

Out to Pasture

“Stoned to death as she attempted to flee the village,” said Camilla. “They left her body on the forest bed like game. The next day, the chief instructed two boys to haul the body to the cliff past the edge of the village. I saw a child playing with her necklace some time after.”

Outside, drums beat. I shifted in my seat to get to more comfortable but to no avail. I balled my fists then rubbed them on the cool dirt of her floor to mask their stench. Visions of the young girl’s body colliding with the jagged rocks on the shore passed in revolutions. I knew the path for I walked along it before discovering the village.

“*Why?*” I asked.

“In a moment of weakness, she removed her hair. All of it,” Camilla stirred her tea in oblong rotations. Clink! Clink! Clink, the spoon ricocheted inside the cup. “She had a mole on the back of her head, like a beady eye that couldn’t see what was coming. In some form or another it was inevitable. How long can any girl remain flawless? The moment the villagers saw that haircut, there was blood in water.

“They assembled around her yurt waiting for a glimpse. Not just the women, there were families present. For hours each day, they gossiped and pointed. When she finally opened her door, they pelted her with dung. How they laughed! They hissed like beasts as they mocked and ridiculed her.” Camilla’s voice broke. “I saw it with my own eyes. Behind the trees, I hid covering my mouth with both hands. My tears burned. Thankfully, my vision blurred. I tried my best not to look away. I tried...”

“*Her hair?*” I questioned. “That’s ridiculous.” A bead of sweat rolled down my temple. My stomach was full of rot. Before I could stand up I vomited. “I’m so sorry,” I heaved. A thick string of saliva dangled from my lips. “They loved her. You said so yourself. She performed

during the last moon.”

“*Love?*” she scoffed as she went for a rag. She produced an ugly laugh. “The chief grew bored of her just like the others,” Camilla continued. “He yawned at her last performance. After that, she knew she was finished.”

“The chief is responsible?” I asked. I felt fatigued. Outside, the villagers rehearsed for the solstice festival. The heavy thump of drums continued. It was a slow, ominous rhythm. Bump! Bump! Bump, like a heart beating against ribs. All the while the drone of cicadas blanketed the forest. I sat soaked in perspiration.

Camilla combed her hair with a bone handle brush. Her raven waves gave way to wisps of silver. “The chief was no more responsible for Isar's death than our sun is for spring showers. Our people are wild and given to fits of lust. Isar tried to change, tried to awe us once more, but like her last dress, fashioned in haste, she'd come apart at the seams. She wrote new material which sounded much the same as her old songs. I liked some of it. Love songs never go out of fashion. Oh, she wanted her fans back! She loved them. She wasn't angry when they came for her. I remember she clasped the hands of a man who once brought flowers to her performance.” Camilla choked on her words. “Isar's eyes pleaded desperately in an attempt to remind him what he was giving up. She could see he was plagued with guilt. Then a clump of dung struck her side and he shoved her away. Afterward, he shouted as loud as the rest.”

“You were once a *soigne* like her, were you not?” I asked.

“Years ago,” Camilla fluttered off while gazing at the ceiling. The afternoon sunshine beamed through her window illuminating thousands of dust particles flowing through the air.

“Like fairies, aren't they?” she asked.

“I'm sorry for my sickness,” I apologized. “This heat is *oppressive*.”

“The wind and light cast upon the dust makes it shines like fairies,” Camilla mused.

“How did you avoid the same fate?” I asked.

“I married,” Camilla responded in a low voice as she glanced at the window. “He was a soldier. Our union wasn't spurred by love but he was good to me. I knew that if I were pregnant I could stop singing. So I decided to become a mother and I was pregnant before the end of the season.

“Fortune often visits us in strange forms. Our child died during the birth. I wept only when the village paid its respects. The fanatics were too caught up in their obsession to see the joy in my tears. By the time I'd recovered, the village had another pretty face to fawn over.”

I couldn't stand to be here anymore. I couldn't stand the nausea and the noise and the viciousness that engulfed the village and its people. My four weeks with the Hamontlum had been tantamount to insanity. Beyond Camilla's, walls a horn choir bellowed a carnivorous tune. I went to the window for fresh air and was startled by a group of women passing by, each covered in the most vibrant feathers. They wore only feathers from head to limb.

Camilla stood and placed her hand on my shoulder. “You should not stay for the festival. You're an outsider here. It's not for you,” she assured me. “Leave tonight. You'll be safe, I promise.”

I thanked her for the tea and apologized once more for my sickness. Returning to my yurt, I hastily stuffed my belongings into my sack. I suspect I was tailed as I departed. Reaching the crest of the hills overlooking the village below, I looked down at the miserable pit and sighed in relief. During the days of my trek back to the city, I thought of the women and was comforted in the knowledge that outside the village such senseless mania did not exist.