

EQUINOX

“This is a good time,” I could hear Ingrid discussing my last day, “the Autumnal equinox. A good time for the soul.” It always was. When winds from the north suggested the coming chill, it was a time to rejoice and celebrate. It made working day shifts at the chemical plant less oppressive and meant Oktoberfest would soon be upon us. This one, we will not have together, but share a wealth of memories, of so many fine times.

It was usually about this time of year when the carnival camps sprouted on the edge of our town like forest mushrooms after a persistent rain. They came in odd assortments of trucks and trailers selling goods and performing services for a week or so before moving on to the next town or country on their annual circuit. Villagers warned young people about tricks and treachery, but we would find subtle ways to make our way out there to see for ourselves.

The first time I took Ingrid to the camps, we were celebrating her seventeenth birthday. From saddle bags, actually on a donkey, I bought her a necklace made of shells from Greece. From the back of an American station wagon, with panels designed to look like wood on the sides, we took home an exercise hoop designed as practice for hula dancing. A Volkswagen van, painted with images from tarot cards and neon peace signs, was mounted with a large replica of a fortune teller’s crystal ball on top. Up two wooden steps, through the open back doors, the silhouette of an old woman beckoned our presence.

Elaborate decorations inside the van created an eerie mix of dread and excitement. Candles on a covered wooden crate separated us from the costumed witch whose touch, as she gestured over our open palms, was cold, dank, and dusty. Before the session reached its end, she foretold that our lives were destined to weave together and then apart but, in the end, would be

served by the love we shared between us. We spilled out and down those steps, loudly teasing each other with newly learned bits of future foretold. A tall man in an extravagant weave of colored sashes was stationed to impart some order among the unruly. He bent in our direction with a long finger to his lips, suggesting we preserve the mystery of the moment. We laughed and pulled each other by the hand, away from the gypsy camp, kicking through the beautiful carpet of autumn leaves that night and all the memorable times that followed.

“This is indeed a good time,” Ingrid was saying in German to someone next to her, “for the transcendent soul. A change of season; light to dark to light again. Joy to suffering and back to joy.” I chose to believe that the Flemish nurse, Ada was her name, understood those words but either way, it made little difference. Ingrid’s care and assistance had been miraculous in getting me to Belgium and the hospital transfer here to Liege. She studied as laws were codified and stayed current with the unfolding legalities that allowed us to come here. Without her help, I may still be in Aachen, beyond the searing, writhing pain of the early stages, through the anguish of knowing the disease would continue, eating through organs and tissue unabated, for as long as tissue is still alive.

I have no sense of how long my eyelids have been too heavy to open. I heard an unfamiliar voice, with a phrase perhaps obscured by accent or language, announce what I understood to mean the medication was now injected into the drip. There are other words afloat in the room, but the spaces in their sequence stretch farther apart. I was aware of no localized pain, and the sensation of Ingrid’s fingertips brushing across the back of my inert fingers turned into a different kind of feeling altogether. It became a light sea breeze caressing the back of my hand and rippling the hairs on my arms like a gentle, incoming tide.

We were at Juist that August with our feet in the sand as the North Sea softly washed around them. We were in our thirties then and I leaned toward her to kiss salt water residue from the corners of her eyes. This was her first trip from the city after divorce from the clerk she chose to wed as a result of my steadfast refusal. Foolish and resolute in my youth, I insisted that the premise of marriage was an artificial social construct and a false institution.

We turned to run from the rushing tide and found asylum down a different, narrow path beneath a majestic canopy. With the tastes of local wine and picnic and each other's love-making on our lips, we whispered we could lie there forever, on the deep, soft matted floor of the Black Forest that June. We lamented that we couldn't. It was a long drive north, back to my shift at the plant the next day. An unexpected rain waited for us to emerge from our resplendent hideout, forced now to manage uncertain footing down the precipitous path.

Now, we are again tripping down the steps behind that Volkswagen van. Our light, nervous laughter tries to obscure the shivering uncertainty bestowed on us by the old witch inside. The tall old man waits in a dark and hooded costume this time, and bends forward as I approach. The long, twisted finger pointed at me curls in on itself and, as it does, pulls me in the same direction. We turn and, in the flickering light of the campfire, I see the stunted maple trees and the gnarled passages between them.
