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SAYING KADDISH

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“JEŠTĚ JEDNOU!” RUDI howled while pointing to the empty shot glass in front of her—over the sounds of punk rock, which were blasting off the walls of the small decrepit bar.

The bartender—a gruff and heavyset man—turned toward her with a sneer, and, forgetting what she had been drinking despite having filled her glass many times that night, howled back, “Co?”

“*Becherovku. Studenou.*”

The bartender vaguely nodded and yanked out a tall bottle from the tiny refrigerator behind him—a bottle of frosty golden liqueur, which he poured into Rudi’s glass, before adding, “*Dvacet korun.*”

Rudi responded by slapping forty crowns onto the table—twice what he had asked for. She also rose two fingers, and he poured her a second glass next to the first.

Afterward, she gazed into the goldness—a goldness that perfectly matched the ring on her finger—a goldness called Becherovka. When she first moved to Prague shortly after the Berlin Wall fell, a colleague told her about this drink. She told her it was different than all other liquor. She told her it was magic—that it cured diseases and performed miracles. She further told her that only two people in the whole world even knew what was in it, and that even the communist dictators didn’t know.

Rudi was more than skeptical. But on this night she was willing to give it a try. She was willing to try anything. Though she found the drink no different than any other booze, apart from its spicy taste—something she tasted again.

At once, she felt warm all over—something she attributed to the fact that she hadn’t drank in such a long time. It was actually the first time she had ever drank at the Alkohol Klub, even though she went there often.

Many times a week she came, as it was the only place in the city that reminded her of her youth—both good and bad. It was also the only place where she fit in—the only place where she didn't seem strange and foreign to everyone because of how she looked and talked—and her manner and attitude. This was because everyone was strange and foreign at the Alkohol Klub.

Rudi not only spent her time there sober, but usually did nothing more than stand in a corner with her eyes closed—while listening to the music and trying to pretend she was somewhere else—that she was no longer escaping. However, on this night she couldn't. She could neither pretend nor stay sober, as this night was special—it was an anniversary—the anniversary of both her rebirth and death, with the two coming only ten minutes apart and revolving around the very same thing.

While remembering every moment of that day and every moment of him, she gazed again into the goldness. She gazed long and hard. She gazed without blinking, hoping for some magic—no matter how small or insignificant.

"I don't even care if it's real," she told herself while clutching the glass. "Just make me believe it. Make me believe."

But nothing happened—nothing at all, and more than once she tried to will herself to leave the bar—to leave and never come back.

Instead, she continued gazing. She gazed until the glass had warmed and the drink had become almost undrinkable. Which is when something small but not insignificant happened: the goldness began to glow just slightly, and, within it, an image began to form.

The image was weak at first, but it got stronger and stronger until it took human shape—until it became him.

Him and his smile, and everything that made both special. This made her happy—it made her so happy that she started waving the glass as if she were slow-dancing with it. The image danced as well. It danced with her and caused her to be born once more.

With the dance, she heard music—their music—music that somehow drowned out the punk. She could even see the orchestra playing in the background of the glass.

“Let’s dance!” shouted a thickly accented baritone voice from behind her—something that made the glow disappear, as well as the image and the music, and her happiness, too.

Angrily, she ignored the man and tried to make the glow and all its magic reappear. She tried and tried and tried, but before long the man behind the voice grabbed her shoulder and spun her toward him.

With her fury barely contained, she looked up at the towering man, who had thick muscles and a shaved head—a man who was wearing a T-shirt with the likeness of Daniel Landa—a fellow skinhead who just happened to be the person singing the song blasting off the walls.

“*Nech mě bejt!*” she barked, right before returning to both her drink and her gazing.

But the man wouldn’t be denied, and he grabbed her again and spun her toward him once more—and he hollered, “I said, dance!”

“And I said, leave me the fuck alone!” she hollered back, with her eyes locked on the glass.

It was then that the man saw the Chai pendant around her neck, and he yelled, “Fucking Jew!” He further spit on her jacket, which made her forget all about the glow and the magic, and she tossed her drink into the man’s face.

He raged at this, with his whole body writhing, before flinging his big fist at her face—a fist she easily avoided, prior to using the man’s momentum to fling him over the bar and headfirst into the bottles against the wall, where he fell unconscious.

“*Ven!*” the bartender screamed at her, while pointing out the door with his face even redder than her lipstick.

Rudi didn’t argue, having been thrown out of many such places under many such circumstances, and not just in Prague. She just vaguely nodded and downed the second shot of magic and left—finding herself facing the five-star Hotel Pariz, which couldn’t’ve stood in sharper contrast to where she had just been. Though she didn’t notice this. Nor did she notice the frigid winter air, thick with the smell of burning coal—something that made the sun almost nonexistent during the daytime. She didn’t notice anything. She didn’t even notice herself. She just started stumbling down the dark and empty cobblestone street without direction—going wherever a gust seemed to take her, with her thoughts only on the day and the person she was celebrating.

She smiled as she remembered him. She remembered so many things. She remembered how different they were, and how little it mattered. She further remembered how she felt in his desperate clutch—how he made her feel—how he made her feel she was the only thing that ever was, and she especially remembered how his touch alone could make everything all right. She further remembered how he breathed and the scent of his hair and the verse he spoke—verse that wasn’t even verse. It just sounded that way.

A singular gust of wind took Rudi past the Powder Tower and Charles University, and many other buildings

that had been around for more than half a millennia. Another gust took her into Old Town Square and right up to the statue of Jan Hus, who seemed to be staring down at her even though he was facing straight ahead, well above her. Then, a third gust—after a brief bout of hesitation—took her into Josefov—the former Jewish ghetto—a maze of ancient twisted streets and even more ancient twisted buildings. It was a place that always gave her a strange sense of belonging, despite the lack of basis for this belonging. It was as if she were connected to it in some unknowable way, and, if anything, this sense was even stronger that evening.

It didn't take long before she was hopelessly lost, in spite of working only a short distance away—and this was before an odd blue fog set in, limiting visibility to a few steps in any direction. But none of this mattered to her. She just kept moving and moving, deeper into the abyss, hoping it would swallow both her and her memories—so she could finally be free of them.

Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba.

These words echoed from a male voice somewhere far off. The voice seemed a million miles away, but it was still clear to her. It was ethereal, too. It was haunting, sounding as if it belonged to someone not quite alive.

Even stranger, Rudi couldn't understand what the voice was saying. This caused her to come to a halting stop while wondering if he were speaking some crazy Czech words she had never heard. Though she quickly realized that the words didn't sound Czech at all—or anything European.

B'al'ma di v'ra kbir'utei.

The second verse was even more haunting than the first. That's because a multitude of male voices were saying it—voices that seemed to be emanating from the

walls of the buildings all around her.

V'yam'likh mal'khutei b'chayeikhon uv'yomeikhon.

Suddenly, Rudi—this young woman who feared no one—felt frightened. She felt frightened even though she wasn't sure why she was frightened, and she started running from the words. She ran as fast as she could. But the voices only got louder and stronger. She also noticed that there was something wrong—that there was something wrong with the buildings. They weren't the same. They were even older than before and more twisted. They were also so bunched together that they seemed to be growing out of each other, like trunks from a tree. The shops, too, looked older and strange—especially as the signs were all in Yiddish, with Hebrew lettering. What's more, there were no longer street lamps or traffic signs or telephone poles.

Uv'chayei d'khol beit yis'ra'eil.

As this verse came to an end, Rudi found herself in front of a synagogue—a synagogue she had never seen before, even though she was certain she had seen all of them in this part of the city. The building at this moment was literally crumbling down, and from the ruins came lines of men. Men with long gray beards, as well as black suits and hats from some forgotten time, and they were all coming toward her while continuing their prayer—the “Mourner's Kaddish.”

“Stay away from me!” Rudi screamed, and she ran from them, without knowing where she was running. She ran and ran, but soon noticed that the men were gaining on her, even though they were walking at a normal pace.

“Help!” she yelled toward the apartment houses on either side of her. “*Pomoc! Prosím, pomoc!*”

No one replied. No one came to her aid. And the men were almost upon her.

Frantically, she scurried into an alley—one whose opening was so narrow that she could barely fit her petite frame inside it, and she continued running. She ran until there was nowhere left for her to run, with the voices now deafening.

Suddenly, these voices stopped. They stopped as the prayer came to an end.

With great hesitation, Rudi turned around, and she saw the men steps from her, walking in a single-file—and, not knowing what else to do, she fell to her knees and covered her head as she leaned back against a wall.

“Please,” she murmured. “Please.”

As these words were said, she felt something. She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder, and she lowered her arms and looked up—at the face of the smiling man in front of her, who kissed her spiked peroxide-blond hair. He also caressed her powder-white face, oblivious to all her outlandish makeup—only seeing what was beneath it.

Rudi started crying. She cried despite not knowing why she was crying. She cried even after the man left.

He was replaced by the man behind him, and he embraced Rudi, too. All the men did—hundreds of them, and with each one she felt a little more strength, and a little less afraid.

Eventually, the last man left, and behind him was her husband, wearing the same suit he wore in the hospital the day he married her—the same suit in which he died ten minutes later.

“Tommy,” she mumbled, not caring if the vision were real. She just wanted to believe it. She wanted the magic to never end.

He smiled at her—a smile that made all her tears come to a halting stop—and he came up to her and lifted her off the ground, with the slightest of efforts. He also

hugged her, clutching her as desperately as he did when he lived.

"Please," she whispered. "Don't leave me again. Please don't."

"Sshhh," he whispered back. "I'm here to tell you something—something important. You must listen. I mean, really listen."

"What?"

"You don't have to suffer anymore," he stammered with his voice breaking—"you don't. Your sun will never set, nor will your moon fade. Your light is everywhere, and your days of mourning are over."

He kissed her as he finished saying this, and he cried as much as she had. Then, she felt him fall—she felt him fall into her. She felt him become her. At the same time, the fog lifted and Prague was restored. The sun, too, was out—shining through the smog. She could even see the building where she worked. She could see everything.

More importantly, she could feel. She could feel herself alive again, finally, and knew she forever would be.

the end