



An Anthology of Strange & Darksome Tales

Nightscript IV

NIGHTSCRIPT

VOLUME FOUR



EDITED BY C.M. Muller



CHTHONIC MATTER | St. Paul, Minnesota

NIGHTSCRIPT: *Volume Four*

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PREFACE

WELCOME TO THE newest installment of what one reviewer recently called “an annual highlight of the genre.” Sentiments such as this keep the enterprise afloat, amplify the passion I’ve always held for this book of strange wonders and the genre through which it was conceived.

Another highlight is in discovering new talent, and I am honored and delighted to include a “first” within this edition. Those wishing to rebel against the established ToC are encouraged to do so. Your entry-point: page 208.

While it’s gratifying to publish new fiction from seasoned veterans, I’d like to continue the trend of profiling the work of those just beginning their journey. That said, I’d like to encourage newcomers to submit their tales during my next reading period, which opens this January.

I think you’ll be well-pleased with Volume IV, and if you are, I’d like to ask a favor: spread the word, share the physical or e-edition of this anthology with friends and loved ones, and if their enthusiasm is aligned with your own, encourage them to repeat the process.

Finally, and as always, thank you to the Nth degree for including *Nightscript* in your reading queue. May your October be strange, darksome, and grand.

C.M. MULLER

SUGAR DADDY

V. H. Leslie

AMIRA'S FATHER HAS arranged a neat spread on the coffee table. Her new boyfriend sits at her side, helping himself to a scone and topping it with dollops of her father's homemade jam. He has made this conciliatory effort, this modest banquet in goodwill, though he has already decided to hate David. She knew it would never be easy, bringing home a man who is only a few years shy of her father's age. There is something unsettling about a disparity in age, something that for some people is hard to stomach. Amira's father offers David a salmon sandwich and she can feel him chewing over the situation as he pours tea for everyone.

To the untrained eye, it is a simple fare, sandwiches and scones, cakes and cream, but she knows that this seemingly humble endeavor has probably taken her father days of planning and preparation. For one thing, the ingredients would all be locally sourced, the scones and cakes baked by her father's hand that morning. But the icing on the cake—so to speak—is her father's homemade jam. Jam-makers, she knows from experience, are a curious breed, the alchemists of the culinary world, and her father, after many years of practice and experimentation, is unsurpassable.

Perhaps it was her mother's early death that forced him into the kitchen, obliged to fill the domestic void she left. Amira has a vague recollection of her mother's improvised meals, the hotchpotch of flavors and spices she'd

lump together: fenugreek, cardamom, turmeric. She didn't believe in lists and instructions. Whereas her father's cooking is based on exactitude and order, the kitchen more like a laboratory, filled with fancy gadgets and gizmos. Now Amira's father occupies what was once her mother's space and her mother is consigned to the living room, her urn perched high on the mantelpiece. Watching proceedings.

Would she have liked David? He isn't much to look at. Overweight, with crumbs on his shirtfront. But he has skipped lunch to be here, persevering with the dainty crockery that's too precarious in his big hands. And he isn't wolfing it all down, but weighing up whether to have another scone, whether to risk eating more under the scrutiny of her father. Amira wonders if her father has engineered it this way, to make it difficult for David, the low coffee table, the finger food. But afternoon tea is the logical choice for an encounter like this, a midway point between lunch and dinner, far less formal than a sit-down meal, though not without ritual. Amira herself is on middle ground, seated between these two men, her loyalty divided like the scone in front of her, cleft into two equal parts.

Amira hears the key in the front door and realizes with dismay that her sister Zahra is home. She hoped David would've escaped meeting the whole family in this one encounter.

"Well, what's this?" Zahra asks, eyeing the feast and David in one glance.

"This is David."

"David," she repeats, perching on an armrest. She reaches for a slice of almond cake, refusing the napkin her father offers. He withdraws to the kitchen, shaking his head.

"Cook much?" she asks with her mouth full.

"We prefer eating out," David replies. He does this a lot, speaking on behalf of them both.

"Don't say that in front of the Old Man," Zahra says, taking another bite, and Amira hopes David accepts it as an affectionate term for her father rather than a reference to his age, and by extension, David's own age. But in her father's absence David is happily loading another scone with cream.

"So, what's in it anyway?" Zahra asks holding up the jar.

"Pomegranate I think."

"And?"

Zahra is right of course. Her father passed the point of making perfect pomegranate jam years ago. Where do pioneering men like her father go after mastering a recipe, why, they push forward. What secret ingredient did this innocuous jar contain, what special process had been used to turn this seemingly regular jam into something extraordinary?

Zahra sniffs the jar and tentatively dips in her spoon.

“It tastes fine to me,” David asserts, though Amira doubts his palate is refined enough to appreciate the subtleties within.

Some of her earliest memories are of her father making jam, wearing her mother’s floral apron while stirring various bubbling concoctions, all the while waxing lyrical on the protean qualities of sugar. He’d talk her through the stages of boiling, drawing thread-like particles from the pan, the slivers enmeshing the spoon like a sticky nest. She’d watch him line the counter with sterilized jars, administering the sugar thermometer to the boiling pot with the same care he used when looking after her and Zahra when they had a fever. How she’d love to watch those bright mixtures strain through the muslin into the depths of the jars. The lucent gleam of their promised delights through the glass.

Once Amira and Zahra found a recipe for Nostradamus’ love jam among their father’s books. It is no surprise to her now that this notorious forward thinker—quite literally—was an avid jam-maker. Like her father, he marveled at the preservative virtues of sugar, which must have seemed to belong to the realms of magic all those years ago. She remembers abandoning the recipe when it called for the blood of seven male sparrows, though she and Zahra ran out into the garden anyway, to declare war on the birds, chasing them up into the air.

Her father returns from the kitchen with an extra cup and proceeds to pour Zahra tea.

“Lovely jam,” David says, holding up the scone as if making a toast, “so what’s your secret?”

Now Amira’s father smiles; having sweetened David up, she realizes he has been waiting to answer this question all afternoon.

“Ambrosia,” he whispers.

Zahra laughs, and David looks at Amira uncertainly.

“I’m quite in earnest,” he continues. “After all these years, I’ve finally managed to make an anti-aging jam.”

David doesn’t have much of a sense of humor at the best of times. He places the half-eaten scone down and sits upright. “If this is about the age difference,” he begins.

“Well, quite,” Amira’s father replies. He sips his tea with a satisfied grin. “You don’t need to thank me. I’ve engineered it so that if you eat a spoonful of my jam each day, you will stay at this age forever. Perfectly preserved.”

David looks at Amira again and back at her father. Then he slaps his knee and lets out a bellowing laugh.

“I’m being perfectly truthful,” Amira’s father continues, “in twenty years you’ll be an old man, who knows how incapacitated or decrepit, and who will look after my daughter then?”

David stops laughing. "Listen, I'm trying to take this in good humor but..."

"But what?"

Amira notices Zahra smiling. Her father is prone to such eccentricities. Once when she'd brought a boyfriend home, his showstopper was octopus in aspic. It was a beastly specimen, a veritable kraken, floating within the savory jelly, its tentacles defying gravity.

The boyfriend never returned. It must be some kind of protective impulse, the use of these scare tactics. Her father's concoctions are designed to test a man's mettle and at the same time to protect his children from getting hurt. It is as if she and Zahra are preserved in aspic still, encased in a gelatinous bubble of their father's love.

"This is ridiculous," David says standing.

Amira can see how David would think so. But another part of her wonders if her father has actually managed to accomplish it. If Nostradamus, that great seer, who was able to forecast so much, believed in the power of jam, why shouldn't she? Made with the right ingredients, in the right way, he claimed that jam had the power to induce love and passion, to cure the plague. Who could say it couldn't stop the aging effects of time?

And if the elixir of life, the nectar of immortality was going to take any form, it is right that it should be jam. For what other substance enhances the sweetness of things and has such a long shelf life?

Amira eyes the jar cautiously, her father's panacea to be consumed on crumpets and toast. To restore the natural order David has upset.

"We won't stand for it," David continues, speaking for Amira again. "I love your daughter and I'm not going anywhere."

And suddenly Amira sees that this is true. David, who has jam at the corner of his lips, leading his simple, sedentary life, is already sealed in a glass jar. He doesn't need a spoonful of sugar each day; his character is already fixed, rigid as if he were set in jelly.

Whilst Amira is still growing, changing, becoming who she is meant to be.

"You should patent this," Zahra interrupts, spreading the jam generously over a scone. "Much easier than bathing in the blood of virgins, eh?"

No one says anything for a while. Then her father walks slowly to the mantelpiece.

"Cinnabar, jade, hematite, gold," he says, lightly touching her mother's urn. "Many ancient alchemists experimented with making life-prolonging potions. They thought these precious substances might somehow bestow their properties of longevity on those ingesting them. But my secret ingredient is closer to home."

Amira picks up the jar, looking for the tincture of vermilion, a dusting of

gold but there is no trace. Part of her doesn't want to know what is in the jam. Forbidden knowledge always demands too high a price.

"What if you eat too much?" Zahra asks.

"I wouldn't do that," her father replies. "Theoretically, you would age backwards."

"Backwards?"

"You would grow younger."

Amira can sense this has David's attention as he sets his plate down. Perhaps he isn't immune to the temptation of going back to his prime. Amira can't imagine David ever having a heyday, though it rankles her that he would favor the past—his younger self—than the man he is now, with her at his side.

As for Amira, how far back would she go? How much pomegranate jam would she need to eat to be a girl of twelve again, to exist in that time before aspic and jam and death. When the house smelt of cinnamon and rose, their suburban English life spiced with her mother's exoticism. Could her father make enough for Amira to see her again?

She lets David take the jar out of her hand. He holds it to the light.

"Why don't you take that one," her father says. "I made a big batch."

David looks at Amira then screws the lid hesitantly in place. He stands up, beckoning her to follow. We are leaving now, is what she hears in her head, but she doesn't move.

Because she can feel herself surrounded by an invisible glutinous mass, a gummy weight around her feet and arms, a sticky, unbreakable bond David could never compete with.

She watches David pocket the jam and leave her behind.

Her father smiles as he pours himself another cup of tea whilst Zahra licks the jam from her fingers. And Amira can see her mother in her mind's eye, somewhere far away, whilst her urn, she imagines, overflows with pomegranate seeds.