

TWO GALLONS OF LOVE

By Lazarus Black

“I can’t believe she’s actually coming,” Gary Cho said to himself.

He slapped the kitchen faucet off. Hot water splashed down the drain. He wiped out an enormous glass jar of kimchee with a squeaking towel and stripped tape from it that read *Two Gallons. Love, Mom*. Banging the jar down on the kitchen island, he leaned its lid against it like magazine staging.

“First impressions are everything.” He dried his hands and dimmed the lights. “Tonight has to be perfect”

His one-bedroom apartment looked as clean as could be. Vanilla candles on wrought iron sticks set the mood and masked the scent of wet dog and bachelor.

A grandmother clock showed 8:13pm and a full moon that reminded him of the face he fell in love with across the courtyard. And for the first time, he didn’t fear it.

His breaths and pulse calmed. He felt ready.

“Just don’t be early.” He laughed. “The food’s not here yet.”

He shivered. “The food!”

His heart raced as he ran past a set table and jumped over a couch to the window. Blinds fluttered as he cracked open a hole with two fingers. Silver beams glinted off the slats from above. Gold rays glowed from three floors below.

“Just don’t be late.”

The dim courtyard between his wing and hers lay empty, but not odorless. Besides flowering bushes and mold on concrete, the scents of sweat, weed, and beer, both new and used, said people had been there all day, but not now. His heart sank.

“Don’t panic,” he said. “It’s okay if she knows you can’t cook.”

Across the way and two floors above, something moved in a mostly black window. Sue Saengchan’s alabaster face and sparkling white smile hovered and glowed. Black hair and dark blouse hid the rest. She winked and vanished.

“Oh, shit. She’s coming.”

He scrambled to shave one last time, filling the sink with thin hair.

“I shouldn’t have made it tonight. What was I thinking?”

A knock at the door turned into a knot in his throat. Lemongrass soap and rose-water perfume spilled from the hall door as he opened it. She glowed like a Thai goddess in her navy silk blouse and blue jeans. Blue sapphire shadow and polished nails matched them. Small, but strong; demure, but not shy; she almost forced her way in.

“Happy Friday,” she beamed. “I hope it’s okay I came early. I am starving.”

“Of course, it is,” he said, and closed the door. He gestured to the table. “But dinner

hasn't arrived yet.”

She laughed, licking her lips. “Or has it?”

A knock at the door startled them both.

He turned from her and answered it. The hot pot's aroma flood over him: garlic, onions, mat ganjang, multiple bean and chili pastes, fish sauce, mirin, spices, beef, anchovies. His mouth watered. An old Black man held out the bag. He glanced over Gary's shoulder and smiled with approval. Gary pulled out his phone and fumbled to tip.

The old man's smile turned to horror, red eyes turning white. Gary flew into the kitchen from a shove. His back shrieked in pain as he struck the kitchen island, up-ended and fell over it. Another body clubbed him to the floor like a stone. His crushed lungs exploded. All wind escaped. The old man's twisted corpse spasmed. Hot blood sprayed Gary's face. Salt and iron spread through his nose.

The door slammed. Candles rippled. Sue's head hovered over the island, snow white, glowing brighter than candles. Her hair scraped the ceiling and clung to it like vines. A sickly spine dripping black ichor jut from her neck.

His eyes stung. His heart pounded. He strained, aching to breathe.

“No!” he gasped. “Not tonight.”

Movement to the left. Her headless body lunged. He dodged. It punched through his fridge. Ichor splashed from its neck.

An impossible blue tongue slithered out her lips. She hissed.

He ripped a cabinet door off its hinges. Grabbing a cylinder of salt, he tore off its top, leaped onto her body, and poured it down her neck. Ichor sizzled and smoked. The scent of

rotting flesh made him drool.

Taking a long knife from a drawer, he jumped over the island.

Tentacles of hair dragged her head toward a window. Her tongue wrapped a wrought-iron candlestick and swung at his head. He ducked, growled, and slashed. Striking steel against iron, his knife's tip snapped. She flailed tongue and candlestick to keep him at bay. He spun, stabbed and raked, but never quite reached her.

He stepped back and gasped, cursing himself, her, and fate.

She smashed through his window. Blinds fell to the courtyard. Moonbeams streamed in.

Fate.

He stepped into the light and ripped off his shirt. The knife fell. His back bent and cracked. Feet and hands became claws. Teeth and nose stretched out from his skull. His skin burned as fur grew.

Sue's eye peeled wide. She screamed. "Werewolf?"

He inhaled to howl, but his jaw shattered from her strike. Agony. He stumbled and tripped over the couch. She dropped like a spider. Ropes of hair wrapped his chest. Cold and wet tongue slid around his throat. He strangled. The world turned red with white stars. He clambered upright and staggered to the kitchen. Stabbing pains lanced through his muzzle. He grabbed the huge jar from his mom and shoved it over Sue's head. He peeled her tongue from his neck and stuffed it into the jar, gasping.

Seizing another knife and the lid, he ended it.

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Sue's alabaster skin and glistening white smile gazed up from the jar in his lap. Her

newly shorn hair framed her face like the moon, but one that brought out his best.

He took an old man's finger from the hot pot and dropped it into her jar. She slurped it down with her blue tongue, wiggled, and winked.

He rubbed the glass with his bandaged snoot, and she kissed it.

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