

BELLE DE MINUIT

I

Maison Belladonne remained awake even after dawn.

From the sea, the mansion resembled a French apparition violently grafted onto the damp coast of Long Island, an architecture too elegant and too diseased to belong completely to the world of the living: balconies blackened by salt rain, stained-glass windows clouded by decades of trapped smoke, gardens where the roses began opening already defeated by a premature rot the nocturnal perfume of the flowers barely managed to disguise, and interior corridors where humidity descended slowly along the walls with the warm viscosity of some organic secretion. During the early hours of morning, when the fog ascended from the Atlantic and gradually enveloped the statues in the gardens, Belladonne seemed to sink inward into itself like an exhausted animal breathing laboriously behind windows that still remained illuminated.

But the mansion never slept, not truly.

Because even empty, the salons continued breathing.

The humidity retained the odor of the parties in the same way lungs preserve smoke too ancient to expel. The curtains remained saturated with sour champagne, damp nicotine, and spilled perfume even many days after the guests vanished once more toward New York. The carpets exhaled a dense warmth of spilled alcohol, saliva, dried sweat, and flowers slowly withering inside crystal vases. Belladonne itself seemed to metabolize all of it, to absorb it slowly into its walls, digesting human excess with a humid and silent patience while luxury gradually began decomposing from within.

The automobiles descended violently along the gravel road even at impossible hours.

And from them emerged great men whose bodies already seemed slowly beginning to open beneath the exhausting weight of wealth. Fingers yellowed by nicotine. Gums get wet with whisky. Necks stiffened by dried sweat and cigar smoke. Some laughed too loudly while small flecks of saliva gleamed briefly beneath the lamps of the foyer; others advanced more slowly while discreetly clutching at their chests, as though the heart itself had already begun tiring after too many nights breathing the thickened air of Belladonne. There existed something profoundly diseased within them, something soft, humid, exhausted by entire decades of excess, and

nevertheless they continued returning once again to the mansion with the desperate obedience of those no longer capable of existing completely outside the thing slowly stealing their lives away.

The women appeared behind them draped in velvet, pearls, and makeup too heavy to survive the heat of the salons. Carmine lipstick slowly began fracturing around their mouths. Sweat descended beneath carefully fixed wigs. Necklaces remained humid against the aging skin of their throats while sweet perfume attempted uselessly to conceal the deeper odor of exhausted flesh beneath silk too expensive to touch. Some laughed while displaying excessively white and motionless teeth, teeth appearing to belong less to a real human face than to some polished object carefully placed inside the mouth as a symbol of status.

Everything in Belladonne appeared beautiful only from a distance.

Up close, beauty itself slowly began opening apart. Dissolving.

And above all of it persisted Belle de Minuit.

Belle de Minuit descended throughout the mansion like a liturgical presence, like a respiration too warm trapped inside Belladonne's damp walls. It remained clinging to curtains even after laundering, descended slowly from the service elevators, reappeared upon pillows still warm after the parties, and continued suspended upon the wrists of the men who allowed their hands to linger too long against Daisy Blanchet's body during the dances. Even the flowers in the gardens seemed gradually beginning to deform themselves around that fragrance: some white roses slowly acquired the nocturnal perfume of gardenias, while others exhaled an almond sweetness, humid, almost organic, seeming to emerge directly from inside the stems themselves.

As though Belladonne were slowly learning how to smell like Daisy.

Or as though Daisy herself had already begun infiltrating Belladonne long before anyone truly noticed.

Lenore DeValé had learned to recognize Belle de Minuit even while asleep.

Sometimes she awoke first before dawn and, before opening her eyes completely, already knew Daisy remained inside the room, entirely because of the perfume suspended between their narrow beds with the warm density of human breath: warm vanilla, gardenias opening too late into the night, sweet rosé champagne evaporating slowly upon damp crystal, bitter almond, and beneath all of it something more difficult to identify, something deeper and more organic, a

dense humidity seeming slowly to settle inside the throat of whoever inhaled it for too long, as though the fragrance descended not merely upon the body but also within it.

Daisy slept beside her beneath Belladonne's lower corridors, there where the women destined to clean away the excesses of the upper class were sent before disappearing once more into kitchens and service elevators. Yet even there Daisy appeared to belong somewhere else entirely, as though light itself had slowly learned organizing around her body and everything surrounding her had become part of a painting created to transmit the perfect passion of the feminine body.

Silk settled over her with the naturalness of a second skin.

Light always found the precise angle of her throat, of her jaw.

Even Lenore never truly witnessed her eating, nor offering any indication that beneath that experience of idealized perception there existed in reality another woman like herself.

During the parties Daisy held champagne glasses delicately between her fingers, barely dampened her lips, smiled softly whenever men leaned toward her while breathing Belle de Minuit with that humid and exhausted devotion slowly beginning to resemble religion itself, yet the plates remained untouched before her body even after hours. Fruits blackened slowly beneath the lamps. Pastries gradually hardened. Daisy never appeared noticing.

And the men followed her.

That was the unbearable thing.

That was what so deeply corrupted the starving soul for attention existing within Lenore.

Part of her tormented itself whenever she discovered herself thinking about Daisy for too long; at times she even wondered whether it might truly be possible that she loved her, a thought worthy of divine punishment according to the religion imposed upon her by her parents. Or worse: perhaps she wished to become her. Perhaps, after all this time watching Daisy, she had already begun believing that the only possible way of receiving the love and attention that young woman inspired was transforming herself into something equally light, equally exquisite.

Miss DeValé observed them from the corners of Belladonne while collecting empty glasses or removing damp cigarette ash from silver trays, and she watched how the men began searching for Daisy even before seeing her, as though Belle de Minuit itself crossed the salons first, slowly preparing desire inside their bodies before Daisy finally appeared from behind the darkness of the perfume. Merely that sweet respiration descending through the air was enough for conversations gradually to begin fracturing, for cigars to remain suspended between motionless fingers until burning them, and for gazes slowly to incline toward her with the unconscious obedience of dying flowers still searching for sunlight.

Then Daisy appeared.

She emerged.

And Belladonne entire seemed to breathe differently. More deeply.

White silk descended softly from her narrow shoulders.

Pearls remained humid against the sharpness of her collarbones beneath the heat of the parties.

Her mouth always retained the faint brilliance of champagne.

And the men approached.

Always too closely.

Some pretended to require fire for their cigarettes merely to lean nearer to her throat; others rested two fingers lightly against the back of the chair Daisy had just abandoned, as though even the empty space left behind by her body continued retaining something sacred. There existed men who closed their eyes while inhaling beside Belle de Minuit, exhausted men humid with alcohol and desire, inclining toward Daisy with the slow and almost childish desperation of those beginning finally to understand they would never again feel anything resembling this outside the existence of that woman.

And while observing all of it, while watching the humid brilliance descending slowly along Daisy's throat and the bodies inclining toward her with that exhausted and viscous devotion seeming closer to worship than desire, Lenore felt something within herself beginning to grow beyond anything she could still completely name, because love itself had already begun slowly

rotting into something else entirely, a necessity deeper and far less human, no longer consisting in kissing Daisy, nor possessing her, nor even destroying her, but in abolishing once and for all the unbearable distance continuing to exist between them, the obscene separation between the body being observed and the body condemned merely to observe, between the body exhaling Belle de Minuit and the body destined only to breathe it from afar.

By night they shared a narrow room beneath the stairway facing Belladonne's eastern wing, and Daisy sat before the mirror in a white nightgown while slowly removing the golden pins from her hair and Belle de Minuit once more began expanding throughout the room like a flower beginning to sicken.

Lenore pretended to sleep.

But she watched.

She watched the silk descending slowly from Daisy's shoulders.

She watched the pale skin of her stomach, skin seeming never once to have suffered the scratches of sunlight.

She watched the naked legs fragmented by the mirror.

She watched the humid brilliance of perfume behind the ears.

At times she desired kissing her with a tenderness so profound it resembled physical pain.

At times she desired opening her chest and sinking herself inside the humid warmth of Daisy's body until disappearing completely between that perfumed and beautiful breast.

And she never succeeded in distinguishing where one thing ended and the other began.

"They never truly look," Daisy murmured one dawn while applying Belle de Minuit upon her wrists and the perfume descended slowly throughout the room already saturated with nocturnal flowers and humid warmth. "They only search for something beautiful inside which to rot for a while."

Then she smiled and lit her seventh cigarette.

And Belladonne continued breathing around them both.

As the weeks passed, the mansion slowly began deforming itself around Daisy in the same way certain flowers deform themselves while searching for light. The men spoke about her even while she was absent, and Lenore listened to them from the kitchens while cleaning glasses covered in saliva and carmine lipstick, listened while they attempted identifying the precise notes of Belle de Minuit while cigar smoke slowly thickened the air above their heads.

“Gardenias.”

“No. Champagne.”

“Almond.”

“There’s something else.”

“There’s always something else.”

Then they erupted into laughter.

But it was not healthy laughter.

It sounded humid.

Hungry.

One night a man requested permission to kiss Daisy’s wrist merely to inhale Belle de Minuit from closer proximity. Another remained for long minutes holding one of her used gloves against his face with closed eyes and a faint masculine smile. There existed those who attempted purchasing the perfume. Those who asked the name of the perfumery. Those who sent white flowers to Belladonne hoping for nothing more than a reply.

And while all of that unfolded, Belladonne continued absorbing it slowly into itself. The lower walls gradually began retaining Belle de Minuit in the same way flesh retains an infection too deep to remove. Even the sheets used by Daisy appeared continuing humid with perfume days after laundering. The flowers in the gardens slowly began reproducing distorted fragments of her fragrance.

As though the mansion itself were learning to breathe like her.

As though Daisy had ceased belonging solely to her body.

Lenore began following her.

Not deliberately.

Or at least that was what she attempted telling herself while advancing behind Belle de Minuit throughout the lower corridors, the humid gardens, and the salons thickened by smoke and bodies exhausted from excess. At times merely in order to inhale the perfume from closer proximity, because upon Daisy the fragrance seemed different, warmer, more alive, as though it had not been applied upon skin but rather born slowly from inside the body itself.

One dawn Lenore found her asleep after a particularly long party. The makeup remained intact. Some pearls still rested against her throat. Belle de Minuit continued emanating softly from her collarbone.

Lenore leaned closer.

Breathed.

Again.

More deeply.

And while the perfume descended slowly through her throat with that humid and diseased sweetness, she understood the desire had already begun deforming itself inside her into

something far deeper and far less human, an unbearable necessity to enter Daisy, to occupy the precise place where Daisy existed inside the desire of others, because Daisy appeared moving through the world without weight while Lenore merely succeeded in observing her from below, from humid kitchens and service corridors, carrying trays too heavy while Belladonne continued inclining itself toward Daisy in the same manner diseased flowers continue inclining toward light even while they slowly begin rotting.

Jazz descended distorted from the upper salons while cigar smoke accumulated beneath the lamps with the warm density of artificial fog and bodies gradually began softening beneath Belladonne's humid heat. Makeup melted slowly across the women's faces. The men sweated inside dark suits with pupils humid from alcohol. The flowers opening inside the vases had already begun exhaling a sweet and faintly rotten odor beneath the dominant perfume of Belle de Minuit.

Daisy crossed the grand salon slowly.

And the bodies literally began opening around her passage.

Conversations fractured slightly.

Cigars remained suspended between motionless fingers.

Respirations themselves appeared reorganizing around Belle de Minuit.

White silk descended softly from Daisy's shoulders while the humid brilliance of champagne still remained upon her mouth and the pearls continued adhering to the warmth of her naked back. The men inclined toward her with that exhausted and viscous devotion no longer resembling desire but hunger. And while Lenore observed all of it she felt a desperation so profound beginning to grow inside herself that her entire body slowly began aching, because she suddenly understood she would never succeed enduring the existence of a world where Daisy continued being Daisy and she continued being merely the woman condemned to observe her from afar.

Then she followed her.

The music gradually began fading behind Belladonne's lower corridors while Daisy advanced ahead of her still swaying faintly from champagne and Belle de Minuit remained suspended in the air even after the body itself continued moving.

Lenore accelerated her pace.

Closer.

Still closer.

Already only steps away from her.

Until finally reaching the humid warmth of Belle de Minuit descending from the skin itself.

Daisy turned her face slightly, still smiling.

And Lenore tore a kiss from her by force.

The perfume invaded her mouth immediately.

Gardenias.

Champagne.

Warm vanilla.

Heat.

For one instant Daisy remained motionless, merely startled, and afterward attempted slowly pushing Lenore away.

Unfortunately, she failed. Because by then her rejection had already reached something inside Lenore that was finally tearing apart, partly from desiring her, and partly from not being worthy of being loved by her.

The letter opener pierced frantically through the rib.

Once.

And again.

And again.

Seven times.

Her hands began moving with a humid and desperate violence while the metal continued sinking itself between the ribs as though Lenore were attempting opening something far deeper than the body itself, as though Daisy's chest still concealed some secret entrance toward that unbearable beauty Belladonne entire seemed to breathe.

Daisy opened her eyes.

Belle de Minuit remained intact.

That was the truly unbearable thing.

Not the blood.

Not the breath breaking apart.

Not the hands clutching desperately at silk.

The perfume.

It still smelled beautiful.

The white dress slowly began staining itself red while the silk absorbed blood with the dark slowness of a flower drinking rotten water and Lenore continued driving the letter opener downward incapable of stopping, incapable still of enduring the obscene separation between both bodies. Pearls scattered across the humid marble. Daisy attempted breathing. Lenore kissed her again.

Then she opened her chest.

The flesh yielded slowly beneath trembling hands while humid warmth began pouring itself across torn silk and Belle de Minuit continued emanating intact from the throat, from the hair, from the skin still beautiful even beneath blood.

Daisy remained beautiful.

Even opened apart.

Even dying.

Perfect.

And when finally the body collapsed motionless upon the stone floor, Lenore remained kneeling beside it for a long time breathing Belle de Minuit directly from the corpse before finally noticing the small rectangular bottle protruding faintly from the silk handbag.

Then she took it.

And Belladonne continued breathing tranquilly around them both.

II

At first the perfume functioned exactly as Lenore had imagined.

She began by using only small quantities behind the ears, upon the wrists, between the collarbones, and Belladonne slowly began inclining itself toward her as well. First came the

men: gazes lingering too long, respirations drawing nearer, fingers brushing accidentally against her waist. Then the women.

“Belle de Minuit?”

“Is that Belle de Minuit?”

“My God...”

Lenore smiled.

Because for the first time people were pronouncing something connected to her.

Because for the first time Belladonne itself seemed slightly to reorganize its respiration around her body.

And the parties continued.

Larger.

More humid.

More exhausted.

Jazz itself seemed slowly beginning to rot inside the salons. Smoke thickened around the lamps until turning them yellow. Some women ended asleep across couches with makeup melting slowly toward their throats while the men remained drinking for entire hours until their hands faintly began trembling around the glasses.

And always:

“Belle de Minuit?”

“Is that Belle de Minuit?”

“Tell me that is Belle de Minuit...”

The name gradually began repeating itself throughout Belladonne like some diseased prayer.

Like liturgy.

Like infection.

The storm began deep into the night.

Rain struck violently against the stained-glass windows while Belladonne continued overflowing with smoke, jazz, and bodies humid with champagne. Lenore descended the grand staircase in a black dress clinging against her body.

The conversations began slowly fracturing the moment Lenore descended the staircase, and for one instant Belladonne entire seemed holding its breath inside those humid salons, as though even the mansion itself had immediately recognized something different that night, something too intense and too alive expanding from Lenore’s body beneath lamps clouded by smoke, perfume, and human heat.

She had not decided to wear Belle de Minuit that night.

And nevertheless the perfume was unbearable.

It descended from her with an almost physical density, a warm respiration of humid gardenias, sweet champagne, and vanilla slowly beginning to sicken beneath Belladonne’s viscous excess. The moment the fragrance began unfolding itself throughout the salon, the bodies gradually began reorganizing around her with an involuntary, animal obedience, as though the perfume had penetrated directly into something deeper than desire itself: something exhausted and starving that had spent years rotting silently beneath velvet, diamonds, and cigar smoke.

First the gazes turned.

Then the bodies.

And finally Belladonne entire slowly began inclining toward her.

Lenore experienced panic for the first time.

Not a clean or sudden fear, but something more humid and progressive, a warm sensation descending slowly throughout the body while she watched expressions deforming themselves around her. The men continued holding motionless champagne glasses between yellowed fingers. Some women barely breathed with parted mouths while makeup slowly melted around fractured lipstick. An old man remained motionless beside a column with his throat humid from sweat and tiny blue veins pulsating weakly beneath the transparent skin of his temples while observing Lenore with an unbearable, devotional concentration.

Because Belladonne was watching.

Belladonne entire.

The faces slowly began drawing closer.

One.

Then another.

Then too many to count.

A man dropped his glass upon the carpet without even noticing. Crystal shattered brutally beneath polished shoes while champagne descended slowly through the dark fibers like pale and sticky blood. Behind him a woman released a strange little laugh before likewise inclining herself toward Lenore, breathing deeply as though she had remained trapped for weeks without sufficient air and for the first time were finally about to nourish her body with oxygen.

“Belle de Minuit...”

“My God...”

“Allow me to smell you...”

“Again...”

The phrases gradually began repeating themselves throughout the salon with a humid, liturgical, ceremonial cadence, and Lenore then felt the first hands closing themselves around her wrists.

Warm fingers.

Too warm.

Humid, heavy fingers.

An elderly man tremblingly approached his face toward the inside of her arm and inhaled deeply with closed eyes while another woman slowly moved aside the hair from Lenore’s throat in order to incline herself directly above the skin. Lenore immediately stepped backward, but more bodies continued approaching from every direction, too many bodies, too many respirations, too much heat accumulating around her.

“No...”

The word barely emerged.

Small.

Immediately drowned beneath Belladonne’s humid murmur.

Because no one appeared hearing her.

Or worse:

everyone heard her and no longer cared enough to stop.

The glasses continued falling.

Crystal breaking against marble.

Champagne spreading slowly across polished shoes.

Cigars consuming themselves between motionless fingers.

And while jazz continued deforming itself beneath clouded lamps, Belladonne entire seemed reorganizing itself around one unbearable necessity alone: to draw nearer to Lenore, to inhale Belle de Minuit more deeply, to sink themselves inside that perfume with the elegant and monstrous desperation of those no longer capable of feeling absolutely anything outside excess.

The bodies finally surrounded her completely.

Humid and starving men.

Women covered in compact powder and blue eyeshadow melting slowly beneath the lamps.

Young people with pupils are dilated by the so-called good life.

Old men barely gasping between short respirations perfumed by whisky.

All inclining themselves.

All breathing.

And Belladonne slowly began closing itself around her.

Hands descended across the black fringed dress as though the body had already ceased belonging entirely to Lenore and had instead become another possession of the mansion itself, another exquisite object arranged for the famished entertainment of its exhausted guests. One woman buried her face directly against the humid curve of Lenore's throat and released a soft moan while inhaling Belle de Minuit desperately, with an obscene slowness almost resembling love. Another pressed her lips too long against her collarbone. One man began kissing slowly the inside of her wrist between trembling respirations while another pushed aside the hair from the nape of her neck in an attempt to absorb the perfume directly from the skin.

"How exquisite..."

"Closer..."

"Allow me..."

"My God..."

The voices slowly began overlapping one another until becoming a single collective respiration.

Lenore attempted pulling away.

She could not.

More bodies continued throwing themselves toward her and toward the source of their pleasure.

The heat became unbearable.

Perfume.

Champagne.

Sweat.

Fermenting flowers.

The watery breath of stale alcohol.

Everything blending itself together inside Belladonne's saturated air while the people gradually began losing every remaining appearance of refinement. Makeup melted down faces like wax. Sweat soaked pearls and stiff linen collars. Some women breathed with tiny desperate contractions inside their throats. The men began gasping softly while pressing their faces deeper and deeper against Lenore's skin, and between those respirations there escaped little humid sounds, murmurs fractured by desire and perfume.

"Again..."

"Please..."

"Let me feel it..."

"Belle de Minuit..."

The words themselves slowly began degrading.

Belladonne's elegant dialect had begun rotting beneath hunger.

The corset slowly began crushing Lenore's ribs beneath the constant pressure of bodies and she then felt something even worse than fear: the unbearable certainty of the end. That Belladonne entire was closing itself around her with the same humid slowness with which a carnivorous flower finally encloses whatever it has ultimately decided to consume.

She could barely move anymore.

Every attempt to retreat met another hand closing around her.

Fingers collapsing into the fabric of the dress.

Nails grazing her back.

Cold gold rings trapping her wrists.

The bodies continued pressing themselves against her from every direction with a proximity increasingly obscene, increasingly suffocating, and the air itself slowly began turning unbreathable beneath the accumulation of perfumes too sweetly cloying blended with smoke, body sweat, and other bourgeois vices dissolving at tremendous speed. Meanwhile the sour odor of champagne drying across Belladonne's humid carpets thickened the atmosphere further and the mansion itself seemed to groan inconsolably.

The gardenias of Belle de Minuit continued breathing beneath all of it.

But they were slowly beginning to rot.

Lenore felt nausea.

Because the perfume no longer smelled merely beautiful.

Now it smelled alive.

Too alive.

She attempted screaming once more, but someone brought his face too close to hers and the hot exhalation entered directly into her mouth between fractured words. The breath was nauseating. Lenore turned her face away desperately, but another woman was already inclining herself over her from the opposite side with dilated pupils and deteriorating powder caked across her skin.

"Belle de Minuit..."

The voice emerged almost transformed into a pleading moan.

The hands continued descending across her body.

One caressed slowly the curve of her waist.

Another remained pressed against ribs compressed by the corset.

Another held her throat as though attempting gently to immobilize her in order to continue breathing her in.

And Belladonne continued drawing nearer.

Because even the mansion itself appeared to have become smaller.

Warmer.

More humid.

Lenore could no longer distinguish where the walls ended and where the bodies began.

The blush of strangers began staining her skin. Smeared lipstick brushed accidentally against her throat. Powder descended over the black dress, making it appear dusted with pale ash. Someone left shining saliva against the curve of her collarbone after kissing her for too long and Lenore then felt a desperation so violent that tears finally began blending themselves with sweat upon her face.

“Please...”

The voice fractured immediately.

No one stopped.

“Please... have mercy.”

Then she released a brutal scream.

Because Belladonne no longer seemed filled with people but with appetite.

The men gasped softly against her skin like exhausted wild creatures. The women breathed with tiny trembling contractions in their throats while bringing their faces closer and closer. Some guests remained motionless, observing from around them with fascinated expressions, as though contemplating some exquisite and slowly unbearable spectacle so hypnotic and grotesque they no longer possessed the strength to look away.

Another glass fell to the floor.

Then another.

Crystal shattering.

Jazz deforming itself.

Perfume rotting.

And while Lenore attempted desperately forcing herself through the bodies, she felt the heat slowly beginning to adhere to her like a second skin, a humid layer composed of foreign respirations, smoke, saliva, and fermenting flowers beneath Belladonne's golden lamps.

The corset compressed her chest to the point of rupture.

Each breath began hurting while her ribs slowly yielded.

And still they continued drawing closer.

Closer.

Always closer.

“Let me feel you...”

“Again...”

“Belle de Minuit...”

“My God...”

The voices no longer sounded human.

They resembled prayers murmured by bodies too wealthy and too rotten to remember any notion as simple as consent, much less the barrier between slight harm and cruelty.

Lenore then felt another hand descending violently between her legs while someone buried his face between her throat and shoulder and inhaled with such force that the entire body seemed to convulse. Another person began desperately kissing the inside of her thigh. A woman slowly pressed her mouth behind Lenore’s ear and left her trembling respiration suspended there too long, humid and quivering, before barely brushing the skin while releasing another broken little moan directly against her ear.

And it was then that Lenore truly screamed.

A sound capable of bleeding other people’s ears.

Primitive.

A sound of pure and sinister fear finally forcing its way through the smoke, the perfume, and Belladonne’s golden lamps.

But no one pulled away.

Some even smiled.

As though terror itself rendered the ceremony even more exquisite.

As though Lenore's tears perfumed the air even further.

And while Belladonne continued breathing around her with that humid and ceremonial hunger of the wealthy who have spent entire lives believing every beautiful body exists solely in order to be consumed, Lenore finally understood the mansion had never truly loved Daisy, not in the way she herself had believed.

They devoured her slowly.

In the same manner they were now attempting to devour Lenore.

Then she fled.

She descended desperately toward the lower corridors while still hearing behind her:

“Belle de Minuit?”

“Belle de Minuit?”

She opened the ancient wine cellar.

And then she remembered.

The corpse.

Daisy.

The stiffened silk.

The scattered pearls.

For entire weeks Belladonne had succeeded in absorbing the murder in the same manner it absorbed everything else, concealing it inside its mold-infested walls until it became almost unreal even to Lenore herself.

But Daisy remained there.

Intact.

Perfect.

The white skin.

Perfect.

The golden hair.

Perfect.

The opened chest beneath hardened silk.

Perfect.

And Belle de Minuit continued emanating softly from the corpse as though death itself had never fully succeeded in adhering to her.

III

Lenore collapsed onto her knees.

She did not understand.

She did not understand why Daisy remained beautiful.

Why did she still smelled alive.

Why did time itself appeared to have stopped solely for her.

Why even death itself seemed to display preference toward her.

Gardenias.

Champagne.

Warm vanilla and almonds.

The perfume descended slowly from the corpse with that same unbearable sweetness as always while Belladonne continued breathing around the intact body.

Lenore began crying.

Then she fled.

After all, she did not wish to deal with a corpse at that moment.

Rain struck violently across the gardens while Lenore staggered through Belladonne and Belle de Minuit continued emanating from her body with an almost unbearable intensity, blending itself now with the humid mud of the storm and the warm smoke still escaping through the mansion's open windows. Behind her jazz continued breathing in distorted form beneath golden lamps. Laughter still ascended from the salons. Belladonne remained alive.

And nevertheless, some people still continued approaching her.

Still asking:

“Belle de Minuit...?”

Because even beneath the rain the perfume continued descending from Lenore with that diseased sweetness of humid gardenias, warm champagne, and vanilla opened too long over human heat, and for several more seconds the guests continued inclining themselves toward her with the same exhausted and ceremonial obedience as always.

Until one woman abruptly stopped before Lenore upon the wet gravel.

Observed her.

Breathed once more.

And something slowly began deforming itself across her face.

First confusion.

Then discomfort.

Then a physical horror was so immediate and involuntary that her mouth parted slightly while her pupils visibly dilated beneath the rain.

“What...?”

She inhaled again.

More deeply.

And then recoiled violently while bringing a hand against her nose.

“My God...”

The voice emerged fractured.

Not elegant.

Not refined.

For the first time: human.

Human.

The woman suddenly began vomiting uncontrollably across the wet gravel while the pearls around her throat collided against one another with a tiny desperate chiming sound and Belladonne itself seemed to hold its breath for one brief instant before more bodies slowly began approaching around Lenore.

Not to help her.

Just to look.

Always was just to look.

The men descended the steps slowly while still holding champagne glasses in dirty hands. The women remained beneath illuminated doorframes with makeup slowly deteriorating beneath humidity. Some laughed nervously. Others observed in silence. Some searched the faces of the other men for some clue capable of explaining what was truly occurring there.

Lenore then felt something cold forcing its way outward beneath the skin of her throat.

A small humid tear.

Warm.

Trembling, she lifted her hand toward her neck.

Her fingers returned stained with a dark and viscous liquid.

No.

God, no.

No.

The word appeared immediately inside her.

No.

God, no.

No.

Not yet as a scream.

Not yet completely.

Not yet surrendered to defeat.

Lenore attempted to straighten herself.

Attempted adjusting the black dress clinging to her body.

Attempted pushing wet hair away from her face.

Attempted breathing normally.

As though she might still preserve something.

Beauty.

Dignity.

Desire.

Something.

After all, who was she if not all of that? Who was she without those qualities? If those very illusions, despite being new within her life and above all artificial, had nevertheless become the genesis of her social existence, the reason Belladonne itself had finally acknowledged her presence. If she was not an object of desire, then she was absolutely nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing more than what she had been two weeks before.

And she refused returning to the humiliation carried by her own identity.

But the odor had finally begun opening itself beneath Belle de Minuit with an unbearable slowness.

Rotten flowers.

Cheap champagne spilled across carpets.

Flesh entering decomposition.

The people recoiled slightly.

Only slightly.

Because even then some still continued inhaling deeply.

As though the perfume still survived beneath the catastrophe.

As though Belladonne itself still succeeded in eroticizing corruption.

Lenore felt nausea.

Then pain.

A profound and viscous pain descending slowly through her gums.

She brought her hand once more toward her mouth.

Felt a tooth move.

Small.

Soft.

No.

God, no.

The word emerged now between her lips.

“No...”

God, no.

No.

Her fingers began trembling desperately while she attempted forcing the tooth back into the gum, as though the body might still obey her, as though there still existed some absurd possibility of preserving intact the golden mask Belladonne had permitted her to construct around herself.

But the illusion of control proved shorter than expected and the tooth finally detached itself.

It fell softly into the humid center of her palm.

Small.

White.

Perfect.

Lenore stared at it in terror.

Then another slowly began loosening.

And another.

No.

No no no no—

God, no.

No.

The words finally began fracturing themselves inside her burning throat while the teeth descended one after another between tiny dark threads of thick blood dissolving beneath the rain. Some struck directly against the gravel. Others remained trembling inside her hands.

A woman tore herself apart with a scream before collapsing onto the ground from the shock.

One man recoiled rapidly while covering the entirety of his mouth with his hand.

And nevertheless others still continued watching with a humid and motionless fascination.

As though horror itself had finally transformed into yet another spectacle.

A featured performance.

Lenore collapsed onto her knees with a sound like enormous drums of bone striking earth.

The corset began tightening painfully around her abdomen while the body itself seemed slowly swelling beneath the wet fabric. The skin along her throat gradually acquired a violet coloration, then greenish black, while tiny humid fissures slowly began opening themselves across her collarbones and Lenore screamed in agony.

No.

God, no.

The phrase returned then again and again.

Faster.

More desperately.

“No...”

“No no no—”

“No please, God, no—”

She attempted closing the dress across the flesh splitting apart in order to stop the bleeding.

Attempted covering her throat.

Attempted desperately gathering the scattered teeth from the mud as though salvaging the final remnants of her fallen empire.

But the fingers themselves had also begun slowly deforming.

The nails detached softly beneath the rain.

The skin yielded.

The bones cracked beneath the force of the wind.

Belle de Minuit continued emanating intact from the opening flesh.

That was the truly unbearable thing.

The perfume remained beautiful.

Precious.

Lovely.

Perfect.

Even now.

Even while the body itself slowly began rotting from within.

Lenore, already unrecognizable, finally lifted her gaze toward Belladonne.

And she understood.

She understood the mansion had never stopped breathing.

Never stopped watching.

God, it had never truly loved Daisy at all.

Much less had it loved her.

Belladonne merely consumed.

Consumed them.

Consumed youth.

Perfume.

Beauty.

Desire.

Bodies.

And afterward continued breathing.

Intact.

Perfect.

Rain descended violently across the gardens while Lenore finally began collapsing apart upon the wet gravel. The skin of her face slowly opened around the mouth. Her bones cleaned themselves beneath the water falling from the sky. One eye began sinking softly inward through what remained of flesh. The black dress no longer succeeded in containing the body deforming beneath it.

And nevertheless the music continued playing inside Belladonne.

Jazz.

Laughter.

Hedonism.

Crystal.

Champagne.

Desire.

Some guests slowly began returning toward the interior of the mansion without displaying even the smallest trace of human reaction.

Others still remained watching several moments longer. Fascinated. Diseased. Incapable of fully looking away from the woman collapsing beneath Belle de Minuit.

Lenore attempted releasing one final word.

But the jaw yielded faintly sideways with a small humid sound.

Another tooth fell into the mud.

Then another.

“No...”

The word emerged already deformed.

Almost unrecognizable.

Like herself.

Finally, the entire body collapsed slowly across the wet gravel while rain dragged makeup, dark blood, teeth, and perfume through Belladonne’s saturated gardens, draining them into the soil in order to nourish the roots of the bushes casting shadows for the night, because after all it was always daytime for those who refuse awakening.

Far below, inside the humid and dust-choked depths of the mansion, Daisy Blanchet slowly opened her eyes.