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Casting Shadows

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CASTING SHADOWS
All Hallow's Eve

BY

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CASTING SHADOWS

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In the contradiction lies the hope—Berthold Brecht

Chapter One

Charlotte's gaze was pale and volatile, like tinder awaiting a spark. Though her perceptive eyes revealed everything, they used a vocabulary I would never know. They spoke a language of the soul. By nature and training, she was a spiritual director, but she lacked the centuries that might have allowed her to embrace my paradox. She didn't recognize the tightropes I walked. She didn't believe in vampires.

As I left the warm August night air and entered the cold building for our monthly meeting, Charlotte greeted me at her office door. The collar of her turquoise blouse curled down, revealing the fleshy cushion of her neck, and I wondered if age had filled in that youthful hollow above her sternum or if a certain weight always rounded her so.

She led me into her office where music played quietly, and an almost invisible vapor hovered at the ceiling. The aroma, like baked rolls or pumpkin pie, became tinged with sweet wood, as if a bonfire burned nearby.

"How are you today, Nadzia?" She spoke the Polish accent well, her voice assertive, flourishing with maturity. "Would you like some tea?" She gestured to a chair and left the room.

The small office crowded me as I sat opposite a window opaque with the night. One wall held a score of photos, myriad faces smiling at some picnic reunion. The glossy photographs hung askew from each other like a forgotten puzzle. Several tables held pencils, feathers, healing stones, a crucifix, and prayer cards.

When Charlotte returned, she handed me a china cup painted with ornate roses. Receiving the steaming cup, I breathed in a spicy recollection from my childhood. The herbal blend was a gift we shared, my recipe built from her garden.

She took a sip from her cup. "So, have you liberated your wild horses yet?" Her eyes sparkled through the steam as she repeated the allusion I once shared with her. She liked beautiful thoughts, as a child likes candy, but little else about her was so simple. She spoke of choices and commitments, oaths that required integrity, and love that required honesty. It was her strivings I knew so well, not her, but those hopes, those

faiths, were compelling. I wanted to believe in her world. Mine had become an extended autism, like trying to understand laughter through a pane of glass.

I had no answer for Charlotte, so I just shook my head.

“Then we still have hope.”

“For sublimation, you mean.”

“Desire isn’t the only assurance of life.” She looked away as she spoke, her focus on the wall of photographs. “There are sensations that tie us to this moment, and ones that release us to eternity. A body is like a vast field incapable of being filled, though you keep trying.” She smiled, self-conscious, it seemed. “You bring out the poet in me.”

During our meetings, we often discussed my lack of discrimination, something she called “a modern disease.” But in all of history, who hasn’t feared being torn open and left bleeding from finding out her love meant nothing? Besides, I didn’t avoid intimacy. What I craved was beyond the flesh, was right through it.

Charlotte spoke of the spirit and the flesh as if they were independent things, but I believed in their union, companions whose joint fire transmuted physical love into purest light. Quoting one of my favorite authors, I reminded Charlotte that in love there are two things—bodies and words, but she wasn’t impressed by the violent world of Joyce Carol Oates.

I blew gently on my tea and set it down. “You live in an age with a poverty of imagination.”

Amusement flashed in her eyes. “And what age do you live in?” She thought I had misspoken.

The dim flicker from a fringed lamp drew my attention back to the room. Although the furniture was well-preserved, the Queen Anne legs and tasseled velour seats suggested something old but not rare. A tapestry rug covered the wooden floor, where whitish distress marks replaced the brown luster. A small brass bell sat on the end of the coffee table in the middle of the room, and on a shelf nearby, a row of empty vases made of blue glass held dust on their splayed lips.

The patterns brought back Victorian memories from my century in Europe, but the management of the color and content was something more like New Age gypsy—quite American. I reached for the bell, curious to hear its sound, and at the delicate “tink”, Charlotte smiled. “You rang?”

She stared at me, one fair eyebrow raised. A sudden insight often brightened her face like a sunrise, and sometimes laughter erupted from her like an afterthought. Now she simply stared, her blue eyes almost entirely black from the size of her pupils, a gaze I

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would usually attribute to desire, but I didn't know what to make of it in my gypsy friend. Maybe it was the dim lighting. Or maybe the dry tinder was kindling.

For months, I had thought of confessing how I felt, not that it could ultimately change anything, but the compulsion seized me again. "I want to tell you something."

"Of course."

"I love you." I nodded to her questioning eyes. "Yes, like that."

She chewed on her lower lip for a time. "You're idealistic, Nadzia, but you can't transfigure lust into love, no matter how lucid your imagination. That sort of alchemy requires transubstantiation; it's an act of the spirit."

She took my confession as a point of discussion, and despite the sting of dismissal, I took satisfaction in her emotional retreat. "Isn't God in the abundance of things, which he made, even more than the suffering, which we make? Isn't he in our love? Why acknowledge divine generosity with a sacrifice?"

"This isn't about sacrifice."

"When death on the cross became a way to everlasting life, we replaced our maternal birth with a father's grace. Mere politics. Whose body and blood give life?" She was frowning, so I emphasized my point. "Who really gave you life, Charlotte?"

"Would you hide somewhere, valorizing ecstasy and demeaning your desire for God into the longing for a mere object?" Her radiant eyes challenged me. "Don't you see? You love me because you love him."

"Yes! Yes, Charlotte, I love you because I love him, and in the end, that's the only reasonable sublimation. Of course, I love you. Of course, I desire you. What would you expect?" Fatigue seized me. "Ah, but maybe it's more honest to say I love him because I already love you."

An appreciative smile graced her face as she paraphrased from the Book of John, "Love follows upon love."

A Chopin melody began in the background, one of his preludes. After a departure and a return, the piano took an excursion into pure chromaticism. His paradox was that his music was neither comforting nor unpleasant; suffering was his appeal. He was the truest of Romantics, precisely because he never wished to be one. I let my heart wallow in the melody before asking, "Do you think all God wants is obedience and self denial—a holy silence? I think he wants all sorts of noise."

For a while longer, we discussed what God might want. She resisted the notion of approaching the spirit through the flesh, despite how I argued his son told us to do that

very thing. She was a woman of integrity, willing to listen but unwilling to relinquish the truths of her hard-won experience.

Only a dream could transform my hopeless love into reality, so I looked forward to sleep, when I would close my eyes in one world and open them in another. When next I saw Charlotte, she came to me in a dream.

This time, she didn't rebuff my confession as she had at our meeting but added her own. She repeated the words I longed to hear, and then, lit with blue fire, her eyes held mine as she left her chair.

She took my hand, kissed my palm, and left the scent of patchouli behind. After I stood, she kissed my mouth earnestly, her lips soft and full, her breath arriving in slow waves. She drew me closer, one hand holding my lower back and the other behind my shoulder. Her small hands were made strong with passion, and I arched against her to feel her pliant flesh, to be more fully a part of this upheaval of life.

Like dying stars, the constellation of my anxieties dimmed as her tongue traced a line toward my ear. Her breathing grew quick and shallow, her excitement inflaming my own, until a sudden lucid fear seized me. I didn't want her to know only this moment of pleasure. I wanted her to know me.

When I drew away, she suggested we go somewhere more comfortable. She took my hand and led me from the building.

As she drove, she mentioned a hotel, explaining about her husband, and then asking about my house. I told her to leave the highway, take the gravel road, and turn up the hill. We parked on a promontory that looked out over a farm. The low horizon offered up a brilliant panorama of stars untainted by city lights. A new moon sat like a hole in the sky.

She turned from the steering wheel. "Wouldn't we be more comfortable at your house?"

After leaving the car, crickets serenaded me and warm air carried the expansive scent of greenness. I stepped through prairie grass and heard the rustle of creatures at my feet. Without moonlight, the stars left the landscape a muddle of silhouettes, and I looked back through them to feel her dismay as she watched from the car.

The thought of surrendering nature for a stuffy room was too much even for a dream. I wanted to make love to her near a tree where wildflowers perfumed the air and we could smell the earth, but she told me all the reasons a hill at midnight was dangerous. I understood. She had entertained the darkness, but she didn't trust the night.

Chapter Two

The waking world's warm summer yielded to a saturated autumn, and I stopped meeting with Charlotte. I thought if I didn't see her in the real world, I might never have to see her again in my dreams only to wake up without her.

Nocturnal flights continued to take me from my rural home to large cities, and among hidden streets. I hunted with renewed zeal; confirming certain experiences, such as the eyes always die first. I realized it had never happened otherwise. The corpse at my feet in this Detroit alley was no different from the first one near my home in Bečkerek, centuries ago. Staring and still surprised by their inadvertent encounter with fate, the drying eyes had lost their light, so I closed them before I fed.

Unlike sight, blood lives on for hours. The athletic neck, heavy with muscle but broken now, lost its tension and the skull lay back. With famished urgency, I tore open the throat to get at the pooling blood. After losing a liter to me and having the rest spill or settle into its recesses, the corpse appeared unreal, its skin possessing the patina of a manikin. I had no compassion for the dead because I never thought of dying as evil. I'm evil, after all, and I will never die.

I dropped the body for the rats, and scaled the building at the back of the alley as easily as a spider speeds up a wall. In my own small town, I was a woman, but in the city, I was a wild thing, unencumbered by empathy. Watching the meandering bodies engendered the same contempt in me for human automatons as for the termite hills and their fecund inhabitants intruding upon my rural home.

Leaving the back alleys of Detroit, I attended a gay Chicago club to watch the dancers. The sparkling silver jock one of the black dancers wore became hypnotic, and the abundant contents became a mystery I needed to solve. After the show, I entered the dressing room from the third-floor alleyway window while the dancer was removing his cosmetics. But before I emerged from the shadows, a disheveled young man, fidgeting like an addict, entered the room. The two men exchanged nods and then, as if it were just an extension of the greeting, the visitor fell to his knees and stripped the silver jock away.

He took the fast-growing swag of flesh into his mouth, but he didn't have nearly enough mouth. His gagging and slurping noises sped my pulse as I watched him try to swallow the uncut hardness grown to a massive size. Like a pornographic actor aware of the camera, the dancer slouched and rested his hand in the visitor's spiked hair.

A knock on the door preceded a man who leaned into the room. He stared at the visitor, still on his knees, and announced that someone was asking for money due. The dancer drew his visitor to his feet. "Go keep Tony company," he said, "I'll be out with the money soon's I get changed."

The man at the door waited for the visitor to join him. After they were gone, my nude body coalesced from the fog-like shape by which I traveled. He stepped back but didn't reach to cover his nakedness as he appraised my own.

He seemed to be appreciating what I had to offer, though he frowned after a moment. "How the hell you get in here?" He was an elegant man with a subtle Mediterranean accent. His mixed ethnicity did little to make him exotic, because his handsome features gave him the bland perfection of an underwear model.

"The window."

He remained composed, unlike most people when they meet me. Perhaps he was more susceptible to seduction, already captivated by a false youth expressed in my lithe figure and long brunette curls. Not every person was subdued simply by the mystical effort of my will. Sometimes I had to seduce them or even break a neck, but this man was more willing than most. He was vain and eager to be used because that's what he thought of as love. Desire was a power I belonged to, not one that belonged to me, and like fear, it expressed its compulsion differently in different people. The compulsion to possess drove me forward, as the compulsion to be possessed kept him still.

As I stared at his fleshy mouth, I pinched my pink nipples, imagining how those lips would feel. As if hearing my thoughts, he obediently leaned down and took an ample amount into his mouth. The erotic magic of watching his dark face tug on my pale breast conjured ecstasy when I took hold of his shaft and found it hard again. I played with the lovely mass of dark meat, my hand squeezing the swollen head until it was bursting out of the foreskin. The musk of his sex teased me with hunger, inciting an ache that dropped me to my knees.

Though my fangs extended, he noticed nothing but the burning in his blood. When my grip eased away, his hand took my place. His corded arms, wrapped in a net of turgid veins, flexed as he masturbated above me, drawing his foreskin back and forth. He tilted his head back, his eyes closing in ecstasy.

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"Come on," I encouraged him, saliva overflowing my lips. "Feed me. Give me that lovely cream. Give me all of it."

My submissive posture excited a tangled hierarchy of domination and lust, and the moment grew pregnant with power. His body raced to claim it as his beefy torso shone with sweat and urgent whines escalated in pitch. He opened his eyes, as if watching his magnificent eruption was the best part of the experience. "Yeah! Oh fuck yeah!" Warm globs dropped as he pumped with his triumphant fist. He groaned and shoved his deflating shaft at me.

Obliging him, I licked every drip, tasting of sugar and acid from his evening's exertion. He kept his pubic hair trimmed, and the neat black curls glistened with sweat. When he was flaccid, I was able to take all of him in my mouth, pressing my face into his groin. Nursing on his soft, fat meat, I enjoyed the rubbery texture and salty coating, and wished he had enough in him for one more, but his manhood hung dead before me.

His expression of vacant pleasure became a sneer after his appraisal counted me just another sycophant.

I rose to my feet. "Do you know what I am?" As my fangs descended, I sensed his self-doubt filling the space between us.

His reverie had dissipated, but I still controlled his will. Muted horror slackened his face as I took hold of his shoulders and pulled him gently to the floor. With no need for eyes in this familiar landscape, touch guided my every move. Lying across his body, I dipped my teeth into his neck. A first satisfying gush of blood followed the tiny "pop" as I pierced his taut skin. Sped by his thumping fear, the flow gave me little chance to savor what I swallowed.

Struggling to overcome the drunken ecstasy that would leave me vulnerable, I took enough only to extinguish the fire in my belly. After I finished, I lay stroking his splendid torso as his breathing grew shallow and the blood thickened around his wounds. When his chest stilled, I closed his empty eyes.

Chapter Three

The oral pleasures of blood and semen often satisfied my sexual cravings, but even full, I hungered for something I hadn't found and couldn't name. A few weeks later, I paid eight hundred dollars for the service of two women, outside Reno.

Female customers were usually barred from Nevada's brothels because owners assumed they were looking for their husbands, but in the new millennium, entrepreneurial pimps were beginning to see angry wives as a potential market. Not that I was mistaken for an angry wife. The owner of the Pony Tail Ranch knew me well. I had been using his women for years. After negotiating in the parlor, I signed some papers and we headed upstairs.

Two sumptuous women began their show, licking each other's tongues and working their way down. They lay on black satin sheets in the Passion Room. Classical piano played from my MP3 player, with earphones creating a world within a world. The music meant I didn't have to hear the stilted sex talk, and part of my negotiation was not settling for a party sheet and foregoing the pornographic movie required to run continuously in every room. That's as far as the owner's goodwill took me. Despising the stricter rules, I walked around the bed watching the women work on each other through dental dams and rude little finger cots. What is sex without immersion in warm salt and liquids ripe with life?

The redhead seemed more genuine in her pleasure as the blonde's tongue lapped at her through pink latex, so pushing the blonde away, I settled on my knees. Transfixed by the beautiful youth spread before me, I relished the view of plump labia, soft and pale as cream, a buttery sheen around the rosy slit.

When I buried my face between her legs, the woman giggled and grew still. Her thighs spread with familiar ease, the casual opening triggering a clenching in my stomach. Heat radiated through me, and fluid seeped into my panties. She rocked her hips sinuously against my face so that my tongue slipped into her as the swollen pea of her clitoris bumped my nose.

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Her undulations were like the ocean, but she tasted of something faintly chemical, like a douche. The taste was from a depilatory, I thought, because she had no rough skin from a blade. After teasing her excited clitoris for a while, I decided to risk my own pleasure.

Stripping away my white blouse and jeans, I lay back and let the women finish undressing me. They spent the next thirty minutes licking my nipples and rolling a lavender dildo around inside me. Desire usually migrated to my mouth and stomach, so an intimate joy often became merely another meal taken from an unfortunate partner, but when the timer went off and the women stopped to negotiate additional time, I declined. There was no risk I might become too aroused here.

Thanking them, I dropped another two hundred as I left. Nevada's free-range laws provided more protection for cattle, though some pimps talked of their sex workers as livestock, or as timeshares they owned and let out. Over the centuries, I had spent many nights in brothels, both legal and illegal, but as I left Nevada that evening, I knew I would never use one again.

Leaving the urban menagerie, I moved upon the night sky like an uncanny shadow, passing over highways and across farmlands, until, far from Reno, I entered a suburban house on Abbotsford Road. There, Charlotte slept beside her husband, Henry, of twenty-five years. They wore pinstriped pajamas, and their room smelled of fresh cotton. Tucked among white sheets and a thick green comforter, they seemed, most of all, quite clean.

My abstinence from her didn't last a month, and this wasn't my first visit. I had watched Charlotte dream and listened to Henry snore many times. As Henry slept and perspired, his gray hair curled into dark ringlets on his neck. Charlotte slept so deeply; she seemed not to be breathing at all.

I hated Henry, but I knew I could never come home to Charlotte and listen to her stories, kiss her goodnight, and lay dreaming with her on such clean sheets, so I loved Henry also.

His leg was lying outside the blanket, and I curled my lips around his toe. With a tongue swirl, I drew the hairy digit into my mouth, and he groaned with weak pleasure. He was a psychiatrist who worked primarily in the state's prisons, and several times, I followed him into therapy where he managed the social hygiene with great success.

He was an aristocratic type, not nearly consumed with his effort so much as his affect, milking his fame at rehabilitating narcissistic and antisocial inmates. Was he dreaming of one of his needy patients or a fawning colleague? Was he dreaming of

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Charlotte? I sucked on his toe, considering whether to puncture it. Instead, I continued to caress it with my tongue until I smelled the release of his ecstasy.

Chapter Four

At any one time on Earth, there are more than fifteen major military conflicts raging. This has always been a convenience for me. When my creativity has ebbed or when boredom has set in and all I want is a full stomach, war is easy food. Sometimes war is more like a buffet, though it's not what it once was, with fields of dying bodies left to the elements throughout the night.

In the Latin American jungle, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia had carried on a war for nearly three decades after compromising its socialist ideals. Despite the paramilitary death squads intent on preserving the hegemony of their allies, the FARC survived through kidnapping, murder, and drug trafficking.

Near the border of a FARC-controlled region, I found a cell of guerillas conversing in a village hut miles from one of their camps. Four men and two women sat on the floor shoving moldy bread into their mouths with dirty hands. Two young women in brown-and-green fatigues entered the hut and dropped their AK-47's to the ground where they also sat to eat.

The young women probably believed they were fighting for the country's thirty million poor. They probably believed the Marxist maxim that contradictions make radical transformation possible. They probably believed that their antagonism would stir a rebellion against the oppressive corporate colonizers. All in all, they probably believed too much.

As I hovered near the hut, a smoky addition to the fog, I wondered at the choices these women made, ones not so different from mine. In a country known for machismo, where citizens could expect to be killed by the army, paramilitaries or the guerillas, these women avoided marriages that left them as little more than chattel. Now they had the same freedom as the men of their camp, provided they engaged the enemy and executed internal justice when called upon. The first time executing a boy for using the drugs he was supposed to be packaging was difficult, but such things got easier.

After one of the young women left the hut to relieve herself, I intercepted her. As I stepped into her path, she raised her rifle, her training quickly overcoming her surprise. Spanish was not my best language, but I managed to convey a courteous greeting.

She looked me over, confused by my nakedness, but my mystical presence was already having an effect, or she would have been shouting for her comrades. Instead, she answered my question, and after I discovered her name, I asked, "How many men have you killed, Maria?"

"Too many to count, and you will be next if you're an enemy of the people."

I recognized her lack of political instincts, and with a clear understanding of slogans, my hand swept the space between us. "This air is your air, Maria."

"I don't own it."

"It's here for you. No one can keep from you what you need."

"They do all the time."

Becoming a killer affects people in various ways. Some people develop a stress disorder. Others adapt to it as a function they later leave behind. Some become addicted to the visceral sensuality of it, while others attach themselves to the power. And then there are those who, like Maria, lose all meaning--a suicide of the soul if not the body.

She frowned but didn't struggle as I removed the rifle from her grip and guided her into a thicket near a lagoon. I had looked into many young eyes in my life, and hers, though tired and much older than her years, were quite forgettable. Everything about her was forgettable—her short hair tucked into her beret, her nervous gaze, and her naïve expectations. She was another meal among centuries of meals, only I find I still haven't forgotten Maria.

She had emptied herself of the feeling of pain for the mere feeling in her hands, and thought that made her strong. She hated being a victim so much that she put a rifle on her shoulder to make victims of others. Reflecting on Maria's choices, I began to wonder at the contradiction between my passion for life and my dispassion for particular lives.

Preparing to feed, I realized I could simply walk away, or disentangle her will from mine and allow her to fight. I found I had options, but no choice. After all, I was one of those visceral, sensual killers, addicted to the taste of pulsing flesh, and the only way I knew to overcome temptation was to give into it.

After a few weeks exploiting any convenient body, I discovered I was utterly bored. I couldn't stand myself, much less my prey so appalling in their submission, so barren in their passions and unthinking in their actions. The rationalizations I employed

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to rescue my self-perception had carried chaos into my life; I was as empty as my victims. Charlotte once told me that we end up casting onto others the shadows we fail to integrate within ourselves.

With uncomfortable clarity, I remembered my life before this transformation. Impotent to make choices more impressive than whether to bake rye or wheat bread, I had longed for a life free of my husband, but I also wanted to hurt him like he hurt me, to make him cry as I cried. In 1723, a creature that followed my husband home from a tavern gave me my wish.

And now, for a century, my goal has been to forget as much as possible. I moved to where people counted the seasons more than the years, where history was about harvests, a cycle that made life, like the soil, so rich.

The prairie sun could burn the mediocre warmth from the flat land, make it feel like a jungle in July after the black rows sprouted and the jet stream carried in wave-after-wave of southern heat. In October, the gray chill blew dry cornhusks across the harvested fields, collecting them in brittle piles along roadways and beneath the fiery orange oaks to be buried by snow in December. In April, machines turned the stubbly fields into rows of moist earth, until July again exploded the barrenness green.

Although my parents had farmed, I remembered nothing of growing things. My recent lifetimes were spent in the tropics, where growing things was something nature did alone. Those lands were easy, and easy lands nurture dependence. Independence was something the people of my adopted home and I had in common. Where survival meant trusting only what one's own hands could do, the dependent didn't survive.

Nevertheless, self-sufficiency vanished the moment a neighbor came to my door. While I craved companionship, I feared discovery, and when the improbable reality of my life became as unfathomable to me as the existence of life at all, I fantasized about escaping even farther away.

The grim creature that made me, moved to the Yukon, and I often wondered whether he built a cabin and lived as a mountain man. Although I fantasized about it, that life wasn't for me. I didn't have a desire to make peace with the world. Like the people of my adopted home, I didn't feel a truce was really possible. I needed to change the world, not let it change me, so I built a cabin on the prairie to make my life a struggle for control rather than escape.

The oldest of my kind, like my creator, always drifted away, farther and farther, until they just disappeared. Unlike the light, darkness does not increase. It doesn't bond in packs or covens and tend toward conspiracies. Those are lies agreed upon when the

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truth of one's choices begins to terrify. The bargain made with the darkness for its lawless power is desolation. Decaying spirits do not keep company.

Chapter Five

How I wanted to see Charlotte, to hear her voice, to know her thoughts. She spoke of important things and carried a precious stillness around with her. Like a planet to the sun, a fundamental force I couldn't resist drew me to her. This was the evidence for hope—that I had been drawn out, again and again, seeking Charlotte.

She had once called me a hedonist, driven by the acquisitive desire of lust rather than the generous self-emptying of love. I didn't know the difference. With her, I felt generous. I felt love and lust, and embraced life. I glimpsed heaven, as I never did alone. How can one experience that and not want to "acquire" it? A philosopher once said, "When God is known, he becomes Man." In my case, he became a woman.

To decide is to let what had once been useful fall away. Believing I had no choice had been useful, but was I an accomplice to a decision made three centuries ago or the architect of a choice made each day since then?

I called Charlotte and scheduled an appointment. At our last meeting, I had made one confession. I had one more yet to make.

When I saw her, I felt as if I had only left her the day before. As we sat in her office on an evening in late October, I told her I had been busy with work. When I needed the cover, I was a travel writer, publishing in trade journals and popular magazines, so she didn't question my absence. "Sounds like you've been busy."

Her framed photographs had new matting, though the images remained the same. "I see you've updated." I never asked who they were, these snapshots of smiling couples and picnic gatherings. I didn't want to know about the many people more dear to her than me.

Glancing from one photograph to another, she nodded. "Reminders of renewal." My curiosity must have made itself apparent, because she added, "They're pictures of the families and friends of murderers and their victims. An organization my husband and I work with brings the two together."

What she said made little sense to me, and I struggled with her implication. Men collected crime scene photographs and studied the techniques of serial murderers. Men

disseminated videos of mutilated children as war trophies and paid for images of raped and beaten women. I had seen such fetishes in one form or another for nearly three hundred years, but this collection of Charlotte's was something I couldn't grasp. These images suggested something so against human nature I didn't know how to categorize it. A man doesn't smile for a camera with an arm around the mother of the monster who suffocated his daughter.

I found myself wondering aloud, "They're lying. These people hate each other. How can they not hate each other?"

Charlotte shook her head slightly, as if she was at a loss for words, but she said, "Violence is a thief. It steals our capacity to love and makes victims of everyone."

The confession I had been anxiously practicing evaporated from my mind, leaving a chilling dismay behind. Until now, I had pitied her small life and never really believed she knew what she was talking about. Her claim felt like an accusation, leaving me with an unaccustomed sense of shame.

"What do you know about violence?" My hands strangled the arms of my chair. "Do you think love is only about forgiveness? Do you think violence should be answered with a 'yes'? Victims don't owe criminals understanding."

"No, there's no obligation." Her eyes narrowed as if she saw something she hadn't before. "It's just an opportunity, an opportunity for peace."

"Peace?" My tone grew heavy with ridicule. "Peace is stopping the pain."

"Yes."

My mouth opened but nothing came out. Peace was what I wanted. Peace was all I ever wanted, and my choices had been testament to the belief that the way to peace was through power. Charlotte knew how wrong that was, and all I could think was, how did she know? How could she accept with ease what three centuries was just beginning to teach me? "There's more to peace," I insisted, "than just the absence of violence."

"Yes, there is also faith."

A few days later, I waited outside Charlotte's house just to get a glimpse of her. The cold rain soaked my costume as I hid near a side yard window wearing a cape and black boots. With my fangs out, I had spent the previous hour joyously scaring children with silly sounds, up and down the street. It was Halloween, and I felt the night breathing.

After a car entered the garage, I climbed the gate and dropped into her backyard. Through her rain-stained windows, I saw lights turn on in a trail to her bedroom, so I

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climbed a shed and leapt onto her balcony. When Henry entered through the doorway behind her, Charlotte turned on him. Her arms struck out at the ceiling as she shouted.

I had never seen her angry. I had never even imagined her angry, but she was flinging her arms, her face red, her voice loud enough for me to hear its tone, though not the words. She stormed from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Dropping from the balcony, I raced to the front yard. A few minutes later, she pulled out of the garage in her car. I stepped into the driveway, causing her to screech her brakes. When I opened the door and entered, she stared at me for a second before continuing on her way.

As she sped down the street, she swerved to miss a group of young trick-or-treaters. When her angry tears subsided, she asked what I was doing at her house.

"Don't you like my costume?"

She glanced at me several times. "Vampire?"

"I want to suck your blood."

Her sober expression cracked with a slight smile. "Where's your bag of candy?"

"Don't you think I'm a little old for trick-or-treating?"

Her smile broadened. "Then why the costume?"

"I like to scare children. I'm sure I told you that. And what better night than the dead's version of New Year's Eve?"

Her expression sobered again as her thoughts returned to Henry.

"You're upset."

"Can I take you home?"

"How about coffee?"

Although she began to shake her head, she pulled into the parking lot of an all-night restaurant. "And pie."

A short time later, we sat in the restaurant drinking hot coffee. Charlotte was a mess, her eyes red and puffy, and her hair as tangled as a bird's nest. She rarely wore cosmetics, nor did she need them. Her unadorned eyes were less than dramatic, but the natural texture of her lids and lashes made every expressive nuance meaningful. Her highlighted hair, blonde rather than gray, was her single vanity.

I knew about her husband's flirtation, so I didn't need to ask why she was upset, but she offered. "Henry's in love with another woman."

I wondered if she thought this was the first time. "He doesn't know who he is."

She tilted her head and scowled. "He's a sixty-year-old man."

"What are you going to do?"

“I think I’ll burn all his clothes.”

“Change the locks,” I suggested. “And run his car into Lake Michigan.”

“I’ll throw his Roger Maris autographed baseball into the swimming pool.”

“Ooh, you are angry, aren’t you?”

We both laughed as pie arrived; chocolate for her and apple for me. I enjoyed watching her eat, and found her more attractive than ever in this disheveled state as she bordered on emotional extremity. Hate can make love that much stronger, but Charlotte didn’t seem the type to enjoin a power struggle. After the shock wore off, she would undoubtedly be quite reasonable.

She straightened her pink rayon blouse, tucked her blonde hair behind her ears, and took a drink of coffee. After she took a deep breath, I saw she had already reached a new level of calm. “That was quick.”

A grateful smile eased her clenched jaw. “You’re an observant woman, Nadzia.”

When we finished eating, she offered to drive me home, and I considered how vulnerable she might be. This friendly moment had given me a taste of intimacy, leaving me hungry in a way I had never been, hungry in my soul. Desire soon became a compulsion pushing hard on me to know her body as I knew her words. Somehow, she had unraveled my complications, and it slowly came to me that I was here in this moment to know her, not to be known.

Before she started the car, she turned to me with an expression of luminous awareness. She offered no sign of resignation, just recognition, as if she knew my thoughts and didn’t hate me for them. I should have thanked her and let her go, but it was Halloween, and I wasn’t really alive, so I muttered an apology for all I planned to do.

Careful to keep our relationship on even ground before, I allowed desire to consume me this time, and in consuming me, it consumed her. With the release of my inhibitions, I became fully present, a personification of desire itself. She appeared struck but not subdued. Only in retrospect did I realize how foolish it was for me to expect a woman like Charlotte to surrender herself so easily. My attempt to take control of her will only left her confused.

“Trust me, Charlotte, and listen. I need to tell you something. Just listen.”

As I stepped through the scenes of my life, disbelief marked her brow in creases until I told her about my visits to her home and the many nights watching her and Henry. Fear clouded her lovely eyes, followed closely by anger, but under the mystical pressure of my full presence, she began to envision the darkest of realities.

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In time, she yielded to the revolution that seized her worldview because she had a profound commitment to destiny; she was capable of accepting an awful truth in a way few people were. Shaken by Henry and now by me, she seemed ready to cry again or maybe go mad. The emotional extremity she had safely backed away from earlier threatened again, and this time, I didn't hesitate to exploit it.

With every fiber of my body, I desired her, and tried to impress that need into her. I kissed her neck, keeping my teeth near her throat. I was ready to steal her life if she didn't surrender it, but I wasn't proven a nihilist that day. The heat of my kisses relaxed her, and she sighed, her neck easing back. I continued to trail kisses down to her shoulder.

When next I looked into her eyes, the clear and perfect light was growing dim. After we left her car and then her city and then her world, she still didn't embrace the darkness, but she had finally come to trust the night.

Chapter Six

Lightless as a womb, a tropical forest surrounded us on an island near the equator. Experiencing flight with me in my numinous state didn't seem to frighten her, and when I set her down and resumed my naked form, she took my hand. We passed beneath dense canopy and through verdant underbrush, emerging eventually onto a warm beach where stars filled the sky more completely than anywhere else on earth. We had arrived at a place untouched by anyone, and this time, it wasn't a dream.

I had been seeing Charlotte for three years, after serendipity transformed an opportunistic hunt into a discussion. During that time, I sometimes imagined consuming her in an orgy of lust or attempting to turn her, as if I might hold onto her forever. Now, as the ocean appeared like a second star field in motion, its blue depths rippling with black waves, it occurred to me that we don't live in an ocean of time but only in island moments. More than most people, I could fully live each moment, because that was all I really had. I was immortal, but only Charlotte possessed eternity.

We kissed hesitantly, and she trembled until our awkward touches evolved into an intoxicated harmony of appetites. Her lips clenched mine, and her warm breaths caressed my cheek. I pressed my lips to hers then spread her mouth to taste her moisture. She slowly dropped to the ground and I followed, until we lay together in the sand some distance from the ocean.

The fresh scents of her shampoo and perfume couldn't hide the smell of sweat made sweet by her day in the sun. I kissed the exquisite taste from her cheek and chin, and worked my way down.

Cooing my name, she tipped her head back and her breath caught beneath my gentle bites. Saliva spilled from my lips when I realized I had her carotid. My fangs descended and my thoughts scattered. My senses scattered too, so I was unsure what was most real: the hollow in my stomach, the longing between my legs, or the constriction that made it difficult to breathe. Releasing her throat, I struggled with love so intimately bruising my chest ached.

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I wanted to possess her, to make her love me and no one else. This was my ostracism. Mine was the love of death—love that accrues, dominates, and controls. The love of life heals and liberates, seeks meaning and connection. This was the love Charlotte possessed, or maybe it possessed her. As I let go of dying circumstances, a new mystery absorbed the world, making my touches about pleasing more than pleasure, but the clarity I cherished was gone from her gaze. That keen-eyed awareness was hidden behind a wall of arousal, which strangely disappointed me.

Brushing my fingers across her cheek, I examined her skin, the story of her life, and felt as though I could know everything if I just touched her enough. Her skin was powder-white, soft with many thin lines around her eyes and mouth. Even expressionless, her eyes retained those marks of mirth and pain. As my fingertips massaged her cheekbones and then pressed gently against her sinuses and forehead, traveling through her eyebrows and circling her temples, she closed her eyes, aware that this touch was not a preparation but my way of loving her.

In time, she returned her attention to me, holding my face and kissing me as if she could draw her whole life from my mouth, and I welcomed her as if I had it to give. She pressed kisses to my forehead, eyes, and cheeks, and then her lips explored my mouth, penetrating and devouring. Her hands raked over my skin as her kisses grew passionate. We spent hours kissing this way beside the sea, and the fire-rush of the waves cascaded into my awareness only after we finally lay apart, staring into each other's face.

Like a prayer, I whispered, "You're so beautiful."

"Only through your eyes."

I recalled some of the smooth faces I had touched, the firm jaws and sturdy necks I had tasted. "I've known many pretty women, Charlotte, but I never knew beauty until I met you."

Erotic hunger strained around her eyes and nostrils, and as I unbuttoned her pink blouse, her breathing began to race. Pulling off her shirt, I traced my fingers over her bra, across white fabric and seams decorated with lace trim that made a failed effort at daintiness. There was nothing dainty about Charlotte. An impractical, self-consciously styled undergarment would have made her a less vital woman. As I caressed the satin, I traced the seams and touched the bare white skin of her breasts. My fingers feathered her flushed chest until the sound of the rushing water stole my attention again.

We went into the ocean, wading waist-deep, where waves broke and returned to us with a playful push, and I removed the rest of her clothes. Her naked body filled my arms. Kissing down her neck, I reached her breasts and nuzzled my face against their

pliant weight. I took one tight nipple into my mouth. She pulled me closer and groaned, so I suckled, desperate to hear more. This was where I wanted to meet her, in adoring oblivion—raw spirits stripped of rational thought, drowning in sensation.

I fell to my knees and kissed her belly as the water lapped at my face. Seawater washed over me and soured my mouth, but the more I kissed her, the sweeter the water became. A desperate urge seized me, so I pulled her back to shore and laid her down where the sand met the sea. Draped across her legs, I rested on my hip looking up at her, caressing her belly and breasts as the sea foamed across us. “How do you feel?”

She touched my hand and followed its movement across her body. “Hmm.”

My fingers journeyed lower, straying into the delta of gray hair between her legs. Heavy with water, the curls lay flat against her skin, and I traced a path through them toward her hidden flesh. As I slipped one finger between her labia, my heart pounded fiercely. She was trembling but said nothing, so I made it clear for both of us. “It’s been a long time since you’ve been touched this way.”

She caught her breath. “I’ve never been touched this way.”

“I want to taste you. I want to taste you while the water washes over us.”

She spread her legs a little, as I tongued the smooth cleft of delicate space above her clitoris. A wave poured over us, lubricating all our surfaces, so I rubbed my face around her slick skin and lapped at her as the seawater drained away.

She let me spread her more as I explored deeper. Settling in between her legs, I curled my hands around her thighs and tickled the tiny hood of her clitoris with my tongue. She muttered affirmations and rocked against my mouth while the sand loosened under us, leaving us half-buried.

As I drew the warm pad of my tongue through her folds, a swirl of seawater joined me. When the wave receded, water dragged my hair into my face, and I brushed away the brunette curls. “Are you ready?”

She took a moment to think about it. “Not yet.”

Water pooled into the corner of my mouth when I smiled. “That’s my girl.” Like her, I wanted this enchantment to linger.

When I licked the sensitive skin of her perineum and anus, she whimpered. She squirmed before enjoying the feeling enough to put aside her self-consciousness. “That feels good,” she moaned after awhile.

She tightened against the intrusion of my finger, though her reaction told me the experience was new but not unwelcome. Feeling her body as if it were mine, I knew the sizzling sensation of that first penetration, the giddy arousal from a finger’s pressure

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inside the smooth walls so sensitive to pressure and so rarely touched. When I had one finger gently stretching her, she began to groan deeply.

I drew the spongy bud of her clitoris into my mouth and flicked it with my tongue. She covered her face with her hands and measured the pace of desire with each ocean wave. Her hips flexed a compulsive rhythm while her moans rose in pitch. As happens so often, the peak of pleasure expressed itself with the sound of pain. Her cry became a wail and faded into tears.

After resting, she returned up the beach with me. Near the trees, she lay on her side as I rubbed her back, and I imagined her lying next to her husband. I asked about Henry.

She said something I didn't hear before turning toward me. Her clear blue eyes told me she possessed herself again, and I dreaded what she might do with her knowledge of me. All I could offer was a small conciliation before that happened. "I'll have you home before sunrise."

With a kind hand, she caressed my cheek, and I realized she could forgive me for seducing and betraying her. She was unwilling to relinquish her peace. I had no doubt she also believed she was less a victim than I was, because the violence was my own. Just as I knew this was the most important moment we had shared, I knew also this was the last.

"Is it always like this for you," she wondered, "a few hours in the night?"

I laughed at the absurd notion that a night had ever been like this.

"Where do you usually go during the day?"

"A mountain near where I was born."

Although she didn't follow with the next logical question, which was where I usually went at night, I could see the unpleasant thought in her eyes.

The shadow of the dying balsamic moon sat low, lending no light, only the promise of regeneration to follow with the seeding of the new moon. She turned and looked up into the sky. "He's given us so many examples, how is it people still don't know the answer?"

"Because we're afraid to ask the right question." I thought again of the dreams that allowed me to adore her as mythology. Focusing on her meant I missed seeing what receded into the background. The effect was meaningful, a message about the paradox of love. Love distorts the world as if through a strong lens, or perhaps more like a light illuminating value as it obscures choices. As she came to trust the night, I trusted the light—a new, less blinding light free of the stark shadows which had hidden the single divine participation still possible for me.

Teresa Wymore

Unlike Charlotte, I never made the sublime leap of loving as both a means and an end, which is why I made that terrible choice three centuries ago. God wasn't a parent I had to please but a lover I wanted to please, and I had finally found him. He lived in her efforts to love single-heartedly and honestly, to listen to the silence and to share it. I felt him in her warm arms and heard him in her acquiescent sighs. Sometimes, I met him alone, where he beckoned me to join him, and though I could never follow where he walked, I knew someone who could. In the end, that was enough.

We left our island paradise long before sunrise. Exhausted by the intensity of my presence, she slept as we returned. After leaving her on her couch, I went to the bedroom and found Henry snoring. Dark options passed through my mind before the habit of violence began to dissipate like a cold fog beneath the morning sun.

Following the night west, I experienced a less radical yet more meaningful freedom. Pulse-for-pulse, I was still the daughter of a peasant farmer; I was still a self-made creature incarcerated in this cannibalistic existence; and I was still a woman not so different from others, except that I relied on God's promises a little more and men's laws a little less.

Passing across the sea and Asia and into central Europe, I returned to the damp earth beneath a snowy summit of the western Sudetes. As I lay resting that day and the many days of my life to come, I sometimes wondered, what Charlotte remembered of me before time finally claimed her. She had called me idealistic, thinking it a means of escapism, but I didn't aim for perfection. I didn't even believe in it. My idealism consisted of loving imperfection only because it was perfectly real, and in that way, idealism became a means of transformation. This is the irony of a wickedness that loves the world.

Before Charlotte, I couldn't conceive of a desire that didn't create a victim, but hope, I had learned, is an action, not a search for proof. For the rest of my days, whenever I turned inward, I asked myself if I sought peace or just escape, and when I loved, did I indulge in hedonistic oblivion or foster a shared transcendence?

With Charlotte, I had been not merely what I was, but what I could be, and through images endless with vertigo, love became an uncertain reality, improbable but possible, like the resurrection that drove all her hopes. She had pointed out the light under the door and left me to choose whether to enter or to walk away.

I found I couldn't live a monarchy of the heart, but I could love, as dark things love, in shadow and silence, and for one lost moment, I was courageous and looked the sun in its face.

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About the Author

Teresa grew up in Iowa and had a quietly painful childhood before marrying an emotionally inaccessible man. Marital attrition evolved into a renaissance of hedonism before she stumbled across the love of her life. She's a reluctant Mensan, a sexist Feminist, a resistant Catholic, a monogamous Bisexual, and generally incapable of any orthodoxy. She's authored novels and shorts in several genres of erotic fiction because she believes an eroticized equality will save the world.

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