



FARRAGO
this WEDNESDAY
@LOVE HOSPITAL
370 Queen St W

\$10

I WILL SOON BE MARRIED

a short story by JOHN TAIT

I will soon be married, though it's nothing I would have believed, nothing for which I'm prepared. The bride is asleep across town, and she and I have made no real plans. We've scarcely discussed it. Yet I feel a pang of anticipation each morning. I feel that same ache now while I sit with my guitar across my lap, drunk and trying to stay conscious at four in the morning. I've spent too many nights like this, drinking beer, holding but not playing my Telecaster, writing songs in my head. Mr. Galvez, my downstairs neighbor, pounds his ceiling (my floor), though I don't know why. I've annoyed him many times with parties and loud music, but I haven't made a

sound tonight, haven't had it in me to play a note while I compose "I Will Soon Be Married," a song for my bride-to-be in her distant bedroom, her black hair arranged in sleep in ways I can't imagine. Mr. Galvez bangs again, and I wish he would go to bed, that he would even be happy for me, that he would leave me in peace and let me finish writing my song.

Elzbietta, my fiancée, is the singer in my band. I met her a year ago, in the summer, after I lost my job at Record King. I was living in a rehearsal space and sleeping on a stinking mattress where something else lived that bit my legs

at night and left scarlet marks that didn't itch but still troubled me. I knew the bites came from that mattress because I would circle each one with blue ballpoint pen before I slept, and the next morning I'd find four or five new ones. I felt a simmering, sick anger all that summer, and I wasn't sure if I'd been poisoned by what had bitten me, or if it was just the indignity of wearing those marks.

I had just formed a band called Farrago. I've been in bands for the past twenty-four years, since I was fourteen. The other members were old friends: Aaron, the drummer; and Carl, the bass player. We came together because we had few complaints with each other as human beings, unlike the members of my previous band, which had dissolved when I punched the drummer in the eye. Farrago jammed for hours in the space where I slept, captured ideas on a four-track when we weren't too stoned to hit RECORD. Over time we developed a repertoire of slow boleros, sleepy waltzes, and lugubrious country ballads that I sang passably.

One night we played the Love Hospital, a small club here in Toronto. In the sparse audience, a black-haired girl sat alone, her backpack balanced in her lap. A skinny punk at the next table was trying to make this black-haired girl, leaning his chair back and rattling his bracelets. A college boy two tables away was trying to make her too; I watched while he stroked his damp upper lip and gathered advice from his friends. Even the barmaid was trying to make this black-haired girl, trailing a hand along her freckled shoulder, pulling a braid aside to whisper in her ear. The girl smiled serenely at each of them but kept her eyes on the stage throughout our set, her braids bracketing her pale, serious face, her eyes the color of varnished teak. I decided if I was going to approach her it should be right after the show, while I was still stoked from playing. After the encore, I headed to the bar to plan my next move, but she was already at my side, so suddenly it startled me. I introduced myself and prepared to discuss what girls usually want to discuss after shows.

"I'm Elzbieta," the black-haired girl said. "I would fit with you."

She was younger than she'd looked from afar, twenty-four at most. I couldn't place her accent, with its nasal lilt and swallowed syllables.

I smiled. "Fit with me?" I was about to ask what she had in mind when her eyes dropped. I thought maybe she was shy, until I followed her gaze to where my wool sock had fallen and saw she was staring at the ring of scarlet bites around my right ankle, some circled in faded blue. They looked like plague sores. I forgot the words I'd been about to speak, drew my foot back, and felt the same heavy anger I'd carried all summer.

"I'm sorry. I mean I would fit with your band." She looked up with timid insistence. "I sing."

"OK," I said, and gave her the address of my rehearsal space before she hurried off. The next day she left two items there: a battered cassette wrapped in newspaper and a jar of fragrant cream with a Polish label that made the marks on my legs fade.

Each night for a week I lay on my infested mattress, head-

phones covering my ears, and listened to her singing over a Casio organ, her voice breathy and close against a cheap microphone. She sang mostly pop songs from the seventies — the Carpenters, Linda Ronstadt, Bread — along with a version of "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head," which she sang in the singular: "Raindrop keep falling . . ." Toward the end she sang along to Polish songs on the radio, very softly, sometimes too softly to reach the high notes, her voice dropping to a broken whisper.

It never occurred to me then whether her voice was good or bad, skilled or unskilled. It was just a voice in a distant room that had become a voice in mine, a voice singing late at night, trying to empty some restless sorrow while not waking the parents in the next bedroom. I listened to the tape every night, rewound and replayed it until the battery light on my Walkman dimmed to a tired amber eye.

I invited her to a rehearsal. Aaron and Carl sat and watched while she laid out her yogurt and bottled water, placed a small stuffed ape by her microphone stand, took off her shoes and socks, and stretched as if she were about to run a sprint.

"We would never subject *you* to this," Carl muttered as I passed.

We began the first song on the practice tape I'd given her, her voice timid at first, then rising and gaining strength in the small room. I saw the others exchange glances during the second song, which was followed by a silence that Elzi broke with nervous laughter. We ran through our set once, then a second time. Afterward Elzi sat on Aaron's stool and asked him to teach her simple drum patterns, then cooed at wallet pictures of Carl's daughter. There was no consultation or vote. She came to our next rehearsal and sang at our next show.

Elzi and I dated for a few weeks, went to matinee movies where I gave whispered explanations when the actors spoke too quickly, window-shopped in front of Bay Street boutiques where we could afford nothing. She came to my place a few times, though she would never stay the night, because her aunt would worry. She always dressed and left after the evening news. One night, after a downtown gig before our largest crowd to date, she told me she didn't think we should continue.

"I'm too old for you," I muttered.

"It's not that. I like you, Tommy. I just think our music is more important. It's more important to me right now than anything. The band is just about to get big, right? If you and me stayed together, and things went badly between us . . ."

"Sure, I understand."

"You are OK, Tommy?"

"I'm fine," I told her, though afterward I walked the streets all night until the cold forced me into a busy cafeteria, where I stood in line with weary construction workers and cops for ten minutes before I realized I wasn't hungry.

Elzi's predictions about Farrago were right. Things have gone well in the year since then, better than any of us imagined, with growing crowds and a successful EP on a local label. Or, rather, things were going well until one night a week ago when I walked Elzi home after rehearsal. She'd

been quiet all evening, not joking or teasing as usual. At her door she invited me in for coffee. Elzi lived with her aunt in an apartment squeezed into the right half of a two-story house. I'd been only as far as the small kitchen, which was just past the front corridor, with its hung jackets and vacuum cleaner. I'd never seen her aunt, only heard her muttering in Polish at the top of the stairs, seen her slippers on the bottom step, and drunk the coffee she'd brewed, though her doctor wouldn't let her drink it.

I was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping strong coffee with whiskey and describing a scuffle with a bouncer the previous night, waiting for Elzi to sigh and scold me, when she asked solemnly if I would "get married" to her.

I laughed, too drunk to catch on.

"I'm serious, Tommy. My visa expires soon." She smiled mirthlessly. "I have to go back. Or they deport me."

"I thought you were getting your permanent residency." I blinked at her. "Why didn't you tell me this before? Jesus. What about the band?"

"Don't be mad, Tommy. I'm embarrassed. I read it wrong, the information. I thought my aunt would be enough for them. But I got a letter." She stared down at her folded hands. "You think I'm stupid, don't you?"

"I don't." I stared at my own hands, scraped and nicked from the previous night's fight, and laughed. "Why me, Elzi?"

"I don't know anyone else I can ask."

She cried then, muffling her sobs in the crook of her elbow. When I told her — when I *promised* — that I would do whatever she needed, she cried louder and kissed me on the temple, dark braids wagging, then said good night and climbed the stairs to her bedroom. I finished my coffee, let myself out, and walked home like a sleepwalker, in a spray of rain that failed to rouse me from my dream.

That was a week ago, and tonight our band is playing an "important" show — important because industry and media people might be present. Jonny Woodbine will probably make an appearance, as he has at a few recent shows. None of this means much to me. Over the years, in different bands, I've been wooed and courted and have even signed contracts. I've heard whispered promises that made me walk the streets all night, too stoked to sleep, predictions that made me quit jobs and lose friends and spend money I never saw. My expectations now are modest. Farrago is specialized and offbeat. We've built a respectable following, enough to fill most smaller clubs, but we've plateaued. Without a major financial push or solid distribution deal, we're better off staying small and local.

Tonight I play guitar and watch Elzi, who stands between me and the faces ringing the stage in her thrift-store cocktail dress, barefoot as usual. I watch how her shoulder blades fan with each breath, how she leans forward on the balls of her feet when she comes to a note she's struggled with, toes curling as if gripping the stage.

Elzbieta is our main attraction. No one but her would deny this. Many of our fans are young men who stand rapt as she sings in her closed-eyed, swaying style, cupping the mike in her hands as if it were a small bird. I suspect many of these young

men imagine hearing this voice across an unlit bedroom. She appeals to women, too, though in them her voice awakens a pleasurable brooding. After our shows, the men look stirred, sharp-eyed with longing, ready for adventure. The women look pensive and morose, ready to go home early, to think and reevaluate. A small throng waits for Elzi after each show. She talks and shakes hands, accepts the adulation gracefully.

As I watch her sing tonight, it occurs to me, as it has in every still moment this week, that she and I will soon be married, and I'm embarrassed to say the idea sends an electrical current through my insides — until I remind myself that it shouldn't. Though Elzi and I have hardly discussed our plan (at her request), it hasn't much left my mind. Tonight, after our important show, Elzi makes the announcement to our bandmates over a bottle of wine backstage. Carl claps and whistles. Aaron says nothing, only looks from one of us to the other.

"Talk about taking one for the team." Carl punches my shoulder.

"Oh, yes, so awful to marry me." Elzi pretends to sulk until he kisses her forehead.

"I'd do it myself, sweetie, but they'd have me in jail for bigamy." Carl frowns. "Though I'm still an accessory to immigration fraud now, right? Great."

After the others leave, Elzi wants to finish the bottle with me and make wedding plans. I pretend to be annoyed, though it's something I have thought about, late at night or in the morning before I'm fully awake.

"You must wear a suit and good shoes, Thomas," Elzi announces, putting on the stuffy manner she uses to tease me now and then, "or I will be very embarrassed."

"I'll see what turns up."

"And it must be in a church."

"For fuck's sake. Are you serious?"

"Of course." I see a mischievous gleam in her eyes, but perhaps some sincerity too. "It must be."

I scowl and sip wine. "OK, how about that little chapel in the Annex, the Polish one near the IGA dumpster that smells like cat piss?"

She gasps and wrinkles her nose. "Saint Stanislaus? No. So dirty."

"Why are you the one calling all the shots? I'm doing you the favor. Saint Stan's or nothing."

She throws up her hands and sits back grumpily.

I lay out my other conditions: that we must be serenaded by a sweaty fat man playing mazurkas on an accordion; that I must have all the homemade pirogies I can eat, preferably greasy ones; that the service must be conducted in Polish by an old drunken priest with bad teeth and gin blossoms.

"What are gin blossoms?" Elzi asks. I tap the bridge of my nose, the broken blood vessels there. She leans close and squints but claims she can't see anything. "Well, I want a little girl to carry flowers," she says defiantly.

"Yes, an angry, ugly little Polish girl from the neighborhood who makes faces all through the ceremony, with a limp or a stutter or a lazy eye or —"

Elzi sniffs. "I should have listened to my friends. They



IGOR MALIJEVSKY

warned me about you. I should have found a nice boy who will be good to me instead of . . ." She sighs and stands, unsteady from the wine, her expression one of convincing martyrdom. Then she kisses my cheek playfully and heads home to her worrying aunt.

After most of the crowd has left and we're breaking down the gear, Aaron stops me and, with the same tone he might use to criticize a guitar solo in rehearsal, asks what the hell I think I'm doing.

"If I don't do it, she'll be deported. We'd never replace her."

"That isn't why you're doing it." He doesn't look up from the patch cords he's untangling. "You know she could find some nice guy to help her out. You don't have to be that guy."

I say nothing, feeling shamed and cross, like a schoolboy caught passing love notes in class. I'm not sure how he knows,

what exactly he's witnessed from his perch behind the drum kit. Though I know he's right, I also know that I will do whatever Elzi needs.

(end of excerpt)