

TANITH LEE - The reason for not going to the ball

MADAM:

The girl will have brought you this, the one you trust. Before you tear it into pieces, remember, never before has she done you a disservice. Rather she has helped you. And, I must tell you now, she has been a friend also to me. This is not to make you hate her. It is to make you pause for a moment. To ponder that, if I have sent her to you, and she has aided you, can I have tried to aid you! Please, therefore, read a little further. Perhaps, say to yourself, you will read until I am cruel or insult you, or ask you for something. That is fair, I think. Of course, you suppose, as how should you not, that I have given you only evil. Your world is colored now by trouble, which seemed to begin, I would imagine, with me. But, beautiful Princess, let me have a little time. I promise, I will at least invite your thoughts. And if you read here a word of mine against you -- throw this letter in your fire.

Where to begin then, conscious you may lose patience. Shall I provoke your pity? No, for how could you pity me, the wicked step-mother who thrust you from your adoring Father, raised her two ugly daughters over you, exiled you to the dungeon of the kitchens to sweep up the dirt. And finally, worse -- withheld you from the famous ball. But then, you went to the ball, despite my efforts. Consider that. Consider what that glorious night has brought you, and read on.

When I was thirteen, my father, a gambler, sold me to a man who offered to pay all the debts. I was very beautiful -- so I can speak of she I was, for she was another and not I. The rich man wed me in a modest clandestine service, and then, for a month, he set about me. You know of rape. Naturally you do. I knew nothing. I was terrified. And before I had even grasped what he had done to me, I was with child. When I grew big he was encouraged. He thought I carried a son. But no, it was two daughters. Four days it took me, it took them, to free ourselves from each other. I almost died, and so did they. Probably from this cause they were so ugly. Or else, it was from their father, a hideous man like a gigantic goblin. But they did not have his nature. No, they were in temperament like my own mother. Sweet and gentle, full of laughter. And loving.

Well, you already think me a criminal. Why dissemble? I poisoned the goblin wretch in my twenty-seventh year. He had begun to beat me by then, as he beat his servants. When I could not hide them, he beat his -- my -- daughters. There was a clever groom. He knew how to procure certain draughts. It looked like a disease of incontinence, and indeed, my husband had given his favors everywhere; no one was surprised, not even he, though he railed against women for a month, before he died.

His estate passed to a brother and I was left with very little. I lived on sufferance in the house of a relation, and my daughters with me. This terrible woman, my aunt, would say to me, in the hearing of my children, "Even though you are poor as mice, and they foul as imps, some man will take you all on, if you act properly."

And to this end she conveyed me about and welcomed suitors. She told me frankly she would expect a gift when I remarried.

Then came your father.

He seemed, of course, like a dream-being, so handsome, so wealthy, so softly spoken and gracious. I was amazed, but even so, now I had the space, I put myself to learning his true nature. I had suffered before, you see, and my daughters had suffered. I did not want them again trapped in the house of a man who would knock them down and spit upon them, calling them pigs and monsters. Your father was, in fact, only courteous to the girls. He even brought them little presents, when he came to call on me -- you know his excellent manners. A red rose for me, wound with a tiny golden bracelet. And for them -- a sash of scarlet silk and a sash of yellow silk. As if they were pretty, and would soon be popular. I thought myself very mean of spirit to set my faithful groom to learn things of your charming father. But still, I did it.

And so, dear Princess, I learned. And what I learned made me grim but not uneasy. For I was quite selfish and perhaps still am. Me he could do no harm I would notice, and my children would be treated with kindness. Even so, I was loath to marry him -- he had by now asked me -- until the evening when I saw you.

It was, in its way, strange, for I beheld you by accident, going by in his carriage, just in the fashion my first

husband had seen me in the carriage of my gambler father. There was only a moment, your pale and perfect face, the glimpse of your raven hair, and then you were gone like a spring flower.

Possibly you have never seen -- how would you -- that you and I resembled one another. Why that should be I have no notion, and probably now the resemblance is less, or is no more. But you, Princess, were like the girl I had been. And, being selfish, perhaps that is the only explanation for what I did next. Because you were like the child I might have borne. Because I knew -- and, to my shame before had never troubled with it -- what would become of you.

I wed your father, and I recall how first I met you. You were twelve years old, and came out to greet me hand in hand with him. You leaned on him, in utter trust and love, and his pride in you was evident. At me you looked not shyly, for you are not shy, but carefully, polite and reticent, yet not cold. You were ready, my dear, I saw, to be my friend, if I should prove worthy.

Even then, I appeared far younger than I was. I had been taken, in candlelight, for sixteen. That is an age he liked, as do so many men. We would sit then, do you remember, on the crimson sofa, you and I, and I would embroider and you would tell me stories. Oh, what lovely stories they were. You wooed me, did you not, with those tales of servant girls who won the love of kings. And I wooed you, tactfully, cautiously, with my embroidered scarves. And do you recollect too, my poor dulcet daughters, who admired you so and were never jealous, as they would no more be jealous of an emerald or the moon?

I told you stories, too. That was when you turned from me. I did my best, but patently, I did all wrong. In my tales the kings were not good and noble. In my tales most men were not to be trusted.

You did not believe me. Why should you? I had only the awful proofs I had been brought, evidence too disgusting to show you. Perhaps I should have done. To you, innocent and gracious and loving his arm about you, his hand on your waist, the pressing of his lips over and over to yours -- yes, even pressing with the lips a touch parted and moist -- these were the normal attentions of a gallant father. But I had heard, I had heard and I had learned. How your mother had been privately dressed, and I was privately dressed, as a very young girl. How he liked best when we whispered girlish rhymes to him, and pretended surprise, even alarm, as he unlaced himself. That is no matter. There is nothing bad in that. But he had bastard daughters too. He had abused them all. There were three, and none a virgin, for each had had to endure him. He did not like them too young, that was the only saving grace. About fourteen, that was the age he relished the most. He had married me in truth not so much because I would play his games and in candlelight looked younger than I was, but since I must be grateful and, while I might please him until you were ready, would never blab once he had begun on you.

Yes, yes, I tried to tell you this, ever more explicit, ever more embarrassed, ashamed, as I have sometimes been, by the excesses of others. And you, naturally, jumped up in horror. You ran away from me.

Did I mention one other matter? Your father was insane. If you can credit anything that I have said here, and conceivably, still, you cannot, although I think you may have learned by now the ways of this world, then doubtless you can believe in your father's madness.

You must judge.

I went about my task a new way after your rejection. My method was --curious, I think a fearsome method. But what could I do? I had no money, and so no power, of my own. No one to assist me but the scurrilous, clever groom. And so I told your father . . . tales. I said you had begun to be hysterical. That, in your rages -- revealed only to me --you spoke ill of him, stupid, dreadful things. I saw him look askance. You were, I said, disobedient, and unwomanly, in one, spoilt. And he --he came to accept all this. Did he ever question you? If he did, no doubt my warning to you had made you evasive, awkward as in nothing else, and this fueled the unsavory fire. Then he was wary of you. He fondled you less or not at all. And this you felt as a rebuke. So it increased, until you were strangers to each other. As, of course, you had always been. Even so I was not done. Day by day, your loveliness shone out of you. It was impossible to keep such light under any ordinary bushel. In the end, he would not resist. And you, loving him, trusting him, maybe you would permit, and so go mad yourself. I said that he was mad. I said you must judge. I had made sure a selection of tender beauties came upon him wherever he went. And some even caused him to believe they were his by-blows. I paid them what I could from the money he allowed me. He never noticed my gowns were made over, or that his enamoras were professional. They are talented, such girls, needing to be. Meanwhile I said to him that

there had been a child like you in the household of my aunt. And, although it was kept secret, a way had been found to bring the fool to her senses. "Let her," said I, "realize what you have given her as your daughter, by allowing her to go without it." He assured me I should have my way. He was even pleased with it.

So, you went down and down the house. I had you dressed in rags that stank. I had you smeared with filth. I let the sluts of the kitchen teach you dirty ways and words. I had them smother you up in that place below, among the greasy spits and smoking hearths. I made you as unappetizing as I could, and oh, my dear, that was very difficult, but in the end, I had succeeded. And so I invited him to spy on you, just once. And you were no longer to his taste, the madman. "No daughter of mine." These words he actually vocalized. He liked his women clean and couth. Educated and gentle. Never swearing, perfumed with roses, not the cinders of the fire.

But you, too honorable to speak ill of me, you pined for him. You pined for your loving father who, if he had had one clear thought, would have rescued you, bathed you, dressed you in silk -- and raped you over and over.

You thought I was a witch, and my daughters, who sobbed for you every night -- I had no need to lie to them -- were creatures of the Pit -- your tormentors. Obviously, being so ugly, they had nothing to fear. I could let them walk about the upper house in the finest raiment. And I could let them, when they were eighteen and you sixteen, go to a ball.

If you have read so far, and I pray you have, and not thrown my letter in your winter fire, you will now perhaps await, scornfully, bitterly, my excuse for keeping you from that ball of state where, it was said, the roving eye of the glamorous prince might light on any girl, so ostentatiously egalitarian is your kingdom.

To be plain, at first I thought that here might be the answer. I had mused on plans to get you from your father's hands, but there was no one I might rely on, or so it seemed to me, who might assist you. But now, here was this. For you were yet so beautiful, and I could allow you to become more beautiful, if away from the sight of your father. And I had heard of this prince, I had once met him, and he was young and straight, handsome, a warrior and a scholar, a paragon. How could he fail to notice you? How could you fail to respond to him? And so you would escape that dire house where you had been made a slattern rather than an unpaid and incestuous whore.

Yet I had to meddle, had to be certain.

And so I turned again to my clever groom.

Yes, in reply to your question, perhaps your accusation, I paid him with my body. That grimy, cranky little man, always to the windward of the law. And do you know, my Princess, this villain was gentle. He had no imagination as a lover, but also he wished to play no games. He took his pleasure politely, and after it said that he had been proud to have access to my flesh, But also he confessed he loved truly a woman of the slums. I had seen her. She is ten years his senior, with fallen breasts, but when she beholds him, her face lights like the face of a girl. He said he would marry her if ever he had money enough. He had never asked me for a single coin, and refused the little I could offer him.

He, then, made investigation of the paragon, and soon enough I was brought word. The prince was another of a kind. Well, do I need to tell you now? You have, so the servant girl has whispered to me, the marks of his whip engraved upon your back, and where they cut the ring from your finger, after he had broken the bone, there is now another ring of white.

Could I have warned you of it? Only as I had tried to do in the matter of your father.

Instead, I kept you close. I locked you in. You were a slut in the kitchen. How could you go to the ball of the prince who was a beast?

You found a way. I had mislaid, thinking of your loveliness and your vulnerability, that you were intelligent, and, like me, devious after your own fashion.

You wrote to your godmother, that icy ambitious woman, and when she consented to interview you, you found a means to reach her. She saw at once, with her gimlet gaze, your potential under my disguise. So

then she had you washed and garnished, and put on you a gown made in a single day by those seamstresses who work until they go blind. It was a sorcerous gown, pure white, and threaded with silver. How many lost the last of their eyesight over it? It was meant to dazzle only one.

She took you to the ball in her own carriage. She introduced you as a relative from a far country. Did she say that, when you were settled, she expected a gift? Perhaps she was more subtle. And anyway, you were grateful, were you not, for he saw you, the beautiful royal young man, and he danced with you. Did his warm possessive hands remind you of the loving touches of your father? And when you kissed, hidden in the vines upon the balcony, were his lips a little parted?

She was very wise, your godmother, whisking you away so decorously on the stroke of midnight. It is said you left him a token, a small glass brooch shaped like a dancing slipper. I imagine that was also her idea. The shoe of a woman is the symbol of her sexual part. That into which one may slip and be a perfect fit.

The rest is well known about the kingdom. That he sought you, claimed you. That he wedded you.

And after that did you hear -- I expect they kept it, protectively, from you -- that your mad father grew more mad? That he went to the king's court and shouted there that you were a minx and a harlot, and the prince a lecher. Those loyal to the kingly house pursued your father. No one knows who. It was in an alleyway. They cut his throat. And I, of course, was disgraced, because I had ill-treated you. They sent us away, I and my daughters, into exile, beyond the border. But they let me keep a share of widow's money, which was to me a fortune, and we have done very well. It may amuse you to know -- or anger you -- or gladden you, how can I tell -- that both my daughters have married. Their husbands are good men, and very rich. It happened in strange fateful ways. I will not tax you with it, in case I should offend. But, one of these husbands is even handsome, and both value laughter and sweetness. My daughters have blossomed in their care. They do not look ugly anymore, I can even see in them -- my younger self. Or, sometimes, you.

So as our path went upwards, lovely girl, sad, lost girl, yours declined. When did he begin to hurt you first? The female servant who has helped me says that it was on your wedding night. She says he chained you in a spiked collar like a dog, and used his boots. And worse. Much worse. Does she lie? How I hope so. Maybe they are even lies about the scars upon you. Though once I came back, yes, hidden in my own disguise, and I watched on the street as you passed in the glass carriage. And you were like a bird in a cage. Your hair so pale a black -- is there white in your hair? Your eyes that looked about, seeing nothing. Just a glimpse, then gone, like a spring flower, the snow-drop, that is swallowed by the mud.

Listen to me.

Tonight the clever dirty groom will be at your door, the hidden door your husband uses, but not now, for he is away hunting, is he not, riding down other slender things with his whip and that sack of poison in him called by some his heart. Yes, the groom will be there, and he will have a cloak for you, and papers. And if you go down with him, he will guard you like a child. He knows how, for he too has a daughter now, by his wife that he loves, in their fine house that I have been able to buy for them. You should witness him with this girl child. I think in him, for the very first, I have seen the proper, golden, everyday love of a father. Trust this man, if you will trust me. If ever again you can trust anyone. The border is near, and it is lightly snowing now. By dawn, when you can be far away, the snow will be thick as a wall between you and your hell.

I have bought a house for you, also. It is in a valley. A fountain falls from a cliff, and there are pines that smell of balm. In the summer there was never anywhere a sky so blue. And in winter, the sun is like silver. Even if you never live in it, this place is yours.

You need never see me, never look at me. Of course, of course, I love you. I always have. It is the selfish love that finds in another its own self. But I ask nothing of you, only that you will let me set you free. That you will let me set free the one I might have been, the one I was, the one you are.

There is everything I can say. I will put down my pen. The groom takes this to the girl, the girl gives this to you. And now, through the hours of the silent night, I will wait, wondering if you are on the road, flying at midnight, leaving not only a provocative shoe of glass, but all the false and empty dreams behind you, the dreams which became nightmares. Or, since I hid you in cold cinders, have you thrown my letter in your burning fire?