

The Hours Before Death

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He comes into the bar an hour before close.

There's been a sort of buzzing in the back of my skull all day: a dull throbbing that worsens as the late hours pass. I choose to ignore it in hopes that it will just fade. I'm white-knuckling the glass I'm cleaning when the slamming of the door brings me back to awareness.

He's dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans, stained with something beige and foul-smelling that I don't think is alcohol. He seats himself on a stool, pockets his phone, and gives me a look that I immediately despise the implications of.

Nonetheless, I unfortunately have to do my job.

"What can I get you?"

"An answer to why you're here all alone," he fires back with a smirk that tells me he thought that one was good. He slurs his words ever so slightly, just the barest tells of inebriation that make his consonants lose their sharpness.

I dump a scoop of ice in the glass, fill it with water, and slide it across the counter. "I'm working."

He takes the glass and inspects it with a scrutinizing gaze. "This is water."

"I know."

He huffs out a laugh—I don't know what's funny—and downs it in one go. He slams the glass back onto the counter with unnecessary force.

"You workin' all night?"

I pull in a breath. This man is well past drunk, smells horrendous, and probably doesn't taste much better.

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But food is food. And if the pain gnawing at the base of my skull keeps getting worse, I know what's going to happen. She'll make me spiral so far that my kitchen floor will be far more comfortable than my own bed. I can already feel the first whispers of her presence, the prickle on the back of my neck that feels distinctly as though my every move is being monitored.

"I get off in an hour." I force the words through my teeth. "If you can wait that long."

Pushing him down onto the bed, I can see her from the corner of my eye, standing sentinel, holding guilt—a snarling, rabid being—by the collar like a disobedient puppy. Her eyes are soulless, the same dull, pale blue as the day the life drained from them while she went cold in my grasp.

The man grips my hips and pulls me down on top of him. His hands are grotesque, malicious, and wrong. I bite his lip and he yanks my hair. My head is pounding now, an incessant pulse between my eyes blurring the edges of his face, and his rough hands only make it worse.

From her post, she laughs. Guilt has come unchained and snaps at my heels, nipping at the fraying hem of my skirt; sequins fall like ash.

You liked it when I was gentle with you.

I take his hand and press it against my throat, encouraging him to squeeze. He says something, but I just hear her voice rattling in my head. Her blatant condescension sears into my skin like a brand.

You never made me do that to you. What makes him so special?

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I screw my eyes shut and rip his shirt open, buttons flying every which way. I can feel his teeth nipping at the side of my neck, sharp bursts of pain soothed by the slide of his tongue. I suppress the urge to recoil.

How ironic. My teeth ache at the sensation: that familiar hunger beginning to slide into my veins, sweet as honey.

Oh, my beautiful girl.

She is beside me. Her fingers slide through my hair, but blunt nails dig into my scalp, and I am viciously reminded that it has been two hundred and seventy-eight years since her skin was warm and golden, her lips soft, and blood still flowed within her. I lost the privilege of her touch when I stopped believing she would come back.

How desperate you become when you miss me so.

Something triggers inside of me: the resounding crack of a gunshot, the quick, clean splitting of a bone.

I yank this nameless man's head back and sink my teeth into his neck.

The blood fills my mouth at once: bitter and vile and *wrong*. Women are sweeter, as I noticed long ago; at least, they are to *me*. There's a certain richness to their blood that men decidedly lack. A sharpness that satiates the hunger as opposed to merely silencing it for a while.

He struggles, albeit briefly, his hands shoving frantically at my shoulders. I grab his wrists and pin them to the bed, feeling the strength slowly seep from him as I drink my fill. A reluctant calm eventually washes over him: a bone-deep sense of exhaustion, a hemorrhage donning the mask of bliss. His skin pales, the stark silhouette of his veins twining like rivers across a map.

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His blood flows over my tongue and settles in the back of my throat, thick and cloying, as if my body is rejecting him. I struggle to force it down, to convince myself that it is a necessity—that it keeps me alive, keeps my head intact, if only until that hunger once more comes to call. I allow my eyelids to flutter shut, taking in the feeling of life simmering just under my skin: the phantom sensation of my heart stirring, beating once or twice more. It is a flower blooming forth, bright and vivid, having never been more alive than in the hours before its death.

Pulling my teeth from his carotid artery feels like unsheathing a blade, and it brings with it the loss of that momentary euphoria, like a violent awakening from the most pleasant dream. My entire body thrums with its sudden absence, an ache that begins just behind my eyes. His body sinks into the sheets as if he is boneless, his limbs gone limp and unnaturally bent. His expression is peaceful, making him appear as though he's simply fallen asleep rather than just having been drained of his very essence.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my sleeve, watching the crimson slowly crawl over the threads of my shirt. My chest feels lighter, my head more still. Now that I have fed, she will be gone, as will the memory of her, at least for a while. That is how it has worked, like clockwork, for the two hundred and seventy-eight years she has been lurking in the shadows of corners, hovering just outside my periphery, a figment that moves too fast for me to catch unless she allows it.

I blink once, hard and long, just to shake off the lingering disgust. When I open my eyes, she is sitting on the bed with the nameless man, perched by his head. It takes everything in me not to flinch or jump back, but my limbs betray a small twitch of shock. I pray she doesn't see it.

Why? I bite the inside of my cheek, my teeth piercing the flesh. Why are you still here?

She studies the nameless man with the same morbid curiosity she possessed in life. I remember the feeling of her fingers on my lips, pulling them out of the way to get a better look at how my teeth sharpened, staring intently as I drank from another poor townswoman she had lured into our home with the irresistible smell of her baking.

I don't know why you still insist on feeding off She pokes his cheek these ones. You told me you didn't like how they tasted.

I don't. It's deplorable. But I don't tell her that I can barely bring myself to lay my hands on another woman, never mind drink from one. Every time I've tried to lay with one, to try to turn an act of necessity into some semblance of pleasure, her face overlaps with theirs. It doesn't matter what they look like or what they sound like. They all don those piercing blue eyes, ink-black curls, and tanned skin dotted with freckles like clusters of stars. Their voices adopt her barely noticeable French accent: the soft lilt with the same cadence as the wind whistling through empty Parisian streets on our cold winter walks.

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But she knows. I know she does. And I will not give her the satisfaction of admitting it.

Instead, I stand there—skirt half off, fresh blood dripping down my chin—and I say the first thing that comes to mind.

“Fuck you.”

Her full eyebrows raise, pale lips parting around a sharp inhale; then, to my surprise, she laughs in my face.

My, Thalia, a miracle you even got him through your door, never mind in your bed.

The blow lands, and I turn away, the uneven click of my boots echoing off the scantily furnished walls as I stagger into the kitchen. There's a half-empty bottle of cheap whiskey sitting in the cabinet beside my fridge; its amber liquid sloshes as I slam it onto the counter. I grab one

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of two clean glasses from their place by the sink and pour a generous amount, enough to dull the throbbing in my head. I throw it back in one go, my throat burning, yet it is somehow more palatable than whatever came from that man's veins.

When I drop the glass back on the counter, she is there, standing to my right. She glances out the open window beside her as a group of rowdy college students passes by below, laughing about something or another. The next second, a cop car speeds down the street, alarms blaring. The Boston night is loud; it's alive, awake with the souls of its inhabitants, and so unlike what she is used to.

She turns back to me, and I can *feel* the pity radiating off her. It makes me grind my teeth.

He didn't deserve that.

I bark out a laugh, short and biting. "God, you're just full of it tonight, huh?"

I say it like this doesn't happen every couple of nights. Any time I try to bring someone home, to lose myself in the heated touch of another, she's always there, reminding me of what I lost. She wields my love in one hand, her humanity in the other, and drives me to *feed* where I just want to *feel*.

But feeding usually drives her away for a while, permitting me a day or two of reprieve, so *why* is she still fucking here?

She sighs. *Selfishness was always your closest friend, mon amour.*

I flinch, barely. Just a reflexive twitch of my shoulders.

"Don't call me that."

When she falls silent for a beat, I risk a glance at her face. There is such *softness* in her eyes that for a second, *just* a second, she looks like she did back then: standing in our kitchen with the smell of fresh bread wafting through the air and birdsong drifting in through the

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windows. Back when I didn't know the exact color her skin turns when her body has been completely drained.

For a second, she is Vivienne: lover of birds, collector of small things. She is a woman with a voice like the winter breeze and hands that are warm no matter the weather.

My love. My wife.

I blink and Vivienne is gone. I find myself staring into the lifeless eyes of the woman I have mourned longer than I have known. There is something sharp there now, dark and withering in the way its gaze cuts through me.

You're right, Thalia. You don't deserve my kindness.

The smell of death wafts out from my bedroom, and my next inhale stutters in my lungs. *I know.* I know this. Yet when I speak, I sound petulant, childish even to my own ears.

"It was an *accident*."

She doesn't say anything; she just sits there, staring at me with a sinister mockery of that infuriating expression. She wore it on nights I spent insisting on my monstrosity through tears, pleading with her to leave before I hurt her too. I'd lash out, and I'd beg, and I'd tear her down in ways that would send anyone else running.

But she'd look at me like *that*, and ~~suddenly, I knew every reason she had for staying.~~ Everything she'd ever said about me was the irrefutable truth.

She had looked at me like that the last night she was alive. I hadn't fed in days, and they had started to catch on: the people going missing, the bodies turning up in rivers and alleys. I couldn't risk us being caught—risk *her* being in danger—but my hunger had begun to consume me, driving me to lash out and shut myself away in our bedroom. I remember the gentle timbre

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of her voice from the other side of the door, insisting that I feed from her and that she knew I wouldn't hurt her. That it would be okay.

And in my starvation-fueled haze, I had believed her.

"It was an *accident*." I am almost pleading now, my voice cracking. I feel like I should be on my knees. But what I say and do in this moment doesn't matter. I had believed her, years ago. I had believed her with every shred of faith I had in me. I was her apostle, and she my savior, her words gospel.

That had not changed.

I turn back toward my bedroom, back toward the nameless man lying dead on my bed. I can't breathe. I am drowning, suffocating in a grave that I dug with my own bloodied hands. Her blood—staining my tongue, caught between my teeth, and lodged underneath my fingernails.

Bile rises in my throat.

"W—" I try to speak, to swallow the warble in my voice. "Why are you still here? I *killed* him. I *fed*. I did what I had to *do*." The words come spilling out fast and frantic, as though I am bartering for my life rather than a few days of peace. "Why won't you just *leave me alone*?"

She tilts her head, her lower lip jutting out in a saccharine little pout. *Oh, darling, you really think I'm still here, don't you?* She straightens again, her expression dropping, replaced with something far more malicious. *You were never one to believe in ghosts. Stop lying to yourself.*

My brows furrow, my mouth opening and closing uselessly, as I try to make sense of her words. She has spent two hundred and seventy-eight years following me from place to place, city to city, and country to country, when she is the only thing I have ever really made an effort to forget. But this is new. She has never stayed long enough to address her own constant presence.

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She has only ever hounded me for what I did. I have spent every night drinking and fucking the memory and shame out of my head.

I grip the counter beside me in an attempt to stop myself from collapsing to my knees. “Please, please, go away.” I think I am sobbing. It is an entirely new sensation. It is raw and ugly and everything I fight so hard to keep hidden. “I can’t do this anymore, I *can’t*, please, Vivienne, please.”

There’s an answering silence. It stretches, long and agonizing.

You keep me here.

I am shaking my head before she finishes speaking. It’s not true. It can’t be.

Thalia, I am dead. I am gone. There is nothing left of me in this world except what you hold onto so tightly. The only version of me that exists is the one of your own creation.

The shaking of my head is more furious now, and I think I am muttering a string of *nos* and *pleases*, but my ears are ringing so loudly I can barely hear myself. I turn away, back toward my bedroom, back to where a corpse lies still, demanding my attention.

The air shifts, and when she speaks again, she sounds as though she is standing right behind me.

You can’t live with it anymore. Her tone is venomous, reverberating through my skull in a sort of growl I have never heard before. *You can no longer pretend that it was not your fault. You drank me dry and called it “life.” I loved you, and you murdered me.*

My hand flies to the glass on the counter and sends it sailing through the air without a second thought. It hits the wall and shatters, shards of glass falling to the floor and scattering across my kitchen like snow.

But she is gone.

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Silence lingers in her absence—no conversation, no car horns, no nightclub music bouncing off the tightly-packed apartments. Nothing. It's as if she took the life of the city with her.

The sound of my own breath is deafening. I am painfully aware of my continued existence, of my heart that will never beat again, of my body that will survive in spite of it.

I am alive, she is dead, and there is a corpse in my bed that needs burning.

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