

2024 ADULT SHORT STORY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

A Surprise Visitor

By Karen Sandler

He sat on the edge of my bed with one long leg flung over the other, appearing bored while slowly stroking my dog, Lucy. She looked so relaxed I thought she might be dead. His frigid red eyes gave him away, although it took me a minute to bring him into focus. He'd woken me up, after all.

“What have you done to my dog?” I asked.

“Oh, silly girl! I could hardly gain your confidence by killing your precious little dog. I like her name, by the way. You named her after me, didn't you? She's just blissfully happy. I have that power, you know.”

He had luxuriously thick, curly black hair that hid his horns pretty well, so I didn't see those until later. I didn't notice his tail at all until he made his exit. I'm not sure how he hid it since he was dressed in black skinny jeans and a black long-sleeved turtleneck. He wore red Chucks on his feet with black laces, the ultimate hipster, excruciatingly handsome. Even the pinkish scales on his hands didn't diminish his appeal.

“You're not what I expected,” I said, still trying to rub the sleep from my eyes.

“It's that dratted Bram Stoker and those inane New Yorker cartoons,” he sneered. “I have never greased back my locks or had a widow's peak. In fact, my hair does whatever it likes. I couldn't slick it back if I wanted to.”

“I know the feeling,” I said, amazed at how calm and safe I felt. In spite of the evident power of this creature, I still felt as though I was in control.

“You know,” he sighed, “I find this aspect of my first introduction to someone exceedingly tedious. I must always endure this weighing of my appearance against expectations; but you are a quick study, my dear. That's clear.”

He produced a very long, curved ivory toothpick, curled back his upper lip, and began picking his teeth. He took it away and leaned toward me to display his perfectly white, dazzling teeth. “See? No fangs, either. People have a particularly annoying habit of confusing me with Dracula.”

“Wow,” was all I could say.

“So, let’s focus on you. Having quite a lie-in today, I see. It’s already noon! Rough night?”

“Don’t you have omniscient powers or something? I suspect you know all sorts of stuff about me already, don’t you?”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head in exaggerated exasperation. “I’m not here to give away the secrets of the ages for nothing, you know! I can answer all your questions, but I want something in return.”

How insidious, how dastardly, how fiendish was this? He was just going to pique my curiosity to the point where I would fall into his trap. This was clearly his playbook for English majors who couldn’t resist a good yarn—and dangerous territory for me. I’d have thought he was just going to offer me something I’d do anything to get, but no. He must have known I am particularly lacking in ambition, and so another tack would be required.

“Well, as much as I’d love to know why you’re here and what you want with me, I most want you to go away. Besides, I’m an atheist and I don’t believe in an eternal afterlife, heaven and hell, and all that stuff.”

He let out a terrific laugh, right from his gut. It wasn’t one of those horror film cackles at all; it was infectious, the kind that makes you smile in spite of yourself. “Ooooh! I love a challenge, my dear. Besides, true atheists are quick to work with me because they believe they have nothing to lose, so I’m game. Okay, I’ll give you a tidbit, because I know you’ll find this fascinating, and it’s clear to me you have a quick and curious mind.”

“Flattery will not work, okay? So just go away.” I was starting to feel less self-assured.

“I am an opportunist. I have my broader, long-range goals but I don’t have a detailed schedule. I’m not a glorified project manager after all. I can only visit someone when they are in the throes of sin, as you are today. Look.” As he had with the toothpick, he produced an object out of thin air and showed it to me. It looked like a gleaming onyx iPad, with a glowing red gauge in the middle of it. ‘Sloth-o-Meter’ was encrusted in rubies under the gauge, and a sparkling needle in it jumped wildly back and forth, especially as he brought it closer to me.

“Oh please!” I protested. “Sloth is a victimless crime. This is the 21st century if you haven’t noticed! Everyone is overwrought all the time. It’s ridiculous! I think some occasional sloth is healthy—everybody thinks that whatever they’re doing is so vitally important, and most of it is

just bullshit! We need a little sloth from time to time to recharge and get our priorities straight. I think it can be a virtue.”

He arched one eyebrow, looking at me as he tilted his head.

“That’s my girl!” His eyes glowed a little redder and that radiant smile spread across his face. “And it’s Friday. You called in sick today. Are you sick? A little untruth thrown in with your sloth?”

“Things must be really tough for you if this is the best you can do. Aren’t there millions of people out there with murderous thoughts or dreams of world domination?”

“I have my minions to handle those. They’re just too easy. Even I can’t be in more than one place at a time, although I do have a bit more flexibility with time management. But let’s not digress. What about that report your boss wants on Monday? If you get fired, you’ll wish you hadn’t blown me off so quickly.” He glanced down at his perfectly buffed nails at the end of his long, tapered fingers. He obviously thought he was making headway.

“Was that a threat? Because if any of my literary instincts are correct, you have no power over me unless I crack. And I would think that would extend to the hard drive on my computer, so I can get that report done this weekend without any help from you.”

“Getting testy, are we? As I noted, you are a clever one. It’s true that I cannot crash your computer, but you haven’t even heard what I have to offer.”

“I don’t want to hear it. You can hang out here all day and it won’t matter. ‘They also serve who only stand and wait,’ and all that,” I yawned.

I must have hit a nerve because the corners of his mouth fell and his eyes became hooded. And then I understood—John Milton! He probably had the Bible quoted to him all the time and he could refute all that. But Milton, that’s another story. I spoke:

“The mind is its own self, and in itself

Can make a heav’n of hell, a hell of heav’n”

“Are you actually quoting that odious little prig Milton to me? You impudent sluggard!”

“Sluggard?” I laughed. “You are showing your age! And as for Milton, I may be a sloth, but I’m an educated sloth, and I did my senior thesis on Milton, so there’s more where that came from:

“He who reigns within himself and rules his passions, desires, and fears is more than a king”

“This is beyond wearisome,” he said, stifling a theatrical yawn of his own. (*Does he even sleep?* I wondered.) “I thought you and I could have had a little fun together, but you are such a bore! Well, I’ll grant you your wish and leave you now, and you’ll never know what my offer was to be. You are correct. I do have some very impressive powers, one of which is to know what you really want better than you know yourself. So just put that slothful, little head of yours back down on your pillow and try to imagine the opportunity you missed. Adieu!”

With that, he sprung up from the bed, causing Lucy to jump. She and I watched as he disappeared into a foggy mist that had spontaneously appeared at the foot of my bed. The last thing I saw was a flick of his pointed tail.

I felt smug, believing I had cheated fate. I stretched and snuggled back down into the covers. It was only one o’clock in the afternoon. There was nothing pressing to attend to at the moment.

Still, I wondered what he could possibly have offered me that would have been so tempting....

Lucy settled back down and rolled over on her back so I could rub her tummy. She turned her head toward me, and I could swear her big brown eyes shone with a newly acquired reddish glow.