

I HADN'T SEEN HANS IN THIRTY SIX YEARS. I CERTAINLY HADN'T FORGOTTEN HIM, DEVOTING MOST OF MY SECOND GRAPHIC NOVEL TO OUR RELATIONSHIP. HE WAS A PART OF MY PAST, THOUGH, NOT MY PRESENT, AS FAR AS I WAS CONCERNED. THEN IN OCTOBER 2024, OUT OF THE BLUE, THIS GUY FROM MY ART SCHOOL EMAILED ME. HE WAS INVITING PEOPLE WHO'D BEEN IN HIS STUDENT FILM TO AN ONLINE REUNION. WELL, HANS WAS INCLUDED ON THE EMAIL. HE WAS HARDLY INTO ARTY STUFF, BUT I REMEMBERED I'D TALKED HIM INTO BEING IN THE FILM. TO MY SURPRISE, HANS ANSWERED THE EMAIL. A FEW WEEKS LATER, HE APPEARED IN A LITTLE BOX ON MY SCREEN. THERE WERE LIKE TEN OTHER PEOPLE ON THE CALL, AND HE DIDN'T SAY MUCH. WE KEPT STARING AT EACH OTHER, THOUGH. YES, EVEN ON ZOOM, YOU CAN TELL WHEN SOMEONE'S STARING AT YOU. HE LOOKED SO OLD TO ME. I'M SURE HE THOUGHT THE SAME ABOUT ME. AFTER THE CALL, HE SENT ME A BRIEF BUT VERY HEARTFELT EMAIL AND SAID HE'D LOVE TO TALK AGAIN. I REPLIED THAT WOULD BE WONDERFUL. HE DIDN'T WRITE BACK, THOUGH, AND I WORRIED THAT WAS THE END OF IT.

Third ACT

Art & Story by
RUDE RUMPS

THEN, FOUR MONTHS LATER, HE WROTE BACK. HE SAID MY EMAIL HAD GONE INTO HIS SPAM FOLDER, AND FOR THAT WHOLE TIME HE'D FELT VERY SAD, THINKING I DIDN'T WANT TO HEAR FROM HIM AGAIN. SO, WE RECONNECTED AND TALKED ONLINE SEVERAL TIMES. HE WAS STILL LIVING IN GERMANY. AT FIRST IT WAS VERY AWKWARD, BUT WE GRADUALLY RE-ESTABLISHED SOME OF OUR OLD RHYTHMS. THEN, ONE DAY, HE EMAILED AND SAID HE'D BE IN NEW YORK IN JULY ON BUSINESS.



I DIDN'T THINK TWICE.

OF COURSE, I SAID YES.

Ach, YOU ARE THIRTY EIGHT MINUTES LATE.

Well, I STOPPED TO BUY YOU A GIFT.

SO, IN THE LOBBY OF A MANHATTAN HOTEL, ON A HOT AND VERY HUMID DAY IN JULY, A MONTH AFTER I'D TURNED FIFTY-SEVEN, THERE I WAS, PLAYING A LITTLE PRANK ON HANS, JUST LIKE I HAD AS A TEENAGER.

IT ALMOST FELT LIKE I WAS DREAMING.



YOU DELAYED TO BUY PEPPERONI PIZZA?!?

I TOLD YOU WHEN WE TALKED THAT I STILL DETEST IT!



Hmmm. I SEE YOU'RE STILL AS INCORRIGIBLE AS YOU WERE THE DAY WE MET.



ME? YOU'RE MISTAKEN. THESE DAYS, I'M AN ANGEL!

I'LL TAKE YOU ON A WALK. A VERY LONG WALK!

BECAUSE, IF YOU KEPT ACTING LIKE THIS HERE, I'D TAKE YOU UP TO MY ROOM...

...AND, YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I'D DO THERE.

WE ARE BOTH MARRIED AND, BESIDES WE ARE TOO OLD FOR THAT.

SO, WE'LL WALK UNTIL WE'RE TOO EXHAUSTED TO EVEN THINK ABOUT THIS THING!

Well, I'M ALWAYS UP FOR A WALK.

BUT, YOU'RE BEING SILLY THINKING TIRING OURSELVES OUT WILL FIX THE PROBLEM.



AN ANGEL? I DON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF IT!

I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I'LL DO ABOUT YOUR BEHAVIOR!



SO, WE WENT ON OUR WALK.

BEFORE WE LEFT, HANS PICKED UP AN **UMBRELLA** AT THE **HOTEL** DESK. I **TEASED** HIM ABOUT BEING **RIDICULOUSLY CAUTIOUS**.

WELL, HE'D ACTUALLY **CHECKED** THE **WEATHER** PREDICTIONS, WHILE I, OF COURSE, **HADN'T**.

I DID HAVE THE PRESENCE OF MIND, THOUGH, TO PUT THE **PIZZA** IN MY **PURSE**, FIGURING I'D **EAT** IT FOR **LUNCH**.

I **REALLY** AM **SORRY** I WAS **LATE**.

I BOUGHT A **DRESS** A **FEW YEARS** AGO THAT **LOOKED** KINDA LIKE THE **ONE** I **WORE** ON OUR **FIRST DATE**.

BUT, I **FOUND OUT** THIS **MORNING** IT **DOESN'T** FIT MY **HIPS** ANYMORE...



...SO, I **KEPT TRYING** ON **OTHER OUTFITS**. AND, THEY **DIDN'T** FIT EITHER! THAT'S **WHY** I LOOK LIKE A **HIPPIE GRANDMA**.

AND, MY **HAIR--**



NONSENSE! YOU LOOK **FANTASTISCH!**



IT IS I **WHO** LOOKS LIKE AN **OLD PERSON**, I THINK.

THE **AGING** SEEMED TO HAPPEN **ALL AT ONCE**, THE YEAR **LEONORE DIED***.

***HANS' FIRST WIFE.**



I'M SO *SORRY*,
HANS. YOU MUST
MISS HER VERY
MUCH.

JA, SHE WAS
THE *LOVE* OF
MY LIFE.

IT IS SO *CROWDED*
HERE. IS THERE
SOMEWHERE MORE
PEACEFUL WE COULD
FIND TO *WALK*?

CLE
FOSTRUNI

SO, I TOOK HANS TO AN AREA IN CENTRAL PARK THAT I FIGURED WOULD BE PRETTY QUIET ON A MONDAY MORNING.

UNTIL WE GOT THERE, HE DIDN'T SAY MUCH. HE SEEMED REALLY UPTIGHT.

I DIDN'T REMEMBER HIM EVER BEING LIKE THIS IN THE OLD DAYS.

BACK THEN, HE ALWAYS SEEMED TO BE IN CONTROL.

YOU KNOW, I WAS WORRIED I'D FEEL ANXIOUS AROUND YOU.

BUT, I FEEL VERY CALM RIGHT NOW.

Oh yeah! I WAS SO NERVOUS, TOO. I MEAN, MEETING UP, IN THE FLESH, AFTER ALL THESE YEARS! I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT!



Ah, NO. THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT.

YOU SEE, SOON AFTER LEONORE DIED I FELT THIS TERRIBLE ANXIETY. THEN, THERE WAS COVID...

A FEW YEARS AGO, IT WAS SO BAD I COULDN'T EVEN GO TO THE GROCERY. I LEFT THE HOUSE ONLY RARELY.

IT'S BETTER NOW, THOUGH I STILL GET NERVOUS IN PUBLIC PLACES.



BUT, I'VE TALKED SO MUCH ABOUT MYSELF. HOW HAVE THINGS BEEN WITH YOU?

DO YOU STILL HAVE DEPRESSIONS? LIKE WHEN WE WERE TOGETHER?



Well, I'VE HAD MY UPS AND DOWNS.

THE WORST WAS THE YEAR MY DAD DIED, AND MY SECOND MARRIAGE WAS FALLING APART AT THE SAME TIME.

AND, COVID WAS BAD FOR ME, TOO. IT WAS LIKE GROUNDHOG DAY, FOR A WHOLE YEAR.



BUT, THE LAST FEW YEARS I'VE FELT PRETTY HAPPY.

I THINK ERIC* HAS HAD A LOT TO DO WITH THAT.



*MY AWESOME HUSBAND.



LEMME KNOW IF YOU WANNA BITE. I CAN PULL THE PEPPERONI OFF FOR YOU.

WE KEPT WALKING, ALL OVER THE PARK.

AFTER A COUPLE HOURS OF IT, I STARTED TO GET REALLY HUNGRY.

THEN I REMEMBERED THE PIZZA.



Ugh. I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU ARE EATING THAT.

Well, HOW ABOUT BUYING A HOT DOG, THEN? YOU MUST BE STARVING.



JA, I'M HUNGRY.

BUT, I HAVE NO DESIRE TO BE POISONED.

I'LL BUY US SOME WATER, THOUGH, PIZZA-MÄDCHEN.



Aww. YOU TWO ARE SUCH A CUTE COUPLE.

YOU REMIND ME OF MY MOM 'N DAD WHEN THEY USTA TAKE WALKS INTHA PARK.

THEY WERE MARRIED FORTY SIX YEARS. HOW LONG YOU TWO BEEN TOGETHER?

Ach! NO, WE ARE NOT--



Wow! WHAT A COINCIDENCE! FORTY SIX YEARS FOR US, TOO! I WAS A CHILD BRIDE!

OUR OLDEST IS FORTY SEVEN ALREADY!

AND, OUR YOUNGEST-- well, ONE OF MY SISTER WIVE'S--SHE'S JUST EIGHT!



Ach. YOU ARE **BAD RUDE. REALLY, REALLY BAD.**

BUT, **SERIOUSLY**, ABOUT WHAT THAT MAN SAID...

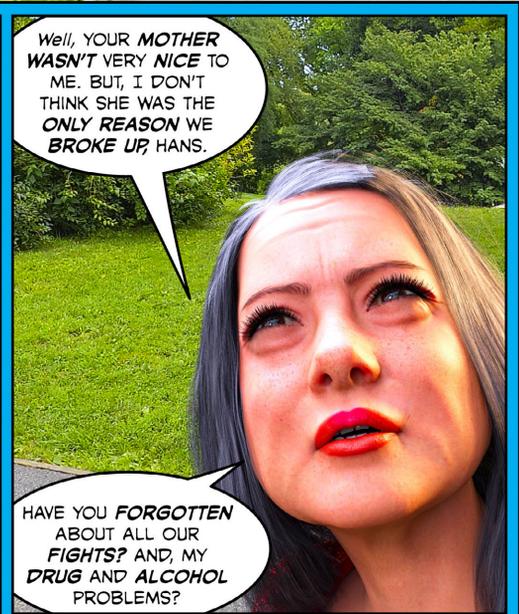
HOW MIGHT IT HAVE BEEN IF WE **HAD MARRIED?**



YOU KNOW, MY **MOTHER** LATER ADMITTED SHE DID EVERYTHING TO **DRIVE US APART...**

...INCLUDING, **THROWING AWAY LETTERS** YOU SENT ME, AND MAKING UP **TERRIBLE LIES** ABOUT YOU.

I WAS **MAD** AT HER FOR YEARS AFTER SHE **TOLD ME.**



Well, YOUR **MOTHER** WASN'T VERY NICE TO ME. BUT, I DON'T THINK SHE WAS THE **ONLY REASON** WE **BROKE UP, HANS.**

HAVE YOU **FORGOTTEN** ABOUT ALL OUR **FIGHTS?** AND, MY **DRUG AND ALCOHOL** PROBLEMS?



B-BESIDES...HOW **DEEP** WAS OUR **RELATIONSHIP**, REALLY?

IT DEFINITELY **WASN'T LIKE** WHAT YOU'VE TALKED ABOUT HAVING WITH **LEONORE.**



JA, BUT WE HAVE **BOTH GROWN** OVER THE **YEARS.** PERHAPS THINGS WOULD'VE **DEEPEENED** BETWEEN US.

MAYBE. WHO CAN REALLY SAY WHAT **MIGHT HAVE BEEN?**

THE **ONLY THING** I'M **TOTALLY SURE** OF IS, YOU WOULD'VE **SPANKED ME** LOTS AND LOTS!



AW, C'MON. I KNOW YOU HEARD ME SAY IT...THE MAGIC WORD.

WE CAN'T AVOID THE SUBJECT FOREVER.



JA, B-BUT IT'S DIFFICULT FOR ME TO TALK ABOUT.

LEONORE WOULD LET ME DO IT TO HER. BUT SHE DIDN'T LIKE IT. SO, I SOON STOPPED.

AND WITH HANNA*, OUR RELATIONSHIP HAS ALWAYS BEEN PLATONIC. WE ARE JUST VERY GOOD FRIENDS.

*HANS' SECOND WIFE.



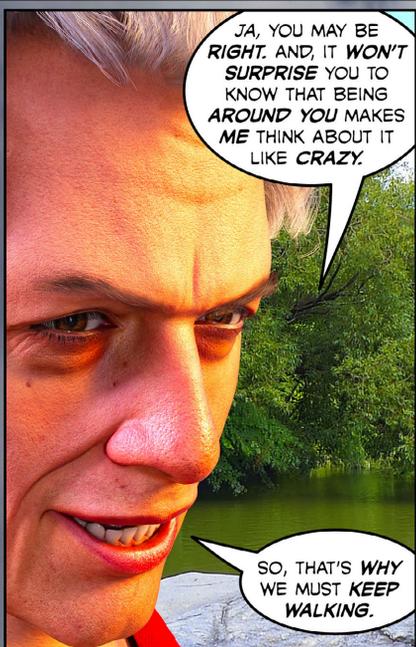
SO, THAT'S MOSTLY LEFT LOOKING AT PICTURES AND WATCHING VIDEOS ON THE INTERNET FOR FULFILLING THE NEED.

I THOUGHT THE DESIRE WOULD BE LESS AS I GOT OLDER, BUT I STILL FEEL IT...EVERY DAY.

Yeah, HANS, IT'S NOT GONNA JUST GO AWAY. NOT FOR PEOPLE LIKE US.

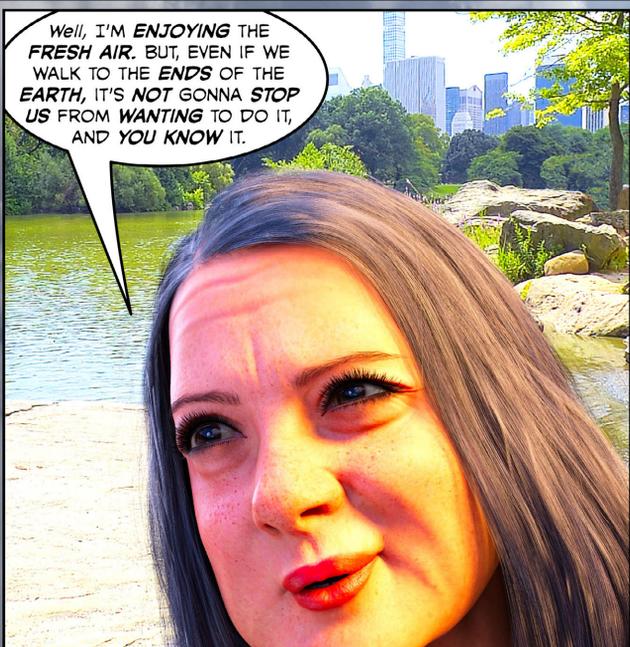
HOW WE EXPRESS IT MIGHT CHANGE AS WE GET OLDER, BUT IT'LL ALWAYS BE A PART OF US.

FOR A MOMENT, THERE WAS A BREAK IN THE CLOUDS AND WE COULD SEE SUNSHINE.



JA, YOU MAY BE RIGHT. AND, IT WON'T SURPRISE YOU TO KNOW THAT BEING AROUND YOU MAKES ME THINK ABOUT IT LIKE CRAZY.

SO, THAT'S WHY WE MUST KEEP WALKING.



Well, I'M ENJOYING THE FRESH AIR. BUT, EVEN IF WE WALK TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH, IT'S NOT GONNA STOP US FROM WANTING TO DO IT, AND YOU KNOW IT.

HANS WAS VERY **DETERMINED**,
THOUGH. SO, WE **WALKED ON**.

FIRST, TO THE **FARTHEST**
REACHES OF **CENTRAL PARK**...

...**SPOTS** I'D NEVER
VISITED BEFORE...

...**DESPITE** COMING
HERE FOR **MORE**
THAN **FIFTY YEARS**.

AND, AFTER THAT,
WE FOUND **MORE**
PLACES TO **WALK**.

Ach, I ADMIT I'M GETTING
VERY HUNGRY. YOU MUST
BE, TOO. SHALL WE **STOP**
SOMEWHERE TO **EAT**?

Well, IT'S A BIT OF A
TREK FROM **HERE**, BUT I
KNOW THE **PERFECT**
RESTAURANT FOR YOU.

IT'S A **CLEAN**,
WELL-LIGHTED
PLACE.

THE RESTAURANT WAS
ALL THE WAY ON THE
OTHER SIDE OF
TOWN, OVER AN **HOURLY**
MORE OF WALKING.

IT'S ABOUT
ANOTHER MILE.

THAT'S MY **OLD**
NEIGHBORHOOD
DOWN THERE...
WHERE I **LIVED**
WITH **DAVID**.

EVENTUALLY, THE **SUN**
DISAPPEARED...

...AND WE **STEPPED**
INTO A **NIGHT** OF
NEON AND **PURPLE**
CLOUDS.



BRINGS BACK MEMORIES?

Yeah, **MOSTLY SAD** ONES.

I HAVE SO MANY **REGRETS** ABOUT THAT TIME OF MY LIFE.



SO MANY.

THERE, THERE, **MÄUSCHEN**, DON'T CRY.

WE'LL GO HAVE A **NICE DINNER** NOW, AND WE'LL TALK OF **HAPPIER TIMES**.



IT'D BEEN **DECADES** SINCE HE'D CALLED ME **MÄUSCHEN**.

AND, IT'D BEEN **THAT LONG** SINCE HE'D **HELD** ME, TOO.

YET, IT **DIDN'T FEEL STRANGE**. IT **FELT RIGHT**.



WE DID INDEED HAVE A VERY *NICE DINNER*.

WE *TALKED* ABOUT THE GOOD OLD DAYS...

...AND, ALSO ABOUT BEING *MIDDLE-AGED*, WHICH WE *AGREED* ISN'T ALL BAD.

WHEN WE *FINISHED* EATING, AND WERE READY TO HEAD *BACK* TOWARD HANS' *HOTEL*, WE *STEPPED* OUT INTO AN *EPIC DELUGE*.

IT TURNED OUT TO BE ONE FOR THE *RECORD BOOKS*.

MORE THAN *TWO INCHES* OF *RAIN* WOULD FALL ON *CENTRAL PARK* IN AN *HOUR*.

ROADS WOULD *CLOSE*.

Y'KNOW, THIS KINDA *REMINDS* ME OF THE *STORM* I *WALKED HOME* IN AFTER OUR *FIRST NIGHT* TOGETHER.

THE *SUBWAY FLOODED*.

TWO PEOPLE IN *NEW JERSEY* WOULD *DIE* WHEN THEIR *CAR* WAS *SWEPT AWAY* BY THE *WATER*.

WE DIDN'T KNOW THAT *YET*, THOUGH. WE *JUST THOUGHT* IT WAS A *LOT* OF *RAIN*.



Well, THAT TIME YOU WERE *ALONE* AND HAD *ONLY MY OVERCOAT* TO *PROTECT* YOU.

THIS TIME, YOU *HAVE ME* TO *HOLD UP* MY "OVERLY CAUTIOUS" *UMBRELLA* FOR YOU.

BESIDES, WE'RE NOT *FRUGAL STUDENTS* ANY LONGER. I'LL CALL A *CAB* TO TAKE YOU *BACK* TO THE *HOTEL* IN *STYLE*.

THEN, I'LL *WAIT* WITH YOU *DOWN* IN THE *LOBBY*, UNTIL THIS *DIES DOWN*.

THIS WAS THE *HANS* I *REMEMBERED*. *EXPANSIVE. CONFIDENT. DECISIVE*. THAT'S WHEN I *MADE UP* MY *MIND*.

NO, WE'RE *NOT* GOING TO *WAIT* IN THE *LOBBY*.

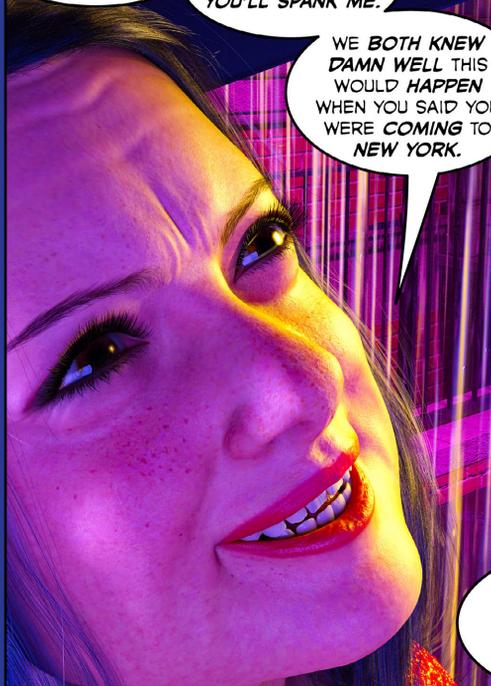
WE'LL *GO UP* TO YOUR *ROOM*, AND YOU'LL *SPANK* ME.

WE *BOTH KNEW DAMN WELL* THIS WOULD *HAPPEN* WHEN YOU SAID YOU WERE *COMING* TO *NEW YORK*.

NO, DON'T WORRY, IT WON'T BE *ANYTHING* LIKE *THAT* TONIGHT.

Y-YOU'RE NOT GOING TO *ASK ME* TO *TAKE OFF* MY *SHIRT*, LIKE THE *FIRST NIGHT* WHEN WE WERE *TOGETHER*, A-ARE YOU?

IT'LL *JUST BE* A *SPANKING*. A *REALLY, REALLY GOOD SPANKING*.



SO, THAT'S HOW I ENDED UP IN A HOTEL ROOM IN 2025, OVER THE KNEE OF MY COLLEGE BOYFRIEND, WHO'D LAST DONE THIS TO ME IN THE 1980'S.

IT DIDN'T START SO WELL, THOUGH. HE WAS SPANKING WAY TOO LIGHTLY. THAT WOULDN'T DO.

Geez. IS THIS THE TENNIS ELBOW THING YOU TALKED ABOUT? OR, ARE JUST OLD AND FEEBLE?

**SMEK
SMEK
SMEK**

This is WNYS. Tonight the theme is six hundred years of roses!



NEIN, NEIN. I GOT SURGERY FOR THE ELBOW LAST YEAR. MY SERVE IS VERY STRONG AGAIN. I WILL DEMONSTRATE.

THWAP!



FORTUNATELY, HE JUST NEEDED A LITTLE ENCOURAGEMENT.



YEOWCH!



There is no rose of swych vertu
As is the rose that bare Thesu.
Alleluya*

IT'D BEEN SO LONG SINCE
I'D BEEN SPANKED LIKE THIS.

ALL MY PARTNERS
OTHER THAN HANS WERE
BASICALLY VANILLAS.

SURE, THEY'D GIVEN ME
SOME GOOD, HARD
SPANKINGS THAT HURT,
AROUSSED ME, OR BOTH.

THWAP!
THWAP!

*THER IS NO ROSE OF SWYCH
VERTU, ANONYMOUS, C. 1420.



THIS WAS
DIFFERENT, THOUGH.

EACH SWAT
MADE A POINT.

IT HAD
INTENTION.
PURPOSE.

WHAT A LITTLE
TEUFEL, TAUNTING
ME ALL DAY!

I'LL SEE TO IT
YOU CAN'T SIT
FOR A WHOLE
WEEK!



BAD GIRL!

THWAP!
THWAP!
THWAP!



THWAP!
THWAP!
THWAP!

THWAP!

AND, THERE WAS STERN TALK
WITH DELICIOUS, DELICIOUS
THREATS. IT WAS WONDERFUL.

BUT, JUST LIKE THE FIRST TIME HANS HAD
SPANKED ME, MY BLADDER BETRAYED ME.



Whoa! TIME OUT!
I GOTTA USE
THE BATHROOM
REAL QUICK.

HISTORY ALSO REPEATED ITSELF, WHEN I CAME OUT OF THE BATHROOM...

THERE WAS A WOMAN LIVED IN THE NORTH AYE, WI THE ROSE AND THE LINDSEY-0

AND, YOU DIDN'T PUT YOUR PANTS BACK ON, EITHER.

GUESS WHAT?

I DIDN'T WASH MY HANDS.

SHE'S COURTED HIM FOR A YEAR AND A DAY AYE, WI THE ROSE AND THE LINDSEY-0

KOMM, KOMM!

*CHILD'S BALLADS #20, C. 1600'S.

YOU REALLY ARE A BAD ONE, AREN'T YOU?

SEVEN YEARS A BIRD IN THE WOOD AYE, WI THE ROSE AND THE LINDSEY-0

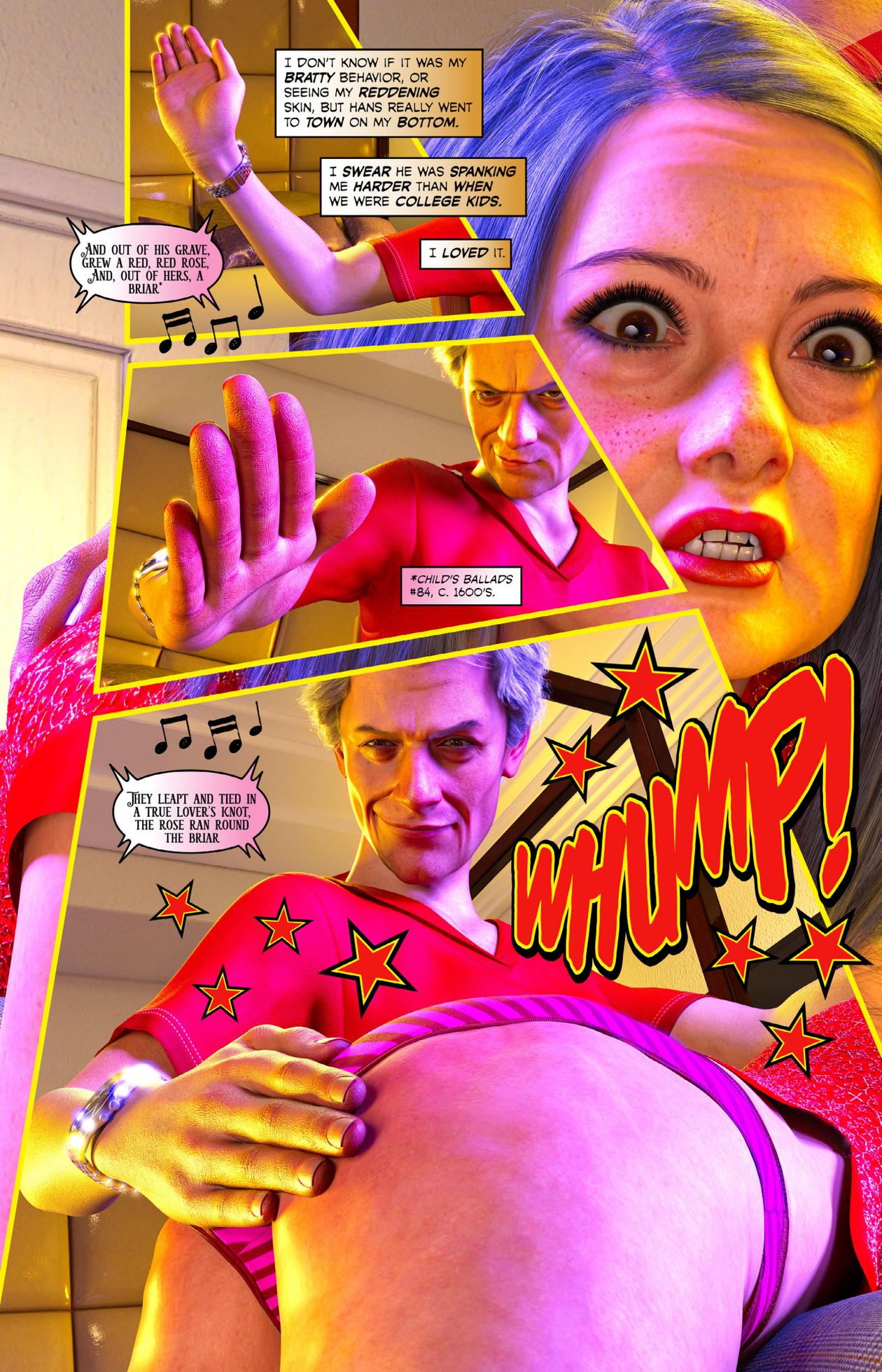
AND SEVEN YEARS AT THE WARNIN BELL AYE, WI THE ROSE AND THE LINDSEY-0

Yeah, I WAS BEING PRETTY BAD.

BUT, HE WAS CERTAINLY SPURRING ME ON.

THE PLAYFUL SCOLDING AND THOSE WORDS, "KOMM, KOMM" IN HIS GERMAN ACCENT WERE UTTERLY MAGICAL TO ME.





I DON'T KNOW IF IT WAS MY **BRATTY** BEHAVIOR, OR SEEING MY **REDDENING** SKIN, BUT HANS REALLY WENT TO TOWN ON MY **BOTTOM**.

I **SWEAR** HE WAS **SPANKING** ME **HARDER** THAN **WHEN** WE WERE **COLLEGE** KIDS.

AND OUT OF HIS GRAVE, GREW A RED, RED ROSE, AND, OUT OF HERS, A BRIAR*

I **LOVED** IT.



*CHILD'S BALLADS #84, C. 1600'S.



THEY LEAPT AND TIED IN A TRUE LOVER'S KNOT, THE ROSE RAN ROUND THE BRIAR

WHUMP!



HE WAS VERY THOROUGH...

...SPANKING CHEEK TO CHEEK...

...THEN RIGHT ACROSS BOTH...

WHUMP! **WHUMP!** **WHUMP!**



MY LOVE'S LIKE A RED, RED ROSE, THAT'S NEWLY SPRUNG IN JUNE*



*A RED, RED ROSE, ROBERT BURNS, C. 1794.

WHUMP!

WHUMP!



...REPEATED OVER AND OVER...

...UNTIL I WAS KICKING LIKE A FROG.



HE KEPT SPANKING,
ON AND ON.

WHAP!



WHAP!

WHAP!

I WAS KIND OF WORRIED IT'D START
FEELING EROTIC, AND I WOULDN'T
KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THAT.



BUT, IT WASN'T LIKE THAT.
IT'S HARD TO DESCRIBE.

IT WAS SOMETHING
EVEN STRONGER.

SOMETHING WAY DOWN
DEEP AT THE CORE OF
ME, THAT I NEEDED.

WHAP!

WHAP!



SOME MOMENTS
I FELT LIKE I
WAS EIGHT...



...OTHERS,
NINETEEN...



...OTHERS,
FIFTY-SEVEN.

Yep, ALL THE ME'S
WERE GETTIN' IT.



WHAP!

WHAP!

FINALLY, HE SET ME ON MY FEET.

I'M ENJOYING THIS MORE THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE.

BUT, MY HAND IS PRETTY TIRED.

ALSO, IT'S GETTING LATE AND YOUR HUSBAND'S PROBABLY WONDERING WHERE YOU ARE.

SO, IS IT MAYBE TIME TO STOP?

HE WAS OVERPOWERED BY DRIVING SNOW AND WITH MOSCOW ALL A-BLAZING HE LOST THE BONNY BUNCH OF ROSES-O

AND THEN HE TOOK AN ARMY AND O'ER THE FROZEN ALPS DID GO HE SAID I'LL CONQUER MOSCOW AND COME BACK FOR THE BONNY BUNCH OF ROSES-O

AND THROUGH TREMENDOUS DANGER GO AND IN SPITE OF ALL THE UNIVERSE I'LL CONQUER THE BONNY BUNCH OF ROSES-O

*THE BONNY BUNCH OF ROSES, ANON., C. 1830.

STOP?!? BUT, I HAVEN'T LEARNED MY LESSON YET.

NEIN MÄUSCHEN, EVIDENTLY YOU HAVEN'T.

AND, I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU CAN TELL ME HOW MUCH LONGER I WILL HAVE TO SPANK THAT LITTLE BOTTOM, BEFORE YOU DO LEARN YOUR LESSON?

I ALREADY KNEW PRECISELY WHAT I WAS GOING TO SAY.

IN FACT, I'D HAD MY ANSWER READY FOR THIRTY SIX YEARS, SEVEN MONTHS, AND FOURTEEN DAYS*.

BUT, BEFORE I ANSWERED, I SLIPPED MY PANTIES DOWN AND BENT RIGHT BACK OVER HIS KNEE.

THEN, I SAID IT.

FOREVER, HANS. FOREVER.

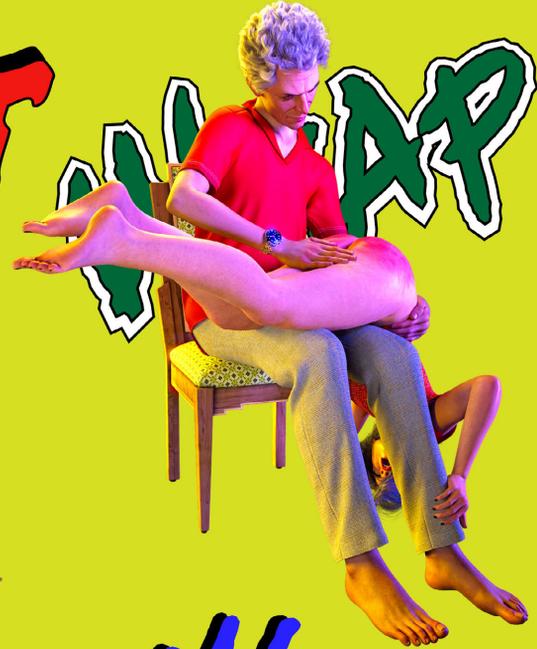
*APOLOGIES TO GGM.

IN ST. HELENA, HIS BODY IT LIES LOW AND YOU WILL FOLLOW SOON AFTER BEWARE THE BONNY BUNCH OF ROSES-O

SPAT



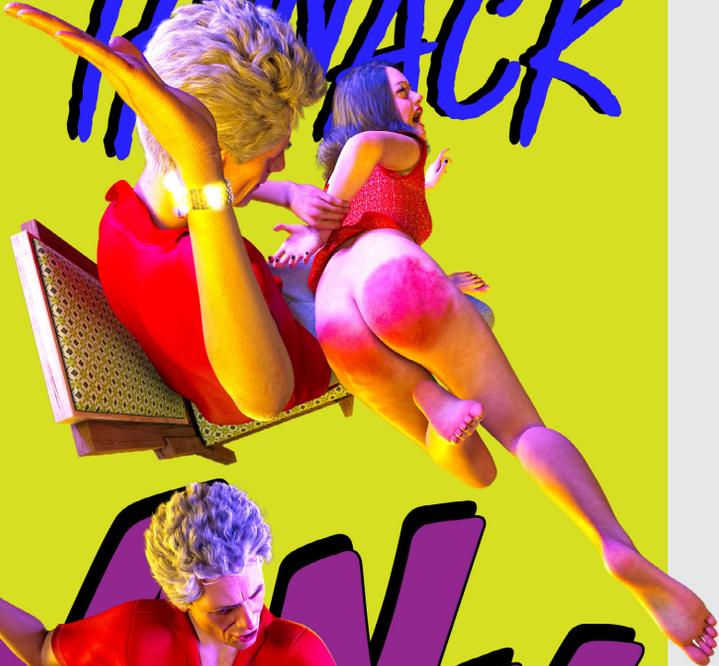
SWAP



CRACK



THWACK



SPANK



THE SPANKING DIDN'T ACTUALLY GO ON FOREVER, BUT IT WAS VERY LONG, VERY HARD, AND VERY, VERY GOOD.



FINALLY, WE BOTH **KNEW** IT WAS **TIME** FOR IT TO **END**.

I **KNELT DOWN** BESIDE HIM AND PUT MY **HEAD** IN HIS **LAP**.

And if it were a song
It would be sung with a
slow and plaintive tune*

I **COULDN'T** REALLY TALK.
I WAS **FLOATING** ON
SOME **FARAWAY** CLOUD.



THEN, I HEARD **CRYING**. AT FIRST I **THOUGHT** IT WAS **ME**. WHEN I'M **DEEP** IN **SUBSPACE**, MY **VOICE** CAN SEEM LIKE IT'S COMING FROM **OUTSIDE** MY **BODY**.

BUT NO, IT WAS **HANS**.

*IT WOULD NOT BE A ROSE,
JOSIENNE CLARKE, 2015.



And if it were a face
It would contain a sadness
you couldn't place

And if it were
the ground
It would pull me in
without a sound



I-IT'S JUST B-BEEN SO LONG...

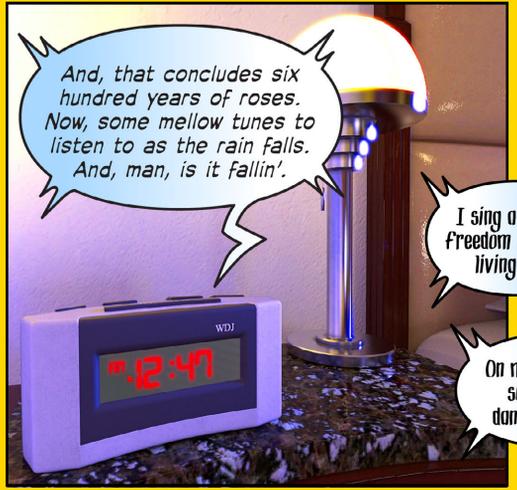
...S-SO LONG S-SINCE I'VE FELT THESE THINGS.



IT'S OK, HANS. IT'S OK.

But if it were a flower
It would not be a rose

I **HELD** HIM FOR A **LONG** TIME.



And, that concludes six hundred years of roses. Now, some mellow tunes to listen to as the rain falls. And, man, is it fallin'.

Across the rolling hills, I come riding With my bonner in the wind, I come riding*

I sing a song of freedom for every living being

On my windhorse at sunrise, we're dancing in the sky

*ACROSS THE ROLLING HILLS, PETER ROWAN, 2010.



Oh gosh, THAT SONG THAT'S PLAYING! I KNOW IT DOESN'T REALLY HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THIS...



...BUT EVERY TIME I HEAR IT, IT MAKES ME THINK OF HOW IT IS TO GROW OLDER.

IT'S LIKE, WHEN YOU'RE YOUNG, IT'S ALL ABOUT CLIMBING THE BIGGEST, HIGHEST MOUNTAINS.



WHEN YOU HIT MIDDLE AGE, THOUGH...



...IT BECOMES THIS LONG, SLOW RIDE ACROSS THESE GENTLY ROLLING HILLS THAT GO ON AND ON.



JA, IT IS LIKE THAT FOR US NOW, ISN'T IT?

SO, WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE'RE REALLY OLD?

DO WE STOP RIDING EVENTUALLY, AND ARRIVE SOMEWHERE?

YES, HANS. SOMEDAY WE'LL GET TO THE OTHER SIDE, BEYOND THOSE HILLS.

BUT, UNTIL THEN, WE'LL JUST KEEP RIDING.

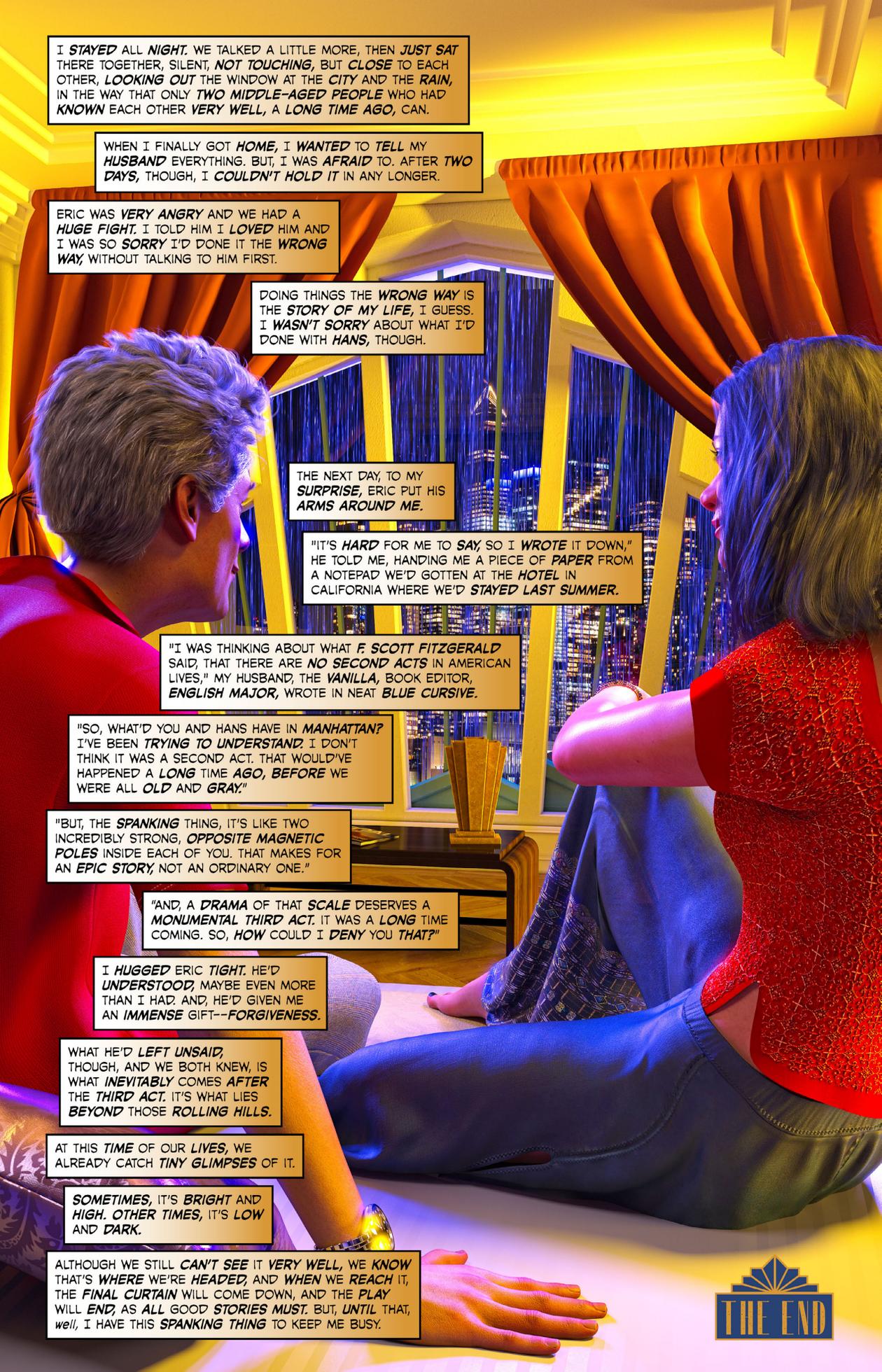
Om Nn Hung Vajra Guru Pema Siddhi Hung Padmasambhava comes riding



Y'KNOW, IT'S REALLY RAINING HARD. HOW 'BOUT I STAY AT LEAST 'TIL IT DIES DOWN?

WE CAN TALK, OR JUST LISTEN TO MUSIC.

I'LL CALL ERIC AND LET HIM KNOW. HE'LL UNDERSTAND.



I **STAYED** ALL NIGHT. WE TALKED A LITTLE MORE, THEN **JUST SAT** THERE TOGETHER, SILENT, **NOT TOUCHING**, BUT **CLOSE** TO EACH OTHER, **LOOKING OUT** THE WINDOW AT THE **CITY** AND THE **RAIN**, IN THE WAY THAT ONLY **TWO MIDDLE-AGED PEOPLE** WHO HAD **KNOWN** EACH OTHER **VERY WELL**, A **LONG TIME AGO**, CAN.

WHEN I FINALLY GOT **HOME**, I **WANTED** TO TELL MY **HUSBAND** EVERYTHING. BUT, I WAS **AFRAID** TO. AFTER **TWO DAYS**, THOUGH, I **COULDN'T HOLD IT** IN ANY LONGER.

ERIC WAS **VERY ANGRY** AND WE HAD A **HUGE FIGHT**. I TOLD HIM I **LOVED** HIM AND I WAS SO **SORRY** I'D DONE IT THE **WRONG WAY**, WITHOUT TALKING TO HIM FIRST.

DOING THINGS THE **WRONG WAY** IS THE **STORY OF MY LIFE**, I GUESS. I **WASN'T SORRY** ABOUT WHAT I'D DONE WITH **HANS**, THOUGH.

THE NEXT DAY, TO MY **SURPRISE**, ERIC PUT HIS **ARMS AROUND ME**.

"IT'S **HARD** FOR ME TO **SAY**, SO I **WROTE** IT DOWN," HE TOLD ME, HANDING ME A PIECE OF **PAPER** FROM A NOTEPAD WE'D GOTTEN AT THE **HOTEL** IN CALIFORNIA WHERE WE'D **STAYED** LAST SUMMER.

"I WAS THINKING ABOUT WHAT **F. SCOTT FITZGERALD** SAID, THAT THERE ARE **NO SECOND ACTS** IN AMERICAN LIVES," MY HUSBAND, THE **VANILLA**, BOOK EDITOR, **ENGLISH MAJOR**, WROTE IN NEAT **BLUE CURSIVE**.

"SO, WHAT'D YOU AND HANS HAVE IN **MANHATTAN**? I'VE BEEN **TRYING TO UNDERSTAND**. I DON'T THINK IT WAS A **SECOND ACT**. THAT WOULD'VE HAPPENED A **LONG TIME AGO**, **BEFORE** WE WERE ALL **OLD** AND **GRAY**."

"BUT, THE **SPANKING THING**, IT'S LIKE TWO INCREDIBLY STRONG, **OPPOSITE MAGNETIC POLES** INSIDE EACH OF YOU. THAT MAKES FOR AN **EPIC STORY**, NOT AN ORDINARY ONE."

"AND, A **DRAMA** OF THAT **SCALE** DESERVES A **MONUMENTAL THIRD ACT**. IT WAS A **LONG TIME** COMING. SO, **HOW** COULD I **DENY** YOU THAT?"

I **HUGGED** ERIC **TIGHT**. HE'D **UNDERSTOOD**, MAYBE EVEN MORE THAN I HAD. AND, HE'D GIVEN ME AN **IMMENSE GIFT--FORGIVENESS**.

WHAT HE'D **LEFT UNSAID**, THOUGH, AND WE BOTH KNEW, IS WHAT **INEVITABLY** COMES AFTER THE **THIRD ACT**. IT'S WHAT LIES **BEYOND** THOSE **ROLLING HILLS**.

AT THIS **TIME** OF OUR LIVES, WE ALREADY CATCH **TINY GLIMPSES** OF IT.

SOMETIMES, IT'S **BRIGHT** AND **HIGH**. **OTHER TIMES**, IT'S **LOW** AND **DARK**.

ALTHOUGH WE STILL **CAN'T SEE** IT **VERY WELL**, WE **KNOW** THAT'S **WHERE** WE'RE **HEADED**, AND **WHEN** WE **REACH** IT, THE **FINAL CURTAIN** WILL COME DOWN, AND THE **PLAY** WILL **END**, AS ALL **GOOD STORIES** MUST. BUT, **UNTIL** THAT, well, I HAVE THIS **SPANKING THING** TO KEEP ME BUSY.

THE END