

Somnambule Ballads

by

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The bedsheets lay in a wrestled slump of folds and twistings at her feet. Jhennya couldn't sleep. Thoughts colliding, her heart stabbing with a hollow tick . . . tick It was true; the doctor has said so. She was pregnant.

The doctor could be wrong. She was almost forty and her life had formed its pattern. Evenings alternated between the Greek and Arabic cafes where Jhennya sang for the dollar tips that customers tucked into the low neckline of her embroidered blouse. Days were a mixture of shopping trips, walks in the park, lunches with friends, visits to museums, and gossip in the delicatessen.

The doctor must be wrong. She was almost forty and a woman who was almost forty couldn't be pregnant. The doctor had made a mistake.

But this doctor wore a white lab coat and spoke with a voice of authority. He was neither too young nor too old. He wasn't a doctor who made mistakes.

Jhennya hefted her body on its side and lay, her eyes round stones staring at the shadowed wall. She pressed thoughts into her head, thoughts of Russia and listening to the gypsy songs of her grandmother; growing up a gypsy girl, swimming in the Black Sea. She tried to remember one of those songs. She had loved to listen to her grandmother sing them, and later, had loved to sing them in her own matured voice of nut-spiced sherry. But Russia was long ago and all those gypsy songs, fragments of eggshell now. Her mind aborted them.

Relax, she told herself. Let your legs fall limp like heavy ropes; let your body fall like heavy ropes, limp and asleep.

Her eyelids drooped, and immediately she thought of him.

Something inside felt like solid ice dropping in a vacuum.

Her body groaned and twisted the other way. The old mattress squeaked like a chorus of crickets, then sagged.

Fahrzad. The name was dark obsidian, heavy with hidden mysteries and incense rising in curls of smoky musk. That was Fahrzad.

She had met him a few months after coming to Hyannis, several years after leaving Russia to live with friends in New York. Hyannis. She spit the name out of her mouth. Hyannis had not been her idea. Friends had invited, begged, and finally persuaded. "Come to Hyannis," they wrote her. "It is spring here and full of clean blue air. The city is too old. It drains you, wears you down." At first she had said no, but it was spring and she had begun to feel older than the city and as worn as the shoes she dragged across its pavement every day. So she came.

It was the end of July when she met him. She was at the Blue Dolphin Restaurant, drinking muscatel with her girlfriend. When the Greek music began, they got up to join the line dance. Somewhere in the snaking line of the dance, in and around the tables of the cafe, a man with hair as dark as Persia opened the chain and slipped himself into Jhennya's left hand. She had been caught up in the rhythms of the clay drums, the ripple and quiver of loud strings, the motion of the dance and her earrings, a metallic rush of tiny muffled tambourines beneath her earlobes. She hadn't noticed him.

But when the dancing was over, he came to their table and told her she was more beautiful than red and amber liquors in dance. Her laugh bounced lightly. She thought him another flattering Greek with too much ouzo in his blood. But his eyes were clear and penetrating.

He ordered a bottle of wine and sat down at their table. Later, when her girlfriend went home, Jhennya stayed. They finished the bottle and he drove her home.

August was wild flowers growing along the marshes. Jhennya felt like feldspar in the sun. She felt green and young and yellow as a sunflower ready to bloom.

Those were the days when they would splash in the ocean and he would lift her into his arms, carry her past the edge of the tide, and drop her into the cold water. And she would

squeal and flap and fume at him, her mascara smudged into eyeshadow. And those were the days when he would take her for a ride in his sportscar, driving like a frustrated race track addict, while she bumped on the seat, bracing arms on the dashboard and laughing.

But it was October now, and Jhennya was in New York, alone. Hyannis seemed like a dimensionless scenario from some impossible romantic novel. Hyannis, her stomach knotted at the thought of it.

She had remembered her grandmother's stories of traveling in a caravan, loving and fighting her way all over Russia with her husband. Jhennya had left Russia before a marriage could be arranged for her. She had wanted the single, independent life of America.

But she was almost forty and her independence felt dried and old. Her grandmother had raised baby after baby along the road. When Jhennya asked how she had borne it, her grandmother smiled and answered, "Many children, much luck." That was a gypsy proverb. And Jhennya had almost believed it. In Hyannis. With Fahrzad. She had suggested taking up the road with him one weekend when he had to go to Boston again. But he said Boston was business and she would be bored.

Her friends had tried to tell her about Fahrzad, but she called them vicious gossips, jealous shrews. Until she found out about Fahrzad herself. Boston had not been business. He was seeing a belly dancer. Jhennya saw him with her, a blond girl of twenty-two. The next day when she confronted him, he was casual and distant. Yes, he saw the girl frequently. So what? Jhennya raged. Lamps and ashtrays crashed into the walls of her apartment. The next day, she made arrangements to return to New York.

Jhennya slumped onto the corner of her mattress. "I am going to have your child."

The words fell hollow in the room. Silence skewered wads of cotton into her ears. The city rumbled outside her window.

There were abortions every day in the city. Hundreds of them. They were statistics that poured down the rain gutters

and into the sewers. Another component of the city's sludge. One more or one less would make no difference.

Her grandmother had once been a young girl, pregnant and unmarried. She had been frightened because it was her first time and because she thought her father would shoot her. She had wanted to run away from her own body. But she was a gypsy, born beside a caravan, rocked in a horse collar, and suckled by a mare. She eloped with one of her suitors and raised the baby, proud and strong.

The mattress groaned as Jhennya let her body droop across it. She stared at the light fixture on the ceiling until she saw spots of blue and purple. Then she flicked off the light. Darkness sank in around her eyes. Her mind numbed and she dozed.

In the morning, she made a cup of coffee and sat down to drink it. Her hair was rumpled with sleep and her eyes circled with grey ashes. Jhennya felt old. She was not a gypsy.

