

OTHER STORIES

*Spectral Love*¹

She was surely dead, and doubtless had been for a long time.

By what miracle of equilibrium could she still be sitting up so straight on her high chair behind the counter of the brasserie?

How was the dead cashier still able to move, and how was she able, continually, to reply to the waiters and the customers?

Ingrained habit, undoubtedly, and a residue of momentum left over from her past life.

She must, while alive, have exercised the profession of counter-assistant for a long time, for, in spite of her premature death—she had passed away in her thirtieth year—she had preserved a prodigious dexterity and a singular ease in the handling of coins and bottles.

Her complexion was white with greenish glints that sometimes played upon the amber of the bottles of cognac and piles of sugar lumps on the counter in front of her.

Her hair, ashen and abundant, had the shriveled appearance observable in the tresses of dead women.

Sometimes, facing exceptionally amiable clients, she seemed to forget the sadness of her condition and she smiled. Then her discolored lips would part and display beautiful white teeth, neatly arranged but dead, their ivory dull and dry.

Her gaze had retained a vague gleam, when you sensed it lingering upon you, and it made you sick to look at her pale and slender hands.

In what quilted coffin, on what funereal bed did she lie down at night after closing up? By means of what miraculous antiseptics had such complete conservation been attained?

For a long time I asked myself those questions, and I felt my heart gradually softening with tenderness for the poor dead woman, who had not been able to find the repose that she had the right to expect.

She noticed that one day, and took it upon herself so set aside, in my regard, the supreme indifference that death habitually provides.

Then, one evening, after a mutual exchange of glances and furtive words—she was closely watched by her employer—she linked her fleshless arm with mine and we left together.

In order to stay there until closing time I had been obliged to drink a lot. In addition, the strangeness of the situation contributed to my intoxication, with a macabre and troubling drunkenness.

The music and singing of my friend Rollinat were hammering in my head.²

She spoke to me in her slow, soft voice, a little too deep for a young woman, but charming nevertheless.

When we arrived in the bedroom I was slightly fearful, and while she undressed I closed my eyes.

I got into bed in my turn. The proximity of her cold thin body made me shiver.

Then there was an uninterrupted series of mad kisses, tortuous caresses and hectic embraces.

The touch of my dead lover, the sepulchral tone of her voice and the night-light whose pale green light was infinitely reflected in two parallel mirrors all contributed to my fear.

The intoxication of that bizarre night was not punctuated by a minute's respite.

Suddenly, she pulled away from my arms, threw open her curtains and blew out the night-light.

The sun was shining.

A miracle! A transformation!

She appeared to me dazzlingly pink and alive.

Very thin, but with the charming thinness of adolescence, she stood before me, smiling softly.

She might have been seventeen.

Unable to get over it, I stared stupidly, unable to account for that delightful transformation.

She understood my astonishment, and she came back to the bed to give me two long and tender kisses, saying to me in her slightly deep voice: "I feel so refreshed!"

¹From *Le Chat Noir*, 21 February 1885.

²The poet Maurice Rollinat (1846-1903) was one of the original group summoned to Le Chat Noir by Rodolphe Salis when he requested that the Hydropathes should re-form and use the café as a base. A fine piano-player, he would provide the music several evenings a week, often singing his poems—which, in the Baudelairean tradition, were preoccupied with the intertwined imagery of sex and death.

Ellen's Spirit ³

That evening, I got home very late and utterly enervated. For the first time, in the year since Ellen had died, I had failed to honor her memory. On her deathbed, she had made me swear to remain eternally faithful to her. Mad with grief at the idea of the rightful separation, and feeling that, with her dead, everything would be finished for me, I had promised her what she had requested with a poor agonized smile.

Until that day, I had never broken my word; my worship of Ellen's memory had remained religious and exclusive.

Then, one day, at a wedding celebration, carried away by joyful companions and beautiful girls, I had forgotten everything. My friends, wanting to chase away what they called my "black ideas," had plotted to get me drunk and throw me into the arms of some hussy.

Their plan succeeded. The girl was superb, quite expert although very young, with a red and fleshy mouth, and fascinating eyes, wide eyes like those of a grazing cow.

The image of the beloved dead woman never quit me, but became so vague and blurred on the blue horizon of my memory that I was not too cruelly obsessed by it.

The strong wine and the odor of women's perfumes had reawakened the beast in me—the brutal and dirty beast that, dormant in my being for such a long time, was finally compensated.

Then, in the morning, I was overwhelmed by a dolorous and irremediable nausea. The shame of my lapse caused me to leave the young woman's apartment so abruptly that she must have thought that I'd gone mad. All day long I walked feverishly, trying to forget my ignominy—a wasted effort. The pale phantom of Ellen always loomed up before me, her heart-rending expression of cruel reproach brought me to the brink of tears.

When dusk fell, my anxiety became more terrible and more precise. I dared not go home, so sure was I that I would find my betrayed beloved there.

So, when I finally went into my apartment, I was less surprised than terrified.

Ellen was there, with her back turned to me, sitting in the armchair at my desk. Although it was quite dark, I saw that she was wearing the white peignoir that she had put on when she could still get up. Her favorite perfume was lingering in the apartment: a heavy and troubling scent dominated by wintergreen, which her sisters had sent her from America, and which she preferred to any other.

I stood on the threshold, mute with terror. Courage gradually returned, and, knowing full well that I was the victim of a hallucination, I struck a match and advanced into the room.

There was no one in the armchair. Nothing was out of place. But how had that perfume come to be spread around the room?

That odor, which delighted her, was odiously painful to me, and it had required all my love and patience to get used to it. Furthermore, I had put all her toilette apparatus away in a trunk, and since her death I had never touched them, so keenly did the sight of them revive my grief.

I opened the windows and went out on to the balcony until the door had dissipated completely; then my lassitude obtained the ascendancy over my enervation, and I soon fell asleep—but not for long.

There was a faint sound, as brisk and slight as the scampering of a mouse. At intervals, the sound was interrupted by a rapid click. The same perfume had resumed floating, with even greater intensity than before.

Again I struck a match and looked around. There was nothing abnormal in the room. For as long as the match burned, I didn't hear anything, but no sooner had it gone out than the faint sound resumed. Sometimes, there was a rustle of paper.

By listening attentively, I contrived to determine the nature of the sound: someone in the apartment was writing.

This time I lit my candle and got out of bed. Once again the sound ceased. Everything on my desk appeared to be in order. Trying to laugh at my hallucination, I went back to bed. As soon as obscurity was restored, the fantastic pen began to gallop over the paper again, only interrupting its flow to retrieve ink.

Crazed with fear, I dared not move under the bedclothes. I don't know whether I lost consciousness then or simply fell asleep again, but I don't know when the sound ceased.

I slept heavily until it was broad daylight. When I woke up, I remembered, and naturally attributed my nocturnal hallucination to a nightmare.

How terrified I was, however, when, driven by a curiosity that I thought superfluous, I went to examine my writing-desk.

The ink-well, which I always took care to close, was open. A pen-holder was lying there, still damp with ink. A sheet of blotting-paper had been taken out and used, certainly not by me as I always use powder.

³ From *Le Chat Noir*, 25 April 1885.

The blotting-paper had evidently been used to dry a fresh page. The last lines and the signature were clearly visible there, although unreadable because of their reversal. Naturally, the idea of inverting the writing by means of a mirror occurred to me.

Immediately, I saw the signature Ellen, horribly distinct. It was definitely her signature, but with a hint of cruelty and precision that chilled me. Even with an effort, however, I could not reward any more, for the page, too dry when the blotting-paper as applied to it, had only left vague traces.

Since that moment, I've been unable to obtain a moment's sleep. Every night a strange perfume floats around me, dominated by wintergreen.

Desperately, I persist in trying to read the dead woman's illegible scrawl in the mirror, which has put an end to my repose—for Ellen will never forgive me for my base treason.