

Beauty by Zachary Lo

When the rain fell it was not the same kind of light, peaceful rain that falls in forests and meadows and other free, happy places. When the rain fell it was cold and bitter and black, like sorrow. The sky was dark and the air was sour-tasting. Puddles ran up against the sides of the alleyway, gleaming liquid jewels glittering with rainbows of oil. Delicate cobweb cracks wove through the ground, miniature canals running with silver.

You see, there is beauty in these cold dark places. The only trick is finding it.

The little dog feels the raindrops in his matted black fur, running through his skin and his bones to the center of his heart. Hunger claws at his whole body, tearing him down. He places his paws one at a time, slow and heavy, weighed down with fatigue. He doesn't know how many steps he takes, or where he wants to go, or why. But he continues now, through the rain and the dark, shaking a little, pathetic and alone. When he stops, it is because something inside him has finally given up. The next footfall does not come.

He does not know how he brought himself here, to the front of a dark apartment building, with dim yellow light flickering from somewhere inside the lobby. He does not know where he will go next, but it doesn't matter, because he is finally too tired to continue. And so instead he waits, cold and hungry and alone. The rain falls. It shines under the jagged glow of the streetlights, glistening in icy rivulets along the broken curb, flowing into cracks in the shattered sidewalk, dripping into the dog's eyes, blurring his vision like tears.

When his waiting is finally rewarded, he doesn't know it at first, because her footsteps are quiet on the sidewalk. The first thing he notices is the smell. It is a golden smell and good. He turns toward it and there the girl stands, with a plastic bag in one hand, looking at him. Her face is sad, her lips sorrowful, her eyes pained. He gazes back at her and wishes he could help. Maybe then she would help him, too, and they could both be happier.

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She kneels down on the concrete and touches his fur, gently, softly. He is startled. He is not used to such kindness. She pushes her hand down his back, strokes his tangled fur, pulls him into her. She is warm and he presses closer, trying to find the source of all her fire. She takes him in her arms.

The girl carries him through a window-glass door into the glow of the building. He feels steps creaking under her feet, and hears the opening of a door. She sets him on the floor and holds a black plastic tray out to him. It smells like heaven. He wonders if she is an angel.

A cover comes off and he sets into the meal with ferocity. All he can feel is the food in his mouth and the hunger in his stomach, which fades away into some dark recess. When it has departed entirely he looks up at the girl, panting, his tongue hanging out. He feels full and content. Her small warm hand finds his fur again and runs back and forth and presses out the cold. He is happy just to lie there and let her stroke him and taste the smell of her. She smells of the rain and the sidewalk and the food she carried. He supposes he has finally found love. All of his searching has been rewarded at last.

When a voice comes from the next room the dog does not know what will come next. He does not know the things he will see and the things he will feel. When he gazes at the girl with her broken eyes and the tears shining on her cheeks it will cut him to his core. She would have been sad, to see how he wandered afterward, in the dark and in the rain and how he lay down to die with the scent of her in his mind, and with his last vision of her lingering, fractured like shattered glass and glimmering with teardrops, or maybe just the rain. And he wonders, if there are those who can fell angels, then what is there to live for? Is all love so fragile? He will never know the answer to these questions. Neither will she.

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A voice says something and the girl flinches. She tries to shoo him out the door, but before she can, someone appears. In two quick strides the man is next to her. The dog does not know what is wrong with him, but he can see the stupid anger in his eyes and smell the alcohol on his breath. The kick comes fast and hard and lands on his ribs. It sends him stumbling to the door, where he crouches, whimpering. Both voices say things, quick flurries of words, traded back and forth like blows. Except the girl is not fighting. She is frightened, and her voice is shaking and scared, and the tears already shimmer in her eyes, like diamonds.

To him she is nothing more than another cowering animal. His hands find her face, her arms, and leave their mark. They leave behind their bruises and their pain, but she only feels the hammerblows deep in her breast. She feels her heart tear apart on her hurt and sadness, beating against razor edges. The dog watches and he sees her agony. He feels it himself. It is impossible for him not to; he loves her even now, but still, he is too terrified to help. Instead he feels her pain as he runs, smoldering deep in his chest. He does not feel the rain or the sidewalk and he only sees her face. He will remember it. It is the only beauty he has ever known.