he never seemed to tire of it.

"Beautiful evening isn't it?" he said hoarsely from the bed beside me. His words yanked me from the past and back to the smell of death and antiseptic in the small nursing home room. Johnny was smiling up at me lightly, his sunken eyes still full of the light and the mischief that I had loved so much.

"It is now," I said, stroking him, soothing him.

He started to laugh, but instead coughed and I soothed him with a touch again.

He blinked a few times, focusing on me, staring at me, touching my arm. "You are as beautiful as I remembered," he said, his voice clearing as he used it, gaining more and more power. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too," I somehow managed to say. I could feel his weak grip on my arm.

He smiled and then his eyes closed.

I touched his forehead and again he was dozing. I sat on the bed beside him and thought back to that last time I had sat beside him on our marriage bed, almost thirty years earlier.

That last night, as with any other night I went out to feed, I had put him to sleep with a few strokes on the forehead and then stayed with him to make sure his sleep was deep. But that last night I had also packed a few things, very few, actually, because I had hoped to take very little of our life together to remind me of him. It had made no difference. I saw his face, his smile, heard his laugh and his voice everywhere I went.

I had known for years that the day of leaving was coming. And many times over the years we were together I thought of telling him about my true nature. But I could never overcome the fear. I feared that if he knew he would hate me, fight me, even try to kill me. I feared that he would find a way to expose those of us like me in the city and around the country. But my biggest fear was that he would never be able to stand my youth as he aged.

I could not have stood the look of hate and disgust in his eyes.

At least that was what I told myself. As the years passed since I left him I came to believe that my fear had been a stupid one. But I never overcame that fear, at least not until now.

I know my leaving to him must have felt sudden and without reason. I know he spent vast sums of money looking for me. I know he didn't truly understand.

But for me I had no choice. During the month before I left comments about my youth were suddenly everywhere. Johnny and our friends had aged. I hadn't. I even caught Johnny staring at me when he thought I wouldn't notice.

Three nights before I left, one waitress asked him, while I was in the ladies room, what his daughter, meaning me, wanted for desert. He had laughed about it, but I could tell he didn't understand and was bothered. As he should have been.

The night I left, I found a book about vampires hidden in a pile of magazines from his office. A well-read book.

I could wait no longer and I knew then that I could never talk to him about it. I had to go that night and I did so, leaving only a note to him that said I would always love him.

I moved quickly, silently, in an untraceable fashion, to the East Coast. But less than a year later, no longer able to even fight the fight of keeping him out of my mind, I returned to San Francisco under a new name and began to watch him from afar.

As with me, he never remarried. Many nights he would walk the streets of the city alone, just smiling, almost content. I paced him, watching him, protecting him from others of my kind and from the mortal criminals. I imagined that he knew I was watching him. Pacing him. Walking with him. Protecting him. I pretended that knowing I was there made him happy. Many nights I even thought of actually showing myself to him, of holding him again.

But I never did.

I never had the courage.

He stirred under the nursing home sheet and I watched him as he awoke. He opened his eyes, saw me, and then smiled. "Good. I was hoping you were more than a dream."

"No, Slowboat Man, you aren't dreaming."

He laughed and gripped my hand and I could feel the warmth flowing between us. I leaned down and kissed him on the cheek, his rough skin warm against my face. As I pulled back I could see a single tear in the corner of his right eye. But in both eyes the look was love. I was amazed.

And very glad.

I had feared he would hate me after I had left him without warning. I had feared that when I came to visit tonight he would ask the questions about my youth and how I had stayed so young, questions that I had always been so afraid to answer. I had feared most of all that he would send me away.

But he didn't. And the relief flooded through my every cell. Even after almost thirty years he still loved me. I wanted to shout it to the entire world. But instead I just sat there grinning at him.

In the hundreds of years that I had been alive I had never felt or seen a love so complete and total as his love for me.

It saddened me to think that in the centuries to come I might never find it again.

"I'm glad you decided to come and say good-bye," he said. "I was hoping you would."

I gently touched his arm. "You know I wanted to when --"

He waved me quiet. "Don't. You did what you had to do."

My head was spinning and I wanted to ask him a thousand questions: How he knew? What he knew?

But instead I just sat beside him on the bed and stared at him. After a moment he laughed.

"Now say good-bye properly," he said. "Then be on your way. I overheard the doctor telling one of the nurses that I might not make it through the night and I don't want you here when I leave. Might not be a pretty sight."

I just shook my head at him. I had seen more death than he could ever imagine, but I didn't want to tell him that.

A long spell of coughing caught him and he half sat up in bed with the pain. I stroked his forehead and he calmed and worked to catch his breath. After a moment he said, "I loved it when you used to do that to me. Always thought it was one of your nicer gifts to me, even though I never understood just how or what you did."

Again he laughed lightly at what must have been my shocked look. Even after all these years, even with very little force behind it, his laugh could still gladden my heart, make me smile, ease my worries. Again this time it took only a moment before I smiled and then laughed with him.

"Now be on your way," he said. "The nurse will be here shortly and I have a long journey to make into the next world. I'm ready to go, you know? Actually looking forward to it. You would too if you had an old body like this one."

I nodded and stood. "Good-bye, my Slowboat Man." I leaned down and kissed him solidly on his rough, chapped lips.

"Good-bye, my beautiful wife."

He smiled at me one last time and I smiled back, as I always had.

Then I turned and headed for the door. I knew that I had to leave immediately, because if I didn't I never would. But this time he wanted me to go. I wasn't running away.

As I pulled the handle open to the dimly lit hallway, he called out to me.
"Beautiful?"

I stopped and turned.

"I'm sorry I couldn't slow the boat down this time."

"That's all right," I said, just loud enough for him to hear. "No matter how long or how short the lifetime, sometimes once is enough. Sleep well, my Slowboat Man. Sleep well."

And as the door to his final room closed behind me I added to myself, "And thank
you."