

TO LIVE OR NOT TO LIVE

It was the row with Alkis that did it. If her life up till then had been a camel's back awaiting one last straw, he was it. And it wasn't even *her* life that got her involved in a row with him. She did what she had always done since she was a child: she had butted in on a bully who was being rough on an unequal opposite. He was shouting at the woman the neighbourhood called 'Sad Mary'. He had her cornered, her back to the wall. Tight in her arms a little Chihuahua, as frightened as its mistress, was barking its boggle-eyed head off at him. Putting out her dustbins, Sofia witnessed the verbal attack. Passers by had looked at the pair but had walked on. No one had intervened, although it was obvious from her posture that Mary was terrified of the man jeering her. Sofia yelled,

“Leave her alone, you bully.”

He turned his head and Sofia thought, not for the first time, “Minotaur”. The man had a bullhead and shoulders, his mind as thick as his body. He sneered at her.

“Mind your own business.”

Sofia went and put an arm around Mary saying gently, “Take Jose home, darling.”

Jose had been named after a character in a Mexican TV soap opera shown on one of the local channels.

“Yeah, go on, take Jose home to piss and shit all over your house, freak. Only filthy people let animals in their houses.” He yelled after her.

“That make you feel like a man?” Sofia wanted to hit him. “Our people have lived in animal and fowl shit and piss up to their ankles for generations, but now that we have money in our pockets we play the aristocrats?”

“Does it make you feel like a man to shout at a man? Why don’t you have a man in your life? Are you a lesbo?”

“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size? You know poor Mary has problems with her nerves.”

“Ehh, like you? And you know why? You both need a good fuck.” He could say that about Mary, what filth was he?

“Better to be without a fuck than to be married to one like you. How your wife stands the whiff of your smelly armpits in her bed, Christ knows. God alone knows what your bloody crotch stinks like.”

Sofia, seeing that Mary was now safely out of range, started to walk off. He grabbed her arm and twisted her towards him, his face made uglier by fury.

“Don’t touch me, you. Put one hand on me and I’ll call the police.”

He sneered harder, “And they’ll take you for the crazy menopausal dope you are.” He nodded towards where Mary had gone, “Show me your company...”

“Better to be crazy than stupid and insensitive like you.”

He raised his hand, dying to hit her; that made her smile.

“Go on, I have witnesses.” She inclined her head to a couple of people getting out of a car, who had paused to watch.

He let go of her arm and stalked off, muttering obscenities to himself. When she went back indoors, Sofia started to cry. Mary had a reason to act ‘crazy’ but not her, not in public anyway. Her last modicum of self-control now gone completely, once she had

started swearing in public. She wasn't afraid of Alkis. She had grown up in an extended family where most of the menfolk, her father being the exception, thought that women were there for their convenience; she was no stranger to being pushed around, but Sofia had never been afraid to push back. Mary was a wreck and through no fault of her own. During the war she had been brutally raped by five soldiers. She had been a mere schoolgirl. Her father had tried to intervene and they shot him. Mary had watched his blood flow into the hot earth, heard him moan in agony from a stomach wound as she lay on her back being pumped full of semen, her thin, tiny body suffering pain and torment that would become forever ingrained in her memory as five brutal, grown men in sweat-wet and dust crusted uniforms had abused her in the searing heat of a July noon. They then pissed on her, aiming for her mouth and walked away laughing, leaving her to die as she tried to crawl to her dead father. Mary survived. Alkis knew why Mary was the way she was, but he didn't care; she was a plaything to him, a helpless victim, a source of amusement. Sofia knew that he would be like those who had raped her if he ever got the chance. If he was ever thrown into war, he would indulge his cruel streak to the full.

"Minotaur." She cried to the back of the door, "A beast disguised as a man. Where are you Theseus that you don't come back and kill the bastard and all the others like him?"

In truth, it wasn't even the row that had driven home the final thorn in her psyche, one of thousands that years of sadness had riddled her soul and mind with. It was the fact that she recognised how aggressive she had become in the world outside her home. Up till then she had been able to control her temper, not any more. She kicked things that got in her way, she found herself grinding her teeth when annoyed, hitting her cushions with bunched fists, throwing things into the sink and revelling

in the noise, relieved that her anger was usually turned inwards and not towards anyone else. Swearing at radio or TV presenters who said things she thought stupid or inane. She hated the music videos on TV, which she occasionally caught while zapping; silly women doing the I-am-so-sexy routine, wearing scraps of clothing that made them look cheap, shoving their bits at the narcissistic males who were singing or rapping, or climbing their thighs. Most of the artists were downright ugly, Sofia thought, and in the real world wouldn't be attractive to anybody save their mothers if they didn't write what kids liked. Men who had money to throw around, a magnet for some gift hungry girls, who thought being on one of those creations was a step to fame when it was more often a step down and back when they became used goods.

"The whole bloody world has gone crazy. I'm glad I don't have a daughter."

She thought of the effect all this pseudo sex had on impressionable kids, in a world filled with all kinds of sexually transmitted diseases.

"Why is nobody real about sex? Why are women still so willing to act like that? Why, after all the years of female emancipation, is fatuous image still more important than reality?"

Conversations with herself had become the norm. They helped get rubbish off her mind.

"We're as much sex slaves now as we were before women even had a vote!"

She then thought of her eldest son's baby girl that she would likely never see; he was so far removed from her by more than a sea. That little one would be targeted by the cold marketing forces of the world, that didn't care about age or the damage that making little kids grow up too quickly did. She thought of all the hideous fashions for children that wanted to make little girls into sex objectified little women; the dance teachers who taught kids

to gyrate as they would in an adult hot club. All sellers wanted these days was to make fast money, she reckoned, and sadly there were mothers eager to help them. Conscience and good taste that once measured the character of old-fashioned companies seemed to have been thrown out in favour of greed.

She had rented an action DVD the previous night and it had the obligatory sex scene where two consenting adults were slurping their tongues down each other's throats and elsewhere. The actors had been in a battle and were dirty, sweaty and tired. Yet they fell on each other, as her mother used to say, "Like ravening beasts." His head went right downstairs and she was doing the orgasmic moaning bit. When he finished, she gave him the same treatment, pulling at his zipper and looking for all the world like a diver about to ascend into the sea without need of oxygen.

"What about the smells?" Sofia had yelled at the screen, throwing a box of tissues at it. "You both stink. What happened to real? Crotches are rancid in sweltering heat. I know; I live in a hot, humid zone. I change my knickers three times a day in summer because I need to shower three times a day, and I get nowhere near *that* sweaty!"

Real for Sofia was the stink of war-dirty men that had never left poor Mary's mind. The horror that had rendered her unable, on the brink of puberty, to ever know what sex or love making was without the image of the men, who had destroyed her mind while they wrecked her body, surging through to freeze her urges. Sofia forwarded fast as she usually did, once she started shouting at the screen. Maybe she was the weirdo, maybe people liked to have oral sex with pubic hair smelling acidic or a strong, unwashed animal smell in their nostrils. She couldn't. Genital smells au naturel were fine, but emanating from a clean, aroused body. She didn't mind a bit of impromptu when things had been

good between her and Charilaos. But he was a clean person; all he ever smelled of was agreeable man-y musk. The best sex for Sofia was at the end of a nice scented bath, when she felt free to allow her man to go where he pleased. She didn't think sweaty smells in the genital region were a turn on. Maybe others liked that, she thought, takes all kinds. It was when she turned off the TV that she realised she had spent most of the movie yelling at the cast, berating them for one thing after another. Charilaos was gone fifteen years now and loneliness was part of her problem, having no one to talk to. Like most women left single by life, she knew it didn't matter how many people you had to talk to all day. The loneliness flowed in once you were alone at night. And her nights were long, the bed too big for one person. And there was fear; the fear that someone might break in and beat her up or kill her. Cyprus was not what it used to be on the crime rating scale.

Money was tight. Her temper had cost her her job and she was having trouble getting another. She had worked long hours in the same busy supermarket for years. One evening just before closing, exhausted by the constant movement of her hands and the bib-bib-bib of the laser that showed the cost of the items, not only hers but the noise coming from the two check-outs either side of her, a rude customer had homed in on her. She complained about the rise in prices, bloody euros, as she moaned about a packet of cheese she had bought the last time, that had gone off too quickly when she opened it. With practically every item she laid on the belt, she spat out annoyance.

"You have to complain to management, it's nothing to do with me." Sofia had told her, her tiredness evident in her face.

"I'm telling you, you tell them."

Sofia had tried to contain her, but the woman was in the mood for a row with someone. The detonator to Sofia's overworked *be-nice-to-the-customer* patience slammed into place