

The Doom of Sir Actaeon

The Ammonite

The sun, a moth, burned high in the late summer sky. A gentle breeze circulated throughout downtown and Sir Actaeon walked along, stepping over cracks in the pavement to the rhythm of a song. His energy seemed nested in his shoulder, which weaved through the crowds and bobbed with each down beat. Sir Actaeon crossed when the red palm flashed to a white pedestrian.

Crickets, concealed in the leaves of the trees, sang out. Hot days would remain though the year had begun to slip towards autumn. Sir Actaeon looked at the towers of the Bridge. Its bricks jutted out into a pale blue sky. Cold days lay ahead.

Sir Actaeon hurried through Little Italy. He turned his head from the pastry carts and kept his eyes welded to the midpoint. He passed a black apartment, an empty square lot, a stand selling cannolis, then crossed the street towards the quiet end of Chinatown. Shadows covered the sidewalk. He let them flow over his head as he walked.

Sir Actaeon's momentum carried him from the street to the inside of a restaurant. Paper currency from around the world hung to the wall. The waiter, a dour and silent man wearing a phosphorescent Hawaiian shirt, led him from the standing area towards a seat in the dining room. He handed Sir Actaeon a menu.

—Any recommendations? asked Sir Actaeon.

The waiter spoke plainly:

—Uh soup dumpling's good, also many of our customers like gong bao ji ding.

Sir Actaeon listened, shaking his head, glancing at the menu.

—I'll have a Qingdao, said Sir Actaeon, and an order of the soup dumplings.

—Beer and an order of the soup dumplings. The man scribbled the order on a pad and walked away.

Sir Actaeon permitted his mind to wander. He was alone save for a couple speaking quietly and intently in a corner of the room. Unobserved, Sir Actaeon slouched in his chair. He pulled out his phone and contented himself on a stream of his friends.

After a few minutes had passed the waiter returned with a bamboo steamer. He removed the top unceremoniously, revealing six plump dumplings on a bed of clear perforated paper.

—Be right back with your beer, he said.

Sir Actaeon used his chopsticks to ferry one of the soup dumplings to his plate.

Meantime the waiter had returned with a bottle of Qingdao. He placed a glass on the table and peeled off the cap. Then the waiter slid the bottle across the table to Sir Actaeon.

Sir Actaeon ate slowly. Hot golden soup spilled onto his spoon each time he nibbled through the base of a dumpling. After raising spoonfuls of savory rich soup, Sir Actaeon cooled the soup dumplings and closed his mouth around the batter and gelatinized pork. He waited a moment and, after the taste had mellowed on his palate, took a swig of beer directly from the bottle. When the dumplings were gone he took swigs from his beer and ordered another.

The waiter laid a second bottle on the table with a thump.

—Thank you, spoke Sir Actaeon.

Alone now, Sir Actaeon relaxed. He knocked back swigs of beer until his head buzzed. Soup and beer sloshed together in his stomach. When he finished the bottle he considered a third...but the waiter was en route with the check. Sir Actaeon counted out dollar bills and, after slotting them into the tray, tipped his head at the waiter and moved towards the door.

The streets were flaring with activity when Sir Actaeon stepped back out. Traffic had thickened and Red Cross and firefighters had barricaded the entrance to Little Italy with sawhorses. In front of the barrier pedestrians watched black smoke rising from a storefront down the block.

—What happened? Sir Actaeon asked a mother rocking a stroller back and forth.

—A grease fire in one of the bakeries, she said, it went up quick and they couldn't put it out.

—Anyone hurt? asked Sir Actaeon.

—Not that I know of. The business is doomed though.

Sir Actaeon made an empathetic gesture with his head.

—Take care, he said.

Sir Actaeon walked into the city. He had nowhere to be and thought he would stroll. He could walk down to the water, there to watch the afternoon deepen to evening.

He did. Sir Actaeon strolled up the avenues. Passing under many a scaffold, Actaeon heard the sigh of the highway by the riverside. As he crossed, a helicopter, its rotors flickering in the sunlight, descended behind a tall black fence. Sir Actaeon walked to the edge of the pier and placed his hands on the railing.

Blue waves chopped under the clouds. Across the river lay New Jersey. The New Jersey buildings seemed distant, and rose up dreamily, reflecting the sunlight. From the left a yacht slowly made its way upstream. As it came into range Sir Actaeon examined the figures on deck. One, a woman wearing nothing but a black bikini bottom, walked from stern to prow. Sir Actaeon's gaze moved up her pale legs, up past the hem of her bikini to the curve of her tits. The woman's gaze met Sir Actaeon's and for a brief moment locked. She had eyes the color of onyx, with the same mineral intensity. She looked hard at Sir Actaeon then resumed her unhurried stride. Sir Actaeon felt shame burning in his wandering eyes. He yawned and the yacht slid up and away.

With the sun at his back he paced down the avenues. The sky above him drained from teal to pale shades of blue. The sight of a mushroom, white with brown scales, arrested his step, and he stooped to take it. The flesh on the stalk was a reddish gray and bruised a reddish brown, retaining his thumbprint. He held the mushroom in his fist; it evoked a scepter as he walked.

Sir Actaeon walked home with the sinking sun at his back. The workers had all been let out. Crowds walked down the avenues in tight-flowing lines; cars jammed the avenues and a sound of frustration lifted from the streets into the sky.

—Yo, said Sir Actaeon as he returned to his apartment.

His roommate spooned pomegranate stones into a white bowl.

—What's going on Sir?

—I found this while I was out.

Sir Actaeon laid the mushroom on the table. An instant later his roommate returned:

—Leucoagaricus americanus, also known as reddening Lepiota—see how the margin turns pink?

—I see, said Sir Actaeon.

—Put it in the oven and shut the door, his roommate said, it'll turn wine-red. The pilot light's enough to dry it out.

—How long?

—Hour and a half.

Sir Actaeon shut the mushroom in the oven, then shut himself in his room. Here he masturbated and watched t.v. on his computer. When an hour and a half had passed, Sir Actaeon paused his episode and went into the kitchen. He pulled open the oven door, a blast of heat rising to his face. Sir Actaeon used an oven mitt and spoon to transfer the mushroom from the rack to a cutting board on the kitchen counter.

The soft fluffy cap had wrinkled and creases had appeared on all of the warts. Its surface, bore vinaceous splotches. The stem had shriveled too, the bulb at the bottom had shrunken to a little black knot. Sir Actaeon turned the mushroom over to examine the gills.

They were yellow and crowded together in sickly hues. Sir Actaeon looked at the dried out upturned mushroom.

The front door swung open.