

Devotion

As she trudges down the alley, Cenessa sees a small mound of discarded roses lying atop the newly fallen snow. Their crimson contrasts sharply against the pure white and causes her to pause briefly and look back at Martin, as if to indicate the hope he notices them too. Of course, he notices them.

As simple as that image is, it drives home a huge emotional jolt to the two of them. It is a reminder of better days. Better days of wine and roses. Not just any wine, Champagne. Not just any roses but giant rose bouquets. Those were the days. Days when they both lived the lives of celebrities. Not like today. Back then, everyone knew them. They were quite the sight, especially Cenessa adorned in flowers and Martin decked-out in one of his striking uniform. Their life was fantastic and highly rewarding, but unfortunately, life can also be cruel. Within an instant, it was over.

Their celebrity faded rapidly since that dreadful day. No one seems to care about them anymore. Even Martin's efforts to save Cenessa's life seems to go unnoticed. Now, the only discussions anyone has about them is how Martin must be crazy to stick with her, especially after her infertility is revealed. The final straw is broken when their employer realizes that with the combination of Cenessa's medical costs and Martin's lack of focus, they are both now more of a burden than an asset. The man has no choice but to kick them out of his life and move on.

Unable to make a living and homeless, they turn to one of Martin's friends for help. In their heyday, his friend, Bernard was always there cheering them on and enjoying the benefits of their fame. He too misses those glory days and feels bad for them now that it's all over.

Bernard owns a coal distribution business and can certainly use help delivering his product to the many downtrodden souls crammed into tiny flats hidden all over the city. Most live on narrow dark alleys with no street lights, no vehicles, no natural gas for heat or much of anything else. Without his coal they would never survive the winter. Their and Martin's plight causes him to explore new ways to gain customers and also help his friends, Cenessa and Martin.

Yes, delivering coal is a huge step down from those glory days, but it has its own rewards. First, it gives the two of them a place to live, and secondly, it gives Martin comfort in knowing they are helping others, including Cenessa, by bringing purpose back to her life.

Each night, after a long day of hauling coal and ashes through the tight alleys, their spirits are lifted knowing the day is done and they have a place to stay. They find their way back to the warehouse, eat their meals and finally curl up together on a mattress of straw for the night. Each morning they start their day by arriving at the loading dock to collect another load of coal sacks. Bernard often greets them, offering cafe-au-lait to Martin and apples to Cenessa. This routine goes on for nearly a year, until one morning neither Martin nor Cenessa appear at the dock. Concerned, Bernard walks back to their living quarter only to find Cenessa laying on the floor with Martin's head upon her chest. Cenessa cautiously raises her eyes toward Bernard, being careful not to move, for fear of waking Martin, but it is obvious to Bernard, Martin will never wake again.

Bernard makes sure the funeral is a grand event. Cenessa proudly leads the procession, once again decorated in flowers. She guides the hearse to its final destination where Bernard delivered his eulogy:

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. It is sad how fast the world has forgotten one of its greatest horse racing teams, Cenessa and her jockey Martin. After Cenessa broke her leg a few years ago, it was as if they had never existed. I have never met a man and animal team so driven to please each other as they were. Most trainers would have destroyed Cenessa after her leg injury, especially seeing she could not be bred to carry on her line. Not Martin. He did all he could to bring her back to health and the two of them spend their remaining days together, even if it meant they had to live the life of common laborers. Every morning Cenessa would pull her narrow little coal wagon, with Martin at the reins, to my loading dock, ready for another day of work. As bad as I feel about the loss of Martin, I feel worse for Cenessa. I can only assume her days will be numbered, once she realizes Martin is gone. God bless them both."

The minister concludes the funeral and as the procession drifts away, Bernard unties the reins from a nearby tree to lead Cenessa and her hearse-coal wagon back onto the road. In the true spirit of the bygone champion she once was, she rears up and refuses to leave. Knocking Bernard to the ground, she prances to the grave side, whinnies and halts to peer into the hole. She paws the fresh pile of dirt beside it, kicking some on to the casket below. Bernard raises to his feet and lets her stand there with her head bowed for some time. Finally she slowly turns and pulls her wagon back to the road where she waits for Bernard to take the reins and lead her home.