

The Temptress

by Hugh Barlow

I find myself walking down a street that I knew from when I was a child. I do not remember how I got here, but I know the street well, and I can see that it is about mid spring. The hedges have all lost their verdure, and fresh buds have yet to bloom on the dead looking twigs of the shrubbery. There are scraps of litter mixed in with the leaves that had fallen from the last autumn. Candy wrappers and cigarette butts are woven into what looks like rat's nests under the hedges, and the snow of winter has vanished long ago. The leaves are the dun color that comes with age and decomposition. I see the red of a Kit Kat wrapper, the green of Wrigley's chewing gum, and the silver tinsel of some foil that was discarded some months ago adorning the detritus under the hedges like Christmas decorations left out to weather long after the season is gone. I feel an errant breeze teasing me with the touch of a chill, but the teasing is just a hint. The bite of winter is gone. In the distance, I see a form that I know well. It is a blond woman dressed in tailored slacks, a white frilled shear blouse, and a black form fitting jacket that is open in the front and accentuates her body. Oddly, while I can see the woman's striking blue eyes clearly, I cannot make out her face. It is as though she is wearing a mask made from nylon stocking that blurs the features of her face enough that they are indistinguishable. Although I know I should know this woman well just by the shape of her body, I am curiously unable to recollect exactly who she is.

My mystery woman smiles a hidden smile through her mask, and attempts to seduce me with her eyes. She says not a word, but brings up her hand and beckons me with the classic one finger curl that says, "Come hither." Her eyes make promises, and she turns: I become excited by the promises and I follow. The mystery woman walks toward the lobby of the most expensive hotel in town. The building has a tower of 10 or so stories with two wings to each side that are about 3 stories tall. The central tower juts forward from the

main structure and is supported by several large pillars where the driveway tunnels under the building on the ground floor. Instead of walking toward the automatic doors, I am surprised to find that the mystery woman begins to climb on the trunk of a black stretched limousine that is parked under the tower. She climbs on the roof, and triggers a trap door that is set in the ceiling above the entryway. Again, she beckons me with the crook of her finger, and I climb onto the roof of the car and help her enter the trap door. After boosting my mystery woman, I grab the edge and pull myself up into a dark space. The woman reaches down, closes the door behind us, and I find that the place where the door once gaped has become indistinguishable from the marble floor that we crouch on. Feeling about with my hands, I cannot find the joints where the door once was. I look about to see where we are, but all I can see is that we are in a darkened space. The only light comes from the distant exit signs to my left and right, and several dim, blood red bulbs set in fixtures on either side of a very long hallway.

The mystery woman stands, turns, and walks down the hallway. She seems to peer at each door to see the number, but I am unable to tell one number from the next except by feel. She goes from door to door in the darkened hall until she reaches the one she is searching for. She fumbles for a key, and I ask myself, "If she has a key, why did we have to sneak in?" The door unlocks, and the mystery woman turns on the lights to the room that I have yet to see. The light from the room floods the hall and shows stained, torn and ruined wallpaper. It seems to have aged several hundred years or so, but the building we are in is only a few years old. The decay that I see is not possible in the amount of time that this building has existed. I shrug that off, and follow the mystery woman into the room after she enters. The room that I see is very different from what I saw in the hallway. The walls are antiseptic white and everything looks freshly painted and scrubbed surgically clean. Instead of seeing the bedroom set that I had expected, I see one wall of the room bracketed by a row of gleaming glass tubes that go from

floor to ceiling. The tubes are large enough that a person could stand inside and not touch the gleaming glass. The windows of the room are curtained with heavy white drapes that do not allow the daylight through, and in the center of the room is a stainless steel console with many lights and switches. There is a computer monitor embedded in the console, and an antiseptically white keyboard on the stainless counter. At the console is a black plastic swivel chair with rollers. The mystery woman walks to the stainless steel console, puts her jacket on the back of the chair and then brushes the chair out of her way. She then uses the keyboard, and flips a few switches. Two of the glass tubes make a popping sound, and sigh with the sound of a vacuum being filled with gases. Two glass doors pop open, and the mystery woman walks up to one of the tubes and enters.

I stand rooted to the spot as I watch the woman enter the tube. She turns and looks at me as the door sighs shut behind her and seems to ask, "Won't you join me?" as she gestures toward the empty and open tube next to her. I shake my head no, and a look of sadness enters her eyes as the machines that run the place start the floor of the tube spinning in a clockwise direction. The floor shakes as my mystery woman turns like a ballerina in the center of the glass tube. The air is quickly evacuated. Blood pours out from her body through the pores on her skin, her mouth, ears, and other body orifices as she snaps her head with each turn to look at me just like the dancer she so recently resembled. The look in her eyes is one of pity as the vacuum chamber centrifuges her blood up against the walls and I lose sight of her. Eventually, the machinery stops, the woman falls limp to the floor in an unrecognizable mass of flesh and bone. The blood on the glass walls of the chamber flows to the floor to puddle while the pink mists of blood in the chamber slowly coagulate and drop to the floor, drawn by gravity.

Although it is mid summer, and sweltering hot in my camper, I awake in a cold sweat, with the acrid stench of fear in my nostrils;

with it burning in my eyes. I shake as the adrenaline courses through my blood. While it is still still very early in the morning, there is NO WAY that I am going back to sleep!

