

Science Fiction

Death Do Us Part

By Robert Silverberg



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IT WAS her first, his seventh. She was 32, he was 363: the good old April/September number. They honeymooned in Venice, Nairobi, the Malaysia Pleasure Dome, and one of the posh L-5 resorts, a shimmering glassy sphere with round-the-clock sunlight and waterfalls that tumbled like cascades of diamonds, and then they came home to his lovely sky-house suspended on tremulous guy-wires a thousand meters above the Pacific to begin the everyday part of their life together.

Her friends couldn't get over it. "He's ten times your age!" they would exclaim. "How could you possibly want anybody that old?" Marilisa admitted that marrying Leo was more of a lark for

her than anything else. An impulsive thing; a sudden impetuous leap. Marriages weren't forever, after all—just thirty or forty years and then you moved along. But Leo was sweet and kind and actually quite sexy. And he had wanted *her* so much. He genuinely did seem to love her. Why should his age be an issue? He didn't appear to be any older than 35 or so. These days you could look as young as you liked. Leo did his Process faithfully and punctually, twice each decade, and it kept him as dashing and vigorous as a boy.

There were little drawbacks, of course. Once upon a time, long long ago, he had been a friend of Marilisa's great-grandmother: they might even have been lovers. She wasn't going to ask. Such things sometimes happened and you simply had to work your way around them. And then also he had an ex-wife on the scene, Number Three, Katrin, 247 years old and not

looking a day over 30. She was constantly hovering about. Leo still had warm feelings for her. "A wonderfully dear woman, a good and loyal friend," he would say. "When you get to know her you'll be as fond of her as I am." That one was hard, all right. What was almost as bad, he had children three times Marilisa's age and more. One of them—the next-to-youngest, Fyodor—had an insufferable and presumptuous way of winking and sniggering at her, that hundred-year-old son of a bitch. "I want you to meet our father's newest toy," Fyodor said of her, once, when yet another of Leo's centenarian sons, previously unsuspected by Marilisa, turned up. "We get to play with her when he's tired of her." Someday Marilisa was going to pay him back for that.

Still and all, she had no serious complaints. Leo was an ideal first husband: wise, warm, loving, attentive, generous. She felt

nothing but the greatest tenderness for him. And then too he was so immeasurably experienced in the ways of the world. If being married to him was a little like being married to Abraham Lincoln or Augustus Caesar, well, so be it: they had been great men, and so was Leo. He was endlessly fascinating. He was like seven husbands rolled into one. She had no regrets, none at all, not really.

* * * *

In the spring of '87 they go to Capri for their first anniversary. Their hotel is a reconstructed Roman villa on the southern slope of Monte Tiberio: alabaster walls frescoed in black and red, a brilliantly colored mosaic of sea-creatures in the marble bathtub, a broad travertine terrace that looks out over the sea. They stand together in the darkness, staring at the awesome sparkle of the stars. A crescent moon slashes across

the night. His arm is around her; her head rests against his breast. Though she is a tall woman, Marilisa is barely heart-high to him.

"Tomorrow at sunrise," he says, "we'll see the Blue Grotto. And then in the afternoon we'll hike down below here to the Cave of the Mater Magna. I always get a shiver when I'm there. Thinking about the ancient islanders who worshipped their goddess under that cliff, somewhere back in the Pleistocene. Their rites and rituals, the offerings they made to her."

"Is that when you first came here?" she asks, keeping it light and sly. "Somewhere back in the Pleistocene?"

"A little later than that, really. The Renaissance, I think it was. Leonardo and I traveled down together from Florence—"

"You and Leonardo, you were just like *that*."

"Like *that*, yes. But not like *that*, if you take my meaning."

"And Cosimo di' Medici. Another one from the good old days. Cosimo gave such great parties, right?"

"That was Lorenzo," he says. "Lorenzo the Magnificent, Cosimo's grandson. Much more fun than the old man. You would have adored him."

"I almost think you're serious when you talk like that."

"I'm always serious. Even when I'm not." His arm tightens around her. He leans forward and down, and buries a kiss in her thick dark hair. "I love you," he whispers.

"I love you," she says. "You're the best first husband a girl could want."

"You're the finest last wife a man could ever desire."

The words skewer her. *Last* wife? Is he expecting to die in the next ten or twenty or thirty years? He is old—ancient—but nobody has any idea yet where the limits of Process lie. Five

hundred years? A thousand? Who can say? No one able to afford the treatments has died a natural death yet, in the four hundred years since Process was invented. Why, then, does he speak so knowingly of her as his last wife? He may live long enough to have seven, ten, fifty wives after her.

Marilisa is silent a long while.

Then she asks him, quietly, uncertainly, "I don't understand why you said that."

"Said what?"

"The thing about my being your last wife."

He hesitates just a moment. "But why would I ever want another, now that I have you?"

"Am I so utterly perfect?"

"I love you."

"You loved Tedesca and Thane and Iavilda too," she says. "And Miaule and Katrin." She is counting on her fingers in the darkness. One wife missing from the list. "And—Syantha. See, I know all their names. You must have loved them but the marriages ended anyway. They have to end. No matter how much you love a person, you can't keep a marriage going forever."

"How do you know that?"

"I just do. Everybody knows it."

"I would like this marriage never to end," he tells her. "I'd like it to go on and on and on. To continue to the end of time. Is that all right? Is such a sentiment permissible, do you think?"

"What a romantic you are, Leo!"

"What else can I be but romantic, tonight? This place; the spring night; the moon, the stars, the sea; the fragrance of the

flowers in the air. Our anniversary. I love you. Nothing will ever end for us. Nothing."

"Can that really be so?" she asks.

"Of course. Forever and ever, as it is this moment."

* * * *

She thinks from time to time of the men she will marry after she and Leo have gone their separate ways. For she knows that she will. Perhaps she'll stay with Leo for ten years, perhaps for fifty; but ultimately, despite all his assurances to the contrary, one or the other of them will want to move on. No one stays married forever. Fifteen, twenty years, that's the usual. Sixty or seventy, tops.

She'll marry a great athlete next, she decides. And then a philosopher; and then a political leader; and then stay single for a few decades, just to clear her palate, so to speak, an

intermezzo in her life, and when she wearies of that she'll find someone entirely different, a simple rugged man who likes to hunt, to work in the fields with his hands, and then a yachtsman with whom she'll sail the world, and then maybe when she's about 300 she'll marry a boy, an innocent of 18 or 19 who hasn't even had his first Prep yet, and then—then—

A childish game. It always brings her to tears, eventually. The unknown husbands that wait for her in the misty future are vague chilly phantoms, fantasies, frightening, inimical. They are like swords that will inevitably fall between her and Leo, and she hates them for that.

The thought of having the same husband for all the vast expanse of time that is the rest of her life, is a little disturbing—it gives her a sense of walls closing in, and closing and closing and closing—but the thought of leaving Leo is even worse. Or of

his leaving her. Maybe she isn't truly in love with him, at any rate not as she imagines love at its deepest to be, but she is happy with him. She wants to stay with him. She can't really envision parting from him and moving on to someone else.

But of course she knows that she will. Everybody does, in the fullness of time.

Everybody.

* * * *

Leo is a sand-painter. Sand-painting is his fifteenth or twentieth career. He has been an architect, an archaeologist, a space—habitats developer, a professional gambler, an astronomer, and a number of other disparate and dazzling things. He reinvents himself every decade or two. That's as necessary to him as Process itself. Making money is never an issue, since he lives on the compounding interest of investments

set aside centuries ago. But the fresh challenge—ah, yes, always the fresh challenge—!

Marilisa hasn't entered on any career path yet. It's much too soon. She is, after all, still in her first life, too young for Process, merely in the Prep stage yet. Just a child, really. She has dabbled in ceramics, written some poetry, composed a little music. Lately she has begun to think about studying economics or perhaps Spanish literature. No doubt her actual choice of a path to follow will be very far from any of these. But there's time to decide. Oh, is there ever time!

Just after the turn of the year she and Leo go to Antibes to attend the unveiling of Leo's newest work, commissioned by Lucien Nicolas, a French industrialist. Leo and Lucien Nicolas were schoolmates, eons ago. At the airport they embrace warmly, almost endlessly, like brothers long separated. They

even look a little alike, two full-faced square-jawed dark-haired men with wide-flanged noses and strong, prominent lips.

“My wife Marilisa,” Leo says finally.

“How marvelous,” says Lucien Nicolas. “How superb.” He kisses the tips of his fingers to her.

Nicolas lives in a lofty villa overlooking the Mediterranean, surrounded by a lush garden in which the red spikes of aloes and the yellow blooms of acacias stand out dazzlingly against a palisade of towering palms. The weather, this January day, is mild and pleasant, with a light drizzle falling. The industrialist has invited a splendid international roster of guests to attend the unveiling of the painting; diplomats and jurists, poets and playwrights, dancers and opera singers, physicists and astronauts and mentalists and sculptors and seers. Leo introduces Marilisa to them all. In the antechamber to the agate

dining hall she listens, bemused, to the swirl of conversations in half a dozen languages. The talk ranges across continents, decades, generations. It seems to her that she hears from a distance the names of several of Leo's former wives invoked—Syantha, Tedesca, Katrin?—but possibly she is mistaken.

Dinner is an overindulgent feast of delicacies. Squat animated servitors bring the food on glistening covered trays of some exotic metal that shimmers diffractively. After every third course a cool ray of blue light descends from a ceiling aperture and a secondary red radiance rises from the floor: they meet in the vicinity of the great slab of black diamond that is the table, and a faint whiff of burning carbon trickles into the air, and then the diners are hungry all over again, ready for the next delight.

The meal is a symphony of flavors and textures. The balance is perfect between sweet and tart, warm and cool, spicy and bland.

A pink meat is followed by a white one, and then by fruit, then cheese, and meat again, a different kind, and finer cheeses. A dozen wines or more are served. An occasional course is still alive, moving slowly about its plate; Marilisa takes her cue from Leo, conquers any squeamishness, traps and consumes her little wriggling victims with pleasure. Now and then the underlying dish is meant to be eaten along with its contents, as she discovers by lagging just a moment behind the other guests and imitating their behavior.

After dinner comes the unveiling of the painting, in the atrium below the dining-hall. The guests gather along the balcony of the dining-hall and the atrium roof is retracted.

Leo's paintings are huge rectangular constructions made of fine sparkling sand of many colors, laid out within a high border of molten copper. The surfaces of each work are two-

dimensional, but the cloudy hint of a third dimension is always visible, and even that is only the tip of an underlying multidimensional manifold that vanishes at mysterious angles into the fabric of the piece. Down in those churning sandy depths lie wells of color with their roots embedded in the hidden mechanisms that control the piece. These wells constantly contribute streams of minute glittering particles to the patterns at the surface, in accordance with the changing signals from below. There is unending alteration; none of Leo's pieces is ever the same two hours running.

A ripple of astonishment breaks forth as the painting is revealed, and then a rising burst of applause. The pattern is one of interlaced spirals in gentle pastels, curvilinear tracteries in pink and blue and pale green, with thin black circles surrounding them and frail white lines radiating outward in groups of three to

the vivid turquoise borders of the sand. Leo's friends swarm around him to congratulate him. They even congratulate Marilisa. "He is a master—an absolute master!" She basks in his triumph.

Later in the evening she returns to the balcony to see if she can detect the first changes in the pattern. The changes, usually, are minute and subtle ones, requiring a discriminating eye, but even in her short while with Leo she has learned to discern the tiniest of alterations.

This time, though, no expertise is required. In little more than an hour the lovely surface has been significantly transformed. A thick, jagged black line has abruptly sprung into being, descending like a dark scar from upper right to lower left. Marilisa has never seen such a thing happen before. It is like a

wound in the painting: a mutilation. It draws a little involuntary cry of shock from her.

Others gather. "What does it mean?" they ask. "What is he saying?"

From someone in African tribal dress, someone who nevertheless is plainly not African, comes an interpretation: "We see the foretelling of schism, the evocation of a transformation of the era. The dark line moves in brutal strokes through the center of our stability-point. There, do you see, the pink lines and the blue? And then it drops down into the unknown dominion beyond the painting's eastern border, the realm of the mythic, the grand apocalyptic."

Leo is summoned. He is calm. But Leo is always calm. He shrugs away the urgent questions: the painting, he says, is its own meaning, not subject to literal analysis. It is what it is,

nothing more. A stochastic formula governs the changes in his works. All is random. The jagged black line is simply a jagged black line.

Music comes from another room. New servitors appear, creatures with three metal legs and one telescoping arm, offering brandies and liqueurs. The guests murmur and laugh. “A master,” they tell Marilisa once again. “An absolute master!”

* * * *

She likes to ask him about the far-away past—the quaint and remote 23rd century, the brusque and dynamic 24th. He is like some great heroic statue rising up out of the mists of time, embodying in himself first-hand knowledge of eras that are mere legends to her.

“Tell me how people dressed, back then,” she begs him. “What sorts of things they said, the games they played, where they

liked to go on their holidays. And the buildings, the architecture: how did things look? Make me feel what it was like: the sounds, the smells, the whole flavor of the long-ago times.”

He laughs. “It gets pretty jumbled, you know. The longer you live, the more muddled-up your mind becomes.”

“Oh, I don't believe that at all! I think you remember every bit of it. Tell me about your father and mother.”

“My father and my mother—” He pronounces the words musingly, as though they are newly minted concepts for him. “My father—he was tall, even taller than I am—a mathematician, he was, or maybe a composer, something abstruse like that—”

“And his eyes? What kind of eyes did he have?”

“his eyes—I don't know, his eyes were unusual, but I can't tell you how—an odd color, or very penetrating, maybe—there was something about his eyes—” His voice trails off.

"And your mother?"

"My mother. Yes." He is staring into the past and it seems as if he sees nothing but haze and smoke there. "My mother. I just don't know what to tell you. She's dead, you realize. A long time, now. Hundreds of years. They both died before Process. It was all such a long time ago, Marilisa."

His discomfort is only too apparent.

"All right," she says. "We don't have to talk about them. But tell me about the clothing, at least. What you wore when you were a young man. Whether people liked darker colors then. Or the food, the favorite dishes. Anything. The shape of ordinary things. How they were different."

Obligingly he tries to bring the distant past to life for her. Images come through, though, however blurry, however indistinct. The strangeness, the alien textures of the long ago.

Whoever said the past is another country was right; and Leo is a native of that country. He speaks of obsolete vehicles, styles, ideas, flavors. She works hard at comprehending his words, she eagerly snatches concrete meanings from his clusters of hazy impressions. Somehow the past seems as important to her as the future, or even more so. The past is where Leo has lived so very much of his life. His gigantic past stretches before her like an endless pathless plain. She needs to learn her way across it; she needs to find her bearings, the points of her compass, or she will be lost.

* * * *

It is time for Leo to undergo Process once more. He goes every five years and remains at the clinic for eleven days. She would like to accompany him, but guests are not allowed, not

even spouses. The procedures are difficult and delicate. The patients are in a vulnerable state while undergoing treatment.

So off he goes without her to be made young again. Elegant homeostatic techniques of automatic bioenergetic correction will extend his exemption from sagging flesh and spreading waistline and blurry eyesight and graying hair and hardening arteries for another term.

Marilisa has no idea what Process is actually like. She imagines him sitting patiently upright day after day in some bizarre womb-like tank, his body entirely covered in a thick mass of some sort of warm, quivering purplish gel, only his head protruding, while the age-poisons are extracted from him by an elaborate array of intricate pipettes and tubes, and the glorious fluids of new youthfulness are pumped into him. But of course she is only imagining. For all she knows, the whole thing is done

with a single injection, like the Prep that she undergoes every couple of years to keep her in good trim until she is old enough for Process.

While Leo is away, his son Fyodor pays her an uninvited visit. Fyodor is the child of Miaule, the fifth wife. The marriage to Miaule was Leo's briefest one, only eight years. Marilisa has never asked why. She knows nothing substantial about Leo's previous marriages and prefers to keep it that way.

"Your father's not here," she says immediately, when she finds Fyodor's flitter docked to the harbor of their sky-house.

"I'm not here to visit him. I'm here to see you." He is a compact, blockily built man with a low center of gravity, nothing at all in appearance like his rangy father. His sly sidewise smile is insinuating, possessive, maddening. "We don't know each

other as well as we should, Marilisa. You're my stepmother, after all."

"What does that have to do with anything? You have half a dozen stepmothers." Was that true? Could the wives before Miaule be regarded as his stepmothers, strictly speaking?

"You're the newest one. The most mysterious one."

"There's nothing mysterious about me at all. I'm terribly uninteresting."

"Not to my father, apparently." A vicious sparkle enters Fyodor's eyes. "Are you and he going to have children?"

The suggestion startles her. She and Leo have never talked about that; she has never so much as given it a thought.

Angrily she says, "I don't think that that's any of your—"

"He'll want to. He always does."

"Then we will. Twenty years from now, maybe. Or fifty. Whenever it seems appropriate. Right now we're quite content just with each other." He has found an entirely new level on which to unsettle her, and Marilisa is infuriated even more with him for that. She turns away from him. "If you'll excuse me, Fyodor, I have things to—"

"Wait." His hand darts out, encircles her wrist, seizes it a little too tightly, then relaxes to a gentler, almost affectionate grip. "You shouldn't be alone at a time like this. Come stay with me for a few days while he's at the clinic."

She glowers at him. "Don't be absurd."

"I'm simply being hospitable, mother."

"I'm sure he'd be very amused to hear that."

"He's always found what I do highly amusing. Come. Pack your things and let's go. Don't you think you owe yourself a little amusement too?"

Not bothering to conceal her anger and loathing, Marilisa says, "What exactly are you up to, Fyodor? Are you looking for vengeance? Trying to get even with him for something?"

"Vengeance? Vengeance?" Fyodor seems genuinely puzzled. "Why would I want that? I mean, after all, what is he to me?"

"Your father, for one thing."

"Well, yes. I'll grant you that much. But what of it? All of that happened such a long time ago." He laughs. He sounds almost jolly. "You're such an old-fashioned kind of girl, Marilisa!"

* * * *

A couple of hours after she succeeds in getting rid of Fyodor, she has another unexpected and unwanted visitor: Katrin. At

least Katrin has the grace to call while she is still over Nevada to say that she would like to drop in. Marilisa is afraid to refuse. She knows that Leo wants some sort of relationship to develop between them. Quite likely he has instigated this very visit. If she turns Katrin away, Leo will find out, and he will be hurt. The last thing Marilisa would want to do is to hurt Leo.

It is impossible for her to get used to Katrin's beauty: that sublime agelessness, which looks so unreal precisely because it is real. She genuinely seems to be only 30, golden-haired and shining in the first dewy bloom of youth. Katrin was Leo's wife for forty years. Estil and Liss, the two children they had together, are almost 200 years old. The immensity of Katrin's history with Leo looms over her like some great monolithic slab.

"I talked to Leo this morning at the clinic," Katrin announces. "He's doing very well."

"You *talked* to him? But I thought that nobody was allowed—"

"Oh, my dear, I've taken forty turns through that place! I know everybody there only too well. When I call, they put me right through. Leo sends his warmest love."

"Thank you."

"He loves you terribly, you know. Perhaps more than is really good for him. You're the great love of his life, Marilisa."

Marilisa feels a surge of irritation, and allows it to reach the surface. "Oh, Katrin, be serious with me! How could I ever believe something like that?" And what does she mean, *Perhaps more than is really good for him?*

"You should believe it. You must, in fact. I've had many long talks with him about you. He adores you. He'd do anything for you. It's never been like this for him before. I have absolute

proof of that. Not with me, not with Tedesca, not with Thane, not with—”

She recites the whole rest of the list. *Syantha, Miaule, Iavilda*, while Marilisa ticks each one off in her mind. They could do it together in a kind of choral speaking, the litany of wives' names, but Marilisa remains grimly silent. She is weary of that list of names. She hates the idea that Katrin talks with Leo about her; she hates the idea that Katrin still talks with Leo at all. But she must accept it, apparently. Katrin bustles about the house, admiring this, exclaiming rapturously over that. To celebrate Leo's imminent return she has brought a gift, a tiny artifact, a greenish little bronze sculpture recovered from the sea off Greece, so encrusted by marine growths that it is hard to make out what it represents. A figurine of some sort, an archer, perhaps, holding a bow that has lost its string. Leo is a collector

of small antiquities. Tiny fragments of the past are arrayed in elegant cases in every room of their house. Marilisa offers proper appreciation. "Leo will love it," she tells Katrin. "It's perfect for him."

"Yes. I know."

Yes. You do.

Marilisa offers drinks. They nibble at sweet dainty cakes and chat. Two pretty young well-to-do women idling away a pleasant afternoon, but one is 200 years older than the other. For Marilisa it is like playing hostess to Cleopatra, or Helen of Troy.

Inevitably the conversation keeps circling back to Leo.

"The kindest man I've ever known," says Katrin. "If he has a fault, I think, it's that he's *too* kind. Time and again, he's let himself endure great pain for the sake of avoiding being unkind to some other person. He's utterly incapable of disappointing

other people, of letting anyone down in any way, of hurting anyone, regardless of the distress to himself, the damage, the pain. I'm speaking of emotional pain, of course."

Marilisa doesn't want to hear Katrin talk about Leo's faults, or his virtues, or anything else. But she is a dutiful wife; she sees the visit through to its end, and embraces Katrin with something indistinguishable from warmth, and stands by the port watching Katrin's flitter undock and go zipping off into the northern sky. Then, only then, she permits herself to cry. The conversation, following so soon upon Fyodor's visit, has unnerved her. She sifts through it, seeking clues to the hidden truths that everyone but she seems to know. Leo's alleged vast love for her. Leo's unwillingness to injure others, heedless of the costs to himself. *He loves you terribly, you know. Perhaps more than is really good for him.* And suddenly she has the answer. Leo does love

her, yes. Leo always loves his wives. But the marriage was fundamentally a mistake; she is much too young for him, callow, unformed; what he really needs is a woman like Katrin, ancient behind her beauty and infinitely, diabolically wise. The reality, she sees, is that he has grown bored already with his new young wife, he is in fact unhappy in the marriage, but he is far too kindhearted to break the truth to her, and so he inverts it, he talks of a marriage that will endure forever and ever. And confides in Katrin, unburdening himself of his misery to her.

If any of this is true, Marilisa thinks, then I should leave him. I can't ask him to suffer on and on indefinitely with a wife who can't give him what he needs.

She wonders what effect all this crying has had on her face, and activates a mirror in front of her. Her eyes are red and puffy, yes. But what's this? A line, in the corner of her eye? The

beginning of age-wrinkles? These doubts and conflicts are suddenly aging her: can it be? And this? A gray hair? She tugs it out and stares at it; but as she holds it at one angle or another it seems just as dark as all the rest. Illusions. An overactive imagination, nothing more. *Damn* Katrin! *Damn* her!

* * * *

Even so, she goes for a quick gerontological exam two days before Leo is due to come home from the clinic. It is still six months until the scheduled date of her next Prep injection, but perhaps a few signs of age are beginning to crop up prematurely. Prep will arrest the onset of aging but it won't halt it altogether, the way Process will do; and it is occasionally the case, so she has heard, for people in the immediate pre-Process age group to sprout a few lines on their faces, a few gray hairs,

while they are waiting to receive the full treatment that will render them ageless forever.

The doctor is unwilling to accelerate her Prep schedule, but he does confirm that a few little changes are cropping up, and sends her downstairs for some fast cosmetic repairs. "It won't get any worse, will it?" she asks him, and he laughs and assures her that everything can be fixed, everything, all evidence that she is in fact closer now to her 40th birthday than she is to her 30th swiftly and painlessly and confidentially eradicated. But she hates the idea that she is actually aging, ever so slightly, while all about her are people much older than she—her husband, his many former wives, his swarm of children—whose appearance is frozen forever in perfect unassailable youthfulness. If only she could start Process now and be done with it! But she is still too young. Her somatotype report is unanswerable; the treatment

will not only be ineffective at this stage in her cellular development, it might actually be injurious. She will have to wait. And wait and wait and wait.

* * * *

Then Leo comes back, refreshed, invigorated, revitalized. Marilisa's been around people fresh from Process many times before—her parents, her grandparents, her great-grandparents—and knows what to expect; but even so she finds it hard to keep up with him. He's exhaustingly cheerful, almost frighteningly ardent, full of high talk and ambitious plans. He shows her the schematics for six new paintings, a decade's worth of work conceived all at once. He proposes that they give a party for three hundred people. He suggests that they take a grand tour for their next anniversary—it will be their fifth—to see the wonders of the world, the Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, the

floor of the Mindanao Trench. Or a tour of the moon—the asteroid belt—

“Stop!” she cries, feeling breathless. “You're going too fast!”

“A weekend in Paris, at least,” he says.

“Paris. All right. Paris.”

They will leave next week. Just before they go, she has lunch with a friend from her single days, Loisa, a pre-Process woman like herself who is married to Ted, who is also pre-Process by just a few years. Loisa has had affairs with a couple of older men, men in their nineties and early hundreds, so perhaps she understands the other side of things as well.

“I don't understand why he married me,” Marilisa says. “I must seem like a child to him. He's forgotten more things than I've ever known, and he still knows plenty. What can he possibly see in me?”

"You give him back his youth," Loisa says. "That's what all of them want. They're like vampires, sucking the vitality out of the young."

"That's nonsense and you know it. Process gives him back his youth. He doesn't need a young wife to do that for him. I can provide him with the illusion of being young, maybe, but Process gives him the real thing."

"Process jazzes them up, and then they need confirmation that it's genuine. Which only someone like you can give. They don't want to go to bed with some old hag a thousand years old. She may look gorgeous on the outside but she's corroded within, full of a million memories, loaded with all the hate and poison and vindictiveness that you store up over a life that long, and he can feel it all ticking away inside her and he doesn't want it. Whereas you—all fresh and new—"

"No. No. It isn't like that at all. The older women are the interesting ones. We just seem empty."

"All right. If that's what you want to believe."

"And yet he wants me. He tells me he loves me. He tells one of his old ex-wives that I'm the great love of his life. I don't understand it."

"Well, neither do I," says Loisa, and they leave it at that.

In the bathroom mirror, after lunch, Marilisa finds new lines in her forehead, new wisps of gray at her temples. She has them taken care of before Paris. Paris is no city to look old in.

* * * *

In Paris they visit the Louvre and take the boat ride along the Seine and eat at little Latin Quarter bistros and buy ancient objets d'art in the galleries of St.-Germain-des-Pres. She has never been to Paris before, though of course he has, so often

that he has lost count. It is very beautiful but strikes her as somehow fossilized, a museum exhibit rather than a living city, despite all the life she sees going on around her, the animated discussions in the cafes, the bustling restaurants, the crowds in the Metro. Nothing must have changed here in five hundred years. It is all static—frozen—lifeless. As though the entire place has been through Process.

Leo seems to sense her gathering restlessness, and she sees a darkening in his own mood in response. On the third day, in front of one of the rows of ancient bookstalls along the river, he says, "It's me, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"The reason why you're so glum. It can't be the city, so it has to be me. Us. Do you want to leave, Marilisa?"

"Leave Paris? So soon?"

"Leave me, I mean. Perhaps the whole thing has been just a big mistake. I don't want to hold you against your will. If you've started to feel that I'm too old for you, that what you really need is a much younger man, I wouldn't for a moment stand in your way."

Is this how it happens? Is this how his marriages end, with him sadly, lovingly, putting words in your mouth?

"No," she says. "I love you, Leo. Younger men don't interest me. The thought of leaving you has never crossed my mind."

"I'll survive, you know, if you tell me that you want out."

"I don't want out."

"I wish I felt completely sure of that."

She is getting annoyed with him, now. "I wish you did too. You're being silly, Leo. Leaving you is the last thing in the world I want to do. And Paris is the last place in the world where I

would want my marriage to break up. I love you. I want to be your wife forever and ever.”

“Well, then.” He smiles and draws her to him; they embrace; they kiss. She hears a patter of light applause. People are watching them. People have been listening to them and are pleased at the outcome of their negotiations. Paris! Ah, Paris!

* * * *

When they return home, though, he is called away almost immediately to Barcelona to repair one of his paintings, which has developed some technical problem and is undergoing rapid disagreeable metamorphosis. The work will take three or four days; and Marilisa, unwilling to put herself through the fatigue of a second European trip so soon, tells him to go without her. That seems to be some sort of cue for Fyodor to show up, scarcely

hours after Leo's departure. How does he know so unerringly when to find her alone?

His pretense is that he has brought an artifact for Leo's collection, an ugly little idol, squat and frog-faced, covered with lumps of brown oxidation. She takes it from him brusquely and sets it on a randomly chosen shelf, and says, mechanically, "Thank you very much. Leo will be pleased. I'll tell him you were here."

"Such charm. Such hospitality."

"I'm being as polite as I can. I didn't invite you."

"Come on, Marilisa. Let's get going."

"Going? Where? What for?"

"We can have plenty of fun together and you damned well know it. Aren't you tired of being such a loyal little wife? Politely

sliding through the motions of your preposterous little marriage with your incredibly ancient husband?"

His eyes are shining strangely. His face is flushed.

She says softly, "You're crazy, aren't you?"

"Oh, no, not crazy at all. Not as nice as my father, maybe, but perfectly sane. I see you rusting away here like one of the artifacts in his collection and I want to give you a little excitement in your life before it's too late. A touch of the wild side, do you know what I mean, Marilisa? Places and things he can't show you, that he can't even imagine. He's old. He doesn't know anything about the world we live in today. Jesus, why do I have to spell it out for you? Just drop everything and come away with me. You won't regret it." He leans forward, smiling into her face, utterly sure of himself, plainly confident now that his blunt

unceasing campaign of bald invitation will at last be crowned with success.

His audacity astounds her. But she is mystified, too.

“Before it's too late, you said. Too late for what?”

“You know.”

“Do I?”

Fyodor seems exasperated by what he takes to be her wilful obtuseness. His mouth opens and closes like a shutting trap; a muscle quivers in his cheek; something seems to be cracking within him, some carefully guarded bastion of self-control. He stares at her in a new way—angrily? Contemptuously?—and says, “Before it's too late for anybody to want you. Before you get old and saggy and shriveled. Before you get so withered and ancient-looking that nobody would touch you.”

Surely he is out of his mind. Surely. “Nobody has to get that way any more, Fyodor.”

“Not if they undergo Process, no. But you—you, Marilisa—” He smiles sadly, shakes his head, turns his hands palms upward in a gesture of hopeless regret.

She peers at him, bewildered. “What can you possibly be talking about?”

For the first time in her memory Fyodor's cool cocky aplomb vanishes. He blinks and gapes. “So you still haven't found out. He actually did keep you in the dark all this time. You're a null, Marilisa! A short-timer! Process won't work for you! The one-in-ten-thousand shot, that's you, the inherent somatic unreceptivity. Christ, what a bastard he is, to hide it from you like this! You've got eighty, maybe ninety years and that's it. Getting older and older, wrinkled and bent and ugly, and then

you'll die, the way everybody in the world used to. So you don't have forever and a day to get your fun, like the rest of us. You have to grab it right now, fast, while you're still young. He made us all swear never to say a word to you, that he was going to be the one to tell you the truth in his own good time, but why should I give a damn about that? We aren't children. You have a right to know what you really are. Fuck him, is what I say. Fuck him!" Fyodor's face is crimson now. His eyes are rigid and eerily bright with a weird fervor. "You think I'm making this up? Why would I make up something like this?"

It is like being in an earthquake. The floor seems to heave. She has never been so close to the presence of pure evil before. With the tightest control she can manage she says, "You'd make it up because you're a lying miserable bastard, Fyodor, full of

hatred and anger and pus. And if you think—But I don't need to listen to you any more. Just get out of here!”

“It's true. Everybody knows it, the whole family! Ask Katrin! She's the one I heard it from first. Christ, ask Leo! Ask Leo!”

“Out,” she says, flicking her hand at him as though he is vermin. “Now. Get the hell out. Out.”

* * * *

She promises herself that she will say nothing to Leo about the monstrous fantastic tale that has come pouring out of his horrid son, or even about his clumsy idiotic attempt at seduction—it's all too shameful, too disgusting, too repulsive, and she wants to spare him the knowledge of Fyodor's various perfidies—but of course it all comes blurting from her within an hour after Leo is back from Barcelona. Fyodor is intolerable, she says. Fyodor's behavior has been too bizarre and outrageous to

conceal. Fyodor has come here unmasked and spewed a torrent of cruel fantastic nonsense in a grotesque attempt at bludgeoning her into bed.

Leo says gravely, "What kind of nonsense?" and she tells him in a quick unpunctuated burst and watches his smooth taut face collapse into weary jowls, watches him seem to age a thousand years in the course of half a minute. He stands there looking at her, aghast; and then she understands that it has to be true, every terrible word of what Fyodor has said. She is one of those, the miserable statistical few of whom everybody has heard, but only at second or third hand. The treatments will not work on her. She will grow old and then she will die. They have tested her and they know the truth, but the whole bunch of them have conspired to keep it from her, the doctors at the clinic, Leo's sons and daughters and wives, her own family, everyone. All of

it Leo's doing. Using his influence all over the place, his enormous accrued power, to shelter her in her ignorance.

"You knew from the start?" she asks, finally. "All along?"

"Almost. I knew very early. The clinic called me and told me, not long after we got engaged."

"My God. Why did you marry me, then?"

"Because I loved you."

"Because you loved me."

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes."

"I wish I knew what that meant," she says. "If you loved me, how could you hide a thing like this from me? How could you let me build my life around a lie?"

Leo says, after a moment, "I wanted you to have the good years, untainted by what would come later. There was time for you to discover the truth later. But for now—while you were still

young—the clothes, the jewelry, the traveling, all the joy of being beautiful and young—why ruin it for you? Why darken it with the knowledge of what would be coming?”

“So you made everybody go along with the lie? The people at the clinic. Even my own family, for God's sake!”

“Yes.”

“And all the Prep treatments I've been taking—just a stupid pointless charade, right? Accomplishing nothing. Leading nowhere.”

“Yes. Yes.”

She begins to tremble. She understands the true depths of his compassion now, and she is appalled. He has married her out of charity. No man her own age would have wanted her, because the developing signs of bodily deterioration in the years just ahead would surely horrify him; but Leo is beyond all that, he is

willing to overlook her unfortunate little somatic defect and give her a few decades of happiness before she has to die. And then he will proceed with the rest of his life, the hundreds or thousands of years yet to come, serene in the knowledge of having allowed the tragically doomed Marilisa the happy illusion of having been a member of the ageless elite for a little while. It is stunning. It is horrifying. There is no way that she can bear it.

“Marilisa—”

He reaches for her, but she turns away. Runs. Flees.

* * * *

It was three years before he found her. She was living in London, then, a little flat in the Bayswater Road, and in just those three years her face had changed so much, the little erosions of the transition between youth and middle age, that it was impossible for him entirely to conceal his instant reaction.

He, of course, had not changed in the slightest way. He stood in the doorway, practically filling it, trying to plaster some sort of facade over his all too visible dismay, trying to show her the familiar Leo smile, trying to make the old Leo-like warmth glow in his eyes. Then after a moment he extended his arms toward her. She stayed where she was.

"You shouldn't have tracked me down," she says.

"I love you," he tells her. "Come home with me."

"It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be fair to you. My getting old, and you always so young."

"To hell with that. I want you back, Marilisa. I love you and I always will."

"You love me?" she says. "Even though—?"

"Even though. For better, for worse."

She knows the rest of the passage—for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health—and where it goes from there. But there is nothing more she can say. She wants to smile gently and thank him for all his kindness and close the door, but instead she stands there and stands there and stands there, neither inviting him in nor shutting him out, with a roaring sound in her ears as all the million years of mortal history rise up around her like mountains.

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