

The White Donkey

By Michael Fine

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“They say the Messiah will come riding through the Golden Gate on a white donkey as Jerusalem glows red and golden in the setting sun,” said Shulamit, who was sitting on the edge of Jennifer’s bed.

“Not likely now,” said Sammy Li, Jennifer’s brother-in-law, who was sitting on the windowsill next to the bed tray and the IV pole. “The Arabs sealed the Golden Gate a thousand years ago and put a cemetery in front of it. It’s tamei -- unholy ground. The Messiah can’t walk through that gate now. If he does he’s not the Messiah.”

“What do you know from tamei?” said Jennifer, whose skin was orange. “The Israelis are bombing the daylights out of Gaza. Talk about unholy ground. The Messiah is probably out looking for a different planet.”

She looked at Sammy. “Heard anything from Diane?”

Sammy Li looked out the window, where, next to the highways and buildings and cars and trucks, was the muddy green-brown expanse of flowing water called the Woonasquatucket River.

“I’ll hear from her next when the Messiah comes on a white donkey, riding through the Golden Gate,” he said and waved his hand beneath the IV pole as if to fan wood smoke out of a closed room with a fireplace after someone had forgotten to open the flue.

Life with Alan in New Hampshire was not anything like what Diane thought it would be. Not even close.

The air was better in New Hampshire though. Diane was up before dawn. The air is as clear as water but a thousand times sharper, at five degrees above zero, sharp enough to make her skin tighten and her eyes burn. She could see the silhouette of the top of Monadnock as she walked out to the outside wood furnace that was the only heat

in the house, the thin red dawn behind the bold dark mountain, her skin pulled tight and her eyes and nose running from the cold.

Alan was gone for two days now without any explanation of where he was going or when he'd be back. Diane was supposed to sit and wait for him. The prick had not even left anything cut and split. The only firewood he left was four-foot-long logs that weighed a hundred pounds apiece, and the damn furnace needed to be loaded with eight of them. Diane barely weighed a hundred pounds herself.

The first four-footer wouldn't budge. It was iced in, like the second and the third. Diane looked around, found a nine-pound maul with a yellow handle and swung it so it hit the wood-pile sideways. The first log jumped a fraction of an inch, enough to prove it was loose. Thank god the logs at the top were birch and ash. Birch burns fast but at least it burns hot and it's not as heavy as maple or locust.

Her life was *never* what she thought it would be. All Diane's choices turned out to be bad choices. Every single one. Marriage. Men. Jobs. Cars. Friends. The whole nine yards.

She dragged the logs across the cement pad, one by one. A cloud of acid smoke that smelled like a toxic waste dump filled her lungs and burned her eyes every time she opened the door of the wood boiler. The roaring flames singed her eyebrows and burned the hair off her arms.

Men wanted what they wanted when they wanted it, and never did what they said they'd do, or were never even who they said they were or would be. This one, Alan, wasn't even good at it. All the warning signs were there. A different expensive car every time he showed. Not having a real job. Kids who didn't talk to him. A wife he'd never gotten around to divorcing. She'd known. Somewhere inside herself, she knew.

Didn't stop her though. One bad choice after the next. What did the world want from her? Diane didn't have anything left to give.

The last log was maple, and probably twice her weight. She put her arms around it, and pulled with all her might.

The log didn't budge. Instead, she stumbled and fell backward, into the barn, landing on a tarp that covered something hard and cold.

The tarp pulled away as she pulled herself up.

Fifteen minutes later, she was in her car, pulling a trailer that had a white motorcycle strapped to it, headed south on snowy backroads to cross the Massachusetts border fifteen miles away.

By midday she was in Maryland. Almost a third of the way there.

Diane knew that her marriage to Sammy Li wouldn't work the moment her mother kissed her forehead on the day of her wedding. It was a loving kiss, the kiss of another woman who had loved the wrong man. Good luck, the kiss said. No harm in trying. You're headstrong and bossy and always in hurry but you are my baby and I love you. There's no future in this marriage. Sammy will never be able to keep up with you. But you're brilliant and beautiful and I will always love you with all my heart regardless of how this marriage turns out.

Of course the marriage was a mistake, a well-intentioned mistake. Sammy was a wonderful man who had all the right qualities. He read everything. He knew everything. Classical High School, Brown, and then URI College of Pharmacy because it was close to home and he could work in the restaurant at night. When they moved to the house in West Greenwich, he learned how to dig postholes, how to cut cedar for the posts and soak them in used motor oil and how to stretch barbed wire. When his sister went to Kenya and met Ahmed, he taught himself Kiswahili. When his brother married Jennifer and Jennifer's cousin Shulamit came to live in Providence so she could go to Johnson and Wales, Sammy learned all sorts of things about Israel and Jewish people. When their son Danny turned seventeen and started to look at motorcycles, Sammy learned how to rebuild old bikes. Sammy could learn anything. He was a wonderful man. They had a wonderful house and were a wonderful family. Diane wanted the marriage. She liked and trusted Sammy.

But Sammy never learned how to look through her eyes right into her soul until she swelled with desire. He never learned to listen to her so that the world stopped, then and there, just because she was talking. He never told her long intricate stories that stretched long into the night, and he never learned to sweep her off her feet, throw her on

a bed, or a chair, or a couch, and leave her out of breath, outside herself, complete and wanting more, and more and more. Never.

And so it didn't matter enough that Sammy was a good man.

Jennifer and Diane's kids were the same age. Sisters-in-law.

When Jennifer got a job in Boston and Diane was working in Warwick, Jennifer would leave her kids with Diane. Bobby Li, Jennifer's husband, Sammy's brother who was to die on Flight 11 out of Boston on 9/11, was always traveling. Jennifer would drop her kids at six am and pick them up at 6 pm. Diane drove all three kids to school.

But their bond – the bond between Jennifer and Diane – was deeper than that. They were married to different men who were the same man. One heavy and one thin. One outgoing and one quiet. One successful and one, well, just home at five pm every single night. Both men grew up in a triple-decker on Morgan Street in Elmwood. Both went to Classical High School and Brown. Both helped at the restaurant on a Friday or Saturday night even when they had families and careers. Neither man ever looked at you.

So Jennifer and Diane learned to look at one another.

Diane had been gone a year when Jennifer got sick, and it was hard to know what to do. Sammy's family had written Diane off. A woman leaving her husband was not something Sammy's family understood.

After Sammy told her about Jennifer, Diane called Jennifer's house a couple of times in the middle of the day. She let the phone ring four times and then hung up. She didn't really want to talk to the kids. She wasn't sure she wanted to talk to Jennifer either. Part of her wanted to be there with Jennifer, for Jennifer. But most of her was ashamed.

She wrote Jennifer a card once. But she never mailed it.

Then Sammy told her about the operation, the yellow skin, the diagnosis and that awful number. Nine months. Like pregnancy. Only different. So different. So fucking different.

Jennifer hadn't known anything about Diane's other life, close or not close. Bobby Li hadn't known either, although it started long before he died. Diane imagined, no she *knew* that Jennifer felt betrayed by her in more ways than one— once because of Sammy, and once because Diane had never even hinted about what was happening in her life, about what Diane had going on inside. And then Bobby got himself killed. So once more because Diane walked away from what Jennifer couldn't have any more. Diane had walked away from what Jennifer wanted so much and lost.

But Danny knew. He was always still awake when Diane finally came home. And Sammy knew. But he didn't have the words. He didn't even have the thoughts. He didn't have the courage or the self-respect. He never thought he deserved Diane. So he just let her go, let her drift away and let their life drift away with her.

Jennifer had no idea about any of it until Diane left home. Maybe, just maybe, if Sammy had tried to stop her, Diane would have stopped. Maybe, just maybe if she'd told Jennifer, Jennifer might have told her to stop and maybe she would have stopped then after all.

But no one stopped her. It happened again and again and again. Not one of those men loved her. Diane was always alone.

The motorcycle was an old white Honda with rusted pipes, a 305 Dream. Rusted pipes, yes – it had been in a barn for 10 years. There were bird droppings on the handlebars as well. Still, it was a gem, a diamond in the rough, a classic. But also wild in its own way. That chunky tank, square as a bank vault, gave the bike a solid look, but it also had a frame that was light and strong and made you think of the wind. Those swept back fenders that made you feel the wind in your hair even when you weren't moving.

Panama Beach, Florida. Long drive, but worth it. The damn motorcycle gave Diane a reason to move, to take the money and run. Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, Diane was free at last.

“Ten days” the asshole said.

“Do it in a week,” she said. “Make it perfect.”

“Perfection takes time. *You* can make me hurry, though”

“Do it in a week,” she said, cutting him off, not the least bit tempted, despite the grease up to his elbows and the slate grey eyes – well, it just didn’t matter now. All men were all equally worthless.

“I’ve got a lot of ground to cover between then and now. Make it perfect. I’ll be back in a week.” She had a room at \$29.99 a night a block off the beach. She could sit on the beach for a week, or even two, but he didn’t know that.

“Perfect. I’ll be back Tuesday.”

And then she was gone.

On Tuesday it was ready, the chrome gleaming. It cost way too much, but at least Danny would have something from his growing up that he valued. At least there was now something to show for all those wasted years.

The family looked away when Diane came into the room but Jennifer looked right at her. Jennifer’s two kids were there but they didn’t look at their aunt. Diane imagined what Jennifer would look like but nothing that she had imagined prepared her for the truth. The air smelled sweet like maple syrup. Jennifer was unrecognizable – sunken eyes, shriveled skin, flat hair that had lost its color, no makeup, orange skin that no makeup would fix. Diane started to look away, embarrassed at the sight, but didn’t. Diane suddenly became stronger once she and Jennifer looked at one another other again. Jennifer smiled, carefully and weakly. It was a sly smile, one Jennifer hadn’t found in herself for well over a year.

“You’re back,” Jennifer said.

“You’re sick,” Diane said.

“Sick as shit,” Jennifer said.

“Sit up,” Diane said. “I’m getting you a sponge bath. I may be good for nothing, but I’m still a nurse.”

That was how Diane came home. The white Honda 305 Dream appeared in the garage in West Greenwich. Diane found a little place near a cove in Gaspee where she could walk on the beach every day and watch the waves come in and go out.

Jennifer died two weeks later, but not before she and Diane looked at one another again and told one another the truth about each of their lives.

Two days before she died, Jennifer was sleeping with morphine, and Diane was sitting, watching junk TV and staring out the window, wondering how it had all happened, how she was who and where she was, and where it all came from. She had been talking to Danny every night. Danny lived in Tampa now, as far away from her and Sammy and the wreckage of their old life as he could get. He worked the night shift in a nuclear power plant because he, like Diane, couldn't sleep. She'd sent him a picture of the beautiful white 305 Dream, the motorcycle he'd always wanted, now waiting in the garage of their old house. All she could remember about him was holding him when he was a little boy and stroking his hair while he fell asleep, a time that had vanished like smoke, a time that, perhaps, hadn't really existed, a mirage, a dream, an illusion.

Jennifer woke with a start, her eyes out of focus and her face tight, as if she were about to scream. Then she saw Diane.

"I was dreaming," Jennifer said. "It was like Shulamit said but totally different. He was a thin brown man with long hair and a full beard and he was wearing white robes. But he was riding a white *motorcycle*, not a white donkey. He rode up from Bethlehem, his hair flying in the wind, his robes sparkling and dancing in the sun. When the road dipped into Jerusalem, near the train station on Zion Hill, he didn't dip with the road. The motorcycle just kept flying into the air. We were all there – you and Bobby, Megan and Shawn, Sammy and Danny and Shulamit, Suzanne and Ahmed and the twins, Mamma and Pappa Li, my parents and all my cousins, even the old ladies from Romania who used to live in Arad, and everyone's parents and cousins and friends. He circled in the air, the sun dancing in his flying hair and white robes. Everyone reached into the air together, as if we were all holding him up, holding him up together. And then the stones fell away from the Golden Gate. He flew through the gate, so he entered the Old City

flying, not walking, and then hit the gas. The bike rose into the sky. He circled the city once. Then he flew away into the east and we never saw him again.”

Diane got a cool wet cloth and placed it on Jennifer’s forehead as Jennifer closed her eyes and squeezed Diane’s hand, looking straight into her eyes.

“It’s not okay,” Diane said, as she swept a few loose hairs from in front of Jennifer’s face and tucked them behind her ears. “It sucks. It really sucks.”

“Of course it’s okay. It’s okay and it glorious and it’s all we have and we are so lucky to have it,” Jennifer said.

Then Jennifer put her arms around her sister-in-law and held her as if Diane were her only child until Jennifer fell back to sleep.

It was March. The sun had become strong again, and it burned through the clouds that hung over College Hill, so the city of Providence was itself red and golden and glowed in the setting sun like Jerusalem glows, as if Providence had become a new and different place after all.

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