

Manitou Blood (sample)

One

Bloodwork

It was only a few minutes after eleven in the morning, but already the sun was beating on the sidewalks as hard as a blacksmith's hammer.

As he crossed Herald Square, in his flappy brown linen suit and his green *Matrix*-style sunglasses, Dr Winter saw a small crowd gathered outside Macy's. At first he thought they must be looking at a new window display, but then he realized that a mime artiste was performing in front of the store.

Frank Winter had an irrational aversion to mimes, or jugglers, or clowns, or any other kind of street performers. Behind their painted-on grins, he had always suspected that they were sly, and spiteful, and out to cause mischief. But this mime caught his attention. She was a girl, to begin with – a very thin, small-boned girl, in a one-piece suit made of tight silver fabric. Her short-cropped hair was stiff with silver paint, and her face was painted silver, too.

Frank stopped for a moment, and watched her. Her suit was so tight that she could almost have been naked. She was small-breasted, with very prominent nipples, and her buttocks were as tight as a boy's. Underneath her Tin-Man make-up she had a thin, sculptured face that was almost beautiful, in a starved, waif-like way, and pale blue staring eyes.

But it wasn't only her appearance that held him there: it was her extraordinary performance. She swayed from side to side, giving the impression that she was defying gravity. Then she began to mime that she was climbing, and somehow she made it appear as if she was actually making her way up a ladder. At the top of the ladder she teetered, and nearly lost her balance. Two small children who were watching her stepped instinctively back, as if she was really going to fall on them from twenty feet up.

Frank pressed his hand to the back of his head, because the sun was beating on his neck. It was well over 93 degrees, with 85 percent humidity. Nobody could walk around the city without gum sticking to the soles of their shoes, and the crowd around him were mostly dressed in T-shirts and shorts and sandals, and were furiously fanning themselves with newspapers and tour guides. It had been sweltering like this for over a week now, since the second day of August, and the weathermen were predicting the longest heat-wave in New York City since the summer of 1926.

Up on top of her imaginary ladder, however, the girl began to clutch herself, and shiver, as if she were freezing. She stood on the sidewalk quaking and even though the sun was beating on the back of his neck, Frank could almost feel a chill, too, as if somebody had opened up a refrigerator door, right behind him. He turned to the man standing next to him and said, “She’s something, isn’t she?”

The man looked Italian, or maybe Greek. He was bearded, with a flattened nose like an osprey’s beak, and bulging brown eyes, and he was wearing a strange dangling earring, like a miniature dreamcatcher, all feathers and beads and fish-hooks. He raised his eyebrows and smiled but didn’t reply.

Frank wasn’t sure if the man had understood him. “I mean the way she’s shivering like that...she’s actually making *me* feel cold.”

“Well,” said the man, still smiling. “She is one of the pale ones, that’s why.”

“The pale ones?” said Frank. He shook his head to show that he didn’t understand.

“I would gladly explain it to you, sir, but you would probably not believe me.”

“You could try me. I’m a doctor and you know us doctors. We’re ready to believe anything.”

The girl began to climb down her imaginary ladder, until she reached the ground. Then she sat on her red-and-yellow rug on the sidewalk and twisted her arms and legs together so that she tied herself into human knot. If he hadn’t seen it for himself, Frank would have said that it was anatomically impossible. Her face was looking at him from between her legs, emotionless, remote, but strangely threatening, as if she were warning him to keep his distance.

She rolled around the sidewalk in a ball, and then, in one fluid movement, she disentangled her arms and legs and stood up, her arms spread wide. The small crowd applauded, and two ConEd workers gave her a piercing whistle.

Gradually, dropping nickels and dimes into her silver-painted basket, the crowd dispersed, but the girl stayed where she was, leaning against Macy’s window with both hands, breathing deeply, staring at herself. The Greek-looking man stayed, too.

Frank took off his sunglasses. He could see himself reflected in the store window behind her – a tall, broad-shouldered man with brushed-back hedgehog hair that was graying at the sides. “That was quite some performance,” he told her. “I’m a doctor, and believe me -- I’ve never seen *anybody* who can tie themselves up like quite like that.”

The girl lifted herself away from the window and turned around. She looked Frank up and down as if she already knew who he was, but she didn't speak. Frank wondered if she might be such a good mime because she was genuinely mute. He glanced again at the Greek-looking man, but the Greek-looking man didn't seem to be interested in contributing anything to the conversation, either.

"Well, great show," Frank told her, uncomfortably. "I have to be getting on."

He took out a dollar bill and he was leaning forward to drop it in her basket when the girl suddenly raised her hand to her throat and made a gagging noise. She took a stiff-legged step toward him, and then another. At first he assumed that she was acting, but her eyes were wide and she kept opening and closing her mouth, as if she couldn't breathe.

Without warning, she vomited blood. A bright-red clattering cascade that splattered the sidewalk in front of her and splashed all over Frank's shoes. She tilted back, and then sank to her knees. Frank knelt down beside her and put his arm around her.

"What's wrong? Are you sick with something? Have you been to see your doctor?"

The girl shook her head. She looked terrified.

Frank shouted, "Call 911!" but there was no reply. "I said, *call* -- !" he began, but when he turned around the Greek-looking man was hurrying away, like the White Rabbit. "Listen," he told the girl, reaching into his shirt-pocket for his cellphone. "I'm going to call for an ambulance, get you into the emergency room right now."

The girl nodded. She started to say something but then she vomited even more blood, so that Frank's sleeve was soaked. A few passers-by had stopped to watch them, but most people were staying well away – even crossing over the street. Frank didn't entirely blame them. He and the girl were plastered in so much blood that it looked as if they had both been fighting each other with box-cutters.

All he could do was kneel down beside her and hold her close against his chest while she sicked up more and more blood. She was shaking wildly, and now she felt genuinely cold.

It seemed to take an hour for the ambulance to arrive, although it was probably less than ten minutes. The sun beat down on the blood that was spattered on the sidewalk, so that it steamed. Frank heard sirens, and banging doors, and the rattle of a gurney, and then he was being helped up onto his feet.

A woman paramedic was staring very closely into his face. “Where are you injured, sir? You want to show me where you’re injured?”

Dr Gathering said, “The *good* news, Frank, is that she’s HIV-negative.”

Frank was standing by the window of his 27th floor office at the Sisters of Jerusalem, looking down at West 36th Street below. The traffic was sparkling in the sunshine, and the crowds far below him were dressed in bright reds and yellows and greens, like a scattered assortment of jellybeans.

“What’s the bad news?”

George Gathering opened the plastic folder that he was carrying and took out three sheets of test results. “I’d call it *bewildering*, rather than bad. She must have vomited more than two liters of blood, not counting the blood she brought up before we got into her emergency. By rights, she should be dead.”

“I thought it might have been a perforated ulcer.”

“Well, that was *my* first guess, too. But we haven’t found any serious erosion of the stomach-lining, although I think it’s worth doing another X-ray. We haven’t found any varices in the esophagus, either. Her liver’s healthy, and she has no portal hypertension.

“So where was all that blood coming from?”

“We’re not sure yet. But you know how ulcers can hide themselves out of plain sight.”

“Still -- this is very unusual, wouldn’t you say? Usually, if a patient’s bringing up *that* much blood -- well, it’s almost impossible to stop it.”

“Like I say, I want to try another X-ray. But she has some other unusual symptoms, too.”

“Oh, yes? Like what?”

“Her digestive chemistry is seriously out of whack for a young woman of her age. Her stomach-lining is secreting less intrinsic factor than an eighty-year-old. Which means of course that she isn’t absorbing vitamin B12.”

“So she’s anemic?”

“Yes, she is. Not only that -- or maybe *because* of that -- she’s hypersensitive to sunlight. We cleaned all that silver paint off her, but when we tried to put her in a bed by the window she literally screamed. We had to move her into a room of her own with all the blinds pulled down.”

“What’s her history?”

“She says that her name is Susan Fireman. She’s twenty-three years old and she’s a third-year fashion student at The Beekman College of Art and Design. She shares a loft on East 26th Street with two other girls and one of their boyfriends. The mime thing is just a hobby, apparently.

“Her medical records are still held by her family doctor in New Rochelle...that’s where her parents live. We’re trying to contact him now. Apart from the usual childhood diseases, though, she says that the only problems she’s ever had are painful periods and an allergy to steamers.”

“Have you contacted her parents?”

“Not yet. She specifically requested us not to. She says that her dad has a serious heart condition and she doesn’t want to worry them.”

“I see. Has she been out of the country lately?”

George sorted through his notes. “The last vacation she took was to Mexico, last October, eleven days in Cancun.”

“Have any of her friends or acquaintances shown any signs of sickness?”

“Not so far as she’s aware. But there’s one other symptom. She’s been having a persistent nightmare.”

“A *nightmare*? Nightmares don’t make you vomit blood.”

“Of course not. But for some reason she seemed to think it was important. She’s been having it night after night, for more than a month. Always the same one.”

“Go on.”

“She thinks that she’s deep inside a ship, somewhere in the middle of the ocean. But she’s shut up inside a box, and it’s totally dark, and she can’t get out.”

“That’s it?”

George closed his folder. “That’s it. But she says that it’s so realistic that she doesn’t like to go to sleep any more.”

“Yes,” said Frank. He thought about the time that his father had taken him to the circus, when he was five, and a clown had come right up to him and screamed in his face. “I used to have a nightmare like that.”