



Hideous Beauty

David Turnbull

Supernatural

Hideous Beauty

In the circumstances, the end may not have been entirely unexpected. After all things had been going from bad to worse for some considerable time. But when it finally came it was sudden and swift and hideously beautiful. Morbidly mesmerised Issie Farren observed its unfolding from her bedroom window, curling a strand of her brown hair absently around her finger. Vapour trailing intercontinental ballistic missiles etching an ever more intricate fiery latticework into the blue morning sky. Blinding white light from juddering impacts. Blooming yellow fireballs, like hunks of the sun fallen to earth. Mushrooms clouds, menacingly magnificent; ten miles high and rising.

By the time she became aware of her father frantically screaming for her to run it was already too late. The howling hurricane winds of the aftershock were hurtling towards the house, ripping trees from their roots and scattering buildings like houses of cards. The window erupted in a hail of crystals as the posters of boy bands that hung on her walls were shredded and tossed to the air like confetti. In the blink of an eye everything around her seemed to disintegrate and descend into blackness.

Issie struggled back to consciousness amongst the strewn debris; bruised and battered, shocked beyond comprehension to find that she was actually still alive. Around her the world seemed to be writhing in agony. Streams of fevered air yanked her hair this way and that, while yawning fissures slashed endlessly through the churned-up ground all around. She called out to her father. When she could not find him amongst the rubble she went lurching off in no specific direction to look for help.

For days and days and days she wandered deliriously, wracked with grief, her dress shredded, the rubber soles

on her sneakers melted and warped. Coughing her way through a churning soup of dust and smoke and cinders that she thought would never dissipate. Mile after mile of burning flatness. Not a living soul in sight. Then, as the clustered air-bound fragments began to settle like snowdrifts on the blasted wilderness, a whisper came to her on the endlessly moaning breeze. A woman's voice. Like a fluttering inhalation of breath, slowly breathing her in, beckoning from somewhere deep in the apocalyptic gloom. Even if she had wanted to she could not have resisted the sweet enticement of that soft siren call.

“Come . . . Come . . .”

Issie walked towards the whisper.

As did several others.

Limping and reeling.

Shuffling and shambling.

Bill Tramwell, Susan Sanchez, and a dozen others like them, wading through the waist deep swamps of ash that had once been the urban sprawl of city suburbs. Khalid Sadique and the remnants of his extended family – a son, an aunt, and a second cousin, all crammed into a coughing blast battered camper van, doggedly ploughing on.

Mort Fernstien, a retired Hatton Garden jeweller, punting laboriously through the swamp-like sludge that was once the Grand Union canal in a listing rowboat. A semi conscious boy of around twelve or thirteen curled up under a charred rug by the bow.

Charles Amoah, leading a wild-eyed farm yard pony he had caught cantering along a furrowed stretch of the M11 motorway. His heavily pregnant wife, Affia, seated awkwardly on its mangy back. The pair of them like a bedraggled Joseph and Mary headed for some hellish rendering of Bethlehem.

They each came upon the apparent source of the mysterious whispering in staggered appearances within the space of a single hour. By then the voice was like tinnitus in their ears, unavoidably there, urging them on, but not always consciously noticed.

They were a pitiful congregation.

Exhausted and drained by exposure.

Half starved and dehydrated.

Suffering the onset of radiation sickness.

Skin riddled in scabs and blisters.

Hair coming out in clumps.

Coughing blood.

Spitting teeth.

They found themselves at the foot of a stone tower, standing forlornly amongst a fallen forest of charcoal crisped tree trunks, the grey slates atop its turreted roof complimenting the glowering mood of the sullied sky above. This desolate and moribund tower seemed almost medieval in its appearance. How such an outwardly fragile and antique an edifice remained standing when all around it had succumbed to the nuclear onslaught seemed wholly inexplicable to Issie.

The mystery of it didn't appear to concern her companions. They were far more interested in the fact that a shantytown of sorts had been constructed in the immediate environs of the tower. Half a dozen little box houses rudely constructed from charred breezeblocks and splintered doorframes. Buckled sheets of corrugated iron for rooftops.

"This is a government thing," said Bill Ramwell.

"Or a military thing," said Charles Amoah.

"Or the Red Cross," suggested Susan Sanchez.

"Or the Red Crescent," proposed Khaled Sadique.

Issie knew they were clutching at straws. Common sense told her that from intensity of the missile barrage the war had indeed been the war to end all wars that everyone had speculated about for years. No one was coming to their aid. She had the awful nagging sense that they had been lured to a very bad place indeed. This little refuge set in the shadowed environs of that eerie tower was all too convenient and quite obviously contrived. Had she not felt so ill she would have fled and somehow forced herself to resist the impelling lure of the whisper. But she was tired and sick. Her bones ached to the marrow. Her lungs rattled like a pair of rusted old radiators when she breathed. Slouching down she rested her weary back against the breezeblock wall of one of the box house and listened while Bill Ramwell pontificated.

"It's part of a plan to rebuild society in aftermath the holocaust," he told them. "The whispering sound we can hear is probably computer generated. Set at a specific frequency that's sure to draw everyone who survived to this place. The tower here is clearly not what it seems. It's been built from some sort of advanced material. Engineered to withstand the strongest blast. It's supposed to be a beacon. So they can locate survivors. You wait. Any minute now a fleet of helicopters will arrive with food and blankets and medicine."

As Bill Ramwell droned on the sun went slowly down.

And when it was fully dark the whispering ceased.

As if out of nowhere the creature appeared amongst them.

Creature was the correct word.

Although it had the outward appearance of a slender, but somewhat voluptuous woman, the sham of this unthreatening countenance could not belie the true malevolence of the awful supernatural thing that lurked not too far below the surface. It swayed before them in its billowing white gown like some Geisha cadaver. Its long glistening hair far too black. Its wan complexion far too deathly pale. It observed them coldly through piercing pinprick pupils as its bloody red lips grinned wolfishly around a neat row of needle sharp porcelain teeth.

Hideous, yet beautiful at the same time, thought Issie.

Just as the end itself had been.

The creature moved amongst them with a shimmering, glimmering judder. One minute here, another there; seeming almost to flicker in and out of existence. The air around its close proximity sent ice-cold daggers jabbing straight into Issie's aching bones. Her throat tensed as if a scream was building up ready to erupt.

Bill Ramwell stepped forward and held his hand out the creature.

"Are you from the Government?" he asked.

The creature let out a throaty, disdainful snigger as it glided inattentively past him. Its piercing eyes fell upon Affiah Amoah and snapped swiftly down to the ripe curve of her pregnant belly. In an instant it was before her, tracing its long-nailed fingers tremulously over the maternal swell.

"Mine," it breathed and let another throaty snigger.

"Now look here . . ." said Charles Amoah, pulling his wife into a protective hug.

"Hush!" said the creature.

The word came out of its mouth like the slow hiss of leaking gas.

Charles Amoah swallowed hard and kissed Affia on the forehead.

"Gather," said the creature with a demonstrative swoop of its tinder-like arms.

Obediently everyone formed a ragged arc around the shimmering, glimmering thing. Trembling with anxiety Issie tried desperately to step back from the crowd. Her feet stubbornly defied her thoughts, forcing her forwards instead. It has us under some sort of enthrallment, she thought. If I could only force out this scream it might somehow break the spell and we can all run for our lives.

"Sick and tainted." The creature sounded disappointed. It crouched low and swayed like a snake ready to pounce. "Need to heal to be any good. A hibernation. I will sleep. You will sleep. A hundred years."

"Like suspended animation?" Bill Ramwell asked.

He turned to address them all.

"I told you this was a government thing. It's all part of the survival plan . . ."

Yet another dirty snigger guttered from the creature's lupine mouth.

"I will sleep," it breathed. "You will sleep."

Slowly, slowly Issie felt her eyelids drooping. She tried to fight it. But she was so very tired. All at once the seductive, whispering voice was back inside her head. "Sleep," it cooed. "Sleep and heal."

Everyone began crawling lethargically into the little breezeblock huts. Despite her urgent desire to resist, Issie found herself doing likewise. There were at least five other people in the hut she selected. She lay down amongst them, head resting carelessly on someone's chest, legs curled limply over someone else's legs. Her eyes fell slowly shut.

Under the creature's malicious influence each of them slept, while all around, the battered Earth fell sick. They slept on through the coming of pounding rains. And screaming winds. And hard, hard frosts. And deep, deep snows.

And the wounded world turned and turned again.

A year became two – became five – became ten – became fifty.

And as they slept their scabs and sores slowly healed.

And the rampant infection was gradually vanquished from their bones.

And eventually good pure blood pumped through their veins once more.

Issie's eyes flickered open and the air that she breathed in felt unbelievably clean and fresh and sharp. She stretched her arms and sat up. Around her in the hut the others were stirring too. Yawning, the sleepy-eyed survivors crawled out of the huts through layered drapes of cobwebs that stretched across listing doorways. During the time they had slept, the odd-looking tower had become covered in a verdant smothering clinging ivy, while around the little settlement a rampant thicket of rose briars, sporting an explosion of blood red blooms, had grown.

"Has it really been a hundred years?" asked Susan Sanchez.

They came upon the crumpled wreckage of Khaled Sadique's camper van, collapsed onto a rusted axle that was entwined in thick green ropes of weeds. And beside it the tell-tale pile of bleached bones that were all that remained of the Amoah's captured pony.

"Must have been," marvelled Mort Fernstien. "A whole century."

"I told you," said Bill Tramwell. "Suspended animation."

"Look!" cried Khalid Sadique's son.

They looked to where he was pointing.

Laid out on a wooden pallet was a bucket of fresh water and the makings of a stew. Chunks of juicy red meat. A selection of vegetables. A stack of ceramic bowls. A pile of aluminium spoons. Beside these a black cooking pot, a heap of kindling for a fire, and a pair of flint stones with which to light it.

“Told you,” said Bill Tramwell, with a smug smile.

“I feel great,” said Susan Sanchez. “Healthier than I have in years.”

Affia Amoah touched her swollen belly. “It kicked,” she cried. “My baby kicked.”

Her husband wrapped his arm around her and kissed her forehead. The mood seemed to lift even further.

People patted Charles on the back. Some came and gave Affia a hug.

Issie was far less elated. True, her scabs and sores were gone and a thick head of hair had grown back over the terrible bald patches where tufts had dropped out. True, her gums had stopped bleeding and her lungs had stopped wheezing. But she was still suspicious and more than a little afraid.

While the others set about lighting the fire and preparing the stew she cautiously explored the perimeter of their makeshift settlement. They were completely surrounded by the rose briar. It had grown a good six-foot high. Through its dark impenetrable depths, it was impossible to fathom how thick and wide the dense labyrinth of thorny stems might be.

Fenced in like cattle, she thought.

A cold shiver washed down her spine.

“It brought us here to trap us here,” said a voice from behind.

Issie turned to see Khaled Sadique’s aunt.

The old lady looked up at the tower and nodded solemnly toward the narrow slat of the window. “We are in the clutches of an evil thing,” she said.

“I know,” agreed Issie. “Somehow we have to escape.”

But no one would listen to Issie or Mrs Sadique.

They huddled around the welcome warmth of the blazing fire.

They tucked heartily into their bowls of hot stew.

They commented on how lucky they all were.

Then late in the afternoon, when the sun had set low on the horizon, and the embers on the fire glowed red, the creature came oozing out of the narrow window of the tower. In its wake came a skittering murder of bats that pulsed out into the coming night like some band of ragged winged marauders. Behind these poured gallons dustily dancing moths, fluttering downwards in a blizzard of russet and rust.

In the midst of this aerial fiesta, the creature came scuttling disconcertingly down the ivy-covered wall like an overgrown insect. Long black locks of hair swaying before it in oily arachnid strands. Vicious fingernails clicking inharmoniously against the stonework behind the gnarled roots of ivy as the white gown puffed and billowed on the breeze.

Issie felt the air around the camp charging as the creature reached the foot of tower. It rose to its feet and tossed back its long black tresses so that they cracked like whips. Voraciously licking its ruby red lips, it shimmied grotesquely towards them.

Bill Ramwell barged his way to the front of the crowd that cowered around the throbbing cinders of the fire. "On behalf of all of us I'd like to say a big thank y -" Before he could finish the sentence the creature leapt on him, shrieking like a wild thing as its wicked teeth tore mercilessly into his neck.

Everyone scattered and ran.

They hid behind the cinder block walls of the little box houses.

They scrambled up onto the corrugated iron rooftops.

They crouched low near the crooked shadows of the rose briar.

Issie crawled on her hands and knees into one of the huts and backed herself as far into a corner as she could. She could hear the strangulated sobs that emitted from someone already huddled there in the gloom. Neither of them dared speak. Outside the ever-darkening night became full of shrieks and screams and tortured groans. And above this a dreadful, slurping and lapping as the creature sated its hundred-year-old appetite on good, pure blood.

Issie pressed her hands against her ears and drew her knees up to her chest.

In time, the creature came slithering into the box house.

Gluttonous lusting eyes fell upon Issie.

"No," she whimpered.

"Yes," hissed the creature.

Issie tried to scramble away.

But those penetrating pinprick pupils already held her in their thrall. Her muscles were fixed in some sort of imposed paralysis. She could not so much as move a single finger. The creature fell upon her. She felt the razor sharpness of its teeth easily puncture the soft flesh on her neck to gnaw at the vein. Her head grew light and woozy as her blood was greedily stolen away.

When at last the creature had taken its fill it turned upon the second person in the hut. The moon was full in the sky by then and in its radiant glow Issie could see that it was Affia Amoah squatting there. Before sating its

disgusting appetites on her the creature ran its spidery fingers avariciously over her pregnant belly.

“Mine,” it breathed. “Soon.”

When they all emerged into the blessed light of the next morning another pallet with the makings of a stew and a fire upon it was waiting to greet them. Everyone seemed too ashamed to look each other in the eye. They skulked around the pallet, rubbing the painful, seeping wounds on their necks. Some openly sobbing. Some muttering inanely under their breaths. Some in an apparent daze.

“We warned you,” said Mrs Sadique. “Me and the girl warned you. But you wouldn’t listen.”

“We’re in the clutches of a cold-blooded predator,” sobbed Susan Sanchez.

“A parasite,” agreed Mort Fernstien.

“She saved us to save herself,” said Khaled Sadique. “It was nothing but a selfish act.”

His second cousin agreed.

“If humankind had become extinct it would have been the end for her too.”

“A parasite must keep the thing it preys upon alive,” said Bill Ramwell. He nodded to the food and kindling on the pallet. “She needs to keep us healthy and well fed. Isn’t that a good thing? Who knows what has become of the world out there. If a bit of our blood is all we have to give in exchange for being well looked after . . .”

Suddenly the old suppressed scream that had been trapped in the well of Issie’s throat for all those sleeping years burst forth. It came out as a single stark word.

“Vampire!”

The accusation went echoing noisily around the stone tower.

Wide eyed everyone turned to face her.

“You’re afraid to say it out loud,” she told them. “Because the very fact that such a monstrously evil thing could truly exist makes the horror of everything else that happened to the world seem ten times worse.”

“I hardly think . . .” started Bill Ramwell.

“What you think doesn’t matter,” snapped Issie. “I’m fed up to the back teeth hearing about what you think.”

“I won’t be lectured by some slip of a girl,” he growled back at her.

“Let her speak!” insisted Mrs Sadique.

“More than anything else the creature is after Affia’s baby,” said Issie. “You’ve seen it with your own eyes.

Imagine if what happened to us all last night was to happen to a poor defenceless baby . . .”

They all imagined in stunned silence.

“We have to find a way out of here,” said Mort Fernstien.

“We could burn down the briar,” suggested Khaled Sadique.

“The smoke would blow back and suffocate us,” said Susan Sanchez.

They argued for hours and hours.

Bill Ramwell insisting they should on no account attempt to bite the hand that fed them. Others worrying that if they escaped, the creature would hunt them down or simply whisper them back. In desperation, Jack, the boy who Mort Fenstien had brought with him in his row boat, was dispatched to see if he could find a way to tunnel his way through the thorny root stems of the briar. He came back ten minutes later, crying and covered with terrible scratches and punctures.

“Then there’s only one thing for it,” said Issie.

She yanked a long piece of splintered wood from the doorframe of one of the box huts and began to sharpen it to a fine point against the rough surface of a breeze block.

“What do you intend?” demanded Bill Ramwell.

“To set us free,” replied Issie.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that.” He tried to make a grab for her.

She dodged him easily and began to scale the wall of the tower. She climbed as fast as she could, grabbing the stems of the ivy with her hands and using her feet to boost herself upwards, the wooden stake twisted safely into one of the shredded stands of her dress. Hordes of lacquer shelled beetles came tumbling from behind the leaves and swarmed over her arms. With forced grunt, she shook them away. When Bill Ramwell started throwing stones at her Charles Amoah grabbed him and held him back.

Half way up the tower she dared to steal glance over her shoulder. How enormous the ring of rambling roses looked to her. Like blood red sentries guarding the ramparts of some wanton green citadel. It almost seemed as if they were watching her, maliciously willing her to fall and tumble into their spiny clutches.

But beyond the briar it seemed that the Earth had been born anew. The green heather splashed hills stretched on for miles. In the valleys between she saw hundreds upon hundreds of white tailed rabbits bounding through clumps of coarse untended grass. To the west, a huge herd of deer were milling around the shoreline of a wide glistening lake, too uniformly round to be anything other than a missile crater. To the east, an immense flock of woolly sheep came pouring over the crest of one of the hills.

The world had healed and it was waiting for them. Imbued with an even greater determination, Issie scrambled up onto the ledge of the narrow window and with one last nod to her friends below, tumbled in through the slit.

The dank air of the creature’s lair hung thick with the sickly-sweet scent of age old decay. The stone floor was

gummy with inch deep deposits of bat regurgitations. Issie had to peel each melted sole of her sneakers away with a sickening rip to make any progress at all.

Above her head, cocooned by their ragged wings, the bats hung from the tower's eaves like outlandishly over-ripened fruits. Issie drew up level to the foot of the creature's bed. Its pale white face seemed eerily incandescent in the gloom. Its black hair snaked out across the mouldering pillow. Traces of dried blood still crusted the corners of its voluptuous crimson lips. It was covered in what at first sight appeared to be a beige coloured eiderdown, but on closer inspection turned out to layer upon overlapping layer of sleeping moths. Issie crept cautiously to the side of the bed. She brushed away the quilting of moths that congregated around the swell of the creature's breast. Dozens of them rose like fluttering brown wraiths to dance around her head. She unravelled the sharpened piece of wood from her shredded dress and took it in her clenched fist. Sucking in a long, deep breath she raised it high above her head.

All at once the bats came awake in terrifying explosion of wings beats. The room erupted into a chaotic maelstrom of flapping and lunging and plunging as they fought each other for access to the narrow slat of the tower window. Issie found herself pummelled this way and that, ducking and dodging, afraid that their gnarled claws might get caught up in her hair. The shaft of sunlight, which had been slicing in through the window, was steadily darkening.

"So late already?" she cried out in fear.

Fighting back the cloying terror she stumbled to the bedside as the last of the bats blinked out of the window. Now it was the turn of the moths. They rose as one, in a dense undulating cloud that for a moment completely engulfed her. She waved her free hand and swiped them away, coughing and wheezing at the dust thrown out from their fluttering wings. Then they were gone, pouring like bronzed smoke through the window.

Issie raised her makeshift wooden stake high again.

"Die hideous beauty!" she cried, and plunged it downwards.

The creature's burning eyes snapped wide. Its pale hand flew up and caught Issie by the wrist. She felt razor sharp finger nails bite into her flesh.

"What's this?" demanded the creature, hissing spittle through the serrated ridges of its vicious teeth.

Issie struggled against its vice-like grip and somehow managed to yank her wrist free. With the pointed end of the stake held out in front of her she backed away towards the window, her feet sticking and ripping, as she reversed over the fouled floor. The creature rose from the bed in a peculiar jarring motion.

"Give that to me," it purred.

"Never!" cried Issie, lunging defensively.

The creature juddered backwards and crouched low, fangs and claws bared.

Taking her chance, Issie scrambled back through the window and over the ledge. She began rapidly climbing down the ivy. The creature slithered like a leach through window after her, hair tossed wildly by the dusk wind, white luminescent face contorted into a ferocious snarl.

“Come here,” it whispered.

In a desperate effort to escape the bewitching lure of its voice, Issie pulled a jagged strand of ivy from the wall of the tower and used it to swing herself out and around. As she veered over the buckled rooftops of the box houses, she let go and fell down onto one of them.

The landing knocked the wind out of her and the stake dropped from her hand. It skittered down the camber of the roof. Panic stricken she made herself roll after it and just managed to grab it before it tumbled over the edge. Perhaps this manoeuvre more than anything was what saved her from the creature as it came plunging down from the tower like some vicious bird of prey.

They faced each other on the fragile rickety roof. The creature leered menacingly down as Issie stared fearfully up. “When I get you,” snarled the creature through the blood-tainted froth that foamed at its mouth. “I’ll suck you so dry that you’ll snap like a twig.”

“Do it then!” yelled Issie.

With an ear-splitting howl, the creature launched itself into a dive. At the same time, Issie spread her legs and dug her heels into the decades of mossy layers that smothered the corrugated sheeting. When the creature fell upon her, she lunged up with the makeshift stake clenched in her white knuckled fist.

As the two of them tumbled from the roof to the ground below Issie held the stake rigid and the weight of the creature as it fell on top of her, caused the sharpened point to slice straight through its rib cage and into the vile heart that nestled behind. With surprising rapidity, the creature rose to its feet and let out a stomach-churning screech.

It juddered drunkenly around the box house, hissing curses, until its grotesquely twisted body fell at last, amongst the tangled weeds that embraced the rusted wreckage of the camper van, its arms and legs splayed at awkward angles. As Issie watched, the pale flesh on its face darkened to brown, shrivelling gradually back to the bone until it took on the appearance of an ancient mummified skull.

The others all came and gathered silently around the wizened husk as Issie stood there shivering in the awful aftermath of her terrible achievement.

“I don’t think you realise the serious implications of what you’ve just done,” said Bill Ramwell, his face scarlet with fury. “She would have looked after us.”

“She would have bled us dry,” Mrs Sadique spat back at him.

“She would have taken my baby,” sobbed Affia Amoah.

“And now we’ll all starve,” said Bill Ramwell. “In case you hadn’t noticed we’re trapped in here with no one to bring us food and supplies.”

Issie looked down at the shrunken corpse, the splintered stake still jutting from its sunken chest, the eyes, once so potent, now vacuous and extinguished. She rubbed at the tender puncture wounds that still pulsed on her neck. Was Bill Ramwell right for once? Had she survived the nuclear winter and risked her life to fight some foul supernatural entity only to condemn herself and the others to a slow death through starvation?

“Look out!” cried the boy Jack, pointing to the stone tower and taking several steps back.

They all looked up. The tower seemed to be swaying and teetering like a tall tree about to come crashing down. It keeled and yawed as hordes of bats and swarms of moths panicked around it. Then just when it seemed sure to come tumbling down, it appeared to lose all substance and its stonework and slate rooftop simply disintegrated and fell to the ground in huge pile a of grainy sand and serpentine strands of ivy. While this was happening Issie saw that the red roses on the briar were beginning to shrivel to blackened nubbins, almost as if they were mourning the demise of the creature.

When she pointed this out everyone cheered.

“What’s there to celebrate?” scolded Bill Ramwell. “The briar kept us in, but it also protected us. Who knows what horrors are waiting out there?”

“The world is waiting,” said Issie. “And it’s more beautiful than before.”

Hurriedly she described what she had witnessed from the tower.

Then without a single backward glance; she led them all through the squelching mulch that had once been the encompassing ring of roses. So intent were they all on the new world that beckoned, no one saw Bill Ramwell grumbling to himself as he crept surreptitiously back to the remains of the creature to leave his spiteful parting gift.

As he walked away grinning smugly to himself, a single drop of potent blood from the prick on his finger went trickling over blackened lips into the expectant orifice of the grimacing maw.

In time the creature breathed a tremulous breath . . .

The End

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