

Tchaikovsky for Zombies, Opus One

by Deborah Cota & Sam Reeves

Vanessa thought the two guys were drunk when they staggered in, but they weren't. The peeks of road rash through their jeans said the holes were not there for reasons of fashion. Shuffling toward the end of the bar, they traded nervous laughs and sat down. *Had they been in an accident*, she wondered and eased her way closer through the crowd of long, gray beards and tendrils of cigarette smoke that looked like floating cobwebs. Vanessa had seen the two guys in here before. In fact, she had gone to school with one that she identified as Marty. In further fact, when she was a sophomore, she had refused to kiss Marty at the Fireman's Hall Dance because she had come with her boyfriend. High standards for someone who earlier in the night let Alfred Dyer accidentally elbow her boob. Four times.

When she got close enough, she noticed the skinny one introduced himself to a green neon sign in the shape of the Monster Energy logo. Vanessa began to reconsider whether he was drunk.

"Me and Marty go way back. Known each other since we was kids. Both came from blue-collar families and saw our share of ups and downs. He's my best friend, and I'd do anything for him. Including jumping in front of a speeding car to save him. Which I did. Helluva lot a good it did, since we both still got rammed good and hard, and even dragged a short distance, the bastard. Not feeling so hot, we decided to grab a brew or two at this local watering hole, The Icebox."

When the sign didn't respond, Frank gave it a customary flip of the bird and spun around to find his friend, "Shit, Marty...maybe we ought to get to a hospital, or something. You don't look so hot."

"Shut up and buy me a drink, Frank...I'm just rattled. Isn't every day you're dragged by a '69 Camaro with a dickwad listening to Disco music while he's driving? Did you catch that crap on the stereo?"

Frank said, "It was Tchaikovsky, I think."

"Yeah, whatever. Shit. Dumbass." Marty motioned for the bartender to come over.

It was Friday night so two bartenders danced the draft handle jerk. They moved quickly, without grace or words between them, and crossed each other's paths with a cold patience that reminded Vanessa of how adults treated children who were not theirs to correct. Garcia, the one with salt-and-pepper hair who had thrown Vanessa out a couple of times, came to the end of the bar, wiping his hands with a towel. "What can I get you two gentlemen?"

"Couple Coronas." Marty looked at Frank and Frank nodded. Then, back at Garcia, "Damn, you gave this place the right name, The Icebox." He hunched his shoulders. "It's cold in here, Bub."

Vanessa ran her hand around her neck. Wet hair stuck to her skin. There were at least a hundred human furnaces in here tonight.

Garcia came back with the drinks. As Frank handed him a five, he said, "Me and Marty go way back. Known each other since we was kids. Both came from blue-collar families and saw our share of ups and downs. . . ."

Knitting his eyebrows, Garcia looked from Frank to Marty.

Marty opened his mouth a couple of times before any sound came out. "Frank, you said that already, Man. He don't want to hear it again."

Garcia waived the five in the air. "It's all right. I was on the other side of the bar. Couldn't hear." He stepped back to the cash drawer and popped the bill under one of the clips.

The two beers sat on the oak bar, sweating. Frank pulled the lime wedge from one of the necks and gripped the bottle as if he were going to chug it. He didn't. He just held it under his nose for a while and then sipped.

"Can you tell me what day it is?" Frank asked.

"Mmm-hmm. Friday. Frank's Friday. The Friday Frank got fucked up by a Camaro blasting *Funkytown*."

"I thought it was Tchaikovsky."

"What-ever, Frank!"

Vanessa laughed lightly. Marty looked back, over his shoulder and saw her.

"Dumbass," Marty said to Frank. "Your pupils are big as dimes, too." He glanced back at Vanessa again. She knew she had been recognized. Her smile grew. "Why don't we skip the beers and I drive us to the E.R. like you said?"

"We didn't drive here."

"Well, we sure didn't walk."

"No, I think we did."

"No, we didn't. Hello? We were dragged! Remember?"

Frank stared at Marty for a long while before finally saying, "Oh."

"That E.R. is looking better and better, isn't it?"

"Oh, yeah...Tchiakovsky."

Marty starts singing, "*Gotta move on! Won't you take me down, to Funkytown?*"

Frank shook his head and turned away from Marty who was now doing his best Tony Manero, to look for the bar keeps. "Hey! Buddy...I think we need to find a hospital. Is there one nearby?"

Garcia walked over and talked to Frank and Marty, at first a normal conversation but it soon became very animated. Vanessa stood up to move a couple of stools closer for a better vantage point, and stepped on something squishy. Looking down, she tried not to barf as she took an obscene cocktail napkin from the bar and scraped what looked like an ear from the bottom of her black Sharpie-repaired, thigh-high boots.

"Excuse me, but...is this yours?" Vanessa said, placing the mangled wad of bloody cartilage on the bar top.

"Is that a pizza roll?" Garcia alerted. "We do not allow outside food in here. This isn't a park. I'll have to ask you to leave if you've brought..."

"Hey! Frank! Isn't that yours?"

"WHAT?"

"FRANK! ISN'T THIS YOURS?"

"Oh, shit! Marty...that's mine! Put this back on."

"With what?"

"WHAT?"

"I have super glue," Vanessa said, taking a small plastic bottle from her oversized Hello Kitty purse. "Never know when you'll break a nail, ya know. Girl's gotta be prepared."

"WHAT?"

Marty took the bottle, "Thank you," he said, looking at Vanessa twice before asking, "Do I know you?"

Vanessa started to tuck her flat-ironed hair behind her ear (more than one guy had said she looked cute when she did that) but the slimy red chunk in the napkin made her stop. *It kinda does look like a pizza roll.*

The wound on the side of Frank's head was smaller than she thought an entire ear should leave. She laid her hand on the side of her neck, because that looked cute too, and it gave her the opportunity for her fingertips to explore exactly how much of her ear made contact with her head. Less than she thought.

"Yeah," she said to Marty. "I think you probably know me."

Marty could not look more different from Frank. Frank was bony with skin so white it had a slight grayish tint. Marty would look good in a suit. He reminded her of Malcolm X -- not Denzel Washington as Malcolm X, but the man born Malcolm Little, who died in 1965, and had once apologized for some of his actions as a Muslim, saying "I was a zombie then . . . pointed in a certain direction and told to march."

Vanessa had paid attention in high school. She learned though, far too late, that taking a break afterward lets people forget those good grades. With a little longer break, you forget too. Bit by bit, that girl is gone and one takes her place that fixes her boots with markers and offers first aid for major head wounds in the form of a "Sooper Stick" from the impulse buy aisle. Normal people don't do that. A woman who starts the night with a Long Island iced tea. Vanessa swirled the ice in her glass.

Marty said, "You're familiar . . . That's all I remember."

"What if I said, 'I don't want to be tied down my senior year'?"

Marty's face smoothed and he picked up his Corona. "Your hair is lighter."

"Yeah. Started happening about the time I hit the big three-five."

Vanessa felt giddy, the same feeling as stepping onto the porch of your childhood home for the first time in years. The same fear of the unknown, too, that something had changed. Of course, flirty nostalgia probably was not a normal sensation while standing beside someone with a wound that wasn't bleeding quite right. There was also a weird scent coming from these guys, something layered, like a trace of car exhaust in wet leaves. She didn't care, though. Those thoughts were just background noise to her main goal, which was *How do we ditch Frank?*

Frank, though, apparently had a talent for making things harder than they should be.

She felt a pressure change in the air, even before Garcia said, "What the hell?"

Frank had picked up the ear, sniffed it, and then popped it in his mouth swallowing it down with a sip of his beer.

Garcia took a step toward Vanessa's end of the bar. "You bunch get out, now!"

Being thrown out brought back memories.

Frank's eyes half closed and fluttering, he said, "It's cold..."

"D' Fuck out now! You too, Vanessa. Shit!" Garcia started wiping his white towel through the gore on the bar.

Without opening his eyes, Frank said, "Me and Marty go way back. Known each other since we was kids. Both came from blue-collar families..."

"Shut up, Frank!" Marty and Vanessa said together as they dragged Frank off the stool and out the door.

A loud, "*Hey, Vanessa! Who elbowed you now?*" came from the back of the bar, followed by raucous laughter, wolf whistles and the clinking of many glasses.

Marty looked at Vanessa. Vanessa shook her head, muttered 'rat bastard' under her breath and continued the humiliated stroll of the recently dismissed.

"My car is over there," Vanessa said, nodding her head in the direction of the garbage bins. "I always park there. By the employees."

"That's a long ways to walk for a young gal all by herself," Frank said, trying his best to flirt with Vanessa, but the moment was lost when his left eyeball fell out.

Marty screamed, "Oh. My. God. We need to get you to a hospital. Saint Andrews still..."

"You haven't been home in awhile, have you, Marty? Saint Andrews is a private facility now. Feds came in and turned it into a special medical treatment center after some Vets who volunteered for a special mission got sick. Somewhere out on that highway. Next closest hospital is thirty miles away," Vanessa said, marveling at the dangling orb. "Frank, doesn't that hurt? Aren't you in pain?"

"Nope. No pain. Check it out! Look what I can do!"

Frank whipped his head back and forth and made the eye bounce off his forehead like an old paddle ball game. The bloody eye bounced further and further until the nerve and muscle tissue snapped. Off went the eye, rolling away.

"Shit, Frank!" Marty said sitting him down on the bumper of the car next to Vanessa's, as she handed him her copious key rings attached to a mini flashlight. "I don't see it. Do you see it, Vanessa?"

Vanessa gasped, "Marty! Your eyes."

"What? What about my eyes?"

"They're white!"

"Yep...just like milk, Marty," Frank said. "How about mine? Look at mine!"

"I can't find yours, Frank."

"The other one, Dumbshit!"

Marty walked up to his buddy, shined the light there and screamed.

Frank laughed, "What? Is it bad? Am I not pretty anymore? Tell me, Marty? Can you still love me?"

Frank's stomach grumbled long and loud. He moaned. Marty handed Vanessa's multitude of key rings back to her as he went to his friend and started to sit beside him. Marty's stomach grumbled. He moaned like Frank, but stopped and nudged Frank to look at the car he was sitting on.

"The car?" Frank said. "What about...? Tchaikovsky's car?"

Marty nodded yes, and yanked a chunk of flesh from the grill and compared it to the gash on Frank's arm.

"This the car that hit you two?" Vanessa asked, her eyes wide at the discovery.

Frank and Marty looked to each other, and then at the car. Nodding to Vanessa in unison, they doubled over in pain, holding their midsections.

"Son of a bitch," Vanessa mumbled, finally putting two and two together.

"Hungry. Feel like...I haven't eaten all day." Frank moaned.

"Me, too. Starved," Marty said. "Must, eat! Now!"

The two stared at Vanessa as if she were a barbecue dinner. Her skin crawled.

"This car...is Garcia's car," Vanessa said. "You know, the prick that just threw us out. Thrown me out before. Stood me up a time or two. Just as well, I guess. That one's ego is bigger than his balls, if you know what I mean. We've all told him he drives like a maniac. Always texting. Tap-tap-tap...all down the road," Vanessa says backing away from the two and around the car. She looked and saw the dents and dried blood along the drivers side. "Looks like he's really done it now. This is a hit and run."

Vanessa's mind was reeling. Should she call the cops? Would they believe her? She was talking to two Zomb...*no, of course they won't believe me.* Should she just get her daddy's gun and put them out of their misery?

"Hungry," Frank moaned.

"Yes, hungry," Marty said. "And angry for what he did to us. To you."

Or use them to her advantage?

No. It's murder! It's wrong!

Just as if she took her daddy's Berretta from the glove box of her car into the bar and gunned Garcia down like she dreamed. And what about the others. All her so called High School 'friends' who laughed at her behind her back; mocked her and belittled her. The poor kid from the other side of the tracks; growing up with nothing in a small town of finger pointers, false friends and little men who just wanted a quick feel with bragging rights.

It felt like Senior year all over again, and she still wasn't going to be tied down.

Marty approached her aggressively. She put her hand on his arm to stop him. He looked at her; his non-fat milk eyes puzzled. Something else drew his attention, over her shoulder. Footsteps in the gravel approached.

"Good night, Vanessa. Better get home before Garcia sees you touching his car. You know how he gets."

"Thanks, Jerome! Good Night!" Vanessa called out to the other bartender as he jumped in his car and sped away.

Marty looked to Frank, smiled and moaned some sort of brotherly acknowledgement that Frank clearly understood. Vanessa smiled at them both, knowing instinctively what they were thinking.

"Marty, do you remember Alfred Dyer? He's the one that yelled to me when we were kicked out. He's a big time banker now. He foreclosed on my family's home and threw me and Dad out on the street. I think you should introduce Frank to him. He's sitting at the back of the bar. I think he might *like* him."

Frank laughed, guttural and congested, followed by a low growl from his throat and stomach.

"What about Tchaikovsky?" Marty asked, his words had begun to slur.

"Yeah, cuz you know, me and Marty go way back...."

Vanessa bowed and waived her arm, inviting her guests back to the front doors of the bar, "Yes, Frank. I know. Tchaikovsky, too."

As the two assassins walked in to the bar, there were no funny punch lines. No quick comebacks. Just a steady increase of screams and pleas for help.

Vanessa ran to her car, and pulled up in front of the doors, blocking them from access outside. Reaching inside her glove box, she took out her daddy's Berretta and shoved it inside the top of her boot. One day, she knew she would have to kill them. They will become feral, just like the soldiers in that facility. For now, they were reasonable and served a purpose.

She sat and waited; listening to the screams and moans start to die down. Turning on the radio, she scanned the stations. Finding something familiar, she sings along, *"Talk about, Talk about, Talk about movin. Gotta move on... Gotta move on... Won't you take me down, to Funkytown?"*