

LOVE: THE BREATH OF EAGLERAY

by *Ennis Drake*

This is Key West. The zero-mile mark. Where the Atlantic dances on a stage of blue depth in the east, and the Gulf de la Mehico lazes green under webs of sunshine in the west. This is Paradise Found, friend. It's true, this is the alley where hurricanes bowl from June to November, but it is, too, a place where—once you've lived here—a little wind and rain is so much lint brushed from your shoulder. Like that song from *Annie* so prophetically points out, the sun will come out tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow's only a day away.

When you're cohabiting with Death, tomorrow's a big fucking deal.

Sunshine is a big fucking deal.

* * * * *

My name is Danial McRae. I have a cat. Her name is Eagleray. She is one of the polydactyl-footed descendants of that most famous local grimalkin—being the cat Ernest Hemingway was given by a Spanish ship's captain during his stay on the island in the 30's.

Eagleray and I, you see, we have a special relationship; a special bond. Trust me when I say—I'm no Charlotte Tan—she is no ordinary cat. And me? Well, I'm the literal walking dead.

* * * * *

I wade the still, crystal waters. It's July. A month before lobster season. Hot, even at nine in the morning. I'm in my boxer shorts. There's no one around. No one of import. I live in a rundown RV at a campsite for thirty-five dollars a week, after all. The sea is twenty paces from my door. I told you this was paradise, right? I'm hunting for breakfast.

In July, you can't enter the water without tripping over lobster. It's illegal to take them out of season, of course, and even in season it's illegal to take them without a commercial trapping permit. But, like I said, this is paradise. And no one's around.

No one that will deny me and my cat a luxurious breakfast.

* * * * *

I find a good spot, once the water's up to my chest. I'm careful to avoid the fire coral; careful about the holes I run my hands into. The last thing I need is a moray eel latching onto me like a little green pit bull. It doesn't take long to find what I'm after—four beautiful, robust arachnids just begging to be eaten. I rip their heads off, then their tails. I tuck the tails under an emaciated arm, the heads I leave for the parrot fish.

* * * * *

I watch Eagleray wolf her meal at a picnic table under the lattice-shadows of an old Queen palm. My own breakfast sits, untouched, on a Chinette plate. I don't eat much these days.

That's okay. Eagleray eats enough for both of us.

She turns to me, in her curious way, as if sensing my thought, fixes me with her limpid yellow eyes. She is not happy. Her scowl seems to say, "Are you calling me fat?"

"Not at all my dear," I mumble. "Eat up. Have mine too. Yours is the only sustenance I need."

I laugh humorlessly. Choke off a cough.

My head is burning.

I'm coming down with a cold.

Eagleray's eyes roam my wasted body: the sickly, bruise-colored flesh; the sallow eyes; the skin, so taugth over my skull; shrunken chest; ribs no longer hidden by fat, or muscle.

I light a cigarette, take a drag. And then I do cough. Once I start, I can hardly stop.

I can feel her eyes on me. She loves me, and I love her, but I know—sometimes—she must be disgusted by me.

I can't meet her gaze, so I stare at the old track marks on my arms instead.

After a few minutes of desperate self-loathing, I feel her brush against my head—her fur so soft; the coat long and plush. She smells of sand, sea, and shellfish.

I wonder: How much longer can she keep me alive?

* * * * *

The day has almost burnt off, the sun a cooling orange spark on the reflective horizon.

Time to go to work.

We take the camper truck. It's the only vehicle we got; besides, we have to haul our props.

Eagleray and I, we're street performers. Buskers. We work Mallory Square five days a week, down by Old Pier, and we have for almost three years.

There's nothing quite like the Square. It's an artisans' fair. Quite the spectacle. Everything from hand-made jewelry to wood carvings, and blown glass, screen-printers hawking T-shirts, painters, body artists, leather workers, and metal sculptors. But the best part is the performers. Musicians, jugglers, fire eaters, and acrobats.

* * * * *

This is it. Sunset Celebration. The nightly gala.

Time for Eagleray to shine.

We secure our usual place at the water's edge, denoting our performance space with poles and rope. I set up a series of small platforms, of varying heights, mounted on tripods for stability.

A crowd gathers like a summer storm.

And I give them my spiel.

“Welcome, friends! Tonight, you will see acts of fearlessness, acts of skill, and acts, too, of absurdity. We have come to entertain. Do you want to be entertained?”

I wait for the few enthusiastic calls, and the small applause, to die off.

I am resplendent in a faded tuxedo jacket, cargo shorts, and flip-flops. But the crowd is not interested in me. Nor should they be.

All eyes are fixed on Eagleray.

She sits atop the tallest of the platforms, at the center of our “stage”, her feathery coat a mottling of white and black, like a three-dimensional Rorschach. Her face is white, but the fur around her nose is black, as is the fur of her chin. It makes her look like a clown. But, stare too long into her eyes, and she will take you into her thrall. If your heart is good, you will feel as though some Judgment has passed you by. If your heart is dark . . .

The last ember of the sun throws itself down into the Gulf of Mexico, dying in a sudden riot of pink and orange light; and, without warning, this once-bright world of margaritas and shimmering daydreams is smothered by long, tangled shadows.

Eagleray’s eyes glow piss-pale in the gloaming, like tiny neon moons.

I hold up a hoop.

Set it on fire.

The crowd gasps. I hear cries of disapproval. But I hear, too, the intake of breath that, to my ears, sounds like the opening of a till.

I warn you now, as darkness sets in, so too must the nature of this story darkle. You want me to tell you of the performance. You wish for that narrative to continue. And I would love nothing more than to regale you with an account of these feats: of Eagleray, with perfect grace, leaping through hoops of flame; the sight of me balancing a bicycle on my chin; of juggling, tight-rope walking, and the eating of fire. But the performance is only an illusion—a sleight of hand to distract from our true intention.

I amuse the crowd with a bit of juggling, allowing Eagleray to wander among them in her search for the darkest of hearts.

She worms her way among a family, slips past a young couple, until she comes to a man in jeans and a khaki shirt. She rubs affectionately against his leg, startling him, and he nudges her lightly with his foot, trying to shoo her away. When he looks down at her, she captures, holds, his eyes, and his face goes slack.

Eagleray has found her quarry.

I watch from the corner of my eye as the man shakes off whatever spell Eagleray has cast on him. He regards her with cold, naked suspicion, and quickly leaves Old Pier.

Eagleray shadows him with ease. She has passed her Judgment. And I know, before long, this man will be dead.

He will die.

And I will live just a little bit longer.

* * * * *

I pack our props and return, alone, to the campsite.

I make a small fire and sit by it with a book—*At the Point of His Claw*, by Jackson VanderMeer—that I never open. When the moon falls out of its zenith, I retire to my bed in the back of the camper. But I don't sleep. I never sleep, on these nights, when Eagleray is hunting breath. I lay in the dark, wondering what I'm most afraid of: That she will not return, or that she will.

* * * * *

Eagleray alights on my chest. It's almost dawn. The world outside the camper's windows is silver. Soon it will be gold and faded blue. The wind coming in the open windows, clanking against the aluminum mini-blinds, smells of salt, but I hardly notice it over Eagleray's stench: she reeks of Death and Retribution.

Within her, she holds the breath, the life—and the evil—of the man in the khaki shirt.

She kneads my hollow chest, readying to bestow her gift upon me.

I ask her, as I always do, “Why? What makes me worthy of life?”

She purrs. And kneads.

I came to Florida from Chicago almost five years ago.

I came to Key West to die.

I was a junkie; heroin being my drug of choice.

I never had any family that I can remember.

The streets were my family.

And the needle.

One day I shared a needle with the wrong person.

When you’re on the street, and shooting White three days outta five, HIV is just part of the game.

You don’t think it will happen to you, but you don’t really care, either.

I never hurt anyone, though. Except myself. Maybe you’ll take a junkie’s word. Probably you won’t. And I don’t blame you.

I stare at the old track marks on my arms. They pucker open, tiny sphincters suckling at the air—little flesh docks waiting for a syringe, waiting for a shot of White, or even Yellow.

I’m dying.

Even with medical attention I’d die before summer’s end.

But Eagleray has my cure.

“Give it to me,” I say, closing my eyes, opening my mouth.

Eagleray hunches forward, her nose touching mine. She bares her fangs, and a cloud passes from her mouth into my own.

I gag. Choke. I breathe deep, taking in the life force she has stolen from the man in the khaki shirt.

I live his experiences . . .

. . . his evil.

It's like a slide show. But there is thought, feeling, texture, smell. The man's name is not important, though I learn that. I know everything about him. For a few minutes, I *am* him. I don't know how many women he raped—because *he* didn't know anymore, so numerous were his victims—but there were dozens, maybe more.

I live through every one. It's fast, and I'm thankful for that, but there are empathic impressions that carry over from his victims, and these, I know, will haunt me for the rest of my life.

My stomach clenches, rolls, shudders.

It's done. The transference complete.

Eagleray leaps from my chest as I roll onto my side, clutching my stomach, my knees drawn up in a spasm. I taste Death, smell it. Eagleray vomits shellfish onto the bed, and I spill froth and acid onto the floor. Even as my stomach empties—a physical reaction to the horror I have imbibed—my emaciated body fills out, the muscles building, bulging, my chest rising, my ribs hidden once again by fat and sinew. The common cold that threatened to kill me is exterminated. My white cells double, treble. And the virus that consumes me is beaten back. At least, for a time.

I tuck myself up like a fetus. I will remain in bed for days, wrestling with myself, with my guilt and outrage.

“Why me?” I ask Eagleray, hugging her close. I bury my face in her side, spill plump tears in her fur. “Why do you spare me? I don't deserve this.”

She answers with a deep purr; licks the lobster from her lips.

I ask the same questions over and over, and receive no answers, but I understand I have been granted Salvation for my unwavering love of her. Despite my doubts of worthiness, I hold this to be true. And I know that the reliving of all this evil is a kind of Sacrament of Reconciliation; a penance I suffer gladly.

I hold her tight, too tight. I want to tell her how much I love her. I need to express my gratitude, my guilt, confess my sins, and my fears. But what could I have said that she didn't already know? What words could possibly matter?