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## A Walk by The Lake

*by Maddog*

*How quick the sun can drop away  
And now my bitter hands  
Cradle broken glass  
Of what was everything  
All the pictures had  
All been washed in black  
Tattooed everything  
All the love gone bad  
Turned my world to black  
Tattooed all I see  
All that I am  
All I'll be ...*

— "Black" by Pearl Jam

**A**nd now the Nightcrawler will leave you all tucked safely in your bed with the demons lying in wait underneath," LaCroix concluded his radio talk show for the night. He enjoyed the creative challenge it gave him to try to come up with something new night after night. It was an amusing diversion to help pass eternity, but right now he had to attend his visitor. He'd seen the deceptively young-looking figure enter the waiting area outside the control booth half an hour ago. Not wanting to hurry the show any, after all it had taken him over an hour to get the audience to the point where they were, he'd simply nodded and let the person wait. Exiting the booth, he greeted his visitor. "Hello, Zavi, enjoy the show?"

"It was very ... interesting," Zavi replied, a grin passing over his face. In outward appearance, Zavi was about sixteen or seventeen years old. Black hair, shaved on the sides and long on top in the current fashion, framed a black-eyed, slightly Asiatic-looking face. His thin, muscular frame was clad in a Pearl Jam Alive T-shirt and baggy blue jeans. He could have been any teenager on the streets of Toronto. He wasn't, though; he had been born and brought across into his current vampiric state nearly two thousand years before.

"Interesting?" LaCroix raised an eyebrow in response, suggesting that he didn't appreciate the implied meaning of the word. He was a tall man, well over six feet, with a powerful frame, dressed in crisp black pants, black cashmere sweater and black wool jacket. Penetrating blue eyes were set beneath short cropped blond hair. His entire being suggested a predator in repose.

Zavi met LaCroix's eyes and made a face. "Not my kind of subject, what were you trying to do? Give them nightmares?"

"I was trying to make them think, actually," LaCroix responded softly.

"Amounts to the same thing," the other vampire shrugged. "By the way, were you aware that there's a character in *Excalibur* named Nightcrawler? He used to be with the X-Men."

"And who are the X-Men? A band?"

"No, comic book."

"Really, Zavi, your taste in literature is appalling at times," LaCroix scolded, shaking his head.

"Didn't you like the *Sandman* comics I sent you?"

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"Some of them, I especially liked Gaiman's portrayal of death. Rather comforting for mortals to think of death as a friendly woman waiting to greet them, don't you agree?"

"Liked it myself. Are you busy for the rest of the night, LaCroix? I fancy a walk and would like some company," Zavi picked up the black leather biker's jacket he'd thrown on a nearby chair.

LaCroix considered the invitation for a moment, wondering at the motivation behind it. Zavi rarely did anything without having a purpose in mind. Sometimes it was an illogical, even whimsical reason, but a reason nonetheless. They'd spent time in each other's company over the centuries. He could be an interesting and delightfully unpredictable companion. Though both Nicholas and Janette, LaCroix's two fledglings, found his behavior irritating at times. That had been another reason to have him around, he acknowledged to himself. Indicating that Zavi should lead the way, they left the radio station.

It was chilly out, Fall in Toronto could be cold at times and it was several hours until dawn yet. A black Porsche was parked outside, LaCroix heard the faint beep of an electronic signal opening the locks to it. The vanity license plate read "SuxBld." Opening the door, he sat in the black leather interior and waited for the car to start. As soon as the engine turned over he found his ears assaulted by a loud blaring and pulsing. Putting his hands over his sensitive ears to protect them, he glared around for the source of the discomfort.

Zavi grinned at him and fiddled with one of the many controls in the car. The sound died down to a dull roar. "Sorry, I forget that not everybody likes music as loud as I do."

"You call that music?"

"Yeah, it's got a melody and a beat. Seems to fit the description of music," came the annoyed reply. The song's words filtered through the car.

*"And now my bitter hands chafe beneath the clouds of what was everything. Oh, the pictures have all been washed in black, tattooed everything."*

"I suppose you're right," LaCroix acknowledged reluctantly, even though he was listening intently to the lyrics.

*"Oh, and twisted thoughts that spin round my head. I'm spinning."*

"I usually am," Zavi responded, allowing a small grin to form. LaCroix knew he often seemed to be all knowing and all seeing. And Zavi enjoyed poking fun at him by imitating the same behavior. It was a dangerous game. Admittedly, LaCroix could be very volatile, but Zavi had fun and LaCroix enjoyed indulging him in it.

The larger vampire snorted in response, his eyes roaming around the car, searching, as they always did, for any information that could possibly be useful. The inside of the Porsche was spotless, the only sign of disarray was the clutter of CDs and tapes in the cramped backseat and a single brown envelope. LaCroix decided that he'd let Zavi make the first move tonight. He could not yet discern the reason for the other's unexpected invitation. He did not feel threatened, so he could afford to wait and see what would develop.

They drove through the darkened roads. Few people were out so late and it was not yet time for even the earliest of workers to be on the streets. Zavi made no conversation as they traveled, the only sounds coming from the car's CD player. Handling the car in efficient silence, he soon took them down toward Lake Ontario. Parking the car in a deserted lot near the shore, they stepped out of the car. The fall air was heavy with moisture, no stars were reflected in the water, blanked out by the rapidly-forming fog. No birds, not even the ever-present lake gulls, were awake yet, making the only noise the gentle lapping of water on sand. Without saying a word, Zavi walked away from the lot down towards the shore, finally stopping inches from the water. The other vampire followed him silently. They stood there for a minute before the younger-looking man broke the silence.

"I've always enjoyed being by a large body of water, you know, makes me feel so insignificant. The size of it all, the sheer power of that amount of water. It's daunting."

"You enjoy feeling insignificant?" LaCroix asked, voice soft in the night.

"Yes, I think it helps me keep a perspective on things."

"What things are you talking about, Zavi?"

"I think people get distracted by all the little things in day-to-day living. They get lost in inconsequentialities. What do I have to do today? Where do I have to go? Where am I going to get food? What do they think of me?" Zavi explained in a melodic voice, remnants of a language not heard in a thousand years softening his vowels. He looked at his companion's face. "They get trapped under a thousand details and let themselves be crushed by them."

"Mortals do that. Perhaps it helps them forget how short and fragile their lives really are."

Shaking his head, Zavi stared out into the dark water. "Not just mortals, LaCroix, vampires as well. Our lives are very much the same. Some of the day-to-day details are a bit different, I admit. Vampires have an easier time for some things, harder for others. And of course, we have so much more time to work things out. But in the end, it's the same."

LaCroix regarded the other vampire. This reflective mood was one he had never seen before. While never a complete hedonist, living only for the hunt and pleasure, Zavi had enjoyed indulging himself. LaCroix decided not to say anything yet, waiting to find out where Zavi was going with this conversation.

Taking a slow deep breath, Zavi continued, "When I look at all the water out there I feel that everything that happens is very small. All that water doesn't care what I eat today, or if I'm having a good day. The water doesn't care what ships are sailing on it, what life resides in it, or if people are going to try to hem it in with some manmade contraption. It goes where it will and crushes anything that gets in its path if it wants to. You ever seen a hurricane, LaCroix, ever see people rushing about trying to protect their little bit of coastline? As if anything they do could stop a force like that."

"Zavi, does all this philosophy have a point?"

"You came to Toronto to be near Nicholas and Janette, didn't you?"

LaCroix tensed mentally, trying to determine the reasoning behind the question. "What if I did?" he responded, dismissively.

"Not everyone is so connected to their fledglings as you are, LaCroix. Most turn them loose after a few years, yet you always keep yours close by. I've always wondered why?"

LaCroix controlled the sudden surge of anger he felt. He did not like this line of conversation. As long as he adhered to the vampiric Code, his actions were nobody's concern but his own. LaCroix kept his voice cold and level, "My reasons are my own and do not concern you."

"You made Nicholas nearly eight hundred years ago, yet still you feel the need to play father to him. Why do ..."

Zavi's words were cut off as LaCroix grabbed his shoulder in a crushing grip. Forcing Zavi to look at him LaCroix asked, words brittle, eyes bright red with anger, "What is the point of all this? What I do with my creations is not your concern."

Wrenching off LaCroix's grip, Zavi turned back to the lake and gave a soft reply, "Gustav died last month. He decided to watch the sun rise again."

LaCroix looked down at the other vampire, his eyes returning to their normal shade of blue. He remembered Gustav. He had been one of Zavi's fledglings, a tall, powerful Swede with shoulder-length blond hair that he'd always worn loose. He had always been filled with energy, LaCroix recalled, the force of his personality, his desire for constant movement, had hit one physically when he'd entered the room.

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Gustav's brightness and incessant need for socialization and action had always stood in contrast to darker Zavi's calmer, more reticent personality. LaCroix had once heard another vampire say that the reason Zavi had turned Gustav was that he had missed the sun and this was as close to it as anything living was. So this was the reason for Zavi's mood. Turning his gaze to the dark waters, he gently replied, "I'm sorry."

Shrugging his shoulders, the darker vampire continued to stare straight ahead, nodding his head slightly, Zavi continued, "Yeah. I never thought that Gustav would decide to die. He always seemed so ... thrilled with being alive. Everything was interesting to him, every day just brought something new for him to be amused with. But I guess even joy gets tiresome after hundreds of years."

"Many of us cannot keep up with the changes that happen over time, Zavi. You know as well as I that more vampires choose to die than are killed by hunters. The world changes, they feel isolated, out of sync," LaCroix explained, "The strong and adaptable survive, the others ..." he let his words trail off.

"I know all that," Zavi countered sadly, wind ruffling through his hair. The air was beginning to grow warmer around them. "I've seen it happen often enough. Did you know, LaCroix, that none of my get are alive anywhere in the world today?"

"So create some more," LaCroix suggested practically. The answer seemed simple enough to him.

"For what reason?"

"If you're lonely for companionship, Zavi, it is an easy enough matter to create some company for yourself."

"No, what I meant was, why do we create them anyway?"

"It's a gift," LaCroix responded, for that was what he considered it. The greatest gift one could give to another. The gift of strength, of power, of life eternal.

"I remember when I gave Gustav that gift. He was dancing the first time I saw him. There were dozens of others dancing as well, but they might have all been stick figures beside him. He danced with every fiber of his being, just as he did everything. I gave him the gift because I couldn't bear to watch him slowly eaten away by time or disease," Zavi explained, eyes focused not on the water but on the distant memory. LaCroix could almost see the memory, Gustav dancing by candlelight, golden hair flying, laughter driving back the night. "But why do we bother to create them at all? Mortals have children because it makes them immortal. We *are* immortal."

"For companionship?" LaCroix suggested, "Amusement?"

"Love?"

LaCroix looked skyward for a moment before replying, giving a reluctant nod. "I suppose that is a reason for some."

"Since Gustav died, I've been thinking of all the others that I've created over the centuries. Lisette, Guillaume, Yuri, and many others. Tried to recall exactly what reason I had for bringing them across, what made them different to me. What makes one person your prey and one your companion, LaCroix? What makes one human being different than another?"

"Every person is different," LaCroix felt like he was stating the obvious. Every person was different, even those that became his sustenance for the night. Each had his or own own hopes and dreams, you could taste it on their blood.

"True, people are different whether mortal or immortal. We all have our reasons," Zavi gave a tight little grin, "I suppose we all do what we do because it seemed like a good idea at the time."

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The two vampires stood there in silence for a few minutes. The gentle lapping of the water was the only sound. LaCroix waited patiently for Zavi to continue the conversation. He let his thoughts drift back in time, recalling events with Nicholas and Janette. The hours he had spent watching Janette sell her body on the streets, the sound of her screams when he rescued her from a brutal attack. Nicholas, the fair-haired knight, filled with good intentions, being seduced by Janette. His musings were interrupted by Zavi.

"No, that's not it. There has to be some reason we choose who we do," fixing his companion with his eyes, he continued, "What are you trying to create, LaCroix? Why did you choose whom you did? Why did I? Is there some play in our heads that we're always trying to find actors for? A scene which must be played over and over again? Are we trying to recreate something from our mortal life? Fulfill some need that can't be denied?"

"I would say that my fledglings needed me more than I needed them."

"Really?"

"Yes, after all, where would they be without me? Long-dead and forgotten," the larger vampire replied assuredly. He remembered all the times that he had helped them since their creation. Protecting them from hunters, the sun, even, in Nicholas's case when they suspected him of breaking the Code, the Enforcers. For all their protestations of independence, they both needed them. Janette would never be as bold to suggest it. She seemed self-sufficient enough, owner of a nightclub, The Raven, handler of all the problems that came into the club from both the vampires and the mortals. Even Nicholas showed up at her door when he had a problem. LaCroix was proud of the hard exterior she showed to the world but he knew exactly where the chinks were in that self-assured shell. The blood she drank continually laced with wine, the way she listened to the mortal prostitutes who found a haven in her club, her deep love and concern for Nicholas. And what of Nicholas, his prodigal son? The child who wanted no part of him or the gift he had bestowed. He would need him when he realized that his foolish dream of mortality was ridiculous. Then Nicholas would need him to pick up the pieces and give him direction once again.

**“A**nd where would you be without them?" Zavi finally asked. The question hung in the moisture-laden air. He did not expect an answer. Wishing he was better with words so that he could explain to LaCroix what he was feeling and thinking, he stood there trying to put the right words together. Zavi wasn't even sure why he was trying to have this conversation with LaCroix, of all people. Then, he supposed, the answer was really simple when you thought about it. Collecting his thoughts, Zavi ran a hand across the shaved back of his head, then spoke, "Have you ever considered that they give you far more than you ever gave them?"

"What?" LaCroix demanded incredulously, turning his gaze from the lake to the other vampire.

Zavi returned the gaze and nodded, "Yes. We grant them power and immortality. We give them our eternal protection, for what it's worth. But do you know what they give us in return?"

"I have no idea," came LaCroix's puzzled reply.

"They give us a reason to keep going on," Zavi pronounced. "Our fledglings help connect us with the world. Without them," he shrugged and looked at the sky, and a gull called off to their right somewhere, "there's nothing to keep us going but our hunger."

**L**aCroix considered the other man's words. Was there any truth to them? Did he in fact need Nicholas and Janette? Is that why he stayed in Toronto, do be near them? That couldn't be ... The hairs on the back of his neck lifted. It took him only a split second to realize what the cause was. He'd noticed Zavi looking at the sky only a moment before. The sky was starting to lighten with the approach of the dawn. "An interesting hypothesis, Zavi. But I think we'd better continue this conversation elsewhere, don't you?"

Zavi looked at him, dark eyes appraising him intently. "You know, I've always liked you, LaCroix. I've never understood why."

Not knowing quite what to say, which for him was unusual, LaCroix turned and started walking back toward the Porsche.

"LaCroix."

Turning back, LaCroix intercepted a missile aimed at his head. Plucking it from the air, he found himself holding the keys to the car.

"There's a brown envelope in the back seat. It has some things in it I'd appreciate you taking care of," Zavi said as he removed his black leather jacket, folded it neatly and laid it on the sand beside him. "The CD player has a message for you, just hit the play button. Actually, it's about you and Nicholas. You'll figure it out, I'm sure." Without saying anything further, Zavi turned his back on his companion and stared off into the distance. The fog was beginning to lift and the gulls were starting their morning search for food.

LaCroix nodded even though Zavi was no longer facing him and walked back to the car. It had, he noticed, tinted windows. That would be necessary, since the sun had nearly risen. Climbing into the car, he adjusted the seat back and started driving away.

**Z**avi took a deep breath and folded his arms across his chest. He wondered how long it would take him to burn completely away but then turned his thoughts away from that. Thinking back over all the people he had known, the places. In his mind, Gustav danced one last time by candlelight. The song that he had danced to changed in Zavi's head. Part of the melody was similar, he realized with a slight smile. Maybe that's why he'd always liked that song so much. He began to sing softly to himself as the sun came up.

*"I took a drive today, time to emancipate. I guess it was the beatings made me wise. But I'm not about to give thanks, or apologize ..."*

— *"Rearviewmirror" by Pearl Jam*

**L**aCroix pulled the Porsche into the indoor garage beneath his home. The windows were done very nicely, he had to admit, no sunlight had penetrated the interior of the car. Turning sideways, he reached into the back seat and pulled out the brown envelope Zavi had left him. Opening it, he found several deeds to houses, one a chateau in France where he had visited Zavi once, the registration and title for the Porsche, a list of lawyers and other people to notify. Not much, he thought, for over two thousand years of living. He was just about to get out of the car when he remembered the CD player. Hitting 'play' he wondered what it could have to do with him and Nicholas. The song filled the car.

*"I know someday you'll have a beautiful life. I know you'll be a sun in somebody else's sky. But why, why, why can't it be, why can't it be mine?"*

— *"Black" by Pearl Jam*

(All songs by Pearl Jam)