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Lady Temptation

J.R. Sloan

The coal miners sat at the bar of O'Reilly's when the old woman who would introduce herself as Lady Temptation meandered up to them.

She leaned against the bar and looked to the youngest of the three, a boy barely graduated from high school with spots of acne under the coal dust. She bent so her lips were inches from his ear. Unheard by his companions, she asked him what he wanted most. He said he wanted to be with someone, to experience love, to experience passion and life. She nodded, took his hand in hers, and pulled him from the barstool despite the protesting grunts of his companions.

They watched as she led him across the bar to a woman his own age, who seemed much like a twenty-year-old variant of the woman. After introductions had been strode back over; there was a floating grace to the way she moved across the bar. She plopped down beside the coal miners on the stool formerly occupied by the youngest miner. She quietly asked the middle-aged man now sitting beside her what he wanted most. He ogled her for a moment before he spoke.

"I want something new," came his reply. His words seemed to tumble from his lips, unwitting and unconnected to the man speaking them. "I'm tired of the same damn life."

Lady Temptation nodded. Long fingers and painted nails curled around his shoulder as she guided him off the stool and glided over to a middle-aged woman, once more not unlike a younger Lady Temptation herself. Words were exchanged before Lady Temptation drifted back and settled upon the stool that had just been occupied.

For the last time, she asked the old miner what he desired most. Her breath smelt like roses to him, a man of about sixty, near retirement. She was far too close for his comfort and he leaned away on his stool. Unlike his compatriots, he kept his lips locked for a moment and instead took a swig of his beer and demanded her name.

She replied that she is called Lady Temptation, a seductive and arrogant air in her voice. It carried like nectar, a syrup that seemed to flood and drown his thoughts and inhibitions. She repeated her earlier question, lips now moving against his ear.

“Peace,” came his fluid reply, although the miner could not place in his mind where the word originated. He continued speaking. “I’ve worked for so long I just want to relax.”

Lady Temptation told him to follow as she dropped from the stool. The old coal miner felt compelled to stand up and follow. He reached a hand into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash, left it on the wooden bar counter, and downed the rest of his beer in one fell swoop. Cold air billowed through the door as they exited out a side door and into a dimly lit corner of the parking lot. The old coal miner looked down to see a syringe lying beside a car, the young coal miner reclined in the back seat as the young woman moved against him, showing him what the lust and passion and life he desired was. Pounding drums and soaring guitars tried to escape the confines of the car’s cab. His eyes burned, and the old coal miner recognized it—the young man would be dead within the hour from the youthful recklessness flowing through his veins.

The old man remembered some advice he had once given the young man. It had been his first day and a man on the left quaked with withdrawal from the medications the doctor had prescribed. “Keep your head down, hands working, and out of them pills.” With enough work he could get out of the darkness, out of the tunnels of nightmares and live his dreams. He wanted to

play in a rock band. The old miner just repeated his advice: “Keep your head down, hands working, and out of them pills.” Protests had erupted from the kid’s mouth as he moaned that life wasn’t fair, and that he’d be on those pills when he hurt his back like every miner before him.

“I was born here,” was how he finished his monologue. “This is the life I was born for. Ain’t no escapin’ it now.”

Lady Temptation broke the old miner’s thoughts and assured him the young man would be okay. She laced her fingers within his as they walked. He knew she was lying, but he knew there was nothing he could do and allowed her to lead him down the street. The middle-aged coal miner disembarked from a car with his companion in the driveway of his small house. Lady Temptation and the old miner stopped outside the door.

“His poor wife,” was all he could say. He remembered their wedding day. Their whole mine shift had been there, gathered in their best clothes to celebrate love. The bride had looked elegant in the white wedding dress, a being with nothing but the purest of love for her husband-to-be. They had danced at the reception, all of them, and in the middle of a song the groom had whispered something in the old miner’s ear.

“I slept with one of her bridesmaids last night.”

The old miner had sighed and knew it would continue.

Shouting erupted from inside, audible only through the opened front window. His wife screamed and cried as the woman he had brought home screamed and cried back at her. It continued for several minutes and the oldest pair stood outside until Lady Temptation suggested they move on. A breeze rattled leaves on the trees as they continued down the crumbled road. To any outside observer, the pair looked natural, as though they belonged on the street, like details

in a painting. He winced as the sound of a shotgun blast behind them rang out through the night. The window of the house behind him was sprayed with crimson as more weeping carried from inside. Lady Temptation seemed unaffected.

“My old man used to write and sing songs,” began the old coal miner. “They were all so depressing, but I loved listenin’ to ’em. They were all about strugglin’ and findin’ a way outta these mountains and valleys. Outta the darkness of the mines and the pain and the poverty. Always told me if I kept my head down low and stayed outta trouble, got good at somethin’ I could escape the fate of him.”

Lady Temptation asked the miner how his father had died.

“Black lung an’ cancer,” he replied, his voice deep and hollow all at once. “Took ’im out in six months from the diagnosis. He worked two of those until he dropped, spent the rest at home in bed.”

The pair stopped at the wood line at the end of the street. Stumps stood around them, the land to be cleared for more houses.

“I managed to get past the temptations of youth and worked my whole life,” said the old miner. His voice began to crack and a tear appeared in the corner of one tired eye. “I found myself a good wife and remained faithful ’til she died. That young man back there was the closest I ever got to kids though. I wanted to do what my old man told me when I was a kid. Work hard and get out. I never did.

Lady Temptation agreed he had not.

“You’re coming for our souls,” said the old miner. His voice was flat with simplicity and knowing. He hadn’t a clue how he knew what he did, just that it was the truth.

Lady Temptation agreed she was and asked once more what he desired most.

“I want peace.”

The old coal miner felt as though a great weight lifted as her fingers splayed across his chest and pulled his soul from where it resided within him.