

SHADOW TREASURES

by Dennis Hiatt

Edwin Albert Hickox woke to a warm June dawn with his heart so heavy with longing that he felt it would surely break. Beside him, under a black silk sheet, Vikki slept curled around a black pillow. From her open red lips dripped a thin line of saliva that damply darkened the silk to it's deepest black. A cut of fuzzy light slipped in from beneath the window blind to lay between them like a panel of light from under a closed bedroom door.

For ten seconds Edwin stared at the white alarm clock without seeing it.

Finally: "E. A., please turn off the alarm." In a fit of bleached hair, Vikki rolled over and he snapped the alarm off.

Ed rose slowly. His knees hurt him as badly as if it was raining but the dream still hung about him, leaving him so warm he might have just stepped out of a heated pool. If Ed had been a different sort of man, a softer man who wasn't an Ironworker, he would have buried his hands in his face and wept. Briefly Ed thought about recapturing the world of his dream by slitting his wrists. That idea, ridiculous and sissified, woke him enough to propel him to the bathroom.

In the heat and grey noise of Vikki's shower Ed tried to keep the feelings of dream from slipping away. He soaped his greying crew-cut and like a Ironworker climbing on to a new job, reviewed the beams and girders of the dream.

His soul, and the soul of a girl named Gabriella, had inhabited the body of a young girl in what seemed to be Hungary about the beginning of the twentieth century. It was as if they were in some manner separate entities and yet they

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were each fuller and no more separate than the right and the left hand, or the eyes and the heart. In the hot shower Ed rinsed his hair and longed with all his halfheart to be warm and whole again. He soaped his hard body.

Their soft body, the girl who was them, had been noble born and a captive. She was watched by an older woman of high birth and lived in the style that she had been born to in the wing of a brocade estate. The dream had opened in a walled garden. The two of them, as the girl, were sitting on a stone bench near a vine covered, thick stone wall knowing that someplace beyond their hearing armed men on horses approached the estate. They (she) were sad and afraid. A battle had gone badly for their keepers and their life (her life) would end in the garden before the fleetest rider could storm the walls. The stern keeper freed the dogs into the garden. She leaped to her feet and tried to flee. The dogs were large, fast and powerfully jawed. There was no place to run.

Ed rinsed, turned off the shower and picked up a towel from the floor. He wiped the fog from the mirror over the sink. The mirror fogged again in seconds. He dried himself.

In the dream, death had not been painful. Lives sped past leaving no more of a memory than a shadow leaves a fossil in clay. The dream separation hurt. Ed's heart felt the same. Half-empty, full of longing as real and tangible as Vikki's red, stiff towel. Time had passed in the dream like a man wandering on a bare plain deep in snow. This was the time he lived in now, even in waking.

Dry, Ed shaved by touch in front of the misty mirror.

They had come together again. It was spring in a time when the sky was a deep polluted yellow-orange. And this sky was above some barely fertile valley and the joy that raptured his dreamheart spilled over his face and so those that knew him in this time feared for his sanity. Gabriella/Edwin was whole and powerful. He (they) were

surging internal joy songs when the alarm had woke him and brought back his life.

Vikki was asleep on top of the sheet when Ed returned to dress. He pulled on his old shorts and jeans and sat in her oak captain's chair to put on his socks and heavy work boots. Her pale white skin outlined her clearly in the shadows. Ed's gaze rested on the large, dark mat of pubic hair nestled in the white valley of her warm thighs. At thirty-one she was exactly ten years younger than him. Vikki "Tiger" Krysl was a good actress and didn't seemed to be plagued with the ambition he'd always associated with that craft.

Dressed, he sat in the dark bedroom that stank of her French cigarettes. The black walled room was trimmed in Chinese red. On the wall over her bed which lay on the floor, was a framed poster of a slasher film that Vikki'd had a bit part in when she was a teenager. She was one of the tiny blonde girls deep in the background by a little faded lake. She was not noticeably attractive then, nor was she now. Her pale white skin and her dark, bored eyes were her best features and she could, when the mood struck her, vamp or puppydog him with charm, but she was not what Ed would call cute or even really pretty.

This morning, in this dim bedroom where daylight, like love, rarely came, Vikki seemed less real, more unknowable than Gabriella, a kid who worked at Fat Fred's Faster Food. A Spanish girl with pale brown skin to whom he'd never said more than, "Extra tomatoes please."

Ed called a Yellow Cab and let himself out. He waited for the cab just inside the Gothic stone doorway of Vikki's apartment building. He'd waited there, in the shade of the grey arch, two days a week for the last nine months. This morning the cab came early, taking him away from the bums sleeping in the doorway, but not removing from him the awful longing he felt as the true feel of the dream slipped away, lost to wakefulness and to the light of the day.

Ed ordered the cabby to take him to Fat Fred's. Normally he'd have eaten steak and eggs at the Old Town Table, but normally he didn't feel like weeping when he left Vikki's bed.

Fat Fred's was closed. The red and yellow building with pastel paint cartoon characters smiling from its dark windows sat still, cool, and empty in the skeletal shadows of the great building being erected across the street. What had he expected, Ed wondered. Had he expected the girl to be waiting for him?

Ed shaded his eyes with his hand and looked across the street at the half-finished sky scraper. The sun was peeking above the eighteenth floor, the last floor with finished outer walls. Forty-nine naked floors of beams and girders rose into the morning sky and cast vast, vague angled shadows over him and the squat red and yellow fast food restaurant. Ed lowered his eyes and crossed the nearly empty street to the construction sight and the coffee shed.

Stump Smith, a fat kid with thick glasses and a long, limp pony tail sat by the coffee pot. "Look's like a good day E. A." Stump said and handed Ed a cup of fresh coffee in a paper cup.

"Yeah." Ed look up at the tin ceiling. "No rain, no wind."

The young Bolter-Upper nodded. He was not used to being alone with the head foreman and he did not quite know how to enlarge this contact. "Those boys on the 67th story are move'n right along." Stump ventured.

"Yeah...that they are." Ed sipped his coffee, but before Stump could find the right volley to lob back, three Mohawks staggered in.

The Ironworkers saw Ed and drew up sober. Jack Pinto Mare, the tallest and meanest of the Mohawks grinned and said. "You're here right damn early E. A.."

"You three drunk?" Ed asked already knowing they were.

"Hell we're high on steel E. A.." Walter Buffalo Man kind of giggled.

"Shit E. A., you know how it is." Pinto Mare said, not unfriendly. He waved toward the tin ceiling. "So when we get a little fresh air, we'll be just fine."

Ed nodded real slow. "You three go out and finish your drinking. But you come in again like this and you're fired."

Jack Pinto Mare's pocked, leather face smiled wide. "Mighty Indian of you A E."

Jimmy Two Owls slurred. "White guy could get killed deader than a son-o-bitch up on the steel." Jimmy's eyes were laughing, red and drunk. Jack Pinto Mare's smile hovered toward a smirk.

Ed rose, handed Stump his coffee and hissed, "Two Owls, you get the hell off this site before I kick your ass so bad the devil won't want the goddamn left overs."

Jack Pinto Mare laughed and swung fat, scowling Jimmy Two Owls out the shack's door. "Tomorrow morning E. A.." He said following Buffalo Man and Two Owls out.

Ed nodded and closed the door. Stump handed Ed his coffee back and said, "Ya know, for what it's worth, I like working with them guys a lot better than those women The Man had to hire."

Ed nodded slow as always. He wondered why the punk imagined his opinion was worth a fart in a high wind. Without looking at the kid, he said. "These are modern times Stump. We don't get paid to like them." He drank the coffee and headed to the trailer that was the office.

After picking up his hard hat and the orders for the day, Ed joined a crew of Ironworkers and made his way up to the sixtieth floor. There he helped himself to a cup of coffee and talked the day's work over with Susan Compo, the union rep, Earl Jones, his leadman, and big Sam "The Man" Kaminsky their supervisor.

When the briefing was over Kaminsky took Ed aside and

said, "E. A., did I see three of your men leaving here this morning?"

"You might have." Ed conceded.

"You fire them?" Sam tilted his hard hat back on his head and showed wisps of white hair.

"I sent them home for the day." Ed saw more of his men get off the elevator and make their way to the coffee. The men were all Mohawks.

Sam shook his big head, he wasn't happy. "Do you know how goddamn far behind we are?"

Ed looked across the plank floor of the skyscraper to where his Ironworkers were standing. A gentle breeze stirred the dust. "I know how far behind we are and how much we've run over cost Mr. Kaminsky."

"Goddamn it E. A.! Those bean counters in the office are eating me a new asshole!" Sam tossed his coffee on the rough flooring and spat.

Ed turned his head to meet his boss's eyes. "I...am not ...sending drunks up to work high steel Mr. Kaminsky."

"Goddamn it to hell E. A....." Sam shook his head and sighed. "Hell, everyone drinks on the job. Even I do once in awhile." Sam looked out over the city seven hundred and twenty feet below. "They just work a little slower that's all."

Ed shrugged.

Sam barked a laugh. "I fired a carpenter yesterday for bringing his girlfriend up to the twelfth floor. He wanted to show her the view." Sam grinned at Ed and slapped his back. "The view from the twelfth floor! Can you imagine that?"

Ed nodded and smiled in spite of himself. "A carpenter's a lot easier to replace than an Ironworker." He sipped his coffee. They both knew Ed meant foreman instead of Ironworker. "If that's all you got to say Mr. Kaminsky, I'm going to erect some steel."

"Yeah, go to it E. A., but," Sam paused and he wasn't

smiling, not even a little, "the next time you send them boys to me and I'll decide if they're fit to work."

Up on the sixty-seventh story the men were beginning to work and the noise of the hammers drowned out the loudest shouts. Ed nodded curtly and turned to join his men on the high steel.

The sky above them was the blue of a butane flame. To the northeast Ed saw black clouds on the horizon like the dark outriders of a fleet. A fleet of black anvils a mile high, angry and powerful as Jesus entering the temple with a flail. Ironworkers built in heat and cold, but never rain. Rain was why they were behind. Rain was why they were over cost, but drinking was why Ed had lost four men over the side on this job.

As the morning passed Ed forced himself to ignore his dream like he ignored his dirty laundry or the dishes in the sink. When he wasn't thinking of the job or checking the sky, he did not let his mind wander. He thought about his late wife, dead two years now, and how they'd planned to buy a summer place in Maine this year. He thought of his daughter Ann and remembered, with a smile, how she'd brought him a copy of lonely hearts ads--only she called them person-to-person ads--and a black and white kitten last Fall. "It's time you meet someone daddy." She'd said, bouncing little Shara on her knee. Ed had felt so much love in his heart for her and his grubby granddaughter that he couldn't say no and they'd spent a Sunday morning at his kitchen table with a red ink pen circling smudged little ads while Shara had slept or played with the kitten.

In the end Ed had answered one of the ads, though it was one they had not circled. It had read: Tall, cool actress in a black dress, looking for generous gentleman to pay my rent.

They'd met in a little Italian restaurant on the lower east side. Vikki had worn a black dress and she had looked real nice without being cute or beautiful. He'd told her he

was an ironworker and she'd informed him that she was in a play named called ON EDGE. If they came to an "agreement" (she'd said the word with a nice smile), they would have to get together on her nights off. Ed nodded and she went on; her rent was fifteen hundred a month and he'd have her company twice a week. He could stay the night if he wanted, and she added with a nice/naughty smile, but no sex in the morning. He'd smiled back and Vikki put her fork down and said, "Oh yes, I'm gay, so this can't go anywhere and if you start thinking that it will, I'll call it off."

It dawned on Ed that the deal was somehow done and he hadn't noticed when. Ed nodded slowly.

"And," Vikki said brightly. "You must bring me gifts." She forked a white scallop to her grinning red lips.

Ed shook his head slowly. He could see where this might get out of hand. "Seventeen hundred a month. No presents."

To his surprise she'd laughed and mimicked him right down to his slow head shake. "Yes, presents." Vikki did him perfectly and when seeing himself on her face shocked Ed, she mirrored his astonishment. Herself again, she said. "I don't care if it costs a dollar. You have to bring me something once a week. You have to." She looked for a scallop, found one and forked it. "Think of me as a real person all the time." She popped the scallop into her mouth. She chewed and Ed waited until she was ready. "That's why you'll do it at my place." She swallowed and grinned nice. "You know A. E..."

"That's E. A., Miss."

"E. A.," She nodded mimicking him a again. "...I've stole the costume of almost every role I've played."

Surprised, Ed looked up from his spaghetti. "You must have a pretty full closet."

"I do." She agreed with satisfaction.

The first night Ed brought her a quart of milk and a box of graham crackers. Vikki had laughed and they'd watched TV

and eaten them, before going to bed.

In bed they'd started slow. The first thing she'd taught him was to use his index finger for foreplay instead of his middle finger. Women do it this way. It's better, she said. Other than that, Ed did what he usually did and she seemed to respond. When she climaxed it was as if she'd stuck her finger in a light socket. He followed her in seconds and after they'd rolled apart and she had fired up one of her nasty French cigarettes, he'd said real slow, "You must be a pretty fair actor."

Vikki giggled. "I closed my eyes."

"Oh." He got the picture. "You must be real popular."

"Uh-huh." She said and then she took his hand and made it alright by sighing. "You straights have it lucky."

"How come?" He turned his head to her and watched her cigarette smoke cloud toward the ceiling.

She smiled and opened one sleepy eye. "Straights can both screw at the same time."

The next week Ed brought her silk sheets and pillow cases. Their black color matched her bedroom walls.

At eleven thirty Ed left his leadman in command and went down to the ground. He stopped in front of Fat Fred's Faster Food and called Vikki from the pay phone.

She answered on the second ring. "Hi. You up?" He asked.

"Barely. What's up A. E.?" Her voice sounded strong, but a little rusty from sleep.

"Uh...I want to give you next weeks present."

"Yeah?" Her voice had lost it's rust, but didn't shine.

"Yeah. Here's what you gotta do..."

Ed told Vikki to dress in a plaid shirt, old blue jeans, work boots and a jean jacket. They were clothes she had used to play a Lumber Jill three years ago. Then he gave her Fat Fred's address and went back across the street and picked up a spare hard hat and a heavy leather work belt with tools strung on it. At Fat Fred's the line had been short and he

was waited on at the middle cash register by a fat, young black girl with buck teeth. Gabriella was working the far-right register which had the longest line. When Ed placed his order, he glanced casually at Gabriella who had her back to him filling three drink cups. She turned and saw he was wearing a white hard hat and holding a blue one. She smiled as if that were silly. Ed smiled back and she shot a glance at his name tag and said. "Hunting for more help Mr. Hickox?"

"Always." He nodded real slowly, but he did not smile. She turned back to the Mohawks who were trying to pretend that they hadn't taken lunch early and that their boss was not standing right next to them.

Ed took his Fast Fish, Fat Fries, and Cool Cola to an empty table where he couldn't see the counter but where could see a cab pull into the parking lot. Watching the parking lot fill, Ed ate the food without tasting it. Hunting for more help Mr. Hickox? He thought Gabriella's words over and over and savoring them each time until, like gum over-chewed, they tasted like rubber. The Mohawks left and Vikki arrived without him noticing.

"Earth to E. A.? Earth to E. A.?" Vikki laughed and slid in beside him.

"Oh, hi." Ed mumbled, handed her the hard hat and heavy leather belt. "Put this on."

With a little frown Vikki took them and looked Ed in the eye. "This is not what I call a well-thought out gift E. A.."

"Come on." Ed Grinned. "You'll remember this the rest of your life." He rose and she followed him outside and across the busy street.

They took the elevator to the sixtieth floor and the stairs to the sixty sixth floor. There Ed walked her to a ladder that would take them to the sixty seventh floor.

Vikki grabbed his arm and said. "What's going on E. A.?" She was looking down, and her face didn't look healthy.

"Don't look down. And," He took her hand from his arm and put it on a rung. "Hold this. No one," He grinned, "holds onto the foreman. Now close your eyes and climb."

On the top floor he strapped her to a beam and said, "Look at the view. We're eight hundred and four feet above the ground."

"Oh my sweet Jesus." Vikki whispered. A few men, coming back from lunch, filed past them. The sun went behind a small cloud and the ironworkers tilted their faces to the dark sky. Vikki looked down and saw far below the shadows of the little clouds race across the tiny city. "Oh my god." She whispered again. The sun came out from behind the cloud and lit up her blonde hair where the hard hat didn't cover it.

Ed thought her hair looked like a halo and that she was, just then, really beautiful. He nodded. "It does take some getting use to."

More ironworkers streamed past them walking nonchalantly on the broad rust colored steel beams. Vikki followed the men with her eyes. "They're like cats! They're like fucking cats!"

Ed smiled proud. "Yeah and when the first rain drop falls they're gonna scat quicker than cats." He noticed a box of soft bolts next to a Bolter Upper and cursed the man under his breath. The son-of-a-bitch had probably run out of hard bolts and was too lazy to haul up another load.

Before he could move Vikki asked, "Are you divorced E. A.?"

He shook his head. The fool was loading the soft bolts. "The wife was killed in a car wreck. A cement truck hit her Nissan head on."

"Wow, that must have messed her up pretty bad."

He nodded. "Yeah."

Vikki squeezed his arm. "Did it mess you up, too?"

"Yeah." He twisted his sunburned face to her pale one. The rising wind gusted and something below them clattered

lazily against a beam. It made a hollow sound like a horse's hoof on steel. Ed swung his gaze down to see what had been left unsecured, but Vikki "Tiger" Krysl looked straight up as if the sound came from the sky and in looking into the sun as a great black clouds bit it, lost her sense of balance and to regain it, she looked straight down the two and two thirds football fields to the rocks and dirt.

Vikki's heart tried to jump out her throat. She grabbed his arm and shrieked into the cool wind. "ED!"

"Hang on a second Vikki. I gotta have a word with that fuck up."

"No! Don't you dare leave me!" She gripped his arm as tight as she could.

Ed peeled her hand off with ease and patted her arm. "It'll just take a second and you're strapped on."

Ed danced over to the Bolter-Upper and gave him a quick, ugly, ass-chewing. The man played dumb and spat out off the steel beam.

When Ed got back to Vikki she gripped his arm and hissed. "You lousy son-of-a-bitch! You brought me up here to show off, didn't you?"

"No," Ed could not understand why she was so furious. "I thought you'd like the v..."

"Screw you!" She cut him short. Her fingers dug into his upper arm. "You thought I'd see you prance around up here and I'd gush; 'My Hero!' and say 'Gee E. A., why don't you just move in with me you â€œÇÑ, brave, strong man.'"

Stunned and hurt, Ed stammered, "V-vikki I-I just thought you might like the view."

"SCREW YOU!" She screamed and his men turned from setting up and stared at them. "You're just a goddamn trick mister! That all you are and all you'll ever be!"

Ed unsnapped her safety line from the beam. Vikki's eyes shot wide. "Now I'm gonna walk you back down that ladder we just came up. " A rain drop splattered on his hard hat. Ed

didn't look up. "Now try not to freeze up `cause we're calling it a day and you'll bottle neck these guys trying to get down."

Visibly shaken and seething with fury, Vikki nodded and they made their way down to the sixty sixth floor. At the head of the stairs Ed collared an Indian and said. "See that this lady gets out okay."

"Sure thing, E. A.." The Mohawk grinned.

As Ed turned his back he heard the man say. "Up close you're pretty cute."

Ed heard Vikki respond, "Say big guy, you eat pussy?"

The Mohawk flustered. "Uh!?...Yeah...sure."

As she started down the stairs Vikki tried to snicker, but her voice nearly cracked. "Great. We got something in common. So do I."

Ed waited until the last ironworker was down and climbed back up to the top floor. He'd just stepped onto the beam when the storm broke like an artillery barrage. Ed was soaked to the skin in seconds, but he stood there until he saw Vikki's light blue jacket bob across the yard and disappear into Fat Fred's Faster Food.

He thought for a second that he heard hoof beats in the distance. He cocked his head and concentrated. No, if something had been loose, it had blown away. There were no sounds but those of the storm. Slowly, carefully, he walked back to the ladder. As soon as he lifted his foot the storm washed away his foot print from the water on the rust colored steel. Ed had a long way to go before he got both feet on the light, brown earth and he needed to go slow.

