

Edju 37 and 38

by RW Spryszak

37.

The shadows have eyes. And gleaming teeth, yellow with sin. Ill at ease with the light. A child's nightmare brought forth in a cup.

All I want to do now is get back to my rooms. My two bowls. A bed I understand. The government seems to have fallen and no one is watching anymore. I want to kneel on bleeding legs before the shrine of Saint Polycarp of Smyrna. Holy stabbings and locks of hair dripping sweet toxic blood from my shoulders in the quiet of my sanctum. A rose of thorns around my head like the boy itself.

Extrapolating the flagellating acolyte

I am wary since the news of the fighting and the sudden shots. And these shadows want only to include you in their game. They seek the livery and the stone like a rocket. It doesn't matter if you desire this inclusion or not. Their imperative is gold in the teeth and the sizzle of electrum. It is unstoppable. Irresistible, and smells of oversweet cologne. These dark rings cannot imagine a life outside of their sign posts and debris. The power is always near. It watches from the shade. You cannot escape it. One must never get too comfortable. There are enough eyes to fill the spontaneous road.

Jacinto, Alice and I are the new serving in their dinners.

I have nowhere to go, he says, whimpering. Since the boss doesn't come around and there's no food left, like I said.

I'm permitting you to come then, says I. But keep to your own side of the road. You are too tall. As tall he was. Seven feet, he said once long ago beneath my window, all owed to his diet. And did I want an egg?

No, I put a finger to my lips. What is that sound?

We stop. I set Alice down and Jacinto leans into the wind. There is a rustling in the leaves, dead on the roadside since the last freeze. I crumble some to dust with my foot, fascinated by the multicolored powder they make. Gold and red and most of it brown. Some yellow.

Someone is watching, Jacinto says, still leaning. I would know that sound anywhere.

And I have been suspicious of the same. But we are twelve steps closer to the town that once depended on my timekeeping. Three quarter. Full stop. Treble o'clock. But there are no moving parts. No swaying bodies. It is treeless, and all the houses are white. They are white until they blur blue in the stark sun that pierces through the dead mantle sky.

Where is everyone. I ask.

He quits his leaning and does not answer. Instead he shrugs his shoulders and says I have a lantern in my cellar if you want to stop for it. But if we are going to your rooms I wouldn't tarry too long here. I can hear the watching.

They gaze at us through a green crystal propped upon a chalklike rock that was once a cornerstone of the old walls. Soldiers at the ready.

We're no threat to them, I complain.

If you are not them you are the other. It's in the Constitution now. Didn't you know? Jacinto's voice is getting deeper as he speaks. I pick Alice off the ground and Jacinto holds an egg in his hand. He tilts his head back and breaks the egg with his thumb and fingers. Breaking it in half as if a master chef in a bowl. The clear pus and the yellow-orange ball slither into him like snakes. It is getting close to midnight. And at midnight all will be shadow and the world will be theirs.

Jacinto bids us to his house. We should stay until dawn and not travel the night, he warns. I take my finger away from my lips and follow him. But before we go in it is obvious to me that we have also entered the maze. In the dim I can't make out the directions and hitches to the walls. It had been a clear path from the crumbling church into town. But now, from his porch, I can't tell the way forward. I point at the high walls on three sides of us and begin to speak. But before I can make the first sound Jacinto pulls Alice and me into his foyer where the butlers take my coat.

We stay the night here. His voice is commanding and square. Someone hands me a cup of water.

There are bright lights down a yellow hall. Unoccupied niches in the walls, making a long and empty hallway. He sees me studying the empty shelves.

You are wondering where the saints are, no doubt.

Yes, I hand the bag with Alice to a footman in a red lacquered coat. The niches are rather sudden in their emptiness.

We do not know, he stares at them as well. I can see his face turn away from me as if to hide his crying. He becomes almost inaudible. We do not know. A rippling sigh escapes his throat. It came from deep in his chest as if the inside man wants to cry but the outside man refuses.

He is facing away as he explains. His voice is calm and careful now. Wanting to savor every detail. To massage every nuance. And to make sure I can hear him over the hammering that starts somewhere upstairs.

I suppose I must have done something sinful. I have always loved the church. That church was where my parents conceived me. It was where I was born, and baptized. I suckled the statue Mary's nipple when my mother ran away. I have been so careful to do the right things. Make the right propitiations. Place my coins in the correct slots. Light the right candles. Sift the red sand. Make sure I touch my left shoulder first. Never let anyone see my privates. I thought I was doing everything right. And that, in exchange, God would protect me. He said so. And the priest said it too. But it didn't work. I woke up one night and the doors were slamming back and forth in the wind and all the saints were gone. I was careless. So I went back to the church. The boss said, yes there is work you can do. He said, a new bellringer is going to arrive and he will need to eat. Do this in penance and perhaps God will return the saints to you.

Did you have many, I asked.

I had Columba and the Witch of Exeter.

This astonished me. I'd seen the statue of the Witch but only ever heard rumors of the statue of St. Columba. There are only three known of Columba, I said. And you had one of them?

Yes. It was a long-standing prized possession in this family. My father brought it back from Jakarta in the last century. Some say it came there with the original Portuguese explorers to ever reach those shores. I must have done something sinful.

I'd heard one of those statues sold for almost half a million dollars at auction.

Yes. And the patina on mine was original to the final percent. At auction I think it would have been worth at least 700,000.

We settled in a nook beside an orange lamp and talked into the early morning about the rarity of certain relics. The value of statues. The hierarchy of saints. Celestial cells where the holiest of dead hermits make their final rest. The hammering upstairs receded beneath our awareness. It melted to nothing as we shared our love of these things.

They are building a catapult anyway, he said at one point. Deep in the smallest hours, ticking unheard in the immortal steam. It is of no interest to me.

38.

Jacinto and I will make excellent friends, I told myself as we went to sleep near dawn. So long as he obeys and remembers that he is still a servant.

I promise to let him choose two or three of my saints to fill his plundered niches. I have plenty, I tell him, and you shouldn't have these empty cubbies all along the hall. There's something untoward about it. I have plenty of saints in my apartment. He seems to relish the idea. The bare niches have only fed his nascent loneliness. It is the least I can do.

After a day of rest, we set out the following morning with full gear and Alice. He filled his red bowl with more eggs. We stepped out, confident in the morning cool. That one moment before sunrise when the houses and trees are a hundred shades of blue. And only

blue is the world. All that was missing was birdsong. I fear they have all gone missing. Fed up with the fighting to return to their primordial manners and secret trees. Secret trees where no mere human can find them. It's the price we pay for our way of life. Nature being a zero sum game.

But to make our way away from the church we must play the maze. It has us going along a wide curving wall that cuts some houses in two. Jacinto pointed as he explained. Inside that one you must walk three miles back that way to get from the kitchen to the dining room. They eat their meals cold now, he says. And milk spoils in the glass from room to room.

This is the new world, I shrug.

People can get used to anything, he shrugs me back.

Curving along we make our way down the street. Three dead ends and a porcelain cave filled with music. This is how we defeated the invaders generations ago. Our little island in the middle of the North Sea. Windswept heather and thistle. Cod at every meal. Six hours to cross the street because of a wall. It is our heritage, and the fascists play it to full effect.

But what is this fighting, I ask again. Unsteady with the occasional flare and pump of automatic fire unseen beyond the rooftops. Is it ambush? Who is there?

There has been a backlash, he rubs his nose. The blue shirts have pushed some too hard. Others never liked it, especially the red shirts. But it's the orange shirts who are fighting back. Well, he corrected himself, orange and yellow shirts. Plus a little green. And a smattering of white. But by and large orange. And yellow. Shirts.

I have no idea what he's talking about. He forgets he is a servant, and I order him to carry Alice as he is twice as big as I am, younger, and a servant. He shoulders her with the ease of the stronger youth and I am jealous. There are no complaints forthcoming from the woman whose honor I have saved. It is ingratitude to the highest degree.

I am thinking of ancient torture devices when I notice that Jacinto does not see the string. All he saw in the road was a banana. This

was an exotic and unheard of thing to him. There has not been such a thing in the country since the rebellion, he drooled. A rare relic and treat. He saw the banana. I saw the string.

And before I could warn him, he and Alice, banana and all were pulled to the side of a lean-to. I followed, in concern, to help him. But the provisional government surrounded us. Soldiers in stark gray necks with tacit underpinnings. Unconventional weapons the size of mighty hammers. And all these weapons clicked and cocked and pushed into our faces.

