

## The Inscrutable Lady

The storm is breaking. It's beginning to rain really hard and I look around for somewhere to shelter.

Right across the road I see an antique shop.

Antique shops cast a strange spell over me. I'm inexorably drawn into their bosom and there time seems to slow down and stop. It's as though the items cast a spell over me dragging me deeper and deeper into their past. Are they trying to tell their stories to me?

Doubly thrilled to have unexpectedly found this gem and to be out of the raging storm, I look around and the wealth of items almost makes my head reel.

I'm immediately drawn to a silver backed hair brush. I pick it up. The silver is worn from many years of use. How many hands used this brush? Or was there only one hand? What did she look like? Was she happy? Was she married? Did she have a lover? Many lovers? Did she use this brush all her life?

My mind has decided, it has created a history just for me. I see her having been deeply in love but jilted at the altar.

Her rival had had straight hair.

Somehow she seemed to think that her beau was put off by her curls.

For the rest of her life she sat in front of her mirror and tried to comb her hair straight.

I'm lost in my silly imagining of what the history of the brush is when an eerie feeling of being watched rises up inside me.

I put the brush down and sweep my eyes around the shop.

No-one.

I feel compelled to look up and an electric shock ripples through my body. Her eyes bore into my soul. They are at once inviting and sneering. I move to one side and then the other. They follow me. Relentless in their intensity.

She is sitting on a stool. Her left hand rests on her right hand which holds an object.

I walk closer.

I gasp as I recognize the object.

It is a silver brush.

I turn and pick up the brush again and walk right up to the photograph.

I inspect the two brushes closely.

Right down to a scratch mark they are identical.

Goose bumps raise up all over my body as an eerie feeling wells up inside me.

This is ridiculous.

How can an object and a photograph have this effect on me?

I look into her eyes.

They seem to mock my concern.

"Eerily fascinating, aren't they?"

I nearly faint from fright.

Turning around, the young man who was at the desk when I walked in, is standing behind me.

"Holy shit." I exclaim, "You damn nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Forgive me," he smiles, "I didn't mean to scare you,"

"That's OK. What do you know about this photograph?"

"It's fascinating, isn't it? Legend has it that the young lady was jilted by a lover. She apparently then placed a curse on it saying that it will make men fall in love with the image and that they will pine away for the love of something that exists only in an image."

I turn and look at those eyes again.

They do conjure up feelings of longing, of wanting of, love.

"Has no-one ever wanted to purchase it?" I ask.

"Strangely, no."

"Have you noticed the brush in the photograph and the one on the table over there?"

A smile crosses his features, "Oh yes. The brush was given to us together with the photograph."

"By whom?"

"A lady dressed in black. She had a black veil covering her features. She would not accept any payment, said she just wanted to be rid of the beastly thing."

"No idea who she was? Or where she is now?"

"No, on both counts. But some folk say that she was the widow of the bloke who jilted the subject of the photograph."

"Do they know what happened to him?"

"Legend also has it that he'd pined to death over the lady he jilted. He was apparently the first victim of her curse. It is said that she will continue to hunt men until the curse is broken by a great love."

I turn to those eyes again. I am drawn to them.

She is beautiful. Soft and feminine. Innocent, yet worldly.

The air grows chilly and I look up. She's walking towards me. The woman in the picture.

It can't be. I must be dreaming.

My eyes sweep back and forth between the picture and the approaching figure to make sure – no to prove – that I'm mistaken.

But I'm not.

I turn to query my perception with the young man.

There is no sign of him.

She walks slowly towards me. Her eyes beckon me, invite me, make me want her.

I'm transfixed by those eyes as they bore into me willing me to love her to death.

She holds her arms towards me.

My feet seem glued to the floor. I cannot move them.

"Come", she mouths wordlessly.

I'm fighting this feeling, my desire, with all my will power.

I close my eyes and try to create an image of my fiancée in my mind. I tell her that I love her above all else. I imagine her drawing me powerfully to her. I will her to do so.

As her smiling image begins to form in my mind I feel my feet loosen.

I grab the opportunity, turn and run rapidly towards the door, out, down the steps and into the pelting rain.

I break my rapid exit by grabbing onto a pole on the sidewalk.

My heart is pounding and I'm breathing heavily from fear.

I turn to make sure no-one is following me.

The rain runs in my eyes and I wipe it away, cupping my hand over my eyes.

I stare incredulously at the blank wall next to a supermarket. There is no antique shop . . . .