

SEASONAL ALLERGIES

By Abigail Miller

Most among the living believe the sun, a braid of garlic, or a stake through the heart to be a vampire's greatest threat. They're wrong. In my 826 years of death, my greatest foe has always been seasonal allergies.

"ACHOO!" I snifle, letting out a dry, uncomfortable sneeze. Seeing as my body is, well, *dead*, I don't produce mucus. Each sneeze feels like pulling a piece of sandpaper through my sinuses.

"Are you kidding me Haelstian?" Glancing over at the passenger in the front seat of my car, I roll my eyes as she starts to laugh. "Are we really going to go through this every Fall for eternity?" she questions.

"You've only known me for five years Aveline, just wait. You'll get used to it." Her melodic laughter makes the hair on my arms prickle – the only "living" sensation I've ever experienced in my eternal death. "And when we get to the pharmacy, remember that my name is Henry now," I remind her. "I'm fairly certain the last man named Haelstian died back in 1652."

"Relax, Haz," Aveline chuckles. "This town is so sleepy, they wouldn't notice us even if we drained all the children right in the middle of the square."

I can't help but chuckle. Her twisted sense of humor is refreshing. Most of the Cold Ones I know are horribly dull. But Aveline is young. Her 19 years of life ended only two decades ago.

Continuing down the narrow, two-lane road my pale fingers grip the worn steering wheel. Aveline has kicked her nearly translucent feet up on the dashboard. I can't help but admire the vision she makes as her long black hair flutters out the window, dancing in the breeze like butterfly wings. From the day I met her on that pier in Seattle, she's always loved the outdoors. Even on

chilly Autumn days like today. That's one advantage to being dead – you're never bothered by the cold.

“Haz, can we stop and watch the puppet show before we go to the pharmacy?” she asks. Shuddering in displeasure, Aveline reaches over and lightly places her hand on my thigh. “Please?” she begs.

“Fine,” I sigh. “But you do know that the French named marionettes after the Virgin Mary, right?”

“Ha!” scoffed Aveline, playfully and gently pinching my cheek. “You know God doesn't exist, my love. If He did, we wouldn't. Don't let the puppets bother you.”

Groaning, but accepting her request, I turn off the main road and begin winding through the town's side streets, passing row upon row of single-story homes. The grand oak trees, in their varying shades of *feuille morte*, are quite beautiful. But not as beautiful as Aveline's dull, dead blue eyes. Nor the thin smile that plays on her pale face as a yellow leaf gets stuck in the windshield wiper. She unbuckles, and I watch anxiously as she leans out the window to grab it.

“Careful, Aveline,” I caution.

“Or what? I'll die?” she retorts with a playful arch of the brow.

She has a point.

Grabbing the leaf, she pulls herself back in the window and leans back in her seat, simply holding the giant leaf in her small hands. Its golden skin and brown veins contrast magnificently against her pale fingers. As my gaze flits between the woman beside me and the road before me, I wonder if at one point in my death I, too, had been able to find happiness in such simplicity. But if those years ever existed, they were long gone.

“Haelstian...turn here. TURN!” she yells, pointing at the turn off to the small parking lot.

Startled, I slam on the breaks, then gently coast into the last empty spot. She starts giggling once more and slaps my forehead with her leaf as I turn off the car.

“Earth to Haz! Are you in there?”

“Hey,” I laugh. “Cut me some slack. I used to travel by horse, you know.”

“Yes, you like to remind me,” she says with a grin. “Just be grateful you died old enough to drink,” she grumbles, gesturing to her own, youthful face. Before I can respond, Aveline jumps from the car, running eagerly up to the tiny, one-window box office and purchasing two \$5 tickets. Catching up to her, I start rubbing my itchy eyes. Unable to make tears, I have absolutely no relief from their burning.

“You okay?” Aveline asks, reaching up and gently touching my cheek.

“Yeah, yeah I’m...I’m...ACHOO!” Another agonizing sneeze escapes, followed by a few dry coughs. Aveline waits patiently until my episode is over.

“Riddle me this,” she questions, taking my hand and pulling me towards the outdoor puppet theatre. “Why is it that we don’t have any bodily functions, and yet you still have allergies? I mean, how is that even physically possible? And how on earth does medication help you if you can’t even digest it?”

Settling into two empty seats, I put my arm around her waist and pull her close to whisper in her ear. “Trust me, my beloved, I have asked these same questions for nearly a millennium. Next time I find a Cold One with a background in medicine, I’ll be sure to ask.”

She snuggles into me, and the puppet show begins. I’m loath to pay attention, but quickly find that this pit-stop is worth it as Aveline’s giggles shake the both of us. Her smile is worth every insufferable second sitting through this atrocity. But soon that irritating tickle in my nose grows once more.

“Ah...Ahhh—”

“No, baby, please. Just hold it in!” Aveline hisses under her breath.

“ACHOO! ACHOO!”

Two loud, obnoxious sneezes in quick succession, followed by another fit of dry coughing, completely interrupts the puppet show. A family with four young children two rows ahead of us turn to look for the source of the noise, the father scowling at me for having interrupted their afternoon’s entertainment.

“ACHOO!”

“Okay, that’s it, let’s go,” Aveline says, pulling me up and guiding me out of the theatre’s sitting area back towards the car.

“ACHOO!”

“This is ridiculous, Haelstian,” Aveline frowns. “We’re going to the pharmacy. Right now.”

Aveline reaches into my pocket and grabs the keys, guiding me to the passenger seat as I alternate between furiously rubbing my eyes and scratching my nose. Rolling her eyes as I sneeze one more, Aveline pulls out of the parking lot and heads straight to the pharmacy down the street. A tiny, family-owned business, Ed’s Pharmacy is a single-room store with only six shelves of medicines to choose from. But that’s enough for us.

Pulling in and turning off the car, Aveline gets out and opens my door, trading places with me as I hurry towards the entrance, eager for the boxed relief sitting inside only a few paces away.

“I’ll wait in the car!” Aveline shouts. I wave to let her know I heard her.

Pushing open the door and heading straight to the first aisle, I feel another growing sneeze.

“ACHOO!”

Rubbing my dry, itchy nose I scour the shelves for that telltale purple bottle.

“ACHOO!”

“Sir? Is everything alright?” asks the young girl behind the register. She takes a few concerned steps towards me.

“Oh, yes. I’m – ah...ahhh – fine, just – ACHOO! Feeling a bit under the weather.”

“Okay,” the young girl says, eyeing me suspiciously before stepping back behind the counter. “Well, the allergy medicine is in the fourth aisle. Sounds like you need it.”

Quickly finding the fourth aisle and grabbing the box I’m looking for, I step up to the register.

“ACHOO!”

Grumbling under my breath as I start rubbing my eyes once more, the girl scans the medication and throws it into a plastic sack.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” she questions. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t look great. And you sound worse.”

“How could I ever take that the wrong way?” I grumble sarcastically under my breath.

The girl smirks as she rings up the total. “\$18.27” she says.

Fishing through the loose coins in my pocket, it takes me a moment to find exact change, and I find myself wishing it was easier for a vampire to get a credit card. As the girl hands me the plastic sack, I fall into another fit of dry coughs and she grimaces.

“Look man,” she says. “That doesn’t sound great. Do you want our nurse to take a look at you to make sure you don’t have a sinus infection?”

“I definitely don’t have a sinus infection,” I shoot back.

“You don’t know that until you let her look, do you?” the girl challenges. “It’s painless, I promise. She just uses a little light to look in your ears and nose.”

“No. I’m – ACHOO!”

The girl stares at me in silence, eyebrow cocked.

“Fine,” I relent. “She can look at me. But I’m telling you that I know, definitively, that I do NOT have a sinus infection.”

“Sure dude. This way,” she beckons, stepping around the counter and leading me to a small room where an older woman is fussing with a stack of papers. “Cheryl, can you check this guy’s sinuses?” the girl asks.

Cheryl and her tight, grey curls turn to look me up and down. Adjusting the bright red spectacles secured around her stout neck by a colorful bejeweled chain, she pushes her rolling chair over to the patient’s table, tapping it lightly.

“Sure, honey. It’s a good thing you came in – you look a bit pale. Sit on down.”

The young girl leaves and I’m left alone with Cheryl. Hesitantly, I sit on the edge of the table that’s covered in paper.

“What’s your name honey? How old are you?” she questions.

I laugh, unsure how to answer. “My name’s Henry Turner. I, uh...I turned 23 a while ago, ma’am.”

“Do you have insurance?”

“No ma’am.”

“Oh well, that’s alright,” Cheryl says with a warm smile. “I’ll just take a quick look. As long as I don’t see anything worrisome, we’ll let this be our little secret,” she smiles giving me a quick wink. “Let me have your hand, honey.”

Confused as to why she needs my hand, I hold it out, and she clips a small, black device onto my finger. She fiddles with it for a moment before shaking her head. She seems confused. Taking it off my finger and putting it on hers, I hear a small beep as it lights up. She unclips it from her hand and puts it back on mine. For a moment, she stares at my hand as an awkward silence fills the room.

“Honey, I’m just going to take your temperature and blood pressure the old-fashioned way,” she says, frowning at the little black clip. “This doohickey seems to be malfunctioning on me.”

I start to panic as I realize that she’s trying to take my non-existent vitals. I glance toward the door. Aveline would be very upset if I blew our cover. Again. We only lasted three allergy seasons in Springfield, so I’m determined to make it longer here. And I can tell Aveline likes this quiet little town. Although, admittedly, I never imagined myself settling in Indiana.

Standing from the patient table, I pull the little black device from my finger and hand it back to Cheryl.

“I’m actually running late,” I tell her. “I need to get going.”

“Honey are you sure? It won’t take but a minute,” she urges.

Nodding, I grab my plastic sack and run out the door, keeping my head down as I pass the girl behind the counter. Walking straight out to Aveline, I slam the door as I get into the driver’s seat.

“What happened?” she asks. “You were in there forever!” Taking a moment to calm myself, Aveline groans. “Haelstian, please don’t tell me you had to kill the pharmacist again. We just got settled!”

I shake my head. Unscrewing the lid on the pill bottle, I pop two tablets into my mouth, swallowing them dry. “Allergies,” I wheeze. “They’ll be the death of me.”

Putting the car in gear, Aveline laughs and takes my hand as I begin the drive back to our new home, vowing never to get my sinuses checked again.