

Lay Your Sleeping Head

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The Gothique Literary Society had completed a Dracula tour with a difference: a trip to Romania with all the right attitudes in place.

‘We wouldn’t want anyone getting the wrong idea,’ said Max, the society’s founder and dictator. They were enjoying a barbecue overlooking the Borgo Pass with Milos, the coach driver, rushing around carrying “robber” steaks on long skewers.

‘We don’t want any weirdos joining us,’ he continued...’you know, the whey-faced, false fanged types who would really, really like to taste someone’s blood.’ The members nodded in agreement; the society prided itself on its serious literary credentials.

As darkness crept over the Pass some of them glanced uneasily out at the wolf-ridden forests, unconsciously drawing nearer to each other around the firelight as they drank more tuica, the fiery plum brandy of the region.

Next morning, more than a little hungover, the group swapped favourite highlights of the trip as they drove out to the airport at Bucharest.

‘I think the visit to Snagov monastery was the high point for me,’ declared Francis Crawley, the society’s historian. ‘Seeing the actual tomb of Vlad Dracula and knowing that it had been found empty gave me a real frisson of fear. Most agreeable, don’t you think, Leila?’ His neighbour on the back seat of the coach gave a wan smile and closed her eyes. She was a slight, faded sort of woman who could have been thirty or forty. Never again would she drink that revolting liquid known as tuica. In fact, it seemed unwise to eat or drink anything in Eastern Europe. This was her second tour and each

time she had been laid low with what their leader had unfeelingly described as “a touch of the turistas.”

Lulled by the rhythm of the coach she felt pleasantly sleepy and the nauseous feelings subsided a little. Mental snapshots of the trip flashed through her mind; not Snagov, not the Borgo Pass, it had been the detour into the Czech Republic which had excited her most of all. They had visited Csjethe, the lonely ruined castle of the infamous Countess Bathory. Murderess, sorceress, probably insane, she had killed more than six hundred young women and girls believing that she could preserve her youth by bathing in the blood of virgins.

A luxurious shudder ran through her thin frame. What a dreadful story – and how reassuring to visit the scene of those horrors while safely removed from them by several centuries. She recalled staring at crumbling walls and the slits that served as windows. The blood countess had been walled up alive in one of the rooms for the last four years of her life. Saved from execution by her royal connections, she had been imprisoned without light or mirrors, in solitary confinement until her death. Now the disintegrating masonry was covered by lichen and delicate white flowers grew over the scattered stones.

On impulse Leila had scooped up some of the lichen into a container to take home. She would re-pot it in London and keep it in her window box as a memento of the tour. It would remind her of the glorious scenery she had enjoyed, the snow-capped Carpathians stretching to the horizon instead of the number twelve bus passing under her window.

² The coach jolted her out of her reverie. Francis was holding forth again.

‘One realizes, doesn’t one, just what a grotty, overcrowded little island Britain is after v³isiting Eastern Europe? All those mountains, those empty passes, the way the towns

² Where no flower can wither

and villages end abruptly and the wilderness begins; there is no ribbon development at all – glorious!

‘There’s a lot to be said for poor old England,’ one member objected, ‘there’s nothing nasty in the woodshed in my neck of the woods.’ He chuckled on until he caught sight of the pot of lichen perched on Leila’s suitcase. ‘That’s a pretty odd souvenir, Leila. Why did you bring that stuff from the castle? It’s guaranteed to give you the creeps.’

‘I wouldn’t want it in my house,’ agreed June, the leader’s wife. ‘Aren’t you afraid it could be ...that it might be, well, tainted, dear?’

‘Of course not,’ Leila retorted. ‘Why would a plant growing on the castle ruins be affected in any way? That’s superstitious nonsense.’ The others looked sheepish; superstition was definitely frowned on in the Gothique. Only one dissenting voice was heard to mutter something about the overwhelming atmosphere of evil at the castle. The coach pulled up at the airport. Clutching assorted souvenirs, bottles of brandy and Dracula dolls, the group embarked for London.

The society was planning a Frankenstein tour to Germany and Switzerland for the following year. That might be interesting, Leila thought, but not as deliciously horrific as the Dracula tour, not as much fun. She sighed; fun was something conspicuously absent from her life. She had had one or two brief affairs, but men generally did not notice her. Even her brothers talked across her as if she had no real substance. It was important to have interests, hobbies, like the Gothique. The men in the society had not shown any romantic interest in her either. She had been aware of a certain amount of room swapping and nocturnal visiting during the trip. Her room mate, a sultry brunette, had disappeared

³ Where no Flower Can Wither

several times, returning at breakfast looking tired and self-satisfied. Leila had pretended not to notice.

She had always been an avid reader: at home books vied with plants in her small flat. The tiny pot of lichen had been placed on a shelf in her bedroom next to a flourishing yucca. She glanced at the pot as she lay in bed reading another chapter of the history of Transylvania. The character of the vampire countess fascinated and repelled her. She had read everything she could find on the subject and Elizabeth Bathory was beginning to appear in her dreams as a faint, sinister presence.

Leila sat up again and looked at the pot of lichen which was on a shelf under a large mirror. With an effort she could see her reflection in the shadowed glass. Eternal youth, that was what the countess had wanted. Leila frowned at her reflection; her won youth seemed to be disappearing rather faster than she had expected. The face reflected back at her looked pinched and colourless, framed in lank, dark hair. Was she imagining things, or did her eyes look slightly sunken?

The tortures inflicted on her young victims by the fiendish countess were described in sickening detail, yet all that remained now were those crumbling, moss-covered stones in a forgotten corner of Europe. Involuntarily, Leila's gaze returned to the pot of lichen. It was certainly flourishing in South London; already it covered the sides of its container. She would have to repot it tomorrow. She shivered and prepared to sleep. It was almost⁴November and the bedroom felt permanently cold.

Three weeks later there was a meeting of the society. Members who had been unable to go on the trip were entertained with videos and descriptions of Romania, irreverent anecdotes about the leaders and scandalous gossip wherever possible. Several people

⁴Where no flower can wither

asked after the lichen, “the gruesome relic” as it had been dubbed. Leila assured everyone that it was quite harmless and growing well. She did not tell them just how fast it was growing, covering everything around it with incredible speed so that she was forced to cut it back every day. Surely lichen didn’t spread at such speed? It might be a special variety; she would have to look it up in the Institute library.

Lately her work had become a burden to her. It was difficult to shake off a feeling of lethargy. Obviously she was coming down with a bad cold or ‘flu. She could never get warm in her bedroom. As she helped herself to a sausage roll at the buffet, two young female members whispered together.

‘Doesn’t Leila Mitchell look washed out these days? She needs to brighten herself up with some decent clothes and makeup.’

‘She needs a man!’ retorted her companion as they moved off, sniggering. Leila pretended she hadn’t heard and sipped her glass of white wine. One of the older members, a professor of some kind, she recalled, was droning on about the flora and fauna of Eastern Europe. Her eyes glazed over until she remembered the lichen. This man might be able to offer an explanation.

He was only too willing; scarcely pausing for breath he launched into a flood of information.

‘Of course your lichen would be one of the crustose variety. What colour is it?’

‘Well, whiteish,’ said Leila slowly...’whiteish grey really.’ The professor nodded and rushed on.

‘Lichens grow very well on almost any surface that isn’t too polluted – even on glass. They secrete acid, you know, so they can eat away at any surface, including rocks.’

⁵ Where no flower can wither

‘But the speed,’ Leila interrupted, ‘it grows so fast.’

‘Oh no,’ said the professor decisively, ‘lichen is very slow growing indeed. Your specimen sounds most strange; it must be peculiar to the area.’

Later that evening when Leila arrived back at the flat she went straight into the bedroom. The feeling of unease that she had tried to suppress rose into full blown alarm as she stared at the shelf where the pot stood. The fungus had grown over the shelf and was starting to grow up the mirror. The professor had said it could grow on glass. Feeling too tired to do anything she went to bed shivering as usual. The temperature in the room seemed to drop every evening.

The cold numbed her as she curled into a ball and tried to sleep. The feeling of dread and general malaise persisted in her dreams. She saw clearly a desolate hillside scattered with stones and ruined walls covered with the familiar grey fungus. Unseen in the background lurked something evil that did not materialise.

She woke at dawn feeling exhausted. Hysteria gripped her as she saw that the lichen was now spreading across the floor towards her bed. Frantically, she scraped it into plastic bags and dumped it in the garbage area outside. Then she sprinkled disinfectant everywhere before putting on two sweaters and her warmest coat. The bedroom was colder than ever.⁶

At the Institute the staff remarked on her drawn, tired appearance. The director asked if she would like to take a few days off. Leila shuddered inwardly at the suggestion. She considered going away for a while or moving her bed into another room, but she could not bring herself to throw the pot of lichen away. The thought was growing in her mind

⁶ Where no flower can wither

that the plant wanted to reach her, needed her in some way. June had been right – it was tainted.

Reluctantly, at five o' clock she went home, bracing herself before opening the bedroom door. With a surge of relief she saw that the lichen had spread very little since the morning. The disinfectant must have helped. She moved a small heater into the room to take the chill away before starting to cook. Afterwards she planned to see a film to calm her nerves.

Before going to bed that evening she poured herself a tot of whisky and left the heater on. It was expensive but the cold was almost unbearable. The room was several degrees colder than the rest of the flat.

Gradually she felt the familiar lethargy creep into her brain. At some point she must have switched off the light because the room was bathed in a soft grey mist. Leila's eyes were closed but somehow she could see the lichen rippling and swaying in its pot, overflowing onto the floor and moving towards her. Through the mist she saw the shadowy outline of a woman standing at the end of the bed.

Paralysed by the cold Leila lay rigid as the lichen appeared to curl around the woman's feet. She stretched out her arms and Leila had a sudden longing to throw herself into them⁷. Lines from a poem she had once read came into her mind....

Lay your sleeping head, my love...⁸

She could not remember anything more. The woman smiled a beautiful, thin, cruel smile and beckoned to her. Leila realised that she was standing up and walking over the soft, clammy fungus. The woman bent her head towards her and the room instantly filled with

⁷ Where no flower can wither
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a numinous crimson light. Blood red... blood was the last thing she remembered as she fell.

Leila Mitchell's death caused shock waves at the Institute and, later, in the Gothique Society. When she failed to arrive at the office someone called at the flat to find a hysterical landlady and several grim-faced police officers. The circumstances of her death, bizarre and unpleasant as they were, received wide coverage in the tabloid newspapers. The landlady had found the body.

'It was terrible, just terrible,' she said in a trembling voice. 'I'll never be able to use that room again. She was lying on the floor and her body was completely drained of blood. That foul grey fungus was everywhere.' The woman hesitated and her voice shook again. 'It was even growing over her face.'
