

A FUTURE WITHOUT DUCKS

I knew something was up with old Mrs Ashes when her ducks went crazy in the morning. They were squawking, running, and trying to clear the wall, a four foot tall brick thing she'd had built around her yard long ago. She had gotten them from an Asian flea market outside town. Sometimes one would clear the wall and I'd have to chase it around my back yard, tackle it and throw it back over. Ducks bite. Her house and mine were the only ones left in the neighborhood you'd still call a modest bungalow, quite a change from Brooklyn.

I decided to ignore the racket and went in pajamas to my front porch to get some writing done.

"Jeffry. how's it going this morning?"

"Hi Mr Adams, fine. Just settling in to write. Wish those damn ducks would shut up."

"Well they might be hungry. The rescue squad took Mrs. Ashes to the hospital yesterday. Adele saw her lying in the front yard and called. Heart attack or something. Her daughter is flying out from California but thought I'd let you know to keep an eye on the place. Maybe you could throw some bread into her back yard for the ducks."

"Sorry to hear about it. Came home yesterday late and had no idea."

"Well, let's keep each other posted. That's what neighbors do." He smiled and headed back across the street. It was 1991. I'd only bought the house and moved in a few months ago and the neighbors had been none too neighborly. Many pointed

remarks about the condition of the house and little lectures on gardening and recommendations for landscapers and painters. The kind of thing Solange would have pulled. I smiled and kept my mouth shut. None of that from Mrs. Ashes, as I called her then. She was just resolutely unfriendly. She was a very old lady with a strong accent from someplace in Europe and a limited command of English. Her husband had owned a small clothing store downtown until Walmart showed up. He wisely shut it down before it drained everything he had but he didn't survive long after. She kept a beautiful yard, colorful flowers in front, raised beds for vegetables in back where she'd had a small pond dug and had an enigmatic statue of a green man, mottled with verdigris, spewing water. She had five gray and black ducks of a kind I'd never seen before. They were from Viet Nam and walked upright like geese, patrolling the garden and occasionally jumping in the pond to splash around and fight. Noisy.

I'd many times observed her feeding them from two plastic garbage cans, one with grain and one with some sort of green pellets, so I didn't hesitate to vault over the wall and throw a few scoops of each onto the oil cloth she'd staked out. I snatched a few tomatoes and jumped back to my side. I did this every morning and evening for a few days until her daughter pulled up in a rental car. She went in the house with a suitcase and then began towing out bags of garbage that probably had a ferocious stink. She saw me on the porch and came over to introduce herself.

"Hi, I'm Klara's granddaughter, Katalin Whitehall. I got in from San Diego two days ago."

"Jeffry Miller, pleased to meet you. So sorry about your grandmother. Mrs. Ashes has been a good neighbor."

“Ashes?” She smiled and showed me a piece of mail. “It’s Eszes, more or less pronounced Esses, Klara Eszes. It’s Hungarian.”

“Gosh, the whole neighborhood calls her Mrs. Ashes and she’s never corrected us.” We looked to the back as the ducks began an uproar.

“Her English has never been super good and she probably doesn’t care. Never say anything bad about Hungary, though. She and Nikola were from a little mountain village in Slovakia, a part taken over from Hungary after the First World War. They pretty much hated Slovaks, Germans, Russians and a few other nationalities you’ve probably never heard of. I think Gran just barely tolerates Americans.”

I smiled. “I kind of sensed that. But we didn’t bother each other. I’ve only been here a few months. Maybe she’d have softened up when she saw I wasn’t a mad burglar. Anyway how’s she doing?”

“She had a stroke that’s partially paralyzed her left side. They have her learning how to get around in a walker. She hates the hospital - the food, the checkups all night long. I’m going to bring her home in a few days. Unfortunately, I have to get back to San Diego.”

“Were you able to arrange some kind of home care for her?”

“Ha! Did she ever let you in her house? She thinks pretty much anybody who’s not part of her family steals or worse. No, she’s taken matters into her own hands. She contacted relatives back in Slovakia and they’re arranging to send out some young girl from the family. On my dollar, of course. Probably tends goats and milks cows. I went with Gran for a visit about ten years ago and the place could be in the Fourteenth Century. Two people in the town had cars, Moskvass that looked like they’d been driven

off a cliff. The economy was sheep, goats, and illegal stills. No school that I saw. We went to the cemetery to pay respects to people Gran knew. She pointed out that it was divided into different sections. 'That's where we buried Germans. That's where we buried Russians. That's where we bury Slovaks and Gypsies.' " A wasp buzzed angrily over our heads and got a wary look from both of us.

"We'll see who they send. Gran's so hard-bitten she can probably handle anybody but there could be a lot of language trouble, paperwork trouble, all that kind of thing. If you could give this girl some help it would really be appreciated."

"Of course. I'll do whatever I can." I explained to her how to feed the ducks and then she headed off to the hospital. She came back two days later followed by an ambulance. The attendants carried Mrs. Eszes into the house and departed. A little later Katalin knocked on my door.

"Well she's back home and not too happy about it. I don't envy that girl her job. She's supposed to arrive at the airport tomorrow in the afternoon and I'm out of here the next day. I feel awfully guilty but I have my work and family to deal with. And by the way, she thanks you for feeding her ducks. It was a big worry to her. Nasty things. They suit her. With any luck the Slovak girl will eat them. My mistake, Hungarian girl. I'm used to it being a part of Slovakia now, but it will take them another three hundred years."

I smiled, "I'll watch with interest and help what I can." Two days later her car returned with a passenger and luggage in the form of cardboard boxes held together with duct tape along with a beat up trunk. The passenger was at another level of style altogether. I was eaten by curiosity but it had to wait until the next morning.

“Mariko is almost done settling Gran in front of the t.v. I’ll introduce you.” The girl seemed to flow out the front door and down the stairs. I stared open mouthed. It was not that she was an outstanding beauty, in fact a bit the contrary. She was slim, maybe twenty at most, with bright red lipstick and clothing off a movie set - long dress, colorful blouse, and her oiled black hair burst out from beneath a bright green scarf. Her gaze seemed to bore through me as she mounted the steps to my front porch. Katalin also seemed a little taken aback by this odd apparition but quickly recovered herself.

“Mariko, I present you to Mr. Jeffry Miller. Jeffry, this is Mariko.” I was about to extend my hand but she bowed almost to the waist so I so I stooped a bit and dropped it.

I said, “I’m pleased to meet you, Mariko. I’ve only lived here a few months but I’ve known your grandmother a little. It’s good of you to come help her.”

“Hmph. Not grandmother. Grand, grand, grand Aunt. She smells. But she is number three oldest in family, so I must.”

“Uh, your English is very good. You must have been a good student in school. I’m sure it will go well here.”

“Yes, good. I learn from television. No school, no Slovak lies.”

“Well, if I can do anything . . .”

Katalin was obviously a little embarrassed. “Well, I have to be off so we’ll leave you in peace.” She gave me a look. “And thanks Jeffry.” The wasp was back, buzzing its warning. Solange would have been flapping her arms. Mariko didn’t even look up.

Three days later I was out on the porch writing. It just happened I had a hammock on the far side and a small table and chair in the corner next to Mrs. Esze’s

house where I liked to sit and write when the weather was good. Mariko came out and leaned over the railing, displaying a disturbing amount of cleavage.

“Always you sit there. You never work?”

“Well actually I am working. I’m a technical writer and three days a week I work from home.”

“Writer. Pay is good?”

“Pretty good. Better than a lot of things, not as good as others.”

“How I get this porch job? Writer?”

“Maybe not so easy for you. You have to know English really well and be good with a computer.”

“My English good. Computer, no. I need to make some money.” She gave me a hard stare. “You need haircut. I do it, five dollars.” In fact, I did need a haircut and I wasn’t that fussy about it, but I wasn’t so sure about the Count Dracula look that might eventuate. But . . . “OK, I’d like that.” She disappeared back into the house and emerged with towels, scissors, combs, and bottles. I pulled my chair safely away from my computer and employed the self-calming techniques I use at the dentist’s. She draped me with a towel and began efficiently combing and clipping. I comb my hair with a part, an almost antique style I inherited from my father. I quickly realized that was going. When she held up a mirror . . . I have black hair like Mariko’s and she had oiled it and combed it all straight back into a tiny ponytail. I was staring at an unfamiliar Italian gigolo. I had no words. I thanked her and handed her a five dollar bill.

Periodically throughout the day I'd find myself in the bathroom looking into the mirror. The next day was on site so I drove to the office. As I walked between the cubicles people glanced up and then stared.

"Hey, whoa. Jeffry got a haircut."

"It's an all new Jeffry."

"I wanna follow battleship Jeffry through the bars and scoop up the fainting women." I knew they'd get used to it in a day or so, not sure I would. I came home to Mariko working on something in the Eszes back yard near the garden shed. Next morning, I was writing on my front porch when Mariko came out her front door lugging a sign on a stake. She came over to show it to me.

"What you think?" The sign said "Psychic Reader" in large print across the top and below: Fortunes, Palms, Tarot - \$20. "I see on television. Good business in America, yes?"

"Um, yeah, maybe. I don't know much about it. The neighborhood might not like it, though."

"You like it?"

"Oh, I don't care I guess."

"Then I put up sign. I need money. Katalin give me just enough to keep her alive, none for me." She found a four pound hammer and beat the stake into the ground, pulled a couple of chairs over to the corner of the porch next to me and sat with folded arms to wait. Cars passed and a few slowed but went on. We both looked up as several crows descended on the wires in front of our houses and then spied a hawk and went

off chasing it, cawing loudly. Late in the afternoon Mr. Adams crossed the street. He looked at the sign, then up at Mariko.

“Good afternoon, miss. You must be Mrs. Ashes new caregiver.” Mariko nodded wordlessly. “Um, just to let you know, we don’t allow businesses like that in this neighborhood. I’m afraid the sign will have to come down.”

“Sign stays. Neighborhood is fine.”

“Sorry, it doesn’t work that way. We have rules and anyway you need a business license from the city.”

“Then change rules. City has plenty to do.” At this Adams glanced up at me and I shrugged. “OK. I’ll call downtown and let them handle it.”

“Anybody bother my sign, bad things happen.” It all made me smile as I reflected on the pushy treatment I had received from the property values Nazis. This was going to be fun. I reflected back to when Solange had run all over me and then run out on me. Maybe fighting crazy losing fights was part of having a spine. The next day I called in sick because I wanted to be home to see what would happen.

A car pulled up, a late model Mercedes, and a well dressed woman of about fifty emerged and tentatively mounted the stairs to Mariko’s porch. Mariko nodded to her and pointed to a chair. “Sit.” The woman carefully folded her legs and collapsed into the chair. I could see she was distressed.

“You have question?”

“I’m trying to contact my mother.”

“Hmph.” Mariko closed her eyes and seemed to fall asleep. Perhaps a minute passed and then she opened her eyes. “You hate your mother. What you want to know: is husband sexing with . . . woman who writes for him?”

“Secretary.” the woman said weakly.

“Secretary. Of course he is. Good sex for him. Buys her things. Not to worry, he is tired of her. Soon he fires her. Guilty. Buys YOU nice things. Be patient.”

The woman looked stunned. She opened her purse and laid some money on the table and descended the stairs without a word. When she was gone, Mariko picked up the money, counted it carefully, then fanned it out and showed it to me with a big smile and a wink. I laughed and gave her a thumbs up.

Late in the morning a patrol car pulled up and two young officers got out, one white, one black. They examined the sign and then mounted the stairs.

‘Hello, miss. We had a complaint about your sign from the neighborhood association. First of all, do you have a business license?’

“No. What for license? I good at this.”

“I can see you’re new here. Where are you from?”

“Slovakia. Shit place.”

“Well, here we have maybe different rules than you’re used to. You need to go downtown and apply for a business license and pay a fee. Also you need written permission from the neighborhood association.”

“I come here because America a free country. Hurt nobody, do what I like.”

“Yes, but even here we have our rules. I’m afraid we’ll have to go downtown and get an order to permanently remove the sign.”

Mariko's lip curled and she snarled out as she pointed at the officers, "You never get to downtown. Car hit by truck. Be nice to me, you live."

"Miss! Threats like that are serious and we don't appreciate it. You'll be hearing more from us." They stalked off and left. I thought of the times Solange had threatened me from a position of strength. She had the rent money, the friends.

"Phaugh!" Mariko spat on the steps. "Like Slovak police or Russians. I go in to check on Gran." The ducks set up another ruckus that echoed between the houses.

In mid afternoon a Honda Civic pulled up and a balding, middle aged man descended. He approached the porch with some hesitation, then resolutely came up the stairs. Mariko smiled at him and nodded.

"I've never done this kind of thing, and have to tell you, I don't really believe in it, but . . ."

"But you here."

"Yeah. I have a big problem I'm trying to figure out."

"Trust or not trust." He looked surprised.

"Yeah. Kind of like that." He took a seat and fiddled with his hat. "Twenty dollars?"

"Yes." He took out his wallet and gently deposited the bill on the table.

"Here goes. I own a restaurant and it's doing very well, so well that I want to open another one. I have a friend with a lot of money who wants to invest in the business. I'm just not sure. Something . . ."

"So you come to Mariko, Psychic Reader. No trust me either. Wait. I find out for you." She reached across and took his hand which startled him. Then she closed her eyes and was very quiet. "Your friend is, how you say it? Crook. He will give you money

then own both restaurants. You get nothing. Law no help.” The man extracted his hand and, much like Mariko, closed his eyes and was very quiet. Then he opened his eyes and stood.

“I don’t know the truth in this, but I’ve had my own doubts. This tips the scales. Like flipping a coin. Thanks, and have a good day.” Mariko waved the twenty at me with a triumphant smile.

“Only twenty this time.” I said in a teasing tone.

“I only save him money, not save his heart.” There was one more customer that day. The sky darkened and the wind rose as one of those sudden Midwestern thunderstorms showed on the horizon. It was a perfect atmosphere for the arrival of a delegation of five from the neighborhood committee. I could visualize torches and pitchforks. Adams spoke for them.

“Miss, were here about this illegal business your running. It’s just not acceptable in this neighborhood and we want you to stop immediately.”

“Police already here. I tell them go away. You go away too.” Melda Johnson from around the corner stepped out.

“If you don’t remove this sign, they’ll be back, we’ll see to that. In fact, we’ll pull it up right now.” She moved forward.

“Not your property! Get back on sidewalk. Now! Why you worry about my little business? You have big trouble. Storm will push big tree on your house. You should be home getting kids downstairs.”

“What! Of all the nerve. You incredible charlatan, threatening my children. Oh you’ll be seeing the police again all right.” She stormed off and the others milled around for a moment and then followed. I was laughing.

“Mariko, I love your style. Bothersome people. Well done. But that bit with the tree and her kids, she won’t let that go.”

“Yes she will.” Later that night the storm came over us, a real gully washer with a lot of wind. Even the ducks shut up. The next morning was clear and I got in the car and drove to work. As I came to the Johnson house, I saw fire trucks. A huge oak had toppled over from the back yard and most of the second floor of the house was crushed.

I leaned out the window and asked one of the firemen, “Anybody hurt?”

“No. They were really lucky. Everybody was downstairs.” I nodded and went on. I pulled the local paper from a news stand by my office and was not surprised to read that two officers were in serious condition after their vehicle had collided with a Fed Ex van. Mariko’s business continued unmolested for the next week.

I was out front trying to work, daydreaming about Solange. I’d gotten a short e-mail from her asking how I was. I hadn’t responded. A shiny black limousine pulled up in front of Mariko’s porch and a man in a green sports jacket got out. I recognized the hair style, oiled hair slicked back. His polished shoes clicked on the sidewalk as he approached the house. Mariko was inside. He knocked and waited. After a few minutes and a second and third knocking, Mariko opened the door. I couldn’t hear the exchange but they were obviously arguing. The man was trying to persuade Mariko of something and she was vigorously refusing. Finally she slammed the door in his face. He glanced

over at me perplexed, then descended the stairs, crossed over the lawn, and came up on my porch. I could swear I could see his footprints in withered grass.

“Good morning Mr. Miller. Such a beautiful day we have.”

“Yes, it is nice. Can I help you with something?”

“Perhaps. Let me introduce myself.” He paused as though deciding how to phrase this. “I’m who you would call Death.”

“Death. Ohhkaay.” Some gag of Mariko’s. I decided to play along. I extended a hand. “Pleased to meet you, I’m Jeffry Miller.”

“Best not.” His hands remained folded behind his back.

”I’d have expected you to have a black robe and a scythe.”

“Oh, that. No, I’m here for Klara Eszes and I come as a Magyar land owner to take her to dinner. If I were to come for you, I might come as a beautiful woman. That, however, is far in your future and by then much will have changed and I can’t predict my appearance.”

“I see. You seemed to be having some trouble with Mariko.”

“Stubborn girl, won’t let me relieve poor Klara of her years and send her on to her reward.”

“But surely, if you’re Death no one can stop you when it’s time.”

“Normally, yes, but Mariko has a friend. In your American slang you’d say she’s connected.”

“Friend?”

“Yes. The Devil. Can’t get around him.”

“Mariko and the Devil? Go on. She seems like a very nice girl, a little crazy maybe.”

“Very nice and not crazy, that one. It’s not so much her, it’s her village. Long ago they made a pact with the Devil to protect them from annoyances like Turks, Germans, Russians, Slovaks, and tax collectors.”

“What did they have to give back?”

“I don’t know the details. Usually it’s first born sons, things like that.”

“So how can I help you with Mariko? She doesn’t seem one to take advice.”

“Mariko doesn’t want to go back to Slovakia. She’s afraid that if Klara Eszes dies they’ll make her return. She has a plan. You.”

“Me! We’ve talked a little across the yard, but we’ve never even had dinner together.”

“So invite her over to dinner. She’s decided on you. You haven’t a chance. Might as well enjoy yourself. She’s beautiful, works hard, will be nice to you, have as many children as you want. . . You can do better?” I thought of Solange. Missing a few of those qualities.

“I’ll think about it.” He turned to go. “Say, you couldn’t take those ducks with you, could you?”

“Animals are another department. Sorry.”

Three days later I invited Mariko to dinner. I had done a little research on Hungarian cuisine and came up with a recipe for a goulash and paprika chicken. Solange could never be bothered with cooking so I’d picked up a few tricks to fill in between takeout nights. Mariko glided in with head back and shoulders square. She

looked wonderful in a colorful blouse and a short skirt that indicated a bit of modern civilization had crept up to her valley from the lowlands.

“You have cooked. I smell.”

“Yeah. Trying some things I’ve never done before tonight. I hope you’ll like it.”

“Men in village don’t cook or they’re very good cooks.”

“I hope to be an average villager.” Her smile was light and amused. She was ready for a good meal and a good time. I’d do my best. I led her into the kitchen. I’d purchased new napkins, bright red with yellow stripes. I like loud things. The artist in Solange always quelled that.

“Ah! Gulyás! And chicken paprikás. And you tried to make nokedii!” She was about to cry and impulsively seized me around the neck and kissed me. Her powerful musky perfume almost knocked me down. Gosh this was going well. Now I was almost going to cry. I pulled free and dished up the food. For wine I had hunted down a few bottles of Egri Bikaver, the only Hungarian wine I could find.

“Ah! Bull’s Blood. Turk saw Magyar fighter with wild eye and red in beard and thought they drink blood of bull. Made them afraid.

“Well, Hungarians seem just a little scary.”

“Be good to them, they good to you.” We settled into the meal and Mariko told me a little of her life in the village. It sounded like a sort of bucolic paradise. The first bottle of wine had disappeared and I produced another. Our heads were getting closer and closer when there was a knock at the door. I wanted to ignore it, but there was another and another. I went to the door and opened it. Solange swept in past me. She was dressed as always: sandals from Italy, long pants artfully decorated with a few

random smears of paint, and a spotless white blouse. Her glistening blonde hair was pulled into a bun held in place with a hand carved pin of a black African wood. Her wide-spaced blue eyes with their look of open naiveté, her slightly crooked sardonic smile, Solange at a New York opening animatedly gesturing as she explained her work to prospective buyers in her smoky voice, Solange in bed with her hair spread across a pillow, her nails digging into my back. Solange.

“Jeffry! I should have called, but I don’t know, just felt better to show up. How’ve you been?.”

“Solange. I uh, it’s not a great time.”

“Jeffry we need to talk. I’ve been thinking. I was hasty and unfair.”

“And unfaithful, let’s not forget. Solange, we don’t need to talk. We did. A lot.” Her face melted into that pleading, childlike expression I knew so well. She reached out and took my hands.

“Jeffry. Don’t be cruel. You were never cruel.” I mustered myself.

“Solange, you need to go.” Mariko had evidently been hovering in the kitchen doorway, overhearing all this. She bore down on us like a battering ram.

“You! Painted woman. You will go.” In her hand was a piece of lamp cord from some abandoned lighting project. She snapped it against the floor like a bull whip. Solange gave me a look of shock and fear.

“Jeffry. What.. . ?” The cord hit the floor again, harder and louder.

“Leave woman!” Solange turned and fumbled a moment with the door handle and then fled. Mariko and I looked at each other and then clasped hands. Through the front window we saw a frantic Solange struggling to get in her car. A black limousine was

pulled up in front of it and a man in a green suit coat was opening the door for a young woman with hair in braids who was looking up at him with the radiant happiness of a child going to a party.

“So. Since no other women can ever get near me again I suppose we should get married?”

“Soon.”

“Just one thing, about the Devil and first born sons . . .”

“No worry. We have only girls.”

“Fine. I like girls. And can we have duck for dinner tomorrow?”

