

The Lady in the Box

Love rarely comes in the form we hope, but it comes nonetheless.

I received a beautiful, but dilapidated Victorian Kitchenette Chest from an old man in a landfill, and while vivifying it, I discovered the picture of a woman pasted against the wood inside. This Memento Mori, or a photograph of the dead, was meant to respect the identity of the deceased; unearthing this postmortem image rudely roused the sleeping spirit within. The abnormal tryst that followed left me humbled and taught me a valuable lesson; never take for granted the ability to love, because some no longer possess it.

It was a humid summer day as I pulled my truck slowly up to the County Landfill. With the lack of wind's steady caress, the palpable aromas of spoiled trash and pine trees were left lingering like a green undulating cloud in the stifling air. Squinting under the blazing sun, looking for an appropriate place for my yard waste, I happened upon a heat-stricken man wearing tired overalls, fanning himself with a ragged old hat. Amidst an ocean of debris, he stood sentinel over a large wooden chest as if it were his anchor." Hello sir!" I called as he slapped his hat back onto his head, "That chest is full of potential; it's gorgeous! Could I take it off your hands?" He said nothing. His grin split and crawled across his face to touch his ears, and with a very sly glint in his eye, he considered me. His strange demeanor weighed me as if I were the decision; he nodded his chin towards the box then threw his gaze back towards me. Without elaboration, he finally replied, "Please... Take her from me."

I put my new friend in my truck-bed and left. The old-timer's weathered and rough face filled my rearview mirror; his eyes shadowed me for a few seconds until I rounded a bend in the road where towering pine trees cut the view of the landfill out of frame, and guided me to my house amongst the hills and coolies of Cataract, Wisconsin.

The birds chirping rapidly at one another flew in frantic circles as if they were having a terrible argument while pop-bellied storm clouds threw their shadow over the brief sunny day. I stood in my garage and regarded my downtrodden chum, which looked to be a very old and black iron-bound Kitchenette Chest. Like a long dead spider's web, she was encased in a dried and torn woven fabric that lined the rusted iron rails and hinges all along her surface, hiding the unknown wood beneath. I set to carefully cut away her rag of a dress to reveal her remarkably healthy cedar body that I lightly massaged with sandpaper. Coaxing blood-red hues and swirls into showing themselves along her smooth curves only added to her bewitching beauty, and carefully scrubbing her metal frame to a shiny raven finish made her seem to beam all over. Musing to myself, why anyone would want to throw her away, I opened her lid. The musky smell of age and neglect assailed me. Then I saw that someone had taken black linoleum and completely covered her. I pulled slightly at the edges of her plastic prison, and it released its grasp on the cedar like a lover loath to leave. A faded old, 1900's, black and white picture of a Baroness, or Lady, revealed itself. Her body was propped up, her hands rested in her

lap, her eyes glued wide open, and she showed no signs of anima or life. Chills like waves washed from my head along to my toes. She was dead.

The light was a long lost friend, and eternally welcomed, when Jayden finally freed me from that onyx imprisonment, because I can't recall anything, except a muffled world of darkness and aloneness. Taste, feel, and smell are all concepts I was once in league with, but those faded along with the last breath from my long lost body. For the life of me, I can't remember how I died, just; that I did die. When I heard the soothing sweet southern drawl in Jayden's voice saying he would take me, I no longer cared to reminisce. He was so handsome I didn't waste my energy on nostalgia; instead I would apply it to staring at the many tattoos that trailed themselves in swirls and eddies along his arms, shoulders, and neck. I loved to gaze past the tips of chocolate hair that occasionally fell in the front of his sparkling brown eyes while he was working tenderly at stripping the crumbling clothes from my body, dusting the grime from my casing, and rubbing the rust from my bones. With every drop of sweat and every splinter, he poured his love into me. He rebuilt and enlivened me with his heart, and then he showed me proudly to his lover, Mira.

She was a cute young girl with olive skin, black flowing hair, and wide amber eyes. By contrast, I had no ample bosom or busting derriere, and my flat squat sides were of no use against her wine bottle figure, but I knew by the way he caressed me whom was prettier, and I knew I didn't like her. As if she already knew that something were amiss, she tentatively reached inside to touch the picture of me. It would've been a good idea, had she asked nicely. I promptly shut my mouth on her supple little wrist. She squealed like a scared puppy, crawled away from me, and nursed her bruised pride. I could almost taste her fear, and I surely felt her terror. I'm not certain of what happened next, but I grew more substantial, as if hurting her added weight to me. It gave me energy enough to step out of my little cedar home and roam around. I waited until the orange light of day slipped away into the shadows of night to haunt. I opened doors, paced, and tried to get attention. It was frustrating watching him and Mira laughing and thrashing in bed, tossing and toppling the covers like waves atop an ocean, warmly kissing, and breathlessly whispering, "I love you", to each other. My heart broke along with every syllable they uttered, and I ached to be in her place. The "sweet nothings" I shared with Jayden spurred me, somehow, into her. "He touched me softer, he poured his sweat, and his blood into me, and he is mine!" All of these whirling emotions coalesced into one single purpose. Without knowing how or why, I willed myself into taking her place. My senses were multiplied and overwhelmed; the warmth of his soft lips, the long forgotten taste of salty sweat on his firm body, the faint smell of his cologne, and the way he trailed his fingers across me was unbearable. I wanted him to love me again, and again, and again. Caught in a maelstrom of sensations and delirium; I gasped, "I love you!" He pulled away abruptly and looked through me, as if he knew. I asked of myself, "What have I done? "

I could only gape at, what I thought, was my love. Mira's body and lips had suddenly gotten colder, her kisses had become more painful and urgent, and her voice sounded as if it came from a distance. I looked into her eyes, and the gleam I found there was

absolute proof that this wasn't my girlfriend. I was more than frightened and thoroughly confused as I listened raptly to her explanation. *"Please don't run away, just hear me out. I have loved you from the moment you pulled that somber veil from my picture."* And it all fell together that she was the reason for the shadows slipping, like wisps, by my eyes, the doors opening and closing, and the lid shutting, like teeth, almost breaking Mira's hand. *"Please just make love to me; I am so alone, I can no longer dwell in that box, I can't watch her love you any longer; just give me your passion, and I'll give you unending love."* she continued convincingly. "I promise."

"No", I resolutely replied. I thought my heart would explode from the mind-numbing wail that followed. As loud as breaks screeching on a speeding freight train, Mira's vocal cords were taut guitar strings while the Lady in the box keened her pain through my lover's mouth, and through my heart. I felt as if I were in the middle of a spiritual tornado, I could see the edges of this emotional storm thinning, and bringing the soft rain of her tears as she abated her anguish by weeping. I felt so sorry for her; she was so alone, so desperate that she latched herself onto Mira in an attempt to simply touch another human being. I felt honored and did what I thought was right; I held her trembling vessel while she cried.

The heart beating inside this body wasn't mine, those tears that burst through the dam weren't even mine, and the man setting in front of me wasn't mine. Those thoughts and sensations were someone else's, I felt so foolish for hurting him. He did so much for me and I had invaded his lover's body made a spectacle of myself. I believed he would throw me away or burn me up after my tirade, but he held me instead. His whispering reassurances; calmed the seething spirit I was, warmed the cold body I had stolen, and gave me a brief moment of clarity. I wasn't alone, I wasn't hidden somewhere in the dark anymore, and I was his friend. "I'm so sorry for scaring you, will you keep me?" I hopelessly begged of him.

I watched her spirit leave Mira's body like a sigh that dissipated into the night air, and then the sharp crack of the trunk's lid snap shut in finality. My new friend and I had struck a bargain. Mira slid into a soft slumber while I knelt absolutely dumfounded. I couldn't believe I had spurned the interest of a spirit who haunted a chest I had gotten from a nefarious looking old man in a landfill. I pondered the enormity of the relationship I'd agreed upon. I loved my friend, respected her disposition, and would keep her until I was long gone myself. But what of Mira, would she remember, what did she feel, and was she alright? I lay down and peered at the slight rise and fall of her chest as natural breath flowed in and out; she seemed like she would be alright. Gazing at my cedar box lying in the shadows, I saw the Lady, shimmering in a translucent white dress, smiling at me. Before sleep finally crawled over the edge of my bed to take me away... I smiled back.

Epilogue

Buzz! Buzz! Buzz! "Patience is a lesson, not a virtue." I muse to myself. Buzz! Buzz! Buzz! Again, with that infernal black box, shouldn't she be waking up now? The red lights blinking on the front of it seem familiar enough that she should be awake by now. Then I see her stirring. Slapping the black buzzer, hopping out of bed, and getting in the shower, she is wobbly-kneed and dizzy. Long nights with him leave her weary because she is often late in the mornings, but no matter. I hear the sounds of splashing stop, and get excited. She springs by like a kangaroo in a towel, and gets dressed. I look to his sleeping form halfway in and out of the covers. His birthday suit is well pressed, and very inviting. I turn my attention back to the sound of metal jingling as Mira dashes through the door. The bolt slides home with a deep resonate, thud. I crawl, hands and knees, out of my wooden palace and into bed. "Good morning, my love," I whisper into his ear.

"Good morning, Baby," Is my Jayden's sweet somniloquy.

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