

That Which Was Lost

by

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That Which Was Lost

Christopher D. Ochs

Kurt wasn't sure of what he wanted more – to kill the bride, the groom or himself. He stood at the reception bar, spending equal time mooning over the bride, scowling at the groom, and grimacing at his reflection in the mirror behind the row of liquor bottles. When he could no longer stand the sight of the dejected figure staring back at him, Kurt reached inside his blazer to feel the reassuring heft of the handgun secure in its pocket, then slugged down another bourbon.

With each gulp, the same three emotions did a laborious waltz inside Kurt's head. “How could she do this to me?” rang the first notes of the sorry melody. “That bastard!” added the syncopation, with “What a gutless wonder I am,” filling in the discordant harmony. The lamenting refrain was completed by Kurt's wincing recollection of how spinelessly he held his peace when the damnable question was asked at the altar.

Down went another jigger as the bride's bouquet sailed into a sea of laughter surrounding an island of squealing, grabbing women. A storm of electronic flashes danced about the reception hall, coursing into the adjoining barroom.

That last shot of liquid courage did the trick. The little voice inside Kurt lamented the usual stupidity, that in its sickened symmetry still somehow made sense – “They'll all be sorry when I'm gone.” He mumbled a reply only loud enough for himself to hear, “By the power vezted in me, Kurt zhall eat hiz Baretta.”

Catcalls and wolf-whistles sang out from the ballroom as a blushing teenager pushed the bride's garter up a cougar's thigh. Kurt squinted at himself in the barroom mirror to avoid another cascade of

soundless white explosions from flocks of dodging and weaving cellphones. But even Kurt's blurred vision managed to catch the reflected flash of light that leaked around the edges of the coatroom door behind him.

Everything about the stranger who emerged from the coatroom was *wrong*.

The newcomer battled his way through an army of coats and empty hangers, wearing an outdated, though immaculate, tuxedo complete with spats, veined onyx cuff links and matching studs. His Van Dyke came to a point sharp enough to draw blood, and his hair was groomed flat with something undoubtedly toxic from your grandfather's barber shop. The man's *wrongness* was completed by a long fob chain attached to a monocle over his left eye.

Scanning the room of men and women engaged in heightening or dulling their celebratory spirits, the stranger brushed himself off as if there were no question that he blended in, then sidled into an open space next to Kurt.

The bartender uttered a noncommittal but polite, “Whadllya have, sir?”

“I think a True Death would be most apropos,” the dapper fellow piped up as he rapped the bar.

“Sorry sir, I don't know that one. What's in it?”

“You know, I'm not quite sure,” the newcomer chuckled with embarrassment. “How about a Pandora's Box?”

“Umm, I'm afraid not.”

“A Mary Pickford? I haven't had one of those in ages, it seems,” he mused with a half-smile stubbornly beaming out.

“Nope.”

“A Penicillin? Scofflaw?”

The man rattled off an ever-lengthening trail of cocktails that neither the bartender nor Kurt had ever heard of, each answered by another apology and a shake of the head. Unfazed by this ignorant mixologist, the affable sartorial penguin took it all in stride. His patient smile turned to jubilation when he finally made a selection that the

bartender recognized – the humble gin and tonic.

“I was about to despair. Then it occurred to me – any joint with a bathtub should have an ample supply of juniper juice.” The stranger accepted the drink, and flipped the bartender a fiver produced from his vest pocket.

“Hey, what's this?” the bartender griped as he held out the crisp paper bill with blue numerals.

“A silver certificate, my good man. Legal tender at any bank,” the stranger quipped. He remarked aside in confidence to Kurt, “Assuming they still exist.” The bartender shot the stranger an annoyed glance, but stuffed the bill with an off-colored Lincoln in his pocket as he scurried off to serve another patron stumbling in from the reception hall.

“Here's mud in your eye,” the stranger toasted his own reflection. But rather than imbibing the drink, he held it under his nose and inhaled deeply. He closed his eyes as he took in the aroma of the lime, gin, quinine and bubbles. He set it down and exhaled a loud and satisfied “aahh” like a man emerging from a refreshing swim.

Kurt watched the unfolding display with curiosity. The newcomer turned to Kurt and offered his hand. “Ponsonby's the name, finance is my game,” he said with a hungry smile.

Distracted from his grisly resolution, Kurt returned the stranger's handshake by sheer habit.

“Mine'z Kurt, Mizzer Pozzibee – Ow!” he yelped as an electrical shock coursed up his arm. Kurt shook his head – not from the echo of pain thrumming in his hand, but from the sensation of instant sobriety.

“It's Tanner, actually. Ponsonby's my *first* name, Kurt. Sorry about that, but Inanna cannot abide alcohol.” Ponsonby held up his hand, fingers splayed to show a silver disc in the center of his palm. He then pointed to Kurt's right hand. Kurt looked down to find an identical disc fused into the flesh of his own palm.

A fresh tune blared from the ballroom, followed by cheers and singing by scores of tone-deaf revelers. Ponsonby yelled something at Kurt, though not quite loud enough to make it over the din. Kurt responded by raising his hand to his ear and yelling, “What?” Ponsonby

grabbed Kurt's wrist with his left hand, grasping Kurt's hand a second time with the other.

Disc touched disc.

A waterfall of white noise flowed over Kurt. The two men stood facing each other in a featureless and quiet gray expanse, still clasping each other's hand. A few paces away to their side stood a figure, obviously female but only roughly humanoid, as if she were hastily sculpted out of white clay.

“There! Now we can hear ourselves think—quite literally,” Ponsonby sighed with relief. “Kurt, allow me to introduce you to our kind but inscrutable hostess, Inanna.”

Kurt looked at the featureless figure, which turned her ovoid head to face him. His first reflex was to run. He tried to tear his hand out of Ponsonby's grip, but the only part of himself he could move was his head. So Kurt decided to do the next best thing—scream.

“And before you ask, I don't know what she is or where she came from,” Ponsonby interrupted in a voice as calming as a gentle rain. “Be she a Babylonian goddess, a vast and cool intelligence from another planet as Mr. Wells so famously postulated, or a mortal woman from some far-flung future, she is not forthcoming.”

“Where are we? What's going on?” Kurt finally squeezed out.

“Inside our own heads, is my best guess. And we shall stay here as long as our discs are in contact. As for why we're here, that's a tad more complicated. Not to worry, we've plenty of time.”

“Let me go!” Kurt demanded. He repeated the command, along with several ultimatums peppered with torrents of four-letter words.

“I cannot let go of your 'fucking hand,' as you so eloquently put it, because it isn't really there. We're actually still at your watering hole, between ticks of the clock. You're stuck here – at least, until you've heard Innana's proposition. After which, you're free to accept or decline her offer.”

Kurt cursed again, remonstrated, tried once more to will his hand to let go, then cursed some more.

“Really, old man. If you're quite through,” Ponsonby patiently

scolded, as he waited for Kurt to finish. Kurt halted in mid-obscenity and wide-eyed fear, as the roughly hewn golem took a step closer. She leaned toward Kurt, examining him with her nonexistent eyes.

“There, that's better,” Ponsonby chuckled.

Kurt felt his brain scraped by something akin to sandpaper, and caught the hint of a siren voice beckoning from a bottomless chasm. The figure stood erect again, turned to Ponsonby and shook her head.

“Oh dear, bad show,” Ponsonby frowned. “Innana brought me to you, hoping you were the one she seeks. Now that you are here, and she's had a chance to examine you directly, she knows you unfortunately are not.”

“The one? The one what?”

“Again, I do not know precisely. Innana does not tell us everything. She is looking for someone—someone like you, someone like me. Heartbroken and on the verge of suicide. Sadly, she has little else to go on. Innana has searched the world over, and across countless ages. The depth of her loneliness and desperation, which makes our meager problems pale by comparison, would crush any mortal soul. How long she has been pursuing that which was lost, no one can tell. But now she can no longer do it alone, and she needs our help. All you need do is accept or decline her request for assistance.”

Kurt glanced skeptically between the pair. “What do I get out of this?”

“Innana offers you a fresh start, an escape from your fate. If you agree, Innana will take you to the next person she hopes is the one she seeks. Wherever she sends you, she promises it is a time and place where you may fit in. It is up to you to do what you will with the opportunity, whether to fail or flourish.”

“What if I don't agree? I was doing just fine 'til you came along,” Kurt growled with the best poker face he could muster.

“Then you will find yourself back where you were, none the worse for our little tête-à-tête,” Ponsonby nodded with a smirk telegraphing he bought none of Kurt's bravado. “Just as intoxicated and morose as we found you.” Ponsonby removed his monocle with his left hand, depositing

the lens in his breast pocket. “Free to do yourself in with that not-so-inconspicuous toy you have squirreled away,” he snickered as he patted his own breast pocket. “I would then continue on to the next locale, proceeding in your stead, to extend to some other poor soul the same offer you declined.”

“Hey—you can move!” Kurt tried again to wrest his hand from Ponsonby's hold. His neck muscles tensed in sympathy, but nothing else budged. He suddenly relented as a glimmer of reason flashed to timid life. “Wait a minute,” he ventured, the arrogance in his voice evaporating. “You were going to cash in the chips, too?”

“Oh yes, quite. The market was crashing, and I had lost not only my entire fortune, but also that of my betrothed's father. There was no way on God's green earth he would permit our marriage, as things stood. I had lost everything and everyone. Just before I was about to step out my office window, a gentleman wearing the most peculiar garb grabbed my hand. You can guess the rest, I'm sure. If I had declined the offer made by Innana's representative, I do not doubt that I would have soon been nothing more than a red splotch on the sidewalk below my twelfth-floor brokerage.”

Kurt looked down at his feet for the longest time. He turned to find Innana tilting her head inquiringly at him.

“All right,” he began in measured syllables. “Let's say I believe all this, and it's not all some blackout dream. Then what...”

“Then what do you have to lose, Kurt?” Ponsonby finished his sentence with a tinge of impatience.

“That's not what I was going to say. Then what do I need to do? Click my heels three times, and say 'There's no place like home?’”

“Not quite,” replied Ponsonby with a quizzical look. “It's as simple as saying, here in the quiet of our consciousness, 'I accept' or 'I decline.' We will both then find ourselves back where we met, and we can both be on our merry but separate ways. I will go to discover the wonders that await me in your world, and you carry the baton to Innana's next prospect.”

Kurt inhaled to bolster his resolve then whispered, “I accept.”

Inanna nodded once. Kurt perceived something on her otherwise featureless face that might have been a gentle smile, and a sigh of gratitude that echoed from nowhere yet everywhere. The sterile gray room washed to a brilliant white, and the momentary roar of waterfalls was drowned out by whoops and hollers in rhythm with wild and energetic dance music.

Ponsonby released his handshake. Kurt looked down to his own hand to find both discs stacked like magnets in his palm.

“What now?” Kurt yelled over the pounding music with a lost look of utter confusion.

Ponsonby leaned close to Kurt's ear and shrilled, “Find a small enclosed space, and go in. Innana will do the rest. Anything will do, a broom closet, an elevator, or even the way I came.” Ponsonby grabbed the gin and tonic and took a huge gulp. “Ye gods, I needed that!” he exploded with an ear-to-ear smile.

Ponsonby led Kurt to the coatroom, dodging a small knot of partygoers that had wandered in for drinks. He opened the door, then from behind the doorjamb, picked up a small black attaché case that matched his shoes. “In you go, my friend. First, you'll spend some time with Innana. She'll prepare you for your assignment, explaining everything you need to know, but little else. Then you're off to who-knows-where. One last word of advice—be ready for anything.” Ponsonby pointed at Kurt's jacket pocket. “You just might need that infernal device where you're going. Innana does everything for a reason. But trust me, you'll be just fine when all is said and done.”

Ponsonby had a queer smile as he peered inside his valise, stuffed with reams of paper. One sheaf poked out, its label declaring “Bearer Bonds.”

“I wonder of these are worth anything,” Ponsonby mused. “Say, old man, is Coca-Cola still around?”

Kurt returned Ponsonby's smile and nodded his thanks. He crossed the threshold, ducking under the coat rod and closing the door behind him. Kurt welcomed the blinding waterfalls.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher D. Ochs' foray into writing began with his epic fantasy *Pindlebryth of Lenland*. His short stories have been published in the *GLVWG* and award-winning *BWG* anthologies and websites, and by *Firebringer Press*. Using his skills learned with the *LVS*, he crafted a collection of mirthful macabre short stories, *If I Can't Sleep, You Can't Sleep*. His latest novel is a gritty urban fantasy/horror, *My Friend Jackson*, a Finalist in *Indies Today's* Best Books of 2020.

His current projects include: two sci-fi/horror novels *Sentinel of Eternity* and *No Place Like Home*; a prequel novella and a second novel in the *Pindlebryth* saga.

Chris has too many interests for his own damn good. With previous careers in physics, electrical engineering and software, CGI animator, classical organist, voice talent on radio, DVD and OTAKON, it's a wonder he can remember to pay the dog and feed his bills.

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