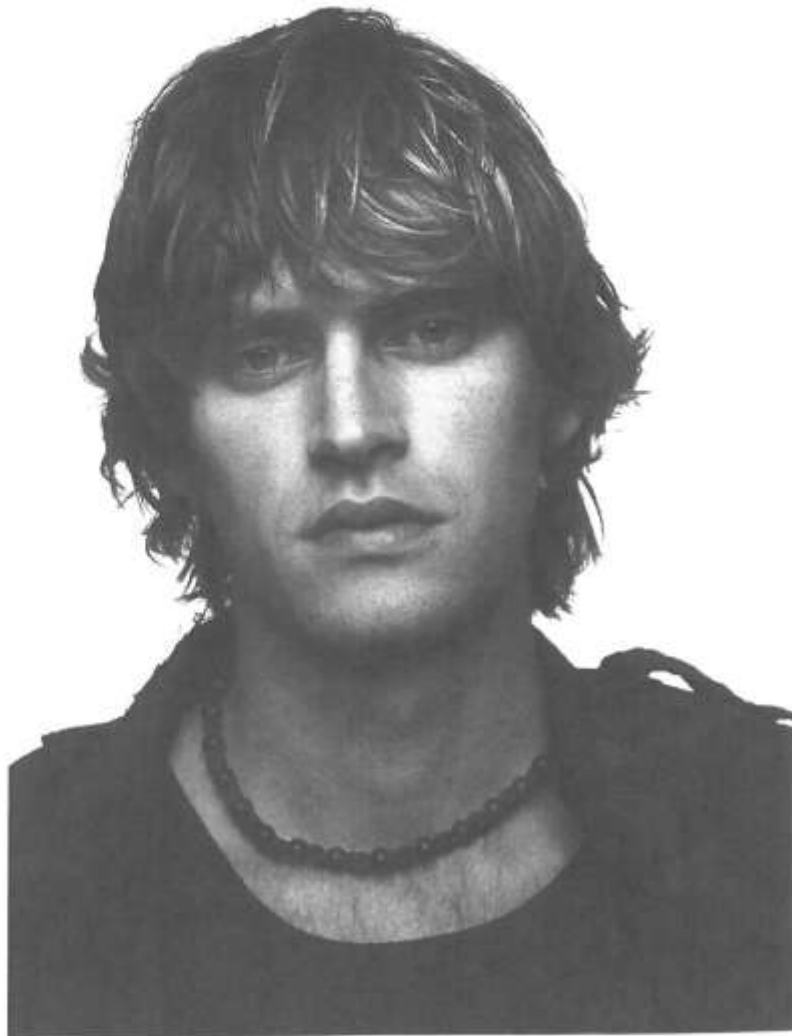


SCENT OF A WOMAN

by

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My mother always said I was like a cat. I sincerely hope she was referring to a big one, perhaps a leopard or a lynx. Something feral and dangerous--a voracious meateater, amoral and beautiful. Yes, I do enjoy the metaphor--me on the prowl, sleek, well-fed but always hungering for the fresh kill. Felines are so brutally sensual, so perfect.

I scratch my jaw, keenly aware of the new beard growth there. I run my fingers against the bristly hairs. My skin tingles against the subtle roughness. Sometimes it's the tenderest touch that hurts most pleasingly.

No one else seems to understand this but me. It's a lonely world when your own special needs and desires are rarely met. Which makes me think of my own little Mushi, my plump little tabby who keeps me company and who adores bathing me with her gravel tongue. I swear she almost purrs my name--Ian, Ian--as her tongue nearly loves me raw.

Sometimes, I've gently raked my own tongue against my own flesh, watching the blood bead and then flow freely. But it's not the same. Not at all.

How I wish I had a tongue like Mushi's, though mine is almost as finely-tuned. Mushi's is lyrical, so delicate, so violent. She teases and tantalizes; I simply deliver. She almost but not quite draws blood, and yet from the gleam in her crystalline green eyes, I know she could if she wanted to. We are so much alike.

My mother was an astute woman; no one else has ever detected my feline qualities. And I've been compared to many things and people, often mundane and pedestrian. People have always insisted on comparisons to some vapid model or celluloid star. They are unduly impressed with the outward mask, whereas I always seek the deeper levels of sensation and satiation. That which exists beneath the skin.

My mother was like me in that respect, though she was actually immune to beauty. I do appreciate symmetry and grace of line; I simply crave more. My mother, though,

shrugged at the sight of a flawless face, a god-like physique.. My father was a thousand times more decorative than I, but her infatuation with him had been very brief. His allure had been his inhumaness, but it faded fast once she grew accustomed to it. She wasn't a person given to deep passions. But she was always cordial--cool and dignified. She respected me and I respected her. Her death was simple and satisfactory--and elegant. Just as she and I planned.

"Ian, I refuse to linger and wither. I refuse to turn ugly and useless," she told me. I could have argued, but didn't try. Her decision was wise, and though I wasn't eager to partake of tainted blood, I knew my healthy system could manage it well.

I did it as a favor. Drinking blood thus straight from the vein doesn't please me at all. Some do enjoy this mode of imbibement, but they are not me. I prefer a more delicate deliverance of nourishment. The others like me are baffled by my esoteric tastes. They are a crude lot, I tell you.

I don't know why I'm dwelling on the subject of my deceased mother. It's been a long time. She was a remarkable woman--one of the few beings who came close to knowing me. I like women in general in a broad, nondiscriminating way. That is, I like their physicality--their earthy fleshiness. I like men too, and yet they lack the extra nuances and flavors that women provide. Men just are, and that's a fact. They are standard fare; women are gourmet cuisine.

But to actually commune with one on a more intimate, soul-felt level--well--let's just say that is a rare occurrence.

Which explains why I'm wandering around town past midnight in the one of the seedier areas, which is charmless and redolent of all sorts of mankind's ills. Sewage, moldering refuse, the unwashed sour bodies of the denizens of the street, diseased automobiles expelling foul chemicals and other rotting materials. And yet through the vile effulgence, there is an elusive sweetness. A tender, fresh, clean, metallic scent which

calls to me in a way I've never experienced before. Or at least it's been so long that I've forgotten what this madness is like.

Somehow she is a part of me. She is one who would know me in a way no other woman or man could. This realization nearly brings tears to my eyes. I can not rest until I hunt her down. My mouth waters as the scent grows just a little stronger. Perhaps this is my last chance to find one such as she.

If I were younger I'd have tracked the scent down sooner. But I'm getting on in years--not that you'd guess if you saw me. I easily am taken for a young man in his second decade of life. My mother died at least ninety years ago, which makes me--can it be true? Am I nearly through half of my second century in life? Time has flown. The later days have been dull, cottony with the sameness of my routine. Until two weeks ago. It's taken me that long to trace down the origin of the that sweet aroma. I've narrowed it to this square block of houses.

I pass more noisome squalor but now there are shrieks, bleats and squeaks. Noise--human noise. One of the raddled little pestholes--the local watering hole--spews forth a knot of staggering people.

Suddenly a shrill, shaky voice. "Hey, take a look at this, you lucky assholes", the voice dissolves into a witch's cackle. A woman is lifting up her shirt and baring her breasts at the men who've just stumbled out the door behind her.

The men stare, then laugh and hoot. A rattling, belching old car idles by and bams it's horn. The inhabitants bark excitedly and cheer the woman. The men on the street laugh louder. "Cover up them flapjacks, honey, we ain't hungry," one yells. The other chimes in, "I've seen bigger tits on my kid brother."

"Assholes," the woman shrills, stumbling away. She pauses to give them the finger, her female companion does likewise. The dark swallows them up.

Suddenly, the human faces, gritty smudges of white, turn towards me and I decide it is time move on. The farce is over anyway. I have no time for distractions. But the brief

delay has whetted my appetite, which is what I wanted. I leave the clamor and rank odors of the humans behind me. Brittle, cold night air slaps face.

There. That fragrance again. My teeth ache. My skin shivers and something deliciously icy traces my spine. I lick my lips. She is close. So very close. How do I know the tender bouquet originates from a she, you may ask? I know. The shenness is obvious to a connoisseur. The flower commingling with the musk of a wild animal.

I'm closer, now. Closer. I move quickly, feet skimming above the scum and damp coating the pavement. Two blocks before me a brownstone arises. Beckoning, a softly illuminated hand surrounded by inky shadows. I wonder should I really follow the enticement of that hand? But I can't resist. Maybe it's a trap, maybe an enemy is luring me, but I don't care. Nothing else matters now.

I surge forward. The hunger for that aroma almost blinding me. I must hurry--

A small, odorous slumped figure bleats from the alley as glide by. It stretches out a hand in supplication. I toss a few coins and it caws something else which I don't decipher. I don't look back. I can't. I'm almost there.

A second floor window, a golden backdrop for her. It is her. I know it. I scent it. I taste it. Like a dancing girl, she dips and swirls, back arched, slender limbs moving to a silent melody. All grace, all curves, as she disrobes. Clothing drops like petals from the loveliest of roses. Sharply etched in light, she is a black supple figure. The swell of her breast, her hip, the fine sloping line of her thigh and knee. She stretches, her belly flexing and tightening. Before her, the outline of a massive old fashioned tub. In a flash, she steps into it and now I only see the top of her head, one out-stretched arm.

But it does not matter that the vision is now obscured, because her scent is amplified. She and the water are mixing into a powerful perfume. Every bead transmits her sweet lightly bitter flavor. I am tempted to scratch at the wall and howl, but I clench my jaw and wait and think.

I've been unable to eat or enjoy other pleasures since I first caught a whiff of her lusciousness. I must act quickly but thoughtfully. If I were another sort of vampire, I'd scale the building, hypnotize her, then drain her dry. Luckily, I am no barbarian.

I do scale the building easily. You'd be surprised to see such a seemingly normal man move so swiftly and gracefully. I'm grinding my teeth. The hunger is a like a rich, red wave as her scent nearly knocks me back. Smiling, I balance on the narrow sill and press against the glass.

She is soaping one arm languidly when she catches a glimpse of me in the window pane; her face, moist and pink, from the steam, convulses. But then, I make the appropriate motions, hum the appropriate seduction song. Oh sweet, sweet one, you want me to enter, to enter. You want me in. In. I croon it and despite the thick glass barrier between us, she rises like a birthday surprise from the rich icing of soapy foam and walks to the window.

If a passerby were to see us, they'd be most transfixed at the image of a well-dressed young man suspended in mid-air, grasping the flat surface of a window, smiling and singing to a naked girl.

She presses her lips and hands against the pane, she is so moist and shiny. Her hair curls and clings to her dewy neck. Her flesh expands and opens under the steam. It feels an eon before she unlocks the latch, throws back the sash and opens the window.

"You," is all she says. Eyes shiny, arms reaching out. I slide into her boudoir and allow her to embrace me.

We stand, her wet skin soaking me, me soaking in her sweet scent. This time I allow myself to howl with delight.

Outside, a dog bays in sorrowful understanding. He knows I'm lost now. I've given up all hope of ever regaining my senses.

Her room is all pink, faded lace, silk flowers and finely aged furniture; like a Victorian Valentine, it shines with love and hope. Her home is an oasis in the foul, diseased part of town. A rose among thorns.

She is so perfect.

She and I climb into the tub together. Lightly, I run my fingers over her back as she snuggles back towards me. I don't bother to remove my clothing. Clothing is simply irrelevant. Up and down her shimmering rosy skin, I caress her. She purrs just like my precious Mushi. When I stop, she whimpers, "More".

You are no doubt surprised I have exercised such self-control, considering how her essence makes me shake with hunger. She is the one. She really is. When she looks over her shoulder and smiles dazedly at me, I know the wait will make the taking all the sweeter.

"You," she repeats. She sounds almost puzzled.

I trace the veins throbbing beneath her skin around her stomach and up. "Yes, I'm him. I've come." Surely she knew her siren's song would be answered by me. She was waiting, was she not?

And if not, she knows now who I am.

She shudders as I stroke her neck. I can hold back no longer, and with a greedy swiftness, I capture her right arm. The skin is smooth, pliant, juicy and my lips tremble with need before they descend. I begin licking without Mushi's tantalizing foreplay style. Blood pearls, like drops of honey from the comb. Honeysuckle nectar. Scent and taste indistinguishable now. I lick without stop from wrist to her elbow. She moans softly as my tongue attacks the soft spot where her arm bends.

The water cools. The bubbles evaporate. The curtains blow with a sudden icy moonstruck breeze. Goosebumps erupt on her skin. I can't resist, I must devour each and every one. I've reached her shoulder and linger there, aware of her intense pleasure as I nibble the innocent curve of her neck. She arches and flings her head back suddenly.

Her words are meaningless, kittenish mewls. I want her to say my name, and I whisper it in her ear. My tongue lashes out and captures a sapling of blood. "Ian," she finally manages hoarsely. Water slops over the tub's side and now more is on the floor than inside. She urges me on, guiding my tongue to the hollow of her throat.

I'm hungrier than ever. I won't stop., I know, until each drop has been lapped up.

The inky silk of the night sky is beginning to fade. Outside, footsteps whisper by. A door slams. The water is cold and filmy. The air is still so rich and creamy though I have almost forgotten the passing of time. The faintest rim of light surfaces on the horizon.

She lies limp against me, quivering just a little. And now I realize, as I pat gently her delicately flayed side, that it is time our souls truly blend and bleed into each other.

This is the moment I've been craving since the beginning of my existence. I'll never go back to what I was before.

My skin aches for what my tongue has delivered to her. I kiss her lips and impart a temporary vigor. I'll need her strength to give me what I want. She is a generous heart. She won't mind being the giver now, instead of the receiver.

Sadly, her tongue is human smooth and human useless. A thousand times less effective than Mushi's. I rise from the tub and search her vanity dresser nearby.

Necessity

is the mother of all invention, they say. Sure enough I spot tiny scissors carelessly tossed among small bottles of polishes, cotton bits, rouge and tubes of lip color. As gently as possible I place the scissors in her cool, limp hand and squeeze her fingers around it. Her wide eyes meet mine and I whisper words to her. She sits up straighter, her pink flesh has paled but is still succulent. Obediently, my soul mate places the handle of the scissors into her mouth, so that the pointed ends protrude from her lips. She wraps her tongue around the metal and reaches for my arm. It grates my skin with startling grace and

finesse, the moistness of her tongue mingling delightfully with the abrasiveness of the sharp metallic edges.

A sudden hungry gleam fills her eyes and joy fills my heart as I realize a surprising truth and twist to this venture, that she is truly like me now. She will sup from me as I have from her. She will lap me up, until the last drop is gone.

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