

"Cherry"
by
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Alex was a girl that night, back in the strange, hopeless summer of 1981. Deep in the churning entrails of New York City, the heat was thick and filthy, clogging the lungs of its parasitic denizens with grit and despair. The hot black sky was heavy with dead dreams and the ripe threat of nuclear annihilation. The concrete burned like fevered flesh. For Alex, it was business as usual.

Long, hungry body sheened with sweat and wrapped in gaudy silver lace, Alex labored over an anonymous cock in the cramped prison of a Japanese subcompact parked on Little West Twelfth street, across from London Meat Packing. The car stank of cigarettes and unclean flesh. An air freshener shaped like a bikini-clad woman hung from the rearview mirror, its vague, stale-candy odor unable to compete with the brutal effluvia of the car's owner.

The gearshift dug into Alex's ribs as he worked the tough-skinned erection with monotonous precision. The trick was close, he could feel it. Alex shifted in the seat, swaths of bare skin sticking to the warm vinyl, and concentrated on ending this irrelevant drama. A dozen heartbeats later, the guy came, grunting softly, fat fingers clutching the sticky dashboard. Alex sat up and spat discreetly into a crumpled tissue.

Back out on the street, Alex pulled a bottle of cheap whiskey from his snakeskin purse. He drew in a stinging mouthful, swishing the liquor over the abused and tender flesh inside his mouth. The slick jiz flavor eventually surrendered to the alcohol's smoky fire and he spat the tainted cocktail on the steaming cobblestone. He took another swig for keeps, letting the whiskey burn a trail of thin heat down to his belly while he fixed his lips, wiping them clean on the back of his hand and then slicking them candy-apple red. He studied his reflection in a car windshield to be sure they were even.

Such a pretty face. Sinful mouth. Delicate cheekbones. Feral eyes like polished amber peering from beneath tangled black hair whose obsidian gloss was only marginally dulled by too much hair-spray and not enough shampoo. If he had been born a girl, such beauty would have been a blessing, a key to open all the doors. But for a little boy on the first day of third grade in a brand new school, it had been a nightmare. Long, dark eyelashes and girlish hands were his curse, reason enough for any self-respecting bully to rub his pretty face in the dirt.

His father had been so ashamed. Alex had been the product of his rash youth, left behind by a passionate artist who could not tolerate the bondage of motherhood. Alone and broken-hearted, Alex's nineteen-year-old father had done the best he could to care for the strange and beautiful child who watched him with his lost love's eyes. As he settled down to start a new family with a plain but loyal woman, it became harder and harder to make room in his heart for Alex. With the birth of new children, all blond and ordinary with smiling faces and simple problems, it became impossible. While his sisters and brothers were joining teams and winning awards, Alex was cutting himself to see what it felt like.

As he grew older, the gap widened. The boisterous horde that surrounded him felt less like family than fellow prisoners too stupid to understand the nature of their incarceration. He used to imagine that his mother had lied about the father of her baby. He imagined who his real father might be, an artist, a rock star, some powerful man who reveled in his beauty and was not ashamed. A man who no one would dare call "Faggot" or "Sissy". He would kill anyone who tried to rub his face in the dirt.

It wasn't long before these fantasies grew stale and childish. Puberty loomed and Alex's imaginings grew darker, tinged with inexplicable longing. But through all the swampy new feelings and aching, half-glimpsed desires, one image remained. The beautiful, dangerous man who would take him away and make him strong.

It was a sticky summer just like this one when Alex made two discoveries that would change his life. The first was the extraordinary sensations that flooded his young body when he touched himself a certain way. The second was a book from the big library. It was old and tattered and the title stamped on its dusty spine in fading gold letters was *Dracula*.

From that moment on, Alex read anything and everything on the subject of vampires. Here was the beautiful monster of his darkest fantasies, in all its sinister glory. Here beauty was deadly strength, not weakness. It was everything he ever wanted.

He stopped cutting his hair, stopped camouflaging his beauty with drab, ugly clothes. Instead, he chose clothing as black as his growing hair, clothing that hugged the contours of his narrow body. He avoided the sun, taking pride in his pallor. The boys who used to steal his lunch money and call him faggot now kept their distance, telling their pretty girlfriends that he worshipped the devil, that he sacrificed cats and drank their blood. He did nothing to discourage these rumors. When his father noticed the change, he asked his son if he was queer. Alex left home the next day. He was sixteen.

Headlights slid across Alex's reflection, obliterating his features in a sudden pale wash. He looked up, instinctual tropism drawing him out into the street. His high heeled shoes were unsteady on the cobblestone as he hustled out to meet the slowing car. Drag was fairly new to him, more an economic endeavor than a personal preference, and though his face lent itself effortlessly to feminine fiction, his body was still awkward with the strictures of modern fashion. Tricks found it charmingly coltish, so he made no great effort to change.

Poised, waifish and sweet in the blinding headlights, Alex watched the car roll towards him, moving slowly, almost nonchalant. As it came closer, a thin trickle of adrenaline constricted his throat and he was filled with irrational anxiety. He felt like a cringing animal caught in the merciless glare.

As the car pulled up beside him, he saw that it was a Mercedes, black and full of quiet power. The tinted window slid down with the organic ease of an eye opening, revealing a face that stopped Alex's heart.

Luminously smooth and aristocratic. Ageless and horribly beautiful. Eyes the color of cold steel. White hair slicked back on a streamlined skull, tightly braided in a thick, slivery cable that hung all the way to the leather seat. Immaculate charcoal suit, subtle tie, manicured nails. Every aspect of this man spoke the whispered language of old money.

"You're not a real girl, are you?" the man asked, grey eyes detached and serious, a careful consumer. His rich voice was flavored with a hint of unnamable accent.

"I can be anything you like," Alex answered, hating the canned sound of that overused phrase, wishing as soon as it passed his lips that he had said something else instead.

Shame warmed his skin as the man's pale eyes skewered him like a squirming insect. He felt suddenly desperate, an orphan aching to be chosen, torn apart by doubt and fear.

"Let me see your cock," the man commanded, eyes unflinching.

Alex's heart clenched. His cheeks burned. Desire to please this chilly beauty warred with the hard-earned knowledge that nothing is free. His fingers drifted to his crotch and the man's gaze followed. He realized that he wanted very badly to obey. The tight panties that kept his penis securely tucked between his legs were suddenly a hellish constriction. He looked up, torn, and caught a flare of stealthy heat in the grey depths of the trick's eyes. This tiny spark filled Alex with momentary strength.

"No free show," he said.

Standing cold and fearful in the wake of his defiance, he was sure that the window would slide closed and he would be left to wait for yet another fat prick from Jersey with ten bucks and a hard-on.

But the man did not close the window. Instead, he smiled and everything changed.

The man's teeth were small and even, their smooth line interrupted by elongated canines that dug sharp points into his soft lower lip.

Alex's breath froze in his chest. Panic and unspeakable excitement churned in his belly. The newly cynical, streetwise part of him struggled violently against the ecstatic child who was already utterly in love, willing to do anything for this sudden manifestation of his dark dreams.

The man's carnivore smile vanished as if it had never been. He reached into his jacket and withdrew a sleek billfold. Arching a silver eyebrow, he extracted a hundred-dollar bill and let it drop to the hot cobblestone.

Alex scrambled after it, gripping the bill in his grubby fist as if he were afraid it wasn't real. Suddenly ashamed to be groveling in the street like a desperate junkie, he stood, burning with contradictions.

"Show me," the man said, seemingly indifferent to Alex's inner struggle.

Struck with inexplicable shyness, Alex turned his face away. He had done much worse for much less, but there was something about exposing himself to such cold-eyed scrutiny that made him feel shamefully inadequate. He had to force his clumsy fingers to peel back the layers of fabric that hid the secret of his masculinity.

Once exposed, his penis did not shrink away from judgment. Instead, it began a slow swell towards erection that astonished Alex. His inability to control his rebellious flesh deepened his humiliation and his shame fed the fire of his need. He knew then that he would do anything for this man.

A thin sliver of a smile passed across the trick's lips, a shadow of his earlier toothy display.

"Get in," he said.

The trick took Alex to a lush apartment deep in the gentrified labyrinth of one way streets that was the West Village. Like the streets, the apartment was a complex network of narrow hallways punctuated with curious asymmetrical rooms and exotic antiques.

"Don't steal anything," Alex's host had told him, disappearing without explanation behind an unremarkable door.

Alex wandered aimlessly through the crooked rooms, fingers returning again and again to the thick roll of hundreds tucked into his glittery purple bra. He was terrified, ecstatic, filled with jangling adrenaline and unfocused lust. Waiting was torture. Time passed with lazy precision, unimpressed by Alex's impatience. He struggled to distract himself from obsessive thoughts of blood and fucking. The trick's warning echoed back to him and he made a game of guessing which things might be worth stealing.

He turned a small jeweled knife over and over in his hands, admiring its razor delicacy, trying to name the exotic-hued stones covering the scabbard. A bright splash of fearful excitement filled his body and he slid the knife under his corset. He wondered if hidden cameras were filming his transgression. Maybe the trick would catch him and punish him for his disobedience. Sweet fantasies of punishment and forgiveness played out on the eager screens of his closed eyes. The knife lay cold and thrilling against his skin. He nearly screamed when a soft voice spoke inches from his ear.

"Thirsty?"

Alex turned to face his host with blood pounding in his throat.

The man's pale feet were bare and his hair was loose around his exquisite face. His jacket and tie were gone, his custom tailored shirt open at the neck. Alex fought against a sudden urge to kneel down and kiss his bare toes. There was something almost feminine in the angles of those smooth little feet. He held a dusty bottle in one long hand and a single stemmed glass in the other.

Alex took the offered glass like a sleepwalker, watching the splash of dark, murky liquid from the bottle's mouth. It smelled like medicine, like bitter licorice and potent alcohol.

"What is it?" he asked, raising the glass to his lips with the slow inevitability of a nightmare.

"Absinthe," the trick told him.

"Absinthe," Alex repeated, rolling the word around in his mouth as if it were the drink itself.

Feeling brave and romantic, Alex swallowed a daring mouthful. It was poisonously bitter, filling his belly with narcotic fire.

The trick watched him drink with reptile curiosity, steel eyes unblinking. Alex drained his glass, wondering if the man might try to drug him. The thought had no urgency in the warm glow that suffused his body. He held the empty glass out to the trick and instead of taking it, he filled it again.

"Don't you want any?" Alex asked, watching the dark liquid splashing in the curve of the glass. His mouth felt strange, rebellious.

"I don't drink," the trick said, eyes dancing with secret humor.

Alex burst out with a string of helpless giggles, splashing absinthe over his wrist and down the front of his tiny silver ballerina skirt. Potent drops of liquor clung to the lacy mesh and soaked through his panties. He raised his hand to his lips, licking the drops from his fingers.

"Well I do," he said, draining what was left in the glass.

He felt his entire body go suddenly soft and uncoordinated. His skin felt outrageously sensitive. The faint currents of dusty air caressed him like lover's fingers. The weave of the rug beneath him seemed fascinating and he wanted to press his cheek against it. He might have done just that if the trick's arms had not slid around him and held him like a child.

Supported in this strong embrace, looking up into that cold and flawless face, Alex was gripped by powerful resurrection of his long buried childhood fantasy. He wrapped his arms around the man's neck and buried his face in the curious fragrance of his white hair, crying helplessly. His ecstatic tears clung to the silver strands like the drops of absinthe on his five-dollar skirt.

Alex allowed himself to be led like a blind boy through hallways striped with light and dark shadow and into the unexplored territory behind the mysterious door.

"I love you," Alex said as the trick laid him down gently on a wide expanse of dove-grey velvet. Four dark wooden posts rose above him, intricately carved with fruit and angels. The pillow beneath his cheek bore a tapestried lion, fierce and golden, its toothy red mouth gaping.

The trick touched Alex's tear-streaked face, catching the salty drops on his fingertips. "Are you afraid?" he asked, touching a wet finger to his lips, pink tongue sneaking out to taste.

"No." Alex shook his head, the motion seeming to go on for far too long.

"Take your clothes off," the trick commanded.

Alex's fingers leapt to obey, but they found themselves thwarted by a thousand tiny hooks and buckles and fasteners. Frustration dug long nails into his heart. He began to tear furiously at the complex network of purple and silver that held him in such cruel bondage. The roll of hundreds tumbled, unnoticed, to the carpeted floor, beside the forgotten blade.

The trick watched this struggle with detached amusement that fed Alex's humiliation. He acknowledged the pilfered knife with an arched eyebrow and cryptic silence that terrified Alex, stealing away the last fragments of coordination.

Alex was ready to scream when the last scrap of clothing tore and gave and he collapsed gratefully into the bed's velvet embrace, resting his spinning head against the lion's warm golden flank. His pale body was crossed with angry red creases where restrictive elastic had bitten deep.

Docile as an infant, he allowed his wrists and ankles to be caught and locked in soft leather cuffs. The cuffs were attached to strong silver chain trailing off to some unseen mooring. They gave him about three inches of free movement.

He looked up at his captor, obsessive eye roaming the pure contours of jaw and throat, of shoulder and hip. Again, a teasing slice of smile and again a stripper's flash of razor canines. Alex's heart was manic in the vault of his chest.

"Please..." Alex whispered, begging desperately with every ounce of his body and soul for a thousand things he could barely articulate. *Please be real. Please don't leave me. Take me with you. Make me like you. Love me. Keep me forever.*

Tears started again, blurring the image, white hair and white skin melting into a shimmering wash.

"Stop crying." A cold command, stinging deeply.

Alex fought shame and a fresh onslaught of hot tears. He forced them back and struggled to still his shaking body.

"There will be enough of that later," the trick said, teeth flashing.

A seed of fear burst to sudden life in Alex's chest. He had imagined this scenario and hundreds like it for years, but never once had he considered that his dream lover could just as easily kill him and leave the meat behind. In the hot grip of fantasy, such a mundane outcome had been unthinkable. Now, in the face of awesome reality, that self-centered naivete could prove to be his undoing.

Alex closed his eyes, bringing the full weight of his will down against his fear. Death was not an option. He had dreamed too hard for too long. It was up to him to seduce his executioner, to show that he was not a mere lamb ripe for slaughter, but a rare lover worthy of the gift of eternal life.

When he opened his eyes, he turned to face his captor with new resolve. The man seemed to sense this change and Alex was sure that he saw a spark of renewed interest in the metallic depths of those cold eyes.

Long white fingers set themselves to the slow task of unbuttoning the expensive shirt. Alex's gaze followed them eagerly, his body flushed with need. To see this exquisite creature unveiled would be worth any pain. As the last button fell open and pale cloth slipped down over the sculpted angles of narrow shoulders, Alex's disbelieving eyes were treated to the

subtle curve of small but unmistakable breasts, coral nipples high and hard above the rippled shadow of prominent ribs.

A confused rush of emotion drenched Alex's shivering body. Reality was untrustworthy. Anything could happen. He had never been with a woman before, and the prospect filled him with dread and fascination. This game was proving to be infinitely more complex than his adolescent dreams had ever imagined. The trick was watching him with icepick eyes.

"There are a lot of things that you don't know," she said.

She unfastened the trousers and let them fall, revealing smooth, shapely legs and angular hips, delicate bones sloping towards a silver-furred delta full of rich pink secrets.

So still and pale she was, pale eyes, pale hair, pale skin. Alex could almost believe she had never moved at all. He felt heavy and frozen as if he had been still forever too, and they were both the stone children of some forgetful sculptor.

When she spoke, it was shocking, a blunt hammer shattering the fragile moment.

"You can leave if you'd like," she said, her voice a soft whisper. The world was suddenly alive with possibilities. There was a shadow of vulnerability in her flawless face igniting fierce passion inside of Alex that clenched his fists and closed his throat. As the two-dimensional fiction of his childish fantasy crashed and burned, he found an astonishing new love in its ashes.

"No," he said, his voice cracking as if he had been silent for years. "I never want to leave. I want to be yours forever."

She smiled at him and his body went weak and hot, shivering as her narrow hand reached out to touch his throat. Her fingers sought his pulse, tracing the path of his blood beneath the skin. She touched his mouth and he kissed her fingers, drawing them in and biting gently, teasing. Scolding with her eyes, she pulled them away and brought them to her lips, tasting his saliva. He strained against his bonds, aching to touch her.

Standing apart, she watched him struggle, her face cool and thoughtful. Then, without warning, she leapt up and straddled him with frightening grace.

The shock of her flesh against his, her thighs brushing his hips, the soft skin of her belly caressing his burning erection, incinerated any doubts and left only incandescent lust that allowed for nothing else. If she wanted his life, he would gladly give it, baring his throat to her with unflinching trust. He surrendered to her kiss with his whole heart, letting her tongue take him the way a man takes a woman, the sharp points of her teeth slashing his tender lips. Blood flowed hot, like his love.

She pulled away, eyes wild and hungry. All pretense of calm objectivity was gone.

"Tell me you love me," she said.

Alex was crying again, blood in his mouth.

"Yes," he sobbed. "Yes, I love you."

She moved like a snake striking, her teeth penetrating the skin of his throat as his cock penetrated the slick mystery of her silver delta. Pain and pleasure fell in love with each other inside of him, fusing together into a single living emotion. Alex lost himself in her, in the pure circuit of mutual need. Hunger and sustenance. Lust and fulfillment. Giving and taking in a balance as old as time. As Alex gave himself over to the little death, filling her with blood and semen and the heady liquor of his love, he felt himself falling away into glittering blackness, melting down into the distillate essence of himself. The last thing he felt before unconsciousness claimed him was the meaty withdrawal of her invading teeth and a swelling sense of emptiness and loss.

When Alex woke, the first thing he became aware of was pain. Not the glorious ecstasy of the night before, but an ugly throbbing ache that spread burning fingers across his jaw and down into his shoulder. His fingers flew to his throat and found oozing scab and bright new hurt. His wrists ached. His head rattled with broken glass as he peeled back sticky eyelids to reveal grey morning sunlight. Beside him, his lover lay curled in on herself, lost in uneasy dreams. The dirty illumination was not kind to her sleeping face. Her skin was fragile as paper, pulled too tightly over sharp bones. Pale make-up smeared her pillow, no longer hiding the pinstripes of facelift scar beneath her chin.

She began to stir beneath his scrutiny, bloodshot grey eyes sliding open and then narrowing to indignant slits against the morning sun.

"Christ," she said, hands cradling her head. "You're still here?"

"Of course," Alex said, hurt and confusion creeping into his voice. "I thought..."

"Oh please." The trick cut him off with a tired gesture. She sat up slowly and spat something into her cupped hand. "Let's not have an unpleasant scene, OK?"

She opened her fingers, revealing an arch of plastic connecting a pair of hollow fang teeth.

Choking on raw disappointment, Alex turned his face away. A thousand black emotions fought like starving dogs inside his belly. The trusting child who had fallen so hard so fast was torn apart, his fragile body lacerated by shrapnel and jagged fragments of his rejected love. The darkly cynical street urchin whipped himself with razor tipped I-told-you-so's, disgusted at having been so suckered. Shame bloomed like rot and in the hot furnace of his heart, the shame smelted into viscous anger.

She was digging through a bedside drawer, her back to him, dismissing him utterly. From a tiny box of gold and lapis, she shook out a candy-colored handful of pills, sorting through the shapes to select a chemical cocktail. As she raised them to her dry lips, Alex's anger boiled over and he grabbed her skinny wrist, turning her to face him. Pills tumbled to the carpet, rolling like pearls.

"Hey, what the fuck is your problem," she said, her voice harsh and shrewish.

"I believed in you." Alex was furious, his fingers tightening around her wrist.

If she had cursed at him and told him to fuck off, he might have just taken the money and slunk away, but instead she burst into nasty laughter that raked the tender meat of Alex's freshly broken heart.

"Oh please," she said. "Give me a break." She yanked her hand free from his grip. "You got what you wanted, I got what I wanted. What's the problem?"

She bent down to retrieve the lost pharmaceuticals as if there was nothing left to be said.

Watching her chasing after the pills the way he had chased that hundred-dollar bill in another lifetime, Alex was filled with rage and hate and other more obscure emotions that tore him in a thousand directions at once. He clenched his fists, still feeling her fragile bones grinding under his grip. Staring at the shivering curve of her spine, he was struck with a sudden contradictory desire. Something about her vulnerability, her humanity, brought saliva to his mouth and hot blood to his slow-blooming erection. Then his eyes fell on the jeweled knife.

He reached out and caressed the back of her head, twining his fingers in her hair. At first she was tense, wary, but soon he felt her relax against his touch. Kneeling behind her amid the scattered pills, he slid an arm around her waist and pressed against the length of her back. With his other hand, he walked his fingers across the carpet until they found the cool metal of the knife. Tightening his grip on her hair, he kissed her softly on the cheek and yanked her head back.

The edge of the blade bit deep into her scarred throat and she bucked frantically against him, scrambling away. Silent fury sang in his veins as he leapt after her, pinning her again and pulling her close. Belly to belly, he held her wrists and pressed his face to the welling blood, a hot baptism driven by the dying panic of her cruel heart. He opened the wound wider with his teeth, tongue probing deep in the living meat as she thrashed against him. The vital flavor of her life spilling down his throat was beyond ecstasy, nauseating and luxurious and unlike anything Alex had ever imagined. This was no romantic fantasy, this was brutal reality, pure and delicious.

When she began to tire, her body going limp and still in his embrace, he unlocked his jaws and his fists, looking down into her face.

Grey mortality spilled across her features and made a lie out of all her careful artifice. Alex studied her while she died, but there was no revelation at the last minute, no shining truth. Just a shaky exhalation and then the unremarkable spectacle of slowly cooling meat.

After a moment of thoughtful contemplation, he found the blood-slick blade and opened her belly, sawing through tough abdominal muscle and spreading the lips of the gash with curious fingers. Nothing but the mundane truth that lies behind all our skin, wet and stinking and utterly human.

It seemed he should hate her for her subtle lies and her mortality, but instead he felt a strange, nostalgic affection. He knew he would always remember her. He had given her his cherry, and in return she had made him into a real vampire, after all.

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