

Fall 12-1-2013

From Dusk 'til Dawn

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Recommended Citation

Blue, Psiren (2013) "From Dusk 'til Dawn," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 36: No. 1, Article 60.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol36/iss1/60>

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The cold, unforgiving wind whipped through the town, lashing out at any bold enough to face the chilly wrath. At this hour, few still littered the streets. Most had returned to the robust flames of life within their homes, while others drifted into the inviting warmth of local bars and taverns. Only she remained to withstand the harsh winter air, oblivious to the painful breaths lashed upon her. As she walked the lonesome city streets, her mind adrift and oblivious to the world, she held tightly to a jacket, though it provided her neither warmth nor comfort. Even as the winds screamed in rebellion, desperate to rob her of any lasting comfort she possessed, the woman continued her silent march forward, her destination within sight.

"I don't know how you didn't see this coming."

"I thought we were happy..."

"Lu, I've been puttin' distance between us for the past few months. How could you not notice?"

"How was I supposed to? You were always smiling like you were happy."

"Yeah, but I was never smiling because of you..."

Lu stared out over the cold, black river, tears streaming down her face in silver rivulets. She feebly clutched the jacket still strewn across her hunched shoulders, her mind not registering the chilling bite of the wind as it whipped past her in icy currents.

She found herself wondering, how had it come to this? Was she so oblivious to the world that something as simple as this was lost to her? Surely, there was another explanation. Surely, there was something else...wasn't there?

The winter winds set down upon her with gruesome terror, but Lu's mind was elsewhere, reliving the most fateful day in her life.

"Eric, can't we talk about this?"

"What's left to talk about, Lu? We're done here."

"How can you just walk away from us like this?"

"Walk away from us? Lu, there is no us. There's just you living in that delusional world of yours like you always do. There is no happily-ever-after, Lu. You need to just grow up and deal with it. We're done. We're over. There's nothing left to say."

But he was wrong. There was so much that Lu needed to say. There was so much she wished he had heard.

He was the only man in her entire life that made Lu feel special. He was the only person in her life upon whom she depended. He was the only person in her life that understood her as well as he did. Hell, if she was honest with herself, he was the only person in her life. She needed him--gods, how she needed him--but he didn't hear her. No, he was far too busy thrusting himself into a woman half Lu's



A fresh stream of tears threatened to spill, but Lu beat them back with the back of her hand, angrily wiping them away before they could fall and admit her defeat. She wouldn't cry for him anymore. She wouldn't depend on him anymore. At least, that's what she told herself as she numbly pulled on her clothes and trenched out into the damnably cold night hours before.

Before meeting Eric, Lu was independent and noble. Her mind was sharp and agile, able to conceive the most complex of ideas with the ease of a child pondering clouds. Before she met Eric, things were different. When she met him, Lu was overjoyed--overwhelmed with a feeling of completion, a feeling of the utmost achievement. How had things gone so wrong, so fast?

Lu promised herself that she wouldn't become crazy over a man, yet here she was, standing on the precipice of destruction. As she peered over the edge, into the dark nothingness the lake offered, she felt a deep, desperate calling resonating from somewhere far below. Perhaps it was the insanity talking, but Lu felt compelled beyond reason to answer the call, to plunge deep into the cold, empty abyss that awaited her and sink into the depths of oblivion.

Almost gleefully, Lu took a step forward and placed her numbed hands on the wooden banister of the bridge. She peered out over the river with tear-blinded eyes. The pain of heartbreak was overwhelming, too much for her to bear, but she barely felt it, now, numbed from the world as she was to preserve herself. Abandoning all hopes for a fruitful life seemed almost a blessing for her, the irrefutable choice she had to make. But, as she prepared to throw herself over the edge and into the blissful embrace of the deathless oblivion, a shuddering movement caught her eye.

Huddled up against the opposite side of the bridge, a trembling ball of fur with two big, black eyes stared up at Lu, watching her fearfully as she hoisted herself up.

"What are you doing here?" Lu asked as she carefully lowered herself back onto the bridge. "Shouldn't you be home with some loving family? This weather is unkind to little puppies like you."

Lu carefully walked toward the trembling pup, barely a year old. It's fur had grown in odd patches and couldn't provide the pup with enough warmth to withstand the cruel winter winds. The fearful creature recoiled when Lu reached out to touch it, before hesitantly melting into the bare warmth of her hand. At least she didn't strike me.

Sinking down beside the pup, Lu wrapped her arms around the tiny ball of trembling fur, careful not to terrify him, careful not to agitate him.

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“Are you alone, too?” Lu asked, cradling the pup in her arms. “Did someone abandon you, as well?”

As if to reply, the pup offered a half-whine, half-bark. In the light, Lu could see him better: His fur hadn't grown in unevenly; someone had torn it free of him in large handfuls, leaving ugly scars littering his tiny body. Where the skin was still exposed, Lu could see black and purple bruises the size of her fist. She wondered if he had any broken bones. The pup's tongue lolled to one side of its mouth, stained with black spots, probably blood from any one of his barely healed wounds. A pang of sympathy tore through Lu as she examined the poor pup.

“You look as bad as I feel,” Lu murmured softly. The pup merely nuzzled into her for warmth.

Lu cast her gaze to the starless sky overhead. An eternal oblivion greeted her, stretching out in all directions to cover the world in a blissful, silent night. The puppy in her arms shuddered as a cold wind washed over them and howled out threateningly.

“I wonder if we're all meant to suffer...if we're all meant to find warmth in one another in the darkest parts of the night. I wonder if that's why we're born...”

As the sun broke through the darkness, Lu shuddered against the cold.

Eruptions

[Linda Elaine]

Cold, thick mists blanketed my hat and slicker. Only a third of a mile to the top, but my calves burned like they had endured five miles of steep, wet, concrete terrain. Forty other Americans and I had traveled by bus thirty or more miles outside of San Jose to Alajuela, where we hoped swift winds would blow the clouds away to reveal one of Central America's largest and most active volcanoes: the Poas. With every advancing step, my lungs labored to acclimate themselves to the bitter, stinging sulphur that had filled the air and the bottom of this volcano for thousands of years.

“Just turn back,” my inner voice said.

Our guide had warned us about the steep climb and the

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