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HUGO IN THE TIME OF DYING

A STORY BY

D. BARRY

Hugo peered through the rain that washed the windshield of Mark's sedan. His stomach began to churn nervously. He had been introduced to the girl only three minutes before, yet he couldn't remember her name.

The rain pounded harder on the windshield. It was December, but a warm spell had melted nearly all the snow. Now it was raining. Mark had forgotten to replace the worn wiper blade on the sedan's passenger side, so Hugo quit trying to see beyond the rain-translucent glass. Street lights and neon signs occasionally filtered through the windshield, but Hugo didn't notice.

Instead he concentrated his attention on the girl who sat between himself and Mark. She was pretty. Soft brown hair, gently shaped nose, smooth pink face with only a trace of makeup. At least Mark hadn't picked out a sloppy girl as Hugo's date. But what was her name? The bubbles in Hugo's stomach began to rise again.

"Felicia is a biology major," Mark said.

Felicia. Felicia Crawford, that was it. Of course. Hugo relaxed a little. He put his arm on the seat-back behind Felicia, and the bubbles in his stomach receded.

"What kind of things are you studying?" he asked her.

"I'm working mostly in genetic composition," Felicia said. There was a distinct softness in her voice, a quality of contentment. Hugo relaxed a little more.

"Yeah," Mark joked. "Genetic composition.

That's where they find out if your genes are composed." He chuckled at his unfunny pun. Felicia seemed puzzled, but Hugo guessed what Mark's next comment would be.

"And if they're not composed," Mark continued, "they must be hot with passion."

Hugo winced. That was Mark, all right. He always had to dirty up the conversation. Felicia ignored Mark's comment.

"And what do you do, Hugo?" she said in the same gentle voice.

"Read philosophy and listen to music," he answered. "Not much else."

"What kind of philosophy and music are you interested in?" she asked.

"Platonic, I guess. I like Classical things mostly."

"Classical," Mark snorted. "He means he likes classy broads." Hugo's stomach began to churn again. Damn Mark anyway.

"What is Plato's philosophy, really?" Felicia asked politely.

"It's hard to say," Hugo said. "You almost have to understand him intuitively. I mean, he didn't have a definite doctrine."

"Personally, I like Epicurus," Mark said. "The old wine, women, and song bit. Now, that guy had class."

"Isn't Plato the one who wrote about the three levels of soul?" said Felicia.

"More or less," Hugo replied. "He didn't actually write about them, he wrote about Socrates talking about them."

The rain had slowed somewhat, and Hugo could again see through the sedan's windshield. The three states of soul. Sensual, sensuous, and the highest of all, the Ideal. Lust, Beauty, Love. Hugo looked at Felicia. In the darkness of the cavern-like sedan, he thought he saw her softness flicker like the light from a fire. Her hair was long and smooth. He felt a trace of her shoulder on his arm.

Beauty. Hugo knew now that he would be a philosopher. He had made up his mind. Felicia was beauty personified. The gentle curve of her neck, the small, delicate form of her chin, the natural pinkness of her cheek. Yes, Hugo would be a philosopher. He was sure of it.

Mark reached over and turned on the car radio.

"A little travelling music, Sammy," he laughed. "Let's get some good stuff on here."

He twisted the selector dial until he got his favorite station. The disc jockey was playing an early Beatles' record, "out of the bag of yesteryear," he said. Felicia lightly tapped her foot in three-four time on the transmission hump, while Mark tried to sing along, "I once had a girl, or should I say, she once had me...." The lyrics bothered Hugo. They were unPlatonic. No beauty in them. "She told me she worked in the morning and started to laugh; I told her I didn't and crawled off to sleep in the bath...." Hugo recoiled. Sure, he had heard the song before; he had the album, had played it a million times. Why should the song bother him now?

It didn't matter. All he had to do was turn his attention to Beauty. The world was beautiful. Beyond that windshield was the crystal beauty of December. Give the rain time; it would turn to snow within a week. The opaqueness in front of Hugo made no difference; there was a world beyond it, a beautiful world. That was all that mattered.

"I've got that song on an album," he said.

"Really? So do I," said Felicia. "Do you have any other Beatle albums?"

"Yeah, I've got Sargeant Pepper. That's probably their best."

"Sure is," said Mark. "With a little help from their friends, especially Lucy and Mr. Kite."

"You said you liked classical music, Hugo," Felicia said. "Do you have any classical albums?"

"Only one," said Hugo. "Beethoven's Fifth."

"I'll drink to that," Mark said.

Hugo was annoyed. "That's an old joke," he said.

"Well," said Felicia. "If you're going to enjoy classical music at all, you've got to enjoy Beethoven."

Hugo was grateful for her understanding. His annoyance at Mark subsided; he again looked at Felicia. The curve of the tan coat on her shoulders, the warmth which generated between it and his arm on the seat-back. Hugo felt his stomach twitch. The beauty of the unseen world beyond the windshield was unimportant. Beauty,

the Ultimate Beauty, was here in the car, sitting right next to him. First comprehend the beautiful, then progress to the Ideal, the Love between souls.

He remembered that he had not properly questioned Felicia about herself. He needed to repay her for letting him reveal himself.

"Just what is genetic composition?" he asked her.

"It's the way in which a person's genes are made up," Felicia answered. "Genetic make-up seems to be correlated with the positioning of RNA and DNA molecules in the chromosomes. These molecules determine heredity and maybe even things like behavior patterns and character traits."

"My genes are blue," Mark said. "What color are yours, Hugo?"

Hugo decided to get even. "Mine are red," he said. "Hot, passionate red."

The rain was now beating the windshield in a steady rhythm. It cascaded down the sloped glass in a steady avalanche.

"Your wiper blade isn't much good," said Hugo.

"Yeah," said Mark. "I've got to fix that one of these days."

Hugo was now aware of the soft touch of Felicia's shoulders. The flickering streetlights illuminated the inside of the sedan like candle light. Felicia's hair was shining; Hugo could see every hair as if he were looking at her through a microscope. The downy fuzz on the nape of her neck reminded him of a peach

he had once eaten on a vacation trip to Georgia. He was conscious of her hip against his. He began to hum the opening theme of Beethoven's Fifth. Felicia turned her head and smiled at him.

The radio interrupted his thoughts. "And here's Led Zeppelin with Whole Lotta Love," the disc jockey was saying.

"Yeah," Mark said and leaned over to turn up the volume.

The lead guitar began the fuzzy part. Hugo was entranced by the steady, pounding four-four beat. He began tapping his hand on the seat-back. The cavelike sedan was electrified. The whole air inside it pulsed with the rhythm of Whole Lotta Love. Hugo's hand tapped harder.

He felt Felicia's hip and thigh move against his. "You need schoolin', baby I'm not foolin'...." The ineffective wiper blade swished back and forth through the incessant cascade. Felicia's hair sparkled like electric diamonds. Hugo was pounding his fist in an uncontrolled four-four rhythm against the seat.

He threw his arm around Felicia's shoulder and pulled her to him. His left hand brushed her hair; the other pulled her face toward his. His nose grazed against hers. He kissed her, his tongue in her mouth. Led Zeppelin pounding away. The whole air electric. He kissed her through the solo guitar, his head pounding in an orgasm of soul, right down to the last dying scream....

"How long before we get to the party, Mark?" Felicia was asking.

"About five minutes," Mark said. "It's only a few more blocks."

The rain suddenly stopped; the avalanche of water down the windshield stopped. Hugo saw the reflection of the streetlights on the wet pavement. The December night was shining with light and water. The Crystal Street foundation was a block down the street, a sperm-whale-spray changing colors in the fountain's prismatic light. Felicia sighed gently.

"Isn't that pretty?" she said to neither Mark nor Hugo.

"Yeah," Hugo said. "Beautiful."

END.

