

Fairy Tale
By Robert Rinne

Sid stood about a foot behind Penny, reading over her shoulder. The room's dim red lights made it hard to see the words of her book. She had the thick paperback open on her small stand, holding it open with all four fingers of her left hand, her right hand between her naked thighs. She wore a shimmering red silk robe that just covered her ass. She sat on a small towel so that vinyl of the stool didn't stick to her skin. The takeout cup of coffee on her stand looked almost wilted and the coffee inside, Sid guessed, hadn't been tasted in hours.

He took out a of thick fold of cash, held in check by a gold money clip shaped like a dragon's head, from the inside pocket of his suitcoat. He tossed it on top of the book she was reading.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Penny yelled and turned around, her right arm whirled out in a fluid motion.

She caught Sid off guard but he managed to get out of the way before she could make contact. He expected a reaction but he hadn't expected this. He held his hands up in surrender, shocked at how timid he suddenly felt.

"It's me!" He said. "Jesus Christ, it's only me!"

Penny stopped a moment and took a deep breath. She put a hand to her chest and closed her eyes. "Jesus, Sid," she said. "Scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry," he said. "Only wanted to surprise you."

"Mission accomplished," she answered and got up off her stool to hug

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him. She had her red, silk robe tied tight but he could feel her young, naked body through it. She hugged a little harder.

"Mmmm," she said. "Wanting a bodyslide like the last time?"

"Mymymy," he said. "What happened to the romance, Sweetheart?"

Penny smiled. "Knowing what my regulars want, I think, is sexier. And you feel to me like you are wanting a bodyslide."

Sid returned her smile but didn't say anything. A bodyslide was what he had in mind. He always wanted to get one the day before he went out to do a job. It cleared his mind. Centred him. Coming from wicked handjob after having a gorgeous woman rub her baby oil soaked body all over you did that.

She stepped back and gave him a peck on the cheek. "I'll just step out for a minute while you get ready."

He watched the heels of her well crafted feet pad out of the room and admired the curve of her calves just beneath the hem of her robe. She stopped at the door and he drank her in from her feet, up her leg and buttock, along the curve of her spine to finally her face and he saw that Penny had her head down a little, her bangs a little in front of her hazel eyes, and she smiled at him.

"It's better if it's a surprise," she said.

"Hunh?" Sid said.

"Everything's better if it's a surprise, Sid," she said. "Wouldn't you agree?"

Sid recovered a little. "You haven't let me down yet."

"The room is yours for now," she said. "Have a shower or relax in the tub or just lie down on the table if you are ready to rock and roll. I'll be right back."

She stood leaned against the open door, one leg straight, foot flat to the floor, her other leg was cocked slightly, standing on the tip of her big toe, arching the muscle of her leg. He did not know why that caught him so, just the sight of that one well turned ankle was driving him crazy. Suddenly, he wanted to know what she was reading. The fucking Kama Sutra or some kind of sexual telepathy shit.

"I'll be right back," she repeated. "The sign on the front of the building says no smoking. But the ashtray is underneath my stand over there." She pointed to where she had been reading her book. And she was gone.

"Fuck me," Sid said when she left and exhaled through pursed lips. "Wee-eww."

He walked over to the stand and took out the ashtray while he loosened his tie. He slipped it over his head while he took the ashtray over to the side of the jacuzzi tub. He undid the knot completely, slipped the thin end through the loop of the back of the tie until it was folded in half, and then he folded it again and slipped it back through the loop a second time. He tucked it into the breast pocket of his jacket before taking that off. He layed that down on the side of the tub and reached into the inside pocket for his battered old leather cigarette case. He snapped it out and rolled out a smoke. He left the case out and then got out his butane lighter, carefull to only lick the tip of the cigarette to get it lit. He stood there and took two more drags before trying to unhook the strap of a shoulder holster that wasn't there.

"What's wrong with me?" he said out loud, through teeth clenching the filter of his cigarette.

He never wore his peice when he came to see her. For all of things that

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she did do for him he didn't want her to know what it is he had to do to afford them. Not that it was the only reason but it was one of the good ones. The other was that you didn't work that often and that once you got used to it, it was pretty easy, straightforward work. The kind of work you could safely retire at an early age if you were careful and didn't make too many mistakes. But still, standing there getting ready to get undressed, he felt more naked than naked knowing that his gun was locked away safely in a case under his hotel room bed.

He shucked off his shoes and walked, stocking feet, back over to the stand, unbuttoning his shirt one handed, while he checked out the book she was reading. It wasn't any Kama Sutra or any such shit thing as that. Self help was all that it was. He saw those all the time at the airport bookstores. It looked like that was all that sold, beside glossy romance novels and magazines choked with more advertisements than articles. The kind of books that sold you on the first page, telling you that if you do these three things, nine good things will happen to you. They show you that you can get it done in these exact, easy steps and that was all it took. Sid knew better.

He took off his shirt and sucked back the last of his smoke while he walked back over to the tub where his jacket was. He turned on the water for the tub without bothering to check the temperature. The parlour made sure that it was always right. He went over to the wardrobe next to the standup shower and took out a mahogany hanger and hung up his shirt. He hung up his suit coat, too, and then took out the cigarette case and the butane lighter from the inside pocket and laid them on the side of the tub next to the ashtray. He slid off his trousers and hung them up, carefull to preserve the

crease. He slipped off his socks and tucked them neatly into his shoes and finally took his underwear off and hung that up, too.

The water had filled up in the tub and shut off automatically. He climbed up the three steps, styled like they were made out of stone but were really just molded plastic that felt squishy under his feet, and slipped into the tub. He leaned back and closed his eyes, enjoying the heat, and reached with his right hand for his cigarettes and lighter. He lit his smoke and put everything back without opening his eyes.

His mind emptied and he thought about nothing. He brought his fingers to his lips to pull off the smoke and then flopped it back over the edge of the tub when he was done. Back and forth, like one of those crazy drinking birds that you could perch on the edge of your glass, though, now that he did consider that image he wondered where he got it from because the only one he had ever seen was on a cartoon that must have been made in the fifties or sixties and it had been depicted and pretty commonplace. As he made a mental note to go back to his hotel and check for one on eBay, the jacuzzi jets stopped.

"Aw, fuck," he said out loud. "On a fucking timer. Shit."

He got up, splashing water off of his body, and opened his eyes. It took a minute for him to focus because the room was pitch black. He blinked hard and rubbed his eyes with one hand, pinching the bridge of his nose. The room was still dark. The jacuzzi's jets didn't shut off because of the timer. The power was out.

"Hello?" He called out. "Penny? Are you out there? What the fuck is going on?"

For the first time, in the three years that he had come here and got

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massages by Penny did he consider that maybe Penny wasn't her real name after all. But it was the only name he knew.

He stepped carefully to the edge of the tub and stepped down to the floor. He closed his eyes, knowing full well doing so was completely stupid, but it did help him concentrate. From where he stood the massage table was a few steps ahead of him and maybe a little to the right. Behind him was the tub. If he guided himself along the tub he would get to the wardrobe and the standup shower, which would take him to a wall, which he could follow along and get to the door and out of the room.

But not fuckin naked, he said to himself. He would go to the wardrobe first.

"Owwawwwfuck," he swore. He forgot his shoes, but remembered them after he tripped over them in the dark and bashed his knees and shins on the uneven stone floor. He got to his feet and asked himself what else did he forget.

"Jesus," he said to himself. "I'm fuckin stupid."

He reached for his butane lighter and flicked it. The pale blue flame was very hot and did not cast much light but it was better than being in the dark. He looked down at his shoes and they were a little worse for wear for having trampled them, but not all that bad. He scanned the room quickly for a towel. His thumb was pinching on the lighter's trigger and the lighter's guard was growing more and more hot. He saw the stand where Penny had been reading and unflicked the lighter.

There's gotta be some towels over there, he thought, and stepped carefully.

He wanted to at least have a towel around him if he planned on

wandering around the massage parlour trying to find someone to answer him and at the very least he was not going to ruin a brand new suit by getting into it all wet. Plus, while it was nice to be in the tub, once he considered inserting his dripping body into his suit, he wondered who was the last person to be in that tub, what were they doing in that tub, and he wondered if he ever remembered anyone even remotely resembling a janitor. Who cleaned the tubs anyway?

Sid found an enormous, oversized towel. At one time it might have been very plush and felt nice to the person in the store that was buying it. He knew better. It could look nice, but it never lasted long, and this towel didn't. He put the lighter down on Penny's stand and wrapped the towel around his waist. It felt grainy against his skin but it took away the moisture from the tub, and whatever else that might have been floating in there. He then felt thankful for the coarseness of the cheap towel. Felt more like scrubbing off a layer of skin than actually drying.

"Goddamnit," he said out loud. He wasn't going to bother getting dressed at all. There would be emergency lights out in the hall, for sure, and the other girls would have all gathered at the front desk. He remembered that there had been one person at the front desk, though he didn't get a good look at them.

Go on in, he remember the person saying, she's waiting for you.

Penny was probably with them, Sid thought. They all went behind the desk and would wait there until the power came back on.

Sid opened the door and stepped into the hall. To his right was the dull, red glow of the Emergency Exit sign. The wide door opened up and blocked the narrow hall, so he had to close it partway to get by and around.

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The front desk would be in the opposite direction of the emergency exit sign. He frowned, thinking that maybe would bring on some kind of night vision that would help him make out some shapes.

"Penny!" he yelled. "You back there? I'm coming. Gimme a minute."

The silencer spread the noise all around him and suppressed the flash. A thunderbolt struck behind his eyes and a torrent of pain shot through him when the bullet shredded his right shoulder. He dropped to the floor, for a blessed moment distracted from his wound, and scampered on his hands and knees to get behind the door and back to his room, but not before three more shots exploded the top and side of the door.

He started to hyperventilate. His left hand grasped his shoulder, thinking that holding it would help, but it only made it worse. His fingers dug into torn flesh. The top part of his bicep had been ripped apart and left heavy drops of blood on the fake stone of the massage parlour room floor. The pain was excruciating. If the gunshot had been a bolt of from the blue, this pain was it's fire, enormous and growing hundreds of times larger, wanting to burn him alive.

Sid had rolled onto his towelled ass, holding the front of the towel with the hand of his damaged shoulder to keep it from sliding away, wincing as he tugged himself backwards toward the wall, away from the door.

Sid got has far back as behind Penny's stand when he realized that no one was coming to get him. His wounded shoulder spilled blood like an invisible child was holding a sand bucket's worth of blood over it, gently pouring it over and around, making sure to get everything and maybe having a little fun putting more in one spot than another just to see what would happen, but not to pour so much that it empty the bucket too fast and end the

fun too soon.

He put his back to the wall and pushed himself to his feet with his legs, using his shoulder blades at first to slide along the jagged clefts of the fake stone wall, then using his towelled ass to slide more easily, careful to be sure to hold it in place with his bad hand. He got to his feet and crossed his chest with his other arm to hold his shredded shoulder.

"All he has to do is wait," Sid said out loud. "No rush."

It was no kill shot, to be sure. It would take a day or more to die from this kind of wound, but he could pass out from loss of blood if he did not stop the bleeding. The imaginary kid with the bucket was still pouring steadily and Sid wanted to stop it up. He took the towel from around his waist, grimacing a little now that his bare ass was against the wall, and wrapped it as best he could around his shoulder. Sid used almost all of the towel to wrap the shoulder, ending up like some kind of misshapen hunchback. The kid on his shoulder went away and the blood stopped. Sid did not want to think about the fibers that would embed into his flesh from the crappy towel. It was the least of his worries.

"He wants me to make a mistake," Sid said.

That was to be expected. When you got wounded like that, your instincts kicked in and those instincts were to fight or flee, no matter what the cost. He remembered the light from the emergency exit to his right when he opened the door to the hall. If he opened the door quickly he could crawl on his hands and knees to the door, but the door could be locked or it could set off an alarm that would bring people running. Maybe some security force for the strip mall, or maybe even the cops.

That would be interesting, Sid thought. Being saved by the cops.

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But that couldn't happen. Sid's killer could be on the right hand side of the door, with his back to the emergency light, aiming his pistol at the opening of the door, ready to tear off the head of anyone who dared show it. But not his head, Sid knew. Not his head. This was a professional job. Someone wanted back at him, he guessed, for any one of a hundred jobs he had done. They wanted to send a message to the people that had hired him. The killer wasn't looking for Sid's head. They wanted his trigger finger. And they would want him alive when they took it.

To take the trigger finger of a hit man to the people who had employed that hit man was to say that you were better than them. And employers had a way of testing that finger. If there were signs in the blood of that finger that it had been taken when the hit man was alive, then they know that the person carrying that finger was true. They usually mailed it.

"Fuck you," that finger said, even though it wasn't the middle one. "Fuck you and the rest of your family. Fuck you and I dare you to come after me. And there is no return stamp, you Fuck, because I didn't use the fucking post office." it said.

"Nice try," that finger said some other times. "But next time, hire someone not so fucking stupid as to let me cut off their livelihood. And I left his dick around, because that never does no one no good."

"Come get some," that finger might say once in a while. "Try me on for size. I'm good enough to take out your hired help. Come get some and see where we go from there."

But sometimes, it served as a curriculum vita. You did a hit man in and then went to one of their employers, in person, and handed over the finger. That finger, cut from a live hit man, told that employer volumes. The cocky

ones would wait until the testing was done on the finger, knowing that they were either to be trusted or to be killed on the spot and it wasn't worth the energy in running.

The killer who was after Sid wouldn't shoot him in the head. That was why Sid was still alive. The killer wanted Sid alive so he could take Sid's finger.

Sid groped his way along the wall, along the tub, to get back to the wardrobe to double check his jacket. Nothing. He had nothing. He had no wallet with him, only cash. He had no car keys because he had a cab drop him off a block from the parlour. His car was in the underground parking garage of his hotel. He had left his hotel key at the front desk, telling them that he would be back for it. He was horrible for losing those things all the time, and this was the best way of doing it. He remembered shooting the hotel desk clerk girl a winning smile and guessing if maybe he got back from being with Penny in good time that he could meet her in the bar for a night cap. The look he had received told him that it was a distinct possibility. As it stood right now, he wished that there was an old battleaxe of a nurse in the emergency room who would do him up just right and not ask too many questions. If he did make it to the emergency room, it would be one guarded with cops. Because he was not getting away from this one.

He didn't even have a cellphone to call someone to help. He could call from a payphone. Sid memorized all of his numbers, a trick he had learned working in prison as a telemarketer. He could remember a string of credit card numbers after only hearing it once. He would get out of here and call from a payphone and maybe one of his employers could come up with a doctor who didn't ask any questions and maybe Sid could convince that doctor that

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Penny was a qualified nurse. It would have to be his current employer of course. Sid would broker things so that his employer got a deal because of the interruption to the promised timeline.

Sid's didn't have anything he could use and still the killer did not enter the room. Sid had chose to come early because he knew the hours that Penny kept and he knew the hours of the parlour. People would start rolling in usually around ten o'clock or so. Stag parties, sometimes. Or university kids trying something daring. Mostly it was guys getting out the strip joints with such a raging hard-on that they came here for some kind of relief. Sid had watched them all from the lobby, reading his newspaper, waiting for Penny to be free. This had been at the beginning. Soon enough, after a few months, all Sid had to do was come in and ask if Penny was in and they took him by the hand to her room. Sid found out after that it wasn't really her room, just the one she rented from the landlord by the hour, and if she was renting, she had explained to Sid, then I want the room that I want. He hadn't argued but then he considered it bad policy to argue with a woman who had a handfull of his cock in her hand.

Sid looked around the room now. His eyes had adapted to the darkness and a little of the dim red light from the emergency exit sign leaked trough. He could make out some features of the wall and the floor, piecing it together with his memory of the room when it was better lit, but always with that same red light that was so forgiving to the mottled skins of the customers that took on Penny's services. Despite all of that, he heard Penny's words when he saw the room.

She had told him it reminded her of a stone grotto that maybe some god of Olympus had scooped from the solid, rocky heart of the Earth in defiance

of the Earth goddess that was his wife, to hide away his favourite handmaiden. Sid had never been into any of the other rooms to see if there was something to compare it to, but he did think that the words she used to describe it were a bit high handed. Not the words he would have thought for her to use.

"A girl like me?" She had asked. "That's what you mean, right? A girl like me."

"Don't go throwing words in my mouth," Sid had defended himself.

Her reply had been the smile that kept on bringing him back. "It's okay," she had explained to him. "It's alright. I like surprising people.

"Everything's better if it's a surprise, Sid," she had went on. "Wouldn't you agree?"

Sid shook his head and forced his eyes to open. He had fallen asleep and the hallucinations started. He needed to focus on the situation. When he had went to sleep, he had managed to fall the the floor again, his bare ass against that cold, fake tile. He put his mind to that and he could feel that chill wash over him. He grabbed it and smiled. He tried to stretch but that pain in his shoulder just wouldn't let him enjoy the release. But the pain was something else to grab onto and he tied it down in his head, pinned it down as one of the things that would keep him awake. He slid to a standing position again, using his legs and griding his back against the wall. Fake or not, it still scratched his skin, but he created spider thin threads of conciousness from them and tied them down in his mind. He reached out to grab at Penny's table for support.

He heard the lighter fall to the ground with a chink and he got an idea. He fell to his knees, taking with him the jarring pain that shot

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through his back, and groped for the fallen lighter. He found it and laughed to himself but looked to the door to see if anyone was coming. He smiled and pulled himself to a full kneeling position, using just his stomach muscles. He shot out his right foot quickly, so he was only on his left knee. He pushed up on his right knee with his left hand and creaked himself to his feet. He would win now, he was sure. He only needed a story for the cops.

He held the lit lighter in his left hand and raised it to the ceiling, walking around that way until he found what he was looking for. He always thought they looked like metal flowers growing upside down on the ceiling. He had thought that way since grade school, seeing them mounted between those cheap, white, fibreboard tiles. The ones that sometimes got those stained in a way that made you wonder if rats weren't scurrying around up there, pissing all over the joint. At least, that was what Sid thought when he was at school. For now, in the massage parlour after being shot by someone who wanted him dead, those metal flowers would save his life. All it took was a lighter placed underneath them to burst that little bulb – Sid noticed that the bulb in the ceiling was either orange or red and he hoped that his lighter would get it hot enough.

He stood on Penny's stool and got high enough to reach up and put the tip of the lighter's flame under the tiny, metal blossom. Once the bulb burst, the rain would fall, and down would come the authorities, cops, firefighters, and all. He shook his head to clear it – he wasn't blacking but he was starting to see things when his eyes were open and hear things that weren't there. Down would come baby, cradle and all? Was that what he had been thinking. His left arm started to ache. The bulb did not want to burst.

It did and surprised Sid so much that he fell off of the stool and onto

the cold floor. He screamed in pain, not caring if the person who was trying to kill him heard. They had five minutes at most to gather up all of their shit and get the hell out of here before the cops got here. Sid prepared his mind. He needed to. The pain was so great and he was so truly afraid that he might say anything to get the cops to help him. And perhaps that would work for him. He was threatened by the cops, he could say, because he had been attacked once and the cops attacked him again, accusing him to be someone that he wasn't. They harrassed him and taunted him and told him that they would give him all of the attention he needed once he told them exactly who he was. Sid would have told them that he was the the fucking King of Nepal for three tabs of Vicodin. That's what he would tell them. He would tell them all that he knew and then take it all back and they would never be able to use it against him. The people he worked for. They would take care of him.

"Run, Run away," he whispered. "Fast as you can."

He got to his feet again, almost slipping under the weight of the drenched towel wrapped around his shoulder.

"You can't catch me," he yelled, sputtering the words. He felt the water spray out from his lips. "I'm the gingerbread man."

He unwrapped the towel from around his shoulder and flung it at the door. The fibers had embedded into the healing wound and when he tore the towel off the bleeding resumed. He couldn't see anymore, the lighter had gone out and was now too drenched to be used, but he imagined thin, pink rivulets flowing away from him to some drain in the floor.

"Sid!"

Someone called his name from the other side of the door. The cops couldn't know he was here. His employers? They might but he doubted it. They

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didn't know his rituals. He loped to his right, to where he remembered the tub was, and tried to get in and hide from whoever was calling him.

Oh fuck, he thought. The guy hasn't left. What kind of motherfucker was this?

"It's Penny! Where are you? Oh, God, where are you?"

Sid splashed over to where he remembered the door to be and smashed into the wall with his right shoulder. Explosions of agony. Time ran short but he couldn't guess how much was left. The cops would surely be here soon.

"Put her down, Fucker," Sid spluttered. "It's me. Let her go."

From fairy tales to fuckin romance, Sid thought to himself. He ran his left hand down his face to clear it despite the fact it was all still dark.

The door to the room opened and the red emergency exit light folded into the room, the falling water from the sprinklers visible only as shadows on the floor. A figure darkened the door and Sid lunged for it, ready to tear off whatever his hands came into contact with first. Penny dodged his grasp and Sid fell to the floor.

"Oh fuck Sid, oh fuck," she said, reaching for him and turning him over.

"S'okay, you go," he said. "I'll take care of him. Cops'll be here any minute."

"I know, Sid," she said. "It'll all be okay. Thank you, Sid, thank you."

He smiled. He wanted her to kiss him.

"Remember that bodyslide I promised you, Sid?" she asked. "Do you want it now? We're all wet. We don't need the oil."

The doorway had hewn the red light into the shape of a dagger on the

floor and Sid lay down on it, Penny naked and at his feet. Naked except for a belt, he saw. He could not stop her as she crawled up his body. He couldn't make out her eyes in the dim light, but they were open only to dark slits, and her smile curved only one side of her face. She put her face to his and he could feel her through the sheath of wetness, her breasts touching his, the soft press of her hips into his waist – she was an inch or two shorter than him. She put her full weight against him and drew his hands to her body and he cried out in pain when she grabbed his right. She let go of his left hand and kissed his right.

“Thank you, Sid,” she said. “Thank you.”

She sat up and staddled his chest, putting his right hand on her shoulder and pinning his left with her leg. She reached around and from her belt drew a semi automatic pistol wrapped in a clear plastic bag, the only thing extended from the bag was the long flash supressor. She fired nine rounds, point blank into his right shoulder, gradually drawing her aim down, like she was trying to cut a piece of paper in half by creating perforations that she could tear across.

“I was going to take just the finger, Sid,” she said. “But I don't give bodyslides for free.”

A pendant on her belt glowed green and she got to her feet. Sid writhed in pain and screamed and screamed some more. The flesh had been shorn from his shoulder and the bone was scattered but not severed. She took the arm and put her bare foot down, close to his neck, and snapped it like a choice tree branch she wanted to use on a nice nature hike. She put the muzzle of her weapon to his forehead but he thrashed too much for her to get good contact so she changed her mind.

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She ran on her tippy toes through the deepening water to the unlocked door beneath the glowing emergency exit signdoor with her key to her new life under her arm.

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