

DECAY

A STORY

by

BRENTON CASSIDY

Children are often told, “Try your very best, because you’re special. There’s only one you, and you can do *anything* you set your mind to.”

Time has calloused my soul to the idealistic bombast of naïve parents, and I know the truth – no one is special. Crawling in the filth of a gluttonous age, we are but insects upon the surface of an uncaring world, with no part to play in the divine comedy of the puppet masters who control it.

This apathetic factory has churned me out and put me together, its seal of quality on each infernal piece.

The dull light of the sunrise does nothing to warm the bitter cold. As I watch the red door across the street, the alley wall clings to my jacket. Soon, the door will open. A girl will step out, and kiss her lover on the lips. She will turn towards home, thinking to collapse on her bed at six o’clock, her parents none the wiser of her contempt for the rules they lay down to protect her.

She is only fifteen, too young for this.

The door opens. She steps out into the brisk morning, and turns to her boyfriend. He whispers something to her - she laughs – they both laugh. She kisses him, her lips lingering on his before she pulls away. Smiling, they share another familiar joke, and their cackles echo throughout the empty street. She waves goodbye, and she walks. He remains for a moment on the doorstep, watching her rhythmic canter before closing the red door behind him.

She is alone now, too happy to be wary – too happy to realise that I am following her.

Her name is Emily. She lives with her family on the third floor of a grimy apartment block in the inner city. Her mother loves wind chimes and cares too much - her father loves electric drills and doesn’t care nearly enough. She doesn’t understand her parents and they don’t understand their daughter; the cat seems to be the only one who does. He goes

out too in witching hours, having secret adventures of his own. The midnight cat brings back the occasional rainbow-coloured bird - he knows exactly what freedom is like.

Though she dreads her mother's concerned gaze and her father's indifferent grunts, she is finding her way back home. She is a symbol for her time, a testament to the lost innocence of the age. This city is rotting underneath our feet, and nobody seems to care. Nobody cares.

We are on the bridge across the river by the time she finally looks back. It is only a quick glance, but enough to tell me she has seen – she catches a glimpse and quickly looks straight ahead. I am not surprised.

I look like everything her mother ever warned her about.

For a while, they doubted I actually existed. There was no pattern; everything was random. Nobody could understand that they all were the same, all hiding their sinful existences from the world. Sex. Drugs. Crime. Their façades only fade with their bodies. A corpse will not lie; it will not try to hide the life you led. They aren't afraid until it happens to them.

Her pace quickens. Mine does too.

She has no idea. None of them ever do – I am just another lowlife who is watching too closely. The truth will dawn on her eventually; the world will darken and she will cry.

While all this is happening, no one will know. No one will know but us. Afterwards, the city will mourn over another dead girl.

We are in step.

Her pace begins to quicken again. She doesn't understand. I am a hunter – this is what I do.

Nobody knew who I was. It was all unsystematic, no clear connections. Eight seconds of security footage was enough to show them.

A teenage girl runs past a camera, looking back; a man runs after her.

They find her in the river the next morning, her sins upon her forehead.

She speeds up again; I am still right behind her. Taking a final nervous glance back, she breaks into a sprint.

They always try to run. Always. I follow her.

We are across the bridge. The labyrinth of streets will do nothing to protect her, each monumental building will grow larger and larger until she realises there is no escape.

The grey walls are closing in on her.

We are on the road and the streets are deserted. The throbbing heartbeat in my ears breaks the silence. She takes a sharp turn right into an alleyway; my foot catches on the curb as I try to follow. I fall.

My hands are bleeding. I look around, still lying upon the concrete. She is nowhere to be seen. Jumping up, I look down the right alley.

She is glancing back, running – tears are streaming down her ivory cheeks.

There is no self-accountability before the end. No one understands that this is punishment for a hedonistic life.

I stumble a little as I begin running after her – my left foot is throbbing. She is slowing, so it doesn't matter. I will catch her. She hasn't done this as many times as I have.

She screams in agony as she prepares her muscles for another burst of speed. She shoots forward, careening into an alley to her left.

I smile.

That's a dead end.

I stand in the alleyway now, looking around. Posters advertising irrelevant bands line the walls as high as humanly possible. Three metal dustbins lie battered near the entrance, and a filthy dumpster sits against the left wall.

A whimper.

My hand closes around the handle of a worn rubbish bin lid, the metal cool against my skin.

I creep towards the sound.

Pathetic.

She is kneeling, facing the wall. Her shoulders shake with each uncontrollable sob.

I raise the lid, ready.

She falls to ground instantly.

I look around. There is no one. Nobody has seen, nobody has heard. Nobody cares.

I drop the lid; it clangs loudly upon the ground. I look down at her, and am surprised for the first time; a tiny glint in the gloom. Kneeling down, I extract a tiny treasure from the loose grip of her left hand.

I don't understand.

They are beads of brilliant sunshine, each arranged specifically.

I don't understand.

A dying man is embossed upon the golden cross that hangs at the end.

I don't understand.

She was kneeling, holding this.

I don't understand.

I look down at her. Her dark hair has fallen over her pale face, but I cannot see her eyes. She was *praying*.

I don't understand.

This is *not* the way it was supposed to be.