

The Final Victim

A Short Story By Grahame Scott-Douglas

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The Final Victim

Emile gathered up his courage but again it failed him and he stood in weak frustration, staring down at the dirty roiling waters far below. He closed his eyes and tried again to lift a leg over the rail but his foot was glued to the dark paving of the bridge. Somewhere a boat mocked him with its horn and a passing car splashed muddy water onto his shoes. The heavy rain had stopped but now a thick and cloying fog swept in from the sea, obscuring the river and muffling the sounds of the city.

Why couldn't he do it? He'd tried so many times to end this pathetic excuse for a life but always the fear would overcome him, arresting him on the brink.

The words of Hamlet came to him and with them he railed at his life and at himself, "The undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns, puzzles the will and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others we know not of."

"Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all." The speaker had come upon him without a sound and he jerked round in guilty surprise. "And thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." The man was tall and thin, dressed in a black overcoat or perhaps a cape, it was difficult to tell in the poor light. He wore a wide brimmed black fedora which cast darkness over his face, revealing only two bright points of greenish light. "Hamlet was rather depressed that day. Was he not?"

"I guess he was", Emile mumbled trying, but failing, to avoid those weird eyes.

"He could not face life but equally or perhaps worse, he was afraid of death: 'The undiscovered country.'" The eyes roamed over Emile's face and, having finished their

examination, once more took possession of his gaze, “Are you perhaps in the same position, my friend?”

Emile looked down at his muddy shoes. It was his usual solution, avoidance, but this time it failed him and suddenly he was back on that shoe lace of a road, swerving back and forth in a wild careen down the mountain. He tried to pull himself back to reality and the cold, damp present, but the picture played itself out like some hellish aversion therapy, refusing to let him escape until he’d learned his lesson.

“Emile, slow down,” pleaded his wife.

“Yeah, dad!” encouraged his son.

He chuckled and pressed down on the gas. There was no need to worry. There was never anyone on ... Bright lights in his eyes, his wild attempt to avoid, the screech of metal against metal as the car broke through the rail and the sickening sensation as it flew out into space. Somehow his door was open and the screams of his family faded as he flew away from the car and slammed into the branches of the tree. In his last conscious moment he saw the flash and heard the boom of the explosion as the car hit ...

And he was back. Standing on a bridge, engulfed in fog, wishing he were dead.

“Are you?” repeated the stranger.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, come now. I have been watching you for almost an hour. You step forward, raise your foot, put it down, step back, mutter to yourself, stare down into the river, step forward ... over and over like a video on an endless loop. You want to die but your fear of the unknown overcomes your will.”

Emile wanted to yell out that he wasn't afraid; that death was his greatest desire. He willed his body to move, to step over the rail and fling itself to a quick death in the river below. But his legs, traitors to his will, would not budge.

"The body has a strong desire to survive and it will grasp at any straw to continue its existence. Your fear is such a straw." It made a sort of sense to Emile. "Do you want death?" It was said without emotion, like asking if he wanted one lump or two, and the very simplicity of it broke through and he was able to answer, "Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Every time I close my eyes I see their faces. Every night I hear their screams. It was my fault they died and I can't live with it anymore."

The stranger nodded, "Then just say the word and I will give you the peace you seek, quietly and painlessly. But once you agree there is no turning back."

Emile looked up. A new fear creating suspicion. "What will you do? A gun? A knife?"

"Nothing so mundane. I will not tell you specifics but you will die gently and painlessly and the death of your loved ones will no longer prey upon your mind. Do you agree?"

Emile tried to speak but nothing came out. He wanted to die but his body did not and it fought him by refusing to function. A hand touched his arm, green fire met his eyes and his body was suddenly quiet. "Yes," he whispered, "Yes, I agree."

"Then let us begin." The green fire expanded, engulfing his universe, until all was green. Then suddenly it ended and he found himself looking down upon his own body, standing quietly below.

The stranger took the body by the arm and led it to a dark sedan parked at the eastern end of the bridge. He guided it to the passenger seat then walked around to the driver side and got in.

Emile floated into the car and watched quietly as they made their way into the warehouse district, driving past the newer developments, past the older but functioning buildings, past buildings defaced with graffiti until they came to an area of dilapidated and deserted wrecks.

The car stopped, the stranger stepped around and guided Emile's body across the sidewalk, over a strip of muddy ground, through a hole in a chain link fence and into the back of a cavernous building with half its roof missing and the other half threatening to fall at any moment.

"This should do nicely," said the stranger, turning to Emile's body.

It was very dark in the still, dank corner of the old building, but somehow Emile could see and hear everything that occurred quite clearly: The stranger opening his mouth to expose the long sharp canines, the teeth plunging into the neck, the body's eyes turning up, showing only the whites, the look of ecstasy that spread over the face and the body growing paler and paler as the blood drained from it.

His wish to die, to end his pain, was coming true. The realization spread through his being like a comforting balm. It would soon be over. Oblivion would erase the memories and the guilt.

"Hey! This is private property!" A flashlight cut through the darkness, highlighting the eerie tableau. The stranger moved so quickly, he seemed to vanish and the body, unsupported, splashed limply into the mud.

Two men approached, waving nervous flashlights. They stopped at the body not quite knowing what to make of it.

"I thought it was two faggots making out," said the plump one, rubbing his jowls with an uncertain hand.

“Is he alive?” asked the bald one. He hunkered down and put his fingers to the neck, “I can’t feel any pulse.”

“Aren’t you supposed to feel the wrist?”

“Oh my god!” Baldy jerked away from the body, dropping his flashlight and repeating over and over, “Oh my god! Oh my god!” as he cast about for it in the mud.

“What the hell is up with you?” demanded fatso but all baldy could do was point. Fatso followed the finger with his flashlight until its beam fell upon the neck, the two puncture marks and the trickles of blood seeping from them. “Heavens protect us,” it was a faint whisper but laden with the fear and superstition of centuries. The two men exchanged a brief look of mutual terror and then fled. Emile watched the twin beams of light flashing about wildly until they rounded a corner and were gone.

His attention came back to the body. He could sense that it wasn’t quite dead. There was a pulse of sorts but no blood was being pushed around. The chest was not moving and the heart was not beating, but there was a rhythm emanating from it and this drew him in. He floated down, closer, closer. The rhythm was fascinating, quite fascinating. Closer, closer. He found himself responding to it. Pictures began to form in his mind. Vast armies lead by him. Populations of cities controlled by him. Entire countries following his commands. Pictures of POWER!

He stood and the body responded as it had never responded before. He felt more alive than ever. He looked around and knew that he was the master. From him all control flowed. The mortals of this planet were his puppets. He was a god!

He emanated a pulse of energy and the mud that had been clinging to him was cast off. He walked toward the broken wall through which he had entered the decrepit building. Plans

were forming in his mind. Great plans. Plans of conquest. Plans of leadership. Plans of empire. Plans of POWER!

Something flickered on the edge of his awareness. A nagging, intrusive something. His attention was drawn to it and, like the bite of a mantrap, it had him. Hunger! He felt hunger. The hunger of a thousand starving beggars. A hunger that had to be satisfied now, before it tore him apart.

His nostrils flared, hunting for the merest hint of a scent, and it came to him and he almost screamed with the agony of it. Blood. Blood! He must have it. NOW! He oriented on the scent and his ears detected a sound. It was a heart. A heart beating. And with each pulse blood was circulating. Warm, sustaining, desirable, satiating blood. The hunger increased tenfold and he ran toward it. The sound became more distinct; two hearts, breathing, gasps of passion, clothing rustling, hands fondling. He raced out of the building, burst through a border of bushes and there they were in the back seat of a beat up old car. He grabbed the door handle, ripping it off in his frenzy.

Two pairs of shocked eyes met his through the window and for an instant the thought of what he intended came to his mind and he shuddered from it. But the overwhelming pain, the agony of unfulfilled need, smashed all thought aside and he became a single thought, a single desire, a single want: To feed!

He drove his hand through the glass and grabbed the top of the door. The other hand dug into the body of the door and found purchase. There was a metallic shriek as it broke off and became so much scrap. He cast it aside and reached for the screaming girl.

An unexpected force grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. He struck out wildly but found only empty air. He screamed with rage and turned back to his purpose but the force

lifted him, flinging him away from the car and over the bushes. Madly he plunged back toward the beating hearts, catching himself in the thick of the bushes, fighting branches and thorns but making no progress. There was a roar of an over-revved engine, a screech of desperate tires and the beat, beat, beat of two hearts fading into the distance. He lashed about blindly at everything and nothing until the insane strength began to fade and the hunger made him weak and he sank down numbly amidst the broken branches and trampled leaves.

He lay sobbing for several minutes, the hunger driving sharp knives through his own silent heart, telling him he must have blood or feel this agony for eternity. He dragged himself to his feet and was suddenly face-to-face with the stranger. The green fire flashed but now Emile was immune. He barked a laugh and tried to thrust the stranger away but the man grabbed his arm, "Let me finish this."

"No!" he screamed, "Get out of my way."

"You made a bargain. There is no turning back. You must let me finish this."

"I must feed!" He ripped himself free and staggered past the terrified tire marks, trying to follow the departed car. But the stranger was before him, blocking his way.

"I will not allow this pestilence to spread. You must let me finish what was begun."

Emile slumped in apparent acquiescence.

"Good. It is the right decision." The stranger reached gently forward to take him.

Emile lashed out, throwing the stranger back into the hungry bushes. Then he was off, down the road, towards the lights of the city and a million beating hearts. As he ran he felt elation, freedom, strength! Nothing could stop him. The mortals were his food and they were waiting for him. Their heart beats called to him like amorous lovers. He rushed headlong down deserted streets until his senses detected a new heart. Now he would ... The car struck him from

the side and threw him into an unyielding brick wall. He slide down it and lay on the sidewalk like a broken doll. Hands were suddenly on his shoulders, holding him down and there was the stranger, his fangs bared and moving toward Emile's neck to finish the job they had left undone.

He thought of all the years of guilt he'd suffered for the death of his family. All that time and energy wasted, mourning over mere morals. He thought of how it had all changed when the stranger had drunk him: no more shame, blame and regret. If only it had happened sooner, he could have enjoyed life, regretless and free from the pointless woes of the past. And now the chance was gone. He would slip into that disembodied state he had experienced earlier and would perhaps discover heaven or more likely hell. It was over. The hope of a new life and the promise of power; gone.

No! He would not give it up. The power he had glimpsed, the power he so desired would be, must be, his! He gathered what resources remained to him and marshaled them for one last desperate assault. With his remaining strength, he twisted the man over and now it was his hands that pinned his victim to the sidewalk. He opened his mouth and lunged, and now it was his fangs that found the cool flesh of the other's neck. He drank and the first drop of the stranger's blood was like a sauce that increases the hunger.

The victim's struggles were the wriggles of a sick kitten and as more life force passed into Emile's body he felt his power grow and the stranger's diminish. At last, unnoticed by the victor, the struggles ceased but he continued to drink until the last blood cell was his. Then the desperate passion subsided and he flopped weakly onto the body of his first victim.

It took him several minutes to recover but at last he rose and smiled, looking around at his new domain. It was an everyday street, one he would never have paid attention to before, but

now he could see it with such acuity that everywhere he directed his eyes was a new world of hues and textures.

He looked down at the drained corpse and noticed that the dead hand seemed to be thrusting something at him. He reached down and pried an envelope out of the death grip. On it was written the message, "To my final victim." He frowned at it. What the hell was that supposed to mean? He felt so superior to this dead husk, so in control of everything, that he almost threw it away. But, what the hell, he might as well check it out. He shoved it into a pocket.

He looked about him, caution returning now that his hunger was satisfied. He quickly searched the pockets of the stranger but, finding nothing, he left the corpse to rot.

When he awoke the following morning, the whole episode seemed like a crazy dream. Only the feeling of power and lack of his accustomed sorrow told him that it was real.

As he got out of bed he noticed the envelope lying by his discarded clothes.

"To my final victim."

There was something ominous in those words. A chill passed over him and for a moment his elation subsided. But only for a moment, after all, why should he worry? He had the powers of a god. There was nothing he need fear. As if to prove this, he tore open the envelope, unfolded the letter and began to read.

"To the one who freed me.

"Dear Friend,

"Mere words cannot express my thanks. For centuries I have waited, hoping to find a being so depraved as to want this existence and cursing myself for wishing hell upon another. And now at last I have found you and you have freed me.

“I had planned to write a long letter explaining why I wanted no more of immortality. I thought of clever stories with cunning metaphors and poetic similes but in the end it simply boils down to two things: Boredom and escape from boredom.

“First the boredom: There are only so many ways to experience the pleasures and sensations of a body and after a century or two sex, food, etc., will lose their allure. You will discover that dangerous adventures will lose their attraction because none are dangerous for you. And so, each day will become a pointless, purposeless blink of light, over before anything interesting has occurred and each night will become a dull routine of killing and feeding.

“Second the escape from boredom: The only way to kill a vampire who was created as you and I were is by the same process as that which created us. So when you decide you want to end your immortality you must find another like yourself. One who will kill his creator.

“Perhaps you feel my explanation is insufficient. Don’t worry, in due time it will become gruesomely real to you.

“So let me thank you again and wish you a final goodbye. I expected to feel pity for you, but this is the fate you have chosen. I do not pity you for soon enough you will be pitying yourself. “

As he finished the letter, Emile’s mind swirled with chilling thoughts but he brushed them aside with the blind certainty of arrogance and, for the moment, regained control.

The fool, he thought, to give up such a life.

He crumpled the letter and threw it across the room. The paper bounced into the corner, unfolding into something that resembled a face and he could not shake off the conviction that it stared at him with mocking eyes and a twisted ghoulish smile.