

*donga* is an exciting project. It shows just how dynamic and engaging an online journal can be. In a short time [it became] very much a part of the writing scene

– Ivan Vladislavić

too original to be easily replaced  
– Lionel Abrahams

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/* when link is clicked */
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On Saturday I bring Mark and we play tennis. I serve. Glide over the court, arms moving low to high the way you're meant to. He smashes with aborted strokes and crooked elbows but in the end he beats me. I chew on my lip in the car driving home. Pull in my cheeks and check my reflection in the rear-view mirror. My face is thin and my hair is sticking to my temples.

Mark comes home early. He says he wants to talk. I say not now because I'm only half way through my yoga exercises. I'm still wearing my gym clothes - the thin vest and shorts when I join him in the lounge. My stomach is flat and my legs are long and slender. I scratch at a small scab on my knee while he talks.

He leans forward and lowers his voice. He tells me that he's worried, he doesn't know, I seem distant, detached. His voice is soft and deep. I hear it float over me. I close my eyes and imagine that I'm at gym. That he's my trainer going through a new routine. After our talk I agree to try harder, to be more emotionally present, to be more physically present.

That night he undresses slowly. Takes my hand, pushes it towards his dick. I bite my teeth together and jerk him off. Flick my wrist up and down like I'm beating eggs. I don't do it fast enough so he reaches down, pushes his hand in under mine. Now he's jerking himself off. He tilts his chin back, his hand is beating - so fast it's a blur.

Just before he comes he stops, pulls himself up onto his knees, aims his cock so it's pointing at my mouth. He starts jerking again. With his other hand he touches my face. Pushes his index finger into my mouth and I suck on it. Sticks another finger in and starts moving it up and down. I keep sucking and flicking at the fingers with my tongue. He's got his whole hand in my mouth now, his other hand beats at his dick. His breath comes in rasps like he's about to come. He doesn't come.

He pulls his hand out and pushes his cock against my lips. It scrapes against my teeth and I mumble sorry. He starts rocking his hips. His dick bounces against the back of my throat. I gasp and break free. His face is red and his eyes are pinched. "Mind if I spit?" I say. He shakes his head and I take his dick back in my mouth.

## STEPHEN HOFSTÄTTER

### The Princess and the Pauper

#### One

It all started with that phone call. Funny to see it like that now, sitting on a tomato crate, slats worn smooth by his arse, watching the world go by. But that's what did it, what brought him here, to this patch of grass, all those years ago. A phone call out of the blue. Mind you, it was no ordinary phone call. He could still hear those shrill rings, growing louder and louder the longer he lay in bed trying to ignore them. He could still see the look of amazement on his face as he stood in front of the hall mirror staring now at the receiver hopping about in its cradle, then at the instrument's chord dangling uselessly from his white and shaking fist. Yes, at that moment he knew it was no ordinary phone call; that this was no ordinary day.

Now Zorn Abraham was what you might call a typical product of his age. He had been brought up to doubt everything and accept nothing at face value, to regard doubt itself as the cardinal virtue. Naturally this had left him with a rather suspicious nature. But if someone rang you up on an unplugged phone and said: "Morning [insert your name here], God here, there's something I'd like you to do for me," you would be forgiven for thinking the old rules didn't apply anymore. And the same courtesy should be extended to Zorn, because that's exactly what happened to him. It's all very well saying Zorn should have doubted the bona fides of his caller — but then, well, he would have had to doubt he was standing there at all. And where would that leave him? Zorn decided to give his caller the benefit of the doubt.

"Er (polite cough), what is it, er... God?"

"Now listen carefully" — as if he was dozing off or something! —

"I want you to take the first road out of the city ..."

After he'd replaced the receiver Zorn sat down and let the whole thing sink in. How odd. God, whom Zorn had airbrushed

out of existence, was not only alive and well and getting people out of bed on Saturday mornings — He actually had a plan for him. And not the sort of plan Zorn would have expected from the Supreme Being either, presuming he'd ever expected such a thing in the first place, which until that moment would have been unthinkable.

It involved a princess who lived in the Purple Mountains and liked to dance in the snow when organ music wafted down from their lofty peaks. But after she'd lost one of her silver slippers at a village ball she'd suddenly grown afraid of the cold and decided to leave the mountains. Now she longed to dance again and sat at her window all day pining for her slipper.

That's where Zorn came in. He was told to travel to the village, find the slipper and return it to the poor princess. God had given him precise instructions on how to get there. But when Zorn tried to press his caller for details of the princess' whereabouts, He had obstinately hung up. All He would say is if Zorn found her when the clock struck four she would remain true to him forever and ever, amen. But He warned Zorn he would only see her if his heart was open to the strange savagery of beauty, for she was the loveliest creature alive. Phew! Talk about a tall order and all that! The Purple Mountains, so-named because they turned purple in the late afternoon sun, were a vast rampart of knotted kloofs and gorges barely visible from his balcony, even on a clear day. Getting to the village would be taxing enough. Once there he had no idea how he should go about locating the slipper. Should he knock on doors, make discreet enquiries in the streets, or go straight to the authorities? They could hardly be expected to know how to handle a request like this. Then there was the small matter of tracking down the princess. And even if he managed to find her, how could he be absolutely sure she was the right person? It was all very confusing, and for three days and three nights Zorn employed various strategies to try to evade the issue altogether. Day one — a rational explanation: the whole thing was a weak joke, no doubt played on him by a colleague he'd snubbed recently and who resented Zorn for going on sick

leave at a time when there was a major backlog of work to get through at the office. This theory couldn't explain how an unplugged phone had managed to ring, but anything's possible these days, Zorn reasoned. And anyway, he wasn't about to get bogged down in details just yet.

Day two — denial: nothing had happened. In a moment of lightheadedness, caused no doubt by his overwrought state of mind recently as well as a mild dose of spring flu, he'd dreamed the whole thing up — possibly even for the very reason that he wished to grapple with a concrete dilemma instead of this vague sense that his life wasn't going anywhere. So there was nothing to worry about, really. It was time to get on with being alive and stop allowing himself to be rattled by the minor psychological disturbances which plague everyone from time to time.

Day three — studied indifference. So God wanted him to lock up his flat, scour the Purple Mountains for a bit of fancy footwear belonging to some or other princess, then wander the earth like a deranged pilgrim until he found her? So what? Who cared what God wanted? Zorn, truth be told, simply didn't give a damn. And to prove it he would just sit tight and do absolutely nothing. Eventually he'd forget about the whole thing.

On the fourth day Zorn realised it was useless trying to evade or even postpone the inevitable. Hadn't Jonah, the Hebrew prophet sent to preach fire and brimstone to the decadents of Nineveh, gone to extraordinary lengths to evade His will? And where had that left him? Utterly alone among shifting sand dunes, coughing up brine and gasping for breath, begging the ocean for another sign, that's where. Zorn was keenly aware it was ridiculous to compare his predicament with Jonah's, that his destiny, if you could call it that, was simply to fulfil a princess's wish to be allowed to dance again. Admittedly, God had hinted there might be something in it for him too. Still, it wasn't as if the fate of an entire city rested on his shoulders. And nowadays, Zorn thought, it was hard to believe even the fate of one other person could hinge on your actions. Hell, even the notion that his own fate, presuming such a thing existed, could be influenced one way or

another by what he did or didn't do was hard to swallow. To Zorn it seemed simpler either to abandon the concept of fate altogether, or, if his life was predetermined, simply to let it take whatever course it was meant to and not bother too much about his role in the whole affair. That didn't quite solve his current conundrum, but by now he'd reached the point where any course of action was better than dwelling on the issue any longer. Even if it meant submitting to divine caprice.

## Two

Later, much later, the sky turned grey. Through the leafless trees that lined the road and clawed at the sagging sky Zorn could see vast fields of corn, trembling stems bent under the weight of silent golden bells. A thin wind was speaking to him through the twigs, whispering in snatches. Soon darkness would settle on their sharp tips.

Zorn arrived in a village nestled between two highland spurs as the sun's last rays faded from red rooftops. The people he passed averted their gaze or shrank into their hooded cloaks as they hurried by. After a while Zorn found himself standing in front of a squat red-brick clock tower, gay and prominent like a mosque against the grey unplastered houses in the heart of the old town. The clock showed it was just before four. Topping the tower, he noticed, was a stubby spire with what looked like a weather vane now pointing this way, then that.

Then something else caught his eye — a figure flitting to and fro past the only open doorway in sight. Zorn approached and saw a slender young woman in a black dress that almost touched the ground pouring some liquid into a small flagon. He watched her set it down near the doorway and, without looking up, turn abruptly on her heels and disappear down a long passage. Zorn decided to go after her, noticing as he crossed the threshold the look of horror on the faces of the villagers hurrying home. The flagon had by now filled the hall with an exquisite fragrance, and when he caught up with her she was lighting two giant incense sticks mounted like medieval torches on either side of an entrance

to another room. After strewing rose petals on the floor her wide brown eyes met Zorn's for the first time.

She pointed first at his shoes, then to an old monk rocking to and fro on his haunches next to a brocaded cushion against the far wall. He was muttering into a long pointed beard, his hands forming a prayer, but the moment Zorn sat down he looked up and laughed, gesturing towards an inner chamber with his cupped hands. There, on an elaborately embroidered cushion below a recessed statue of the Virgin Mary lay what looked to Zorn like an old, mud encrusted boot. Zorn glanced enquiringly at the old man, but his laughter and gestures just grew wilder and more emphatic. Zorn took the hint; it wasn't a silver slipper, but it would have to do. When he returned with the boot tucked under his arm he looked at the old man again, who by now had sunk back into his guttural chants and incantations, but he simply waved Zorn out, giggling and guffawing loudly into his beard from time to time.

Outside it was dark and gloomy; an icy wind swept through the village and soon fat raindrops began to fall. Zorn noticed a faint light burning in the distance, the only sign of life in this long narrow lane. He hurried towards it, hoping he would be offered shelter for the night. It was the young woman from the chapel, holding a candle that cast long shadows up a wall Zorn now saw belonged to a quaint whitewashed cottage with blue shutters. The door was open. He shivered and held up the boot, and that was enough. Without exchanging a word they tumbled onto a large feather bed, her skirts hiked high above her knees as he buried his head between her thighs, tossing the boot unceremoniously into a dark corner.

The next morning he dressed quietly and lit a cigarette at the window. The clouds had scattered and the sullen villagers lined the streets again, some slowly going about their business, others simply squatting in front of rain-streaked walls, hugging their cloaks against the biting wind that swept down from the mountains. He turned to watch her. She was breathing deeply; a lock of hair trembled above her nostrils and parted lips as he imagined

it had done throughout what for Zorn had been a long sleepless night.

When at last a ray of sunlight strayed across her face and she clenched her hands into little balls and opened her eyes with a yawn and a stretch Zorn turned to look out the window again. It seemed to him that no matter what cataclysmic upheaval befell the world, whether drought, floods, pestilence, the archangel of death or the second coming of the Messiah, these people would still be here, rubbing their bony shoulders against chapped plaster, muttering bitter complaints or prayers of appeasement to the inscrutable forces that had condemned them to stoically endure this wretched existence.

By the time he managed to tear his gaze from the window she was gone. He only heard the door slam afterwards, like an echo, and by then she was already hurrying down the lane, almost at the chapel in fact, her black hem just beyond the reach of the dust that swirled and hovered at her feet.

There was no need to go after her; Zorn knew her disenchantment was complete. For the night before she'd whispered to him as they lay in each other's arms that she'd read of his coming in a book — many books, in fact. She could show them to him if he liked; they were all at the local library. Some were even illustrated. Oh, he looked different in each story; he would see that right away. But that didn't matter. For henceforth in her mind she would see his face in those pictures. She hastened to explain that the old man — who was in fact the church caretaker, not a monk as his get-up suggested — used to taunt her for believing what he called "silly nonsense tales"; that the ritual at the chapel Zorn thought he'd chanced upon was in fact an elaborate masquerade, a trick they played on every young stranger who happened to pass through the village. It was easy enough to accomplish, for everyone was immediately drawn to the clock tower; all she had to do was cross back and forth in front of the doorway and sooner or later the intended victim's curiosity would get the better of him.

Hadn't he noticed the disapproving glances of the villagers as he entered? They'd been meant for her, not him, because she

used the chapel and its objects of worship as her playthings when the priest was away. The old man had suggested the game to her after he'd grown tired of listening to her incessant prattle about knights and princesses. At first she'd thought it cruel, to her and her potential suitors.

But she had come to enjoy it nonetheless. After all, it was simply a harmless diversion; her real passion was the church, her convent, her Maker. Which was why her eccentricities were generally tolerated.

"It was harmless fun . . . harmless fun . . ." she'd murmured. But with Zorn it was different. There was something in his eyes, a glint that made him look almost as though he was guided by a higher purpose, and after leaving the chapel she suddenly decided there was no reason why, after all, that higher purpose shouldn't be her.

By the time she mumbled these words she was so close to sleep she no longer heard herself. Zorn had gently stroked her cheek and brushed back the lock that kept falling over her eyes as she slid into unconsciousness, oblivious to the horrified look that for the rest of the night had replaced the apparent beatitude in his eyes; oblivious, that is, until the next morning when she saw him sitting at the window looking at the bent scarecrows lining the street. For she had dreamed that night that she had joined a travelling troupe of entertainers, a circus really, only there weren't any animals, and at first, so she thought, no curiosities at all, nothing to attract the crowds. Until one day, crossing a flyover into a foreign city, she saw a giant billboard — so large, in fact, if stood vertically it would have covered a 60-storey skyscraper.

At first she barely noticed it as the circus convoy ground past in the late afternoon traffic, thinking, if anything, it was simply another advertisement for aftershave or underwear. Then she recognised the face staring out over the endless lines of fuming cars on innumerable highways snaking into the city: it was an advertisement for their show, featuring a picture of her. Only, it wasn't her face at all; at least not the way she liked to recall it: her dimples had turned into what looked like craters or rock pools

choked with rotting seaweed; her eyes were two Moray eels, their scaly beaks baring row upon row of sharp teeth, just visible outside their ocean crevices; and her body, though slender, stooped under the enormous weight of her head, which was shaped like a giant golden bell. By now the traffic had ground to a standstill, and she saw someone in the opposite lane wind down his window and follow her gaze, then turn to her with a look of horror; yes, and pity too, but mixed with an indescribable kind of tenderness, even love; now she saw row upon row of car windows wind down, row upon row of faces staring at both her and the billboard in pure hatred, but when she turned to look at him again she saw that his eyes had never left her face, that he still wore that same expression, carried that same dreadful pitying tenderness in his eyes. Then the golden bell which was her head began to chime, but without emitting a sound, and she woke to see Zorn sitting at the window watching the villagers, saw him turn slowly towards her, wearing the exact same look of horror, pity and tenderness as the man in her dream.

When Zorn left the village he did not look back; he knew she'd be deeply engrossed in her devotions, in trying to find that place in her soul small enough for her to feel whole again.

The path he chose — leading, like the one that had brought him here, directly off the plateau on which the village was built, but this time dropping from the end of her lane — wound down the mountain past terraced vineyards and vegetable gardens. To Zorn's relief the air, though still refreshingly cool in the morning sun, was gradually beginning to thaw. And rounding a sharp bend he suddenly saw an inviting valley lying at his feet. Flanked by shady groves that thinned on the higher slopes, and dotted with gardens, it was generously watered by a wide muddy river fed by numerous sparkling streams. Slinging the old boot over his shoulder he set off down the steep path at a jaunty trot while high above him mischievous chariots chased green birds across a mildly elated sky.

### Three

Above the steady crunch of dry leaves underfoot Zorn heard a tinkling sound, like water falling. It was carried through the trees on a warm breeze that brought with it the fragrance of roast meat and spices, and a gentle hubbub, growing louder. The wood began to thin until Zorn came upon a large clearing bordered by a dense hedge about five feet high and two feet across, neatly trimmed. At the centre of the clearing was a statue of Leda and the Swan. The creature's beak was drawn wide open and emitted a thick jet of water that rose 10 feet into the air before returning to earth in a lazy arc that glittered in the early afternoon sun.

Zorn followed the hedge until he reached a narrow opening of about four feet across. But instead of entering what he assumed must be a private garden he found himself plunging into a maze. After continuing for a distance along a gravelled path which seemed to lead directly to the statue he was suddenly forced to veer left in a wide semi-circle that brought him to a kind of crossroads. Now he could either keep going straight ahead, turn right in the direction of the statue, head left in the hope of finding a shortcut out of the maze, or even retrace his steps, for he was not yet lost. But when he looked up at the swan snaking its neck around Leda's supple thighs, breathed in the fragrances and the occasional violin strains wafting over him, he knew he had already made up his mind.

The gravel path took him deeper and deeper into the maze but every time Zorn felt sure he must soon stumble into what, judging by the deafening din, was a festive gathering, he reached a dead end. Nevertheless, Zorn did not feel disheartened. For by looking carefully he was always able to find a small gap in the hedge, which without fail led in a semi-circle to another crossroads. Zorn realised he was tracing a spiral, with the swan at the centre.

The final gateway was guarded by two fierce looking men with curved daggers at their belts, barring the way with crossed halberds.

For a moment Zorn thought he had negotiated the maze in

vain, but as soon as they become aware of his presence they snapped to attention and smartly raised their halberds to reveal what was indeed a curious scene.

Around the statue was a large moat in which couples reclined on craft which looked just like giant tropical leaves. They trailed their hands in the water while oarsmen dressed like bellhops in red livery complete with tails, so that Zorn could have sworn they resembled grasshoppers, propelled the little boats with paddles mounted at the stern. A chamber orchestra was seated on a floating platform held in position by an ingenious if cruel innovation. For each corner had a goose attached to it by means of a rope tied around its legs; the platform was held in an uneasy equilibrium by these geese trying to fly off in different directions, their beaks snapping uselessly at the sky as their furious exertions brought them ever closer to death. At the rear of the platform, under a giant fan driven by the water flowing from the statue, Zorn saw a young boy dressed in a pale blue robe sitting crossed-legged and singing the same high-pitched plaintive note over and over while systematically tearing pages from a large book and throwing them into the air. The fan blew these sheets over the heads of the musicians, who snatched them at random and began to play a few bars until another sheet caught their eye.

The moat itself was surrounded by a large semi-circular table on trestles, piled high with an array of delicacies such as Zorn had never seen before. There were hog's heads set on giant silver salvers, stewed eels in ceramic bowls, quails and ortolans laid in neat rows, soup tureens under Bunsen burners, roast fowl of every description; grapes, strawberries, litchies piled high, surrounded by artichoke hearts, peppers, caviar, roast nuts, salted pomegranate seeds, pastries and bakes. Small groups of guests twirling champagne glasses and engaged in animated conversation stood within arm's length of this sumptuous feast, reaching over for a morsel every now and then.

So engrossed were they, Zorn thought his arrival had gone unnoticed.

But he had barely crossed the threshold (whereupon the

guards crossed their halberds again so that it sounded like a door clangng shut behind him) when a dwarf in black rags brandishing a tiny violin rushed up to Zorn and propelled him to the table, attacking his instrument in a wild frenzy from time to time. The dwarf insinuated Zorn into the midst of a group of revellers; two women trailing ribbons and golden curls immediately tugged at his sleeves and caressed his chapped ears with butterfly kisses, while the rest clapped gleefully at their performance. Extricating himself with difficulty Zorn stumbled backwards — his erstwhile companions bidding him farewell with small, ironic waves and frozen grins — into a fat man who spilled port over his white dinner jacket, tut-tutting indignantly. Zorn tried to wipe it with a grimy checked handkerchief he found in his pocket, but the fat man waved him away in disgust and waddled off, whereupon he was swiftly intercepted by a naked young woman who took him grunting with satisfaction to the moat, laid him on his back in one of the little boats which just barely managed to stay afloat, and proceeded to unbuckle his trousers.

Now Zorn noticed that all the couples in the moat were in fact in various states of undress. Then the boy singer raised his voice a pitch or two and suddenly Zorn heard groans and sighs coming from all directions. He looked around him and it was as though the garden had been invaded by an army of maggots swarming among the trestles. For at his feet he saw a sea of writhing limbs, so closely intertwined he found it difficult to distinguish one person from another, to link this or that breast, bobbing knee or arched foot with this or that face in the throes of ecstasy. At the tables soup tureens, animal heads and bowls of fruit were sent flying; in the moat naked couples danced and copulated in knee-deep water while the boy's voice grew thinner and more high-pitched, the musicians snatched more wildly at the sheet music he flung at them in ever increasing ferocity, and even the swan seemed to disgorge its cargo of water with greater force.

Zorn wandered among them like a trench war survivor wading through the tangled limbs of the dead, and suddenly he felt something grab his ankle. He thought of those geese, flying still,

their wings beating harder and harder until it looked like they might tear their limbs from their bodies; and even now, as he felt his trousers drop, felt his sex eye staring deep into the soft cave mouth of the nymph looking up at him with beautiful green eyes — even now he was at the point of drawing back, of refusing, denying even, what he did not have the strength to refuse or deny. Instead he flung aside his boot and leaped on her like a man possessed, mounting her from behind while the dwarf forced his mouth open to pour wine down his throat, then took up the violin to parody Zorn's cries of ecstasy.

Zorn woke feeling dull and heavy. It was dark already but from where he lay he could see the green hedge illuminated by a strange yellow glow surrounding him like a horseshoe. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. Everyone else, indeed everything, seemed to have vanished — except for a yellow marquis. As his eyes grew accustomed to the light he caught sight of the swan's head protruding from the tip of the tent. So that's where it's gone, he thought. The geese, too, had been profitably employed. Their beaks, still attached to their now lifeless and blood-flecked bodies, had been driven into the ground to serve as tent pegs.

Gradually Zorn made out swaying forms silhouetted against the canvas. The dance, naturally, had to continue — this time to the liquid drum-'n-base beats of the night.

He kept watching them like that — circling, advancing and retreating; caressing and parting; spurning and embracing — kept trying to decide whether he should steal out of the garden now, before it was too late, or once more succumb, succumb because the imperatives of the flesh seemed at that moment no less noble than those of the spirit. But gradually a feeling of sadness came over him, for it struck Zorn that these shadows were condemned to describe the same gesture, over and over, to eternity. There wasn't the slightest tremor of compassion or even understanding passing through that accumulated wall of flesh, just the dull, empty throb of blindly repeated desire. It was the dance of death, of the dead.

He looked at the wine stains on his bare chest and shoulders,

the snail tracks down his thighs left by sex juices long dry; at the bloodstained geese and the yellow-green walls which imprisoned him, and suddenly his sadness was replaced by a kind of nausea. Scooping up his clothes and his boot, Zorn made for a gap in the hedge, which mercifully led directly out of the garden, in search of a stream to bathe in.

He found a small pond by an oak tree surrounded by a thicket. Using a fern frond he scrubbed his body, then stretched out under the oak. He lay there a long time, watching the moon through the branches, the leaves trembling in the breeze.

The sound of a twig snapping nearby, followed by a patterning of footsteps, jolted him out of his reverie. He dressed quickly and went to investigate but after a fruitless search sat down on a rock to catch his breath. It occurred to him then that he could remain sitting there even after he'd caught his breath. Long after. In fact, he could sit there from sunrise to sunset, day after day, week after week, and it wouldn't make the slightest difference to himself or anyone else on this earth. Except perhaps the princess. He'd almost forgotten her by now. And why not? It took an effort to convince himself she was still out there. But if she was, then he held it in his power to make her wish come true. All he had to do now was find her. He supposed it was worth a try, if only because at this point nothing else was. Zorn was making his way back to the pond to retrieve his boot when he knocked the elf over. She was a vision. Her eyes were warm and gentle like a foal's and an enticing pair of pixie ears peeped through her long straight hair, which was streaked with henna that glinted in the moonlight. He helped her to her feet and she immediately turned to go with a frown of annoyance. Then she hesitated a moment to allow herself a half smile and slowly made her way to a gravel path nearby, casting Zorn an inviting backward glance. He fell in beside her and they continued side by side, engulfed in a warm comfortable silence.

It was clear to Zorn she did not regard him with indifference either. Her hips trembled with suppressed excitement at every footfall and her shoulders heaved as though every breath she took

were a small sigh. Every now and then a gust of wind flared her hair into fine strands that drifted gently down to the nape of her exquisitely carved neck. They walked slowly, the gravel crunching rhythmically under their feet; in the distance a sparrow let out a sharp cry that rang into the night.

The path meandered through the thicket and took them back to the pond where, it seemed like hours ago, Zorn had bathed. They stopped under the oak. Around them they could hear small stirrings of life now; overhead a smudge of morning grey coloured the sky.

When she looked up at Zorn she shivered as she drank in that strange power of her magnetism and the sudden knowledge that she was, after all, capable of utter abandonment. Then the sounds around them died and all they heard was the hoarse gasping of their breath, the galloping of their hearts. Zorn knew he must kiss her now.

Something approaching a frenzy of urgency gripped them both, yet they remained rooted to the spot. At last Zorn felt his body grow shaky and he drew closer; he seemed to be moving further and further off balance until he was convinced he would topple over.

Quickly, blindly, he struck out and an instant later his arms fitted snugly into the curves of her body, drawing her nearer still. Her breath was like a divine mist, not the distilled fragrance of perfume but something more fundamental — like the flower itself. The instant their lips touched he ceased to tremble. When Zorn allowed the world to wash over him again she was watching him with a lazy, satisfied smile, her dark mysterious eyes dancing with delight. He lifted her up and laid her down gently on the soft grass, curling up beside her and burying his head in her downy neck. Later he would ask her to try on his boot; this time he was sure it would fit. As he closed his eyes he heard four faint chimes sound in slow succession.

When he woke up she was gone; nothing remained of the enchanted glade where he'd kissed her. Behind him a dog was scrounging for scraps in an overturned bin. The mutt stopped

to eye Zorn suspiciously; Zorn glared back. Then he spotted his boot. It was perched prominently on a rock so that Zorn could not fail to see it. When he picked it up a small piece of paper which had been wedged under the sole fluttered to the ground. Zorn felt his heart hammering against his ribs. Despite his upbringing Zorn remained prone to that curious type of optimism which interprets the smallest bit of encouragement as grounds for hope. But after he'd turned that scrap of paper over ten, twenty times, he knew it was futile. Not only did he have no right to ask her to try on his shoe: he'd been ordered to go. He was the one who'd just been passing through last night. She'd delighted in his chance arrival in her world, but now it was time he was on his way.

Just then he heard a shrill whistle. And sure enough, just past the oak tree Zorn saw a long line of blue carriages. But wait! There was the marquee! Last night... the pond had seemed so far away, so remote and secluded... yet here he was, a few paces from where he'd started! He heard the whistle again, louder this time. Zorn needed no more prompting. He gave the dog a hefty kick in the ribs and ran to catch the train, waving at the conductor with his boot in one hand and the ticket she'd left him in the other. Minutes later he sat watching gardens bleached white by the harsh light of day sliding past his window.

#### Four

As the train raced ahead ivy-clad picketing gradually gave way to barbed wire guarding used-car lots and factory yards with loading ramps, then long brick walls topped with broken glass and brightened by the occasional splash of graffiti. Zorn was entering the industrial outskirts of a great city. Then, without warning, his carriage shuddered violently and the train screeched to a halt. Zorn leaned out the window just in time to see the last commuters disappear in the distance. On either side, stretching for what seemed like miles, was a platform made from compacted earth baking in the sun.

So that's His game, thought Zorn. The princess was just a ruse to get him to this desolate place, where neither roof nor tree

offered shelter against the sweltering sun. Now he would have to plead for mercy and forgiveness, or beg to die.

Zorn looked at his boot and again it occurred to him to refuse to submit to His will. But what could he do? Stay in the train in the hope that some day it might start up again and take him one stop further? Search it from end to end in the hope of finding the conductor? The engine driver? Demand an explanation? An apology? But hadn't he seen every last soul vanish into the distance? Wasn't it the conductor in fact, one of the last of the stragglers, who was engaged in a jovial conversation with a man who looked very much like an engine driver? The man who, seeing Zorn crane out the window, turned to wave at him with his cap before disappearing out of sight (rather a comic gesture, it must be admitted, like a slapstick actor's)? He even considered running after them. After all, they must have been going somewhere; why shouldn't their destination be good enough for him? Were they so different after all?

But he knew it was no use. Hadn't Jonah tried to flee from the presence of the Eternal by flinging himself on the first ship to set sail from Tel Aviv? Zorn couldn't shake the image of Jonah being thrown overboard by his terrified crewmates, into the black, heaving waves where the whale lurks still, mouth wide open; winking at the mermaids and eels swimming by. Later, when his second call came from the Eternal, the old fool knew what he had to do.

As Zorn alighted he heard a splash. It sounded as though it came from the platform, but there was no one in sight. Reluctantly he advanced, but the platform seemed to expand with every step he took. Walking backwards now he saw the train was just a thin blue line on the horizon, yet he seemed no nearer those splashes, the only sign of life here, his only hope, however slim, of finding his princess.

He stopped and turned just in time to prevent himself falling off what looked like a precipice, causing a few clods of dry mud to tumble into the depths below. Immediately a foul stench rose to meet him, but its origin lay in the deepest shadows. It reminded

him of the rotting scraps the dog had eaten for breakfast. But there was something about the smell that was somehow more familiar, somehow closer to him, somehow more... more human.

Then he noticed a tiny set of stairs to his right, cut into the mud wall. With great care he picked his way deep into the pit. What seemed like hours later he reached the metal rungs of a ladder fixed into a sheer cliff, forcing him to turn his back on the splashes growing louder as he neared the bottom. Now he could swear there were moans too, soft piteous moans too exhausted by anguish to salvage the slightest shred of solace from the approach of death.

His foot at last pushed past the final rung, flailing helplessly for a moment in sheer nothingness. Then he saw he was but a few feet from the bottom. All that was required was a short jump.

When he turned round he gasped. For in front of the narrow strip of earth under his feet were hundreds upon hundreds of sunken tanks running the length of the platform and spreading deep into the darkness. And each and every one as far as he could tell was inhabited by an enormous woman immersed up to her waist in water, each carrying a baby strapped to her back with filthy swaddling.

They paid no attention to him, so absorbed were these sunken Madonnas in scavenging for crumbs and rotting insects the West wind had swept into their lair, first feeding their infants before shoving what remained through their own rotting gums. And when the threadbare swaddling split and snapped, causing its sacred cargo to slip silently under the water and drown instantly, too starved to struggle or even cry out, each Madonna would try to scramble out, preferring death by starvation on the dusty platform to death by drowning in the prison that had nurtured another Son of God. But none ever made it out. For although they found the strength to clamp an elbow over the rim of their tank, the moment they raised their torsos they found no purchase on the smooth sides; day after day of immersion in that putrid swamp had caused their feet to melt like wax in the sun. Zorn looked at his boot as their dangling strips of flesh and soft bone slapped

and clicked pathetically against the sides until they lost the little strength they'd mustered and slipped back into the water next to their babies' lifeless white bodies, slowly starving to death with only a pair of nostrils protruding from the slime.

He tried to shut his eyes, but their moans could not be silenced. He tried to close his ears, but the stench forced its way up his nostrils. They remained, always, there again as strong as the first time, stronger now and more terrible, nothing could ever wash them away now, nothing could ever make him clean.

Zorn felt his legs buckle. He sank into the dust, crying: let me die of starvation here even as they rot and fester, grow soggy and pale. But the more he tried to die the stronger his heart pounded, the louder the wind roared through his lungs, the shriller it whistled through his nose.

Then he tried to shut out the din of life itself, but the tighter he closed his ears the louder the thunder grew. And now it roared like a tornado, a tornado which refused to burst his eardrums but swept away all the dead wax so his hearing was sharpened a thousandfold. And when the volume became unbearable Zorn began to roll around in the dust, beating himself with his boot, crying to the Eternal: Why, why, oh why? Why hast thou led a thirsty man to a poisoned well? Led a lover fainting from tenderness to a corpse already stiff and cold? Why? Why? He kept beating himself like that, striking at his skull, his shins, his groin, trying to inflict a mortal wound but knowing deep down he would never be able to extinguish himself.

At last Zorn subsided. When he heard the conductor's whistle he didn't even turn to look back; he dragged himself up that shaky cliff, up and up onto the tiny stairs that led him back to the edge of the precipice; away, away, across that vast earthen platform and back onto the train that was empty, still, but the conductor was waiting for him, it was his train, the same train, blue, there was one more stop, and they were moving already, leaving those gasping Madonnas behind to die in their ghastly ravine of pain.

Zorn hardly noticed the scenery now; he hardly cared. The

next stop would be his terminus. There was nothing he could do. Nothing left to do. His submission was absolute.

Before long the train rolled into a vast vaulted station, silent and empty. When he got off he heard a thin piping sound, like a girl's voice singing fragments of a half remembered song. He crossed into a large marbled forecourt lit by high skylights. At the centre sat a small boy. A single shaft of sunlight illuminated his yellow locks, creating a kind of halo. Zorn walked straight up to him. He held a rattle in his right hand and was shaking it solemnly with eyes downcast while chanting in a strangely reassuring rhythm words Zorn couldn't understand.

Then he looked up and Zorn saw in those eyes such forgiveness, such compassion and understanding, that he gasped and almost dropped the boot in his hand, involuntarily tightening his grip until his fingers turned white. The child smiled and raised his rattle, pointing. Zorn turned and saw he was standing in front of a giant portal, a fitting frame for a church spire which towered over the urban tangle outside the station.

It didn't take him long to find the church. It was built on a low grassy mound and surrounded by a bed of snow-white daisies, with a magnificent spire which seemed to disappear in wisps of cloud turning orange in the afternoon sun. A few crows circled overhead.

Then he noticed the giant stained-glass window over the main door. It consisted of a large circular panel depicting the church itself, surrounded by four smaller circles, each describing a scene that, if viewed clockwise from the bottom left, formed a kind of narrative.

In the first a woman imprisoned in a stone tower seemed to be singing while her long flowing locks spilled down the wall through the bars of her window, filling the foreground. There they became golden fields of corn, meandering rivers and a long road on which a man was walking. In the second the man had found some company and appeared to be twirling the prisoner's tresses around his dance partners.

In the third he was climbing the tower using the girl's hair

while she cut it with an enormous pair of scissors. The last panel showed him sitting at the foot of the tower looking up as though he planned to wait there until her hair had grown long enough to reach him.

Zorn looked at the central panel again as the church organ began to play, and just at that moment a ray of sunshine struck the stained glass that formed the spire, causing it to emit a faint purple glow. The next moment the doors swung open and a crowd of parishioners spilled onto the grass. He stepped aside to let them pass. There were mostly old men and young women. Some of the women walked arm in arm in twos or threes, others tugged at each other's pretty floral dresses stretched tight over pregnant bellies or at the sleeves of T-shirts with logos emblazoned across heaving breasts; some walked on rubber platforms mounted under their soles, others wore translucent sandals that magnified the soft hairs on their feet; some even went barefoot, with tiny bells tied round their ankles.

When they'd gone he sank into the soft grass under his feet and let his head rest against the sun-baked stone, happy to remain there until woken by the call to matins. A stillness had settled in his soul at last and, clutching his boot, he fell into a deep satisfying sleep as the church bells tolled four times.

That was a long time ago — so long, in fact, that Zorn has very little hair left on his head now, just a few silver tufts above his ears, although he does sport a flowing white beard he twirls between his toes when the weather is nice and he can afford to take his shoes off.

But every afternoon, come rain or shine, Zorn returns to that church to sit on a tomato crate donated by a nearby grocer and rattle his boot at the parishioners as they walk past.

Some take pity on him and toss a coin into his boot. But they misunderstand his gesture. True, the money does allow him to buy the food which gives him the strength to drag himself back to that garden, to that church surrounded by a moat of snow-white daisies, and watch the glass spire in its stained glass window glow purple, and the slim clouds slowly turn orange around a

crow infested tower.

But that's not what brings him back here day after day, year after year.

For Zorn knows that one fine day one of those princesses will sit down next to him, hike up her skirts and let them flow down around her hips. Then she'll grab his boot, empty it's contents over his head and try it on her delicate foot, laughing as she ladders her stocking.