



Killing Off Maria

By Cam Tan Ringel

Read at Storytails on 28th March 2010

'Come on!'

Mo stood impatiently in my doorway.

'We're gonna miss 'im'

With 'him', she meant 'Vicks', the current object of my platonic affection. I didn't know his real name, but Mo had nick-named him 'Vicks' because he'd had a cold first time I laid eyes on him. I had absolutely no idea why this was of such interest to her.

Couldn't she get her own fantasy love life? But that was just typical of Mo; - rather live life through others than bother with her own.

'Hold on' I said, feeling a pang of nervousness as I changed my clothes and adjusted my jewellery for the third time.

'How's this look?'

'Yes, yes, he'll like that.' Mo's eyes gleamed excitedly.

We hurried down the steps into the cold Swedish winter evening, leaving our hats behind in a gesture of vanity. One never knows; perhaps someone would recognise me from that gig last week. Some shadows moved down the street ahead. My heart jumped. Was that Vicks?

People began gathering under streetlights, in corners and outside McDonalds. Mo and I were the only twosome. Everyone else seemed to be in groups of five or more. The shop windows spread warm light on the glistening snow. Svea High Street was now rid of cars as always on a Friday night after eight. Only trams were running. I heard one coming; the dull sound of it's wheels against the track and the clinking bell of warning. You wanted to stay well clear of the tracks, - sometimes they didn't ring the bell. They would sneak up without notice, like silent yetis ploughing through the

snow, catching up with you from behind. – Tram drivers, the hobby sadists of Svea High Street.

Mo and I were on our second stroll up and down the same street, - just like everyone else.

'Wonder where he is.'

'Well', I thought, watching drunken teenagers clutching homebrewed vodka mixed with far too much orange juice; - 'this is probably as exciting as it will get.'

'Oi!' Someone shouted from across the road. I ignored the girl's voice but Mo turned around.

'Oi!'

'She's shouting at you.' said Mo. 'Ask what she wants.'

'Nah.'

But Mo wouldn't let be.

'What do ya want?' she blurted in my place.

'Not you, 'er.' The girl pointed vigorously at me. 'Give's your autograph or a punch in the mouth!'

I laughed. She was obviously pissed and cocky in front of her friends.

'She'll give you a punch!' shouted Mo before I could stop her.

'Oh ye...'

'Leave it Maria.' I heard one of the girls in the group say, but Maria had made her sozzled mind up and came staggering towards me until she was closely face to face with me. I could feel her breath against my chin. She was about the same height, built and age as I; slight, five foot five. She had long blond hair. Mine was dark brown with some left over colours of red and purple. Me; - with big earrings, long necklaces, bangles and a bright purple suede coat that probably saw its best days two decades ago.

Maria had one of those trendy thick jackets that made everyone look like the 'Micheline man', jeans, tight enough to crunch your hip bones and cause urinary infections and trainers of a make I'd seen on many of the others tonight, but failed to register the name of. I was never much for common fashion.

'Come on then!' she splattered in my face.

'What?' I asked. 'I've never seen you before... What's the matter with you?'

'Well I've scheen you' she slurred; slightly wobbly on her legs. 'You sching in that punk band. And, you promised to fight.'

'Actually, no, I didn't. I don't fight. I'm a pacifist.'

'A paschiphischt! A fuckin' paschiphischt!' She turned to her crowd smirking. She gave me another contempted look before raising her hand.

I froze and waited for it all to end, her to leave and summer to come. I looked in the corner of my eye and noticed Mo had withdrawn about 20 feet.

Maria teasingly tapped my chin twice. – Then, twice again slightly harder. I felt my teeth hit against each other. I had never liked my teeth, but I sure wanted to keep them. A voice came over from my right and a strong hand swiftly grabbed Maria's arm in midair.

'Can't you see she doesn't want to fight?' Vicks said and pulled her away. He gave me an apologetic look and shrugged his shoulders.

On the way home; I said nothing. Mo stayed the night because I'd already promised her she could.

'Come on then. Get your bangles on and let's go!'

It was Friday again, - time to enter the danger zone, conquer bad weather, sadistic tram drivers, lethal vodka and mad blondes; and, my hero.

I was weary, yet excited. Had his look meant something more? Or maybe something was going on between him and Maria? Maybe he had been saving her, not me? My heart sank as I changed clothes once more.

Mo was bouncing around impatiently in her usual manner.

'Something always happen when I'm with you.' she said. 'I've got a good feeling about tonight.'

'Yeah, just keep quiet this time.'

We met up with some guys from college, - well on their way to wasteland.

'Drink?'

'Nah,' I looked at the orange coloured fluid and then at the dribbles around his mouth.

'I don't think so.'

Mo said nothing and we walked on, leaving them to haunt their own little corner. We passed Mac D and got out into Svea. More people than usual were out tonight. We wandered, said hallo to a few and wandered again, said hallo again and.. I began feeling uneasy. The town clock pointed at ten thirty.

And there it came...

'Oi!

She was right behind me. I turned around.

'Listen, I do not want to fight you.' I said calmly.

She walked right up to me, entourage in tow, bored eyes gleaming for entertainment.

Some guys stopped on the other side of the street, waiting...

Maria playfully fiddled with my necklaces, pulling them slightly, letting the beads slip between her fingers. Then she flicked at my left earring. I backed up against the wall, feeling the cold stone through my coat, but also feeling something else; - something hot and pumping. Fury began to rise from within me.

The necklace snapped. Beads flew across the pavement, got buried in the snow. She had destroyed something of mine! My head began spinning and I stood there, shaking, as Maria was once again lifted away and I didn't even see who by.

I stormed off into an empty back street to cool off.

'Gosh, she's really out of order.' said Mo, who suddenly seemed realize the consequences of her interference.

We could never go out like this again. That mad blonde would always be there, waiting for me to throw the first punch. I didn't want to fight. I had never fought in my life. I might kill her. I wasn't afraid of her. I was afraid of me.

Three weeks passed, - three weeks in the safe warmth of my flat. Mo came to stay quite a few times. She never pushed to do the Svea High Street round again, but she did bitch about Maria.

I fantasised about being stranded with her waiting two hours for an infrequent country bus where there was nothing else to do but talk. I dreamt of what I'd say to her and how we would finally become friends.

In the fourth week, a plan formed in my head. I wrote a list, took my list, a pen for ticking off and a large bag with me. I needed the right paraphernalia to set my plan off. Nobody, nobody would scare me into hiding.

I strode confidently into the shops on Svea High Street and put each item into the bag. Black jumper, thick and close-fitting; black hair dye; black trousers, tight but stretchy and hair-bands. I walked out unnoticed.

It was Friday lunchtime when I dyed my hair jet black, tied it back sleek so noone could grab hold of it. I put my new jumper and trousers on, did a few kicks in the air before putting on an old pair of boxing shoes. I looked in the mirror; - perfect.

I was doing my warrior make-up when Mo arrived.

'We'll go out tonight Mo.' I said.

She looked slightly nervous now.

'What are you going to do?'

'Depends on her, but I'm ready – with or without you.'

We left the flat, me with a spring in my step and straightened back, - Mo slightly behind me. A surge of power filled my chest and I made a point in greeting everyone we met. But there was no Maria. Ten thirty – no shouting.

'Where's Maria tonight?' I asked the next person, - a girl I'd seen hanging about around her but who didn't seem to be too close.

'Oh, she's been in McD's all night, - hiding.' she replied.

'Hiding?' My heart filled with joy, pride and satisfaction. The plan was working.

'Yeah, she saw you earlier and maybe her brother's had a chat with her.'

'Brother?'

'Yeah, Fredrik. You know him. He's the one lifting her off you.'

That night I went home, rid of Maria, rid of my platonic lover and rid of the desire to get bored every Friday on Svea High Street with Mo. And I never had to steal another black outfit.