

Budapest

Howard Firkin

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He followed her to Budapest and found her in a dozen forms before he was deported.

She remained in Melbourne and raged against the easy way he left her and enjoyed himself with other women.

He had been interrogated prior to his deportation; so his first weeks home were spent in hospital. He was delighted when she visited to taunt him.

“I have taken a younger lover,” she announced, mistakenly assuming her statement could penetrate the twin gauze bandages of his arrogance and the Valium.

He smiled to irritate her.

“Don’t bother,” she responded. “I’m not interested. It’s wonderful. It’s just a wonderful relief.”

He smiled again and thought of saying that her relief at his absence was a type of presence, but didn’t trust himself to time the pauses correctly, doped as he was.

“What have you done with all my stuff?” he asked instead.

“I threw away all the rubbish, but I put aside all the better pieces...”

She paused clear-headedly.

“...and then I burnt them.”

* * *

Two days later he was well enough to telephone to inform her, in an assumed voice, that he was calling from the hospital with the news that he had died, leaving a will that named her executrix. She did not disappoint him.

“Never heard of him,” she said, hanging up.

Her first reactions were always perfect.

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He appeared at her flat weeks later. She was outraged; her boyfriend was embarrassed and rushed out to the kitchen to make them all a cup of coffee.

“Somebody – oh yes, probably you, you bastard – told me you were dead.”

“Some truth in it, too.”

“What do you want here?”

“Conversation. Let’s discuss why films are so like books and not at all like life.”

The boyfriend set out cups and saucers, a sugar bowl, and milk jug.

“You discuss it,” she sighed, “we’ll have coffee, and then you fuck off.”

“Why is it that filmmakers, when they’re free to introduce anything at any time, or to change anything or betray every expectation at any time, why do they persist in stories, characters, plots, structure? They should be as free as in dreams. They don’t need logic, they don’t need events, causes. Film should be effects, effects without a cause.

“Take my appearance here. If this were a novel, I would have to be introduced, named, someone would have to have let me in. But if this were a film, there should be no need for all that... machinery. I could just appear, without need for explanation.

“Yes, you can probably name a couple of avant-garde filmmakers who try to free themselves of plot and logic and so on, but what are their films like? Boring. Nonsensical. Why can’t we accept such films the same way we accept dreams? Dreams don’t need a plot. Dreams don’t need characters. We’ve all had dreams where people change into other people. Why would we walk out of a film that had shifting characters and no plots? We find dreams fascinating. Why couldn’t we recognise them as film, recognise our dreams?”

"That's an interesting point," began the boyfriend.

"Don't," she interrupted. "He's full of interesting points. They all lead to three a.m. and hangovers. Drink your coffee."

"Let the boy talk," he smiled, and continued. "You, because you are the young boyfriend, you appear in jeans, no shirt, no shoes."

"You," he went on, turning to her, "are smoking a cigarette and watching me through half-closed eyes."

He stood up and began moving around the coffee table.

"I stand up and begin moving around the coffee table. I have been in hospital, so there is no inconsistency in my pulling a scalpel from my pocket. I must have stolen it."

He took the scalpel from his pocket and placed in on the coffee table in front of the young man.

"But the point is surely that if this were a film, it would not require that I had just been in hospital. There would be no implausibility if that were never made clear. It shouldn't matter. We wouldn't question it in a dream. In a dream, motive would remain unclear. We can rule out jealousy."

He stood behind the boyfriend who nervously took a sip of coffee, his eyes darting to watch her, looking for reassurance. Unseen, he drew a large, bone-handled carving knife out of his sleeve.

"I stop behind the boyfriend who nervously takes a sip of coffee. He turns to face me, and somehow sensing my intention, he starts to rise, and as he stands and turns, I stab."

He pushed the knife in until his thumb was inside the young man's flesh. He slashed upwards and across, slicing through skin and fat and muscle and peritoneum and intestine. The young man fell across his chair and onto all fours and saw his giblets fall steaming to the floor. He couldn't move. He stared and shook uncontrollably, and then fell into his own offal.

She couldn't comfort him as her young man died. He stank. She had the carpets steam cleaned, but the smell remained.

He fled and chased her back to Europe, intending to recover her in Budapest where the exchange rate, women for dollars, was favourable, but he was arrested in Vienna passing badly coloured greenbacks.

The smell was something like the smell of skinned possums, but stronger. It contaminated her clothes, her flat, her hair. She wrote to him in gaol in Austria while he awaited extradition and he replied, continuing the unsatisfactory correspondence they could never abandon.