

Page 1 – DADDY NANNY by Margaret Karmazin. Ms Karmazin’s credits include *Rosebud*, *Chrysalis Reader*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Mobius*, *Confrontation*, *Pennsylvania Review*, *The Speculative Edge*, *Penumbric*, *Aphelion and Another Realm*. Her stories in *The MacGuffin*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Licking River Review*, and *Mobius* were nominated for Pushcart awards. She has published a YA novel, “Replacing Fiona”, a children’s book, “Flick-Flick & Dreamer” and a collection of short stories, “Risk”..

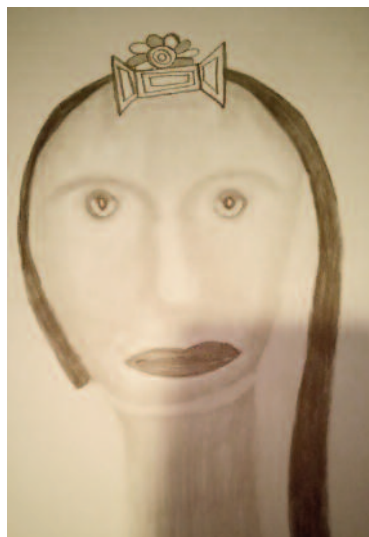
Page 11 – MEN’S HEALTH by David Kloepfer. Mr. Kloepfer writes, “My first novel, *Cheap Thrills*, was published by Now or Never Publishing in 2019. My writing has also appeared in *Hacksaw Literary*, *The Rumpus*, and *Spank the Carp*.”

Page 21 – EXILE by Miriam Winget. Ms Winget lives with her family in the Southern United States. She enjoys writing fiction in her spare time as a creative outlet.

Page 26 – THE ENTERTAINMENT by Livia E. De Souza. Ms De Souza lives in Connecticut, where she writes speculative fiction. Her writing has been featured in *Literally Stories* and *Tales to Terrify*. She can be found at www.liviaedesouza.com.

Page 34 – THE GOLDEN JESTER by Christina H. Janousek. Born in Vienna, Austria, Ms Janousek holds a bachelor’s degree in Comparative Literature and is currently working on her master thesis at the University of Vienna. In 2023, she will complete a newspaper internship. She is an admirer of the literary fairy tale, the Decadent Movement, Absurdism, and surrealism. Her previously published work “Der Spitzel in Viktor Pelevins Roman ‘T.’” can be found on the homepage of the Documentation Center for Central and Eastern European Literature. Her first short story, “The Mirror of First Gazes”, was published in *Impspired* (Issue 21).

Various Pages – Andy Graber (Six Untitled Pencil Portraits) writes, “I am a self taught artist who likes to experiment in various forms of artwork, while using different mediums as well as techniques. In a lot of my drawings, I try and add a blend of both mystery and of beauty wrapped up in one.”



“DADDY NANNY”

by MARGARET KARMAZIN

He was learning to make Lobster Thermador with a side of wild rice. It had taken him several tries but he thought he'd get it right tonight. When she was in town, Silvie was usually home by 6:45 and she knew he was making something special. The children were already bathed and eating their dinner and he'd have them in bed by 7:30, then he and his wife could enjoy their private time. Finally, he heard the door unlock with the sound of her setting down her briefcase and he rushed to hand her the expected chilled martini.

“Thank you, Roger,” she said, her voice deep and cool as usual. “I'll just take this into the living room and put my feet up. It's been a grueling day.”

He admired the porcelain smoothness of her skin and her flawless haircut, how the rich mahogany colored hair fell perfectly about her jawline. A two-carat diamond flashed on her throat, held by a platinum chain. She was class from top to bottom and he was proud to be her mate. He himself wore a simple sterling wedding band. He didn't need expensive adornment, being as he was, a stay-at-home dad. Though unbeknownst to Silvie, he often wished for a Cartier watch or, if he let himself get carried away, a Jaguar. But that stuff was only in his daydreams. He had accept-

ed that he was a Beta male now, much better suited to simple things and a quiet, non-competitive life. Well, not always so quiet, not with two kids under seven. He was, he supposed, just lucky to be alive.

“Did you get that contract?” he called from the kitchen.

A moment passed before she answered. “Not yet, Roger, but just let me unwind here, all right? I'm not ready to converse yet.”

It bothered him when she was dismissive but he supposed it was her nature and he just had to accept it. He figured he was fortunate that she put up with him at all, considering what he was like now.

“That does smell good,” Silvie said. “I'm pretty hungry.”

“Five minutes,” he said.

She was complementary during the meal, admiring his efforts, almost in the manner of praising a child who had drawn a nice picture. This was, Roger knew, the way of adults to encourage the repetition of desired behaviors. But at present, he was improving his cooking for his own personal pleasure, not only to please his wife. Surely, she must know that.

“Cooking is my hobby,” he said, somewhat prissily.

“And I'm proud of you,” she said.

They had separate bedrooms. Unlike the next-door neighbors who shared just one. Roger was friends with Chloe while Silvie was at work or away and Chloe had proudly shown him their bedroom after she'd redone it herself. Painted it a delicious dark blue with white trim and then used lots of red accents. She'd made the artwork herself by stretching bright fabrics over canvas stretchers. Roger had been quite impressed and, he could only admit to himself, enjoyed a few fantasies involving Chloe in that colorful bedroom.

Silvie was not very sexual, possibly since the accident. He couldn't remember anything before that. Maybe then she'd been a tigress but she was forty years old now and possibly slowing down. But didn't women peak at forty? Or maybe what had happened to him, losing his entire memory, had permanently turned her off. It troubled him greatly. It was hard to take on top of everything else, losing his whole past and all. He often wished she would allow him to find release outside of the marriage if she was not so inclined but didn't have to courage to broach the subject. Had he always been this docile? The doctor had assured him that it was a result of the accident, damage done to his brain.

"Well, can you introduce me to my relatives again, at least?" he'd asked her more than once but every time, she insisted he didn't have any and he couldn't remember any himself.

"Your mother died from Covid eight years ago," she told him, and your father nine years earlier from a diving accident.

You don't have any siblings and I don't know about cousins. We, both of us, just don't have much family, and what there is of mine are all in England."

But he wondered about this often in the night, especially when Silvie was on business trips. If he could get ahold of enough extra money, he wanted to secretly do one of those DNA things they advertised on TV where they find all your cousins. But somehow, he usually only had enough money for household expenses.

"I should get a job," he said once.

"Well, that might be difficult," Silvie had replied. "Since you lost your memory of everything before, you also lost your education. It wouldn't do much good to apply for an architecture job if you don't remember anything about how to do it."

He felt it was sort of cruel of her to say that. He wouldn't have been so...well, *harsh* about it. "Maybe I could go back to school; you know, brush up?"

"It would be more than brushing up, Roger. You would have to relearn every single thing. Five years of college all over again and you at this age."

"People go to college at forty," he said. "Why not? Besides, maybe I would like to be something else. An engineer, maybe. I could go part-time."

But she discouraged him again. "Oh, honey, you have brain damage. Why don't you just enjoy being home and able to watch the kids? You can have hobbies if you want."

"I want to talk to another doctor," he said firmly.

Silvie's expression turned irritated. "We've been all through this, Roger. You have to be careful and not get riled up or jar your brain around too much. You're lucky to be alive. I'm lucky to have you at all!"

And so once again, the "discussion" had ended up the same. With Silvie free and out in the world and him stuck at home, a comfortable prisoner.

The children, Thomas, age six and a half and Olivia, age 4, could be a handful, but he was making every effort to teach them good manners and how to take care of their bodies. Thomas could brush his teeth competently now, put on and tie his own shoes, get into his clothes (though still needed some help with shirts over his head), and comb his hair. He was starting Bradford Academy in a week after a year of kindergarten at Ms. Roddy's down the street.

"Roger," said Silvie, breaking his contemplation as she maneuvered her lobster, "Dr. Heights said to remind you that you need to find one or more hobbies to stimulate your mind. Have you thought about that? Before the accident, you were into some computer game involving designing cities, I think. And you went to the gym more than you do now."

"I might be interested in woodworking," he said.

"But how would you do that? We live in a high-rise cooperative."

"Did we always?" he asked, confused. He would much rather they lived in a house.

She gave him a look over the top of her glasses. "Yes, Roger. We have lived in the city all of our lives."

After a long pause, he said, "I don't like Dr. Heights. And I don't like that other doctor either, what's-his-name, Vaja. I would much rather find my own doctor."

Silvie lay down her fork. "Roger, you cannot go to anyone else. Only these doctors understand your situation. They've taken care of you since the accident and they work for our company, so they're the most convenient."

"Who was my doctor before the accident?"

"Oh, some nurse practitioner over on Ninth Street, I think. I don't think she's there anymore. Believe me, she wouldn't be up on the state-of-the-art medicine of our own doctors at Vital."

He sighed and chewed his food. It was damn good, but he wasn't enjoying it. There was something creepy about the doctors at Vital Inc. He couldn't put his finger on what exactly, but the vibe was disturbing.

He changed the subject. "I thought we were going to get the computer fixed. Or replaced. I want a Mac."

"Oh, uh, all right. I guess you need a new one if you want to play games."

He did not want to play games; he wanted to research. "How about I go over to the Apple store and-"

"Oh, don't worry about that," she said. "I'll get you one from work."

From work, always from work. He thought of stealing one of her credit cards.

He had one of his own but there was a limit on it of \$1500. Why the limit, he couldn't imagine. He did the food shopping and bought clothing for the kids and true, it had never run over that amount but he usually used almost all of it. What was the real reason for such a limit? When he'd asked his wife about it, she said that she'd gotten the card with that limit on some kind of promotion and since he never needed more than that, what was the point of changing it?

She set her fork down and wiped her mouth firmly. He hated the way she wiped her mouth. "Well, I have some work to do, so I'll be in my study," she said. "Just go on to bed when you feel like it."

Was that her usual hint that there'd be no sex? They'd had sex only twice since the accident. Was she getting it somewhere else? He realized he didn't care if she was, but he cared that he himself had to go without.

A strange thing happened a week later. Home from school, Thomas was flushed and excited about something that had happened during the day and bursting to tell Roger. "We had a visitor! From the museum! He showed us a movie about dinosaurs! And then I saw him when we walked out and he's the boyfriend of our teacher!"

"Well, that's cool, very cool," said Roger.

"And he and Miss Meacham got into his fancy car! It looked like that one on TV. Black though."

What was he talking about? Then

Roger remembered a show they had watched in which the hero drove a gold Jaguar.

"Was it a Jaguar?" Roger asked, not really expecting Thomas to be identify car makes.

"I don't think so," he said. "But Dad, what happened to your B Emmy W?"

"What?" Roger said.

"Your silver B Emmy?"

"You mean BMW?"

"Yeah, that. You don't drive it anymore."

"Wait, what?" Roger looked at his son closely. "I never had a BMW. Mommy said when I had the accident, I was driving a Subaru. A dark blue Subaru."

"No, no!" Thomas insisted, starting to get worked up. "You took me for a ride when we went to that restaurant, the one with the fountain in the middle. It was real hot out."

Fountain in the middle? Roger didn't know any restaurants like that. And he certainly did not have a silver BMW in the summer. Actually, he didn't drive at all; he used Uber, public transportation or walked.

"You were wearing those cool sunglasses. Rabies or something."

"Ray-bans? I don't have any Ray-bans, Thomas. They're way too expensive, a silly waste of money."

Thomas looked sullen. "Did too," he muttered and walked away.

Did Silvie have a lover then? But why would Thomas think the lover was his father?



He let an hour go by and then grilled Thomas a bit. “What did this guy look like, the one with the BMW and the Ray-bans?”

Thomas gave him a *you’re-crazy* look. “It was *you*, duh!”

Roger thought a moment. “Did you see me other times wearing the Ray-Bans? Or driving that car?”

The boy took his time answering, as if to torture his father. “Maybe.”

“When was this?”

“I don’t know. We went to the movies.”

“To see what?”

“Jurassic New Earth!”

Roger was silent while his mind whirled. That movie came out in the sum-

mer. He remembered because he'd been looking for a movie to take the kids to but then had chosen "Mars Voyage" instead. He himself had never seen "Jurassic New Earth" and had no desire to.

Since Thomas had grown sulky, he decided against grilling him further but he felt vastly disturbed. He would need to question Silvie about this when she got home. But then he remembered she'd said she was going to Toronto on business, something about setting up a new lab in her company's extension up there. She'd be gone three days, she said.

When the kids were in bed, he turned on the very old computer in Silvie's study, the one that acted up and was practically useless, but could not get onto it. The password she'd written down for him didn't work. Why was it so difficult for him to use a computer? When he had actually gotten onto it last week while Silvie was in the bathtub, Google wasn't working. He tried another search engine, put in his name and it appeared that he didn't exist. There were Roger Buckleys, not many, but some - a farmer in Idaho, an electrician in New York State, a gastroenterologist in Pittsburgh, but no mention of Roger Buckley, successful architect, seriously injured in an accident two and a half years before. It was as if he had never existed.

His phone rang, the out-of-date flip phone Silvie had bought him, not a smart phone like he wanted. In a mild rage, he opened it and barked into it. "Yes?"

It was Silvie.

"What's the matter, honey? You sound

upset."

He didn't bother to address that. "How's Toronto?" he said.

"Oh, it's fine, though I don't see much of the city. Inside all the time."

"How's the new lab?"

"Fine, fine, no problems. How are the munchkins?"

"All right," he said. He could swear he heard a cat meow at her end. "Is that a cat?"

Some shuffling followed and, her voice slightly muffled, she said, "Cat? I don't think so. I don't think there are many cats in the hotel here."

He could tell she had her hand over the phone.

"I gotta go," he said, "someone's at the door."

"In the evening? Who would it be?" she said, her voice amused.

It was probably Chloe, but he wasn't going to say that. "I won't know until I answer it, right?"

"You seem upset," she said but he wasn't having it.

"I have to go," he said firmly and hung up.

It was Chloe. She was crying.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"Oh, just a little tiff. We fight a lot. Do you have any booze?"

Did he? Well, yes, there was wine. He himself didn't drink alcohol. Silvie's doctors forbade it. "After your coma and all," they'd explained. So, out of fear, he never did. That creepy Dr. Height had made such a big deal of it, it had scared him half to

death. "You could fall if you drink, and trust me, if you hit your head again, you'll be a goner!"

"We have wine," Roger said. "I'll pour you a glass."

They sat in the living room and Chloe cried and then as she drank, her mood changed and she even laughed. He couldn't help having thoughts about what it would be like to take her into his arms and kiss her. But what if the kids should wake up and wander out? Thomas especially would never forget it and would blab all over the place. Besides, maybe she wouldn't want him to.

It hit him again how long it had been since he'd had sex. Something wasn't right.

Chloe drunkenly gushed out her story of pain and then suddenly fell asleep. He could see her phone sticking out of her pocket, almost ready to fall, so he gently pulled it out and googled his name.

He could find no information about his accident, which supposedly had been horrific and would certainly have left an online news trace. However, he did find his own name currently on LinkedIn as an architect with a long resume including projects within the last two years. What the hell? This Roger Buckley was, apparently, working right now for a company called Cohen Designs and was a partner! A quick trip to the Cohen Designs website and there this twin Roger was looking competent and smug though slightly different. The haircut was shorter and he wore tortoise shell glasses. The site mentioned his current project, a hotel in midtown.

Feeling terrified, Roger shook Chloe awake. She groaned, but he kept at it until she sat up. "Chloe, your phone was lying there and I used it to google something. Look at this!" He held it in her face.

"That's you!" she said. "Or...do you have a twin?"

He felt a deep sense of panic.

"You know what else is weird, Melissa? I couldn't find even this other Roger on Silvie's computer in her office here, before it went bad."

"What, you mean when you googled your own name on it, nothing came up?" Chloe was awake now and suddenly more sober.

"Other Roger Buckleys, but no architects. And no big car accident. Nothing."

Chloe was silent for several moments and then said, "This is creepy. Scary actually." She stood up. "I should go, really. In case Jeff comes back." She paused. "Listen, if you need me..."

"Thanks," he said, his mind racing.

Silvie was due back the next day and he dreaded it. He felt as if the floor under him had turned to slick ice. He was suddenly startled by Thomas walking into the living room.

"What's the matter, son?" he said.

"I'm thirsty," Thomas said. "I keep thinking about dinosaurs. What if they come back and walk on our buildings?"

Roger got him a glass of water and watched him drink it down. "Dinosaurs are not likely to come back, son. Governments just wouldn't allow it. Don't worry." He paused before asking, "Do you like it better

when I wear glasses?"

Thomas set his glass on the counter and studied his face. "You're different when you wear the glasses."

"How?"

"You spend money a lot and talk loud. I like it better when you don't wear them."

"Thomas, when you've seen me wearing them, did you come home with me?"

It was a weird question and he knew it, but the boy took it seriously. His little forehead scrunched into a thoughtful frown. "No, Dad, I don't think so. I'm sleepy again now."

Roger's mind was frantically running backwards, going over all the odd moments he could remember and how things did not add up.

He tucked Thomas back into bed and checked on Olivia who was sound asleep. He loved them so much, but he had a feeling that he might lose them and more. Fear gnawed at his stomach.

The next morning after dropping the kids off, he packed a bag and stowed it in a locker at the gym he sometimes attended. He'd taken what cash he could find in the apartment, which wasn't much. Then he tried to behave normally when Silvie arrived. Except that in his pocket, he concealed a small kitchen knife.

He found plastic cord on a roll in the hall closet – didn't remember what he'd had in mind when he purchased it, but now he cut off some lengths and had them ready under a sofa cushion.

"Are you wanting your martini?" he asked as she laid her briefcase on the entry-

way table. She looked tired. Good, he thought.

"Of course," she said and plopped into her easy chair, kicking her shoes off.

"Coming right up."

"In the kitchen, he mixed the drink stronger than usual and added a ground up Xanax tablet to it, Silvie's own that she kept in her jewelry box. She did not have a lot of jewelry, just a few classic and conservative pieces. Of course, he thought, she might keep a lot of it *somewhere else*.

"Drink up," he said, handing it to her. She looked at him oddly.

"Are you alright?" she said.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You seem strange." But she didn't look too alarmed.

The drink kicked in and she nodded off. Quickly, he used the cord to tie her up. She struggled in her sleepy state, but he was stronger. After he got her immobilized, he sat back down and watched her. She struggled to awaken, would go in and out but finally she managed to gain reasonably full consciousness. "Roger, please, what are you doing?" she said, at first in her usual slightly teasing tone but soon she dissolved into fear. "Please Roger, please...."

"Why," he said coldly, "is there another Roger Buckley out there partnering in an architecture firm? Why is there no record online of my supposed accident?"

"Where did you go online? At the library?"

"Ahhh, so you admit you were preventing me from doing it," he said. He wanted to hit her.

She was silent.

“You might as well explain. I am not going to let you go until you do.”

“What if the children-”

“I don’t care,” he said. “They’ll see you tied up. I’ll tell them that you’ve lied to me. It’ll scare them and scar them so you might as well explain now.”

“Honey,” she said, “you’re having a mental breakdown again. It happened before. After the accident. That’s why-”

“Shut up,” he said. “Try again.”

She looked really frightened now.

“I want you to tell me why you limited my internet access, why there is nothing about an accident and why there’s another me out there working. Talk or I swear I will-”

She gave him a look that was anything but loving but said nothing.

He took out the knife and her eyes widened. “All right, you want the truth? You’re not who you think you are. You’re not *what* you think you are.”

“And what is that? What do I think I am?”

“You think you’re Roger Buckley. You think you’re my husband. You think you’re the father of the kids.”

“And what am I then?” He moved closer with the knife.

Her eyes were almost full of hatred. “You’re a clone.”

“What?”

“It was a Vital Inc experiment. Roger and I volunteered for it. You were created to be our nanny. It was working so well -”

He interrupted. “Your *nanny*?” He

paused and looked at his hands as if to determine if they were real. “I-I don’t believe you.”

“Then how do you explain the fact that the real Roger does indeed work as a very successful architect? He lives in our townhouse. Those business trips I take so frequently - I stay at home with him.”

“But the kids!”

“He sees them often enough. They don’t know the difference. Roger is careful not to clue them in. They never see the townhouse. They think this is home here.”

“But how would you make a clone grow up? I’m middle-aged!”

“Vital experiments with de-aging, has for years, though nothing ready to go on the market yet. But this gives us the ability to go the opposite way.”

“You created an old baby and told me I lost my memory in an accident!”

Suddenly Thomas appeared in the doorway to the living room. He took in his mother tied up in the chair with his father holding a knife and his eyes widened in fear. “Dad?? he said in a trembly little voice.

Silvie, turning her head, said, “Abracabra, Thomas! Abracadabra!”

What the hell did that mean? Thomas turned and disappeared. Roger heard his bedroom door slam, then a scraping noise. He wanted to check it out but couldn’t leave Silvie. She might get loose.

“But why would you do this?” he resumed. “Why not just hire a nanny if you don’t want to do the actual mothering? I don’t get it.” His voice was cracking; he thought he would cry.

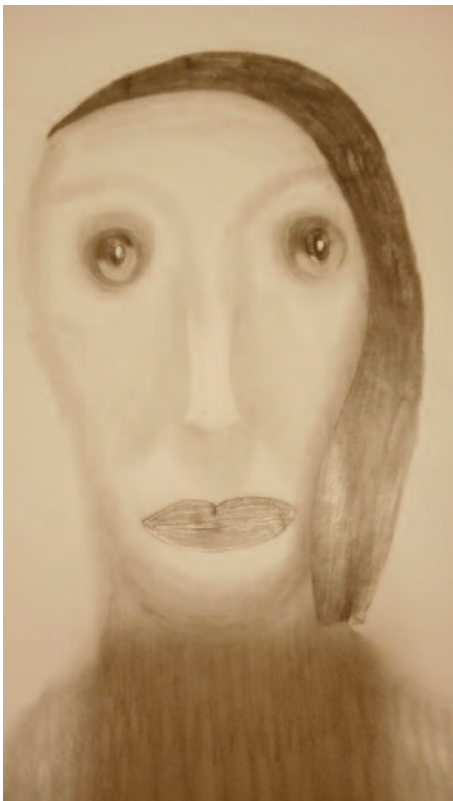
She resumed coolly now, less nervously. Why was she suddenly less nervous?

“This is way bigger than just our family, can’t you see? You’re a success story, a fully functioning adult. You could be programmed any way we wanted. Your basic personality would remain the same, of course, but you could be told anything, made into anything.”

Suddenly he understood. “I see,” he said. “You could sell clones to the military, program them to be soldiers or workers or whatever. No family, no one asking about them, no expectations, no hopes. Well, you’re wrong, Silvie. I have hopes! I am a full human being! This is the most evil-”

She was silent and he sat down and put his head in his hands. He had to figure out what to do with her now or how to get out of there and away.

He was interrupted by someone unlock-



ing the front door. His exact twin, the original Roger Buckley burst into the room holding a revolver aimed right at him.

“Untie my wife,” he ordered.

In a flash, Roger understood what “Abracadabra” had meant. Somewhere in Thomas’ bedroom, there’d been a way for him to contact “help” from this other Roger, Thomas’ “real” father. He had seen all over that bedroom, cleaned it several times when the cleaner couldn’t come, and yet never noticed anything of that nature. But now almost psychically, he thought of the “rocket” lamp next to Thomas’ bed. Was there something to push on it or inside it?

Other Roger was untying Silvie and comforting her and she held the gun now. “I’ve called Vital,” said Other Roger looking straight at him. “They’re coming to take you.”

Roger understood what that meant. “Just let me go live my own life,” he begged, though he knew it was useless.

“We’re afraid that won’t be possible,” said Silvie, pointing the gun at his chest. “The experiment has been reasonably successful though, there is that. But you’ll have to be returned to nature. Sorry, Roger. It’s for the best.” ❖

“MEN’S HEALTH”

by DAVID KLOEPFER

The procedure was on a Thursday in July and by then I knew what I was in for. I remember the day clearly: A sun so hot it wavered in the blue sky, shimmering waves of heat over the sidewalk. Dr. Wurtzer kept his waiting room cold, and I remember how the punching recycled chill of the office freeze-dried the clammy sweat to my skin.

There was an obese man in the waiting room, a candidate, dressed in black sweat-pants and a black hoodie, his hair matted to his head with sweat. I considered what was about to happen to him, eventually, and what was about to happen to me very soon, and still couldn’t imagine how the procedure was physically possible. But what was physically possible in the world was no longer a certainty, if it ever had been.

I discovered Dr. Wurtzer in the back of *Live Long!*, a magazine I knew by then was nothing more than an advertising vessel for the conglomerate of fitness and nutrition companies that owned it, the articles more interested in selling whatever product or lifestyle that benefited the magazine financially than in improving the reader’s well-being. I read it anyway, some small part of me thinking the information inside might prove useful someday, even though my “workouts” now consisted mostly of lazily

pedaling a machine more like a recliner than a bicycle.

The obese man in the black tracksuit read and sweated, the secretary clacked at her keyboard, and I flipped to the back of the magazine I was holding, to see if the ad that drew me to Dr. Wurtzer was running in this fitness magazine, too. It was.

The ad was a little vague, but there was something about it that piqued my interest. Strangely enough, it isn’t until you’ve really given up on what you think your body can do that you go in for the quick fix solutions, the weight loss pills, the bizarre diets, the slabs of beef accompanied by a few lonely vegetables, the UPS-delivered shakes, the cleanses, the eating how caveman ate a million years ago, or at least how someone who could profit from the idea had decided cavemen ate a million years ago. It wasn’t the first time I’d bought into a health and fitness scheme—DVD sets, torturous spring-loaded equipment, meals delivered to my door—but all those options, most every option found in the glossy magazines with the muscled gladiators on the cover, all those options had slick ads, beautiful people, marketing campaigns.

Dr. Wurtzer, on the other hand, had published a simple black and white ad. The photo was of Wurtzer himself, a hunched,

hairy little Mediterranean, grinning awkwardly, standing beside a lean, happy, FBT™ success story, a ripped young man wearing a Speedo and a smile, washboard abs, chiseled shoulders and pecs, and an oddly small head.

I had first seen the ad some six months earlier while sitting on the recumbent bicycle in my gym. The ad was at the back of an issue of *Live Long!*, and as goofy and dated as it was, almost a throwback to the days of Charles Atlas, medicine balls, and elixirs, it hooked me, and not in some mocking or ironic way, but in desperate earnest.

The issue of *Live Long!* was still sitting in my closet, a shirtless, ripped man in camo fatigues on the cover. A real SEAL, it turned out from the article inside, who related the horrors he'd seen, and how keeping fit and active helped him and other soldiers adjust to life after the military. The SEAL, expressionless and mannequin-like, led you through his workout, his fatless body demonstrating the exercises in a series of photos, a routine the magazine assured would provide abs women dreamed of, pecs carved from marble.

I'd been trying to get a six pack, status symbol of my generation, and the lean, low body-fat look in its entirety, for as long as I could remember. I did the Hell Week workouts (as best I could—off balance and with many breaks), and the Marine Blasts, the Ranger 2-a-Days, and the Six Tips To A Rock Hard Core, and the Twelve Minutes To A Lean Body, sweating like a Dubai labourer. I could feel the six pack under

there, if I poked and prodded through the flub with my fingers, or at least imagined I could, it was there, beneath the stretch marks and one beefy roll. If I stuck to a plan, stopped snacking at my desk, really dedicated myself, I could look the way I wanted, like the pictures in the magazine. If....

When I first visited Dr. Wurtzer, I was beyond that. I was forty-three, and I'd given up on what I could make my body do—I'd given up on my body.

After finishing at the gym, at home on the couch after dinner, something in me, I can't remember what, or maybe something I was watching on TV, maybe an infomercial for a product I'd already bought, now interred in the closet along with obsolete video game consoles and shoes I couldn't bring myself to throw out—or maybe it was the whole meat lover's pizza I had just eaten—had me pull that issue of *Live Long!* out of my bag, flip to the back, and call Dr. Wurtzer's number. There was no website, or email address: only a phone number.

It was evening, maybe seven or eight o'clock, and I was expecting to leave a message, so I was caught off guard when someone answered the phone.

A bright and cheerful female voice answered, identified the office as Dr. Wurtzer's and asked what she could do to help. I mentioned that I'd seen the ad in the back of *Live Long!* and was interested in learning more about the procedure.

The secretary told me that she couldn't say much over the phone, but that she'd be happy to schedule a first appointment. Dr.

Wurtzer would explain his patented procedure and ask some preliminary screening questions.

“When do you think I could get in?” I said.

“Just one minute and I’ll take a look,” the voice said, a pretty one, happy little upticks in her tone.

“How about tomorrow!” she said.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yup! Can you do 9:00 a.m.?”

“Oh. No. I wasn’t expecting so soon.”

“How about 11 a.m.?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yup!”

“I’m sorry, I have to work tomorrow.”

“Oh, no problem. Let me look. How about...5:30 p.m.?”

“Ah...”

“How about six?”

“I just—I didn’t expect to get in so quickly.”

“You’re lucky! You caught us at a good time! Come on in and Dr. Wurtzer can explain some things and see if you’re a good candidate for the procedure, and then you can decide from there.”

She seemed genuine, and if I was willing to go two weeks from then, or whenever it was my brain was expecting the appointment, then why shouldn’t I be willing to go the next day?

“Well...” I said, hesitating.

“You can do it!” The voice said.

“All right. I’ll come by and check it out.”

“Great! See you tomorrow!” the voice said, and hung up.

Due to heavy traffic, I arrived fifteen minutes late for my first appointment. The office was in a four-story complex on the corner of 7th and Ash, dentists, optometrists, actuaries, and a market research firm occupying the list of tenants on the board in the lobby. I found what I was looking for, spelled out in slightly crooked plastic lettering: Wurtzer, Dr., M.D., F.O.F.S. Rm. 2301. The first set of credentials I knew, the second I didn’t and, as it turned out, never would.

I climbed the stairs and tried a few wrong doors before finding the correct one, indicated by a simple brass nameplate, again bearing Wurtzer’s name and credentials.

The office was empty, save the secretary sitting behind her glass partition. She wasn’t more than twenty-five, redheaded and lightly freckled, in a nurse’s scrubs, so ensconced in whatever it was she was typing that she didn’t even notice I was in the room until I knocked on the glass.

She looked up. I read her name tag, Karen, and she welcomed me.

“You must be Andy,” she said.

“Yes, that’s me. Sorry I’m late.”

“No problem!”

“Not very busy today?”

“Nope! I’ll let Dr. Wurtzer know you’re here.”

She left her booth and went down the hall and around the corner, out of sight. I heard a door open, some piece of medical equipment beeped and whirred out into the waiting area, then the door closed and

all was silent.

I walked over to the table to pick up one of the many magazines covering it, expecting them to be as current as the décor—stained carpeting and eighties furniture—but they turned out to be the latest six months or so of a dozen health and fitness and lifestyle magazines, all of them directed at men.

I had barely opened an issue when a door opened and closed down the hall, and Karen came back out into the waiting room.

“Dr. Wurtzer is almost ready to see you, but I’ll need you to fill out some forms first!”

She reached through the open window onto her desk and pulled out a clipboard and pen. When I was done, I handed the forms back to Karen, who checked them over, then led me down the hall to the third closed door on the right. She knocked twice, then a voice from within welcomed us inside. Karen swung the door open, pointed me at a chair, left the forms I had filled out on the counter, and left.

In the corner, sitting on a stool, in a white smock, and a pair of black trousers, with a stethoscope around his neck, was Dr. Wurtzer. He was small, olive skinned, and hairy. A few strands of chest material escaped the collar of the once-white t-shirt he had on beneath his smock, a few more grey hairs poked out his ears, and a horseshoe hedge of frizzy hair ringed the prominent bald spot I noticed as he swivelled in his chair.

He was sitting with a thin smile on his

face, his eyes glazed behind thick-lensed glasses, and I was left wondering what it was he was doing before I entered the room. It was as if he’d been sitting there staring at the back of the door.

“Dr. Wurtzer?” I said, starting to wonder if he was in the midst of a stroke.

“Yes. Absolutely,” he said, still not really looking at me, but past me, to the door. He spoke in a slow, deliberate tone, as if he was responding to some other invisible person, an apparition that happened to have asked the exact same question at the exact same time.

After what felt like several minutes of awkward silence, he finally stood from his chair and retrieved the clipboard of forms from the counter. I am 5’9” in my tallest shoes, but Dr. Wurtzer, as he passed me by, barely reached my chin. He took the clipboard back to his seat, leafed through the forms I had filled out, and finally spoke.

“What do you know about the procedure?” he said.

“Well,” I said. “Nothing.”

Wurtzer nodded.

“That’s good,” he said. “It’s best to come in with an open mind. How did you hear about me?”

“I saw your ad in the back of *Live Long!*”

“That’s it?”

“That’s all, yes.”

“Nowhere else? Not the internet? You haven’t spoken to anyone who’s visited me?”

“No. Nothing. I only saw the ad yesterday and called on a whim. I wasn’t expect-

ing to get in so quickly.”

“No,” he said, smiling. “No. You wouldn’t.”

Dr. Wurtzer tapped his pen on the clipboard.

“Well, this is good, as I said. To come in with an open mind. An open mind is essential.”

Finally, he looked directly at me. It was unsettling, like he was looking at something other than a person, at perhaps a lump of clay, or a canvas, or some other medium of art.

“You’d like to change your body,” he said.

“I would. I would,” I said, genuinely, a confession. “I’ve tried everything. The diets and the workouts and cleanses. But I can never stick to them. I’m ready to try something...something more serious. I’m guessing from your credentials you offer a surgical solution?”

Dr. Wurtzer nodded.

“Yes. But don’t worry about that for now. I’ll ask you a few questions and take a few simple measurements and we’ll start from there. Please, please, have a seat.”

I did, and Dr. Wurtzer’s slight smile turned into a wide one.

Those first tests and questions were simple ones, what I’d tried before, why it hadn’t stuck, why I was considering the surgical route. Dr. Wurtzer measured my body fat, a woeful 32%, measured, oddly, with calipers, odd only because I’d read more accurate techniques existed, though I should have known better considering the

state of the office and the black-and-white ad. He took my blood pressure, and my heart rate, and poked and prodded at my neck and head, going as far to measure the latter from several angles with both a tape measure and calipers.

After the tests were complete, I was sent on my way and told to visit Karen on the way out. When I did, she told me I need not schedule another appointment, and that I’d be contacted to undergo further testing and consultation when the appropriate materials became available. I expressed that I was still not committed to the procedure, and my concerns were alleviated: I could opt out at any time.

I left wondering what exactly the appropriate materials were, but by the time I heard back from Karen, I’d forgotten about that particular mystery and mostly forgotten about Dr. Wurtzer as well.

I had fallen into the habit of ignoring the problem, avoiding mirrors as much as possible, loathing my body the two or three times a day I was forced to witness it unclothed, enduring the unavoidable reminders my belly provided when saddling up to my desk. But one day, months later, my phone rang with an unfamiliar number. I let the call go to voicemail, figuring it for a telemarketer.

“This is Dr. Wurtzer’s office calling,” the message said. “Your next appointment will be next Thursday the 5th at 2 p.m. The appointment will last about an hour. Thank you!”

I found it strange that after hearing

nothing for nearly four months I should be expected to drop everything and show up for an appointment. At first, I considered not calling them back and forgetting about the whole endeavour, but I was checking my voicemail with one hand while the other reached into a takeout bag, having just explosively failed at going to the gym for the third time that week, instead visiting a McDonald's drive thru on the way home.

The voicemail from Karen arrived as a reminder that I had one last drastic surgical option—in my head this whole time, you see, I was considering Dr. Wurtzer a nip and tuck artist, because what else could he be?—to cure my self-loathing, to get me a body I felt comfortable in.

I called back and confirmed the appointment.

I showed up at the office on time for the appointment and found two other patients in the waiting room: a man in his fifties or sixties in an electric wheel chair, his head hanging to one side, his body fully conquered by whatever disease had overcome him; and beside him a man that I could find nothing wrong with whatsoever, fit to the point of visibly muscled, a full head of lush blonde hair, and no apparent physical impediments.

I took a seat and picked up a magazine, leafing through the pages as I waited. I was about ten minutes into an article when Karen called my name. Neither of the other men in the room spoke up, or even looked up, so I tossed the magazine back on the

pile, stood, and followed Karen down the hall to the same room Dr. Wurtzer had examined me in months earlier.

Karen set my chart down on the counter, instructed me to take a seat and wait for the doctor, then left me alone in the room.

I waited twenty minutes before first going out to check with Karen, to see if the doctor had perhaps forgotten I was there, but the receptionist's desk was empty. The men in the waiting area were exactly as I had left them, neither of them seeming particularly anxious about the length of their wait. I went back to the room and waited.

Some ten minutes or so later the door finally opened and the doctor entered. The usual distance existed between his eyes and whatever it was he was thinking about, and he was dressed exactly as he had been last time, down to the off-white t-shirt. This time, though, he got to the point without wasting another moment of my time:

"Well here we have it," he said. "It's between you and the guy in the wheelchair for the other guy out there, the delivery man. What do you have to offer?"

"Excuse me?"

"What're you willing to pay?"

"For what?"

"The wheelchair guy offered twenty-five thousand. What've you got?"

"How about me for what?"

"For the delivery man, the amateur athlete out there. How much?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Man, did you not read the literature?"

"What literature?"

Dr. Wurtzer took a breath, then let out a dissatisfied sigh.

“Do you have any idea what’s going on here?” he said.

“No,” I said, angrily, feeling like I was the object of some practical joke.

“Absolutely none.”

“Did you not read the literature Karen gave you?”

“I didn’t get any freaking literature! I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Karen didn’t give you any literature,” he said to himself, and the room, and only sort of to me, in another sigh.

He opened the door and called down the hall to Karen, who appeared a few seconds later.

“He didn’t get the literature,” Dr. Wurtzer said.

“Oh,” Karen said, looking a bit sad. “I’m sure he did.”

“He didn’t,” Dr. Wurtzer said.

“I didn’t,” I confirmed.

“Oh. Well. Sorry,” Karen said, biting her lip. “Is that a problem?”

Dr. Wurtzer stared blankly for a moment.

“No,” he said. “It’ll be fine. Please send in Craig.”

“OK!” Karen said, and got halfway out the door before adding: “Which one is Craig again?”

“The one in the lobby?” Dr. Wurtzer said. “The one that can walk?”

“OK!”

Karen was gone and a moment later the one that could walk, the delivery man, six feet tall and looking like he could win

whatever sporting competition you entered him, tomorrow, without notice or training, entered the examination room.

“Craig, this is Andy. Andy, Craig,” Dr. Wurtzer said. “Craig, please take off your clothes.”

Craig pulled his t-shirt off to reveal a torso and arms that the *Live Long!* Photoshop artists would need to do very little work with, which made me jealous enough, but then he toed his shoes off and wriggled out of his jeans and there he was, in a pair of boxer briefs, with the kind of legs normally seen on professional soccer players.

“The briefs, too, Craig,” Dr. Wurtzer said, taking me aback. “He gets the whole package.”

And then the doctor laughed.

Craig obediently pulled his boxers off and out dropped a digit like a whole tenderloin, without much exaggeration if the tenderloin were pork. I’ll never forget that first look, and at Craig in general, though I’ve grown accustomed to the whole set-up by now, even proficient with it, though not expert—the image of Craig standing there, the poster of the skinless anatomical figure on the examination room door behind him, Craig’s obscene member, uniform in tone and straight as a PVC pipe, hanging like a divining rod, but Craig himself not looking as confident as such a specimen should be, or as I thought one should be, his shoulders rolled forward and his face sullen, his expression hopeless.

“So what do you think?” Dr. Wurtzer said.

I wasn't sure who he was talking to, but I managed to look away from Craig, and noticed that Dr. Wurtzer was looking at me.

"Of what?" I said.

"Of this. What else?" Dr. Wurtzer said.

"It's something," I said.

"Is it what you're looking for?"

"What?"

"Is this the sort of body you're looking for?"

I looked back at Craig. Craig was lighter skinned than I by at least a few shades, and maybe an inch shorter, if I had to guess, but he was pretty much what ninety-nine per cent of the earth was looking for.

"Well yeah. You can make me look like that?"

"Does he not know how this works?"

Craig said, as if I were impaired or not even in the room.

"Nope," Dr. Wurtzer said. "So that's the kind of body you're looking for?"

"Well yeah, yeah," I said. "He looks great. But if you can give me a body like that, you're not a plastic surgeon, you're some kind of fucking miracle worker."

Dr. Wurtzer nodded slowly.

"I can give you that body, Andy. That one." Dr. Wurtzer poked Craig in the abs, causing his wiener to wiggle. "Not *like* that one. *Exactly* that one."

I only had a brief second to look baffled before the doctor continued.

"Take a seat, Craig."

Craig hopped up on the examination bed. Dr. Wurtzer leaned against the

counter and settled in for an explanation.

"I'll keep this simple, Andy, because to be honest it's the end of the day and I'm in a bit of hurry to get out of here. The literature is much more detailed, what with the medical jargon and all, but I like to keep things simple. What I do here, Andy, is lop off your head, lop off Craig's head"—Dr. Wurtzer waved the edge of his hand across the room sharply, demonstrating the technique—"then I jam your noggin' on top of that body, and presto change-o you're off to the races. All right?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I said.

"Head transplant, Andy. You get Craig's body, we harvest your body for organs, everybody's happy." Dr. Wurtzer checked his watch, looked at Craig, who nodded, and then at me again. He spread his hands, indicating that the explanation should be sufficient enough for anyone.

"So," he continued. "The guy out in the lobby has offered twenty-five grand. What've you got?"

I looked back and forth from Craig to the doctor, then did it again, to see if they were putting me on. But they weren't. Craig looked sad and the doctor looked like he had a bus to catch.

"So what happens to Craig?" I said.

"You mean his head?" Dr. Wurtzer said.

"Yeah. His head."

"Tumor," Craig said, looking at the floor. "No insurance."

"His body won't be much use to him for long, unfortunately. But his family get

something, and I of course will get my cut, and you'll get your ripped bod, and everyone's pleased as peach!"

The good doctor clapped with excitement.

"So, what's it gonna be?" he said.

"I have to decide right now?"

"Pretty much."

"When do I need the money by?"

"A.S.A.P., my friend. Frankly, it's a miracle Craig is still standing, considering the hardball he's got lodged in there! He's a motivated seller, for sure!"

"Jesus Christ," I said. "Craig, what do you think of all this?"

"Man's gotta take care of his family," Craig said, proudly, defeated.

"Jesus," I said. "Jesus. Fucking Jesus. And when would we, you know, get this done?"

"Oh, I don't know. Pretty much as soon as the cheque clears. Unless you've got a duffel bag full of cash out in the car."

"Good fucking God. Can I have the night to think about it?"

Dr. Wurtzer rolled his fingers on the counter.

"Well," he said. "Seeing as how we sprung the details of the procedure on you...how about you give me a shout, let's say tomorrow by five p.m., with your decision, and your offer, if you have one."

We occupied the room silently, Dr. Wurtzer, Craig, and I, until Dr. Wurtzer agreed for me, patted Craig on the back, and left. Craig pulled his clothes back on, let himself out, and then it was just me sitting in an empty examination room, wonder-

dering what the hell was going on.

I went home and sat on the couch and replayed what Dr. Wurtzer had said, the images of Craig's naked body, the hopeless man in the wheelchair, envisioning the procedure and its aftermath in its various permutations—my head on Craig's body, the man in the wheelchair's head on Craig's body, my head on the man in the wheelchair's body, Craig's head on my body, Dr. Wurtzer's head on Karen's body, because why not with all this madness—and then masturbated to the thought of me in my new body, fucking Karen, or the barista who made me my morning lattes, or my neighbour with the idiot little pug. Then I ate a whole pizza and fell asleep on the couch.

When I woke up, I stood in front of the full-length mirror in the hall, hung my gut out over my belt and kneaded my belly. I evaluated the thatch of hair in the concavity between and just below my breasts. I pinched the fat on my arms. I turned around and dropped my pants and poked at my dimpled rear. I considered my sad little dick.

I left a message with Dr. Wurtzer.

On the day of the procedure, I did not cross paths with Craig, and was glad I didn't. The fat man in the black track suit, the potential next candidate, was the only one in the lobby.

Dr. Wurtzer again afforded me the bedside manner of a bank robber after the

teller had fingered the alarm, rushing his explanation of the procedure in a pidgin of medical jargon and plain English that came out like a frantic, unskilled interpreter translating an urgent 9-1-1 call. At one point, in explaining the actual head-removal stage of the procedure, Dr. Wurtzer reached behind a piece of medical equipment and brought out a gleaming scimitar. I balked, jumping nearly out of my seat. We both got a laugh out the good doctor's prank—if it was a prank, I never knew, having chosen anesthesia for the procedure and being not particularly sure if Dr. Wurtzer was being serious or not about anything—and then Dr. Wurtzer finished his explanation.

“So that's about it,” he said. “I'd expect some soreness for a while, and you'll be a little clumsy for the first bit, but it's all sunshine and roses from here on out for you!”

“How much soreness?” I asked.

“Considerable. Walking will be difficult. Impossible, really. Actually, even breathing will be tough. I'd hire like an assistant or something, what do you call them? To change your piss tray or whatever.”

“A nurse?”

“That's it.”

Dr. Wurtzer slapped his knee and laughed.

“Oh,” he said, raising a finger, impressed with himself for remembering whatever it was he was about to tell me. “I wouldn't recommend turning your head too quickly for a good, oh, I don't know, six months or so. It's rare, but I've had

them come off. A few times. The heads I mean. I can usually get them back on, but it's a real bitch. And of course, repairing damage caused by neglecting to follow the outlined recuperative therapy is not covered by the warranty.”

Wurtzer nodded solemnly.

He noticed my hesitation, my nervousness, and then sealed the deal:

“Listen,” he said, scooching forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees. “I know this is no joking matter. I know that what you look like is important to you. It's important to everyone, whether they're willing to admit it or not. Some people don't need this procedure, because they already have the body they want. And some people don't need it because they've convinced themselves, to varying degrees of success, that they're happy with the body they already have. What I can promise you is that when we're done here, you will be happy with your new body. You're here, Andy, because you *need* this. You're incapable of convincing yourself that you're content with what you have. It's not an insult, it's just who you are. You should be happy you found me, Andy, because this *works*. It works every time. You will be happy, Andy. You will.”

Dr. Wurtzer was smiling at me, genuinely, still leaning forward with his hands on his knees. I could only nod in agreement. ❖

“EXILE”

by MIRIAM WINGET

It was the third day of Cultus, the last part of the Festival, when Lyssena urgently beckoned Cassandra away from the temple. Cassandra knew something was very wrong for her to interrupt a group of praying women, and Lyssena sped down the mountainside without answering her questions. With the pressure from her ponderous belly and much shorter legs, Cassandra could hardly keep up with the long strides of Lyssena, who stood over seven feet tall.

Lyssena stopped at the Kharakas' stronghold and enveloped Cassandra in a tight hug as her composure broke. "Heressa is dead. Killed by a captive," Lyssena sobbed. She turned and walked through the vast entranceway to her mother's council, leaving Cassandra in shock.

Cassandra's mind raced with questions and possibilities. She thought about the laughter she had shared with Heressa and Lyssena weeks ago during the start of the Festival, Pleasure. At eight months pregnant, Cassandra had no taste for strong drink and rich foods, and her swollen womb made sex burdensome. Instead, she had spent the hedonistic fortnight reflecting on previous years of wild Pleasures with Lyssena and contently watching the twin sisters dance and indulge until she could stay awake no longer.

The Hunt came after Pleasure and was the time of the Festival when the Andronakians showed their strength by raiding the neighboring villages for strong men to perform during Fertility. Lyssena had joined the warriors to participate in the Hunt, as she always did, but Heressa, identical to Lyssena in stunning, dark beauty and opposite in every other way, had little interest in the violence and stayed back with Cassandra. That was the last time Cassandra had seen her, and she was filled with sadness at this thought.

After an hour, Lyssena reappeared at dusk to debrief Cassandra on the ruling of the Council. As heir to the realm, Lyssena was privy to all the official proceedings, and, as Lyssena's wife, Cassandra was privy to all that Lyssena knew. Lyssena depended on Cassandra's wit to help guide her toward becoming ruler.

"You remember the man they called the wolf, the largest of the captives?" Lyssena whispered as if it hurt to speak out loud. "I caught him myself during the Hunt, from the Barbos tribe on the Lynx River. He was given extra guard because of his ferocity. And do you remember Heressa during Fertility? She had shown no previous interest in becoming a child bearer, yet she mounted him half a dozen times even

though he was chained on the main stage. The great goddess Aspasia would not overlook such a blatant effort to bear a child; Heressa had not even undergone the cleansing ritual.”

“Heressa had not intended to become a child bearer?” Cassandra asked with a confused look.

“No,” Lyssena shook her head forcefully. “She performed, but not for the goddess’s blessing. She wanted that beast!” Lyssena’s anger burst forth with these words. “She did not join the main Cultus prayers for the Fertility blessing yesterday. Instead, she snuck off to the stables to unchain him and continue her own perverse ritual in private!”

Cassandra didn’t know what to say. There had always been rumors of Heressa’s unnatural interest in the Vale men, but this seemed too much.

“After he killed her,” Lyssena paused to compose herself. “After he murdered her, he tried to escape with other prisoners. But we caught them all earlier today” Cassandra heard the grim satisfaction in Lyssena’s breaking voice. “Now, there will be a purge. None of the captives will be released this year. And, and I am petitioning my mother to consider a sweep of the Vale. The men have grown too numerous.”

Cassandra felt horror upon understanding Lyssena’s intentions. “Lyssena, they are innocent. What did they have to do with any of this?”

“You do not think this attack will embolden them? One of their kind killed a warrior!” roared Lyssena, looking danger-

ous. “Konstanze as easily as any of them.”

“Do not roll this into your old vendetta,” Cassandra said softly, knowing she was provoking a fragile Lyssena.

“So, you still want him, do you? Are you like Heressa too!” Lyssena’s voice was slightly hysterical. Her anger at her sister’s death could not be contained within one man’s actions, and she spread her pain out so that she could bear it. Without waiting for a response, Lyssena stormed away from Cassandra toward the stables, where the prisoners were huddled. Woe to him who had wronged Lyssena.

Cassandra moved herself to a nearby tree and rested her back against it to cry out the overwhelming swells of emotion that ebbed briefly, leaving her with exhausted emptiness, only to erupt once more. She longed to crawl into Lyssena’s arms and tell her how much she loved her.

Their quarrel over Konstanze had long been over when this tragedy brought it back to the surface. Cassandra hadn’t wanted to conceive a child by force, although Lyssena demanded that it was the only way to bear a strong daughter. “I can find a brash breeder in the Vale whom we can sacrifice, one we need ourselves rid of,” proclaimed Lyssena against Cassandra protests. But Cassandra had chosen Konstanze for another reason than method; she knew she could take a male baby to Konstanze, and he would be its father. As a favorite, he had raised several boys and loved each one.

Newborn boys were often abandoned in the mountains, but some were given to the Vale men, the other Andronakian

castoffs. Those kept usually showed some weakness from the beginning and were used as low-level laborers and breeders. They were not slaves like in some larger cities across the Pelagos Sea, but they had to tread carefully. If a man were too bold or not subservient enough, he would be killed.

Some women thought of the men as pets but only used them when in need of seed, never for enjoyment. Since there was no record of whom a child was born to, inbreeding was hard to avoid. The Hunt was necessary for revitalizing the Andronakian offspring.

Lyssena hated them all, couldn't bear to touch a man, and Cassandra agreed to carry their child. Cassandra was very fond of Konstanze. His mind was soft, like so many in the Vale, but he was a skilled blacksmith who had repeatedly helped her with specialized weapons.

Cassandra instinctively felt her belly. Now that there was life inside her, she was terrified of leaving it to die. She tried to calm herself: the child was a girl. Lyssena would forget her pain once she held the baby in her arms—knowing Cassandra had given her a successor—but Cassandra couldn't elude her fear. Something wasn't right.

With sudden inspiration, hope came to her; she could ease her anxiety about the unknown. Action replaced helplessness, and Cassandra walked back toward the mountainside into the night. Her feet mechanically carried her across the hills to the tremendous mountain-carved temple and into its caverns. Holding a dim torch,

Cassandra felt along the halls of the cave, her gait unsteady on the uneven rock floor. She entered the inter-room, and the familiar dread spread in her gut as she extinguished the fire.

Cassandra had endured this routine many times in her youth. She was intended for the priestess-hood as a prophetess, but she could not do it. The complex language of the goddesses was never meant for Cassandra. Some could bear it well, but others did not live long after becoming a prophetess. The ones that did often became disconnected from the mortal world, speaking only in the riddles of the goddesses and wondering about with wild gazes.

It took tremendous perseverance to shed her calling and break into the warrior class. She was so much smaller and weaker than her sisters, for she had not a drop of Andronakian in her blood. The Andronakians were an ancient race of giants, grew larger and lived longer than any of the people of Cassandra's birth. She was taken from a village after a warrior inadvertently killed her mother, maybe the only outside child ever to call herself Andronakian. She was placed in the Nursey with all the other, natural-born, girls and raised in a community of sisters by professional mothers. Andronakians did not pause from battle life to tend small children.

It was not until a girl was of age and showed talent or proclivity that she would be adopted by a mother, who acted as her mentor. There was still love between mother and daughter, but families were formed



with intention. A woman, especially one with status, might follow a little girl whom she had carried or had close ties to and guide her from the beginning, but, just as often, a girl had no attachments in her early childhood—a situation that brought no shame. Sweet Heressa never resented Lyssena when the queen adopted only the strongest girl she had birthed, and

Cassandra called the great Agriana mother, which helped her realize the hard-won position of warrior wife to the future Kharakas.

In the pitch black of the mountain's insides, Cassandra waited for over two hours for the vapor to begin to rise from the deep gap in the stone bottom. She braced herself for the madness that would follow. Prostrate on the ground with knees

spread wide to allow for her bulging middle, Cassandra spoke, “I implore the great goddess Dione to condescend to her humble servant and give the answer to her question. Do I carry a girl?”

#

“Konstanze.” Cassandra prodded the giant of a man awake, his body taking up nearly the entire floor of his thatched roof dwelling. Konstanze rose, bleary-eyed, trying to understand what he was supposed to be doing. Cassandra started stuffing clothes and dried food into a large bag to tie to the waiting horses.

“We have to go on a journey, Konstanze; you need to come with me.”

As always, Konstanze did as he was told without question, only asking Cassandra in his childlike voice if she needed help with her bag. Within minutes, they started out of the Vale with two old, retired war stallions laden with supplies, the sun just rising. Cassandra had maps of the surrounding land, but her plan only extended as far as a good place to rest after a day’s travel.

If Cassandra thought too long about her actions, she would stop and go back. How could she leave her people, the only life she knew? How could she leave Lyssena, her love? But there was an internal force that was compelling her to keep moving. She had to birth the baby, then return alone to submit to Lyssena for her transgression. She suppressed the voice that told her this was an irrevocable decision. Even if the Council refused Lyssena’s wish for the Vale genocide, Lyssena would not have suffered the child to live. Lyssena did not for-

give easily, and the price she would demand for reconciliation would be everything Cassandra was now sacrificing for.

Cassandra was doing the impossible to stay an act equally impossible for her.

With nothing to occupy her mind during the long ride, Cassandra convulsively tormented herself with the image of Lyssena. All ambition, all the joy and purpose she had felt throughout her life, seemed to have led to nothing. The little girl accepted into a majestic society was going back to her humble beginning in a mundane world of patriarchal squalor. But there was also a nascent feeling creeping into her consciousness: a sense of fulfillment from uncompromised principles, despite all the ills that would come of it.

Body and emotions exhausted to numbness, Cassandra hazily came into mind of an ancient passage that accompanied Agriana’s villa mural depicting the last moments of two warriors of legend, Hesstina and Selene—doomed lovers—dying in each other’s arms. *We have controlled and weaved our journey’s destiny through the force of our great will only to find the power of that poignantly tragic fate waiting for us at our destination, for we can never escape ourselves.* ❖

“THE ENTERTAINMENT”

by LIVIA E. DeSOUZA

Out of mourning.

I repeated the words to myself again, nearly muting the bustle of the preparations around me. It had been over one year since I had thrown a party, and one year since my husband had been lost to the depths, just another drowned by the sinking of an unsinkable ship. His waterlogged body had joined those of the others, as they radiated from the ship’s own resting place in a slowly spreading arc, a trail of breadcrumbs that would alert their seekers, but far too late.

These were the details that I divulged only to those indelicate enough to actually inquire, and, from then on, they left me alone: their pity morphing to distaste. Of course, I had not witnessed the ship’s sinking myself, saved from the very prospect by my own physical intolerance for seafaring, but I could picture every aspect of the tragedy in my mind, and I drew upon this wealth as needed.

It was nearing six o’clock and the house was finally looking ready. I had chosen a blue dress: not so light as to be ostentatious, but light enough to serve as a subtle nod to this new chapter of my life. It was a chapter I would face without my husband by my side.

Annette had arranged the night’s enter-

tainment: a self-proclaimed psychic who would have the women manipulating their necklaces and the men feigning a lack of curiosity. At least, if I knew Annette, any indifference toward the act would truly be feigned.

By the time the first car pulled into the driveway, the sun had just begun to set, and the electrical lights within the house stretched their jaundiced illumination. My husband had ordered the installation of electricity shortly before his death and, like his absence, it took some getting used to.

Annette was the first to arrive. She took my gloved hands in hers, pressing them only lightly. She knew of the importance I placed on belonging to myself again, so she offered no hollow words of consolation. I could only hope that the other guests might possess her tact.

“And your friend?” I asked.

“Communing with the devil, I would imagine,” Annette responded with a small laugh.

Annette put little stock in speculation regarding the paranormal, but she possessed a willingness to suspend her own disbelief. She openly considered it a credit to her character, though others rarely agreed.

“Will he arrive before the guests?” I asked.

Before Annette could answer, we saw the lights of a few cars approaching. My question would be answered soon enough.

Edna and William had arrived and, just as they began to offer their hundredth condolences respectively, Annette steered the couple into the parlor before they could further mire themselves in vicarious depression.

I waited alone to greet the other guests and, after the last of the invited had arrived, a man I had never met walked in unaccompanied.

He was handsome, in a melancholy way. His dark hair was longer than was fashionable, and his eyes were like black pools: wide and unblinking.

“Good evening, madam, I don’t think we’ve met before,” he said.

“You must be—”

“The entertainment,” he said with a rough, humorless laugh. “I’d prefer to think of myself otherwise, but spiritual pursuits untarnished by money cannot pay the rent.”

My lips thinned as I perceived his too quick anticipation of offense. Still, I allowed him to extend the crook of his arm and accompany me to the parlor.

When I touched him, I could feel myself shrinking from the place of contact. It was as though his peculiarity was somehow transmissible, as though I had freely offered the means of my own bodily corruption.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I released him, moving quickly to the protection of Annette’s side.

“It’s late. I was beginning to think you had forgotten,” Annette said to the entertainer by way of greeting.

He offered a low, awkward bow. “I am glad to finally meet you, Miss Howard.”

“You may call me Annette, everyone does,” she responded, the words spoken in the same chastising tone.

His lips parted, showing the tips of his teeth. The thought itself seemed somehow distasteful to him.

An outstanding job had been done with the parlor, and I could see the guests milling around the room. They were unconcerned with the party’s latest arrival.

I made polite conversation with a few guests. However, midway through nearly any exchange, I found my eyes returning to this stranger whom Annette had invited. I had not inquired too much into the nature of his act, still trusting in Annette’s sensibilities, but I found my curiosity reluctantly growing.

As the evening found a natural lull, I looked to Annette. She nodded and cleared her throat, gently tapping the side of her champagne flute with a spoon.

“If I may have your attention, I would invite everyone to find a seat, as the night’s entertainment will commence.”

The small party gathered around, seating themselves in chairs and on couches. The man crept silently to stand beside Annette.

“We have a truly unique act: a type of clairvoyance, from my understanding,” she continued.

I studied the psychic as Annette spoke,

and watched as the now familiar look of displeasure spread across his features.

“But, perhaps, I should let the man himself explain what is involved,” she said. She offered a slight, playful curtsy, before sitting down in a nearby chair.

The psychic stood alone before the party. His condescension was evident, and he knotted his fingers together against the small of his back.

“Tonight, I will ask someone here to find a physical object. They will go wherever they please, select whatever they wish, and act as my eyes. My vision and theirs will be bound together and, without leaving this room, I shall draw for the group the object of their selection.”

“Sounds boring,” I heard Edna whisper through a giggle, before she was quickly hushed by William.

I could see Annette looking almost nervous as she scanned the faces of my guests. She glanced toward me apologetically regarding the solemn, self-important psychic, but I shook off her concerns.

“How shall we get started?” I asked, taking the initiative to quiet any concerns. It was as though Annette’s doubt had granted me compensatory strength.

The psychic looked toward me harshly, showing no appreciation for the effort his own failure to generate enthusiasm had made necessary.

“I will need someone to volunteer to be my eyes,” he said.

“I volunteer myself, unless someone else would prefer to,” I said, the burst of confidence dying on my lips.

I looked across the room, but there were no other applicants.

“Very well,” he said.

He walked to where I stood and took my hands in his. His hold was forceful as he stared into my eyes, and I fought the urge to look away. His irises seemed almost too dark, as though they had trespassed upon a color beyond the scope of black, and they only moved further from human features the longer I looked.

“Your vision is bound to mine. Go where you will, find what you wish. I shall stay here.”

I nodded, quickly withdrawing my hands the moment they were no longer sickeningly clasped by his. His skin had spread over mine like blood; its essence remaining long after his hands had been retracted.

“Are you prepared?” he asked, the words fading as he spoke.

“I am,” I replied.

“Very well, take a few of the party with you,” he said. “I shall stand right here until you have left.”

Only two of the small party rose, Annette and William, and they walked with me into the foyer.

“Where shall we go?” Annette asked, her voice filled with an enthusiasm her posture did not mirror.

I looked through the hallway into the parlor, and I could see the psychic taking paper and charcoal, and setting them out on a card table.

“Let’s go outside,” William said. He had joined us, while his wife remained in

the parlor.

“Alright,” Annette said with a short, relieved laugh. “Let’s go outside. Keep your eyes closed, that way he can’t just sketch the path.”

I complied, closing my eyes and allowing myself to be led: Annette holding my right hand and William holding my left. I could sense their growing eagerness as we walked out into the cool evening air.



I could smell a nearby woodfire, as well as the fresh, muted scents of earth and grass in the evening. I stumbled over stones and a few protruding roots as we walked. In truth, though it was my own home, I found myself unsure of where exactly we were heading.

Finally, I heard Annette’s voice. “Alright, open your eyes.”

I opened my eyes, and they adjusted quickly to the surrounding darkness. I could see the well, and the nearby shed.

I could see the oak tree, and now I knew that I had been feeling acorns beneath the soles of my shoes.

I looked around the well, and the tool shed. I took in the shadowed trees, and my eyes passed briefly over the reflecting pool. I turned to the stone wall at the edge of the forest as the breeze grew a little colder.

“Maybe in the shed?” Annette said.

She opened the door and ducked beneath a thick bundling of cobwebs. She retrieved a broken rake from the wall and passed it to me through the open door.

I held it in my hands, surprised as its ungainly weight contrasted with the near silhouette discernable in the low light. A few tines had broken off completely, while those which remained attached were badly warped.

“I think that ought to be enough for the man,” I said, setting the rake against the stone wall. “If he needs any more than that, he’s not so skilled after all.”

Again, I closed my eyes and allowed Annette and William to lead me back to the house. This time, I was mindful of the

acorns which rolled themselves beneath the soles of my shoes.

When we reached the indoors, I opened my eyes again, my pupils constricting in the presence of the artificial light.

“Let’s see what he’s drawn,” Annette said, still grasping my hand and leading me back to the parlor.

The psychic set the large piece of paper down on the table, rotating it so that it faced me. Recognizable in heavy strokes of charcoal was the rake, with its missing and misshapen metal pieces rendered in dusty, black lines.

“Incredible,” I said quietly.

I looked to the artist himself, but he did not seem to register the praise. Instead, he looked to the ground, as though the attention still only made him uncomfortable.

“Suppose he just looked in the yard before he got here,” Edna piped up.

“But she closed her eyes until we got to the tool shed,” William said quietly. “We passed dozens of things that could have been sketched. You know how Harold left the place.”

Edna shrugged, but looked to me, as if assessing my reaction to the mention of my late husband. “Well, whatever it was, it seems a fun game after all,” Edna said.

I offered her a reassuring smile I did not feel.

The party continued, and it seemed my psychic guest had been offered dinner upon his acceptance of the job, because he stayed there, though he kept to himself. At times, I could sense his eyes on me, but I rea-

soned that he was watching all the guests. Perhaps careful observation was merely a part of his practiced trickery.

Later, as I walked toward the kitchen to alert the staff of the need for additional refreshments, I heard footsteps behind me. I turned, and found myself face to face with the psychic.

Before I could so much as blink, he grasped my forearm, and drew me into a concealed corner beside the door to the basement.

“I saw,” he whispered into my ear, his breath raising the hairs on my neck.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said.

I tried to pull away, but his fingers dug into my arm. He stepped closer and I backed away, though my retreat was cut short by the wall.

The gentle, despairing melancholy which had defined him from our first meeting had vanished from his face. His features were now twisted by an acute viciousness, his muscles contorted by the same venom which stained his words.

“You do,” he said. “You’re lying.”

I tried again to pull myself free, but to no avail.

“I don’t—”

“You do. Perhaps I should alert the law.”

“What do you want?” I hissed.

He smiled and released me, his nails dragging across my skin.

I rubbed my arm, fixing him with a stare. I could hear blood hammering in my ears, practically drowning out the inevitable

words of extortion.

“Wait until after everyone is gone,” I said.

He nodded and I walked past him into the kitchen. The second the door closed, I nearly collapsed against the wall. I wrapped the chain of my necklace around my knuckles, pulling tight until the skin over my joints was traversed by a fine line of white.

The cook was in the kitchen, and she watched me. We had met only a few times before, so she hesitated before speaking.

“Is something wrong?”

I waved her away. “Nothing, just a bout of lightheadedness. I experience them from time to time.”

She splashed brandy into a glass and brought it to me. As I extended my hand, I noticed I was shaking.

“Is there anything else I can do?” she asked.

“Nothing, thank you for this,” I said, taking a grateful sip.

My nerves somewhat steadied by the brandy, I returned to the party. I fixed my smile in place with whatever resolve I had remaining, and this inert, pantomimed enjoyment conducted even my smallest actions until the final guest and member of staff had left my home.

Only he and I remained.

I touched the back of my neck as I sat down on one of the couches, and my necklace twisted against my fingertips. During the final hours of the party, the psychic had remained in the corners of the room. Now, he walked to the foreground, where he loomed over me.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“What is keeping this secret worth to you?” he responded.

“Everything. Instead of us bartering, let me know exactly what it is you require, and I will never have to set eyes on you again.”

The reflection of the electric lamps blazed with an unfelt heat, deep set in his dark eyes. He relented and bared his teeth, performing the desecration of a smile for an audience of one.

“I shall fetch what little I can offer,” I said, convinced that he would make verbal nothing else. “I hope you are not too disappointed.”

I walked toward the kitchen and he followed me, the soles of his shoes thudding against the aged floorboards. I could feel his closeness to my spine like a chill, and my body recoiled.

I could see the corner where he had pulled me to the side, isolating me from the others: the corner where he had distorted the night, dredging to the surface a memory intentionally forgotten.

My fingers found the handle of the basement door, only barely guided by conscious decision. The metal was cold, its hidden half near freezing, and I opened the door. It was dark beyond the threshold, and I could not see the stairs.

“Fetch me a candle from the kitchen. The basement is not wired with electricity yet,” I said, my gaze still fixed on the dark descent.

He shook his head and not a single word passed his lips, his eyes continuing their study of me.

I left him there and went into the kitchen. I retrieved an oil lamp from the counter, which I lit before returning.

He was staring into the basement, his thoughtful eyes captured by a point beyond. There was a brief moment during which he was between me and the open door, and I set the lantern on the ground. In the count of a single heartbeat, I slammed my bodyweight against his shoulder and sent him sprawling into the pitch-black depths.

My breath caught in my throat, choking me, and I swept the lantern up. I stumbled down the first few steps, trying to cast the light wide without going any further. I prayed for greater illumination, but it took a few more steps before I was able to see the body at the bottom, his legs and arms at odd angles, and the trickle of blood coming from his ear.

I raced back up the little of the staircase I had descended and slammed the basement door shut. I set the lantern on the floor and sank to the ground, my skirts at my knees, and the light flickering against my exhausted, crumpled form.

Though a reactionary panic crawled up my throat, I tried to reason with myself. After all, there was nothing immediate to be done.

I was alone in the house. The staff and guests had long since departed, and a few days would pass before anyone returned. I would use those days to carry out my disposal of the dead psychic.

My body was practically consumed by weariness as I turned off all the lights on

the ground level, locked the outside doors, and readied myself for bed. I left the oil lamp where it was, unwilling to engage any further with my committed crime, and ascended to the second floor.

There, my bed received me with an earnest warmth, and the image of the dead man on the basement floor was blotted from my mind by the blanket of slumber.

A few hours later I awoke. Yet, it was not to my bedroom that I found my consciousness restored.

My eyesight was veiled by an all-consuming darkness, save for an unmoving strip of flickering golden light. I sat up in bed and tossed the cloying blanket from me. My bare feet searched out the floor. I braced my grip against the headboard and stood, yet the line of light remained steady, even as it shifted within itself.

My vision, bound to his.

I made my way from the room like one blinded. The line of light offered no guidance, shed no illumination on my surroundings. Suddenly, it drew a little closer. In increments, it became greater, grew nearer, commanded more of my vision.

I inched through the hallway, helplessly watching the light as it grew nearer again.

Yet, my own movement did nothing to bring the beam nearer, its position beyond my control. I was watching through the eyes of another: the eyes of one desperately crawling toward a single point which spilled a lantern's light.

My dread was untempered by the burden of early hours. I felt for the railing of the upper staircase, sure that if I could only

make it from the house, I might survive.

I found the first step and then the second, each motion precarious. The ornamental railing was rough beneath my hand, scraping my skin as I dragged my palm against it, unwilling to break contact for even a moment.

The light jolted nearer, and I felt the effort of the witness: the exhausting strain of salvation just beyond reach.

Yet, the sudden shift undermined balance, and my foot missed its mark. My grip failed and I tumbled forward, barely sensing what lay beneath as I fell.

Epilogue

The police were called to the property after a maid found the homeowner deceased. It has been determined that the death was most likely the result of a fall on the staircase leading from the second floor to the first.

Upon an initial search of the house, a second body was discovered at the top of the basement steps, just behind the door. It appears the man had climbed the steps on hands and knees after sustaining a head injury. This conclusion is based on the trail of blood leading from the basement floor, and the wood splinters embedded in his palms and shins. The basement door was locked from the outside, making egress all but impossible considering his level of injury.

Given these findings, a thorough search of the property was conducted and, after the search dogs were brought in, a third body was found, buried beneath a stone-

lined pool of water in the backyard. This body was that of an adult male and, based on both physical characteristics and possessions found in the jacket pocket, it was determined to be that of the homeowner's husband.

Though he had reportedly died in a shipwreck, this is no longer believed to be the case. ❖



“THE GOLDEN JESTER”

by CHRISTINA H. JANOUSEK

I knew it inside out – the baroque castle *Schönbrunn* with its waving angels on the roof, and the castle gardens with their straight paths and sharply cut hedges. I knew the crunching sound made when the little pebbles rubbed against my shoes when I walked towards the main entrance gate. I knew in which season what kind of people passed their time in front of the Neptune or the Obelisk Fountain or near the orangery, and what the most frequented castle tour was. I knew around what time the lions would start roaring at the castle zoo, and where the newly enamored couples tended to give free rein to their flaming passions. I even knew which rose in the Rose Garden attracted the most bees. I had remembered most of the names of the deceased who each had a rose dedicated to them, including my parents.

As a child and young adult, I had never noticed the orderliness and predictability of this place, this strict symmetry my mind had inserted itself into. I unconcernedly had loved all of it *at the time*, a time of carefreeness and ease. A time where everything seemed to be set in stone and I could afford to dream along and not worry about my quirkiness or existential matters. A time when I did not want to acknowledge that pragmatic people sorted their acquaintanc-

es according to degrees of importance and opportunism and did not care what damage they could do interpersonally. As a woman in her early thirties who had lost her parents due to a drunken driver, was born a bookish loner, and an aspiring journalist still trying to find her own voice, I felt the whole complex now resembled a lady-in-waiting. A lady-in-waiting being forcefully squeezed into a corset, grinning and bearing it because *she* adhered to the *belief* that she had no other *choice*. I had taken so much of my privileged middle-class life for granted.

Yet, I was always drawn back there. You might wonder whether this monotone place is the only thing I was truly familiar with in life. You probably believe that I might as well have gone to another baroque palace garden to dispel my thoughts about society. In Vienna, the former capital of the Habsburg Monarchy, they were still plentiful. Although they were not as abundant as in other European cities I had visited, their calculated, inescapable beauty was both enchanting and stifling my soul, no matter where I would go. I sometimes felt I only had to take a few steps out of my flat, and voila, there I was again at court.

And yet, in front of *that* particular castle, for as long as I could recall, stood *this*

one man whom I knew *nothing* about. His presence had never really made an impression on me. Standing on a small pedestal and always smiling as if nothing could shake his spirit, this man worked as a street performer and called himself the Golden Jester. He was dipped in golden color from head to foot, wore a flowing sash around his arm, and warbled songs merrily in the manner of a balladeer. He somehow reminded me of a living statue and of the tale *The Happy Prince*, my mom would read to me as a child. It was hard to tell if he was wearing a toupee, because the hair was braided into two pigtails. But it also flattered his face naturally. Due to the golden color, one could hardly guess his age. His singing voice revealed even less about his nature.

In front of the platform stood a basket into which bystanders occasionally threw money. In each of his hands the Golden Jester held a kind of fishing rod with which he cautiously pulled up the banknotes and coins. He would then make them disappear like a sleight of hand. Oddly enough, this would often lead to the applauding people tossing him even more money. (A microcosm of how everything in this world seems to work *for some*, I think now.)

How did that first encounter between the Golden Jester and me come about you ask? Back then, I probably would have said by chance. Today I know that there is no such thing, and that it has never existed in the first place. It was one day in late spring when I left work earlier than I had intended to. I should have prepared questions for

an interview with the head of the Viennese Artists' Association. She was a descendant of a Hungarian magnate family and mother of a talented ghost-writer. I had been given the prosaic and hackneyed topic "Money as the Object of Art, Money as Art" by my boss. But surprisingly, the interview did not materialize. My interviewee had resigned as director without cause and had refused to comment on it in any other way. (To this day, I joke that she was apparently bored with the topic herself, and that it must have given her the last jolt).

Since I enjoyed walking in the afternoon sun and one of the castle routes lay on my way home, I took it until I reached the gate, the same one I would also pass when entering. Standing in the gateway, I already witnessed the approaching disaster: Without feeling the slightest qualm, two drunk teenage boys, both with swastika tattoos on their arms, had been grabbing the banknotes from the Golden Jester's box. As if they had not given free rein to their impudence already, they additionally plucked at his pockets and the sash, attempting to find more money there. Then they pulled out their cell phones and started making obscene gestures for a selfie.

Obnoxious brutes, I thought to myself. Despite my delicate facial features and my fair wavy bob, I was not as dainty as I might have looked to someone who was not acquainted with me. But I could not argue that physically they were much stronger. Perhaps they were even armed.

Although I did not want to play the hero by any means, I felt that if I did not

act now and just walked along like the other bystanders, I would have crucified myself for my cowardice later. So, without further ado, I ran to the pedestal, while the two were still indulging in their deeds. Just as they were about to rush off with some bills in their palms, I instinctively fetched one of the Golden Jester's rods. I tossed the string with the hook attached to it. I managed to grab one of the scoundrels by the collar until he fell to the ground, like a tin soldier. He dropped the money in his befuddlement. I took advantage of this element of surprise and did the same to his partner. With erratic movements I collected the banknotes. I happened to notice that a yellowish-white piece of paper had gotten stuck to my sweaty hand. Yet, I didn't have time to take a closer look at it. So, I frantically put it in one of my jacket pockets without thinking twice.

The two boys had already risen to their feet. One was swearing at me, the other was just reaching out with his fleshy hand. I flinched and was about to take cover when suddenly a policewoman and her partner intervened. The supervisors of the castle must have called them in time. They restrained the two and made sure that the money was returned to the Golden Jester.

After they and the other bystanders had left, he turned to me and dropped a curtsey. "Thank you, my dear. It's good to see that some young people still possess enough courage to stand up to bullies who are especially ... (he paused for a second) ... aiming for *my kind*. If you don't mind my impudence, may I ask your name?" the

Jester spoke with tears of joy and gratitude in his eyes.

It took me a while to respond. Not because I minded the question. But because I could have sworn that those tears that pearly down his golden shoes were liquified gold themselves. They were not just stained from heavy layers of make-up. Even his teeth were golden. You could have bet that he did not wear braces or have fillings. His pupils had an amber circle around them. Not only that, after the tears had reached the floor, they kept on rolling like pearls of mercury, intermixing with the grey pebbles. They then crawled under the pedestal, as if to stay hidden there and always be wary.

"Uhhhm Flora ... Flora Hortense Forst, nice to meet you. And of course, don't mention it," I replied, still somewhat perplexed. I could not tell for sure whether the Golden Jester had taken notice of my reaction and chose to 'ignore' it. Especially after what I had just witnessed, I did really want to know *his actual* name, more about him as a person. I thought he would at least have given me that. Even now, standing in front of him, I could not determine whether he was as old as Methuselah or another Benjamin Button. It was as if his face didn't want to decide whether it should look young or old.

Although I did not want to come across as indifferent or detached towards him, I was afraid to overstep a personal boundary. So, I refrained from following my compulsion of 'nosy interrogation'. It was a habit I practically had to acquire due

to my job. It did not always come in handy in interpersonal relationships, even if I meant well by it. (Especially in a city that not too long ago had been named the world's most unfriendly one in terms of settling in according to a tourist survey.)

The Golden Jester seemed to sense this, and so he showed more interest in me. "Flora Forst! That does ring a bell, indeed. Are you not the one who wrote this magnificent article about looted art and forgotten partisan artists? I vaguely remember the content. But I believe it had something to do with a painting that was fought for in close combat at the Viennese Forest at the end of WWII," he exclaimed. His face suddenly lit up which made his golden skin shine even more.

"Yes, that's right. You have a good memory," I responded. I was surprised that he had remembered this article, of all things. I had received harsh criticism for it. At the time, I was still an intern, and didn't really know how to deal with it. Therefore, I had put it out of my mind.

It was about an Austrian artist who tried to 'steal back' a portrait that he apparently had dedicated to someone with the initial 'C' that had been engraved on the picture frame. The painter, although not a soldier himself, had therefore been in a battle at the Viennese Forest to fight for what was his. The picture betrayed a youth like figure painted in the manner of Monet's Impressionism with a touch of golden floral Nouveau Art elements, what Viennese Secessionists would have called *Jugendstil*.

Unfortunately, the Nazis had managed

to nick it again, and to return it to the Reich Chamber of Culture. The artist himself was only known as Maestro. It was assumed that he had died at the forest in close combat, although the body was never found. The only reason mankind knows about his existence in the first place is due to a letter that had survived and is now archived at the Austrian National Library. One of the Nazi soldiers wrote it to the President of the Reich Chamber confirming the reappropriation of the painting.

After the war, the Austrian government managed to purchase it. But they had been unable to figure out if any family members or friends might come into question as rightful heirs. (Nor had they put any sincere effort in it.) The painting is now displayed at one of the *Schönbrunn* castle museums. That is because the castle zoo itself touches the edges of the Viennese Forest, which is where the mentioned dispute had taken place.

In my article, I had argued that the sitter of the portrait could have been the artist's lover, and that the style it was painted in was not the only reason it was discarded as 'degenerate art'. To back up my statement, I had referred to other artists who, living at that time, had experienced a similar fate.

Only a couple of hours later, the online comment section of the newspaper was riddled with insults. The commenters, most of them anonymous, claimed I should not tell stories but stay professional, stick to the facts. To top it off, people like me were the reason why 'fake news' were being spread.

Yet, I had clearly not disguised my opinion as fact.

I could have lived with *that*. But what irked me was that my boss was more worried about his reputation. So, he had that one paragraph cut out on the same day just to please his audience.

There was no way I could know for sure that the Golden Jester had read the original version that had not been out there for long. However, I did not put it past him. "I am sure you will write more splendid articles of that sort in the future. Call me kind, but I believe you are quite gifted. As much as I would love to continue our conversation, my shift is almost over. I must get ready. You know, it takes quite some time to put on all this tedious make-up. I hope you forgive me, but I am sure we shall see each other again quite soon," he responded.

Again, I was puzzled because he had said 'put on' instead of 'take off' make-up. But then I convinced myself that I should not overthink every action, especially not of someone with such a warm heart.

The Golden Jester suddenly winked at me before we departed. Even after I had already crossed the street and had walked past a couple of tram stops, as I turned around, I still saw him wave towards me. The other pedestrians were just gawking at me like some kind of mad person, not being able to discern whom I was waving back to.

#

In the evening of the same day, I made myself comfortable on my sofa and cruised

through some TV channels. At some point I fell asleep and woke up again around midnight. I fetched the remote control, turned off the TV and quickly watered the sunflowers on the windowsill.

I was about to go to bed and lie back down when I suddenly stepped on a piece of paper. I reached for it and found that it was the same one that I had pocketed in my rush during my confrontation with the bullies. But for reasons I couldn't explain, it could not have dropped out of my jacket, which I had put on the coat hook. I also did not have any intruders or unwanted pets who could have moved it. What's more, I hadn't opened or tilted the window once since I got home, so there couldn't have been a breeze either.

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and unfolded the paper. At the same moment, a bleak gloominess added to the darkness of the night. I felt as if I were being sucked away in a morphine rush. Shortly afterwards, the sunflowers, suddenly withering, dropped their upright heads. Then there was a woody, musty smell. The ground beneath my feet morphed into a muddy mass on which I almost slipped. On the walls of my flat, foliage had spread, but not in the way one knows from ivy. It was as if nature had no regard for what was in front of it, as if it knew no boundaries between inside and outside, like a surrealist painting.

All this was followed by the barking of dogs, gunshots, and shouts. They sounded like orders, but I only perceived them in a muffled way. At closer examination, I

learned that I had stepped into a bomb crater, possibly caused by an artillery shell. The paper resembled a kind of cartography that kept unfolding, like a hologram that had become real. I felt the sheet of paper that was still lying at my feet. Only after all these impressions did I realize that it had been addressed to someone.

Vienna, April 8th, 1945

Dear Constantin,

If you are reading this letter delivered to you by the diligent carrier pigeon, then you must know that I have tried to fight for you with all my might. But as much as it pains me to admit this, I ultimately failed.

I have poured my soul into my last work, only to have it displayed to the world's eyes of hate who were never meant to see or understand it. To see and understand you and who you are to me.

I can hear you complain "I warned you" and how foolish it was to risk my life for 'some brushes of paint'. But to me, that painting had always been more than any of us could have fathomed.

I write these last lines to you from the Viennese Forest, the place where I have been left wounded to bleed out after you had been ripped from my arms. Although I initially managed to drag the painting away safely from Munich, the SS stooges are everywhere. When the train stopped in Alland, one station before Vienna, taking flight had become inevitable. For hours, the Nazis have been chasing me until they finally caught up with me so close to the finish, at the forest line near Schönbrunn.

I am leaning against a checker tree.

Amongst all the oak trees, it is a true rarity in this forest. I was smashed against it during an attempt to save you. Having eaten from its fruit, I feel as if I am becoming one with it.

Promise me: Do never ever let go off your gift to smile and make others smile, your mischief that has always been pure and never been stained with falsehood or dishonesty. It is what I have always admired about you, and what has inspired me to create.

May the gold I have poured into it keep you and your smile alive.

*Yours truly and eternally,
Erich*

After I had finished reading the last lines, the whole scene evaporated. As fluidly as it had come and sucked me into its spell, it now ended abruptly. The transition was that stark. My room had taken on its usual dimensions again. Everything was unchanged, except for the sunflowers, of which only one had survived.

Pacing around, now fully awake, I wanted to grab my phone and call the Golden Jester, or Constantin, as I had now learned his name. But then – suddenly breaking out in laughter – I forgot I did not have his number. I was so anxious to talk to him about what I had just witnessed.

I couldn't sleep a wink all night. My thoughts were racing, incessantly overlapping, and repeating themselves. What was happening?

#

The next day, it was Saturday afternoon, I waited for Constantin, hoping to intercept him. On weekends, his working

hours always started a little later. But he did not come. Not that day. Nor the following day. Nor the day after. Nor the whole week after.

I was at unease. I doubted he had fallen ill. Did he fear I had stolen from him? Was he desperately looking for Erich's letter? That must have been it, I tried to convince myself. Did he consider me a fraud after all? Did he now perhaps believe that I was with the two Neo-Nazis, and that the whole action had been staged? But then I reassured myself I was being paranoid. Had that been the case, he would have thought that I had been aware of the letter's existence to begin with.

And yet, it occurred to me, I did not have it on me. I had safely locked it away. I came to grasp the inconsideration of my reaction. I had unconsciously treated the letter like a document that needed more research. While working, I had even used my breaks to find out more about the Golden Jester. I just had nothing else on my mind. I had studied the letter so many times. I had weighed every single word until I knew the content by heart. I had dissected it like a pathologist would take apart a corpse. It was as if my acquired detachment suddenly felt like the wrong approach to take.

On a personal level, I could imagine it must have felt like an insult. I had to see the situation and my own shortcomings for what they were: I wanted to have the letter to myself, but still keep the Golden Jester as a source for a potential story.

I now loathed myself for it. I had

always used my distanced attitude towards people, most of whom I didn't have much trust in, as a protective mechanism so as not to make myself vulnerable. That way I would always gain the upper hand as the lesser evil in contrast to the others, even if that may sound a little Darwinian now. It was a bit like learning to walk through the world with blinders on.

And yet, it was precisely people with that mindset who only made things for themselves and others worse. At that moment, I wished that the whole incident had not occurred, that I had been in the wrong place at the right time on that one Friday.

I decided to return the letter to Constantin the following weekend. But I did not want to let on that I had read it. At least I hoped I would see him again at my scheduled time. I was now convinced that I should not get involved in something that was really none of my business.

Although Constantin was again nowhere to be found, this time at least the small platform had been set up. Nevertheless, I doubted that he was taking a break or would appear later. Clutching the note tightly, as if I could get some encouragement or confirmation from it that I was doing the right thing, I strolled to the podium. I tried to avoid the persistent crowds and their camera flashes.

As I stood in front of it, the same golden tears that had crawled under the stone a fortnight ago rolled out. They moved up from under the stone and formed the following writing:

Tomorrow. After the thirtieth roar of the zoo lions. Under the treetop path. Don't forget it this time.

This didn't exactly come in handy, as the weather reporter had announced heavy rain for tomorrow. But after everything that had happened, I didn't dare question Constantin's motives. He must have had his reasons.

The next day I put on a waterproof coat, and counted every single roar of the zoo lions that I could hear all the way home. Now at mating time, they were increasing rapidly. I had to be extra attentive which meant another sleepless night.

After the fifteenth roar I left my flat. By the time the twenty-fifth rang out, I had already started entering the edges of the Viennese Forest that were located under the castle complex's tree top path, usually quite crowded by tourists.

It now occurred to me that Constantin had not mentioned a specific spot in his cryptic note. It could have been anywhere, as far as I was concerned.

A sudden thunder sound muffled the next lion's roar, so I could not determine the number. I started pacing nervously again and was afraid I would not make it in time. "The checker tree! He has to be there!" I suddenly shouted out. I got in gear and fought my way through the dense undergrowth and bushes that scratched my face. Since oaks and checker trees look confusingly similar at first glance and rain kept dripping down my face, I had difficulty locating it.

When I heard the next lion's cry,

which now seemed as loud as if a lion were shouting behind me, I lost my balance. I tripped over a tree root and fell face first into the mud. As I absentmindedly looked up and cleaned my face, I gazed at Constantin, holding out his hand to me.

It seemed to me at first that he was in 'civilian' clothes because his hair was tied back in a ponytail. There was no sign of him working as a golden street artist. But then he took off his coat, jacket, and hat. The rain washed off the flesh-colored makeup, rouge, and mascara, revealing his skin that was shimmering like gold leaf.

It was precisely at that moment I learned that there was no point in feigning ignorance about the letter to Constantin, as I had intended. I had already learned so much. I could not just dismiss it, having one foot in and one foot out. This man, who had just given me the benefit of the doubt and literally shown me his true color, did not deserve any more suspicion or retention on my part. If anything, it should probably have been the other way around. I took his hand.

"I am sorry, Constantin. I did not mean to - " I started, but he had lifted his other hand as if to signal me that no further explanation was needed. However, it was not a gesture of resentment.

"Erich died here exactly one month before the end of the war at the age of 40. In a little more than a month, on June 21st of this year, he would have been 118 years old. Can you imagine that? He was so close. Too bad he did not experience the end of the war," Constantin sighed.

It didn't escape me that Erich and I were born on the same day. But that seemed secondary at first compared to what Constantin added. "I come here every weekend. How am *I* still alive, you wonder. I can see the big question mark in your face. I noticed it too the other day. I myself can't quite explain it. But if I had to take a guess, I would say that part of the gold from the painting flowed into my organ system. It appears that with his last words in his letter Erich wanted to keep me alive and preserve the day we first met. I was working as a stand-up comedian in a small Viennese cabaret. Erich was the only one who could detect the most subtle witticisms that even the strictest censorship could not muzzle. I don't know whether I should hate or love him for what he did, if it was an act of selfishness or love on his part," Constantin continued.

He gestured towards me. I followed him under the tree whose dense foliage surrounded us like a protective wall. Although the area had changed somewhat after all these years, it was still unmistakable.

I remembered the letter I now pulled out and handed to Constantin. He gratefully took it from me. From the way he withdrew it from my hand, I gathered that he had forgiven me. Then we both turned closer to the tree. At first sight, there was nothing outstanding about it. The rain had already subsided a little. After only a few minutes, a rainbow adorned the sky and a nightingale rustled past us.

It was precisely then when I turned back to the tree and noticed some furrows

that seemed to form a face, as if a male, nymph-like creature, or perhaps rather a male wood sprite, was brazenly looking at me in all its vividness. Indeed! It was hard to miss now. Constantin must have seen it too. The legend that a soldier of Napoleon died in a tree during a battle in Schleißheim, Upper Austria, and that his skeleton was found in a hollow oak tree, was nothing compared to what presented itself to my eyes. Not only did the tree live. Erich lived in the tree!

Abruptly, I turned to Constantin. "What are you looking at? You look like you have seen a ghost," he spoke with genuine concern.

Well, that was because I sort of *had* seen one. Did he really not notice it? "The tree ... it I think Erich is still alive!" The words poured out of my mouth like untamable waters breaking the dam of this uncomfortable silence that had spread between us.

Constantin contorted his face as if he had just been punched in the pit of the stomach. "I don't ... see anything other than the tree. What are you getting at?" he asked exasperated.

"You really can't see Erich's face in the tree? When I saw the content of the letter I was practically here when the fight happened ... but I'm sure you must know what I am talking about," I stuttered in disbelief, struggling for words.

"I sincerely do not have the faintest clue. Do explain!" Constantin urged.

For a moment, I became aware of that glimmer of hope that shone in his eyes

once more. Then I told him what had happened to me when I read the letter. I was horrified to discover that Constantin had never experienced anything like this during all the years with the letter in his possession.

“So, you are a kind of medium between Erich and me. Do you have any idea why that might be? Is he talking to you right now?” Constantin pressed on.

“Could it be because Erich and I were both born on the same day? At least that might be *one* reason,” I speculated.

Then I put my hand on the face, which looked as if it had been carved into the wood. I slowly traced the furrows with my fingers. I was now permeated by such a powerful energy, as if someone foreign were taking control over my body. But this feeling lasted only temporarily. I could now tell that I was looking at Constantin through Erich’s eyes, had obtained his thoughts, carried myself like him and spoke his words, as if reading a telegram.

“Constantin ... do not forsake us ... all is not lost ... *save the portrait* ... trust Flora ... take the sunflower ... at the right time ... the rest will come naturally,” Erich whispered through me.

Then this energy left me. It was as if Erich had to spare the rest of it for himself and could not afford to give away more. I almost had to pull myself away from the tree. It seemed to me as if it didn’t want to let me go, as if it was inviting me to take root with it.

Constantin did not budge. His facial

expression betrayed a combination of fear and joy. *Save the painting?* How on earth are we supposed to arrange that? The sunflower part was the one I could least make sense of.

“It all happened so fast, I wish he had made his request clearer,” I sighed, facing Constantin again.

“Cut yourself some slack. You have done so much for me already, even if initially I didn’t take it that way. Reservation and false modesty have clouded both of our judgements. But now I am sure that we will get to the bottom of it all. It is only a matter of time,” Constantin reassured me.

At that moment, I knew that I had made a worthy friend.

#

And so, the next few weeks of May were relatively unspectacular. Constantin and I met every weekend under the checker tree. But ever since my last merge with Erich, the latter had not revealed himself to me once. It was as if he also wanted to put me and Constantin to the test. But in return, it brought the two of us closer together. Instinctively, I got the impression that Erich knew exactly what he was doing, and I do not mean that in a disparaging way by any means. Sometimes I wondered what would have happened if I had taken that one sunflower with me that Erich had only mentioned in passing. But I refrained from doing so, because again, I didn’t want to seem too opportunistic. I shared Constantin’s view that everything would eventually take its course.

And it sure did, although it was more of

a derailment, if you will. After nothing earth-shattering had happened professionally in the first two weeks of June, what I now learned a week before the start of summer was like the announcement of another declaration of war, whose vicious circle simply would not end. I had been given another story to write about. About the upcoming auction of Erich's painting at the *Dorotheum*, on June 21st at 1 p.m. The after-party would start at 11 p.m.

Some simpletons had given Erich's painting the title "*Burli*", the Austrian slang term for the diminutive of boy, which can also be used in a condescending manner. (It never ceased to amaze me how mankind desperately adhered to the strategies of belittlement and the minimization of ideas only to make them more tangible for their own convenience, thus even proudly flaunting their ignorance.)

The director of the *Schönbrunn* castle museums had argued that he had been toying with the idea of selling for a long time. Compared to all the other art, the "*Burli*" stepped out of line and had not had a single visitor in years.

Journalists were invited to the after-party, and that also included the newspaper I was working for. I was allowed to bring a companion. In fact, societies like these, for whom the presence of art connoisseurs was not necessarily a mandatory requirement, frowned upon unaccompanied guests. The kind that *in their minds* drew unwanted and undivided attention to themselves, especially if this kind was female.

I had considered avoiding the atten-

dance of the auction as well as the party in protest, if not quitting my job completely. All my optimism, all the hope of reuniting Constantin and Erich that I had gained over the past month and a half was gone. I was on the verge of surrender and had started envisioning the worst-case scenarios again. That's what Erich must have meant by "save the portrait".

But *what exactly* did he expect Constantin and me to do? Literally commit a robbery before the painting could get in the clutches of some shady 'man of private means'? Or some politician who would just place it next to other art 'souvenirs' in the Parliament building that had secretly been financed by taxpayers' money?

Constantin was no less crestfallen when I told him about the terrible news that had not yet been revealed to the public. He too seemed at loss. But for some reason, inexplicable to me, he took the news better than I did.

"I know it looks hopeless for both of us right now. I don't have a plan for what we could possibly do either to stop all of this. But so far, your instincts have never led you astray. It is a rare gift. Please do not dismiss it now, if not for my sake, then for yours," Constantin besieged me.

While I still could not let go of the thought that we just blindly let ourselves fall into the depths of fate, he truly believed in me.

And so, it was decided. I had an appointment with Constantin. I had given him my address, and we had agreed that he would come to my place in the evening of

June 21st, after the acquisition of Erich's painting.

And yet one question remained. What kind of 'combat gear' should I wear? When Constantin rang the doorbell, I had just startled from my sleep. I had been completely out of it the whole afternoon. The exhaustion of the last few days had simply taken a toll on me. I had not used the time to doll myself up like I should have. Unshowered and unkempt, I could have been mistaken for Shockheaded Peter's sister. When Constantin gazed at me, I couldn't help but notice his glimpse of horror and disappointment.

At this point, I just wanted to throw in the towel. I was not prepared, we had to be at the *Dorotheum* in an hour. Even a cab would not be exactly on time. My apartment was located in a rather winding alley and could easily be overlooked, even with the best navigation system.

Exhausted, I buried my head in my hands and leaned against my windowsill where that one sunflower was still blossoming. My gaze lingered longingly on the forest edges that lined the castle building in the distance. Constantin looked at me with compassion. A tear wetted my cheek until it buried itself in the soil of the pot.

What happened next struck me as a modern (and, I dare say, better) version of that scene from *Cinderella* where Ella is taken under the wing of the Fairy Godmother. The sunflower, from which a radiant glow suddenly emanated, turned to me, and bathed me from head to toe in its light. Then my clothes fell away from my

body like a cover. An emerald, silky fabric entwined itself between my fingers, toes, and legs, covering me up to the neckline, but leaving my neck and shoulders untouched. My face had taken on a bronze tan, which added a turquoise tint to the moss green of my eyes. My even wavier hair, which still reached my shoulders, resembled a sun-kissed fleece. The sunflower, however, could no longer be found in the pot.

Constantin dropped his jaw in astonishment and curtsied, just as he had done the other day. Around my neck the petals hung like a necklace, and around my eyebrows two flower-veil-like circles had formed, giving my appearance something incognito.

"Of course. Take the sunflower at the right moment. Those were Erich's words," Constantin and I suddenly warbled out in unison, smiling at each other.

We left the flat and took the tram to the *Dorotheum*. After entering the reception hall, we both tried as best as we could to avoid superficial gossip and other inconveniences. We did not enter our actual names in the guest book, but this went unnoticed.

The buffet was more than ample. On an adjacent table stood several bottles of Checker Schnapps, almost all of which were already emptied. This was touted as a true delicacy from the *Schönbrunn* checker tree. It was said to flatter the palette in a very special way.

The receptionist boredly blew a chewing gum bubble and directed us to the auction room where most of the invited guests had already been seated. Amongst them

were some camera crews as well as the culture department of the newspaper I was working for. I gathered how they anxiously whispered my name. They had obviously not become aware of my presence yet and had been expecting me impatiently. The fact that no one had recognized me yet must have been due to my altered appearance, which was just fine by me.

Constantin took a seat next to me and squeezed my hand encouragingly as our gazes fell on the picture on the stage, now shrouded in wine red drapery. The painting had been acquired that afternoon by the owner of Austria's most successful consumer goods company. It was rumored that he wanted to give his pregnant wife the "Burl" as a gift for her 27th birthday. At midnight, the painting was to be toasted to and unveiled. Then the interview I was meant to conduct, and a subsequent celebration were to take place.

A minute before midnight, the doors to the auction room were shut. Then one of the hosts, who was to moderate the introductory speech, approached the painting. Eagerly raising his hand, he was about to unveil it. Even before the clock hand approached twelve, I jumped up as if stung by a tarantula and shouted a loud "No!", louder than I had intended. The presenter dropped his hand. All the visitors turned abruptly to me and Constantin. For a minute, it was utterly silent. No one moved, it had already struck midnight.

Then suddenly, the acquirer of the painting fell to his knees. It was not long before his wife, and all the others present,

followed him like dominoes, as if they were possessed and did not know how to help themselves. One of them, as if in a delirious daze, bawled, "Behold, the Sun Woman, she has truly descended to us from heaven, as from the Revelation of John! Let us celebrate! *Walking on Sunshine*. Music on!"

The audience had completely lost its interest in the painting. I had attracted all the attention. Although now this ghastly song had broken the silence, no one felt prompted to dance and everyone continued to remain on the floor.

What was I waiting for? This was the only opportunity! Without thinking twice, Constantin and I left these goofballs to their own devices. We stormed towards the painting, removed the draperies and were about to take it back to its rightful owner. We were not able to refrain from a laugh or two since this whole scene could have come from a Chaplinesque slapstick movie. But we didn't even get to grab the painting by the frame, as it catapulted us away from the *Dorotheum* in a split second, like an opening portal.

We arrived in front of the checker tree. The painting stood upright, fully facing the furrows that had yet again started to form Erich's facial features, now discernible to both Constantin and me. The tree bent and twisted. Its leaves rustled wildly. Then the bark cracked, fell off, and a man of graceful stature and noble countenance flitted through the painting, directly in the arms of Constantin. The makeup and the gold underneath came off Constantin's

skin, revealing a handsome man with golden curls and of youthful disposition. However, nothing was left of the painting. It was as if it had now manifested completely and had burst the frame that had been holding it all this time.

I was now waiting for a retrograde alteration to occur in my appearance as well. The only thing that changed was the flowery veil-like rings that now fell away from my eyes.

Erich and Constantin rushed into my arms. "Thank you, Flora. I don't know what Constantin and I would have done without your help. We are forever indebted to you", Erich's gentle voice resounded. And to this day, the same holds true on my part.

Over the next few weeks, amusing headlines graced the front pages of a wide variety of newspapers, such as "Mysterious Sun Woman Spotted at *Dorotheum* Auction Party. Apocalypse not to be ruled out?" or "'Burli' lost without a trace. No birthday present for 27-year-old trophy wife?".

Fortunately, no one from work had pestered me about my 'absence' at the *Dorotheum*. I had given them little opportunity to do so. The excuse to which I stuck was that I had tested positive for Covid and had not been feeling well all afternoon.

I had decided to work at the newspaper until mid-July before handing in my resignation. By then, I should have enough sav-

ings to help Constantin and Erich find a place to live. Plus, I had also inherited a manageable sum bequeathed to me by my dear parents. For the time being, I had taken Constantin and Erich under my shelter. The reason I had given for my resignation was that I wanted to develop my professional and personal horizons. The usual empty phrases people resort to.

On my last day at work, as I was strolling home, I accidentally ran into a lady in front of *Schönbrunn's* main gate, trying to catch the streetcar in time. When I picked myself back up, I realized it was the lady who had resigned as director of the Viennese Artists' Association and was now self-employed. She bared her teeth and gave me a sincere and charming smile.

"Mrs. Forst! What a surprise! I was just about to come to your office and make you a job proposal. It has come to my attention that you are particularly interested in lost or thought-lost art and the inheritance issues involved. My son and I could use some bright minds ourselves right now for a research project. I would be honored if you, and possibly other trusted candidates, could assist me. You don't have to worry about the financial issues, you will be more than generously compensated," the lady suggested.

Without hesitation, I agreed. I knew immediately who should accompany me on this new and wonderful path of life. ❖

END TRANSMISSION