

The Diocese of the Dog

It is the last night before the deadline. But I have found a suitable boy, standing alone beneath the festival lights, gazing up in wonderment at the market vendors and tumblers and the people in brightly-coloured clothes. I crouch before the child.

“Take my hand, boy, and I will tell you a story.”

“Who are you?”

“I am the one who lives in the old cathedral in the eastern district of the city.”

“Nobody lives there. *Mamá* says the air is poison there.”

“Does your *mamá* also tell you to walk through the streets with strangers at night? I could be dangerous. Yet here you are, holding my hand.”

“You don’t look dangerous.”

My bony hands. My hunched back, and tattered brown cloak in a city where colors and swirled capes are hung, sequined and glittering, over the backs of even the poorest man. I suppose I don’t look dangerous, but then, intentions are difficult to see.

“Do you really live in the cathedral?” he asks.

“What do you know of it?”

“Nobody goes there. Not anymore.”

“Do you know why?”

“I know something happened there a long time ago.”

“Yes, it was a long time. I was only a boy then.”

“You were there?”

At this I chuckle. I’m horrified by the sound that comes from my dusty throat. I haven’t laughed in such a long time. “I was there. And I will tell you what I saw.”

Ah, there it is again, the strange ache of remembering what I was before, someone who is as much a stranger to me now as I am to this boy.

They called him a doctor, a man of healing. They called him to purify the disease, although the disease was more terrible than any that had been seen before. First he visited the house of the cardinal. He stepped into the villa's grand entrance hall, which was hung with tapestries and crystal chandeliers, and when he took a breath he fell to his knees and vomited until there was nothing left in his stomach.

“When I was just a boy, a little older than you, there was a great sickness in the eastern district. They thought it came from the country far away where we get our spices and our herbs, and that the ship rats had just borne it with them.”

“They *thought* it came from the rats?”

“They were wrong.”

The cardinal lay naked in his bed, on top of the sheets because his skin was falling away and the slightest pressure caused it to slough off in patches as big as your hand. The men clustered inside the room all wore leather masks over their faces. The cardinal's wife would not even hold his hand. When Castile entered the chamber they all turned to look at him, all except the cardinal, and he had never seen such a look of desperate hunger before.

They think I can save them, he thought. They think that I must save them.

“Hold a moment.” I place my hand on the boy’s shoulder as we pause before a market stall.

“Would you like something to eat?”

“Really?”

“Really. I’ll buy you anything.” Eat, please eat, before it is too late.

He takes an apple from the cart and shines it with his sleeve.

I watch him eat. I hope it is the sweetest apple he has ever eaten.

“Where are we going?” Juice runs down his chin.

“Patience, child. I am taking you to a certain place.”

It was there, in the corner of the cardinal’s room, that he first saw the dog. Its golden eyes were fixed upon the cardinal, on the bloated pile of flesh that lay wheezing and weeping on the bed. Nobody else could see the dog. Nobody else knew it was there. Castile fingered the hilt of his rapier, and suddenly it swung its huge white head around and it was looking at him. He realized that the plague had not come from the rats.

He let go of his sword. He should not have brought it; it would do nothing for him here.

“The sickness spread swiftly through the eastern district. Death was as silent as an owl when it first entered a home, but soon announced itself in screams and stench. Three days after the fever began in a person, it left the body and took every drop of life with it.”

The boy stares at me. For the first time, he looks afraid. I must restrain my language.

“It was said to be the judgment of God, and they all flocked to the cathedral to pray. To my cathedral. To my home, as it is today.” *Don’t follow me there. Run, boy, run.* Those last

words push against my throat. I want to scream them aloud. I want to break my voice with them. I always do, with the children, and I always have to remind myself why I must keep silent.

The cardinal died within the hour, and the white dog, which had been sitting silently on its haunches all this time, stood and padded from the room. Castile bade a hasty apology to the cardinal's wife – although she looked more relieved than grieved now that the thing on the bed was dead – and followed the dog. It made no sound as it loped through the cobbled streets, slipping unseen between the sullen masses, who in their colorful clothes and slashed doublets looked doubly tragic. Women keened, men had tear tracks on their cheeks, and the dead were piled in the gutters.

He came to the cathedral square and joined the crowd that was shuffling through the great polished doors. He saw the white dog vanish inside, but first it looked over its shoulder, and only then did it occur to him that he had not followed it, but that rather it had led him here. That it had wanted him to come.

The boy bites the last chunk of flesh from the apple. He chews fifteen times – I count – and swallows. He drops the core into the gutter.

“Why haven't I seen you before?” he asks.

“I haven't visited this district for a long time. I live in the east, and I stay in the east. I tend the cathedral.”

“Why do you tend it, if nobody goes there?”

How to answer this? We are still far from our destination.

“In repentance. For things done and for things undone.”

“What things –”

“Do you know the story of Abraham and his son?”

“I think *mamá* told me once, but I can’t remember.”

“Good.”

A solemn murmuring filled the grand halls of the cathedral. Every head in the pews was bowed in the quiet routine of worship that disguised the stark desperation of the entire congregation. In the back of the cathedral was a bench isolated from the rest, where men and women dressed in black robes knelt and pleaded with the unrelenting heavens. As Castile passed them he saw the legions on their faces and hands, the yellow crust around the rims of their eyes, their burning cheeks and foreheads.

Following some sudden instinct, he slipped into a new line, a procession of mourners in beaked leather masks, intended as shields from the infected air. The procession was moving toward the back of the cathedral. It was moving toward the crypt.

The boy has not yet recognized the towers on the horizon, several streets ahead of us. He appears to be musing on some deep notion. So he is a thinker. I look away from him.

“How do you tend the cathedral?” he asks. “Tell me what you do.”

“I suppose you could say I’m a sort of guardian.”

“A guardian? Against what?”

I smile at him, but the pain of his question lances my heart. “Oh, rats and mice, mostly.”

We have crossed out of the northern district, and the boy takes notice immediately because the streets are suddenly empty. The buildings are gray, like dead things, and even the

stars mask their brightness, although whether it is out of respect for the dead or to hide from myself and the boy, I can't say. Perhaps they are trying to warn him. To give him a chance to turn back.

He hesitates. "This is the eastern district."

"Yes," I say, "it is. Are you afraid, child?"

"No. It's just... so quiet."

The time in this place seems to be frozen. A moth-eaten hat lying in the gutter shivers in the breeze. A shutter on the second floor of a house flaps back and forth against the wall, *slap, slap, slap*. But nothing else moves. Not even animals come here any more. Just me.

"Is this where everyone died?" he asks.

"This is where everyone died." I put my hand on his shoulder again. How must I look to him? An old man, hunched, skinny, dressed in ragged clothes. "Those who didn't die abandoned this place long ago." Those who could abandon it, at least.

"Where... where are the..." he doesn't want to say *corse*, doesn't want to taste that horrible word on his lips. This one is more curious than the rest have been, more intelligent. I owe it to him to satisfy that curiosity, at least.

"Inside the houses. You won't see them."

He swallows and nods. I lead him on.

"Hold fast to my hand, child. I'm taking you to a certain place."

The parade of mourners went on its way to the burial room to pay its respects to the newly dead, but Castile broke away from them and stepped into the silence of the crypt. If his mind wasn't

sure what he was doing, his heart was. He called over the echo of his footsteps, and his voice rang between the low pillars, down the dusty corridor.

“Who are you?”

A prickling on the back of his neck made him sure it was behind him. But he hesitated to turn around.

“Are you God?”

Silence, except for a muted panting. Castile turned, and it was there. The white dog seemed to be smiling with its black lips.

“Are you... Death?”

You will die one day. Castile heard the words in his mind as clearly as if they had been spoken aloud – but they had not, and he had not thought them. **No matter what you do, you will die one day. They will die one day. All will die one day.**

“Who are you?” he said again, but the dog just sat and grinned.

“Did you cause the plague? Are you what’s bringing death to everyone?”

We all bring death. We all are death. We all become death. If you will die soon why not die now? It’s all the same day any way, over and over again.

Then it stood and took a step toward him.

Castile stumbled backwards, brandishing his hand. “Get thee behind me, Satan!”

No. Nothing so petty as that. This time there was no riddle in its tone. **You are the doctor. Will you perform your task to heal?**

He lowered his hand, watching the dog warily. What was the meaning of its words?

The boy gazes up at the cathedral that overshadows the square like some great sleeping beast. Its heavy doors stand open. He seems to be thinking again. There is an expression on his face that makes him seem old beyond his years. “It doesn’t seem holy anymore,” he says.

“No,” I reply, “it doesn’t.” Perhaps because I’m finally going senile, or perhaps because I have been alone for so long, with no other person to talk to, I look down at the boy and stare right into his eyes. This is my unwritten rule: never look into their eyes, because when you meet a person’s gaze, then you know them, and it is not my duty to know them. But I look into this boy’s eyes. This intelligent, curious boy. Such a bright light shining within his eyes.

And I say, “If you could give up your own life to save the lives of many other people, would you?”

“Mamá says that sacrifice is the greatest virtue of all, because *Gesú Cristo* died for us.”

“Ha. Martyrdom doesn’t make you Christ. It doesn’t bring you glory or joy. *Gesú Cristo* rose again, but you and I – we would not. Would you still do it?”

He thinks for a moment. “Is my family going to die if I don’t?”

“They might.”

“Then I would.” He looks up suddenly, his brow furrowing. “This is all... pretend, right? I mean, it’s silly to ask. Sorry. I don’t mean...”

“Yes.” I break my gaze from his. “Yes, it’s all pretend.”

It stared at him with amber eyes. Castile was held rapt by its gaze.

You are the doctor, it said again. Will you perform your task to heal?

“I would that I had the skill,” he said. “Nothing can cure this illness.”

You may cure it.

“What?”

*The dog, the plague bringer, Death or God or a demon or whatever it was, grinned at him and panted. **You have a choice, doctor. I am giving you a choice. All will die tomorrow, without your aid. Or all will die eventually, if you give me the years they would have lived.***

“What nonsense are you speaking?”

Give me your years, Castile. You have many ahead of you. Give me your years and I will not have to take theirs. Each little life in this town will get one of your years. Heal them.

There was a sudden clink on the stones behind him. Castile whirled, and his heart froze inside his chest. There was a dagger lying on the icy floor. It had not been there before, and now it gleamed like silver, the wire-wrapped hilt and reflective blade cold and white. He looked back at the dog, which was still grinning with its black lips, still watching him with its strange and otherworldly eyes.

Will you perform your task to heal?

So this was how it felt, thought Castile, to stand in the presence of something larger, something more important than the sack of flesh and ideas that he was, the blood and thought and ambition that made a man.

He knelt and picked up the dagger.

But you are not enough,** said the white dog suddenly, stopping him. **You do not have enough years to sate my hunger forever. One life. One year.

“You said it would heal them,” whispered Castile.

You will be my guardian,** said the dog. **You will feed me, doctor.

“And why would I do that?”

For every life you feed me this city lives another year. Be the healer. Be the guardian.

One for many. It's worth it, doctor, is it not?

One for many. Castile touched the dagger with his fingertips. Yes, it was, wasn't it?

The boy hesitates to enter the cathedral. I turn and offer him my hand.

“Come, my boy. I am taking you to a certain place.”

He comes up the steps to me, but before he takes my hand he looks down, and his eyes widen. Has he seen the scars, the dark skin in vertical stripes along my wrists? One scar for every life. One scar for every child. If he has seen them, he makes no mention of it. Perhaps he is too young to know.

It is mine to decide who dies for the lives of many. I am a doctor. I will perform the task to heal.

“Take my hand, child, and I will tell you the story of Abraham and what he was willing to do with his son, in the name of greater things.”

He takes my hand. His skin is soft, unmarred against my leathery palm. I meet his eyes again, the bright and intelligent gray of his irises, and I lead him, gently, into the darkness of the long-forsaken cathedral.