

## High On A Red Platform

"There's always a woman in it, isn't there," Max said. "Or on top of it, you could say, unless you're on top of her."

It was unlike Max, to say that. He seemed such a gentle man. Before he broke his leg anyway. He hadn't become bitter, but perhaps more assertive. He was telling the *long* story of his accident. There's always a long story to any accident, isn't there?

The red shoes are important. Max is short, not pathologically short, just at the lower end of the norm, about five foot five, he doesn't have a thing about it. He was going out with a tall woman once and a builder up scaffolding shouted down "six inches shorter". It was the kind of event Max likes, it made them laugh a lot.

But for a while he'd been looking at platform shoes. On people's feet, and mostly women's feet - well, Max likes women of any height, but he does like the way tall women move, their long loping steps. The way tall people move, the way tall men move too. When he imagines himself tall, the way he moves is different, he told me once. He doesn't like the quick nervous shuffle short people often have. OK, he admitted, if the truth be known he'd like to be tall.

So he bought some platform shoes, they were red and fun and people looked and really liked them.

He was wearing the red platforms when he first met her. It was at an arty event about death, part of a week of shows and events about death, some of it funny too. A festival of death-art.

He got up and asked a mildly stropky question, which he only did in public, he wasn't often stropky in private. Not then anyway. She must have liked people who asked stropky questions, because she came up to him afterwards and said "Good question," and smiled. "And great shoes. I've got a thing about shoes too."

He looked down and she was wearing a pair of platforms too, though fewer inches than his, and not a bright colour. He didn't really notice her that day, she didn't get inside him, like she did later. He asked her name, just to be friendly really, and she said "Nick", and he asked how it was spelled and she said "N-I-K". And he nodded and she said "It's short for Nicola." She had a little snirt to the end of her laugh and a lift to her voice, sort of childish and later Max would find this very endearing.

It was just a few days later, at another event in that festival of death events, that he did notice her. They started some casual talk and then he was sitting next to her at this seminar, she'd specially asked him to come to it with her.

The discussion turned out to be about prison camps, and torture. And he felt this tremor, not an actual tremor, nothing visible or audible, he wasn't even looking at her and he was pretty sure she wasn't looking at him, but there was some big sort of desperate sorrow, it came like waves, or some of the time like one continuous wave. That was when she got inside him.

And they did things together, they met up for a meal, they saw a movie. But there was one thing she would not do, which was invite him to her flat. Not for tea, or anything. He offered to meet her there, and she reluctantly agreed, but then made him wait below, outside on the pavement, till she came down.

She just didn't want him in there, - looking over her things, she didn't want anyone snooping. She kept her books in her bedroom, she didn't want anyone snooping into her books. Snooping? He didn't understand, but again there was this sort of pull inside him.

Once, during that time, she asked three people, who she knew much less well than she knew Max by now, back to her flat. It was after an evening drinking, mostly she and them, since he's a very moderate drinker; and mostly vodka, since one of them was a young Russian student she was flirting with.

Max asked her about it, about allowing them into her flat, challenged her, carefully, he sensed this was a tender area. And she said "Oh well they were much too drunk to notice anything in there." She herself drank a lot, every day, and smoked a lot too.

Soon after, she told him about a really weird thing in her past. When she was quite small, just a baby, eighteen months, she had this very serious diagnosis, a "syndrome" with a name, it affects the immune system, like HIV but different, something genetic. Life-threatening, anyway. From eighteen months to nine years she was in hospital, often in isolation. She'd be in a tent, a transparent tent, in a ward with a lot of other very sick kids. They knew death well, some of their friends died, and they themselves, some were dying, and knew it, death lay all around, they were familiar with it, they talked about it. Except when their parents were there, or older brothers and sisters, or other visitors. The grown-ups, these other people, big people, they wouldn't be able to cope.

Well, Nik was lucky. When she was nine they discovered a cure. An enzyme replacement or blocking medicine or something. And she recovered. She returned to normal life, to her parents, to an ordinary school.

They went on meeting, at ordinary art events not to do with death, they went to a wedding of a mutual friend wearing their platform shoes. Normal kinds of things, exploring, Max thought, their connection.

Then came the night of Karen's birthday. Karen is an editor in a production company. To start the evening, Karen showed an old movie in the company's viewing room, a comfortable little cinema. Max asked Nik to the party. He asked her specially - Karen didn't know her. He was wearing his platform shoes. After the film there were drinks at the little bar outside the viewing room. Gary told jokes, Max did some acrobatic rolls, quite tricky in the red shoes, Susie took pictures, one of him and Nick with their arms round each other on a settee. A lot of laughter and fun.

Then Anton started playing accordion. And Nik got him back into the viewing room to play on the platform in front of the screen. He played music on this platform, a red platform, it was all draped in red. So the others drifted in also, standing about, sitting in some of the seats and listening. Russian and gipsy music mainly, and some old folk-tunes.

Nik was one of those near-alcoholics who can hold their drink. She didn't go slow, her speech didn't slur. It was more to do with attitude. Her view narrowed, her mind pursued one thought, usually some kind of challenge, she could pick out what would outrage. She wanted to stir things in the world around her, and would egg on others to do it for her if she could.

Now she was walking past the platform, backwards and forwards, making little jumps, she was a child collecting companions for a game, she collected

people to walk past that platform.

But the game turned dark. She actually got someone to lower the lights. "This way," she said. "We walk past the music. This way. Towards the river. We're going to throw ourselves in. Or we'll get thrown in. There are men in white coats. And dogs."

She was very pale and looked faint. She leaned against the steps at one end of the red platform, almost falling. Everyone stopped. She looked towards Max and he felt that wave of sorrow again, he felt it deep inside himself and he went towards her, but she pushed herself up and got back to the bar. "Haven't you got anything stronger?" They'd only brought in wine and beer. Karen thought there was a bottle of whiskey but nobody could find it.

Someone was a member of a club round the corner where they could drink as late as they wanted so a few of them went there.

In this club, from another group of people, a young man, a Scotsman, he was actually wearing a kilt, came over and tried to join them.

This is how Max explains the layout of the place, describing it with his hands. "There's a rectangular table, with a bench along it, and it's sort of enclosed by the back of an upright piano, and a partition at one end. Nik is at the closed end of the table. I'm next to her, then Susie, then there's someone else, and then there's the other end, which is open and this Scotsman is trying to get in on our party at the open end but he's boring, no-one wants to talk to him, Nik included, and after some stories and questions, he backs off."

Then Susie begins telling Max a long sob-story about her boy-friend.

And then the next time Max looks, there are this Scotsman and Nik snogging, through a gap, there's a gap between the partition and the piano.

"Snogging, sounds jolly doesn't it, but their lips are glued together, they're like two worms who've opened their mouths and reached towards each other, along the bench and the seat on the other side of this gap, and they're fused together, fused and sort of undulating." Ten minutes before, she was bad-mouthing this man, like everyone else. Now, here they are, connected mouth to mouth, through this gap at the corner of the table.

Max was paralysed. He didn't speak, he didn't shout, he didn't do anything. He was looking round at these faces, everyone noticing, amazed or laughing. Max felt nothing. He was disgusted, he realised afterwards, he said, but at the time he was all clogged up with too much niceness inside him.

Karen stood up, she was tall herself and she was opening an umbrella. She placed it like a shield, from the partition to the piano, with Nik underneath. Nik rose to push it off, a pot with a plant in it fell with a crack on the table and spilled some earth.

Max heard Susie say to Nik "You can do better than that". Nik stood up. Nik said "If I want to get off with someone I will." Susie said "You don't have to do that to yourself." Nik said "It's only his sporran. I like his sporran." They were talking right across Max's face. Was this a challenge? Was it an insult? Was it a message to say she wasn't interested?

Then he was up too, they were both in their shoes but he stood just that bit taller than her, and he burst out, his voice completely surprised him, "Hey" - he was really shouting - "I asked you to this party, if you want to get off with him then fuck off out of here." The Scotsman had gone. Which was just as well, if things had got rough Max surely would have got the worst of it, he did do a bit of judo once many years ago, but the Scotsman was in his prime, he was short too

but maybe he'd grown up on the streets of Glasgow.

The evening had gone very sour, had curdled completely. People got ready to leave.

Now this is important. Max is emphatic about this. He had some old ordinary shoes with him for the way home and now he changed into them. The red platforms went into his rucksack. Then he left with Karen who was wheeling a bicycle and Max was heading for a night bus.

Just round the corner from the club, a stranger approached. He started this long involved story, a bad luck story, a sick relative, no mention of money, "he was trying to involve us," Max told me, "like in some scheme, some kind of a scam, it was all a complicated attempt to knuckle his way into our brains, I almost felt sorry for him, he could well have succeeded - before that night, anyway. And he had a Scots accent."

Or did he? Oh God, has he got a Scots accent? Max felt this anger coming up inside him. He couldn't, he wouldn't, take in this recital. All he could think was He's another fucking Scotsman.

"Where's your kilt?" he said. And "Piss off," all in a tight, quiet voice.

The man moved back a few steps but went on with his story.

Now Max said "Fuck off". The man took off his shoulder bag, he dropped it on the ground and walked over close. Max doesn't remember the push, but he was falling, he fell off the curb, and what stays in his mind like slow frames on a videotape was landing with a crack on the tarmac in the road with the outside of his thigh-bone. Then he just couldn't stand up.

The ambulance came within about ten minutes and they pinned the leg that morning. They got him on to crutches for a few minutes the next day, and he would be out a couple of days later.

Nik called him on the phone. "Can I come and see you? Karen told me not to call - " she sounded quite nervous " - because she thought you were upset - I mean, not because of your leg - - but I really want to come and see you."

Max wasn't at all sure he wanted to see her. But he wasn't sure he *didn't* want to see her either. He remembers all the details of this too.

"Well, I'm being discharged tomorrow." He stopped.

"Oh." He thought he heard some kind of disappointment in her voice. "Can I come today? To the hospital?"

She arrives about three-thirty, and he's in the bed. She leans over him, she's all soft and caring, she takes his hand in both of hers and kisses his cheek. He's never known her all tender like this.

"Can we draw the curtains?" she says, and then does it, one curtain on one side, the other on the other side and then round the foot of the bed. She keeps looking out as she does it. Now they are enclosed, in this small space. She looks around, then she gazes at him, then leans over and kisses him on the mouth, not pushily sexual, just tender.

Max is confused. "What is it you want?" She is different in some way.

"I did want to come and see you."

He shrugs. "You can come and see me at home."

"No, I meant here." She sits down and just stays still, as if listening. "In this place."

She gazes into his eyes again. "Is it true you were upset?"

"I was angry."

"You're like everyone. Please don't judge me."

"I wasn't judging. My anger is not my judgement."

"Everyone judges me."

Then the curtains opened. The ward sister puts her head in . "Are you alright? What's happened?"

Nik says: "We were just being alone in here."

The sister draws back the end curtain a short way, leaving a gap. "I think that should give you enough privacy."

Nik looks at her, then back at Max. "I liked the privacy we had. And - it's just, I don't know, she's got that white coat."

But there is something not right with this privacy. It feels not right. Max raises himself up, he reaches for the crutches, he starts to get out of the bed. "Draw the curtains right back please, sister, all the way, open."

Nik gets up. She is changed. She is all agitated. She looks around. "I can't bear it in here any longer. It was a mistake."

Max is standing, on one leg and a crutch, he reaches for her hand, she is still inside him, but he isn't quick enough. She runs out.

Max paced up and down the ward, and then the corridor, on his crutches.

He half-waited for another call, while his fracture was mending, but it never came.

A lot of calls did disturb his thoughts though. Some of these interruptions he invited. He needed to talk. But some became annoying - the ones, and there were several, when concern disguised a particular curiosity, always signalled by a remark dropped casually into the conversation. "A bit hard to balance on I suppose." "Not quite so steady at that elevation." "Need to keep a special eye out on rough pavements." "I must admit I was a bit worried when you bought those shoes." And then this sort of half-laugh. There it was, deny it however much he did, this assumption had gone round his friends.

Another friend rang up with some stupid quip about the red platform shoes.

Max said: "I wasn't wearing the fucking red shoes." And he clicked off the connection, as aggressively as it is possible to click a button.

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