

## Danse Macabre

(See the end of the document for content warnings)

I wanted to see you again.

The estate had been abandoned a few years after your death. Perhaps it was the grief of your parents or the failing economy. Either way, I did not know because they told me to never come back.

But they were long gone, and I needed to see you again.

The steps to the front door *creaked*, and the wood splintered off in long, vertical strips. I got a small piece in my index finger, but I did not notice at first. It was hard to feel anything in my body by then. My hands shook, as the doorknob creaked, rotating slowly. Unexpectedly unlocked. I was surprised your parents cared so little about their ancestral home by then.

I walked into the darkened foyer. Cobwebs lined each crevasse, and many of the windows were shattered. The chandelier drifted carelessly with the howling wind, threatening to fall upon me and end my sorrow.

We were sitting underneath the large willow tree on the estate grounds. It was your favorite spot, protecting you from the cruel summer sun and the even crueler people. Your dark hair fanned out past my legs and into the grass. Your hands were folded over your breasts where your heart was, dark eyes closed and mouth smiling. I was stroking your hair— an innocuous touch.

You said you wanted to travel more. Your father often went to Hungary for business. I told you about Countess Elizabeth Báthory, and you scoffed, saying a lady shouldn't have such morbid fascinations.

Though I sensed you were just as curious as me.

“Tell me about your symptoms, Miss Dumont.”

Dr. Schwarz sat cross-legged with a notepad in his lap. He wore a perfectly tailored suit with clear round spectacles in sharp contrast to the disheveled auburn nest of hair on my head and wrinkled black dress. He had to look down at me, as I lay upon a chaise longue.

“It happens every night,” I began. “I wake up suddenly, but I can't move. I start to breathe heavier. In the corner of my room is this long, blackened figure. So dark I can't see it. Except for two bloodshot eyes where I suppose its eyes would be. It looks at me until I black out.”

Dr. Schwarz's eyes were not on me, but the notepad. “And do you think this has anything to do with your homosexual tendencies?”

“Perhaps...”

A half-truth. I was getting these night-terrors since you died.

Dr. Schwarz closed his notebook. “Then, it seems that curing you of your illness will cure these night terrors.”

I remained quiet and still.

“I know the treatments are difficult, but your father and I want what is best for you. Curing you of this illness will ensure that you live a long, happy life.”

I turned to him slowly. I wasn't sure what to think of the treatments anymore.

“Shall I send in a nurse to escort you and strap you to the chair?”

I ran my hand along the peeling wallpaper. I only had the light of the full moon, but I could tell that the pattern was faded. I walked past the stairs, heading towards the gardens. The stone walls had large cracks in it where moss had grown freely. The statue garden was being overtaken by morning glory vines, twisting and contorting around the alabaster figures. I walked through them, carefully trying not to snag my boots on a vine. But what did it matter anymore?

I almost stumbled into a statue of a woman. The fabric of her dress was gathered into one hand, which cloyingly concealed her bosom and bottom, though her teats still showed. She had a pot of water in the other hand. I assumed the angle of pot meant it was supposed to be a part of a fountain. No water poured now.

The news of your engagement affected me more than I thought it would. After all, you were getting what you wanted: to go to Hungary by means of a marriage to a wealthy suitor. He was objectively handsome enough, and though I never talked to him, the smile he gave to guests was as warm as could be.

Still, I stood alone in the ballroom, clutching my glass of champagne with a fierceness that could have shattered it with just one more iota of force. A pit formed was forming in my stomach, threatening the hors d'oeuvres I ate to come back on my plate.

When I finally spotted you across the room, my heart ached. You looked divine in a cream floor-length dress with your raven hair half-down. The silky strands floated and gently fell back when you moved.

You made eye contact with me, and the room disappeared.

The condenser couch was deceptively comfortable. I sat with my legs propped up on its padded leather, my head falling behind the seat due to how tall I was. The nurse told me to grip the phallic metal rod jutting from one of the arms. I did as I was told. The sessions would be shorter if I complied.

Dr. Schwartz held up the picture of you from my locket in front me, as the nurse turned on the couch.

All the muscles in my body were tingling and burning. It was not the same warm, exciting electricity I had felt around you. This was disruptive. Your electricity invigorated me as if you were the proverbial doctor and I the monster. The treatments were like someone was shaking my very core back and forth, a friction I never wanted.

I slinked through the statue garden like the Biblical snake. I was a temptress, I knew this. I disrupted your life and inserted myself, destroying all in my quake. Though I was moved half

as gracefully as a snake, tripping on the overgrown bramble, getting my skirt stuck in thorns. I stepped on broken glass, thanking God for the shoes on my feet.

I passed the door that led from the gardens into the ballroom. The glass on it had been shattered, and the wood splintered. My heart dropped to my feet when I saw it, and I quickly looked away. I could never go back there. That was where our lives were ruined. And that was where you took yours.

A white flash met the corner of my eye, though. I stood firm in my conviction not to look, but it was as if there was a string connecting the bridge of nose to the door. And someone was tugging on it. I slowly looked; the string was being tugged harder.

Between the shards of broken, dirty glass was you.

You were as you were from that night. In that ornate dress with your hair untampered. Your makeup precise and delicate. Your flesh soft and pale but pink with blood.

I couldn't control my own body when I opened the door and stepped through, my eyes wide and dumbfounded.

The room around you was falling apart, the chandelier hanging diagonally. Gaps occupied what used to be a complete staircase. I even saw the rope you used, hanging by a thread from the balcony. I dared not to look at it. But you. You remained intact.

"You..." I whispered.

You gestured your arms out with a sheepish smile. "Me."

I rushed towards you, terrified that you'd be gone again if I moved any slower

You let out a sigh. "I missed you."

A tear fell down my cheek. “Why did you leave me behind?”

You turned so that you didn’t look at me head-on and held out your hand. “Care for a dance? The one we couldn’t have last time?”

“Evangeline,” you greeted me at the party, grabbing my hand in both of yours. “You made it.”

“Of course,” I replied. “Hopefully, my best friend is only engaged once.”

You bit your lip, the ruby lipstick getting caught on your teeth. “Right...”

A silence fell. I wanted to compliment you, but my cheeks burned. My heart leapt from my feet to my throat. “You look radiant. A handsome bride you’ll be.”

You squeezed my hands, looking at the floor. I could feel your sweat and shakes.

“Are you not happy?” I touched your jaw with my finger and gently moved your head to face me. A move I would regret.

You locked eyes with me. Those dark brown eyes were so intense that I dared not look away.

“It’s not easy...”

“What isn’t? You’re not making any sense, Lorelei.”

Conviction replaced fear on your face. “Follow me.”

You led me into your room. I had been there plenty of times already, but I was nervous to enter. You urgently closed the door, stood on your toes to reach my height, and kissed me.

We had kissed plenty of times before that. Platonic pecks that stung my lips, but this was urgent, wanting. A kiss meant for lovers— I immediately knew. I was anxious when I thought of kissing my future husband, but this kiss melted me. It was soft and hard and exciting and calming all at once. I deepened our touch, pulling your hips toward mine.

You pulled away. “I don’t want to get married. I want to be with you. I want you.”

I wondered if this was another dream as I looked at your face. But this was real. You were real. I responded by kissing you again, gently guiding you to lay on the bed. My hands lifted your skirt and traced your thighs, to your stomach, to your sex.

I began doing the motions that I knew I liked on you. You responded by grabbing my breast and bucking your hips. This was sex should be. What love should be. Not knowing where your being begins and where the other person’s ends. To create something together that transcends both of you, even for just one night. To be wrapped up in the ecstasy of a new existence.

We didn’t hear the door open.

“I am not sure if outpatient treatment is helping, Miss Dumont,” Dr. Schwarz told me.

I sat across from him, grabbing the fabric of my skirt. My hands shook all the time now. Grabbing something was the only way it would cease.

Dr. Schwarz leaned forward. “Have I told you about some new inpatient treatments? There’s a wonderful facility in Iowa for people like you. I’ve only heard good results from it.”

I looked up from my skirt and looked up into his eyes in a desperate attempt for him to see how much I hated treatment— how much my body hurt from weekly convulsions.

“I would consider if I were you. I will ask your father, too, since he is still your legal guardian.”

Any effort I could have made to stop it was futile. I gazed out the window of his office and pictured your father’s mansion on the hill. The one I heard he abandoned, and I knew I had to go back. I had to say goodbye to you before I left.

You took my hand and guided me to the dance floor. We began to sway and swing in perfect tandem, as the lamps around us began to fill with light again. Oblong wisps of light began to form on the dance floor, moving with us. You held me close, our chests pressing together, but I did not feel your heartbeat.

You hummed, pressing your cheek against my breast. “This is wonderful.”

“Yes,” I whispered, closing my eyes, feeling your body against mine. Moving together as one. Becoming something more than ourselves once more.

“I want you to stay with me.”

You looked up at me. I wanted to say I couldn’t stay. I wanted to say I could never leave you. Nothing escaped my lips.

You pulled back, those dark eyes overwhelming me. Oppressive, beautiful, enchanting, endless, horrifying. You held my head in your hands and pulled me in for a kiss. You tasted



exactly how I remembered: sweet and earthy, a flower directly plucked from the soil. It was a tender yet intense kiss. I felt your desperation when you leaned into my touch.

You pulled away, breathless. “Stay. Just one more dance. Stay, please.”

Your eyes lingered on my lips when I said, “Of course.”

We continued our swaying. You leaned towards me to indicate a twirl. As I spun, the lights went out. The walls decayed before my eyes. My legs became weak, and I dropped to my knees, sliding against the rough wood for a moment.

I stopped in front of one of the broken mirrors. Even if I wanted to scream at my appearance, I couldn't; my tongue felt immeasurably small in my mouth. My eyes were bloodshot and bulging out of my head, and my lips were completely gone. Under the moonlight, my skin seemed to be the color of ash. I didn't want to open my mouth, but I had to know. My teeth and gums protruded, reminding me of a skeleton. I stuck out my tongue, which was a browned strip with deep wrinkles that split it into thirds. I looked behind me to see if you were there, but I only saw a trickle of brown liquid trailing behind me.

I looked back at the living corpse in the mirror and saw you standing behind me. Your hair was falling out of its bun, and your dress was coated with dirt and holes. I saw the deep purple bruise around your neck.

You extended your hand out again. “One more dance. I can't be without you again.”

My blackened, shaking hands reached for you.

Content warnings: Suicide (implied), homophobia (conversion therapy), dehydration