

Love Potion, Ray Bradbury

Love Potion

ALONE THEY LIVED in their house, the two old sisters, as quiet as spiders, as large as sofas, both of them, stuffed with time and dust and snow. Walking by their house at night you saw their faces, like porcelain plates in the unlit windows, or you saw their hands put up to draw the green shade.

And you heard no noise inside, save the dry crackling of newspapers. Miss Nancy Jillet and her sister Julia took their air at four in the morning when the town was undercover, and the only one who ever saw them was the policeman walking by swinging his nightstick threateningly at his shadow which ran away ahead of him down the lanternd street as he marched away from the raw lonely light.

So it was not impossible, then, that on an evening in summer, unable to sleep, with lines in her forehead and perspiration in a dew upon her upper lip, Alice Ferguson, out for a walk around the block, and not afraid for the moon was out and the town serene and beautiful, and she was aged eighteen and nothing could happen to her, happened upon the Jillets, the two old ladies, sitting in the milky dark of 2 a.m., with needley, silver stars for eyes and fat porcelain hands across their pincushion breasts rocking slowly in their asthmatic rocking chairs, alone, alone.

At first, Alice Ferguson was quite startled, and then, remembering the tales of their solitary confinement within life, lifted her hand and called, "Good evening," across the lawn to the silvered porch.

After a time, one of the chairs stopped rocking and one of the sisters said, "Good morning."

Alice Ferguson laughed. "Of course, it is morning. Good morning, then." The sisters nodded silently.

"It's a lovely night," said Alice Ferguson.

"You're Alice Ferguson," said one of the old women.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"And you're 18 years old."

"Yes," she replied, uncertainly.

"Come here, child," said Nancy Jillet, the oldest and fattest of the two, in shadow.

She crossed the soft moon lawn to the edge of the railed porch and peered in at the two half-seen faces.

"And you're in love," said Nancy Jillet, in an awful whisper.

"How did you know?"

The sisters rocked and looked at each other wisely.

"How did you know?" demanded Alice Ferguson.

"And he doesn't love you," said Nancy Jillet.

"Oh," said Alice.

"And you're unhappy and out walking late tonight," said the other sister in an old voice.

Alice stood before them, her head sinking, her eyelids flickering.

"Never you mind, child, never you mind," whispered Nancy Jillet, uncrossing her arms from her amazing breast. "You came to the right place."

"I didn't come..."

"Sh, we'll help you."

Alice found herself whispering, also, they were a trio of black velvet and white ermine conspirators, half moon, half shadow, there at the center of the night.

"How?" she whispered.

"We'll give you a love potion."

"Oh, but..."

"A love potion, child, to take with you."

"I can't afford..."

"No money, child."

"I don't believe..."

"You will, child, you'll believe, when it works."

"I don't want to..."

“Bother us? No bother. It’s right inside, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“I must be going.”

“Stay just a moment.” The sisters had stopped rocking altogether and were putting their hands out, like hypnotists or tight rope walkers, at her.

“It’s late.”

“You want to win him, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“All right then. Directions on the bottle. Get it, sister.” And a moment later, in and out of the house like a huge dream, the sister had gone and fetched the green bottle and it rested, glittering, on the porch railing. Alice reached up her hand in the moonlight. “I don’t know.”

“Try it,” whispered Nancy Jillet. “Try it once, is all we ask. It’s the answer to everything when you’re 18. Go on.”

“But, what’s in it...”

“Nothing, nothing at all. We’ll show you.” And from herself, as if she were bringing forth part of her bosom, Nancy Jillet drew forth a wrapped kerchief. Opening this she spread it on the rail in the moonlight, where a smell of fields and meadows arose instantly from the herbs contained therein.

“White flowers for the moon, summer-myrtle for the stars, lilacs for the rain, a red rose for the heart, a walnut for the mind, for a walnut is cased in itself like a brain, isn’t it, do you see? Some clear water from the spring well to make all run well, and a sprig of pepper-leaf to warm his blood. Alum to make his fear grow small. And a drop of white cream so that he sees your skin like a moonstone. Here they all are, in this kerchief, and here is the potion in the bottle.”

“Will it work?”

“Will it work!” cried Nancy Jillet. “What else could it do but make him follow you like a puppy all the years of your life? Who else would know better how to make a love potion than us?”

We’ve had since 1910, Alice Ferguson, to think back and mull over and figure out why we were never courted and never married. And it all boils down to this here, in this kerchief, a few bits and pieces, and if it’s too late for us to help ourselves, why then we’ll help you. There you are, take it.”

“Has anyone ever tried it before?”

“Oh, no child. It’s not just something you give to everyone or make and bottle all the time. We’ve done a lot of things in our life, the house is full of antimacassars we’ve knitted, framed mottos, bedspreads, stamp collections, coins, we’ve done everything, we’ve painted and sculpted and gardened by night so no one would bother us. You’ve seen our garden?”

“Yes, it’s lovely.”

“But it was only last week, one night, on my seventieth birthday, I was in the garden with Julia, and we saw you go by late, looking sad. And I turned to Julia and said, because of a man. And Julia said, if only we could help her in her love.

And I was fingering a rose bush at the time and I picked a rose and said, Let’s try. So we went all around the garden picking the freshest flowers and feeling young and happy again. So there it is, Alice, rose-water to whirl his senses and mint-leaves to freshen his interest and rain-water to soften his tongue and a dash of tarragon to melt his heart. One, two, three drops and he’s yours, in soda pop, lemonade or iced-tea.”

“I DO LOVE you,” he said.

“Now I won’t need this,” she said, taking out the bottle.

“Pour a little out,” he said, “before you take it back, so it won’t hurt their feelings.”

She poured a little out.

She returned the bottle.

“DID YOU give him some?”

“Yes.”

“Good, good, just wait and see.”

“And now we’ll take some.”

“Will you? I thought it was only for men?”

“It is, dear. But just this once, tonight, we’ll take some, too. And we’ll have beautiful dreams and dream we’re young again.”

They drank from it.

In the very early morning, she awakened to the sound of a siren in the streets of the green town. Running to the window, she looked out and saw what everyone had seen a few minutes before and would remember for years afterward. Miss Nancy and Miss Julia Jillet sitting on their front porch, not moving, in the broad daylight, a thing they had never done before, their eyes closed, their hands dangling at their sides, their mouths agape strangely.

There was something about them, something that suggested sheaths from which the iron blade is gone. This, Alice Ferguson saw, and the crowd moving in, and the police, and the coroner, putting his hand up for the green bottle that glittered brightly in the sunlight, sitting on the rail.

The end