

## THE FIFTH HORSEMAN

by

Samantha de Bendern

It's becoming all about the bat.

Bats have fascinated humans for centuries. My own flamboyance has undoubtedly played a part in this, but even without my excesses, bats have festered in man's dark pool of fantasies ever since our species crossed, and vampires were born. Part mammal, part bird, in remote parts of this planet we are still worshipped as gods, mortal-immortals, shape shifting half-human half-demonic liminal beings.

Now all is about to change. Bats are to blame for the coming Apocalypse. No more Horsemen roaring through a sky of flames to the Ride of the Valkyries. Pestilence has taken the shape of a common bat, cloaking men's lungs in shards of glass. I can see whole iconographies being redrawn: The Four Bats of the Apocalypse. The End of Days is supposed to be a grandiose earth-shattering affair, with Death swooping in for its explosive finale on a blazing golden mane, not wearing a surgical mask on the back of a flying mouse.

None of us will survive this calamity with our reputations intact, neither the common bat, nor vampires. Not even the Horsemen.

Talking of Horsemen, I've sensed their presence more than once over the many long years I've roamed the Earth.

Last time was less than a century ago, in a desolate encampment of squat redbrick houses surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers somewhere in southern Poland. It was just before dawn in midwinter. I had been drawn there by the smell of burning flesh swirling above the frozen ground. Famine and her skinny horse hovered over half a dozen skeletal human corpses of

indefinite sex piled up near a furnace. She muttered something about man having surpassed her own evil imagination in devising ways to starve and torture his fellow man. Her days trying to bring about the End of the World were over. Humans could take over from now.

We parted ways with a polite bow, and I only realised who she was as she rose towards the sky with a clattering of hooves.

I wish I knew how to contact her now. If the calamity that has currently befallen mankind is the work of her fellow Horseman, I would like bats to be left out of this. We're getting so much bad press these days that I find myself longing for the dreadful Hollywood movies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. At least there was some dignity in our battles with zealous white bearded professors and their virginal daughters. Now I fear equally zealous young men and women, in white coats and face masks, condemning us to slow deaths in sterile laboratories as they dissect our genomes.

I'm also afraid for my human cousins. This new disease eats away their souls even before it hits their lungs.

You may find this hard to believe, considering how many men and women my appetites have sent to an early grave, but I'm very fond of humans. More than once I've fallen in love, and more than once my heart has been broken. Even those who cross the species barrier to join me in immortality get bored eventually. They are fickle creatures, in whom not even eternal life is able to instil a sense of permanence.

The last human I loved died in Flanders on a glorious spring morning over a hundred years ago. As I cradled his mutilated body, the shadow of a Horseman passed over us. "War" I screamed, for it had to be War in this terrible place, "do your duty, but spare this one for me, I beg you." His reply boomed with the cannons across the burning fields.

'It's not up to me, my friend. Ask the Fifth Horseman. He's the one who really matters.'

The boy died shortly afterwards, and I cried tears of blood that fell on the ground in the shape of bright red poppies. In my grief I did not even stop to think about War's cryptic warning, nor did I notice the flowers pushing up from the ground beneath me.

Now Pestilence has descended upon Earth in the most cunning and insidious way, and I wonder whether he is the Horseman War spoke of. Even though this is not my first plague our paths have not yet crossed.

I was in London in 1666, where some of my pyrotechnic experiments lead to the great fire that killed the disease-ridden rats and put an end to the epidemic. As flames raged over the city, I glimpsed a horseman wavering in the flames. He was gone in an instant and may have been a hallucination caused by too much mead and the intoxicating smoke.

300 years earlier I had listened to the sighs of the sick and dying in the narrow backstreets of Florence as Boccaccio penned his Decameron, but no Horseman haunted the city.

In Medieval France I mourned human friends as Death left black hoof prints on untouchable corpses, her silver tipped wings barely visible behind the clouds shrouding the moon.

All these plagues had one thing in common: I could go elsewhere. Even during the Spanish flu there was some respite as the fever coursed around the globe in uneven strides.

Now there is no escape. Pestilence is everywhere and is causing me distress in more ways than one.

To begin with, half of humanity is under house arrest, and feeding is problematic. One has to be less choosy when indulging in random blood-sucking encounters.

New laws have turned my city into an open-air prison. Since the Revolution I've been based in Paris. It was the most propitious time for mischief making and I stayed on after the last heads fell. I love the city. I love its contradictory mix of revolutionary zeal, bourgeois comfort and aristocratic grandeur.

The problem with Paris of course is that it is in France, and the French have applied their usual bureaucratic ardour to enforcing the plague induced quarantine (how I regret those late nights with Napoleon as we discussed the Civil Code). Citizens cannot leave their homes without paperwork proving who they are and why they are out on the streets. I've been forging my papers since the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, but with today's technology it's becoming more complicated. I get bored being in my bat form all the time, but each venture onto the streets in my human form brings the risk of being stopped and discovered.

Then there are the face masks.

They attach close to the jugular and I've already caught my fangs in a few of their foul-tasting elastics. Even when I succeed in satisfying my hunger, I feel incomplete. Necks are less sensuous when half a person's face is covered in a surgical mask. Like sex with a condom.

So prevalent is the wearing of masks these days that I've started to wear one myself. The police are less likely to ask masked citizens for their papers. Perhaps they assume that a mask shows a certain deference to the disease, and therefore to authority.

I've survived centuries of plagues, but this one feels different. Death is less visible and brutal, but an unquenchable melancholy has settled over mankind.

Now, as I hang upside down from drainpipes and gutters on balmy spring evenings, I glimpse men and women through open windows, faces lit by the blue light of their screens, fighting lonely battles as they reach out to pixelated friends and relatives. Their souls are withering away as they crave human contact. No wonder their prisons use solitary confinement as the ultimate punishment.

The melancholy has seeped into me as well. When I feed, I usually try to find a happy soul. The family man or woman tastes of those he or she has loved, and a recent embrace lingers for a

long time in the full-bodied aroma of their blood. These days blood is turning to water. It carries the oxygen man needs to live, but his passions are wasting away.

\*\*\*

Paris is beautiful all the time, especially in the Spring. An old cliché I know, but as with most clichés it's true. In all the centuries I've walked or flown her streets I've never seen her so empty or desolate, even though the chestnut trees are in full bloom and the roses in the Tuileries are running wild in their untended beds. Paris today reminds me of one of those marble statues in the Louvre: sublime in beauty and form, but whose vacant eyes are incapable of arousing desire or pleasure. They lack the life-fire of the gods, just as the city lacks its humans.

This evening I stopped on a bench near the Luxembourg Gardens to chat to a young girl. In spite of her mask I could tell she was beautiful. Her eyes contained the particular mix of boredom and expectation I often see in attractive women who assume most men they encounter will try to seduce them.

I hesitated before making my approach. Despite her looks and her youth, she smelled of stale air and of skin that has been out of the sun for too long. It jarred with the spring breeze and early blossoms locked inside the park gates behind us.

'Good evening,' I nodded.

'Good evening,' came her muffled reply.

I could hear the blood pulsing through her body, and my fangs tingled behind my mask.

'What a lovely evening.'

'Yes, it's been a wonderful day... I wish I could have spent more time outside.'

I could tell she was smiling by the creases in the corners of her eyes.

'I don't normally talk to strangers,' she sighed almost apologetically, 'but it's so nice to talk to

another human, face to face as it were.'

Across the centuries, men and women have given themselves willingly once I reveal my true nature to them. Terror and desire mingle as their souls depart on wings of ecstasy. I fear that now I would be cursed and reviled were I to display any bat-like qualities. Instead of enjoying the sweet pain of my bites, their parting thoughts would be about whatever contemptible virus may be swimming in my saliva.

This is all so bad for my image.

For this reason, if for nothing else I control the umbrella-shaped wings that swell in my back when I'm aroused.

The girl continued to smile as I moved closer to her. Her craving for company had dulled her natural instinct to flee a stranger sidling towards her in the isolation of lockdown twilight. We chatted for a while and she didn't flinch when I put my hand on her knee.

When I took her, she deflated like a pin-pricked balloon. Her blood trickled through me like thin air, and not even her youth and beauty could make up for the lack of oxygen in her cells. As life seeped out of her body I was filled with such despair and loneliness I nearly gave up before her heart stopped beating. Only the knowledge that I am in no state to take on a vampire puppy in these uncertain times pushed me to finish.

After she drew her last breath, I saw the slither of a soul scurry out of her body. It looked back at me in anguish, then dissolved in the evening light.

Her pale body lay on the bench. I took away the mask. She was beautiful, but her skin had clearly turned grey long before her death. Poor creature.

I hugged her close, gave her the touch she had been craving for, and as I squeezed her tight, I heard something shatter underneath her bosom.

I shuddered.

Her lungs were covered in breaking glass.

Had she been sick, or had I given the illness to her? Either way I knew that tomorrow she would join the ranks of those inexplicable deaths, the young and healthy whom the virus kills against all expectations.

What if this really is all about the bat?

Bats rarely howl. When they do, you will never hear it. Our frequencies are too high-pitched for human ears. Other creatures sense us though, and I know the Horsemen do as well. It was my cry over the death camp near Cracow that summoned Famine all those decades ago, and War smelled the blood on my tears as I grieved in that Flanders field.

When I howled this evening, trees shook as birds, beasts and a few wild bats rushed towards the night sky, circling like a thunderstorm in an ever-tightening frenzy. Green leaves swirled upwards, prematurely torn from their branches before they had completely unfurled. It felt like the beginning of the end of the world.

Once the cacophony died down, I became aware of the sound of hooves on the pavement. A horseman draped in a grey misty veil rode towards me on a translucent white horse.

I knew immediately this was one of the Four.

'Are you Pestilence?' I asked, my voice hoarse.

I hoped for relief, a final confirmation that bats were not responsible for this strange and terrible plague. With some firm negotiation I could start rehabilitating the reputation of my species.

'No, my friend.'

The voice was that of a boy just past adolescence.

'Pestilence retired years ago. As soon as antibiotics and vaccines became widespread, he realised humans had got the better of him. These days he runs a rejuvenation clinic for ageing

rock stars in Switzerland. I'm afraid he's become rather materialistic. I stopped speaking to him when he replaced his horse with a Porsche.'

'You must be Death then.'

'No, I'm not Death either. She only comes when everything is over. You will have felt her presence many times, but you will see her only once, when she comes for you, as she will you know.'

'Yes, I know.'

I was feeling uncomfortable. Maybe this actually was Death, trying to trick me. Maybe the diseased blood of the young girl was already pushing me into those diaphanous arms.

'Well, you can't be War. We've already met.'

'Correct. I am not War. He too gave up. His work became redundant when man split the atom.'

I could swear he chuckled as he spoke.

'I am the one they cannot write about in that great Book of theirs. I cannot be seen or painted or described by music or song. And now, my time has come. Fear of Pestilence and Death has allowed me to run wild through man's world and take away all that makes him human: love, touch, friendship, community... I reap the empty husks where souls once rested far more effectively than War or Famine ever could.'

'Who are you then, what are you?'

I felt nauseated, and it wasn't the badly - digested food lying like a stone in my stomach.

The Horseman came close to me and whispered in my neck.

'I am the Fifth Horseman.'

I am the Apocalypse.

My name is Solitude.'