

THE WEEK-END

A Story by Mona Elaine Adilman

Bebbs awoke to a Holiday Inn dawn, pink slashes of sky shafting the hazy parking lot. Open valises on the dresser and endtable yawned in the stale air. The wallpaper around the bathroom door had undergone two or three fadings, and curled back from the plaster like a claw. Even the light fixture looked out of place, with a spent bulb blackened and moldy.

Bebbs drew a quiet breath, thankful her body was free for a time from her husband's morose assaults of passion. The night before his hostility and anger seemed to flow through her like a lightning rod, transfixing her to a thousand barbed memories in the listing bed. Thirty years of contention festered like a herpes simplex cold sore bursting through the most casual conversation. In their married existence intimacy was synonymous with invasion, touching, with travesty.

She remembered last night's concert in the Tanglewood music shed, the usually formal musicians in shirt sleeves, trying to escape the ninety degree heat. Thousands of music lovers dotted the lawns with blankets, picnic baskets and candles, creating a magic orbit of the imagination. Everything fused into a familiar yet surrealistic landscape: the music and the festive, multitudinous melting pot of people.

Only her husband's unrest jarred the rapture of the evening. He rattled the program, twisted in his seat like a rebuked child. The Brahms symphony thundered over his bald head like a disoriented mistral, and the tumult of the finale which swept the audience to its feet with bravos brought an audible sigh of relief to his lips. He stumbled to the exit, crushed the program, and stepped on it with crass finality. Now for the good things in life – a Howard Johnson double scoop of butterscotch ice cream.

All around them in the restaurant people were discussing the concert, the conductor's sensitive interpretation of the score, the emphasis on *accelerando* for musical color. Her husband put a fat hand on her knee, slurping the ice cream. He was in his element. The creamy concoction vanished in seconds, and there was nothing more to say except a burped imprecation – "Bitch!" – when the waitress was slow in bringing the cheque. Reading lenses bridging his nose, he added up the bill a number of times. Bebbbs was relieved that he did not use his American Express card. This involved the complicated ritual of tearing up the carbon into minute fragments and crumbling it into the ash tray. He had been told that the signature can be duplicated, so every time he used his credit card, immense amounts of energy went into pulverising the carbon paper. He unnotched his belt, freeing a generous fold of fat, and put a heavy arm over her shoulder. "Come, Mama," he said. "Bedtime."

The maid had left the air-conditioning on and the motel room was freezing.

"Tomorrow," Bebbbs pleaded, "let's do it tomorrow." She touched his cheek. "You know how sexy you are in the morning."

A stream of abuse erupted, but Brahms had flattened the magnitude of his desire to a monotone. "This is costing, don't forget," he muttered to his wife, and turned his head to the wall. Almost immediately he exploded in snores, his jumping-jack legs jerking in spasm. She thanked God he was dead to the world and out of hers for the time being.

In the middle of the night his legs began to execute the pugnacious jabs of a Japanese wrestler. Bebbbs grimaced. She looked at

the broad expanse of silk pyjama with distaste. You phony, she thought.

Her husband was a doctor who hated people. All the spleen of his hate pumped out in those flogging legs. In his office he sat like a buddha for interminable hours listening to complaints. He wore the set smile of a rabbi whose beaming countenance belied his cynical thoughts. He had learned, like a politician on an election bandwagon, to roll along with the Great Cover-up. He busied old ladies with the panache of a politician kissing babies. He donned and doffed his bedside manner with the rapidity of a sailor using prophylaxis in a foreign port. It served his purpose in and out of consultations, protected his image.

But at night the truth exploded in his legs. They jerked like living creatures under the knife of a slaughterer. Violent and painful spasms rocked the bed. Bebbbs was frightened. She saw a stranger behind a dark glass that threatened to crack at any moment.

She once tried tapping her husband on the shoulder. He awakened in a rage and hit her a brutal blow across the face. Since that time she endured his jumping-jack antics in silent martyrdom.

Bebbs popped her sleeping pill and waited for the blessed spacing-out, the slackening of nerve and sinew taut with tension. It took a long time before the knot under her ribs loosened, and the walls of the room lost their malevolent character. Other women waited for their knight on a white charger; she waited nightly for Morpheus on blue wings to transport her to halcyon pastures. Sleep was a bonus and a release.

Her dreams dissolved from the Tanglewood music shed to the McGill Faculty of Music during the thirties. She entered a darkened hallway, high-domed in sombre hue, oak doors leading to mysterious chambers. The sound of various musical instruments emanated from those closed doors, and she held her music case tightly against her slim body. She found her way through what had been a musty butler's pantry to a narrow flight of stairs. Her heart pounded with trepidation and the knowledge that she was held captive in a castle of musical ghosts.

Perhaps Beethoven was hiding behind the bust on the marble pedestal, or Debussy might pop out of the varnished woodwork. Schubert was sitting on the frame of a large painting; Handel leaned out of a faded print and tweaked her ear as she bent down to straighten her knee socks. The austere figure of Bach presided over the friezes adorning the ceiling. Her thoughts were sonorous with organ music. She could hear generations of students performing excruciating Czerny finger exercises.

She climbed high, with bated breath, and thought of Rapunzel, the fairy-tale damsel who let down her long, golden hair so a handsome prince could climb up to the tower and rescue her. She glanced at her watch with its black, imitation leather strap. Three fifteen . . . Mrs. Winifred Harris at Herbert Symonds School must be just beginning to conjugate the irregular French verbs. Mrs. Harris was proud that one of her pupils was attending the distinguished McGill Faculty of Music.

The stairway ended in a gloomy hallway fronting on a heavy door. Surely the portal to heaven or hell could not be as forbidding. She knocked fearfully, and a gruff voice from the ominous depths said "Come in."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hungerford," she lisped, to the elegant gentlemen attired in a wine velvet smoking jacket. He nodded with a langorous inclination of his head. A kettle of boiling water whistled vigorously, shaking the hospitality of the fragile, carved table on which it reposed.

He indicated the piano bench; she sat down and began her lesson. "Count to thirty on each note," he admonished, closing his eyes. He dozed throughout the entire half-hour lesson. Her fingers itched, ached to dance over the piano keys, but she obediently counted to thirty on every single note of the scale. Her heart dropped into the cracks between the ebony and ivory keys. She longed to escape, and gazed out the attic window at the trees on the McGill campus. Were they prisoners, too, she wondered, and kept counting . . . twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. Now for the Debussy. She turned to ask Mr. Hungerford if she could play the piece she had memorized, but he was nodding, fast asleep, a cup of strong tea tilted in his lap.

A legend in his time—but within the framework of his discipline she was compressed, bored, disenchanted, every ounce of her creativity desiccated by his lack of communication, his coldness. Oh, Rapunzel, she thought, you must have been trying to escape from the tyranny of a music teacher who was past all love for teaching or children.

The next morning brought the Holiday Inn decor sharply and agonizingly into focus. The Tanglewood music shed and Mr. Hungerford's study merged into a haze of memory. Bebbs felt an amorous nudge, and her husband proceeded, without a word, to shift his body over hers. He squeezed her breasts, and his head dropped to her nipples. She let herself go limp, remembering previous episodes of tenderness before their marriage. But this time his lips hurt, and her breasts became sore and tender. He

spent a long time fondling her, and she felt guilty that her only sensation was pain. She pleaded with him to stop, and the ensuing sex act seemed to tear her inside out. She tried to move rhythmically, but his bulk pressed her deeper into the sagging mattress.

"Move, move, damn you," he gasped. She struggled for air and sanity.

Finally, it was over. He lumbered to the bathroom and urinated. Bebbs stood in the doorway. He went over to the sink and put his thick fingers into his mouth. While Bebbs stared, incredulous, he withdrew the plastic guard he wore every night to keep from grinding his teeth.

She looked down at her inflamed nipples, and understood. Self-protective, he had called her, neurotic, frigid, slut, a hundred names from a hundred grisly experiences. Her past was not related to Brahms and Beethoven, but to the Marquis de Sade. Waves of helplessness eddied from the nub of her fear. She stared into the mirror, and saw endless years rolling by like a speeded-up film without focus, without meaning, juxtaposed on the relentless prison of habit.

What was the word . . . sado-masochistic?

The redness around her nipples was fading. Bebbs looked at her watch, which had a black, imitation leather strap.

"Hon," she called, "it's almost noon. Soon be time to check out." She picked up a comb and drew her gleaming Rapunzel hair around her throat.

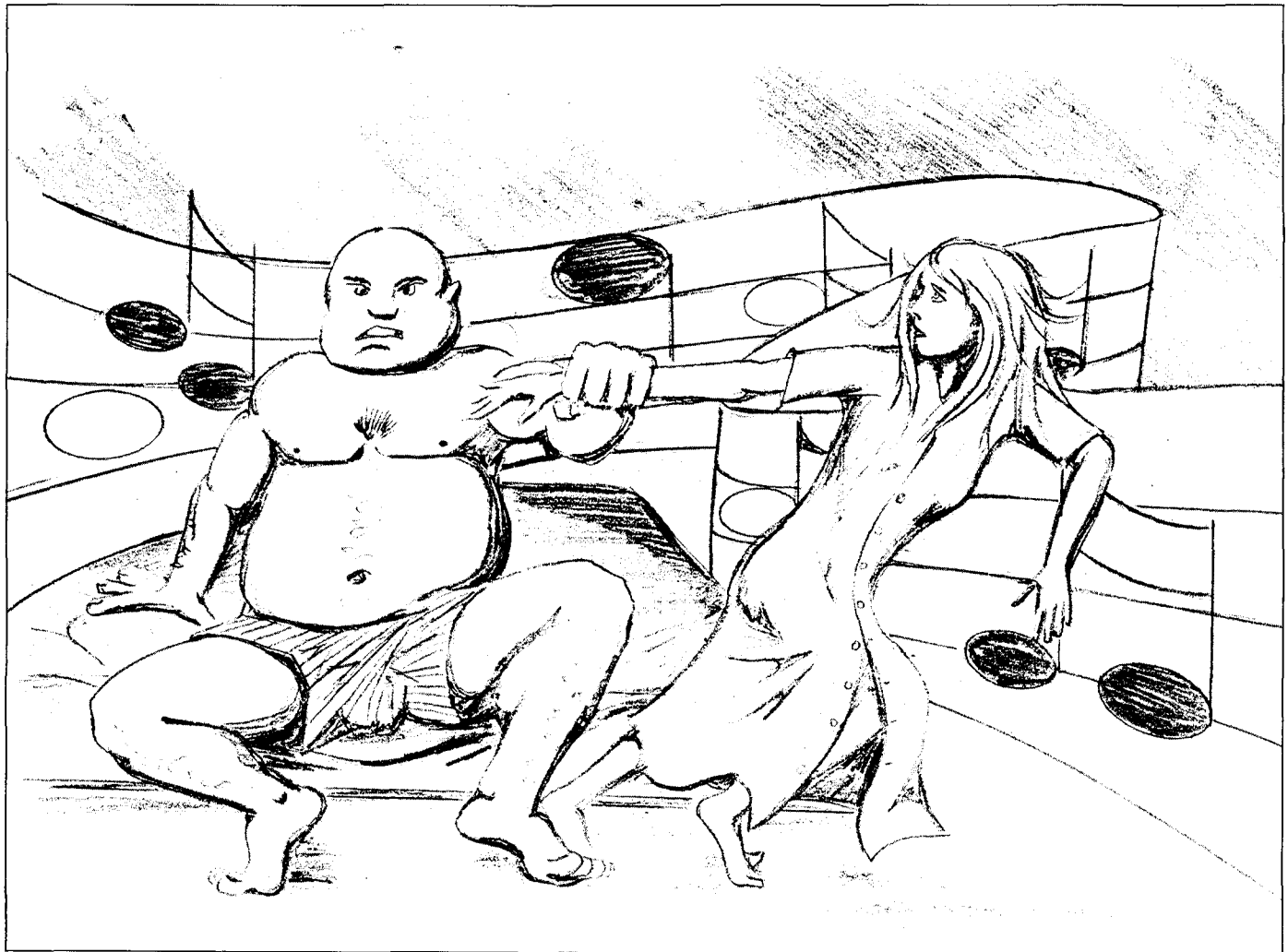


Illustration: Tony Venditello