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Suede
(Excerpt)

The darkness Irvin entered was much deeper than he had expected. He hesitated, pausing momentarily at the threshold. Then he slammed the door and looked around.

He could see absolutely nothing.

He stepped into the cold, sterile, air-conditioned space, shut his eyes briefly and put the bag down. The room remained shrouded in blackness.

He expected the same music he heard outside to be thudding inside. But he could hear neither the dance rhythm nor the infantile melody, nor even the chorus of aroused female sighs. The only things he could hear in the silence were his rapid heartbeat and the low hissing sound of his own breath.

He bumped into the back of the door with his own back, and was surprised by the softness of its surface. He unclenched his fists and buried his fingers into the delicate and supple matter stretched all around the walls.

„Strip. Let’s get down to business. No need for foreplay," he could hear a low female voice somewhere ahead of him.

Irvin’s whole body stiffened. It took him a while to understand the quickly spoken words. They robbed him of all courage. He tried to ignore the rush of blood, but his pulse was racing. He could feel sweat erupting on his temples.

No foreplay straight down to business. He remembered the words. He had seen them on the banner which had led him in here. He couldn’t manage to remember the reason for choosing this one. There had been more offers: *Down or up? A bit on the side. Traditional and bizarre. Physical training without taboo.* And many more.

He looked in the direction from which the girl’s sighs were coming. For so many days now he had replayed this situation in his head, yet the crucial moment caught him unprepared.

„Of course, just a second," he answered. He wanted to add a bit more. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

He was trying to calm down, but his head had a mind of its own. He didn’t move; his hands refused to function. His mouth flooded with sour spit.

He set his teeth, so they wouldn’t start chattering. It surprised him that he became confused this easily. But there was something unusual about this darkness. It was the *sound* of the dark.

The darkness in front of Irvin wasn’t the kind marked by dead reverb and profound stillness. If he listened carefully he was able to perceive something like whisper. Silent rustling... the atmospheric feel of the night breathing... panting and hissing...

No.

He could hear quiet sobbing in the room. It was very weak, almost muted.

Or was this just some kind of weird game?

In this city, he couldn’t be sure of anything anymore. Ever since he left Bratislava a year ago, he travelled constantly outside of Europe. He wasn’t looking for adventure; it was just room to breathe he was after.

Metropolis beat everything he had seen before. This city has flat feet. Everything is flat, made even, adjusted to the common average. There is a heavy smell of sausages, flat beer and soccer lawns in the air.

In this country, sexual revolution had not run its full course as yet; it was very much in progress. As the summer had moved in, the parks in the city centre turned into nudist beaches. In the overcrowded underground a man took off his clothes right in front of him.

Sex does not exist in here; it is actually the feng shui of sex. Instead of masturbation you can get seven levels of satisfaction through reiki massage.

Vaginal balls ben-wa were sold at the post office. You could get suspender belts at the grocery store. Womb became dzhana. A man is Asva, Vrisaba or Sasa. To lay on one's back means to take the position of Indra's wife. Here, making love was approached holistically. Family doctors prescribed men courses of chi-kung for penis.

From the very first day Irvin followed the advice column for lovemaking in the city's most popular daily. The columnist's name was Erica Erotic. She hung her shingle at the Aroused Horst Inn in Horny Street. Seriously.

Right next to her column was a permanent ad run by a pastoral service for people suffering from sex addiction. Twenty thousand of satisfied clients weekly.

Every day a different picture was posted of Erica Erotic next to her column. The Moslem girl in Islamic paradise. The despotic woman in high-heel imitation leather boots. The food tray on offer. The Vietnamese seasonal worker.

To stimulate her readers' imagination, she provided free advice:

Convince her to have herself handcuffed, but don't forget to agree on a password before.

If he longs to be truly humiliated, give him a collar and pull him around like a dog.

In the boiling hot weather undressed bodies were everywhere. Kissing couples. Female tourists groups from Asia. Swimmers on city beaches. Watching them was driving him mad, for they were beyond his reach.

Avoid covering your partner's face with foil when playing - it's dangerous!

After a week he became convinced that even the map of the city concealed something obscene. He would try to read unambiguous invitations in the passing women's glances. In accidentally overheard conversations among girls he would look for double meanings and signs of interest. He expected one of them to whisper something unreal into his ear very soon.

Before sitting on him make sure the office door is locked and the phone switched off.

That morning Irvin knew that he couldn't survive on his own for much longer. In his room he read Erica Erotic's column twice. Impatiently he awaited the evening.

Then he set out.

It felt as if the girl's shrill wail drilled his bones.

„Are you okay?" he asked into the empty space in front of him.

Keep on telling him softly that he had been a naughty boy, good for nothing, and that he needs to be punished.

The answer did not come. There was another sob, louder and more desperate.

Irvin stepped forward. He moved like a puppet. One of his shoes sank a little into something soft. Only then did he realize the floor was made of the same material as the walls. He had to lift his feet to avoid tripping.

„Yes," she breathed. „Sorry, it's not my day today. Come over and help yourself if you want to."

„Are you kidding? I didn't come to rape anyone."

He tried to pull himself together.

„I don't know what's gotten into me. As I was waiting here, by myself, all of a sudden I started crying.”

“Have you been here for long? To tell you the truth, I'm not feeling that perky myself. Pretty bad, actually.”

Having said that, a kind of relief came over him. He breathed out with ease, feeling he could swallow again.

„That makes two of us then,” she whispered. „Will you tell me your name? You don't have to if you don't want to.”

He hesitated whether to tell the truth.

„Irvin,” he answered with a resolute voice, though he had originally planned to use an assumed name.

Give his penis a nice, proud and manly name, but be careful not to use the names of relatives or superiors.

„You could have told me your real name, you know. As for me, if everything goes the way it does now, soon I'll be calling myself Erica Erotic,” said the woman. She was trying to stop sobbing, but with little success.

„If you are Erica Erotic then I am the Aroused Horst from Horny Street.”

„I live in Munich but I'm an intern here during the summer. I'm a journalism student,” the girl went on. She had not stopped crying, but her sobs were much quieter.

„I come from Bratislava. You've never heard of it, but it's a fairly big city not far from Vienna.”

„You are quite right, I don't know your city. But that doesn't mean anything since I don't travel much. Even in my home country I don't feel quite at home. So, what's brought you in here, Horst? I guess it's also your first time here. Or am I wrong? Do you like darkness?”

„I don't know. Ever since I came to this city I've been like possessed. I feel exhausted. What are *you* doing here? Apart from crying and trying to stop...? Can I help you somehow?”

„Probably not. Most likely driving myself into absolute darkness was what I needed. I don't know, I must have been doing something wrong right from the very start. The worst thing about it is that it doesn't seem to be my fault; it just seems as if my life has made a mess out of things all by itself. Do you think one can kill the world and then build a new one?” she asked.

„Sorry to let you down, but I'm probably not the right person to say. If you don't mind, though, we can stay here a bit longer. At least we can have a chat, if you like. I'm paid up for an hour. I've been in town for a few weeks now, but have only managed to say very few words.”

„I didn't say I wanted to leave,” she muttered.

He stopped talking to take a breath and to ask what he wanted to ask. He pretended to have the situation under control and to be in charge of things to come.

„Let's change the subject. Don't take this personally, but if you are almost Erica Erotic, as you say - what's the smell of your kaama-salila?”

The girl laughed, but it did not seem too spontaneous.

„Because I am Ashva, therefore a horse. My sperm is thick and salty, rather like a goat's,” Irvin added.

The girl burst out laughing, louder and more naturally.

„So, your lingam is lustful and sometimes a little lazy. In that case you prefer larger women and you'd probably be disappointed with me. I am Shankhini. The shell. And to answer your question - my taste is distinctively salty.”

Irvin could feel the level of adrenalin rising. How old is this woman and what does she look like?

He stepped forward silently. Moving about in darkness was a bit easier now.

„What do you do all day long? Do you work here too?" the girl asked.

„I should. But I've just been wasting my time until now. I'm a photographer. I got a grant and need to finish a project. In fact, I should start it..."

„Did you bring your camera?"

„Of course, I always bring my camera". The truth was he had completely forgotten about it.

„Do you have a flash?"

„Not a built-in one. But I do have a flash. Why?"

„You could light, so we could see each other."

How come that he didn't think of that before? Maybe he should have done it right at the beginning.

He didn't answer and turned around towards the door instead. At least he sensed the door in that direction.

When he reached the back wall, he knelt down, groping around his feet. It was tricky in the dark. Finding what he needed took a while.

She went on talking.

„Maybe it's just the two of us here. I mean now. No idea how many rooms are there exactly. Maybe it sounds silly, but I'm kind of glad I don't have to be here alone anymore. Perhaps you were a bit startled by the state I was in, but you really don't need to worry. Anything can make me cry. Maybe I'm a bit old-fashioned that way... are you listening?"

He only grunted, busy with something else.

The girl stopped talking.

He picked up the flash and checked for batteries. His heart throbbing, he moved closer to the girl without a word. The only thing he cared about was finally seeing her.

He pressed the on-switch. The flashlight activated with a quiet beep.

Irvin pressed the button.

A sharp flash of light cut through the darkness to the far corner of the room.

She wasn't there!

He turned a bit, confused and pressed the switch again.

There was another flash.

Again, he saw nothing.

She must have moved, while he was searching the bag. Or did she run away? But he would have heard the noise.

He turned quickly and pressed the button again.

The light revealed a person in the far corner.

He stepped forward, pressing hard on the button.

As if in a dark pit he could see ahead of him a fluorescent and frightened pair of dark eyes.

Stroboscopic flashes slashed the space black and white. Irvin was looking at the girl whose naked body was trembling and twinkling before his eyes.

Her pale face was slender, the nose provocatively asymmetrical. Delicately shaped lips were tight and quiet. Details began to appear of the picture he had grasped, clearer and better defined.

In spite of her delicate features there was a kind of threat in her sadness. Her silhouette cast an enormous shaky shadow into the corner of the room.

Only in the last round should you reveal the reason for her humiliation.

He was just about to say something, when the batteries went dead.

The cold flow of visual sensations came to a halt.

Again the room was submerged in deep darkness.

Irvin blinked his eyes, trying to restore his vision. No use.

He tried to find something, anything, in front of him, but all his fingers encountered was emptiness. Frantically he considered the next move. He bit his lips to force himself to concentrate. His imagination worked at full speed, visions were coming in a stream, like his sweat.

„Can I touch you? Don't get upset, please. If you say no, I'll understand and leave."

Begin by deciding who is the doctor, who is the nurse and who is the ambulance-man.

„Come closer," she whispered.

He approached her, so close now he could smell her. Irvin's breath became faster, both breathing at the same pace.

He stretched out his hands, feeling the hot touch of her skin on his fingertips. He took her face into them.

„I am not Horst. And I don't have an idea what they do in Horny Street," he said. „And Irvin is my real name."

He embraced this mirage of a woman. He pressed the palm of her hand and touched her chin.

„But I really am Erica Erotic," she answered.

When she says no, she means yes, and you are not be put off; she is only doing it to turn you on even more.

She was stroking his hair, touching his skull, caressing his neck. The rhythm of their movements became faster, harmonized. She was taking off his clothes.

„What do you mean?"

„My real name is different, of course. But I work for the newspaper. I don't know... at first I had wanted to do something completely different. Long pieces... even books maybe, later... But I haven't gotten round to it so far. At the beginning I probably made a mistake. And after that I jumped on the bandwagon. Here was my chance to work on a successful column. The editor has sent me here. They want the real life stories to be more real than before. Erica Erotic must get much closer to the average person. Our readers demand that the stories must be authentic ..."

„Then give me some advice."

She stuck her tongue between his lips. He felt her hot breath deep in his throat. She was scratching his lower lip.

„Before the quickie on the motorbike in the garage, be sure to off switch the engine and check the exhaust vent. Serve the appetizer on his bare chest, the main course on his stomach and the dessert a bit lower."

He had the impression that he understood everything and nothing at the same time. Her insolent self-assurance annoyed him.

„That's enough. Cut it out! I don't need to hear more of this bullshit!"

„You're the one to be telling me this? Loser, feeling sorry for yourself? Showoff, afraid of the darkness?" she started yelling.

The sudden blow on his chin nearly knocked him out.

„You've been a naughty boy, good for nothing, and you need to be punished," she added.

The sharp pain caused his head to spin. His jaw dropped; he couldn't say a word. She punched him again. Into the chest.

„You didn't have to lie to me, you jerk! I only wanted to be honest with you. I don't believe one word of what you said!" she hissed.

He bent forward in pain, moaning.

„Time we agreed on a password," he said.

He grabbed her wrists. She started to jerk as if wired to live current. Her hair was whipping his cheeks.

He embraced her with more force, pressing her hands down with all his strength. She stopped fighting.

He put his palms on her small, firm breasts. Then he squeezed one nipple tightly between his lips.

He wrapped her arm around his neck. His mind went blank.

„Do you have an idea about what it should be?" she asked.

He could taste his blood in his mouth.

Forgetting the pain from the little wounds, he dug his fingers into the soft material.

„What's the word for the fabric on the walls?" he asked.

He was confused, his forehead about to crack. After a while he loosened the tight embrace.

She leaned towards his ear. Then she quietly said:

“Suede.”

Translated from Slovak by Slava Kaffka