

Valkyries
by Joe Nobel

Thursday

They all think I'm insane. They had known all along I was crazy. Crazy is cute, crazy is eccentric, crazy is something you talk about at cocktail parties. Insane is ominous, insane is pathetic, insane is dark. Maybe it's true, maybe I am going insane from the pain. Yes, the pain - plus the fact that I've been cut off from the world. They think I'm insane because I am having trouble speaking. Yet whenever I try to tell them something they tell me to save my strength.

From this vantage point all I can do is look up at them. I hate to see them cry. Yet, if not for them I'd only have the pain to keep me company. "I" is what you get at the end stages of kidney failure. Look at me, here lies what should be a virile body. Something else could have taken me. It could have been something sudden, like a motorcycling accident, a plane crash, or a random killing. At least, this way, I had time to attend my affairs and bid my farewells.

The Vikings feared this kind of death, vegetating away to nothing. They all wanted to go out in a blaze - in battle. Valkyries would swoop down and carry them off to Valhalla if they fought and died bravely. I have my own battle now, my enemy is my body. But I don't think this is the kind of battle the old gods had in mind. Perhaps I would do better staying with the modern myths and pray for forgiveness and redemption.

Someone stroked his face. He wasn't sure which one it was.

"Forgive me," he tried speak to whoever was there. He was sure they didn't understand his words.

"Shhhh," the woman said, "just rest."

It was Erica. Or perhaps Mary. Yet it could have been Ildiko. "And I'm not insane. Just tired. Incredibly tired." He reached for her, whoever it was. His arm went flailing wildly into the air.

Mary held it and gently placed it back by his side. She held onto his hand. Maybe it was Ildiko.

Or Erica.

The doctor came in, Dr. Toth. He couldn't see her too well, but remembered exactly what she looked like: her white lab coat, slightly stained, slightly worn. He imagined the white open toed clogs she wore. Quite typically of the staff in these Budapest hospitals. Her pale white skin and hair of strawberry blonde, cut squirrel short, along with her black horn rimmed glasses made her instantly unattractive. Perhaps she gets prettier when she goes home. Unlikely. She runs around all day, nonstop. I bet she's dead tired by the time she get home. His imagination ran wild and he put together picture of the doctor in her pretty youth. He entertained the thought of flirting with her in his broken Hungarian. "If you help me up and out of here, I'll buy you a beer at the pub around the corner." Or maybe he'd say "Let's drive out to Vienna for the evening, we'll be back by morning. No one will miss us. I know of a dark little underground cabaret. You'll have to do the driving of course."

Yeah right! If not for the wheels on these hospital beds I wouldn't be going anywhere.

Perhaps it's all true, perhaps I am insane, not merely crazy. Look at me, I'm playing mind games with myself while the three loves of my life are here with me standing beside me as I fall.

Even Ildi is here, and she isn't obligated to stay and watch me decay. I always suspected she was in it for the money, now I'm glad to know I was wrong.

The good doctor talked to Mary. Erica listened. Ildi stayed by his bed. Ildi took his hand and stroked his face. The old passion welled up in his chest. It was that old, happy, giddy feeling. Somehow it bubbled up through the pain. He tried to smile back at her. He had to accept these all

too fleeting encounters of joy, accept them as rare gifts. His feeling of holding Ildi's hand didn't travel down to his loins. How could it. His days of erections were long past. He had even accepted it. He wondered what Ildi was thinking. She didn't have to stay, yet she did.

He tried to listen as squirrely Dr. Toth spoke with Mary. He couldn't follow the conversation. Even on a good day he was never able to follow a fast conversation in Hungarian. And now with the resistors of pain slowing down his thinking ...

"What - did - she - say?" He enunciated the words after the doctor had left the room.

"It not good for you." Mary sat next to him. She held back a tear. "A few days, maybe a week. Your body is decaying. They can't help you. There's not much they can do except make you comfortable."

"I'm - comfortable - enough," he lied. He didn't take a single hit of the morphine from the self injector since his visitors arrived. It was out of dignity, or to show them a path to follow should the time come for on of them one day. It was the only thing he could give to them, especially for his "little" Erica.

"I love you so much!" Mary cried. "I always thought I'd be the first to go."

"You don't get off that easy," he croaked. "Erica may be off to college, but she's still a baby. You'll have to take care of her."

"Erica, you and Ildiko go home." Mary commanded. "I'm staying here." The winter sun was setting and Budapest was shifting into rush hour mode.

"Mom, I'm staying too," Erica said.

“Go,” Mary was adamant. “Get some sleep. Be fresh for your father in the morning. If anything should happen I’ll call. You’re only twenty minutes away.”

Erica checked the battery level on her cell phone. A nervous reaction.

“Alright. But, if anything happens –”

“I’ll call right away. Now off with the both of you.”

He lay there silently. Silent, except for his labored breathing.

“I wanted a few minutes alone with you,” she said.

He didn’t respond. She put her head on the bed beside his.

“Are they gone?” he finally asked.

“They’re gone,” Mary said, surprised, she thought he fell asleep.

“I’m afraid,” he said coldly. “And it hurts,” then after a few moments he added, “Don’t leave me just yet.”

“I won’t leave you, my love,” she said. “I’ll get the nurse to give you something and-“

“No, I have all the drugs I can use.” He clicked the button taped to his wrist and it gave himself a long overdue shot of morphine. “You think I’ll see Angels?”

“I don’t know. You might.”

“Damn. I was hoping for Valkyries,” he tried to smile.

“For you ... God will send Valkyries. I bet He’s even got a little place in heaven set up so it looks like your beloved Valhalla ... whips hanging from the walls, cages, and everything you could possibly want.”

“You’re really put up with me over these years, haven’t you.”

“It wasn’t easy. I’ll say that much.”

“Thanks.”

“For?”

“For putting up with the crazy stuff. For all the little crazy things like editing my erotic books for me, taking trips down the Amazon with me ... the hot air balloon trips ... catering to my vegetarian side. But, letting me have Ildiko was the big one. I know you would have rather seen thing work out differently.”

“It was a wild ride with you.”

“I’m just sorry that this isn’t how it’s supposed to end. And, I’m sorry I put my needs ahead of yours.”

”Shhh,” she put a finger up to his lips. ”No regrets, remember?”

“OK. No regrets,” he repeated. Then he slowly drifted off to sleep.

Mary stayed by his bedside. She watched as the last of the sun fade away below the horizon and the purple sky turned black. The bustle of rush hour died down and was replaced with sound of shoes as lovers walked by on the sidewalk below the hospital window. How life went on for them, oh how they didn’t know what was in store for them as the years laid out one ugly surprise after another.

An orderly came in to change his sheets. Mary helped him, if for no other reason than to be sure that the orderly would be extra gentle handling his frail body. He woke with a jerk as they moved his body but was back asleep by the time the orderly left the room. She pulled out an afghan and prepared to curl up on a sofa. Before falling asleep she decided to call Erica.

“Hi Erica.” Mary spoke into her cell phone in a hushed voice.

“Is everything alright?”

”Yes, he’s sleeping,” she said. Alright? How could it be alright? But she knew what her daughter meant. “How are you?”

“Fine, we just had some hibiscus tea, and I was about to go to sleep.”

“Do you remember those Viking costumes from the ball a few years ago? Can you find them?”

“Yea ... Okay ... Why?”

“Maybe they’ll put a smile on your father's face. He was lucid enough to muse about whether it’ll be Angels or Valkyries coming for him. You know how he got into those old Norse myths. Find the costumes. Remember the paper wings that go with them. I may have given them to Mrs. Kosuth for her kid’s class play.”

”Yea, that’ll be fun. Dad will enjoy it.”

“Erica, three sets.”

“Ildiko should come too?”

“It’s for your dad. Does she bother you being there?”

“No she doesn’t bother me at all, I thought that maybe you wouldn’t want her there. The two of us cried together on the way home.”

“I’ve been fine with Ildiko for a long time now. After all it’s not as if we have anything left to compete over.”

“Mom!”

They spoke a bit longer. They cried on the phone. Then Mary told her daughter to get the costumes ready then go off to sleep. She looked on her dying husband one more time. Then she

curled up on the sofa under the afghan and fell asleep too. She was a small woman, and she could always fit onto furniture too small for her husband. If the tables were turned, he would have a most uncomfortably cramped time in the same spot. Erica, although lithe, was a head and a half taller than her mother, a few inches taller than her father. At twenty two they thought she had finally stopped growing. She too would have found sleeping here uncomfortable.

Only Mary and Ildiko would be able to sleep on this hospital sofa. Ildiko was as small and thin as Mary. Her husband had to go and find a lover who looked like his wife. Was it out of some sort of flattery? She fell in and out of sleep, upon waking she remembered disquieting images of fast fading dreams. Even lying awake her thoughts wouldn't leave her. She thought back, back in time many years ago to when he let Ildiko into their lives ...

Their fights were growing with intensity and regularity. Gone was the low grade guerilla war she had with him over the past years. Now theirs was a mix of incendiary bombing and an ice cold war. He ignored her whenever he could, never providing a moment of comfort, never a smile, never an encouraging word. She, in return, would blow up into a rage at any moment, over the smallest household detail. Constantly badgering, always micromanaging, slowly suffocating him with her very existence.

“What do you expect out of me?” he would retort many times, getting a word in as she screamed at him for whatever shortcoming of his came to mind at the moment, “how am I supposed to behave around a cold bitch like you. You want me to give a damn about you, you want me to march in lockstep in your quest for an immaculate house! Yet need I remind you, that you are the one who shut me off. Five years - five

damn years - without sex. Any normal man would have walked out of that kind of perverse arrangement years ago!"

"Sex, that's all you think about. I told you years ago, I'm no longer interested in sex! You'll just have to control yourself. And yes, I still expect you to -"

"A healthy sexual relationship is the most important thing in the world. I won't live life without it."

"Sure, just get up and leave and go fuck all the teenagers you want. Just remember, I will be here raising your daughter."

"You've threatened me with that line time after time, it's wearing thin. In case you don't know by now, Erica is the very reason I put up with you for all these years. But by now I've had all I can take."

"Just think of her as you walk out," she said calmer, having spent her fury from whatever was bothering her.

"Other kids have divorced parents too. It's a sad situation, but they manage to grow up too."

"If you have to satisfy yourself why don't you go and find yourself a lover," she turned and walked out of the room.

"I don't want just an occasional lover, I want someone I can wake up with too," he yelled his words into the kitchen, not bothering to get up and follow her.

"I'm always here, you can wake up with me!"

"Ha, your idea of sharing a bed doesn't make it for me. That's why I've got my own bedroom, I can't sleep in the same bed with you as cold as ice."

“I told you, I’m not interested anymore. Like I said, go find yourself a lover - and put her in the spare bedroom.”

“If I find someone willing to go along with that, I’ll stay.”

“Go ahead and look. Just make sure you don’t bring a prostitute or a drug user into my house. If you actually find someone who’s not a loser you can keep her as your pet.”

Why not, she reasoned, he’ll never find anyone.

But to her surprise, he did. He met her a chance meeting just a week later. Her name was Ildiko. She moved in within a month. She was a young woman, bright, and sassy. She’d be in college but for the finances. She was eager to try out being the third in a relationship. And eager to do her share of work around the apartment. And Mary couldn’t, by any stretch, label her as a loser.

The hospital, Friday

Erica arrived by nine.

“Sorry, mom. We had trouble finding all the pieces of the costumes. Ildi had to do some sewing, she was up ‘til three. We called it a night and finished up in the morning. Here, look at these.” She pulled the costume bits out of the large canvas bag that she plopped on the floor.

He was still sleeping.

“Don’t they look fantastic?” Erica said, showing off a pair of angel wings.

“They do.” Mary handled the wings of gossamer. “Ildi did a good job. Where is she?”

“Parking.” Erica pulled a piece of armor from the bag. A breastplate, points on the tits 'n all.

“Or rather, she's arguing with the parking attendant. Don't they look great, I touched up the paint. How's dad?”

“He slept through most of the night. I woke at four. I couldn't get back to sleep until six. I just woke up a few minutes ago too.”

“How's your back?” Erica looked at the small sofa, her afghan was still strewn across it.

“Fine. Stiff, actually.”

“Here let me rub it.” Erica dropped the bag and stood behind her mother.

“Mmmm, nice.” She thought of her back rubs, after he brought Ildiko into the house he actually spent a lot more time paying attention to her again and doing things like rubbing her back.

“The doctor's going to get a heart attack when she sees us in these.” Erica gave a strained laugh. “Doesn't it bother you?”

“I can't get embarrassed any more for the things I do for him. Something like this doesn't even register.” She sighed, lost in thought for a moment. “At first though, after I let him keep Ildiko, I was so ashamed of myself I thought I would curl up and die. Especially when we invited friends over, my friends. Everyone could tell that she wasn't just a serving maid. And, he did nothing to hide it from them.

“And you,” Mary went on, “when you figured it all out ... I felt like running out of the house with two suitcases, just you and me. The deal was, you weren't supposed to figure it out. Ever.”

“Mom, I'm not stupid, you know. And, it wasn't like they ever did anything in front of me. Like, not even a peck on the cheek. I remember seeing lots of passionate kisses between you and

him after she moved in. At the time I thought that getting a maid has left you less tired and you had energy for that stuff.”

“So how did you figure it out?”

“Actually I was clueless for the longest time. Then I got onto the net and discovered some dirty pic's. Some were threesomes. Others were of a guy spanking a girl over his knee. I've seen pictures of sex before, but when I saw those series of pictures it all clicked. ‘Oh, that’s what’s going on,’ I said to myself. Ildiko is his sex slave. I felt relieved to figure it all out. I must have been fifteen or sixteen. I don't know why it didn’t hit me earlier.”

“The parking is infuriating around here!” Ildiko stormed in.

“Shhhhhh!” They both turned to her.

“He's still sleeping,” Mary scolded.

“Sorry.” Ildiko dropped her canvas bag, more costume pieces. “Here I brought you coffee. I've got some pastries in here someplace too.” She handed Mary the coffee and rummaged through her bag.

“Mmmmm, coffee,” Mary said. “Thanks.”

“So when do we turn into Valkyries?” Erica finally asked. She was loath to bring up the topic. The others weren't ready to hear it either. But, now that all the work was done, all they would have to do is present themselves to a dying man. "Shall we wait ‘till he wakes up and then get dressed? Or, shall we get dressed and have him see us as his Valkyries when he opens his eyes?”

“What do you think?” Misgivings welled up in Mary all of a sudden. It seemed like a good idea last night. Now it seemed rather silly. Another embarrassing corner he made her back herself into. It may be dangerous too, showing angels to a dying man. “Could this kill him?”

“Only if he’s going to die anyway” Ildiko said. The words didn't come out exactly like she meant. “That is, die right then ... like, I know he’s dying. That’s not what I’m trying to say.” Having put her foot in her mouth she shut up and started to undress. Her top came off first, and she didn’t care if anyone barged in. Without a bra, her small breasts hung free and nipples perked up in the cool air. Her jeans slid off next. Wings went on. Breast plate. Battle girdle. Knee pads. Elbow pads. Spiked gloves. “I hope that stuck up doctor bitch gets a heart attack and dies first,” Ildiko snarled. She laced up her sandals to her knees. All the pieces except the wings were plastic, all left overs from last February’s costume ball.

Erica was next. She swallowed her embarrassment and followed Ildiko’s lead and started dressing. Her clothes came off and the costume came on. Her mother helped adjust the wings and tie the breastplate behind her back.

Mary changed next, taking her time in changing and refusing to get embarrassed at what Dr. Toth would say, or any of the nurses and orderlies. Her resolve didn’t get better as she felt her cheeks blush red. What would they think of her? “She’s as crazy as that American husband of hers,” they would say. “Fuck them!” she would say in return. She breathed deep. The costume was in place. “Fuck you too!” She looked down at the dying man. “You're still doing it to me, jumping me through hoops, even now that you’re lying here helplessly.”

She sat by his right side. Erica and Ildiko sat by his left. Mother and daughter each held a hand. The paramour stoked his head. They sat there waiting for something to happen. He slept on. He never did accommodate anyone’s plans.

A nurse came in shortly after. She proceeded to check the level of morphine in his dispenser. Then she entered his vitals on his chart. “He’s needs are far beyond a floor show, I’m afraid,” was all she said on her way out.

An orderly came in to check his bedpan. Someone else came in to tip the trash can. Several staff peeked in through the window on the door. They were tipped off. Word must be buzzing all over the ward. Dr. Toth herself made an appearance within fifteen minutes.

“Did he sleep though the night?” the Doctor asked Mary with a ‘you don’t surprise me, I’ve seen it all’ attitude.

“All night. He stirred between four and five. I was up around then. I clicked his morphine button for him and he fell back to sleep.”

“I can see in your eyes you haven’t slept much.” The Doctor stated as she reviewed the chart. “He may not wake again,” she said, “he may be seeing real angels soon.” She pulled up a rolling chair. “If I were lying there, I’m not sure if I would want to wake to angels ready for battle hovering over me.”

“Valkyries,” Ildiko spoke. “He was really into old Norse myths. We’re his Valkyries. It will make him so happy to see us like this.”

Then he stirred, as if for no other reason than to prove the doctor wrong. *That’s why I loved him.* Mary reminded herself, *always doing the opposite, always debunking the pompous.*

“Ildi, is that you? I hear you.”

“I’m here, right here.”

“And Mary? Erica? Are they here too?”

“Here.” “We’re all here.”

“Mary? Mary? Can you hear me.”

“Yes, I’m right beside you.”

“Good. I want you to know something. This may sound crazy, but they’re here. They’re all around me. They’re here to take me away. And, I’m not afraid. I’m ready for them.”

“Daddy, it’s only us! We’re in costume,” Erica said.

“Erica? Is that you? You be good. I’m so proud of how well you turned out. What a beautiful young woman you became.”

“Thank you Daddy.”

“One last piece of advice. Don’t marry early.”

“No, Daddy, I won’t.”

“Mary!”

“I’m still here.”

“I see you. But, it’s hard to tell you apart from the Valkyries. You look just like one of them.”

“Like Erica said, we’ve dressed up for you, silly.”

“Will you be alright alone?”

“I’ll have to be. Yes, I’ll be alright.”

“I never realized how much you’ve done for me.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“You haven’t said that in a long time.”

“I should have. And I should have said ‘thanks’. Thanks for everything, thanks for Ildi.”

“Shhh, save your strength,” she said though she was tempted to say “you had better thank me for Ildiko, no one else would have let you bring her into marriage. But then again, Ildiko wasn’t such a bad thing for us after all.” And another memory welled up from the past.

After Ildiko moved in Mary's head was whirling like a cyclone. She noticed an instant change in him. He was actually smiling, and making jokes. He was doing things around the apartment, long overdue things. She promised not to cry, not to throw plates, not take a tantrums. After all, she couldn't ignore the fact that this strange arrangement was good for him. But what about her? It wasn't good for her. She got sick every night when she went to bed. Sick every time she thought about where he went at night. They'd been sleeping apart for all to many years, but now he slept with someone else, and she still slept alone.

Sounds came from Ildiko's room late at night. Mary knew the two of them were "together". They had a CD on to blanket the sounds they made. They weren't sounds of orgasmic ecstasy she heard, it wasn't the "Oh yes, baby, give it to me" kind of sounds. Rather, it was a steady thumping melodic beat, it would go on for ten or fifteen minutes, then the pace, or the rhythm would change, and a new sound, perhaps sharper, or perhaps fuller, would replace the old one. Occasionally a cry could be heard, Ildiko's cry. They weren't orgasmic cries, rather cries of joy - or cries of pain.

One night, it had been about a week since Ildiko arrived with her two suitcases, Mary was lying in bed. The day had been ... light. That was the word to describe it, the ominous cloud was gone from their lives. They ate dinner together. He and she and their daughter. Ildiko cooked and served, the perfect maid. After serving the family Ildi sat down with them and joined the meal. She would hop up in an instant to get more wine, or a cola for Erica, or anything, always eager to serve.

But here was the discontinuity. The difference between day and night. Mary lay in bed alone, the street lights of Budapest being the only source of illumination. The house was silent, except for the sounds coming from Ildiko's room. Mary wondered if Erica was being kept awake too. If so, she would give them a piece of her mind.

She checked on her daughter. Sleeping like a baby. Then she walked down the hall compelled by the sound. The radio couldn't drown it out, it sounded like spanking - heavy spanking.

Mary opened the door, not sure if she should have knocked.

They looked up. Ildiko was on over his knee, naked. He was using a leather flogger on her. Her butt cheeks were

Ildiko jumped up as she saw Mary. He just sat there on the edge of the bed.

"Want to join us?" he said.

Mary was without words. "No," she managed.

"Then come in and sit. You can watch."

She found herself frozen in place on the threshold, not able to run away, nor able to walk in.

"You have to wake up your soul sooner or later, or you'll just fade to nothing," he said.

She wasn't sure what he meant. She wasn't even sure she heard his words.

"Come in, it's all right," it was naked Ildiko. She came and took Mary by the wrist and led her into the room shutting the door behind them.

"Ildiko, on all fours," he snapped his fingers pointing to the bed. Ildiko complied, and assumed a kneeling position with her bottom high in the air for all to see.

“This is how you hold a flogger,” he said dangling it in front of Mary. “Look at how I swing it. You want to let it land here, across her rump. Like this.” Whack!

“Don’t let it go too high, stay away from her spine or the areas on the side, here, here, and here. And when it lands, have the thongs land in the middle of which ever cheek you’re aiming for. Don’t let it wrap, that’s bad form.”

“It’s all very interesting but I have to go.”

“Here take it.”

“What!”

“Take it, no hold it like this. Yes that’s right. Now stand this way, not facing her, turn to the side. Your throwing arm should be this far from the body.” He held Mary by the hip and positioned her to where she should be. “Okay, now pull the whip back like this. And let her fly.”

“No! This is disgusting.”

“I said, let it fly!”

She did. She didn’t expect such command in his voice. Not when in the past he assumed a ‘do whatever you want’ attitude with her.

The throw landed across her bottom, a bit high. It had a weak plop to it.

“Try again, here, let me adjust your shoulders.”

Whack! Mary found herself throwing another stoke of the flogger. This time it had a truer sound. And the lashed fell right on Ildiko’s right cheek.

“Youch!” Ildiko jumped two inched up. “That was good!”

That was good! She didn't expect that from her husband's ... She didn't know what she was, mistress, spanking toy? Ildiko surely wasn't enjoying this, was she? How could she possibly like being spanked?

"Don't stop now," she heard him say. And she found herself letting another throw fly. And another.

After five or six strokes, something snapped in Mary. She started flogging Ildiko mercilessly. One whack after another. How dare she move in, how dare she be so good, doing the dishes, vacuuming, cleaning, serving dinner. One whack came after another, with an intensity fast building to a fury. How dare she exist, making him happy, giving him what he wants. What he needs. Soon she didn't see what she was doing, or where the stokes landed. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Stop, stop!" she heard him say. "Stop, that's enough!" At first his words didn't register. Then as he grabbed her from behind and wrapped his arms around her body. She came back to Earth to find herself in his embrace. "That's intense enough, I don't want Ildiko to be really hurt." He turned her to face him and only then did he see the tears in her eyes. "Come, sit down," he directed her to the edge of the bed.

She sat. By now Ildiko turned around and sat beside Mary.

"Are you alright?" Ildiko asked.

"Me? Are you alright? I didn't mean ... that is ... I shouldn't have hit you so hard."

"Don't worry. I've been flogged harder."

"I have to go," Mary said.

"No you don't," he answered.

“Yes I do,” Mary got up and ran out.

“Come back tomorrow night,” Ildiko said as Mary crossed the threshold.

Mary stopped and turned back. She managed to say “okay, I will” before running out.

“Ildi? Are you still there?” he called out. He could see, but he couldn’t focus his thoughts, or maybe he just couldn’t focus his eyes.

“Yes, I haven’t moved.”

“I can release you now.”

“No ... master.” It was the first time after all these years she called him that in front of Mary and Erica. “Leave things as we discussed.”

“Very well then, I have one last assignment for you,” he said pulling her closer. His voice was failing or he was just whispering to her. “I can’t call it an assignment any longer, I can only call it a request. Help them out after I’ve gone. I don’t want them to worry about the day to day chores like cooking and cleaning while they’re mourning. Stay as long as they make you feel welcome. If they should ask you to leave, you’ll have to face the real world, get a real job and all that. As we discussed there’s a fund set up so you can take some courses and pay for an apartment ...” His voice trailed off.

“Now, I’m tired. I want to ... pray.” He added, this time for all to hear, as if this was one more thing he decided to merely tack on to the end of his life.

“You’ve never prayed before, Erica said.

“True, but I’m willing to make an exception right about now.” He managed a smile.

His three Valkyries held hands and prayed with him.

“Shall I send for a priest?” Dr. Toth asked when their prayer was over.

“Nahh,” he said. “I’ve already got one quack here, I don’t need another.” Then after some hesitation he spoke again. “Dr. Toth, take this IV out of my arm. I’m sane and I know what I’m asking.”

The doctor hesitated, concern filled her face for a moment. Then a look of resolve took over. She gently pulled the needle out of his arm. She placed a piece of gauze and a bandage over the puncture mark.

“One more kindness you can do for me, Doctor, he spoke once she finished. “Take these pillows out from under me. They’re so uncomfortable.”

“No!” Mary cried, blood rushed from her face as she realized what he was asking. Neither Erica nor Ildiko understood the implication.

“I’ll never be as brave again as I am right now,” he looked Mary in the eyes. “I won’t have the courage to ask again later.”

Mary wanted to reply but there were no words. Her mouth was stuck in an open position as tears burst forth. She kissed him, she kissed him on his forehead, his cheeks, his nose, lips and chin. Her tears streaked down her face and pooled onto his. She held his frail head in hands. How strong he had always been, now it seemed he would crumble if she touched him with anything more than the gentlest caress. She kissed him again and again. Then she gathered inner strength from him. She turned to the doctor and nodded once.

It soon dawned on the two younger women that this was the end. A simple change in position would do it. Lay him flat and he would no longer be able to keep up his breathing.

The doctor gently pulled the pillows out from under his back and head. Then she lowered the bed to a level position.

Mary held one hand. Erica held the other.

He laid there looking up at them, his breathing was now more labored than ever.

“Mary, may I climb up?” Ildiko asked.

After hesitating a moment Mary nodded. Ildiko turned to the doctor for her permission.

“Don't put any weight on him.”

She climbed up and straddled his chest. She noticed how much body mass he lost since he was brought to this hospital. She never thought she would be able to touch a man in this condition. She held herself with grace. She knelt above him. Never once resting her body on his frame. She gently stroked his chest and face. Mary and Erica kissed his cheek on either side.

Then he was gone. They knew for sure when his labored breathing stopped for good and his eyes moved no more.

It started to rain by the time they got to the car. It was a cold and windy rain, but it was not a heavy rain. They rode home in silence making their way away from St. Janos Hospital along the main arteries of the Buda side of the Danube. They negotiated their way through the traffic of Moscow Square and headed along the road under Buda Castle Hill. Then they turned left into the tunnel under Castle Hill. The traffic was stop and go as they inched their way through the underground connector and finally emerging to the sight of the Chain Bridge.

The bottleneck was in Adam Clark Square, the rotary connecting the Chain Bridge to the tunnel and the river roads on the Buda side. It was stop and go across the bridge too, plenty of

time to stare at the buildings on both sides of the Danube; the Parliament and hotels on the Pest side, the castle, church, and Fisherman's Bastion behind them in Buda.

There was more traffic in Roosevelt Square on the other side of the bridge. They waited while cars merged in coming up from the river road in front of the Intercontinental Hotel. Ildiko sat in the back, she looked out somberly as life went on for the thousands of other people around them. The rain stopped somewhere between Adam Clark Square on one side of the Danube and Roosevelt Square on the other, not even cooperating to match their mood. The sun even broke through the clouds.

She looked to the right to see a motorcycle inch its way along in the next lane. She didn't notice it at first. But it was a big bike, demanding attention. She saw it was a Honda Valkyrie. Its engine was bigger than those of the left over communist era cars. It was big and noisy and the driver revved the engine while inching along in traffic.

She took a good look the driver and passenger, snapping herself back to this reality. Her heart leapt through her throat. Both were dressed in head to toe in bike leather, and they had full helmets with smoked black face plates. She couldn't see who they were, but she could tell by their physiques that the driver was a woman. A tall woman. Long braided hair stuck out from under her helmet and came to a rest half the way down her back. Hair of gold. Just like one of his Valkyries. The passenger was a man. It could have been him before his body deteriorated. He turned and gave them a slight nod. Head slightly cocked to the left, it was one of his classic trademarks.

"Mary, Erica, look!" she said, almost jumping out of her seat.

"What?" Mary said turning her head. Mary and Erica both caught a glimpse of the Honda Valk as it sped off and turned down the river road. The passenger waved at them as the bike

disappeared out of sight, curving down the road and circling back under the Chain Bridge heading north.

“It was him!” Ildiko stammered, “Him and his Angel, or Valkyrie ... don’t you get it ... his Valkyrie taking him away.”

Stuck in traffic, embedded in the center lane, they could do nothing but watch the motorcycle disappear and inch their own way out of Roosevelt Square.

Tuesday

Mary walked through the apartment in a hurried nervous huff. The funeral was over, guests would begin to stop by any moment to pay their personal respects. The entryway: spotless. The living room: immaculate. The bathroom: shining and sterile. The kitchen: clean and in order with coffee, hors d’ouvers, and pastries ready to serve. The den: clean, neat, with all his effects caringly boxed away, Ildiko as the curator of his sex toys. Mary’s problem, something she didn’t realize until now, she had nothing to do, everything was ready. Ildiko did it all with some help from Erica.

Their townhouse was on the Pest side of the river. It was on the intersection where Jozsef Attila Road turned into Andrassy Road. Mary looked out of the living room window down to the street. She recognized one car from the funeral slowly driving by, looking for a parking space.

When she left Hungary in the 80’s Andrassy Road was known as People’s Republic Road. When she returned, married, in the 90’s it was back to its original name. Theirs was already a rocky relationship by then, America was never her home, and now she was asking him to move back to her home. Home for her, a foreign land for him.

Then she found this apartment. And to her surprise he fell in love with it on the spot. It was in an elegant old building with a courtyard in the middle and well worn marble steps leading up to their third floor apartment.

Before buying it, Mary had learned that that a Soviet General lived in the apartment with his mistresses during the occupation. He ran the home like his own private brothel. The General disappeared one day, there were conflicting stories, he was either killed by one of the mistresses or defected to the west with her. His eyes lit up hearing this story. The house had a lot to do with him staying with her. And when he had enough of her, even with the incentive of living in this one of a kind house, he found himself a pet slave girl, and that got him to stay 'till death parted him.

He turned the den into his personal game room once he brought Ildiko into the family. She called it his game room. He called it "the dungeon", a phrase she could never accept. It already had hooks in the ceiling from the Soviet General's time, strong enough to hoist a squirming submissive.

She walked through the den. Now reclaimed from his kink. Chains gone, dungeon furniture gone. But no matter how much of a cleaning she gave the room she still remembered ...

It was a cold winter's day. Erica was off skiing with friends in Slovakia. Mary came back early from a shopping expedition, not finding anything of interest. She found him and Ildiko in the kitchen. She was naked. He was in black.

"Didn't expect you so soon," he said, "I'm making coffee, want some?"

"Yea, sure," she said trying not to be shocked.

He took two cups from the cupboard. He poured one for her and one for himself, adding milk and sugar. Then he poured one more coffee into a dog's dish, for Ildiko, and placed it in the middle of the kitchen floor.

Ildiko gave him a look of dread. A look saying: you're not going to humiliate me in front of her, are you?

"Here, I hope I've added enough milk," he said to Mary in a matter of fact tone, as if turning Ildi into a dog was a natural act and one expected of him.

"You've got to be kidding," Mary said.

He just snapped his finger. Ildiko got onto all fours in the middle of the floor and proceeded to lap the coffee from the dish.

"What else can you make her do?"

"I was about to take advantage of the fact that I can make all the noise I want, nobody else being home. I was about drag her into the dungeon, hang her from chains in the ceiling, and whip her." His eyes darted to the black bull whip on the chair in the corner.

"Don't let me stop you," she said. Then she slammed her cup onto the counter and stooped in front of Ildiko. She grabbed his slave girl by the hair and pulled her up to meet her eyes. "Ildiko, why do you let him do this to you?"

"Can't you see by now, I love it! All of it. The way he uses me, the way he makes me do things, his total dominance over me. But all the while, never really hurting me."

"The flogging, the whippings, I see the welts on the back of your legs."

“He whips me, flogs me, and so much more. But he would stop immediately if he knew it was hurting me. And I ... I love him for that.”

“I don’t understand. You, how you can get pleasure from pain? And you,” she turned to face him, “how you can get your thrills from abusing such a beautiful young thing.”

“If you don’t get it by now, I’m sorry to say, you never will. I’ve explained the allure many times. I’ve told you the difference between BDSM and abuse. There’s volumes on the shelves about the psychology of the scene if you want to get into that. If you don’t understand by now, then just accept.”

“Fine, then. I’ll accept you two freaks. So, when are you going to whip her?”

“As soon as we finish the coffees.”

The door bell rang, pulling Mary back to the present and out of her day dream. Ildiko was at the door letting the first of the visitors in before Mary got to the living room. She greeted the guests while Ildiko took their coats. And throughout the afternoon Ildiko did everything, Mary had nothing to do but sit with the visitors and entertain them and tell them that Ildiko is just their housemaid, perpetuating the lie to the outside world. As more and more guests arrived she noticed that Ildiko constantly had a tray of something in hand, or she was on the way out with empty glasses and plates. Eventually, Mary noticed the absence of work that she would have otherwise been doing herself.

“What are you doing?” She grabbed Ildiko by the arm cornering her in the kitchen.

“Taking out a load of dirty dishes and bringing some coffee for the guests. They been asking for some ever since the sandwiches were served.” Ildiko threw a handful of discarded napkins into the trash and plopped several empty wine glasses into the sink once her arm was released.

“No. I mean what are you doing?”

“I’m yours now.”

“What are you talking about. He’s gone, you’re free. You’re not my slave, and I certainly don’t need one.”

“Read the will. He showed it to me some time before we took him to the hospital for the last time. It says all his property goes to you. I don’t know if he mentioned it to you, but I’ve been his slave all these years. It wasn’t just talk, I have a slaves contract with him stating that I’m his property, I can show it to you if you insist. So that means, you’ve inherited me too. I belong to you now.”

“A slave contract! That will never stand up in court.”

“This isn’t a matter for the courts. That’s why he put a stipend away for me, in case you should send me away. But, I really do belong here, in this family, with you and Erica.”

“I don’t need a lesbian lover,” Mary said bitterly.

“I know you don’t. And, that’s not what I’m offering for you.”

“What then?”

“Just what I’m doing now.”

“What is that, precisely?”

“Giving you one less thing to worry about in your time of grief.”

“Then what about next week? Or next month?”

“What are you saying, will you be over him by then? If you will that’s great, because I know I won’t.”

“No, I’ll never get over him.” Mary turned away as she felt the tears well up again. “We’ll have to see. It’s just so strange for me. I thought that when he dies I’ll be finally free of you.”

“If you did that, wouldn’t your life be all the more empty for it?” Ildiko said in a hushed voice. She too, turned away to arrange a tray of pastries.

Erica burst into the kitchen. “Ahh, here you are. Ildi, the guests are wondering where that coffee is. Is it ready? I’ll take it out if it is.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Ildiko said, as she danced out with the coffee pot in one hand and a tray of cups and saucers on the other. “Talk to your mom.”

“Did you convince her to stay with us?” Erica smiled.

Her mother nodded.

“I’m glad you did.” Erica said. “I’d miss her if you’d send her away.”

“Yes, and look at her running about. I’d be doing all that work,” Mary said craning her neck into the living room. I suppose I’ll have to pay her something for all she’s doing, she thought, I wonder if I have to whip her or if a mere hand spanking would suffice?

“It looks like the bastard got things his way in the end.” Mary added. Her tears turned to hysterical laughter. The contagion caught Erica and she laughed too. They laughed and cried and hugged each other as they watched each others tears streak their makeup. All the while Ildiko served the guests in the living room.

The End

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