

YOU CAN'T BUY A HOME

*Gnarled bone and putrid flesh –
Rotting stigmata -- Hand of Death,
Poison weed to Devil's Ear,
Queen of Boneyard – art thy here?*

A heady stench hung 'bout the sullen room – an engraved scent of tobacco and desperation, toxic to the soul. There was an aura there, dilapidated and heavy, despite the outdated fineries that echoed of a grandiose time – now come to ruin. There were those who sought her rebellion, who painted the idea of her in glamor, and clung – like she – fastidiously to the denial of time and change. To them, she was not only a house, but a symbol: a symbol of grandeur and sin, the melody of memory – of infamy, one who stood for so long – sanctioned off to prying eyes and empty pockets. She was no symbol, only a house – a host to an energy that was not her own, but one that clung like coal-soot to every peeling pane of wallpaper and every creak in the floor. Her true face looked not to the street, but into the back alley where such lofty and loyal patrons would ooze into every aching joint of her, billows of pipe-smoking and desire could yet be tasted therein. Beneath there was a bitter taste, a burning poison on the tongue, unmistakable, yet unrecognizable. It tasted of a floral rot, of perfumed decay – it was the taste of saccharine death, but to those who do not know its sapor: it was a delicacy.

Dusty light filtered through the boarded windows, casting sweeping beams 'cross aching floorboards. The familiar tune of high heeled shoes beat heavy upon their face – accompanying their pleading groans – “Let us at last rest in peace.” But ever-graced with an eye for potential, her majesty: Susan Deary, realtor, would not give in so easily to the warnings of troubled wood. The sharp angles of her person contrasted the soft features of the home, with her figure adorned in shapely pastel colors the walls seemed to scream at her blatant disregard for their austerity – and the season. Pastels: in fall? Tactless.

In a great sweeping motion, she called attention to the grand windows – boarded and weighed down by heavy ox-blood curtains, “Look at how large! Nearly floor-to-ceiling!” Her voice was just as sharp as her features, bright and droning, like the sound of a siren with the volume control of an air-horn. She brushed a streak of grime from her polyester pink skirt, casting a momentarily glare of condemnation that cut at last through her sunny demeanor, “And just wait until you see the upstairs! Didn't you just love that staircase? So elegant – if perhaps a little dated. Maybe a nice floating staircase would be better suited for you. I know a great contractor, and I'm sure he—“

“That's quite alright, Ms. Deary,” toiled a reply, his charm was fleeting and it was most certainly in direct correlation to that effervescent shrieking of one screaming Easter egg, “I've seen enough. Once more – what is the list price?”

“Given its condition, the neighborhood and its—” she paused, “Reputation... It’s no surprise that it would sell for so low.”

“Price, Ms. Deary.”

“Right, right! Silly me! One hundred and forty seven, but with a quick close...”

“Put in an offer of one hundred and fifty. Cash, if they prefer.”

“Right a-way!” she shimmied, picking her equine feet up and galloping through the door, “I’ll just make the call now – be right back!”

Pushing a tanned hand through his slick, black hair, there came from his chest a sigh, granted finally with a fleeting moment of quiet. He thought to himself: *There is a magic here. A magnificence beneath the wreckage. Something reminiscent of youth, of childhood, some lost retreat or beauty. Not unlike the arms of a mother, there is a fondness.* About his debonair visage clung an air of sophistication, one that must have abated the miasmatic odor of his newest investment, or perhaps that damnable “fondness” clouded aspects of reality. This place was no investment, it was a condemnable hovel, decked in the ancient remains of luxury. Perhaps, though, it was that very concept that attracted him the most – that incessant, Pygmalion-desire drowning out any semblance of logic. They say women are ruled by emotion, but in truth – it is men who are so ruled by vexation, fascination, conquest and triumph. All of which they disguise in the *infallible* decoction that is “logic.”

So returned the petal-toned drone, buzzing into the great room – cellphone to her ear. She covered the receiver with a cupped hand and offered, “I’m afraid I have some bad news, Mr. Galant – it would seem that there has already been an offer placed for one seventy-five. Are you willing to go any higher?”

“Did you express that my offer can be paid in cash?” he replied, stricken.

“I did, yes, and I’m afraid the other party has expressed the same ability.”

“One-eighty, then. No more than two-hundred, Ms. Deary...”

She nodded, conveying the message into the receiver. He listened as she, again, raised the offer to one-ninety. One, ninety-five. One, ninety-nine, nine. She continued, “Well, I’m afraid my client won’t go any high-“

“Two-fifty,” Mr. Galant chimed in, stroking his chin between his fingers and taking in the small elegances of the manor.

“Two-fifty, final offer – cash, quick close,” Ms. Deary pressed. There was a long pause, “Well, I’m afraid we do not wish to match that. Given its condition, I can’t see anyone-“

“Who is the other party?” Mr. Galant snapped, his reservation marred by a spark of agitation.

“I can’t ask tha-“

“Ask, or give me the *goddamned* phone, Deary!”

“Yes, my client would like to know who it is offering so much for the estate... Mmhm, yes. It’s Mr. Galant. Yes, *the* Mr. Galant. Ah, thank you, darling. I’ll be just delighted to pass on the message! Thanks. Yes. Buh-bye.”

“Did they concede – what was that about?”

“Oh, no, I’m afraid not. But I did get the party’s name – one: Devalo. *Maria* Devalo. Apparently she has the intentions of restoring the place to its original ‘glory,’ though I feel like ‘glory’ may be a *bit* of a stretch, don’t you thin-“

“Devalo? Devalo, *Devalo*...” he tossed, “I’ve never heard that name before.”

“I don’t suppose you would. She’s apparently from upstate but has shown *considerable* interest in the property.”

“Yes, well...” he began sharply, before his temperament settled once again to its stoic nature, “Thank you anyway, Ms. Deary. It was...”

“A *pleasure*, Mr. Galant?”

“Ah.”

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M. Devalo
Might we speak in regards to the
Neguerria Estate.
H. G.

The house had even more of a presence after nightfall – as though it were all the more consumed within its own indignation. About it swarmed a warm static, reminiscent of dancing embers around the flapping tongues of a fire: beautiful, delicate, but not without thorns. The fat moon above rested on its eaves, as though it were rolling – against the natural force – up the razor-edge of the gable to the ridge, where it would teeter precariously before (inevitably)

rolling down the opposing side. And so the moon crept, and in its warm-glow the silhouette figure of H. Galant – tall, broad-shouldered with a long coat dusting at his heels and a briefcase in hand. Beneath – now – were more casual clothes, for swept away were the guises of day and in their place came the sincerity of night. No longer was he H. Galant, C.E.O, but a man – with an exorbitant amount of money – hell-bent on buying a condemned estate.

It whispered to him, the house – whose exterior peeled crimson flakes that rained like snow – and he listened to it coax him down the deserted alley-way, through the hall of gaping-mawed dumpsters and sleeping degenerates. He clutched at the rusted wrought-iron railing and heaved himself toward the door. From his breast pocket he drew a key – one that conveyed the true age of the domicile. He turned the latch and pushed into the devouring blackness within.

There were whispers within – not simply the house, but true, barely intelligible whispers. Women – three by the sound of it: M. Devalo and guests. He followed, through the gloom, the faint glow of candlelight and the devilish whispers. The backdoor – the one that faced the alley – opened into the kitchen. It was a grand kitchen, no doubt original to the house – equipped with wood-burning stoves, ovens. The ceiling was lined with empty racks, once used to accommodate hanging pots and pans, but now extended bare and skeletal along the room. He followed it, passed the door that lead to the basement and to the wide opening that spilled into the dining area.

Amongst other things, the home had once been an inn – and a favorite gathering place for government officials who sought to entertain themselves in as many ways they could in one locale. They would even hold dinners and galas in the manor, and he traced his way through the now empty room that once was host to formal tables and china. Overhead hung the broken remnants of a chandelier – strands of glass beads now hanging loose from above like serpents on the branch. The whispers persisted, but he could hear more clearly now – they spoke not in his tongue, but in what sounded like Spanish, perhaps even Italian. His repertoire of language extended only to his “Good-Catholic” Latin. The glow of the candlelight grew brighter now, as he approached the formal foyer.

At once he was greeted by the warmth of the flame, which cast long shadows of the delicate figures – stretched, bent, grotesque things playing on the cracked, plaster wall. He cleared his throat in a (unnecessarily) chivalrous attempts at alerting the women to his arrival, to which their response was an apathetic placidity. This room remained the most grandiose, marked by a giant mantle, over which remained the faint outline of where a portrait must have once hung. And the staircase – proud – wound around the curved wall and slithered thusly to an overlooking balcony – one whose drop was shielded only by a rusted, iron railing. Furniture, draped in linen cloths dotted the room, their characteristics unknown.

A woman stepped forward from the group which nested before the exuberant mantle. She was of slight build, a curtain of black curls devoured her upper body, obscuring the applique of her red dress – which possessed an eerie breathe of antiquity, helped in no part by the rather dated cape drawn around her shoulders. Her lips were twisted into a lecherous smile, painted a violet-shade of red. At either side of her were women whose complexion accented the ghostly appearance of the first. To her right, a slighter figure – waif-like, with skin as dark as

the hall that stretched out behind her. Her hair was done in ringlet curls – and wrapped around with a golden scarf. Though her attire had a particularly fresh design, there remained that creeping absurdity of timelessness. And finally, to her left, a towering figure with long black hair and copper skin. Her shoulders were wide, nearly masculine, but the rest of her form seemed to fade into wiry limbs and her long fingers were decorated with jewels of all shapes and sizes. Her face also bore an intense sort of expression – dark eyes watching, knowingly, from beneath thick (but manicured) brows.

There was a mystery and innate intensity about the women before him, who remained – yet – silent. It would be the fairest to break the hum of atmospheric noise, with a melodic voice – tinged by the same smoke that seemed to be exuded by the manor, “Welcome, Mr. Galant. We’ve been expecting you. I am Maria, as I’m sure you well know. These are my sisters, Madama,” she motioned at once to the darkest complected woman, then to the tallest, “And Tiresa.”

“You may call me Henry – It’s a pleasure to meet you all. I’m sure you’re wondering why it is that I asked you ladies her-“

“No,” snapped Maria, who laughed it off playfully, “I know why you’ve brought us here. You wish to... *compromise*, correct? Attempt to buy us out, so that you might restore the house. *Yes?*”

“Ah, you are quite sharp then, Ms. Devalo...”

Maria stepped forward, approaching the large man – who stood in solidarity against the sisters – and touching a hand gently to his cheek. He reacted preemptively, pulling away from her foreign allure. She smiled softly, speaking in a delicate whisper, “Do not patronize me, Mr. Galant – we will not concede to your desires, no matter how... *persuasive*.”

“I ask that you reconsider – I have a particular *affinity* for this house. One that I can’t quite describe...”

The sisters shared a knowing glance.

“We, too, have a particular affinity for the house – as it had belonged to our family for four generations, before it was foreclosed upon after our *father’s* untimely death. So, you see, we have a very specific attachment whereas yours seems far more... *transitory*.”

“Transitory or otherwise, I have an affinity, and if what you say is true I’m *sure* you would prefer to move on from such upsetting memories as your father’s... illness?”

“He’s *sure*,” the sisters repeated with a snide laugh.

“Murder,” corrected Maria innocently.

“Even more a reason, then! Wouldn’t it be better if you used the money... along with some extra, perhaps... to buy yourselves a nice place: one that doesn’t require as much work as this manor certainly does? I have every intention of hiring a top-notch team to get this place back to what it once was.”

“And how do you intend to do that if you never knew what it *once* was?”

“Surely I can find the blueprints, original designs, photos...”

The sisters let out a laugh in unison, casting glances amongst themselves, Maria – again – spoke up, “You will find no such things! You must really be unaware of this house’s reputation. Is that so, Mr. Galant? Do you know the history of this house?”

“I do not need to know the –”

“Oh, but I think you do – as you seem to be under the impression that this place was always a stately and honorable place and there are no definitions that could be further from the truth.”

“Enlighten me, then, sisters...”

“I’d be delighted,” Maria began, snagging a linen cloth from one of the obscured sofas, revealing an ornate, mahogany couch with worn, ruby-colored velvet. She sat, and her sisters sat with her. The tallest sister, in a rough voice, pointed a finger – “Try that one.”

Henry drew the curtain away, and sat in a matching armchair.

“—Years ago, our great, great, great, great – *right?* – grandmother built this house. *Maria Noguerra* – after whom I was named – was the daughter of a wealthy, Spanish spice-trader. Well, with her wealth, she attended university – studied in the finest schools both here and across Europe. But finally, the time came for her to return – as her father had grown very ill. Upon this return, she met a man – *William Seymour Blake* – a banker with whom she fell in love. They were a great pair. Dynamic. He was a kind and adoring creature, but one with strict values and a penchant for ‘integrity.’ As such, her father gave to them his blessing before he was eventually consumed by his maladies.

“Not long after, Maria and William were wed. Given their combined wealth and Maria’s love for people and adventure, she convinced him to fund the construction of this manor – utilizing the remains of her family home. Her mother had passed long before – confirmed to the asylum, and Maria – as an only child – was left the entirety of her father’s estate, should she be married. The new assemblage – this manor – would serve not only as a house, but an inn, restaurant and bar. Of course, there was more to the story, however, you see – *Mi grand-mama*, she was no louse, no. She was something else entirely.

“On the outside, this place was a marvelous establishment, a grandiose palace that served all clientele – but on the darker side, it, too, was a place that served *all* clientele. See, Maria was not simply a sharp business woman, but a madam,” Maria added dryly, “And a witch.”

“Preposterous!” Galant interjected, throwing up his hands in exasperation.

“Not at all! Before the night is over, you will see all the hidden places this estate has to offer – but first, there is more story to be told:

“So, after the construction was nearly complete, her husband William fell ill. While he was nearly 15 years her senior, he was in perfect health – until was confined with mysterious ailments and died – nearly overnight. Now, any ordinary wife would have been investigated – for murder, but not Maria – no! – she was the gem of the city! A doctor confirmed – no doubt with the accompaniment of a lofty addition to his coin purse – *natural causes*. A few knew better, but none would believe a foul word spoken of *Madame Noguerra*.

“With William out of the way, Maria needed to be even *less* secretive in regards to the arcane rituals performed at the this manor – no longer were the women confined to the top floor, working covertly from room to room. Instead, they walked brazenly through the halls – nude and proud, because Maria, she took very good care of her working girls. Some even said she knew how to cure syphilis with her magics. You know, that was a very big problem at the time – *and pubic lice, but that is another story...* Yes, Maria was becoming more powerful and an extraordinary business woman: which made the things she did in the cellar all the more horrifying.

“It is said that on the expeditions of her youth – accompanying her father to the most remote locales – she learned many things from the native peoples. Some even suggesting that she, perhaps, even developed a taste for human flesh and blood: convinced it was the key to immortality – or at least an *extended* mortality. What was all the better, she said, was the blood of babes. What better a place to collect unwanted – discarded – infants than a brothel? According to one of her more homely girls, when one of the working women would give birth, she would dispose of the children... in her own way.

“Unfortunately, despite her keen business skills, the maintenance to this building – as well as her expensive habits – began to surmount. She then went about procuring other means to finance her lavish (and macabre) lifestyle – she married a man named John Luke Vicard. John Luke, however, was notoriously abusive when he drank and – given the situation – he spent his time in a perpetual state of inebriation. Now, it’s said only once did he lay a hand on Mistress Maria – and in that moment, his hand took on a blackness and had to be promptly amputated. Wary (and repulsed) by the Wiles of the Madam, John Luke would strike – instead – the working girls. And when Mistress Maria retired to her dungeon, there was nothing the frightened girls could do to subdue his violence. It was only after a young woman – one of her most trusted attendants – professed as witness to John Luke’s menacing acts did she commit to justifying the wrongs he had written. By that time, however, it was too late. Driven by madness, he used his sole, remaining hand to strangle the faithful attendant who professed to the Mistress of his atrocities.

“Now, as I said, Maria was fiercely protective of her girls and – upon finding one of them strangled – she worked her bones and blood to bring her back. But such works always require a certain price, you see... It was no surprise that after that night, John Luke was never again seen stumbling through the corridors or breaking glasses in the tavern. Some of the girls – who would aid in Maria’s workings – confessed that she had dug hundreds of individual hooks into his skin and used them to suspend his body from the ground. Every day, she would turn a rusted crank that – very slowly – pulled the hooks, peeling his skin incrementally further from his body – until it sloughed off, decayed. All while he remained alive – as witness!”

“Some also said she cut out his eyes, removed his tongue, his dick and his remaining hand and used them to conjure a Devil so that He might impregnate her,” interjected Madama – her face reserved as ever.

Maria continued: “Regardless what she did with him – his finances and estate had been signed over to her, and once again, she was a widow – spared the inquisitional glass – especially now that she was with child.

“Being a mother most certainly did not suit her lifestyle, and after childbirth, Maria found a suitable *father* for the child. You see, the boy’s ‘father’ was unlike any before – not a *man* at all, but the spirit of a woman within the body of a man. She had been one of Maria’s girls – one who attracted her own reliable brand of clientele. The Boy – her son – would be raised within the manor walls, attended by this woman and his name would be: *Pietro Artisson.*”

“Artisson...?” Henry puzzled.

“*Artisson,*” confirmed Maria, “The very *same* Artisson who founded the medical company of which you are now C.E.O. He was no saint either – as much of his medical knowledge came from his mother’s curious experiments.”

“It all seems a little fantastical – don’t you think? Absurd. Lacking any semblance of rationality,” chided Henry, knotting his fingers before him and leaning forward pensively.

“*Fantastical,* indeed... But if you would humor us, we’d like to show you some of the hidden chambers – before you make any further decisions as to the absurdity of the story,” Maria proposed, rising from her seat and gliding about the room before brushing at the dusty hearth. There was a wave of fire that divided the room, propelling (if only for a moment) a suffocating heat before an unsettling chill nipped at Henry’s exposed flesh. If not a slave to logic, this sign would have been read as a warning – the knowingness that is *intuition.*

The women joined their sister at the mantle, dresses dragging dust in their wake – the familiar click of heels echoed through the emptiness, through the silence.

“And what say you?” Tiresa chimed, her hoarse voice a stern punctuation to the ambient rattles of the restless manor.

“Perhaps a deal...” Henry bartered, brushing at the settling dust on his fitted pants, “If you make me a believer, I will happily resign – the house will be yours, I will even arrange partial payment. But... If I remain skeptical, then you relinquish the house to me – No questions, no problems.”

The sisters deliberated with their eyes and Maria stepped forward, “A deal then...”

She reached out a delicate hand to him, which he took with vigor. She smiled knowingly – if with a breathe of warning. *There are things no man has ever seen in the bowels of this house.* There was a twist in his stomach.

“Lead the way.”

“Where shall we begin?” Maria swooned – tossing each delightful possibility around the confines of her mind. Her sisters each paid their remark: “The attic!” “No! The dungeon!”

“Sisters, the dungeon must wait, as it is – the *pièce de résistance*, don’t you think?”

They nodded gleefully, taking their rightful places on either side of her. Maria held in her hand the single flame that lit the barren chambers, Henry following precariously in toe. The women marched in unison up the grand staircase, pointed heels plucking gently at every step. There came a cacophonous crack from above – origins unknown, and Henry – stricken – gave a pointed gasp. The girls paid him – nor the sound – no mind. A balmy breeze came rushing down after them, reeking of mildew and stale perfumery.

They rounded the stairway and nimbly navigated about the overhang into a long expanse of hallway. On either side stretched (seemingly infinitely, in the dim light) doors – arranged to face their mates.

“The wind carries here, dear Henry – do not be startled by any moving doors, they are but phantoms,” Maria warned sympathetically as the nearest pair of doors gave off a low resonance. He did as instructed, ignoring the hum that seemed to beckon.

“This functioned – in the glory days – as both inn and bordello, depending on the varying needs of any particular night. As with any place for wayward souls, the legends suggest this wing to be haunted – but I find this locale to be the least of your worries. If this building retains the Dead, it is in the recesses where they thrive yet,” noted Maria – who shone the light briefly in the rooms as they came to pass. Most still played host to rotting mattresses and silken drapes – armchairs dressed in cloths and candelabras strewn thoughtlessly about by time.

“This was my room,” remarked Madama, who lead the group into its confines, gesturing to an ornate mirror, cracked and tilted, “Maria – do you remember? This is where you taught me how to do my make-up *just* so, “ she was swept away to the boarded window, caught up in a momentary bend of time, “And the curtains! Oh, how I hated these curtains. I can’t say it’s a shame to see them like this. In fact, I quite like it. Drab things.”

She took the stained curtains in her dark hand, rubbing gently at the soft fabric, “I always wanted something blue,” she laughed – tinged with a melancholic nostalgia, “I always loved blue, especially turquoise. It gives me a certain glow, I think. What do you think, Maria?”

“You do look *ravishing* in blue – and violet. Oh-so-beautiful in violet, especially with a crimson lip.”

Maria went to her, then, taking Madama’s delicate hand in her own, and gave her an encouraging smile, “Perhaps this time you shall have the blue – just imagine it. Gauzy sheers in cerulean, paper patterned in lilacs and hydrangeas, soft and delicate – as you have always been to me, Dama.” She kissed her on the cheek and Madama’s face brightened, caught up in the vision.

“And mine,” directed Tiresa, who remained isolated in the hall, leading the surveyors across the tiled floor to a room swathed in golds and oranges. Tiresa looked on fondly – she,

too, caught in the web of dreaming – but not for a hopeful future, but a warm past, “I’ve missed you, room.”

She fell upon the filthy bed and let out a comfortable sigh – sending a cloud of dust (and mold) into the ether. There was a bassinet tucked neatly away in the corner – carved intricately in warm wood and draped with a golden silk, and housed therein – when the golden cloth was pushed back – hung an antique mobile. Just as Tiresa recalled, she leapt from the bed and took at once to it, spinning the darling little pieces.

“You know,” she remarked, the echo of a forgotten tune snaking through her throat, “It’s now said that the reason mobiles are effective in quieting a child is not because it is comforting to them – but because it mimics the flight of circling birds: scavengers. It is instinct for babes to quiet themselves – so as to not call their attention. Rather horrific, *no?*”

She proceeded to spin the mobile, cooing softly at a memory. There was a hush that came over the room and Henry was again plagued by that fondness he hadn’t experienced since earlier – when the warm sun beamed through the boarded windows.

“Shall you show him your room, Maria?” Madama asked innocently, pulling on Tiresa’s hand and leading her away from the cradle. Painted on her face was a look of unflinching sadness – more than melancholy, more like true sorrow – her face was, in that moment, not her own, but the face of Bouguereau’s *Pieta*.

“Well, if our guest desires it...”

“I would be delighted.”

“This way then,” she led to the end of the hall – at long last – where there stood a foreboding set of double doors. Their face look stoic, crisp shapes etched into mahogany. Thoughtlessly, Maria pushed through them, throwing the heavy doors open without the slightest feign of resistance.

It must have been such a beautiful sight once – heavy with crimson silk and moth-eaten, Chantilly lace. It was the largest of the three rooms and certainly lacked their austerity. The room was host to its own bathroom, which professed the presence of a rusted, claw-foot tub, and an expansive vanity – upon whence yet rested ornate bottles and powder tins. Over the large bed was draped the tattered remains of a canopy and the tall windows (the only ones that remained unboarded) beamed in the faint amber hues of street lights – looking out into the silent slums below. It exuded an innate luxury – balancing its overwhelming grandeur with delicate, architectural detail.

On the furthest side, amidst what seemed to be the remains of a sitting area – was a pointed-arch door: which appeared to be heavily fortified from within. She danced across the room without descending – like her sisters – into the lost-time. She hovered before the imposing door – dragging a pointed finger over its familiar surface.

“The attic is this way, my dear,” she remarked – though there was a pause in her voice. It passed and from beneath a hidden fold of fabric at her waist, she produced a ring of keys.

Blindly, she thumbed through them until she felt the correct bit between her expert fingers, “Are you quite sure you wish to proceed, Mr. Galant?”

He had been quiet for some time, unphased by their sisterly ploys, voice steeped in tired scorn, “I’m quite certain, *Mistress*.”

She placed the key into the tumbler, jostling it just so and letting her agile fingers push the numerous deadbolts up and aside. The door swung ajar – seemingly on its own accord – to expose a narrow, stone chamber that snaked upward, “Sisters, if you would be so kind as to stay here as I lead our guest up – and, Mr. Galant, *watch your step*.”

As promised, she floated through the mouth of the arch and ascended in a dozen pointed clicks, the cavernous hall blossoming into a room of abject horror. There remained a foul odor, no doubt the metallic scent of soured blood – which seemed to be sprayed in varying degrees on every slate brick that comprised the squat fortress.

Mr. Galant was at once taken aback – a dry wretch boiled in his gut. *Such a putrid odor*. His eyes adjusted to the even scatter light, as no windows marred the stone surface of the walls – not even the light of the moon dare shine on such a place. On heavy, roughly-hewn tables were an assemblage of grotesque surgical instruments – rusted and forgotten – which circled an iron-studded slab in the center of the room. On hidden shelves rested any number of human limbs – jars of teeth, and innards, eyes and phalluses – all perfectly preserved in measured solutions. Mr. Galant was not a squeamish man, but his stomach turned at the sight. From the ceiling hung mummified parts – some wrapped, others bare to the elements. A curious collection of unidentifiable members and shrunken heads, dangling hands and snake skins. There was a heavy pain that clung to every inch – and a phantom chorus of screams that plagued the man’s wracked mind.

“The smell!” he churned, waving a deft hand before his face, “What kind of hellish room is this?”

“I warned you,” scolded Maria, who made herself at home amongst the specimens, “It is... a curio cabinet of sorts. A cupboard for all things macabre. And you haven’t even seen the best part!” An excited Maria shot headlong for a huge armoire, whose doors she threw open with a horrifying tinge of glee. Therein were the skulls of twenty men... perhaps more, in varying states of preservation, bleaching and – in some cases – reconstruction.

Mr. Galant looked on not in horror, but curiosity; transfixed, he crossed the room, eager to touch the dried remains, “And these are all donated?”

“*In a manner of speaking*.”

“Willingly?”

“*In a manner of speaking*...”

“And what exactly does that *mean*?”

“Well, you see these here –” she motioned to the unbleached skulls, ones tinted yellow with age and grime, “These were *borrowed* from the cemetery. Most of these men committed

great atrocities and some were simply her lovers – like this one! – Oh, and the bleached ones were her victims.”

She touched at a skull tinted a rather unnatural shade of red, bearing the symbol of a rose etched into the tender plate of the forehead, “This was *Matteus Troubauld*. A darling lover, hopeless romantic – unfortunately, he had such an *abhorrent* habit of seeing things he wasn’t meant to see. Would you like to hold him?”

“I really shouldn’t,” Henry urged, placing his palms to his chest.

“I’m quite sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“I’d rather not, then.”

“Suit yourself,” she conceded, placing the skull back into its allocated position, and tossing a devilish grin his way, “Rather *fantastical*, isn’t it?”

He nodded silently, lowering his eyes to the cobblestone underfoot, searching their smooth faces for any notion of logic, “Fake. They must be fake. This is all an elaborate ruse, isn’t it? *Isn’t it, dammit!?*”

Her grin remained.

His tone sharpened, vexed now at the realization that they might be trying to drive him away from the manor with cheap, scare-tactics. He would not be scared away so easily. In a momentary fit of rage, he took Matteus by the orbits and meant to fling him across the room – but instead, an instantaneous reaction sent a chill up his spine as a fleeting vision – a fleeting feeling passed through his chest. *He looked through a mess of ringlet curls at a woman, whose nails peeled at the flesh of his narrow thigh – whose obscured face tore at the ribbons of his own skin with gnashing teeth.* And it was over. The skull hung gently – swaying – by his two fingers. A cold sweat was building on his brow and there came a persistent lightheadedness. He returned the skull from whence and abruptly left the enveloping room.

The stale, rotten air of the manor felt refreshing to his scorched palate and he dabbed at the sweat with his shirt sleeve, brushing the droplets from his lip. The sound of Maria’s heels sent a panic through his mind as she descended, joining him once again in her bedchamber.

He spun on his heels, his clouded mind obscuring any filter, “Damn you, lying whores! Messing – you’re just all messing with my mind! I fucking *know* what you’re doing!”

He raised a hand to Maria, who remained unmoving, cat-like eyes locked onto his.

“You bitch... You’re the worst one... The brains, hah. All I see is tits and ass. No fucking reason, just sex and stupidity. And games – women and their *fucking games!*” he bellowed, his face now burning bright with fire, droplets of spit peppered the air and the tiny veins that ran through his face and arms were now engorged with blood. He spun again and darted headlong for the door, his heavy feet hammering at the floorboards. Madama and Tiresa parted, allowing him to pass through without circumstance.

He strut through the door, wide shoulders heaving like a beast – the hallway doors stood agape, black mouths mocking him. He screamed obscenities at them and they responded with slams. *Had they really moved?* He cast a glimpse over his shoulder, only to find the singular silhouette of Maria standing in the doorway – the candle casting horrific shadows on her face. At once, all the doors in the hall swung wide and *slammed!* He screamed and sobbed and cursed. Nearly to the stairs, he rounded the corner, looking over the balcony and clutching blindly for the iron handrail. *One last glimpse.* He turned – she was there: *right there.*

There was a noise, and a pointed finger driven into his back – one simple touch that sent him cascading over the delicate railing. There was a whirring – and terrible, sickening *crack* and then there was nothing.

Wait...

She smiled.

“H—ryyy... M—lant, you d—n’t get to finish your tour...”

It was her.

God, my eyes...

“Henry, darling,” she whispered sweetly, rapping a knuckle gently on his forehead – it burned, it burned like fire – wet and hot, “You had a fall... But everything is going to be fine.”

What the fuck have you done to me? My mouth – it:

There was only gurgling.

He lifted his heavy lids to spy the foggy outline of that raven hair and chalky face, looking down on him. It was the red lips – those lips that terrified him most. *Why can I not move my neck?* His vision hardly cleared, as though he were underwater – or looking through the raindrops on a window pane.

“It’s all rather *absurd*, don’t you think? *Fantastical*,” she giggled, strumming her fingers over a collection of clanking bottles. She hummed softly, mixing the tinctures and tonics, and drizzling them over his naked chest. It stung like a white-hot iron, branding his tanned flesh. There came another wet gurgling from his throat.

“It seems, my dear, dear, Henry, that I may have mislead you – you see, my name isn’t Devalo at all – *no!* That’s just a little joke I like to play. Actually – and I’m sure your logical mind has already pieced it together, you sharp man, you – my name is Maria Noguerra. Well, *Maria Rosa Isabella Caveira y Noguerra*, but that’s a little much, I think. *Ring a bell?* It should. You see – this has always *been* my house, and it will always *be* my house – and *no entitled, arrogant, capitalist son of a bitch* will *ever* have what belongs to *me...*”

She laughed again, his whole body burned – the air moved and everything was on fire, “You can open your eyes now! I’m all finished!”

The dungeon. It was the dungeon.

His head was fixed, tilted back and forced to look upon the desecrated remains and pieced together projects. He could make out a break in the light – a circle drawn – therein sat a skeleton, decorated in arcane shapes and symbols. In place the skull – the horned head of a bull – *or was it a goat?* Candles burned and dripped hot wax from the ceiling, *god the smell...* “Oh, right! My greatest apologies!”

She rose, lifting an iron shackle that held his neck – his eyes were still cloudy, but he could make out the faint pink ribbons strewn overhead, delicate and – there was clarity then. He looked down to himself, all fibrous muscle and naked bone and blood. He wanted to scream, but there was no use – his throat only rattled with fluid. The ribbons – the ribbons of skin hung in esoteric shapes above him. Clouded vision gave way to expanding blackness.

Just fucking kill me. He pleaded with his mortified eyes, a face – crushed, bare of flesh-contorted into a look of absolute dread. He was choking on pooling blood and shrapnel fragments of his own bones, shattered in the fall.

She whispered into his ear in a saccharine sweet voice – poisoned with lust – and reminiscent of that taste... That palpable, yet unrecognizable grime that coated his tongue. He knew now its taste.

And in a voice so quiet it was almost inaudible... She assured:

After I take your bones...