

Black Swan

BEFORE

1 Two Nice Young Ladies

“Hey, Duuf.”

“What?”

“You know what’d be a laugh?”

It’s Friday afternoon after school and we’re sitting by the Purple Pond.

“We” is Rifka and me. And Rifka is my best friend. She invents stuff. She does it all the time.

“My dad died last night.”

“What?!”

“Just kidding.”

That kind of thing, but also stuff to do.

“Shall we start smoking?”

“Why?”

“Sounds like a laugh.”

I didn’t think it sounded much like a laugh, and I was right. But we did it anyway. We tried smoking. I was sure Rifka had done it before. I kept coughing the whole time. Rifka didn’t.

“You’re not doing it right,” said Rifka.

“So how should I be doing it?”

“Give it here.” Rifka took the cigarette. We were sharing it. Because we only had one between the two of us. Rifka had nicked it, from our teacher. He’d left the packet lying around on his desk. “He won’t notice one missing,” said Rifka. We were standing behind the bike sheds, just after home time.

“Look,” said Rifka. “Like this.” She took a drag. It looked good, like the way you’re supposed to take a drag on a cigarette. “Do you see now?” said Rifka.

I wondered where all the smoke had gone that she’d just sucked out of the cigarette.

“Duuf,” said Rifka. “Watch this.” She lifted her chin just a little and went, “I’m a dragon!”

And yep, there, at long last, came the smoke. Out of her nostrils.

Rifka really was a dragon.

I’m Duuf. Or Duuk. People call me both for short, but my real name’s Duveke: Doo-vuh-kuh. Rifka thinks it’s a very ladylike name.

“Just like mine,” she said. “Rifka and Duveke are two nice young ladies.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know,” said Rifka. “Don’t you think so, then?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Sometimes Rifka just comes out with weird things for no reason. But it’s true. We really are two nice young ladies. Smoking that one time wasn’t a big deal.

Another time we phoned Childline, but that wasn’t a big deal either. We just thought it’d be a laugh.

“I’m pregnant,” said Rifka.

“How old are you?” asked the woman from Childline.

“Twelve,” said Rifka.

We were over at Rifka’s place. The phone was on speaker, so I could hear everything. Rifka looked at me and put her finger to her lips. It made me feel warm all over.

“Well, you’ve done the right thing calling Childline,” said the woman. She was being really kind. She said she thought Rifka was a brave girl. She asked if Rifka would tell her who the father was.

“I don’t dare,” said Rifka.

The woman understood. She got even kinder. She said she really wanted to help and that was what she was there for, after all. Rifka winked at me and I could feel my heart pounding. The woman was right. Rifka really was very brave.

“It’s someone in my family,” Rifka whispered down the phone.

The woman didn’t reply. Maybe it had shocked her. It had shocked me. We hadn’t agreed before the phone call exactly what Rifka was going to say.

“Oh, sweetheart,” the woman finally said.

Rifka started to cry. I thought that was really clever of her. There were actual tears coming out of her eyes. And the woman from Childline got kinder and kinder. “Go on. You can tell me,” she said. “If you like.”

“It’s...” cried Rifka. She paused for a moment. A sob. And then, quietly, “It’s my brother.”

I felt really warm now. The woman didn’t say anything for a moment. You could hear her brain whirring through the speaker. When you work at Childline, people must tell you really bad stuff all the time. Like their dad beats them, or their mum’s always yelling at them. But this was really, really bad. Too bad. The woman had already worked out what to say though. “Oh dear, you poor love,” she said. “Oh my goodness me.”

It was at that point that I realized Rifka wasn’t crying, not anymore. She was laughing! Laughing out loud, with tears of delight.

“Oh my goodness me!” yelled Rifka in a mad, squeaky little voice. “Goodness gracious me!”

We were helpless with laughter. I didn’t feel warm anymore. Rifka doesn’t even have a brother.

Another time we nicked all of Luuk’s marbles. So we could give them away to everyone else. But that was because Luuk had said “curly cow”. To Rifka.

“We are going to teach that dorktard a lesson,” said Rifka.

I went and got the marbles from Luuk's drawer. There were about thirty of them, and they were all mega-whoppers. I gave them to Rifka and she stashed them in her jeans and coat pockets. At lunchtime, she climbed up into the crow's nest with them. That's a kind of pole in our playground that you can climb up. With marbles in your pockets.

"You go and gather the people together," Rifka said to me. "And announce to them that I intend to hand out my bounty."

By "the people", she meant as many kids as possible. By "bounty", she meant marbles. I did as I was told. And before long the two of us were up there in the crow's nest. Together. Everyone else stood waiting down below in the sandpit. The people. Lots of people.

"Who..." Rifka shouted down, "... is the King?"

"Rifka!" shouted the people.

"I can't hear you!" said the King.

"RIFKA!" shouted the people again. Louder this time.

So the King took a marble from her pocket. A panda. She held out her arm and opened up her hand. The panda fell straight down into the sand. The people pounced on it. Two boys banged heads. For a panda. Rifka thought that was a right laugh.

"Who..." she asked then, "... would like another marble?"

"Me!" cried the people.

"What you mean is: Me, Your Majesty!" said Rifka.

Yes, that's what the people meant. And so they got another marble.

Rifka is actually more of a Queen, but she thought King sounded better. Which was of course true.

All lunchtime, everyone did whatever Rifka said. For marbles. That was our revenge. On Luuk. For calling her a "curly cow".

We didn't stop until after the bell went. Rifka had handed out all of her bounty and Luuk had actually caught the last marble. I think it was a tiger, or maybe a panther. But whatever it was, there was a chip in it. And the missing chunk had been in Luuk's own trouser pocket all morning.

We call it R.D.F. Which means RIF + DUUF FOREVER. It's written in all of our schoolbooks and on our desks and round the back of the bike sheds. Rifka even wrote it in pen on the bottom of our teacher's desk, but I'm the only one who knows about that.

She's got me and I've got her. That's all there is and we don't need anything else. We don't want anyone else. We think the girls in our class are slutbutts and the boys are all dorktards.

But everyone's always nice to us. That's because of Rifka. And it's not just because you might lose your marbles otherwise. There's another reason too. I can't really explain it, but that's the way it is. Being friends with Rifka is the greatest thing you can achieve. That's pretty much what it's about. And that's why everyone wants to be her friend.

But Rifka herself isn't interested. "Sod the lot of them," she said. "It's us against the rest of the world."

I nodded.

"You and I have only one goal, Duuf."

What's that, then?"

"The two of us have to rule over the nation of dorktards and slutbutts."

Rifka is the boss of the class, and as the boss she gets to decide when we're going to be nice and who we're going to be nice to. I am Rifka's only and best friend. That's because I'm the only one she really likes. "You're not a slutbutt," she once said. I already knew that of course, but it was nice to hear it.

We call it R.D.F. And we are two nice young ladies. We really are.

"Hey, Duuf."

“What?”

“You know what’d be a laugh?”

So yeah, the Purple Pond. We’re nearly always hanging around up there. You know, because we’ve got to hang around somewhere. And because the Purple Pond is ours. No one else goes there, except for us. It’s a bit of water on the edge of the woods. A sort of little lake. And there’s nothing purple about it, but that’s what it’s called. I don’t know why. Rifka knows though. Not really but, like I said, she makes stuff up. All the time. Like why the Purple Pond is called the Purple Pond, she makes that up too. And she comes up with a different reason every time.

“This little boy went missing,” Rifka said one time. “From the village. And then later they fished him out of the pond.”

“Oh.”

He was as dead as a doornail, of course. His face had gone completely purple.”

“Really?”

“From the water.”

Another time she said it was called the Purple Pond because a purple monster had gone for a swim in it. And another time it was because the Germans had dumped bodies in it during the war. “The Krauts,” Rifka called them. And she said the water had turned purple because of all the blood.

“But blood’s not purple, is it?”

“It is if you put it into water,” said Rifka. And she wanted to test it out straightaway. “Got anything sharp?”

“No,” I said.

“That’s a shame,” said Rifka. And she also said we should always carry something sharp with us from then on. Just in case.

“A knife?” I asked.

“As long as it’s sharp,” said Rifka.

I said I thought my bike key was sharp enough. That was a bad idea. Our bikes were lying beside us in the grass. Rifka walked over to them.

“Give me your hand,” she said. She took my key out of the lock and pointed it at me. I didn’t want her to start cutting me. She could go ahead and cut herself instead.

“Fine,” said Rifka. She rolled up the sleeve of her sweater and slashed the bike key over the inside of her arm, in the soft spot by her elbow.

And it immediately started bleeding. Not really badly, but it was still a shock. That soft spot is where your thickest veins are, and you really don’t want them bleeding. Only if the doctor has to give you an injection or something.

“Or if you’re a junkie!” said Rifka. “That’s where they inject their heroin.” She walked over to the edge of the pond and crouched down. She dangled her arm in the water. “You see?” said Rifka. “It’s really purple.”

“Yep,” I said.

But I had to stop looking, because I can’t stand the sight of blood.

“So?” I ask. “What did you think might be a laugh?”

Rifka looks at me mysteriously. With one of those Rifka looks. I know that look very well. It means she’s come up with yet another idea.

“I think it would be a right laugh...” says Rifka, “to go to your own funeral.”

“Oh,” I say.

“Don’t you think it’s a fantastic idea?” asks Rifka.

“But everyone goes to their own funeral, don’t they?”

Rifka shakes her head. “I mean when you’re still alive,” she says. “Actually being there.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“You don’t get a funeral until you’re dead.”

Rifka just nods and smiles. She's already figured that out, but she still wants to do it.

"Well, you can want it all you like," I say. "But it's still impossible."

"You reckon?" says Rifka.

"But how?"

"I don't know yet."

Rifka suddenly looks at me very seriously. Then she says, "Or maybe you've got a good idea."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Do you see anyone else here?"

I don't say anything, because I don't have a good idea.

Rifka slowly shakes her head. She doesn't get why she always has to come up with the ideas.

"Can't you think of something for once?"

"Yeah, sure," I say. "But going to your own funeral is impossible."

"Is that right?"

This time it's me who nods. Rifka laughs. The way she often laughs. Not because something is funny, but because she knows better than you. Rifka often knows better than everyone else.

"You know what your problem is?" she says.

I don't say anything, because I don't know what my problem is.

"You think small," says Rifka.

Like I said, sometimes she just comes out with weird things for no reason. Thinking small. I don't know what that means, so I ask her.

Rifka pretends not to hear. "And thinking small," she continues, "never gets you anywhere."

"Oh."

"It's true," says Rifka. "And that's the difference between you and me. You think small. I think big."

Thinking big and thinking small. Is there really such a thing?

Rifka says, "I think big, so I achieve things."



“What kind of things?”

Rifka laughs her laugh again. “I’m going to be there at my own funeral,” she says. “Because I want to. And when I want something, it happens.”

Rifka’s always coming up with stuff. But I have no idea how she’s going to get this plan to work.

“Just you wait.” She sounds tough. “Want to bet I have a brilliant brainwave in a minute?”

We sit in silence for a long time. We look at the water. Now and then, Rifka throws something in. A pebble or a twig. The twigs float on the surface.

“How did you actually come up with the idea?” I ask. “Of being at your own funeral?”

Rifka laughs. “You’ll never guess,” she says.