

Double Knotted

According to Google his wife is already dead. She doesn't seem to agree.

She moans and puts her hands on her inflated stomach, her eyes pinched as if the light from the single bulb hanging from the ceiling of the smallest room is too much for her.

He shoves his mobile back in the pocket of his woolen vest, pinches his nose tight and stares between the legs of his wife, disappointed.

What he wanted to see was the friendly face of a Tuvalu Airlines stewardess, a warm welcome wrapped in red lipstick.

He retracts his head and let his eyes slide over the walls, desperately looking for help or answers that the Internet didn't give him.

Dozens of small cacti, drawn up as small armies are staring back at him back from a shelf. Some are wearing sombreros, one is encrusted with small colored flowers and there are two that wear a small guitar in front of there prickly belly, but they all have the same accusing look in their plastic eyelets. A bottle of tequila stands beside them. Disappointingly empty.

On another shelf a city of Delftware mills has risen. The city walls a pair of yellow clogs and some plastic tulips. On the shelf above, fifteen Brussels bladders are being emptied next to a porcelain bag of fries.

A whole lot of shelves, a whole lot of souvenirs; African and Indian elephants, shiny Eiffel Towers and Towers of Pisa - some leaning even more then others. In the corner behind the infected toilet brush stands a hard wooden penis sheath from Papua.

The back wall is pinned with postcards. Greetings from Amsterdam, greetings from Texas, cabécar to Czech, paama, velkommen, rade to Rwanda, pyen to ... and so on. There even is a sound card in Xhosa that says *click ... click, click ... clock* when you open it.

The entire space is so crammed up that it is the emptiness that stands out the most. A white, empty shelf, screaming a duet with the three-and-a-half by five inches of cork on the back wall for attention.

'Ouch. Honey, it's not working.'

'Calm down dear, just calm down.'

His wife seems even smaller in all her pain than normally. The points of her Sandals just touching the tiles, her feet swaying like slow dancing marionettes.

Sweat covers the bodies of the elderly couple. The walls are closing in. Breathing feels like being wrapped up in an old blanket that is being used to dry of a golden retriever that went for a dive in the pond.

He radiates anxiety, helplessness. She seems frozen. Blue veins cutting through her skin. Shit seeps over the inside of her legs. This is not the image he wants to remember of his wife. Sixty years of marriage delivered so many better images. Images flashing by as if he is the one who's dying; their first meeting at a Catholic dance event -she had had the hips, he the nerves to ask her- their marriage -even though their parents were against it- all those summers they traveled by camper, bus or plane to discover new destinations, the bridge events where they were especially notorious as a couple, their last holiday on Curaçao where they met The Voice. (They kept forgetting his name but were impressed with his voice that sounded like Pavarotti and B.A. at the same time.)

The Voice possessed a chic suit, an engaging smile and a good pair of ears that overheard their conversation at the croissants.

'Can I get you a croissant dear?'

'Oh, yes honey. I've just put the plate on the seat of my walker.'

'That's very clever of you.'

'Indeed hon.'

'It's a very decent breakfast, don't you think?'

'Yes, pity the orange juice isn't fresh.'

'Well, let's just enjoy it. It might just be our last holiday.

Why? I still feel like I'm in my twenties.'

'And that's how you look my dear but the problem is that our wallets are starving. '

The Voice coughed in his fist, hungry for French dough. They apologized. He accepted them. Five minutes later he, after politely asking them, joined their table. They got into an conversation and The Voice payed full attention to their stories. Attention they hadn't received from anyone in a long time except from each other. He was impressed with their wanderlust and let them know how sorry he felt they couldn't finance the last destination on their wish list; Tuvalu. So sorry, he was willing to sponsor, he said.

The help of a complete stranger, imagine that.

It was a strange proposal, though. But being able to swallow a handful of grapes by the end of the week without squashing them or damage them in any way seemed like an easy way to make some money. They both took a bunch of grapes from the breakfast table to their room and started practicing. The trick was, they discovered, to leave their teeth out. Ashen, wrinkled lips under sunken cheeks clasping green shiny grapes. A sucking and gulping sound followed. Succession.

The old man focuses on his wife again. Help and answers not found. She looks worse per heartbeat. He breaks down, his knees hit the sticky tiles and make a crackling sound. His hand finds hers. Her small, petite fingers buried in his huge knotted workers fist. He squeezes gently to let her know that he is there for her, to compensate the words that don't come. Telling her he loves her now is like giving up, like saying: follow the light woman.

'*Aaah!*' Every nerve twists at the sudden sound of Tom Jones singing the old man his once favorite tune from his pocket. Seniors mobile, extra large keys, loud ringing tone, easy Internet and a preinstalled bingo app. Ideal according to the salesman. The old man really started to hate the slick voice claiming that it's not unusual and thinks of flinging it between the legs of his wife and flush. Instead he slowly brings his trembling hand to his breast pocket in order to mute the sound. His heart beats furiously against the palm of his hand. He rests his hand there for a few seconds and finds back his breath. Without taking his eyes of his wife he grabs his mobile and brings it to his ear.

'Who's this?'

The tough tenor voice sounds: 'Did your chick lay my eggs?'

'I ... I don't know. She sits right in front of me ... She looks so pale. '

'How much time has passed since the intake.'

'Thirty-Two. Thirty-two hours.'

There is a brief silence on the other side, followed by a sigh.

'Alright, listen to me old man. I want you to tell me that you are listening.'

'I am ... I am listening.'

Charm has left the voice

'If your wife doesn't make it, do not call no police or ambulance, hear me, but call me first.

Understood? I must secure the cargo first.'

'How ... ,' but he doesn't finish his question, not sure he wants to hear the answer.

'Understood,' he replies and shoves the phone back in his pocket. Silence. Absolute silence.

The hand of his wife lays loosely in his.

Gently he starts to rub her belly, around the spot where ninety-six latex balloons full of cocaine (or eastern eggs as the voice called them) were still hiding somewhere. Double knotted, he tries to reassure himself.

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