

The Muse

R. William Vincent

It took the Writer most of the day to work up the strength to kill her. He didn't eat, didn't work, didn't even shave. He spent the day sitting in front of the door to his basement where she lay, staring at the knife in his hands. Eventually, as the shadows grew long and night drew in, he finally found the strength to open the door and kill his muse.

When most people call someone their muse, they are saying they inspire them, that their very presence in their life motivates them to create beautiful works of art. They are talking about a muse in a figurative sense. When the Writer talks about his Muse, he means it in a very literal sense. She came to him in a storm, almost a decade ago to this day. He remembers vividly the night she fell to earth in his backyard.

That night, he was staring at his computer screen, watching the flickering cursor on a blank page. It was an empty comfort to him on those nights when he couldn't write anything. Those nights seemed to become more and more common. When he was younger, he was a prolific writer. He was never that talented, but he didn't care. For as long as he could remember, he had wanted to be a writer, and that's what he was. It was more than a title to him; it was his identity, so who cared if it made him money? But now, as the vigor and immortality that comes from one's teens and early twenties retreats into the rearview, his ability to write seemed to have gone with it.

It was then that he heard it, a thud as something heavy fell into the wet grass of his backyard. More confused than scared, he went outside to investigate. It was then that he saw her. She was so beautiful. She had clearly fallen from a great height, for she had dug a deep groove into his backyard. Despite that, her skin and robes remained perfectly clean and blemish-free. Her whole body had a faint glow to it, as if some divine fire burned within her. Indeed, she looked like a creature plucked straight from the scriptures, some biblical ideal of femininity. There she was, someone who could only exist in dreams, lying unconscious in a pit in his backyard.

The Writer brought her in from the storm. Despite having to drag her through the mud and rain she remained spotless, though his clothes were

drenched and matted. He laid her on his couch and began the long process of trying to revive her. For days and days, he tried. He tried giving her food and water, but she would not stir. He tried smelling salts, various rubs and ointments, everything he could think of, but nothing worked. She remained in a deep slumber, and he began to lose hope that she would ever wake.

He spent his days sitting by her side, reading her his stories. What a pair they made, the Writer who couldn't find readers, and the woman who wouldn't stir. And so they might have remained if it weren't for one fateful day.

The Writer was in the kitchen prepping his dinner. He was slicing a tomato when he accidentally cut himself. As he raised his finger to his mouth, he suddenly felt her beside him. Despite not hearing her move, there she was, just behind his shoulder. He turned around to face her in shock, and as she saw the blood on his finger, she smiled. It was a wicked smile, the smile of sadists, and psychopaths, and all the harbingers and avatars of evil. She ran her tongue over her lips before she began to speak.

While he heard her clearly, her mouth didn't move. Instead, he felt her words in his head, dancing along his synapses and worming their way in. "Blood," she said, her voice raspy and hoarse from disuse, "I need your blood."

"What are you going to do with it?" The Writer asked.

"Drink deep and grow strong," was her reply.

Before the Writer could tell her no, she said something that gave him pause. "For your...devotion... For your...sacrifice...I will reward you."

"What will you give me?" The Writer hesitantly replied.

"I will tell you a story," she said, her smile returning, "I know many stories. Ancient stories, potent stories. Stories of the magic that dances between the tree branches. Stories of when your kind was young and the world was powerful and strange. Beautiful stories, stories that could make statues weep...stories that could make you wealthy."

With that, she knew she had him. He held his hand out and she took his bleeding finger into her mouth and drank of his blood. With every sip the Writer felt a part of him seep out, as if she wasn't just draining his blood, but his very essence. When she had drunk her fill, when the Writer felt weak and woozy, she let his hand fall to his side. She stepped back from him, her feet slowly lifting off the ground as she hummed in contentment. She then leaned down and began to whisper in his ear.

When she was done, the Writer still in a daze—sat down at his computer and began to type. His fingers moved practically of their own accord, as if he were being puppeteered. He typed and typed till his fingers felt numb, and he collapsed at his keyboard from exhaustion. When he awoke,

he saw his manuscript. He had written the Muse's story.

The story quickly brought him the success and the wealth he had wished for his entire life. The Writer finally felt worthy of his moniker. But despite all the joy he felt, all the celebration, there was a hollowness behind it all. For the Muse was still in his house. And she had more stories to tell.

For months after his first hit, he tried his best to ignore the Muse. Tried to tell himself that it was a one-time arrangement, something to get him over the hump. To her credit, she never harassed him, never cajoled him, never called out to him with need. In time, she even moved from his living room to his basement, but she never left. She waited and waited. It was like she knew she wouldn't have to wait long, for no matter how hard he tried, no matter what he told himself, night after night, he could do nothing but stare at that blinking cursor. So eventually, when his desperation outweighed his shame, he went down to the basement.

For many years, their arrangement was prosperous. He would let the Muse feed on him, and once she was done, she would whisper in his ear, filling his head full of stories, guiding his hands to the keys. With each of the Muse's stories he found more wealth and fame, but it was never enough. Despite all of the money, all of the attention, he still felt hungry for more. He became even more of a recluse than he was before his success. He didn't need people in his life; he had the Muse. He had success.

All this success came at a cost.

As the years went on, the Writer felt a weariness creep into his bones. His skin began to fade, hanging loose around him like a poorly fitting suit. His eyes sank into their sockets, a perpetual tiredness hanging over them. Even his own mind, once considered his proudest possession, grew foggy when he wasn't writing. He tried to starve the Muse out, to write under his own power. While his brain was full of ideas of his own, whenever he tried to put them to the keys, to bring them to life, he found himself staring at that blinking cursor. As the Muse depended on him for sustenance, he depended on her for his stories. He was her physical lifeblood; she was his creative.

The Writer didn't know how much more of himself he could give. It would never be enough, not for her. He began to worry that if he continued on this path, he wouldn't survive. That one day, he would go down into the basement and never come back up. He decided to do the one thing he never thought he could do. It took everything he had, but eventually he found the strength to take a kitchen knife and set out to free himself.

It took him all day to gather the courage to open the door. He went down into the basement, the wood creaking under the weight of his emo-

tions.

Step.

By.

Step.

Until eventually he reached the basement floor. There she was, standing before him at the foot of the stairs. She saw the knife in his hands, but she didn't even look scared. She looked amused. She stood before him unafraid. She didn't even have to speak, as he could see what she was saying to him written across her face. "You. Won't."

It was at that point, the cauldron of shame, rage, and fear that had been brewing inside of him all night finally came bursting out of him. He raised the knife over his head, swung it down, and...stopped. He couldn't do it. No matter how much he wanted to, no matter how much he needed to, he couldn't do it. Her hold over him was too strong to cut. He let his arm fall impotently to his side, the knife clattering across the floor. When the Muse saw that her guess was correct, she smiled. She had won. Defeated, the Writer went back upstairs. The next day, he went back down those steps once again. Not to try again, but to make an offering of himself upon her altar once more.

It took three weeks for anyone to find his body. When they finally found him lying on the floor of his basement, having spent his last drop, they found him alone.