

THE WARY EYE

It watches me. Not constantly, not every day, but when *It* appears, it follows my movements with suspicion and fascinated interest.

I attempt to communicate, I ask it questions, I offer it small smiles and pleading expressions, yet it never responds. It remains stoically impassive, as silent as an echo without a mouth and ears.

It's been two days since the last visit- I'm desperate to see it again. It's the only living thing I've seen in months, aside from the rats. They've almost depleted my food supplies. Every night I trap some and throw them into the canal, but they keep coming back. There are too many.

I know what they want, they traipse from home to home, looking for rotting flesh, the bodies of people who perished in the plague. They want to gorge on the remains and feast their ugly hairy bodies on human meat. Fat, skin, muscle, tissue, and bone- they consume it all til there is nothing left. They lie in wait for me to succumb to the same fate, to become so ill I can't move. They won't wait for death; they'll start the ravenous gorging while I still have air in my lungs. For now, while I'm healthy and able-bodied, they keep their distance with watchful eyes and glistening snouts.

Two hundred and forty-three days. I call it my post-epidemic era; *la vita dopo la morte*- my life after death. Life after the vilest and most vicious disease ever to sweep through Italy, probably the world. Here in Venice, where the streets are narrow and the water envelops us, it was a swift-moving entity- a storm of black mist that blanketed the city with screams of terror and putrid smelling expulsions.

Once we knew it was a virus, a plague, the authorities took control of the city. Homes of the infected, both old and young were boarded up. Soldiers came and forced the occupants inside and closed them off from the world forever more. There they remained, abandoned in the darkness, with nothing but the banging of nails into wood and the cries of the still conscious people being gnawed at, one bite at a time- until the rattle in their lungs ceased and their eyes went frigid with perpetual dread.

I know this. I saw my husband and his Mamma and Papa perish with the disease. I held their hands, I wiped the black liquid seeping from their eyes; I was their dutiful daughter-in-law right to the end.

Despite coming from a well-respected family in England, regardless of my hefty dowry and marriage contract, they treated me like an uneducated fool. My inability to speak the language was one thing, but purchasing a wife gave them the impression I was their property, not an individual.

My husband of eleven months, Signoro Alessandro Barone was last in line to inherit the family fortune. He came from a long line of Venetian nobility, not the wealthiest family, but the Barones' history dates back to the sixteenth century when they were sea merchants, bringing tomatoes from Spain to Italy. I was the English rose, the pretty jewel Alessandro purchased from another land, with fair skin, hair like melted butter, and eyes the colour of pistachio cream, or so he claimed.

Those pretty words settled my nerves and persuaded my father to make an advantageous match. I was to give him the next generation Barone heir. I failed - thank the Lord. They were not cruel, nor was I hurt physically, Alessandro was courteous and pleasant to me, but it was a business contract. His family saw me no different than any other item they traded, I was a commodity with a pretty face and a womb to incubate his seed.

I expected the end. I believed I would be next to yield to the disease and perish in the same fashion, with blood so viscous and black it resembled tar seeping from my eyes and ears. But, I am still alive. I don't feel sick, nor am I showing any signs attributed to the virus: no cough, no crippling pain, no fever. It's been eight months; surely if I was going to die, I would have by now.

My husband was the last to die and that was months ago, six, no seven months. The noises, the banging, the nailing people into their homes with large timber panels over all the doors and windows, stopped about six months ago. No sounds or signs of life have been present, aside from the rats scurrying and the water lapping at the villa's foundations. Sometimes I think I hear a boat in the distance, but I can't be sure. There is nothing but darkness, silence, and rats... the goddamn rats.

If I don't escape soon, they will be rewarded with my emaciated, but disease-free, body- not much of a meal even for them. I've lived off the food stored in the cellar: cured meats, aged hard cheeses, wine, preserved fruit in jars, dried pasta and nuts. I estimate I have one month's worth of food left. I've tried to escape, but it's no use. Every door and window is boarded, barricaded like at the siege of Scarborough Castle during the English Civil War. I recall it lasted five months, and here I am, outlasting even that.

About four months ago, *It* appeared. Barely noticeable through a tiny little crack between the foundation and the wall. The crack must have been the Villa settling, the vintage home worn down by time and the heavy burden of the famiglia Barone legacy. Now, it's full of ghosts, rodents, and a twenty-four-year-old widow who seems to have survived one of the deadliest epidemics in European history.

I wish *It* would come back. I feel less alone when *It* watches me. I talk to it- I don't know if it understands English, but over the months I believe I've been able to decipher emotion from it.

I feel the concern, the intrigue, the utter astonishment that I'm still alive in this tomb of a house.

It follows my movements and dilates when I get close, like it's fearful I might touch it, or infect it- I'm not sure. On one occasion it looked at me with what I assumed was reverence. *It* is not soulless. *It* speaks to me without words.

I'm always kind and polite. I want it to come back, to not forget me, so I speak slowly and gently, making sure to enunciate my words perfectly. I talk about England, about the countryside and the city. I tell it about my family and my sister who has three young children and lives in Wales. I wonder if she kept writing to me, if all the letters are piled up awaiting collection from the postal service. I wonder if England suffered like we did and if my family survived.

Maybe we have special blood. Maybe our blood is different and only Italian blood can fall victim to the disease. I'm not educated in medical subjects, so I don't know why I was spared when so many others perished. *It* must be wondering the same thing. *It* looks at me like I'm special, as if I'm a magical character in JM Barrie's novel *Peter Pan*, with fairy wings and unending youth. But I'm not magical, or immortal; I'm not a fairy who can fly and sparkle.

I'm just Harriett Davies- excuse me, Barone- an English miss who married an Italian noble via arrangement and is now imprisoned in his ancestral home for all of eternity. I sigh. My knitting needle awakens me from my thoughts by biting into my index finger with a sharp jab. I take the opportunity to rest my hands and take a much needed privy break. I stretch my legs on the way to the back room where I do my business through a tiny trap door that opens to the cool air and the murky depths of the Rio di San Polo.

I catch a glimpse of sunlight reflected on the surface of the water. It must be afternoon. I check my traps on the way back to the sitting room- where I've been living.

Even though this villa is huge, I won't go back upstairs, not after they died there, not after it took months for the smell to dissipate, and certainly not after the rats had their banquet of Barone family members. I stay in this one room because it's the only space I feel safe, and I know *It* can only see me in here. If I'm in another room I might miss it, *It* may think I'm dead and never come back. I couldn't bear to be alone again.

"Oh! Another beast caught in my snare!" I exclaim as I enter and find my makeshift rat trap has captured another Venetian brutto ratto- as my mother-in-law called them. I take the hessian wheat sack and place it around the top of the trap, ready to hold the feral animal inside while I empty the cage. I go through the motions as I have been for months: trap, empty, extinguish, then discard the hairy corpse via the trap door and watch it sink into its watery grave.

I place the cast-iron pan back on the shelf. It's not used for cooking anymore- I have nothing to cook- but it works a treat to kill a rat in a sack with one swoop. I wash my hands in the little bowl of pure grappa alcohol before going back to the sitting room and resuming my knitting in near darkness. My candles ran out some months ago, but I have a small oil lamp that comes in handy when I especially don't feel like sitting in pitch-black darkness.

My eyes have adjusted well to living in low light. I can usually navigate without holding the walls like I had to in the first month. I ended up knocking over lamps, stepping on Signora Barone's reading glasses, and slicing my finger on the glass when I tried to clean it up. She would have been so angry knowing I broke her spectacles, but alas, she's not here to chastise me now. No one is, except *It*. *It* doesn't care if I break lamps or step on glasses. *It* likes to keep me company and listen to my stories.

As I take my seat on the floral-printed settee I get the eerie feeling I'm being watched. The hairs on the back of my neck rise towards the ceiling, and my heart starts to pound in my chest like an orchestral Timpani drum.

It's back. I can feel it. I look over towards the crack and see the slender gap is filled with a darkened shadow and an eye, the exact shade is indistinguishable in the dim lighting. The white of the eye stands out like a full moon on a clear night over the Moores of Eastern Yorkshire.

I take a quick breath in. It's been the longest two days of my life. I worried *It* wouldn't come back to me, I feared *It* would forget me and I'd die never knowing why it visited me so often, why it watched me so faithfully and with such interest.

"Hello," I whisper into the eerily quiet room. I hold my breath, barely able to take in air. *It* blinks, long lashes fluttering before opening once again to continue our usual exchange: Me speaking, and *It* observing with engrossment.

"I'm knitting a blanket, did I tell you that last time?" I ask, already knowing I won't get an answer, but continuing like it will respond regardless.

"Winter will be wet and cold, so I thought I'd make a warm woollen blanket just in case." I pick up the knitting needles and continue slowly adding stitches while keeping my attention on the eye, waiting for any slight change, or acknowledgement.

"Today is day number two hundred and forty-three. I'm not sure about the actual day and month, but I count the number of days in my journal, the year would be 1922 if I'm correct. I can't write much as it's always so dark, but I know exactly how many days it's been since I was- we were..." I correct myself as I look up from my knitting.

It stares at me from the edge of the room. I take a breath and continue, "Since we were locked in. They died, as you know- the Barone family- but I'm still here. I'm not sick at all." My voice wavers slightly with the knowledge that I don't have much time left, that my food is dwindling and that not a soul has come to open or check on me in months.

The wary eye is my only hope. It's the only connection I have to the outside world. I can't wait any longer- *It's* been watching me for four months. My time is running out.

“I don’t want to inconvenience you, I know you have important things to do, but if you could contact someone, let them know I’m in here, maybe they can let me out. I promise I’m not sick, I don’t have the disease...see?”

I stand up slowly and place my knitting on the seat. *It* watches me as I approach, the eye getting clearer and more defined as I walk towards it. I spin so it can see me. I run my hands over my dress, down my arms, and then turn my palms up just two feet from the eye.

I see the pupil dilate and see the response in the way it sparkles even when there is no light to reflect- it comes from within. I’m so close now I hear a faint breath. The walls are thick and solid, but I hear it. I take another step closer, closer than I’ve ever been, and I lean in, placing my hands on the wall on either side of the eye. I take a moment to study it up close. I still can’t see a colour, but I can see its surprise at my nearness.

The eye roams over my face like a starved sailor seeing land for the first time in months. The eye wanders my face, my body, my hair, taking in every little minute detail with rapt attention and ardour.

“Please, help me,” I whisper in my most beseeching tone. My eyes turn glassy and my breath hitches. The eye snaps back to my face with astonishing speed, staring, unblinking as a single tear rolls down my cheek. *It* tracks the tear’s agonisingly slow journey to the corner of my lip, where it melts away in the grooves of my mouth. Its attention is captured there for several moments, I stand there in silent appeal, waiting for a sign, for anything.

The eye blinks slowly, three times, like it’s coming out of a trance before it looks back to my watery gaze. Then it leaves. I stand there, agonising over my actions, wondering if I blew my chances. Was I too bold? too desperate?

Day two hundred and fifty-two. It’s been nine days since *It* came. I scared it away, I’m sure. It’s never been this long between visits. I’ve trapped and extinguished ninety-four rats in that time, I’ve finished one blanket and started on the second one, and I’ve run out of

cured meat. I have a small chunk of hard cheese left, four bottles of wine, seven jars of tomatoes, and three jars of preserved lemons and oranges left. I may not make it another week. My body is weak and thin, and the air is so stale it feels like breathing in dried tree bark and cinnamon powder.

“BANG!” I jump at the sound, almost flying off the settee like a frightened animal hearing a gunshot. “BANG!... BANG!...” The loud noise sounds again!

I haven't heard a sound like that for almost nine months. I cock my head, trying to find the source of it, and then all of a sudden the villa rattles violently like someone is trying to take it apart, piece by piece.

I run to the entry, the vibration from the floor travelling up my calves and into my knees like an army marching on hard ground.

As I stand there in abject fear, light starts streaming into the cracks of the front entry doors, the left side first, then the right, the top and bottom. A square of light frames the doors before they are smashed open with blunt force power.

The light instantly blinds me. Raising my arm to shield my eyes from the blinding burnished stream, I hear voices speaking Italian. I can understand some words: “la ragazza” the girl, “viva” alive, and “miracolo” miracle...they think it's a miracle I'm alive.

As I lower my arm and blink rapidly, allowing my eyes to adjust to the brilliant sunlight flowing from the open doors, the fresh air hits my face like a welcome old friend. I see a figure materialise from the group of blurry shapes.

It's a man in uniform- a soldier, walking towards me through a tunnel of light. He looks celestial, backlit with his face hidden in shadows. My eyes begin to focus on a brown woollen coat, with badges and medals on the pocket and sleeves. His hair is cropped short, a dark coffee colour, like the roasted beans we used to grind and brew every morning. He stops right in front of me, staring down at my astonished face.

“Harriett,” his deeply accented voice says while I gape at this mystifying creature who saved me. I stare into his eyes. They seem so familiar, so knowing.

“Who are you?” I breathe.

“I am Luca,” he answers with a smile, and then I notice his eyes. They are the colour of toasted wheat with undertones of glazed sand. He blinks at me, slowly...three times.

THE END