

Date: Unknown

Dear Reader,

As I sit here in this place, contemplating the events which have brought me to my current circumstances, I find myself wondering about you. For while I never intended (at least seriously) for these words to be shared with any eyes but my own, my present situation has made it abundantly clear that this diary will, in all likelihood, be my final legacy. This being the case, it occurs to me that it lacks something, a proper introduction.

Until now.

You see, there are things you must understand before you begin this, the story of my life. I say this because my journal includes no prelude, no opening dialogue between two trusted servants (a common conceit of the theater during my earliest years) who acquaint the audience with the history of the characters prior to the drama's beginning. In point of fact, until the boy's death, I had never so much as contemplated the keeping of a diary. So when I began this one, I approached its composition in the style, as well as the spirit, of the frustrated novelist whom I believe dwells within all of us, who leaps precipitously into the narrative as if mounting a wild stallion.

How am I doing so far?

You will no doubt wonder about the boy when you encounter him in my first entry. Perhaps, depending on your role in the events which have led to this moment, you will know of him from elsewhere. But though his part in what is to come is prominent, I will spend very little time discussing it, or him, at least not here.

This is my tale, after all.

So allow me to begin by saying that, if you are reading this, then it is all but a certainty that I am no longer of this earth. For though I have no way of knowing who you are, I do possess a certain confidence that I know *where* you are. And while you may doubt what I am about to tell you the better acquainted you become with me through these pages, believe me when I say that I am most profoundly sorry for your present circumstances since (if I am correct) *They* will no doubt be coming for you, very shortly now.

But perhaps not.

In any event, understand that I originally composed this document purely as a personal indulgence. You will note that, rather than speaking to the book itself, I

typically address an invisible and intangible reader. That conceit was quite intentional. You see, my entire existence, from a very early age, has been predicated on the keeping of secrets, their taste a bitter bit in my mouth directing the course of my existence for far longer than I care to remember.

That ends now.

Of course, it may be that no one will ever read this work, in which case these pages may well serve as my shroud as I pass from this world into whatever terrors lie opposite the grave. For there are horrors in that realm to make your worst nightmares an afternoon daydream by comparison. Trust me on this.

So take my hand, my (theoretical) friend, and allow me to share with you knowledge which has been kept secret from the bulk of your kind since your species first lay pen to parchment, or even tool to clay. And not just the what, but also the why. For if I were not already little more than a memory, my sharing of this history would absolutely guarantee such a state of affairs. In any event, I will now explain myself since, as I will later relate, there are few things so frustrating as to die without knowing why death has come for you.

My name is Penelope Ember, and I am of the Breed. Our race is ancient, though not so ancient as your own. For however we came to be, there is one certainty beyond argument, you and your kind came first.

And while we call ourselves the Breed, you would most likely refer to us as vampires, though we are in fact nothing of the kind. True, some of your myths regarding our species do have some grounding in fact. After all, there was almost certainly a Great Flood, since so many ancient cultures refer to it, but, like your legends of our kind, there is considerable disagreement on the particulars. Later I will elaborate on said particulars, but for now you may assume the most familiar traits of our kind, that we consume human blood for nourishment and are, quite literally, immortal. Our bite causes what we refer to as *Som na Idilque*, the Ecstasy, allowing us to drain you in silence, even unto death, cradled in the arms of unimaginable bliss as you pass from one reality into the next.

What you almost certainly do not know is that we have existed behind curtains of shadow for much of recorded human history, influencing (sometimes even controlling) your governments, your industries, even your religions. Banking? We invented it, and through it have generated wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. Kings? For centuries we whispered into their ears in much the same way as we do now with your modern political leaders, guiding their hearts and their minds in whatever direction we please. Conflicts? Wars? Frequently (though not always) our personal chess games, played sometimes for strategic advantage, at other times from sheer boredom.

For you see, while we are of one race, we are not all of one mind, no more so than yourselves. Our people are divided into twelve Great Houses, though it was

not always this way. Once we were of a common heart, as well as a common mind, but no longer. Now we are divided

Why?

I will get to that later since, as you can see, the flyleaf of this volume grows crowded, leaving little space for further exposition. For now, you should have enough information to alleviate at least a portion of any confusion you would no doubt experience if simply thrown willy nilly into my tale sans preamble.

And so we begin . . .

#

November 18, 1979

I stand in near darkness, arms folded beneath my breasts, ten feet away from the dead boy in my basement.

How do I know he is dead, you ask?

Because I am the one who killed him.

I am Penelope Ember, scion of the Breed. Two weeks ago the last member of my family, House Ember, perished screaming in flames, and I am now alone.

#

Earlier I hovered over the boy's body, as cold and pale as the stone it rests on. And as I did, I marveled at life's quaint eccentricities. Because, you see, when I killed him, the last thing in the world I expected was that he would *remain* dead.

I should also mention here that the term 'boy' is a bit of a misnomer, since he had turned eighteen perhaps two months or so ago. Yet somehow, looking down on him now, the only word that comes to mind is *boy*.

I reach out to stroke the marble flesh threaded with blue veins, the ungainly limbs reminding me of a puppy whose massive paws betray the animal he will one day become. His wounds have closed, another source of confusion, since I have seen many corpses during the driftwood decades of my existence and the one thing all have had in common is that none have ever healed from their injuries.

Yet this one has.

I held him in my arms not twenty-four hours ago. He resisted fiercely; at least at first. I recall the heat of him, like fire against my chest, then the steadily fading warmth as his essence flowed over the length of my tongue and the hollow of my throat. Something almost like a flush rises in my cheeks as I remember the joy I took in his useless struggles, followed soon afterwards by the eventual, and

inevitable, surrender of hope as he gave over what was left of himself to me completely, totally. The memory now embarrasses me.

Mildly, true, but still . . .

Once as a child (and it was not so very long ago, whatever you might think) I wept over the sight of a mouse squirming helplessly in the jaws of a cat. I hated them both in that moment, the cat for what it did, and the mouse for being its victim in the first place.

How different my life has become.

I approach the table. Dust motes dance in the glow of the naked bulb hanging over the pedestal upon which his body lies, their Brownian Motion a counterpoint to the stillness of a room holding its breath. Odd, how the minutia of life insists upon making its presence known.

I sit next to the boy, his thigh pressing against my hip. His face is placid, no longer the terrified visage when he saw the truth of me, the monster behind the veil, who drained his fluids with a rapaciousness surprising even myself.

Goddamn it.

It should have worked. I had shared my blood with him prior to taking his life, after all. Even now he should be stirring, eyelids fluttering. It would then be necessary to explain my actions, though could I truly do so? Fully? Transparently?

For I had acted on faith. A faith which I now must consider might possibly have been . . . misplaced.

For he is the key, the bridge that spans the chasm. And he must belong to us. Because if you do not claim him, then eventually—inevitably—others will.

Eyes hot and dry, I stretch myself prone across his body, sharing whatever heat remains from what I took from him. Or stole, if you will.

Meaningless semantics.

"You must rise," I whisper, so viciously my voice is a stranger in my own ears. "You *must*." For if you do not, then where shall I lay blame? No further than my front stoop, after all. Because I was the one who took such great delight in revealing myself. To say nothing of tormenting you as I did; for we Breed are a cruel species, constitutionally compelled by our natures to take a malicious delight in such petty (and not so petty) torments.

But no matter how long I lie atop his motionless form, it remains motionless. Eventually I rise and go back upstairs.

As I exit the stairway and enter the kitchen with its expensive industrial appliances (which I have yet to use) the telephone rings. After checking the clock to verify the time, I stare at the phone as though it were a snake before picking it up, knowing as I do who must be calling. I shut my eyes and listen as He speaks, the echoes of His voice like waves on a beach.

"We must meet."

#

Charles stands in the foyer, waiting. I fuss with my gloves and my sunglasses, in addition to my hat, though I've no true need for any of them, not at this time. Call it my paranoia, which I have Him to thank for. After all, no Breed has ever walked carelessly beneath an unobstructed sun, though the White Lady claims we all did, once upon a time. Yet I do so daily now. Why?

Because of Him.

Which makes my conundrum even more puzzling. Why would He steer me to such a precious gift, only to betray me now?

It still feels odd to refer to Him by pronoun alone, an affectation limited primarily to references to the Divine. But He has never shared a proper name with me, suggesting instead the first time I asked that I feel free to give Him one, had I the need. And I did try several over the years, though none ever quite took, and ultimately I gave it up as a lost cause. Inconsequential, really, since the first thing He ever said to me was that I could never reveal knowledge of Him, or of His existence, to anyone. And since not only had He just saved my life, but was also in the unfamiliar (at least for me) position to take that very same life Himself, I wasn't inclined to debate the matter.

I precede Charles to the car, then wait as he opens my door. My mind is overly occupied, because the next thing I am aware of is his presence in the front seat. "Where to, Ma'am?"

"Bishop's," I say in a perfunctory manner designed to discourage conversation. "And you may speed at your discretion."

Charles smiles, pleased at the opportunity I have given him to put this silver beast through its paces. I have found that giving *topovar* the illusion of choice is beneficial for soothing their occasional anxieties. This is helpful, particularly of late where Charles is concerned, since I have not fed on him in some time, consequently depriving him of *Som na Idilque*, the Ecstasy. I remind myself to make arrangements to my schedule, so that I might accommodate him at some point in the near future. For the human mind is a fragile thing, after all, and while I do not doubt his loyalty, his ability to endure such deprivation will suffer the longer he is required to do without.

Soon, I promise myself, then think no more of it.

It is a gorgeous day for driving, I note with pleasure. The autumn leaves are in full flower, their reds, yellows and oranges setting the woods lining the highway aflame. How long had my unique circumstances denied me the opportunity to enjoy such colors? For while the night has its own beauties, a Fall day is not to be numbered amongst them.

We cross the border from North Carolina into Virginia. He meets me here for my own comfort, as I dislike being seen openly too often in my small town. Too many opportunities for uncomfortable, and disquieting, questions.

Soon we enter the city limits of Branson. Bishop's occupies the near right corner of the first intersection, one of those homey, comfort food diners so common in the South, where waitresses ubiquitously refer to their clientele as 'honey' or 'sugar'.

"You may order your lunch and eat in the car," I tell Charles as he holds the restaurant's door open for me.

"Yes, Ma'am," he says, moving without further comment to the counter. As he does, I look around.

There.

Rising from the booth with its red vinyl seats, some cracked, all worn, He steps towards me. I almost retreat.

Such a plain looking man. Inconspicuous, a creature of determined averageness. It frightens me a bit. For were He to remove a weapon and open fire on the dozen or so patrons surrounding us, I very much doubt any theoretical survivors would be able to meaningfully describe Him afterwards. Myself included.

He approaches, then reaches out, steering me skillfully to one side. As he does, a passing waitress trips, spilling a pot of freshly brewed and blazingly hot coffee in the space I had so recently occupied only a moment before.

"Oh god, ma'am, are you all right?" she asks breathlessly.

I nod, a bit shaken. Not by the near accident, but by the certain knowledge that there had been no indication of said accident prior to Him removing me from harm's way. Which leads me to wonder (as I have before, under similar circumstances), did He predict the accident?

Or cause it?

Flustered, the waitress excuses herself to get a mop, and I allow myself to be led to His booth.

He waits until I sit before taking the seat across from me. "I heard about Sebastian," He drawls in an accent to match that of the waitress,

The taut muscles in my shoulders bunch into knots. "Then you must know what that means," I say to Him, my voice low.

He shrugs. "That your House is empty." He gazes at me with neither sorrow nor pity. "And you are now alone."

I glance over His shoulder to avoid a staring contest. "And this is where You say to me, yet again, that there was nothing to be done."

He shrugs again. "I am already stretched further than I'm comfortable with. Unless you're willing to forgo your own protection?"

Protection? Protection from whom, I wonder? Others? Himself?

My lips thin. "Let's not be melodramatic," I say with emphasis as I accept a menu from a waitress, not the same one as before.

He smiles. "I assumed as much."

When the food arrives, He watches me eat, still smiling.

"What?" I finally say, mouth half full.

"Do you still sleep as well?"

"Only behind locked doors," I reply before bringing fork to mouth again.

"And Charles still has no idea?"

"None," I say. "And I am comfortable with this."

He nods. "So tell me. The young man, the father." He watches me carefully. "The husband."

I stiffen. "What about him?"

Another smile. "He continues to prove . . . satisfactory?"

I refuse to play this—well, whatever game it is He is playing. "Tolerably so," I toss off. "Though he could prove just as satisfactory elsewhere. Say, Paris? Or perhaps Madrid?"

He shakes His head. "No. He has his part to play as well. You might find this hard to believe, narcissistic creature that you are," He says with a smile, leaning back in His seat, "but I do have other concerns."

Sneadsville. Even the name grates on my sensibilities, along with the need for my relocation there. "What is so special about that ode to small town, not to mention small-minded, America?"

As usual where this topic is concerned, He refuses to acknowledge my questions. "There is something I meant to mention earlier, but forgot." He leans forward. I force myself not to pull away.

"He is not the only one of his kind," He whispers.

I freeze.

Over the past five or so years I have fed, once a month or so as circumstances have allowed, on the blood of a man whom He first brought to my attention. I will never forget that first day, greeting the sun. And then, later, the sleep. My first genuine rest in so very long. So very deep . . .

Though not dreamless, I recall with a shudder.

"What else do You know?" I say, voice low.

He rests His arms on the table, hands clasped, watching me like an interrogator.

"I know who killed Sebastian," He finally says.

For a moment, I remain still.

"Male or female?" I finally ask.

"Male."

Water from my glass has left a damp circle on the plastic tablecloth. I play with the ring with my nail. "And do you know where this man might be found?"

He nods. "I do."

I glance up, suspicious now. "And You are going to give me his name?"

"Yes."

Just like that?"

He nods again, a faint smile on His face. "Just like that."

I affect boredom. "I don't believe You."

Now He feigns surprise. "And why is that?"

"Because the boy is dead!" I hiss.

"Not an unusual consequence of being, quite literally, drained of blood." He lifts a careless eyebrow. "And your point is . . . ?"

"You said he would be the salvation of my House!" I growl, mindful of eavesdroppers. "You said he would rise, just as the legends say!"

He stares into my eyes, and it is all that I can do to continue to meet His gaze.

"You've repeated what I once said," He murmurs. "Now, tell me what I didn't say."

For a moment, I'm confused,

Then, suddenly, I understand.

"You didn't say when," I mutter.

He grins.

"How long?" I ask.

"As long as it takes," He replies. And I can tell from His tone that this particular line of conversation has come to an end.

So I switch topics. "Where might I find Sebastian's murderer?" And before He can reply, I continue. "And will I have to hide during the daylight hours once again?"

"That depends," he says.

"Explain, please?"

He rests an arm on the back of His seat. "You will find those 'others' I spoke of in the same city where you will find Sebastian's murderer. But there is a problem."

"Say it isn't so?"

He ignores my sarcasm. "The one who knows where these others are, and who also knows where to find the one you seek, will try to kill you once she realizes why you are there."

"And this is a concern because . . . ?"

He smiles yet again. "Because she is like you."

There are more words, simple in their brevity, directing me to where I must go. And go I do, taking a perfunctory leave of Him.

For I have a man to kill.

And, should it prove necessary, a woman as well . . .

#

They say that Leonardo da Vinci took twelve years to paint the lips of the Mona Lisa. I have a memory just as detailed. The night I drank the blood of Timothy MacAlister for the first time.

I had received a phone call the previous day, from Him.

"Come to Fayetteville. There's someone I want you to meet."

After He instructed me not only where to go, but what to wear, I had Charles drive, depositing him at a local hotel with detailed instructions on what to do should for any reason I fail to return. Then I left, my thoughts a dust devil of confusion. The what to wear, in particular, had confounded me.

Wear something similar to what you were wearing on the night we first met, in spirit if not in actual style.

Which is how I came to be striding along the crowded sidewalks of downtown Hay Street in the middle of the night, surrounded on all sides by military men out for a night on the town, alongside the prostitutes who serviced them. Not that, dressed as I was, you could have easily distinguished me from the latter.

I trawled up and down the sidewalk several times before I found what I was searching for, a tiny bar at a street corner where the market diverged between the women selling themselves and those men who simply looked like women selling themselves; one of those watering holes where customers and service providers of all genders had agreed to a mutually tolerable *détente*.

Peering through the sticky fog of alcoholic fumes, I spotted my quarry seated in the rearmost booth. And He was not alone.

"This is Tim," He said to me as I approached, tugging at my hem to bring it back down to mid-thigh. "Tim, this is Penny."

I frowned at the diminutive as I took a seat next to the man He had indicated, a handsome—though not extraordinarily so—gentleman who looked well on his way to total inebriation. He turned to face me, his irises gray, his pupils wide and unfocused. Then he smiled.

"You didn't tell me she was such a gorgeous thing," Tim said.

Annoyed at the compliment, and confused as to the need for my presence, I gave Him a frown while stewing in the fumes of Tim's breath as the man undressed me with his eyes. A brief enough process, considering how little I was wearing.

"Tim is an acquaintance of mine," He told me while taking a sip from His glass. "And I owe him a favor."

I was moving quickly from petty annoyance to sheer rage at His volatile innuendo when I caught Tim's scent.

Not the booze. Nor the clean, soapy fragrance of a man who had recently showered in preparation for a night out. Something else. Something . . . deeper.

I closed my eyes and drank it in, like a starving man amidst the restaurants of the Champs-Élysées. A few breaths later I felt light-headed.

"Let's take this party back to my room, eh?" He suggested. Dizzy from the man's odor, I exited the booth, allowing Tim to claim my waist with his arm as we left.

When we got to the hotel, a seedy-looking place, and Tim had excused himself to the hotel's questionable bathroom, He pulled me to one side.

"The gentleman will pass out shortly," He whispered harshly into my ear. "Wait for that. Then you can feed. But take very little of his blood." He gripped my upper arm and shook me, none too gently, to emphasize His point.

I barely heard Him, so anxious was I for the man to return. When he did, I practically knocked him down onto the room's single bed. Startled by an aggression he could not possibly have comprehended, I allowed his hands free rein as I nosed his hair and his neck, rubbing my face against him like a cat claiming its territory. Trembling from his scent, my mouth wet with hunger, I tolerated the entrance of his fingers into places no living being had explored for many, many moons as I waited impatiently for him to pass out. Then, just as my self-control had almost exhausted itself, I heard the first snore.

"Remember," I heard Him warn as I slid my lips over the nape of Tim's neck. "Control."

Eyes squeezed shut and tearing slightly, I bit.

And lost myself.

The next thing I clearly remembered was His fist in my hair as He dragged me off the bed.

"No," He said, yanking me away like a dog on a leash. I whimpered, scrabbling madly to return and finish what I'd begun. But He would have none of it, instead flinging me down onto the stained sofa just underneath the room's single window with its wrought iron bars.

We had never had a physical confrontation before, He and I. There had never been a need for one. But now I fought to break His grip, despite the flicker of sanity in my head like a distant scream, demanding to know what the Hell did I think I was doing?

Understand this, I am strong. Very strong, as the boy in my basement learned to his dismay. But that night He held me in His arms like an ill-tempered child as I struggled, almost in tears, exhausting that same strength in a vain attempt to free myself.

Then, after a time, I knew nothing.

When my eyelids did finally part, I felt an odd sensation on my skin, an unfamiliar warmth. I opened my eyes . . .

And stared directly into the face of the morning sun.

Instinct took over and I cried out, masking my face with my arms to minimize the damage, muscles coiled for the sudden movement which would be necessary to (I hoped) carry me to safety. For there are no words for the pain we Breed suffer, should we be caught in the sun's embrace.

But there was no pain.

As this realization swam upstream against the terror, He whispered into my ear.

"Yeah, my methods do incline towards the dramatic," He drawled. "But I wanted this experience to be a memorable one."

We were outside, sitting on a small bench.

"What happened?" I finally managed.

He coughed. Or laughed. With Him, it's hard to tell sometimes.

"You fell asleep," He said.

I could not believe what I had just heard. "Asleep . . . ?"

"I'm hungry, let's go," He said, rising, my hand in His. "Oh, by the way, when's the last time you visited a Waffle House?"

#

He sat across the booth from me, watching with something resembling amusement as I devoured a plateful of eggs and bacon. "You might consider taking it easy," He said, eyes smiling, "assuming, of course, you plan to keep wearing that dress."

"What did you do to me?" I said between mouthfuls as I continued to attack my meal, hardly pausing to consider how long it had been since I had last consumed anything but human blood.

"Me? Nothing," He said before sipping on a cup of coffee, the only thing He'd ordered.

"Please explain, then," I said, folding the last strip of bacon into my mouth while looking about disconsolately for one I might have missed. You always said please to Him when making a request, or else He would refuse to acknowledge you until you did.

"I have no explanation."

I leaned back in my seat. Across the aisle a boy, not quite old enough to shave, stared at me, mouth slightly agape, lowering his face with a blush when I caught his eye. "Then how did You know?"

He sipped His coffee again. "Let's just call it an educated guess," He said.

I struggled to remain nonchalant. "And Your . . . friend. Tim, did you say?"

He chuckled. "No need to worry yourself over him. I phoned one of his military buddies, asked that he look in on him. Maybe take him over to the hospital, get that nasty bite looked at." And though the humor never quite left His eyes, He did flash

me a warning with them as well. "We'll discuss him, and a few other matters, later on."

I looked again at the boy who, despite his best efforts, could not help stealing glances in my direction. I smiled, then leaned across our table in a languorous fashion, allowing him to view a not inconsiderable amount of cleavage while simultaneously crossing my legs, raising my hemline high enough to no doubt violate the letter (if not the spirit) of multiple local ordinances. As I did this, I slipped two fingers between my lips, sucking with hollowed cheeks at the leftover bacon essence coating them. The boy's eyes near doubled in size.

Then, with an audible *pop*, I pulled my fingers from my mouth. His cheeks flared as he spun in his seat like a top, eyes front once again.

The woman across from him, almost certainly his mother, noticed this and turned in my direction, disapproval radiating from every pore as she raked me with her gaze. I smiled, taking her in from ankle to face, then gave her the slowest of winks. Flustered, she flushed a dark crimson before turning away, just as quickly as her son had.

A subtle cough brought my attention back to my Companion, all humor now absent from His gaze. He studied me, His eyes dark and unreadable.

"You cannot share this knowledge with anyone, ever," He said. "If you do, I will know. Do you understand?"

I opened my mouth to make some offhanded sarcastic remark about geese and their golden eggs, then thought better of it and simply nodded.

"None of this comes without a price," He said, lowering His voice. "The good news? You're more human now, and will remain that way for the next month or so. The bad news?" He took another sip of coffee. "You're more human now, and will remain that way for the next month or so. Or unless you drink normal human blood, which I suggest you avoid during the daylight hours. You can now go out during the day, but you'll heal less quickly if you're injured. You'll only need to drink blood from Tim about thirty days from now to renew the effects, but you will have to consume human food and drink in the interim for nourishment. And there may be . . . unanticipated side-effects. The return of long-forgotten emotions and involuntary bodily reactions, for example," He said, giving the nearby table with Mother and Son a brief glance as He collected the check. "Having been deprived of them for so long, I strongly advise you to proceed with caution on that score." Would that I had given more weight to His words that day.