

A Wailing Heart

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A short story of the Grand Experiment Collection

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CHAPTER 1

“Like, he is super-hot. Tall and handsome, ya know?”

“Isn’t it supposed to be ‘tall, dark and handsome?’” Ashley’s new friend joked over her Bluetooth headset. “Something like that?”

“Well,” Ashley acknowledged the term with a chuckle, “he isn’t really dark. Like, he has kind of tan skin. What do they call it?”

“They call it tan.”

“No, oh my god Valerie shut up! I mean, there’s another word for it.”

“Brown? Olive.”

“Yeah, that’s it! Olive skin. But on the lighter side. He’s not as dark as me.”

“Oh, sexy.” Valerie snickered on the other end of the phone.

The two young women had met at a mutual acquaintance’s party a few weeks earlier. They had immediately hit it off; Valerie was a bit of a bad girl, which Ashley found exciting, although not entirely healthy. But she was still young, early twenties, and there was plenty of time to make mistakes—or so Valerie would say each time they hung out.

Tonight, they were headed to a popular haunt on Ashley’s side of town for a ladies’ night out, a recurring theme as of late. Where before Ashley would go to a bar maybe once or twice a month, now she was going out two to four times a week. Sleep was being lost and hangovers were impeding her work performance. *At least I’m having fun!*

With a snap of her wrist, she flicked her long, dark brown hair out of her face as she agreed with her friend. “Hell yeah. He has these, like, I don’t know, vibrant eyes. I can get lost in them.”

“Why don’t you just ask him out already? What would it hurt?” Valerie’s voice had a hint of seductiveness.

“I don’t know. It’s weird ’cause we work together, ya know? I’ve asked him out just for drinks, as friends. But like an actual date?” Ashley kicked an errant shirt lying on the floor. “I’ll have to see him all the time if he rejects me. Even worse, what if he says yes and the date sucks? How awkward would that be?”

“What if? What if? Waaaah! Seriously, you need to take a risk girl. Guys are stupid, straightforward creatures. You have to be blunt and up-front with them.”

“I guess.” Ashley leaned toward her standing mirror to apply mascara, making sure not to poke her eyes. “Maybe if I jump him in the bathroom, he’ll get the idea.”

“I’ve done it.”

“Ew, guácala! I bet you did.”

“Ashley hopped up and down, struggling to zip up and button her tight, blue denim jeans. Being a short, chubby yet shapely woman with ample bottom and breasts, wearing slightly smaller clothes than needed showed off her buxom physique, but were also a pain to get into.

The pile of clothes on her computer chair made for a daunting excavation given the diversity of color and fabric. Shirts, pants and bras went fluttering through the air like a flock of colorful drunken doves, coming to rest on her pink rug. The darker colored linen clashed with the bright pink of her floor, walls, bed covers and furniture. Even the stuffed animals resting against her pillows were various shades of pink.

Eureka! Ashley held up a dark blue top with embroidered silver trimmings. “What time you going to meet me there?” she asked into the headset.

“Oh, could you come by my place and pick me up?”

“Again?” This would be the sixth time in twice as many days.

“It’ll take forever for me to get there on the bus.”

“Okay, but—”

“What?” Valerie gave an annoyed sigh.

“It’s just, you’re completely out of the way and I’d have to double back to get to the—”

“Well if you don’t want to then fine. I’ll take the stupid fucking bus.”

“No, no, I’ll pick you up.”

“Great! I’ll give you gas money. See you in a bit!”

“Okay, see ya.” Ashley rubbed her forehead with the palm of her free hand as she ended the call. *Maybe next time she’ll take the bus*, she thought, but she knew she wouldn’t.

She straightened the blue blouse, tidied herself up and took another glance in the mirror. Then with car keys in hand and her gigantic handbag that weighed more than a small child, she headed out into the crisp evening air. The night was on.

If only he could see me now.

CHAPTER 2

It sat perched inside the bar on the railing of the second-floor balcony. Those bright yellow eyes, foreign to the realm of humans, slowly scanned the large open rooms below, observing the young crowd as they consumed copious amounts of that familiar poison. Some staggered drunkenly as their friends laughed and held them upright. Others scoffed at those types, sipping their drinks with an air of superiority. But most simply drank and talked as they would any other day. The dark, grey-skinned creature had seen humans take part in this “social drinking” activity many times throughout their existence; to it, this was nothing new.

The reason for its particular interest in this bar was the young, thick woman walking in; she was an associate of its host, and might say that over the past few years the two of them had become friends. But lately she had become infatuated with him—wanted more. And when one takes a special interest in *him*, the demonic entity that watches over him always takes notice.

The demon could see that Ashley felt a little out of place, but Valerie put on her don't-give-a-fuck attitude, and Ashley took from this some confidence for herself.

Searching through the crowd of well-lubricated denizens, the two women spotted an empty table in the back corner of one of the side rooms. Ashley held the table while her tattooed friend stalked off.

Ashley watched Valerie check her makeup in a little pocket mirror then head toward a young, muscular brunet man in a blue business shirt and matching tie. She sauntered up to him and wiggled her hips, placing a hand on his shoulder. After less than a minute of conversation, the man was ordering her two cocktails: apple martini for her, cosmopolitan for Ashley. When Valerie snatched the drinks and headed back to base without so much as a “thank you” to the young man, Ashley cringed at the dumbfounded look on the confused soul’s face. But they had their free drinks.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Ashley told her manipulative friend.

“Men are easy babe,” Valerie replied with a smirk. “Give them just enough whiff of pussy and they’ll be crawling after you. Simple.”

“I guess.” Ashley shook her head, her eyes looking down at the table, not able to connect to Valerie’s in that moment. “You ever think of getting a boyfriend? Like, for real I mean?” The demon stared at her, methodically, its interest piqued.

“Why? So much cock and money out there why limit myself to one?”

“Oh my god, you’re so bad!”

“Don’t knock it till ya try it. All I’m saying.”

“You say that a lot.”

They sat there quietly for a while, enjoying the music. Ashley began swaying back and forth, her head bobbing up and down.

Valerie finished her drink before Ashley was even halfway done with hers, so she went back to the bar in search of more prey. This time it took three different attempts before she found another fool. The man cussed her out as she walked away with two Long Island Iced Teas, smiling and laughing it off the entire way. The demon smirked, somewhat admiring Valerie’s deceptive techniques. *They show such promise, these humans. But so do many other species we’ve observed in the Experiment.*

It could tell Ashley admired and feared her new friend. Valerie was ultimately a woman of the world, experienced and carefree; whereas Ashley led a more reclusive life. It was obvious to the demon that Ashley was in need of something more than just a man. There was need for excitement, living her life in ways she was unaccustomed. She seemed to have found some of this in Valerie. It could see this, given the change

in her demeanor just from when she entered the bar. She was looser, but there was still a barrier of discomfort she had yet to get over.

Now Valerie had started dancing next to the table with drink in hand. She sauntered over to Ashley and tugged on her arm, urging her to join.

“No,” Ashley cried, but Valerie pulled her in and began rubbing her body against hers. “Oh my god fine, just stop!” Ashley laughed.

The two swayed to the loud rhythmic beats of house music, caressing each other’s bodies more and more sensually. The demon understood this was their ritual; it wasn’t sexual between them, but a display for prying eyes. Their enjoyment came from the excitement of others looking upon them. Ashley closed her eyes and gently bit her bottom lip as she swayed her ample hips from side to side in a seductive manner.

The demon spread the gigantic bat-like wings that protruded out of its upper back like a ship’s dark sails waving in the wind. The large, grey appendages filled the entire upper deck of the bar. With a forward lean, it gently floated off the balcony rails, passing through the people and furniture like a ghost, and landed softly next to Ashley and Valerie. They continued dancing drunkenly despite the over seven-foot demon towering over them, observing them as a research scientist may observe a pen of rats.

Walking around the pair, it took note of Ashley first and foremost. She wasn’t entirely accustomed to these outings, hence her lack of stoicism when it came to alcohol. With inhibitions dropped, her shyness melted away, but her companion seemed to have gained more and more control over her like a puppeteer.

Ashley was not a fit mate for its protégé; she was simply too weak, no match for the young man it had accompanied since he was a mere toddler playing in the sand. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t have some sort of impact on its host, be it for better or worse. The demon had come too far for its plans to be ruined by some ill-begotten relationship.

Almost as if she had heard its thinking, Ashley clutched her mouth suddenly and ran to the bathroom, pushing past the short line of women waiting outside its doors. Expletives flew. The demon didn’t need to

follow; it could hear her excreting the night's beverages in a recently occupied toilet. For now, its attention shifted to her new friend Valerie.

It had seen the likes of her many times before: a supposedly carefree soul who “doesn't give a shit about what anyone thinks,” yet was always the first to inform the world of that aspect of her personality. She fed off those who were passive by nature and ignorant in the ways of the world, so she bent them to her will. Though she was giving Ashley some tenacity, she was also boosting her own damaged ego. The demon could see straight through the façade, and it knew that this could become a problem. Ashley's newfound, albeit misguided, confidence may make her more aggressive in pursuing its host, something the demon could not tolerate.

The demon's attention shot back to Ashley as, clutching her stomach, she made her way back to her friend. By now, Valerie had begun grinding against another young man in an overtly sexual dance, pulling him in by his skinny necktie. She kissed him sloppily while they both laughed. Ashley, red faced with desperation and immense nausea, grimaced at the thought of trading fluids with a complete stranger.

“I need to go home Val,” she pleaded, holding her purse tight against her stomach. “I'm not feeling good.”

“Again?” Valerie rolled her eyes, not turning away from the young man. “Okay. Well, I'm gonna hang out here with Todd, maybe go back to his place.”

Ashley's shoulders slumped and face sagged. “Can't you drive me home please? Take my car and drop it off tomorrow or something. I don't think I can drive like this.”

“Um, well. Todd was gonna give me a ride home.” A smirk tilted the edge of Valerie's mouth as she looked to the young man. “You'll be fine. Or you can Uber or something.”

They stood there, the three of them, staring at each other in an awkward silence that almost drowned out the loud, pulsing beats of the music. The tall demon towered over them like a vulture watching their every move.

“Okay,” Ashley said, and grasped her purse tighter. “I'll see you around, then?”

“Let me know when you get home. Hope you feel better!” Valerie yelled over her shoulder and went back to dancing with Todd.

The demon looked on without surprise or disdain; the outcome was ever-so-predictable. There were very few surprises for a being that has lived since the creation of the universe. But like all of humanity’s affairs, the demon would not interfere unless the fate of the world was at stake. For those were the laws of the Grand Experiment.

CHAPTER 3

The demon watched Ashley as she sat at the reception desk at her work the next morning. For several months, she had been the team lead of reception for a prominent accounting firm that leased multiple floors in a skyscraper in downtown Ghetti, on the West Coast of the United States. The majority of her days were spent answering phone calls through her headset and welcoming and directing guests. Most would find the task daunting given the amount of incoming traffic, but she appeared to thrive on it. The demon noted her enthusiasm and professionalism when greeting people, in person or on the phone.

When she was at work, she was told what to do, what to say, what rules to follow and guidelines to embrace. Here, so long as she was busy, her will and mind mostly took a hiatus as she focused on completing her tasks. When a client arrived, she would greet them with shining eyes and gaping smiles. The demon pitied her, as it knew this was merely an intermittent mask of confidence, even if she didn't realize it. Once she was left alone with her own thoughts, the mask would melt away.

Last night the demon had followed her home and watched as she dropped her keys on the floor and stumbled into the bathroom, clumsily stripping off her clothes on the way. Dots of vomit plastered her pretty blue blouse like speckles of paint. Seeing Valerie's recent social media post in the bar caused Ashley to utter a sorrowful groan. The tattooed girl was holding up a drink while the blond-haired Todd held an arm

around her, both smiling for the selfie. She'd tossed her phone aside in disgust and stepped into the hot shower to wash off the night's events. She gently scrubbed her skin in a sensual manner as if she were comforting herself or perhaps longing for the touch of a nonexistent lover. But now the mask was up and she presented well to the world.

All told, Ashley seemed well-liked among her peers; everyone thought she was a nice, talkative young lady. But the demon knew she was simply good at hiding her woes. At work, when her energy was high and her mask was up, she sat up straight at her desk and smiled with every greeting, even when just answering the phone.

Though she usually occupied the front desk by herself, the room behind her housed two other receptionists who answered phone calls and covered her when she went on lunch and breaks, at least when she'd take them. It worked out for all of them because they preferred not to deal with people directly whereas she enjoyed the face-to-face interaction in this setting, despite her being more reserved in others. The demon found this fundamental contrast intriguing. Perhaps her work gave her purpose, which in turn gave her some modicum of confidence that didn't require alcohol. It could only speculate.

Sometimes, her stress was so great that her hair would start falling out; a few slightly bald spots peeked through her straight locks despite the way she expertly covered them up. The demon could tell from the first time it laid eyes upon her that she was damaged, like so many others of this human world.

A yawn escaped the young woman's lips as she disconnected her last call. Last night was the second time that week that Valerie had dragged her out to a bar. Over time, she had become decent at hiding her grogginess from her peers, but the demon couldn't be fooled. *Is this the life you wish to lead, young one?* it uttered to her unhearing ears.

It was then that it noticed her eyes light up and her heart begin to beat faster. The elevator doors had opened and a tall, young man stepped out into the corridor, his eyes looking down as he sifted through a handful of envelopes. She frantically waved at him to get his attention. That, and the soft, genuine smile spreading across her face and her innocent swaying back and forth were strong demonstrations of her feelings.

What began as simple body language and gestures had more recently turned into open flirtation. Its host mostly laughed it off as jokes, but his not outright rejecting her advances led her to be more aggressive, albeit without fully committing. The demon was protective when it came to its host's relationships. It had to see if she was worthy or dangerous.

Now it decided, in its observations, that she was neither. She seemed a relatively harmless yet damaged human being, but it wasn't entirely sure why. This piqued its interest, as the unknown always did. Not knowing her roots instilled a great curiosity in the ancient being.

After some idle chitchat about the show Ashley had been watching on Netflix, the young man said goodbye and left her alone at the reception desk. The light within her eyes swiftly faded and a darkness washed over her as she sat staring down the corridor towards the elevators. The demon pitied her to an extent; she was simply seeking companionship after all, as her life was rife with loneliness. Like every day, she fixated on the fake plant that stood at the end of the hall. It sat there beautifully, a work of art in its lavishly painted porcelain vase. Beautiful to the world, but completely unalive.

CHAPTER 4

Ashley tried to not look around as she struggled to climb the perpetual stairs at her gym. The Stairmaster was her go-to machine as it was in the back of the cardio section and no one could really see her straining unless they went out of their way. Her rotund posterior and thick thighs burned as she pushed on past the twenty-minute mark. The sweat pouring from her body made her feel dirty but proud that she was improving herself.

At this moment, the demon was the only one watching her. Its host was upstairs lifting weights, so it had taken the opportunity to see what Ashley was up to. It was somewhat surprised at how much she pushed herself, and even admired her for it. But it sensed the majority of her time here was spent looking around the gym to see if anyone was staring at her; it was obvious where her attention was focused. It seemed that in her mind, no matter where she went, others were staring at her, mocking her. Any time a group of pretty girls laughed while stretching on their yoga mats or a frat boy snickered on the treadmill, she assumed they were laughing at her. Why else would they be giggling in the gym? From what the demon had seen, this mindset didn't change no matter the setting.

But the demon knew that wasn't the case, mostly. It could hear them all, and no one was paying attention to her or even thinking about her. Most were focused on their own problems and insecurities—often

surrounding relationships—or discussing something as mundane as their utter disappointment in the series finale of *Game of Thrones*. The grey-skinned veteran of the universe knew this mentality would hinder her progress in this world, which was another reason why it could not allow her to be a more intimate part of its protégé's life, not now at least. A damaged soul would only distract its host from his true purpose. If she were to become stable, then perhaps the demon could use the relationship to its advantage. But the odds of that were unlikely. It had seen too many of her kind before. It knew where this road ends.

A sound like a frog's croak emitted from behind Ashley and immediately she flushed and, without hesitation, stopped the Stairmaster. Under a blanket of embarrassment, she ran off to the bathroom but not before making sure to wipe down her machine; those were the rules, after all. The unfortunate gymgoer next to her winced a little as she sped off toward the locker room.

The demon, ever watchful, turned its head to discover its host descending the stairs from the weight room. Turning back to Ashley, it gazed into her eyes awaiting the moment she too would spot him. Would she exhibit her workplace boldness or her social anxiety? It noted when her eyes grew large, and she abruptly turned and fled into the women's locker room. The man walked past and into the men's room, never seeing the girl clutching her phone. She waited several seconds before creeping out and then quickly walked to the gym exit.

The demon wasn't entirely surprised at her. Who would want to be seen by their infatuation while covered in sweat and unpleasant odors? Still, it had almost hoped they would bump into each other only to see the result. Undoubtedly, its host would play it kindly, acknowledging her and smiling. But what would she do? Would she gain some confidence upon realizing its host wasn't offended? Would she panic and flee? These curious creatures always found some way to intrigue the cosmic being.

CHAPTER 5

“Oh my god he fucked me so good,” Valerie exclaimed on the other end of the phone.

“Yeah?” Ashley rolled her eyes. She was in her pajamas, lying on her bed in the dark. Valerie had called right before Ashley fell asleep in order to gloat about the other night’s sexual escapades. The thought of apologizing to Ashley for abandoning her and failing to give her gas money had never crossed her mind. Ashley was no stranger to this; she knew she was being exploited, but she kept answering that phone, nonetheless.

“I could barely walk the next day. You should've come along, could've used a copilot,” her friend teased.

“You're so bad.” Ashley blushed, not knowing what else to say. This wasn’t the first time Valerie had implied a threesome with her and some random man. Occasionally, Ashley would see a man eyeing her up and down when she dressed up, but ultimately nothing came of it other than a few stares. But Valerie actually knew her, to a certain degree, so her flirtations were somewhat flattering, albeit uncomfortable. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Suit yourself—you don’t know what you're missing, honey. I'm very limber.”

“I bet you are.” Ashley cleared her throat nervously.

“Better believe it. Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it. Look, I gotta go. Talk later, yeah?”

“Sure, see ya.” They disconnected and Ashley was left alone in her dark room.

The demon saw through the darkness as if it were light as day. It saw Ashley wrap her arms around herself in a weak attempt at self-comfort. It could see the doubt on her face as she contemplated the utter loneliness that made her room feel colder than it actually was. Pain oozed from her skin like sweat that the demon could sense with the keenness of a razorblade. The woman was hurting, and as much as it had seen and felt that pain from many others, it couldn’t help but sympathize with the poor girl. This Valerie was no doubt unhelpful in this regard. It wondered if her influence on Ashley could become a threat to its host. Or, as it always wondered in these predicaments, could it be an advantage?

The being watched as Ashley turned over onto her belly and groaned. It noticed her legs rubbing together and her body temperature rising. This behavior wasn’t unfamiliar; and it knew what to expect next when she moved her hand down past the waistband of her pajama pants.

The demon looked on with the demeanor of a scientist observing their experiment come to fruition. It watched as she moaned, writhing back and forth, her ample buttocks gyrating in the dim light of the moon sifting in through the partially closed window blinds. Of a curious note, a few tears slid down her face as she panted vibrantly. Was it from pain or pleasure? It could not say.

With a soft grunt and a gentle splash of fluid, she collapsed onto the bed, her face pressed into the mattress, her errant hair covering her sweaty brow. The tears didn’t stop; instead, they flowed more steadily. She wasn’t necessarily crying, the demon knew, but she couldn’t control the outpouring of the consistent stream of salty liquid. *What is inhabiting your mind?* the demon wondered.

After some time, Ashley pulled her thick, pink comforter up to her chin and rolled over. As she drifted off to sleep, the demon scanned her room. Her bed in particular was a haven of comfort. The down comforter and copious pillows seemed designed to envelop her in a soft cocoon, and in her sleep, she burrowed under them almost to the point

of suffocation. Even while she was unconscious, her mind was trying to keep her safe.

What are you hiding from, young one? the demon thought, as it passed through the pink walls and entered her kitchen. The rest of her house was the opposite of her bedroom. The furnishings were mature and well-designed. The décor was fashionable, eclectic even. There was a tidiness that showed discipline and structure, but the demon felt that the drive for such orderliness didn't particularly correlate with Ashley's personality. It suspected this came from fear instead—fear of what others might think, perhaps fear of past punishment.

It floated into the hallway where she kept pictures hanging diagonally all along the wall. The demonic entity inspected each one of them to the sound of her loud snoring. Upon closer observation, an obvious pattern emerged: in most pictures, she was smiling, but in those where she stood with a particular man and woman, her expression remained flat and afraid. There were many pictures with them, more with the woman than the man. All three had similar facial features.

The pictures on the wall were calling out to the demonic being. There was a story here that they were trying to tell. The tall demon wasn't void of empathy. Its interest in Ashley was becoming something more than simply protecting its host. It wondered what led her to become what she was. What life experiences caused this young woman to be so broken?

Its attention came back again and again to the photos of Ashley with those two adults. Her look of fear, terror even, had been captured by the camera all those years ago. Her solemn eyes spoke louder than any words ever could. The demon understood then: The child in those photos was crying out to the viewer, pleading, begging.

Being content with its intricate observations, the demon stepped through the walls and into the front yard. The sun was just above the horizon, waking up the birds and daytime critters of the neighborhood. The being looked directly into the orange orb as it peeked over the roofs of the neighbors' houses. Unlike humans, it could see directly into it—the storms of fiery mayhem and swirling infernos larger than a thousand earths danced and clashed in the violent star. It could even see the

hidden civilizations that resided there, unknown to the human species. But its attention was ultimately focused on this world and its inhabitants.

And here, it had seen enough. *This one is definitely not worthy of him*, it thought to itself as it leapt into the air with a strong beat of its wings. Life in the Grand Experiment was often cruel, especially to the young—an unwarranted but intrinsic fate bestowed upon her and many like her by humanity's very nature. The demon felt that although her future was predictable, she might have a much grander destiny in regard to the Grand Experiment. Only time will tell.

To be continued...

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