

Miss Temptation
Kurt Vonnegut
1956

Puritanism had fallen into such disrepair that not even the oldest spinster thought of putting Susanna in a ducking stool; not even the oldest farmer suspected that Susanna's diabolical beauty had made his cow run dry.

Susanna was a bit-part actress in the summer theater near the village, and she rented a room over the firehouse. She was a part of village life all summer, but the villagers never got used to her. She was forever as startling and desirable as a piece of big-city fire apparatus.

Susanna's feathery hair and saucer eyes were as black as midnight. Her skin was the color of cream. Her hips were like a lyre, and her bosom made men dream of peace and plenty forever and ever. She wore barbaric golden hoops on her shell-pink ears, and around her ankles were chains with little bells on them.

She went barefoot and slept until noon every day. And, as noon drew near, the villagers on the main street would grow as restless as beagles with a thunderstorm on the way.

At noon, Susanna would appear on the porch outside her room. She would stretch languidly, pour a bowl of milk for her black cat, kiss the cat, fluff her hair, put on her earrings, lock her door, and hide the key in her bosom.

And then, barefoot, she would begin her stately, undulating, titillating, tinkling walk—down the outside stairway, past the liquor store, the insurance agency, the real-estate office, the diner, the American Legion post, and the church, to the crowded drugstore. There she would get the New York papers.

She seemed to nod to all the world in a dim, queenly way. But the only person she spoke to during her daily walk was Bearse Hinkley, the seventy-two-year-old pharmacist.

The old man always had her papers ready for her.

"Thank you, Mr. Hinkley. You're an angel," she would say, opening a paper at random. "Now, let's see what's going on back in civilization." While the old man would watch, fuddled by her perfume, Susanna would laugh or gasp or frown at items in the paper—items she never explained.

Then she would take the papers and return to her nest over the firehouse. She would pause on the porch outside her room, dip her hand into her bosom, bring out the key, unlock the door, pick up the black cat, kiss it again, and disappear inside.

The one-girl pageant had a ritual sameness until one day toward the end of summer, when the air of the drugstore was cut by a cruel, sustained screech from a dry bearing in a revolving soda-fountain stool.

The screech cut right through Susanna's speech about Mr. Hinkley's being an angel. The screech made scalps tingle and teeth ache. Susanna looked indulgently in the direction of the screech, forgiving the screecher. She found that the screecher wasn't a person to be indulged.

The screech had been made by the stool of Corporal Norman Fuller, who had come home the night before from eighteen bleak months in Korea. They had been eighteen months without war—but eighteen months without cheer all the same. Fuller had turned on the stool slowly, to look at Susanna with indignation. When the screech died, the drugstore was deathly still.

Fuller had broken the enchantment of summer by the seaside—had reminded all in the drugstore of the black, mysterious passions that were so often the mainsprings of life.

He might have been a brother, come to rescue his idiot sister from the tenderloin; or an irate husband, come to a saloon to horsewhip his wife back to where she belonged, with the baby. The truth was that Corporal Fuller had never seen Susanna before.

He hadn't consciously meant to make a scene. He hadn't known, consciously, that his stool would screech. He had meant to underplay his indignation, to make it a small detail in the background of Susanna's pageant—a detail noticed by only one or two connoisseurs of the human comedy.

But the screech had made his indignation the center of the solar system for all in the drugstore—particularly for Susanna. Time had stopped, and it could not proceed until Fuller had explained the expression on his granite Yankee face.

Fuller felt his skin glowing like hot brass. He was comprehending destiny. Destiny had suddenly given him an audience, and a situation about which he had a bitter lot to say.

Fuller felt his lips move, heard the words come out. "Who do you think you are?" he said to Susanna.

"I beg your pardon?" said Susanna. She drew her newspapers about herself protectively.

"I saw you come down the street like you were a circus parade, and I just wondered who you thought you were," said Fuller.

Susanna blushed gloriously. "I—I'm an actress," she said.

"You can say that again," said Fuller. "Greatest actresses in the world. American women."

"You're very nice to say so," said Susanna uneasily.

Fuller's skin glowed brighter and hotter. His mind had become a fountain of apt, intricate phrases. "I'm not talking about theaters with seats in 'em. I'm talking about the stage of life. American women act and dress like they're gonna give you the world. Then, when you stick out your hand, they put an ice cube in it."

"They do?" said Susanna emptily.

"They do," said Fuller, "and it's about time somebody said so." He looked challengingly from spectator to spectator, and found what he took to be dazed encouragement. "It isn't fair," he said.

"What isn't?" said Susanna, lost.

"You come in here with bells on your ankles, so's I'll have to look at your ankles and your pretty pink feet," said Fuller. "You kiss the cat, so's I'll have to think about how it'd be to be that cat," said Fuller. "You call an old man an angel, so's I'll have to think about what it'd be like to be called an angel by you," said Fuller. "You hide your key in front of everybody, so's I'll have to think about where that key is," said Fuller.

He stood. "Miss," he said, his voice full of pain, "you do everything you can to give lonely, ordinary people like me indigestion and the heeby-jeebies, and you wouldn't even hold hands with me to keep me from falling off a cliff."

He strode to the door. All eyes were on him. Hardly anyone noticed that his indictment had reduced Susanna to ashes of what she'd been moments before. Susanna now looked like what she really was—a muddle-headed nineteen-year-old clinging to a tiny corner of sophistication,

"It isn't fair," said Fuller. "There ought to be a law against girls acting and dressing like you do. It makes more people unhappy than it does happy. You know what I say to you, for going around making everybody want to kiss you?"

"No," piped Susanna, every fuse in her nervous system blown.

“I say to you what you’d say to me, if I was to try and kiss you,” said Fuller grandly. He swung his arms in an umpire’s gesture for “out.” “The hell with you,” he said. He left, slamming the screen door.

He didn’t look back when the door slammed again a moment later, when the patter of running bare feet and the wild tinkling of little bells faded away in the direction of the firehouse.

That evening, Corporal Fuller’s widowed mother put a candle on the table, and fed him sirloin steak and strawberry shortcake in honor of his homecoming. Fuller ate the meal as though it were wet blotting paper, and he answered his mother’s cheery questions in a voice that was dead.

“Aren’t you glad to be home?” said his mother, when they’d finished their coffee.

“Sure,” said Fuller.

“What did you do today?” she said.

“Walked,” he said.

“Seeing all your old friends?” she said.

“Haven’t got any friends,” said Fuller.

His mother threw up her hands. “No friends?” she said. “You?”

“Times change. Ma,” said Fuller heavily. “Eighteen months is a long time. People leave town, people get married....”

“Marriage doesn’t kill people, does it?” she said.

Fuller didn’t smile. “Maybe not,” he said, “But it makes it awful hard for ‘em to find any place to fit old friends in.”

“Dougie isn’t married, is he?”

“He’s out west, Ma—with the Strategic Air Command,” said Fuller. The little dining room became as lonely as a bomber in the thin, cold stratosphere.

“Oh,” said his mother. “There must be somebody left.”

“Nope,” said Fuller. “I spent the whole morning on the phone, Ma. I might as well have been back in Korea. Nobody home.”

“I can’t believe it,” she said. “Why, you couldn’t walk down Main Street without being almost trampled by friends.”

“Ma,” said Fuller hollowly, “after I ran out of numbers to call, you know what I did? I went down to the drugstore, Ma, and just sat there by the soda fountain, waiting for somebody to walk in—somebody I knew maybe just even a little. Ma,” he said in anguish, “all I knew was poor old Bearse Hinkley. I’m not kidding you one bit.” He stood, crumpling his napkin into a ball. “Ma, will you please excuse me?”

“Yes. Of course,” she said. “Where are you going now?” She beamed. “Out to call on some nice girl, I hope?”

Fuller threw the napkin down. “I’m going to get a cigar!” he said. “I don’t know any girls. They’re all married too.”

His mother paled, “I-I see,” she said. “I-I didn’t even know you smoked.”

“Ma,” said Fuller tautly, “can’t you get it through your head? I been away for eighteen months, Ma—eighteen months!”

“It is a long time, isn’t it?” said his mother, humbled by his passion. “Well, you go get your cigar.” She touched his arm. “And please don’t feel so lonesome. You just wait. Your life will be so full of people again, you won’t know which one to turn to. And, before you know it, you’ll meet some pretty young girl, and you’ll be married too.”

“I don’t intend to get married for some time, Mother,” said Fuller stuffily. “Not until I get through divinity school.”

“Divinity school!” said his mother. “When did you decide that?”

“This noon,” said Fuller.

“What happened this noon?”

“I had kind of a religious experience, Ma,” he said. “Something just made me speak out.”

“About what?” she said, bewildered.

In Fuller’s buzzing head there whirled a rhapsody of Susannas. He saw again all the professional temptresses who had tormented him in Korea, who had beckoned from makeshift bed-sheet movie screens, from curling pin-ups on damp tent walls, from ragged magazines in sandbagged pits. The Susannas had made fortunes, beckoning to lonely Corporal Fullers everywhere—beckoning with stunning beauty, beckoning the Fullers to come nowhere for nothing.

The wraith of a Puritan ancestor, stiff-necked, dressed in black, took possession of Fuller’s tongue. Fuller spoke with a voice that came across the centuries, the voice of a witch hanger, a voice redolent with frustration, self-righteousness, and doom.

“What did I speak out against?” he said. “Temptation.”

Fuller’s cigar in the night was a beacon warning carefree, frivolous people away. It was plainly a cigar smoked in anger. Even the moths had sense enough to stay away. Like a restless, searching red eye, it went up and down every street in the village, coming to rest at last, a wet, dead butt, before the firehouse.

Bearse Hinkley, the old pharmacist, sat at the wheel of the pumper, his eyes glazed with nostalgia—nostalgia for the days when he had been young enough to drive. And on his face, for all to see, was a dream of one more catastrophe, with all the young men away, when an old man or nobody would drive the pumper to glory one more time. He spent warm evenings there, behind the wheel—and had for years.

“Want a light for that thing?” he said to Corporal Fuller, seeing the dead cigar between Fuller’s lips.

“No, thanks, Mr. Hinkley,” he said. “All the pleasure’s out of it.”

“Beats me how anybody finds any pleasure in cigars in the first place,” said the old man.

“Matter of taste,” said Fuller. “No accounting for tastes.”

“One man’s meat’s another man’s poison,” said Hinkley. “Live and let live, I always say.” He glanced at the ceiling. Above it was the fragrant nest of Susanna and her black cat. “Me? All my pleasures are looking at what used to be pleasures.”

Fuller looked at the ceiling, too, meeting the unmentioned issue squarely. “If you were young,” he said, “you’d know why I said what I said to her. Beautiful, stuck-up girls give me a big pain.”

“Oh, I remember that,” said Hinkley. “I’m not so old I don’t remember the big pain.”

“If I have a daughter, I hope she isn’t beautiful,” said Fuller. “The beautiful girls at high school—by God, if they didn’t think they were something extra-special.”

“By God, if I don’t think so, too,” said Hinkley.

“They wouldn’t even look at you if you didn’t have a car and an allowance of twenty bucks a week to spend on ‘em,” said Fuller.

“Why should they?” said the old man cheerfully. “If I was a beautiful girl, I wouldn’t.” He nodded to himself. “Well—anyway, I guess you came home from the wars and settled that score. I guess you told her.”

“Ah-h-h,” said Fuller. “You can’t make any impression on them.”

“I dunno,” said Hinkley. “There’s a fine old tradition in the theater: The show must go on. You know, even if you got pneumonia or your baby’s dying, you still put on the show.”

“I’m all right,” said Fuller. “Who’s complaining? I feel fine.”

The old man’s white eyebrows went up. “Who’s talking about you?” he said. “I’m talking about her.”

Fuller reddened, mousetrapped by egoism. “She’ll be all right,” he said.

“She will?” said Hinkley. “Maybe she will. All I know is, the show’s started at the theater. She’s supposed to be in it and she’s still upstairs.”

“She is?” said Fuller, amazed.

“Has been,” said Hinkley, “ever since you paddled her and sent her home.”

Fuller tried to grin ironically. “Now, isn’t that too bad?” he said. His grin felt queasy and weak. “Well, goodnight, Mr. Hinkley.”

“Goodnight, soldier boy,” said Hinkley. “Goodnight.”

As noon drew near on the next day, the villagers along the main street seemed to grow stupid. Yankee shopkeepers made change lackadaisically, as though money didn’t matter any more. All thoughts were of the great cuckoo clock the firehouse had become. The question was: Had Corporal Fuller broken it or, at noon, would the little door on top fly open, would Susanna appear?

In the drugstore, old Barse Hinkley fussed with Susanna’s New York papers, rumpling them in his anxiety to make them attractive. They were bait for Susanna.

Moments before noon, Corporal Fuller—the vandal himself—came in to the drugstore. On his face was a strange mixture of guilt and sore-headedness. He had spent the better part of the night awake, reviewing his grievances against beautiful women. *All they think about is how beautiful they are*, he’d said to himself at dawn. *They wouldn’t even give you the time of day.*

He walked along the row of soda-fountain stools and gave each empty stool a seemingly idle twist. He found the stool that had screeched so loudly the day before. He sat down on it, a monument of righteousness. No one spoke to him.

The fire siren gave its perfunctory wheeze for noon. And then, hearse-like, a truck from the express company drove up to the firehouse. Two men got out and climbed the stairs. Susanna’s hungry black cat jumped to the porch railing and arched its back as the expressmen disappeared into Susanna’s room. The cat spat when they staggered out with Susanna’s trunk.

Fuller was shocked. He glanced at Barse Hinkley, and he saw that the old man’s look of anxiety had become the look of double pneumonia—dizzy, blind, drowning.

“Satisfied, corporal?” said the old man.

“I didn’t tell her to leave,” said Fuller.

“You didn’t leave her much choice,” said Hinkley.

“What does she care what I think?” said Fuller. “I didn’t know she was such a tender blossom.”

The old man touched Fuller’s arm lightly. “We all are, corporal—we all are,” he said. “I thought that was one of the few good things about sending a boy off to the Army. I thought that

was where he could find out for sure he wasn't the only tender blossom on earth. Didn't you find that out?"

"I never thought I was a tender blossom," said Fuller. "I'm sorry it turned out this way, but she asked for it." His head was down. His ears were hot crimson.

"She really scared you stiff, didn't she?" said Hinkley.

Smiles bloomed on the faces of the small audience that had drawn near on one pretext or another. Fuller appraised the smiles, and found that the old man had left him only one weapon—utterly humorless good citizenship.

"Who's afraid?" he said stuffily. "I'm not afraid. I just think it's a problem somebody ought to bring up and discuss."

"It's sure the one subject nobody gets tired of," said Hinkley.

Fuller's gaze, which had become a very shifty thing, passed over the magazine rack. There was tier upon tier of Susannas, a thousand square feet of wet-lipped smiles and sooty eyes and skin like cream. He ransacked his mind for a ringing phrase that would give dignity to his cause.

"I'm thinking about juvenile delinquency!" he said. He pointed to the magazines. "No wonder kids go crazy,"

"I know I did," said the old man quietly. "I was as scared as you are."

"I told you, I'm not afraid of her," said Fuller.

"Good!" said Hinkley. "Then you're just the man to take her papers to her. They're paid for." He dumped the papers in Fuller's lap.

Fuller opened his mouth to reply. But he closed it again. His throat had tightened, and he knew that, if he tried to speak, he would quack like a duck.

"If you're really not afraid, corporal," said the old man, "that would be a very nice thing to do—a Christian thing to do."

As he mounted the stairway to Susanna's nest. Fuller was almost spastic in his efforts to seem casual.

Susanna's door was unlatched. When Fuller knocked on it, it swung open. In Fuller's imagination, her nest had been dark and still, reeking of incense, a labyrinth of heavy hangings and mirrors, with somewhere a Turkish corner, with somewhere a billowy bed in the form of a swan.

He saw Susanna and her room in truth now. The truth was the cheerless truth of a dirt-cheap Yankee summer rental—bare wood walls, three coat hooks, a linoleum rug, two gas burners, an iron cot, an ice-box, A tiny sink with naked pipes, a plastic drinking glass, two plates, a murky mirror, a frying pan, a saucepan, a can of soap powder.

The only harem touch was a white circle of talcum powder before the murky mirror. In the center of the circle were the prints of two bare feet. The marks of the toes were no bigger than pearls.

Fuller looked from the pearls to the truth of Susanna. Her back was to him. She was packing the last of her things into a suitcase.

She was now dressed for travel—dressed as properly as a missionary's wife.

"Papers," croaked Fuller. "Mr. Hinkley sent 'em."

"How very nice of Mr. Hinkley," said Susanna. She turned, "Tell him...." No more words came. She recognized him. She pursed her lips and her small nose reddened.

"Papers," said Fuller emptily. "From Mr. Hinkley."

"I heard you," she said. "You just said that. Is that all you've got to say?"

Fuller flapped his hands limply at his sides, “I’m-I-I didn’t mean to make you leave,” he said. “I didn’t mean that.”

“You suggest I stay?” said Susanna wretchedly. “After I’ve been denounced in public as a scarlet woman? A tart? A wench?”

“Holy smokes, I never called you those things!” said Fuller.

“Did you ever stop to think what it’s like to be me?” she said. She patted her bosom. “There’s somebody living inside here, too, you know.”

“I know,” said Fuller. He hadn’t known, up to then.

“I have a soul,” she said.

“Sure you do,” said Fuller, trembling. He trembled because the room was filled with a profound intimacy. Susanna, the golden girl of a thousand tortured daydreams, was now discussing her soul, passionately, with Fuller the lonely. Fuller the homely. Fuller the bleak.

“I didn’t sleep a wink last night because of you,” said Susanna.

“Me?” He wished she’d get out of his life again. He wished she were in black and white, a thousandth of an inch thick on a magazine page. He wished he could turn the page and read about baseball or foreign affairs.

“What did you expect?” said Susanna. “I talked to you all night. You know what I said to you?”

“No,” said Fuller, backing away. She followed, and seemed to throw off heat like a big iron radiator. She was appallingly human.

“I’m not Yellowstone Park!” she said. “I’m not supported by taxes! I don’t belong to everybody! You don’t have any right to say anything about the way I look!”

“Good gravy!” said Fuller.

“I’m so tired of dumb toots like you!” said Susanna. She stamped her foot and suddenly looked haggard. “I can’t help it if you want to kiss me! Whose fault is that?”

Fuller could now glimpse his side of the question only dimly, like a diver glimpsing the sun from the ocean floor. “All I was trying to say was, you could be a little more conservative,” he said.

Susanna opened her arms. “Am I conservative enough now?” she said. “Is this all right with you?”

The appeal of the lovely girl made the marrow of Fuller’s bones ache. In his chest was a sigh like the lost chord. “Yes,” he said. And then he murmured, “Forget about me.”

Susanna tossed her head. “Forget about being run over by a truck,” she said. “What makes you so mean?”

“I just say what I think,” said Fuller.

“You think such mean things,” said Susanna, bewildered. Her eyes widened. “All through high school, people like you would look at me as if they wished I’d drop dead. They’d never dance with me, they’d never talk to me, they’d never even smile back.” She shuddered. “They’d just go slinking around like small-town cops. They’d look at me the way you did—like I’d just done something terrible.”

The truth of the indictment made Fuller itch all over. “Probably thinking about something else,” he said.

“I don’t think so,” said Susanna. “You sure weren’t. All of a sudden, you started yelling at me in the drugstore, and I’d never even seen you before.” She burst into tears. “What is the matter with you?”

Fuller looked down at the floor.

“Never had a chance with a girl like you—that’s all,” he said. “That hurts.”

Susanna looked at him wonderingly. “You don’t know what a chance is,” she said.

“A chance is a late-model convertible, a new suit, and twenty bucks,” said Fuller.

Susanna turned her back to him and closed her suitcase. “A chance is a girl,” she said.

“You smile at her, you be friendly, you be glad she’s a girl.” She turned and opened her arms again. “I’m a girl. Girls are shaped this way,” she said. “If men are nice to me and make me happy, I kiss them sometimes. Is that all right with you?”

“Yes,” said Fuller humbly. She had rubbed his nose in the sweet reason that governed the universe. He shrugged. “I better be going. Good-bye.”

“Wait!” she said, “You can’t do that—just walk out, leaving me feeling so wicked.” She shook her head. “I don’t deserve to feel wicked.”

“What can I do?” said Fuller helplessly.

“You can take me for a walk down the main street, as though you were proud of me,” said Susanna. “You can welcome me back to the human race.” She nodded to herself. “You owe that to me.”

Corporal Norman Fuller, who had come home two nights before from eighteen bleak months in Korea, waited on the porch outside Susanna’s nest, with all the village watching.

Susanna had ordered him out while she changed, while she changed for her return to the human race. She had also called the express company and told them to bring her trunk back.

Fuller passed the time by stroking Susanna’s cat. “Hello, kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty,” he said, over and over again. Saying, “Kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty,” numbed him like a merciful drug.

He was saying it when Susanna came out of her nest. He couldn’t stop saying it, and she had to take the cat away from him, firmly, before she could get him to look at her, to offer his arm.

“So long, kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty,” said Fuller.

Susanna was barefoot, and she wore barbaric hoop earrings, and ankle bells. Holding Fuller’s arm lightly, she led him down the stairs, and began her stately, undulating, titillating, tinkling walk past the liquor store, the insurance agency, the real-estate office, the diner, the American Legion post, and the church, to the crowded drugstore.

“Now, smile and be nice,” said Susanna. “Show you’re not ashamed of me.”

“Mind if I smoke?” said Fuller.

“That’s very considerate of you to ask,” said Susanna. “No, I don’t mind at all.”

By steadying his right hand with his left, Corporal Fuller managed to light a cigar.