

The Sins of Love

By Alvin Michael

I grab my throat and swat away at my foe, but no one's there. I squint in the darkness, my breath quick and shallow. It was just a dream. The same dream I've had for weeks. This time felt more vivid, more lucid. I lay back, feeling the cold sweat drenched through my flannel pyjamas. Red neon numbers glare at me; I won't fall asleep again now before the alarm blares – and truth is, I'm afraid of what awaits me if I do. Maybe a hot shower and coffee will wash down my tiredness and trepidation.

I gulp the last of the brown elixir and head out towards the stables in the vast field. I hear my boys whinny and snort; the chattering swifts add a melodic harmony to nature's orchestra. The sweet scent of lavender fills my thin nostrils. The low-slung sun has chased away the dark blue and black of the night sky. Pink and orange hues catch the fluffy clouds, transforming them into giant floating marshmallows. I absorb this beautiful canvas, seemingly painted just for me, and smile. Bruno and Sebastian stamp their hooves eager to escape their overnight confinement. They trot and roll around on the thick dewy grass; their exuberance is infectious, but my bliss is snuffed out instantly when my gaze falls upon the pile of rubbish in the corner. I shudder, and a cool breeze suddenly whips up around me, urging me to go back inside and get ready for work.

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There's nothing interesting or exciting about my job. I do it because it's easy and it pays my bills. I feign polite interest in my colleagues' mundane banter, but I'd rather just be left alone. I've always preferred my own company ever since I was a little girl. With no

siblings or friends to play with, I'd spend hours each day reading, and the rest of the time ensconced in my imagination. So, I don't care much for the daily office chit-chat. Today, however, is different. The rumour mill is churning, and I'm caught up in its choppy wake: the police are looking for a missing boy from the big town over. He's been gone a few weeks. I wonder why they think he might be in this sleepy West Country village. Has anyone seen him? They've been going house to house asking questions. They'll be at my door soon; probing, enquiring. My thoughts are reeling and my imagination – normally a source of joyous escapism – is thick with ominous speculation.

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Pale bony hands clasp around my throat. I can't breathe. Their vice-like grip is icy cold. I can't free myself. I look up at the face of my killer, but it's blank and ghostly white. I'm powerless. This is the end...I awake.

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I can't concentrate on anything anymore; not work, not my books, not even my boys. Those beautiful animals have been a part of my life for 15 years. After my parents died, I lost my way, shutting myself off and hiding away in this secluded cottage. They gave me a reason to keep living and I owe them my life. Yet now, even their companionship can't stave off this dread that crawls over my skin.

The weather too conspires against me now. Mother Nature is furious. I hear her anguish in the howling wind that shakes the branches. Her tears fall heavily, lashing against the windows, beating an incessant drum to my thoughts. Black clouds press down upon me. I know what I must do, but I'm afraid. I look out to the corner of the field and lightning strikes; my tormenter's pale blank face dazzles momentarily in the glass staring back at me.

My impulsive actions have haunted my unconscious for weeks, and now they haunt my conscious too. I've tried so hard to not remember. But the dam I erected is starting to crumble and my memories are spilling out:

The silhouetted figure charges at me and I swing the spade hard. The sound of steel cracking bone reverberates through the icy air like the sound of a bell chime in an empty church.

Who was he? What did he want? Why was he in the stables? It was an accident. I didn't mean to. It was self-defence...wasn't it? Would anyone have believed me? Maybe, if I'd reported it right away, but not now. Not after I buried him. I dumped empty barrels, rotten timber and other rubbish on top of his shallow grave to hide him further from view, but it just screams at me like a decrepit tombstone – 'Here Lies The Boy You Killed'.

Another bolt of lightning flashes up another memory:

The clouds drift away, and the full moon – like a theatre spotlight shining down onto the stage – reveals my victim lying motionless on the hay-strewn earth. He's fair-haired and pale; more skin and bone, than fat and flesh. He's filthy, clothes torn and ragged. The stench of not washing emanates off him in waves, fighting for my attention with the unmistakable metallic tang of fresh blood. I swallow the bile threatening to

erupt. Bruno and Sebastian call for me, still agitated by this intrusion into their lives. What would happen to them if I was convicted of murder? What would happen to me? I wouldn't survive prison. My boys plead with me again. They need me and it stirs me into action; one life's been lost – and by the looks of him, he won't be missed. There's no reason to ruin three more.

But I was wrong. He *was* missed. And now people are looking for him. The sound of tyres crunching gravel snaps me out of my coma of piteous wallowing. The constables walk up hurriedly, heads bowed against the downpour. I know what must be done. I become resolute. I'm sorry for my sins, for all the hurt and damage I've inflicted. But what's been done cannot be undone. I'll do anything to keep my boys safe. Even covering up a murder.