

Wistful Autumn

I.

At the corner of Peach and Birch sat what was quite possibly the oldest house in Hamden. Victorian in build, in contrast to the colonial types so common in the northeast, and bright purple in color. It had a cottage fence that wrapped around its perimeter that met with a large metal gate at the mouth of a walkway dotted with various statues of all sorts. It would have looked charming if the fence had not been painted entirely black. An old woman lived there who went by many names, but she was known throughout the underground for being able to help the ailing of heart.

II.

Dante was someone whom everyone knew. He was tall and pleasant faced and had a smile that lit up the whole church on Sundays when he, his wife, and two daughters filed in- stopping every other pew to say their greetings. He was quiet, only speaking his mind when he collected his thoughts, kind, and raised well by a father who helped build half the town of Hamden and a mother who was the nurse at the school. For all intents and purposes, Dante was the perfect man. A man of honor and family and love for his church and community. And all of that would be true if he wasn't deeply in love with someone else.

III.

Enter Bea, the small-town girl, raised by a single mother, who lived on the fringe of town in a beat-up mobile home and who spent her days working three jobs. When she wasn't the cashier at Mulligans or the bartender at Micks or sweeping the altar at the church, she was at home taking care of her aging mother, who in her later years had begun to see things that weren't actually there. Bea knew Dante from church and her interactions with him were usually cordial but warm – never saying more to each other than needed. Though sometimes in the corner of Bea's eyes she would catch Dante looking at her and if she wasn't a God-fearing woman perhaps, she would have turned her head and met his gaze. But she couldn't and wouldn't entertain such thoughts. And so, she stomped them out of her head and heart before they had a chance to take root.

IV.

It was early October when Dante decided he could no longer take being married to the wrong woman. He still *liked* being around his wife; he was too honorable of a man to treat her any differently. He did willingly date her when their parents had set them up and he did willingly ask

her to marry him when everyone around him said it was the right thing to do. But in his heart was always Bea whom pleasant people deemed unworthy of him – she had no father, no family name, and most importantly, no money. In the eyes of the congregation Bea was tainted by her harlot mother. And as much of a logical person Dante was, he could not seem to talk his way out of his feelings. When he closed his eyes he would see her, when he felt the winds kiss his neck he would feel her, and when he lay with his wife, he would think of her. Dante would look at his daughters and imagine them with Bea's dark curly hair instead of his wife's strawberry locks. When he looked at his ring, he thought of Bea's hand wearing one that matched. And so, on the 9th of October, Dante got into his car – a handsome red pickup truck- and drove to the corner of Peach and Birch.

V.

The old woman knew of Dante's arrival before he had pulled up at the curb – the birds told her so. She quickly put on her black embroidered cardigan and descended the ornate staircase - pausing for a moment to adjust her many bangles. She opened the door just as Dante was lifting his hand to knock and invited him inside. He looked bewildered, like a deer in headlights, and she liked them that way – more entertaining. And one could see the ghosts of the manor swell in exhilaration – if one knew where to look. She led him down a long hallway with glittering mirrors that hung this way and that on peeling wallpaper from the yester years. She talked about several things all at once – how she knew why he was here, how she had been waiting for his visit for some time now, how the church's new roofing looked, and what she had for breakfast. Dante was most confused and felt as if his head was spinning when she plopped him down opposite her in a room filled with taxidermy squirrels, and various sigils drawn into the walls. She fanned out a deck of cards on the table in front of him and began speaking in tongues. Dante answered her questions when prompted, even the more invasive ones, and when whatever the old woman was chanting had reached its zenith, Dante slammed his fists on the table and stood up. He said he couldn't go through with this- he was a good Christian man after all- and instead he wanted to be done with it. All of it. Dante pleaded with the old woman to take his feelings, he didn't care what she did with them, he just wanted them to be finally out of his chest. The old woman sat in silence for a few moments, watching him – calculating- before producing a small red vial from her sleeve. She handed him the vial and told him to drink it outside at midnight during the next full moon. Dante grabbed the vial, and without even a goodbye, he stormed out of the house. The old woman cackled. What excitement indeed!

VI.

Perhaps it was fate who intervened or perhaps the old woman had chosen her words with intent, but the blood moon would rise that very night and Dante thought himself most fortunate. He made up an excuse to his wife – he was needed for something somewhere- and

tucked his daughters into bed. He gave them each a kiss on their forehead before setting out into the brisk October night. He knew exactly where to go. A clearing in the woods just beyond the sight of the church. No one knew about it – he had come here in secret as a child whenever he felt the tug of the forest. He didn't remember it being so alive – it felt like the very earth below him was vibrating. His heart thumped loudly in his chest with its rhythm in tandem with the breathing of the woods. When his watch struck midnight, Dante held up the vial towards the sky. A cloud parted and the brilliant redness of the moon shown through the glass of the vial and Dante let the light filled his pupils. He popped open the vial and down its contents in one swig. He stood there for a few moments – waiting for something to happen- and, before he even knew was what happening, Dante collapsed onto the ground.

VII.

He awoke several hours later when the morning sun began to peak through the horizon. He was nowhere near the clearing he was at last night, and he hadn't the shred of clothes on him. He looked down at his stark-naked body and noticed several large gashes on his abdomen. The blood had dried and caked along the edges of his cuts and that's when he noticed was holding the body of a decapitated chicken. Dante lifted his head and saw that he was standing on the shore of a river deep within the forest. From his scout days he recognized it as the one that divided the town of Hamden right down the middle but for the life of him, he couldn't remember how he got here or where his clothes had gone. And that's when thoughts of Bea crept into his mind again and he left his heart give a tight squeeze. The love he had was still there, still strong and lingering, and he had been a fool. Across town, Bea' mother shrieked with indignation. "I saw him! I saw him!" she bellowed and poor Bea struggled to keep her mom laying down in her bed. "He came for you! He was here! I saw him!"