

Winter Kills

by Kyle Hemmings

Cold wind bites. I trudge down East Third, leaving a trail of footprints that the snow will soon cover. Winter pulls you in and summer spits you out. On the street, I pass school girls, drug dealers, snake-eyed women who can't shake off the cold. This winter's a bitch, so hard on black leather. Everybody wears it and hides their tattoos under layers of knit, synthetic yarn. I turn, run up the steps to the tenement that siphons out the very warmth it's supposed to keep in.

I throw off my pea coat, pull off the cheap cotton gloves. I rub my fingers against a sage horseshoe pullover, trying to stir some life back into them. They are detached phantoms, numbed mercenaries. Head toward the chintzy living room that's really a crawl space, cheap balsa wood and floorboards that echo your curses to the tenants below. From the window's cracks, edges, a stench of burning transmission wafts in, its bluish gasp of smoke. I can hear the tires whirl and whine. Today, nothing gets liberated.

I stand over Martha. My needy lover who has turned me into a junkie. I'm hooked on promises but I never see a return. Don't ever invest in love. You'll go broke.

She's lying on the sofa, wrapped in her grandmother's shawl, a white cable knit. Her red spiked hair's a mess and she wears the same fishnet stockings she wore the night before. I think how Martha could once sing.

I work as a part-time audio engineer in Chelsea, where she once recorded demos. That was before she decided to trash her career and her life. I fell hard in love with Martha and wanted to save both. Maybe she reminded me of myself before rehab. Now days, I can't

even save myself. Maybe it's what we both want. To be a player in each other's destruction. Maybe we'll burn in the same pyre and never return like some crazy Phoenix ascending, yearning for another chance at life.

"Martha, " I say, "wake up. You know what time it is?"

But she's so tired, she says, can barely lift her head.

And I know the feeling. The feeling of days yawning forever, fishermen dying in a fog, thoughts turning still as oyster beds. If only we could grow so small, to disappear through the pores of others' skins.

Her clothes rustle and I think of maple leaves somewhere in a warmer season, and not the crinkle of cheap leather in cold-water flats.

"This body," she says with eyes closed, head rolling back, "it's like chain links. Rusted fucking chain links."

I edge closer to the sofa. My hands dangle at my side. They are useless puppets. I'm afraid to touch her. To hurt her.

"Honey," she says, "could you go out and score me some more pain pills? It's really bad."

And Martha, I tell her, don't you think you should see someone? Don't you think it's time?

Time. I peep outside the window, people walking as if outside of themselves, as if their bodies are glass bubbles to look through. If only bodies could float up and not down. If only bodies could turn to ribbons decorating the flagpoles, the tips of skyscrapers, the hair of

yellow goddesses. Hell, there ain't no goddesses in this life. There's only Martha and her seashell eyes.

"Martha," I say, "there's no mail today. The check didn't come in."

"It's a fucking joke, ain't it? Our luck."

I smile and nod my head. But Martha isn't watching. She plays with a loop of the white afghan. I wonder in what season her grandmother had knitted it. I wonder how cold it gets in Russia.

Sometimes, after Martha and I make love, she curls up like a frightened child and stares out to the far wall, some photo of Russian soldiers left by a previous tenant. Maybe WWI. Some are smoking cigarettes. Some have no rifles. Maybe these same ones got wiped out by the Kaiser's troops. "If only there was some way out of it," she says, "it's not just the pain. Not just that. I mean, you always return to where you are. And I don't want to be here. Tell me to shut up, baby. Tell me to shut the fuck up. Aww, if it weren't for you, sweetie, I'd be dead. I know it."

Then she squeezes my hand and falls asleep resting her cheek on my knuckles. But I'm not sure if she's really sleeping. Sometimes, I wonder what does she think about after we fuck. Fisherman dying in fog? Maybe.

And on nights like these, I conjure Martha's childhood, a little girl who could make the whole world fall in love with her, with those goddam big seashell eyes, enticing adults to drift into a blue-green sea that never ends, never promises survival. Then, she'd walk away like some cat bored playing with a ball of twine. I imagine a girl easily distracted by, pulled into the possibility of warmth that she would take for granted.

There were summers of rising balloons and wisps of low clouds. Little girls jumping or dodging the spray of hoses in the streets, lingering smiles in a dim hallway, a man with a gap-tooth smile selling chestnuts on East Tenth, and years later, a stranger's sausage-like fingers sliding up her Catholic girl skirts. This barter of sex for warmth, or something close to it.

She would remember his eyes large as wafers and how unromantic his lust lingered on a hot afternoon. She would recall her body as spongy dough under his kneading fingers, the scent of fresh shoe polish on his imported oxfords, a present from his wife in some other desert, and how his breath always smelled fruity. He always claimed he was on a fast of some kind. His name, he said, after devouring her, was Ari. And in time, he'd become a mirage of the dangling father, a demon inside her 6th Ave. pastry. There was the insidious cooling of late summer nights, the rocket-cries of boys at the far end of the block. By the age of fifteen, everything tasted like snow. She cried over the white-out of yearning. No one ever told her that winter kills.

I trudge past St. Mark's and onto Ave. B. I knock on the door of a Pakistani guy I know, a medical student, who occasionally fronts an Indy band at a corner club. I hit him up for some Vicodin and promise to get him some free time in the studio. I don't think he buys my bullshit, but fuck, he gives me the pills anyway and says last time, asshole.

You want some free time or what? I say. Tell her to see a neurologist, he says. All that nerve damage from the drugs.

I can't even get her to see an acupuncturist, I say, you know, the holistic shit. Man, she won't even pop a vitamin.

I fly down the sidewalks laced with snow and footprints. It's kinda poetic, the way Martha and I once were. The way I like to think we

once were. But I knew she was screwing every Tom, Dick and Harry behind my back. I knew we were both desperate for something we never could find.

Maybe we really deserve this winter. Maybe you could learn to love the winter because there is nothing else. You get used to the feeling of cold palms and flesh stinging like pine needles. Your pores too big to keep out the chill. Hell, there ain't no antifreeze for this kind of winter.

Back at the apartment, I call out to Martha. I got good news, baby. Like Merry fucking Christmas, Santa Claus is here, even though Christmas was last month. But Martha's quiet. Real quiet.

I kinda tiptoe inside and sit down in an old rocker across the sofa. Martha's face is ashen and twisted. Now, you don't get ashen from the winter. You get blue. You get stone-cold blue. I don't think she's breathing. I don't think she is. I'm tempted to leap up, dial my cell phone. Call 911 and say some shit like, "My girlfriend just swallowed some bleach." 'Cause that's what's lying on the floor. A bottle of Clorox. Color safe. Can you imagine that? Color safe?

But I'm not going to dial anyone, see? Because Martha doesn't want to come back here. She'd never return to this place. And because I love her, or because I'm as crazy as her, I'm gonna grant her that last wish. Here's what I'll do: I'm gonna do all her dirty laundry. the laundry she kept putting off for days. Bras, undies, dresses, skirts, spandex. The whole shabang. So, when they lay her out, she's gonna smell sweet. Real sweet, baby. Sweet like gardenias and not mothballs. Sweet like summer and not winter.

