

Manhattan Love Stories

#5: Suicide Birds (sic)

by Kyle Hemmings

Zin and I are standing in an alley behind a church converted to the nightclub-Happy Judas. Behind stained-glass windows, there's an occasional flickering of addiction. "I'm tired of holding the sun," says Zin with black eyeliner and bone earrings, in fishnets with tiny eyes.

I look for the boy we met inside the club, the one who claimed he loved playing with matches, setting fire to churches. I spot him smoking a cigarette, standing so cool against the side of the club, like he might be the nephew of some Viking guitarist hung up on perfect fifths and palm-muted riff. He's missing a pinky.

The matchstick boy gives us the devil horn with his free hand, and says, Oh yeah, the guy with the split lip and the ghost girl from Swedish summer nights. Excuse my Netflix eye, but your girl's got some mean curves. She reminds me of someone. I never get that lucky anymore."

"Look," I say, " we need a favor. Could you marry us? Then set us on fire. We'll pay you."

From across the river, I hear the sound, the grumble of the Insect People. They work the graveyard shift and beyond, pulling things to under, stuffing crumbs of lives into plastic bags for pocket-savvy consumers.

"It's like this," says Zin. "We're in love, Beatle-Boy and me. But marriage would only kill us. I mean, isn't it what real time does? Slows down your life and makes you miss pedal points and hooks. So marry us, man, and set us on fire."

I pay the matchstick boy and he marries us with several false starts, a sticky tongue, some striking spaces. His eyes are all about Zin and some old hurt, maybe never to be remembered as a lesson. Zin and I kiss, our bodies a cradle, a soft blanket. Matchstick boy looks away then sets himself on fire. Up in smoke. Zin cries in the high pitched wail of a Grade Z slasher flick.

We carry his ashes to the river.

"Maybe I should join the Insect People," says Zin. "Live on the dark throne of his remains and drink 24-hour rat poison coffee. He reminded me of somebody who never left. Canned love? Voices in a jar? I can't sleep on sharp stones. Tonight is another country."

"Isn't it true, " I say, "that every girl, from uptown to Panic Park, from Soho to Stockholm, has under their bed a tin can Harry, echoing in tritones, heart of springs?"

She says nothing. Only looks into the water reflecting blank night, melting stars in the shape of radioactive bananas.

On the banks of the river, I am tense as a chord, in the heart of suspicion, 350 beats per minute, as I look sideways at my dying bride.

