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books

Blood
on Her
Tongue

— a novel —

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Poisoned Pen
PRESS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

MY BELOVED READER,

In your hands, you hold a work of gothic horror. As such, it naturally contains terror and rage and other emotional extremes, strange and frightening occurrences that may or may not be supernatural, and an atmosphere so thick you can stick a knife in it (though you can never be sure that knife will be where you left it once you return from your nightly wanderings. That is, *if* you return. It's gothic. You never know.).

What I mean to say is that you can expect quite a lot of disquieting, dark, and dreadful things from this book by virtue of its genre. I do not wish to spoil the story for you, but I do wish to warn you so that you may prepare yourself accordingly before you wander into its darkness wearing only a flimsy nightgown and holding a dripping candle to light your way that this book contains discussions and instances of sickness, death of a loved one, body horror/gore, the stigmatization of the mentally ill, misogyny, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, cheating, and toxic

codependent relationships (where would gothic and queer literature be without them?).

It has always been my intent to treat these issues with the sensitivity they deserve. Because the road to hell is paved with good intentions, I have not merely *intended*; I have, among other things, done a lot of research into different mental illnesses: what may cause them, how they manifest themselves, how they affect both the person who has the illness and the people near them, as well as how these illnesses would be perceived in the late nineteenth century in the Netherlands. Additionally, I have made grateful use of a sensitivity reader (thank you, Johanie!).

Dark and creepy things lie ahead, yes, but hopefully a delightfully spooky good time as well. Please enjoy, and thank you for picking up *Blood on Her Tongue*!

Part I

“I am longing to be with you, and by the sea, where we can talk together freely and build our castles in the air.”

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

LETTER FROM MRS. SARAH SCHATTELEYN
TO MISS LUCY GOEDHART

My twin my darling my LUCY

All is not well with me not AT ALL well

NO

ive a BLINDING PAIN in my head

i didnt think it was possible to experience such pain and

LIVE

i feel like taking a SPOON

to my eye and scooping it

out out OUT OUT out

anything to make

it STOP MAKE IT STOP makeitstoppleasemakeitstop

i often think but only when SHE allows me to think because

how can anyone think with a pain like this like something

rooting through your head or or or theres a word for it and i

know it but it wont come to me i think shes taking away my

words now too oh god oh god oh god ohgodohgod please no but

*when she lets me i think how good it would be to be DEAD
because then at least it wouldnt hurt*

*only i cant because thats what SHE wants and no matter
what i cant give her what she wants not NOT EVER
never NEVER NEVER never*

*shes a DEMON an UNHOLY thing all WILE all UNCLEAN
i wish i could KILL her or at
least hurt her like she hurts me*

*see how she likes to have her brain feel like a salted slug
see you HORRIBLE THING you can rob me of some of my
big words but i can use other words to describe what youre
doing to me*

i hurt so much lucy

*please please PLEASE come to me my sweet sister i am
terrified of what i might do if you dont*

Sarah

TELEGRAM FROM MR. MICHAEL
SCHATTELEYN TO MISS LUCY GOEDHART

RECEIVED AT

VEENPOORT 11:06 28/09/1887

SARAH DEADLY SICK. PLEASE
COME IMMEDIATELY. NO NEED TO
SEND WORD AHEAD. WILL ENSURE
SOMEONE THERE TO MEET YOU AT
STATION NO MATTER THE TIME.
JUST HURRY. I FEAR FOR HER LIFE.

MICHAEL

Chapter 1

THE TRAIN LEFT THE STATION at noon.

By then, so many little things had gone wrong that Lucy couldn't help but wonder whether her journey was ill-fated. Firstly, she had intended to be on an earlier train, the one that left at ten, but one of the horses pulling the carriage taking her to the station had thrown a shoe, delaying her by almost two hours. When she finally arrived, the heel of her left boot snapped off, causing her to sprain her ankle. Once she was seated within the train, she thought herself momentarily safe from the common misfortune that had dogged her that morning. This proved to be an illusion when a fellow passenger, a middle-aged woman who smelled strongly of rose water, dumped her travel bag onto Lucy's lap.

Startled, Lucy jerked in her seat. The book she had been idly flicking through, a collection of gothic tales translated from English, fell from her lap. In between its pages, tucked there carefully to prevent loss and creases, lay the most recent letters

from her twin sister, Sarah. They spilled onto the floor and under the seats.

"Oh my!" the woman said. She snatched up the bag as if afraid Lucy would make away with it. "I didn't see you," she said, by way of explanation. Then she added, "You really should be more careful, you know."

Lucy, who had dropped to her knees to gather her precious letters, only smiled wanly in response.

Offended, the woman huffed and sat in Lucy's seat. Lucy opened her mouth to tell her, then decided against it and took an empty seat by the window. She brushed away the dust and hair that clung to the envelopes, then smoothed them carefully and counted them to make sure she had retrieved them all. Merely looking at them had her feeling restless and sick, her sternum throbbing as if a piece of string had been wound around the bone and someone were trying to gather it up, pulling her along with it.

She did not have long to muse on these sensations. The only other passenger in the carriage, the woman who smelled of rose water, let out a scream a mere five minutes after the train had pulled out of the station. "Oh my God!" she shrieked, pressing her hand to her chest.

"What?" Lucy asked wildly. "What is it?"

The woman pointed. At first, Lucy had no idea at what. Then she saw a spider had crawled onto the windowpane, on their side of the glass. It was only little, barely bigger than the nail of Lucy's thumb.

"Oh," Lucy said. "Don't worry. It won't hurt you."

The woman shook her head. Her eyes had gone round, leaving the irises all rimmed with white. "Get it away from me!" she gasped, as if her fear were so potent it was choking her.

Perhaps this is another sign, Lucy thought, as she took a letter out of its envelope and placed it in her lap, though a sign of what, she didn't know, and besides, signs were cheap when you went looking for them. Better to just focus on the task at hand.

She applied pressure to the sides of the envelope, causing it to gape open, then carefully brushed the spider inside. Spiders did not frighten her, nor did any other insect, for that matter. Aunt Adelheid, her mother's eccentric older sister, had loved them and studied them obsessively. One of Lucy's earliest memories was of herself and Sarah sitting on a blanket in the garden while Aunt Adelheid dug into a patch of earth close to them. It must have rained only recently; Lucy remembered the blanket had been damp, and the soil had been dark and soft, sticking in great clumps to her aunt's fingers.

"There!" Aunt Adelheid said triumphantly. She plucked something from the ground and held it out for her nieces to see. It was a worm, nearly as long as a finger, delicately segmented, with a thick band near one end. The worm writhed in her grip. In the soft spring light, it gleamed various shades of pink and beige.

"Pretty!" Sarah cried out.

"Pretty!" Lucy agreed.

"You may touch it, but be careful! It's delicate," she said.

"Some people think that if you cut a worm in half, you will have two worms. How amazing that would be! A creature that can twin itself! But that's..."

Sarah, always quick, always decisive and boundlessly curious, grabbed the worm and tore it in half.

"...nothing but an old wives' tale," Aunt Adelheid finished.

Sarah placed half the worm into Lucy's hands. It was cool to the touch, slightly wet. Sarah's own half, the one with the band near its end, continued to wriggle in her grip, its whole body curving and then straightening again as it tried to get away. Lucy's half only twitched weakly. Soon, it lay still. Lucy stared, aghast, as its vivid pink hue blanched into an unremarkable gray. It looked pathetic next to Sarah's squirming half, a poor version of what a worm should be.

A thought had come to her, horrible enough that she remembered it even now: What if she and Sarah were like those pieces of the worm? Sarah, vivid and alive, and Lucy, nothing but a weak imitation of the real thing?

No wonder people don't notice me and accidentally throw their luggage on my lap, Lucy thought, as she folded the envelope shut with the spider inside, taking care not to hurt it. Funny what things one could remember in sudden moments of stress. Not that the thought caused her any anguish, not anymore. She had long since accepted what she was and was not. In fact, the memory was almost sweet; Sarah had tried to comfort her by saying her worm must simply be sleeping and, when it still wouldn't move,

she had dashed it from Lucy's hand and declared the whole thing silly, asking Aunt Adelheid if she had something else to show them, something better?

Lucy placed the envelope with the spider carefully on the empty seat beside her. She could release it once she left the train. It would be much better off spinning a web in a tree somewhere, or a lantern post, where the light might attract moths and other insects it could eat—or was this not the kind of spider that wove a web? Sarah might know...

No sooner had she let go of the envelope than her fellow passenger whacked it with her umbrella. She used such force, the envelope flew into the air. With a screech, she batted it to the floor, where she stomped on it with first her left foot, then the right. Her boots left dark marks on the paper, which was now so flattened as to make the survival of the spider impossible.

Shocked, Lucy stared at the woman. "Whatever did you do that for?" she exclaimed.

"Nasty creatures," the woman said, then shrugged. When she alighted at the next station, it was to Lucy's profound relief.

Only a few more hours, and then I shall be with Sarah again, Lucy thought as the stationmaster blew his whistle and the train resumed its journey.

Rain rattled against the thin windowpane, mingling with the soot on the glass and creating fantastic streaks of gray. Lucy frowned. She hadn't thought to bring an umbrella. No doubt it

wasn't the only thing she hadn't brought and would miss; her mind had been elsewhere as she packed, and she had done a poor job. Mrs. van Dijk had offered to help her, but how could Lucy have accepted? Mrs. van Dijk was old and infirm. More importantly, she provided room and board for Lucy and paid her a small amount of money each month in return for companionship. A world in which an employer packed her employee's belongings would be a strange one indeed.

Only, Mrs. van Dijk would never have forgotten to include an umbrella.

At least Lucy had thought to bring a book, though stories teeming with women bricked up alive and haunted by chattering ghosts did not appeal to her now. But to simply sit and wait was even more unappealing, so she took out one of her sister's letters from between the book's pages, fished it from its envelope, and began to read.

When she was done, she felt nauseous, though perhaps that was partly because she hadn't eaten properly. Mrs. van Dijk's cook had made her some sandwiches for the journey, but Lucy's mother had ingrained in her a firm belief that eating anywhere in public was indecent. It did not matter that she had the train carriage to herself now that the woman who smelled of rose water had left and that she could have consumed those sandwiches slathered with butter and cold cuts unobserved.

Not that she had much of an appetite anyway. Who would, after reading something as disturbing as Sarah's final letter? If

one could even call the undated sheet of paper with almost illegible scribbles that.

Lucy sighed and slipped the letter back between the pages of her book. She had read it so many times, the creases from where the pages were folded threatened to tear. Tucked in the same envelope was Sarah's drawing of the bog body. Lucy did not take it out. She had looked at it often enough to conjure it in her mind. It came to her unbidden now, and she closed her eyes in an effort to strangle the image.

When she opened them again, the train had left behind the sprawling farmer's fields, which looked stubbled and unkempt now that the summer grain had been harvested, and wound its way through an area full of trees. Their leaves plunged the carriage into momentary twilight, snapping Lucy out of contemplating her sister's letter. She frowned and turned her head to the window.

Sarah's face looked back at her, gaunt and wild and mad.

Lucy jerked back violently, her heart pounding, only for Sarah to do the same.

Your reflection, you silly goose, she thought. The sudden darkness from the thick foliage outside had turned the window into a mirror. She almost laughed at herself in derision. Instead, she leaned closer to the glass and studied her reflection. A tendril of hair had escaped its pins, and she had a smudge of something dark that was hopefully just ink on her cheek. Worse were her eyes: there was something frightened and wild about them, like