

Speak Softly, Tricky Man

by Kevin Hunter

Snow fell against the windows casting shadows that danced like fireflies or flame—he couldn't make out which for sure. He'd tumbled from balcony to balcony, the snow calming with the winds and gently falling, now.

His thick gray beard was mottled with dust and tire-washed snow and dirt, yet he found the occasion palatable, considering. To his own surprise he was—having finally landed for good—somewhat content. Nevertheless, his pale luminescent skin shown brightly in the night and his veins scurried like blue worms from the inescapable frigid air. He could still remember with some general haze, enjoying the feeling of their squirming, squiggling and dancing up and down his arms and stomach. He'd show them to children perceptive enough to notice his effervescent presence, gaining a laugh or maybe a smile before their parents wondered about that peculiar gentle breeze or incessant tickle. But now he was alone and whenever the winds howled he felt his bones knock painfully and became keenly aware of his skeletal frame.

For some time, he'd hung onto the railing to prevent himself the embarrassment of falling in the snow, yet he felt this was inevitable. He remembered few things specifically, but everything generally and as it came to him by the tip of his tongue. He knew that though once his great wings could lift his foundation and project solid balance, that now those wings were tattered and torn; old, decrepit and miserable through time. It was why he'd fallen, he assumed though could not exactly say. They drooped, unbalanced and were held up with great effort—or skill, as he'd rather think of it. He knew he had not always had those wings and recognized the pain on his back as the point of their original sudden protrusion. He also knew that he was lost.

His naked body shivered in the deep snow; so he schemed to protect his feet by dancing about while gently caressing his prided

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ears with his wings yet could not help but wince with every vain brush. Those once luminary feathers of which he'd recalled being proud were now grey and black and fell against the snow, one after the other, as easily discernible as blood onto ice. If nothing else the sight of them depressed him and made the frosted tips of his fingers seem to bleed just the little more, and his face tingle just the little more intensely. He could barely be moved and barely desired it, when the balcony door opened and there arrived a small girl.

Immediately, his veins burrowed about the body, he instinctively desiring to soar through the night's sky. But with his broken wings, could muster only a gentle flap before succumbing to aching pain. Rather, he towered over the child hoping to scare her off yet felt regret instantly once she did indeed scream and did indeed cower beneath what to her was a giant winged beast and began to whimper like a frightened wet kitten. He quickly composed himself, lying down his wings and having remembered his nakedness, with a flick of the hand called away one of her blankets that had covered her and which had fallen into the snow. It rose up before the girl from the glittering wet powder and enveloped his pale chalky body. Afterwards with his wings he covered his other parts and sighed, having finally become modest.

The girl was no taller than his torso and now after that fantastic spectacle, smiled wildly. She had gapped teeth at the front, frizzy black hair, messily colored in caked reds, blues and maybe a mixture of brown and yellow, and wore a one-piece sky-blue pajamas with pictures of bunny rabbits surrounded by words he guessed were of Soviet origin. They were of a make he'd never seen and like all else there, of a quality from a different time. Moreover, she seemed all alone.

To calm her further, he stepped closer but slipped on a patch of snow, predictably and comically falling against the railing, wings stretching awkwardly against the air, hands flailing, body contorted. She could not help but laugh and laugh and laugh. He could not help but feel pain. How clumsy, he seemed, having banged his elbow against the metal bars. Blood dripped from his arm. It glistened and

warmed the snow like acid as it fell; and as he lie on the ground still partially covered by the towel for which—all things considered— he was grateful. It was embarrassing, yes and yet her laughter filled his lungs; somehow fleetingly familiar and oddly comforting. He saw a fireplace, then; felt its warmth, and heard voices from beyond thick wooden walls. Then it was gone and there was only the laughter left. It really was rare to find such a full, lovely sound.

“Wait here,” said the child, excitedly through her wide smile.

She went away, her pajamas sounding like rustling leaves in the fall. The old man fell back onto the balcony floor. He sunk into the snow; was in much pain. He decided to wait as the girl had said but wondered what for. Still, what a view he had of those thick billowing clouds; the snow; his breath; the honking horns, that slick sound of snow on rotating tires. Of life. Through all the chaos he had not taken in his unusual surroundings. These buildings that stretched so high. This balcony he lied on. It was all like magic.

Across the court and behind the many windows, silhouettes played with one another. Some came together at the head and for a moment became one amorphous, mutating blackness. Some seemed to spin round and round, their feet mixing together in harmony. Everywhere was something new to see. All the while his mind rambled on and on and on; much time passed. Eventually, he moved about less, then no longer fidgeted much at all. He could not grow hungry, but still felt those phantom pains in his stomach. He appreciated them. Days went by and then weeks, all without notice as does time typically flow by him. It had become intensely warm, yet there was the feeling of a thousand fireflies on his body, nibbling at his finger tips and face and feet and chest. He could see them in the air before his eyes, still flickering, still alive. Then at other times there was nothing.

The old man leaned his head against the side of the building and let it rest. It was almost hot and he wondered about whether there was really any need to enter that house. After some more time he remembered the girl but had lost interest in what she wished to give

him. In whatever time had passed surely she had forgotten him and thought of him as a dream or a night terror.

The wings spread open from his body nearly unconsciously and stretched about the balcony. It was truly quite comfortable and the snow was still soft and gentle. Only for a second more, he thought. Only for a little bit of rest to the bones and for a chance to dream of Lorelei. Then after some rest, he'd worry about time. His eyes began to fade in that quiet unassuming way and again he saw Lorelei over the hill, there as she always were, still so beautiful; her hair still pristine and still like gold. Still she smelled of sweet lavender. Still she spoke softly in her gentle calming whisper. Even now from so far, it was as though her lips were by his ears. He imagined her nibbling on them again as before; finally telling him in his favorite ear where to find her. Her wings were still as the purest ocean, blue and clear and she called out to him, now. But no sound came forth. He was left only with the longing for her voice, the foreshadowing sense of fading time and the frantic motions of ever distant lips in panic. Lorelei! Lorelei. Lorelei? She was soaring away across the sky still so far away. He would not make it, he thought, as he drifted in and out through time.

Suddenly, then, a knock came at the door.

His eyes opened slowly.

But no-one was there.

Refilled with life but quickly growing panicked, he got up and tugged and tugged at the door. He bashed at it loudly but still nothing and no one and in the process slipped and fell into the cold snow again noticing the little kitten staring at him with her large blue eyes, snickering and shaking her head slowly back and forth as if to say, "You are an odd old thing. An impatient one at that."

"Open the door," he pleaded. "I am cold and tired."

She did not answer, only staring, her hands holding something behind her back.

Showing her his wounds, he begged, "Let me in! I am bleeding."

She would not do it. She inhaled like a bloated puffy fish and took from behind her back a case of bandages, opening the door and

throwing them before the man before closing the door again. The girl laid a hand against the door and shook her head slowly back and forth. There still was something hidden behind her.

"I can't do anything with this," he said."

"Where is your mother? How long have you waited?"

"Where is momma?" she asked confusedly.

"Yes," he replied. "Go and wake—"

"Where is she!?" screamed the girl, stomping her feet.

Quickly her interrupting, sudden shrill voice jostled him and the snake-like veins pulsed unthinkingly and wild. His wings tick, tick, ticked up like clockwork. His chest undulated. Outstretched, his wings were the width of the balcony. Mist rose from the freshly dripping blood. Those eyes held no sympathy for him from behind the glass door and so his sudden agitation dug deeper. He noticed himself growing weaker and with every second more filled with fear. It was not just the cold or being stranded. He had fallen out of time and space and continued to fall uncontrollably back and forth. Had barreled through decades from place to place in search of Lorelei and for his efforts had nothing but broken bones and sickly wings. A storm broiled and blackened. It gurgled, boiled and crashed like waves against his mind turning previous calm into dull desperation.

"What is your name?" He asked, plainly. " And what year?"

The girl stamped her feet again, slamming her hands against the glass. His hands grabbed the door handle and rocked it with all his force. Those great wings came against the doors like war drums. The balcony shook. All the while, the old winged man roared loudly as a cornered dying animal. "If you do not open this door, child," it bellowed. "I will rip you apart with my bare hands! And feed on you; and leave nothing for your mother or father to find!"

But she was unperturbed. She stomped her feet again, shaking her head in a disappointed manner and turned off the porch lights leaving him in intense blackness.

From that absence of light branched out a pitiful bright blue luminescence. She stood in awe and fear. His large eyes sunk into near nothingness and the man collapsed, huddling upon the door

closer barely within the dim light projected from inside. His wings drooped as a scolded dog's ears.

The light which once coursed through his veins now resided solely in his tiny pupils, and his skin was dead and grey. Those lights flowed fixed, diminutive like flickering beams into the focused eyes of the girl.

"Do not leave me in the dark..." he whimpered. "I am only afraid. Please let me in."

"I might die," he said, though he did not know what death meant for him.

The girl smiled sadly.

Then she almost seemed to disappear, the door locking behind her, the curtains turned and soon the lights went out in the bedroom.

The drooping wings, he held up with one arm, and with his other, the towel which hung clumsily from his wiry body. Through the snow he dragged his feet. But the process took an energy he barely possessed. Through the effort his body arched as he slowly slogged. In the darkness two fixed lights calmly danced, rhythmically, equidistant and in synchrony with the sounds of displaced snow. In this way he walked. Once more he touched the balcony door, then, defeated, sat himself in his dark corner. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall and felt his mind drift again through time, remembering, finally, why he had fallen.

