## Is There a Demon Lover in the House?

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This story was solicited by Heavy Metal. I was in the mood to do a mood piece at that time.

Nightscape of the city in November with fog: intermittent blotches of streetlight; a chilly thing, the wind slithering across the weeping faces of buildings; the silence.

Form is dulled and softened. Outlines are lost, silhou-ettes unsealed. Matter bleeds some vital essence upon the streets. What are the pivot points of time? Was that its arrow, baffled by coils of mist, or only a lost bird of the night?

... Walking now, the man, gait slowed to a normal pace now, his exhilaration transmuted to a kind of calm. Middle-aged, middle-statured, side-whiskered, dark, he looks neither to the left nor the right. He has ,lost his way, but his step is almost buoyant. A great love fills his being, general, objectless, pure as the pearl-soft glow of the comer light through the fog.

He reaches that corner and moves to cross the street. An auto is there, then gone, tearing through the intersection, a low rumble within its muffler, lights slashing the dark. Its red tail lamps swing by, dwindle, are gone; its tires screech as it turns an unseen corner.

The man has drawn back against the building. He stares in the direction the vehicle has taken. For a long while after it has vanished from sight, he continues to stare. Then he withdraws a case from an inside pocket, takes out a small cigar, lights it. His hands shake as he does so.

A moment of panic...

He looks all about, sighs, then retrieves the small, newspaper-wrapped parcel he had been carrying, from where it had fallen near the curb.

Carefully, carefully then, he crosses the street. Soon the love has hold of him again.

Farther along, he comes upon a parked car, pauses a moment beside it, sees a couple embracing within, continues on his way. Another car passes along the street, slowly. There is a glow ahead.

He advances toward the illumination. There are lights within a small cafe and several storefront display windows. A theater marquee blazes in the center of the block. There are people here, moving along the walks, crossing the street. Cars discharge passengers. There is a faint odor of frying fish. The theater, he sees, is called the Regent Street.

He pauses beneath the marquee, which advertises: EXOTIC MIDNIGHT SPECIAL THE KISS OF DEATBPuffing his cigar, he regards a series of photos within a glass case. A long-haired, acne-dotted medical student comes over to see the still shots, innocuous yet titillative on the wall. “Thought they’d never get to show it,” he mutters.

“Beg pardon?”

“This snuff film. Just won a court decision. Didn’t you hear?”

“No. I did not know. This one?”

“That’s right. You going to see it?”

“I don’t know. What is it about?”

The student turns and stares at the man, cocks his head to one side, smiles faintly. Seeing the reaction, the man smiles also. The student chuckles and shrugs.

“May be your only chance to see one,” he says. “I’m betting they get closed down again and it goes to a higher court”

“Perhaps I will.”

“Rotten weather, huh? They say so ho was an old hunting cry. Probably from people trying to find each other, huh?”

He chuckles. The man returns it and nods. The calm of controlled passion that holds him as in a gentle fist pushes him toward the experience.

“Yes, I believe that I will,” he says, and he moves toward the ticket window.

The man behind the glass looks up as he passes him the money,

“You sure you want to spend that? It’s an oldie.”

He nods.

The ticket seller sets the coin to one side, hands him his pasteboard and his change.

He enters the lobby, looks about, follows the others.

“No smoking inside. Fire law.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Dropping his cigar into a nearby receptacle, he surrenders his ticket and passes within. He pauses at the head of an aisle to regard the screen before him, moves on when jostled, finds a seat to his left, takes it.

He settles back and lets his warm feeling enfold him. It is a strange night. Lost, why had he come in? A place to sit? A place to hide? A place to be warm with impersonal human noises about him? Curiosity?

All of these, he decides, while his thoughts roam overthe varied surface of life, and the post-orgasmic sadness fades to tenderness and gratefulness.

His shoulder is touched. He turns quickly.

“Just me,” says the student. “Show’ll be starting in a few minutes. You ever read the Marquis de Sade?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think of him?”

“A decadent dilettante.”

“Oh.”

The student settles back and assumes a thoughtful pose. The man returns his eyes to the front of the theater.

After a time, the houselights grow dim and die. Then the screen is illuminated. The words The Kiss of Death flash upon it. Soon they are succeeded by human figures. The man leans forward, his brow furrowed. He turns and studies the slant of light from the projection booth, dust motes drifting within it He sees a portion of the equipment. He turns again to the screen and his breathing deepens.

He watches all the actions leading to the movements of passion as time ticks about him. The theater is still. It seems that he has been transported to a magical realm. The people around him take on a supernatural quality, blank-faced in the light reflected from the screen. The back of his neck grows cold, and it feels as if the hairs are stirring upon it Still, he suppresses a desire to rise and depart, for there is something frightening, too, to the vision. But it seems important that he see it through. He leans back again, watching, watching the flickering spectacle before him.

There is a tightening in nis belly as he realizes what is finally to occur, as he sees the knife, the expression on the girl’s face, the sudden movements, the writhing, the blood. As it continues, he gnaws his knuckle and begins to perspire. It is real, so real...

“Oh my!” he says and relaxes.

The warmth comes back to him again, but he continues to watch, until the last frame fades and the lights come on once again.

“How’d you like it?” says the voice at bis backHe does not turn.

“It is amazing,” he finally says, “that they can make pictures move on a screen like that."He hears the familiar chuckle, then, “Care to join me for a cup of coffee? Or a drink?”

“No, thanks. I have to be going.”

He rises and hurries up the aisle, back toward the fogmasked city where he had somehow lost his way.

“Say, you forgot your package!”

But the man does not bear. He is gone.

The student raises it, weighs it in his palm, wonders. When he finally unwraps the folded Times, it is not only the human heart it contains which causes his sharp intake of breath, but the fact that the paper bears a date in November of 1888.

“Oh, Lord!” he says. “Let him find his way homel”

Outside, the fog begins to roll and break, and the wind makes a small rustling noise as it passes. The long shadow of the man, lost in his love and wonder, moves like a blade through the city and November and the night.