

WEST

A play by Terry Kroenung

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SCENE: *Assistant commandant's office, German concentration camp; spring, 1945.*

KLAUS MANN, late 30's, the acting camp commander, stands DC, looking out of the "window". He smokes a cigarette, which is nearly finished, and toys with his SS dagger. He is in full uniform, collar undone, but his holster is empty. Enters JUDITH FRIEDHOF, who is still in the filthy clothes she arrived in: trousers, man's shirt, boots. She has been given an army greatcoat, however. Her hair has not been cut. In her late 20's, she is striking but not beautiful.)

Klaus *(after a pause)*
Fraulein.

Judith
Major Mann.

Klaus *(after a pause)*
Seat?

Judith
No. I've been sitting on the floor of a cattle car for four days.

Klaus *(reaching for her face)*
My poor Judith---

Judith *(jerking her head away)*
Don't.

Klaus *(crosses toward desk)*
Ah...so I'm to pretend that we are merely jailer and inmate, then?

Judith
Pretend? I've been locked up with the dead and dying for the better part of a week, up to my ass in their puke and shit, nearly deaf from their pathetic pleadings to an indifferent God. Five miles away from here we started gagging from the chimney stench. Inside the gate we were herded between head-high heaps of contorted corpses while the guards cackled like lunatics. My entire group, those not pulled lifeless from the car onto the frozen ground, were shoved shrieking into your so-called showers. At the last second I was yanked aside and dragged to a barracks. Now I'm here. Precisely where is the pretense, Herr Jailer?

Klaus
It's complicated.

Judith

You thought I'd walk in here and throw myself breathlessly into your manly arms? "Oh, Klaus, you saved me from the gas! Take me, my love!"

Klaus

Not at all.

Judith

Because I have to tell you, moonlight and candles on the Rhine this isn't.

Klaus

Stop...

Judith

Granted, there is a certain ineffable charm to the warm glow of the crematory fires. And the piles of glasses and dentures make for an erotic ambience a girl would be hard put to resist.

Klaus *(moving toward her)*

Please... You don't---

Judith

I have to confess that the dead bodies of the desperate tangled in the electric fence **do** make me think of romance, somehow.

Klaus

Judith---

Judith

They remind me of how I'd like to cut your heart out, just like you did mine when you started butchering my people wholesale!

Klaus *(slapping her)*

Shut up!

Judith *(doesn't move)*

Yes, that's the sentimental lover I remember. If memory serves, that was your parting kiss in '39. The taste of blood really takes me back to the good old days.

Klaus

Don't try to put it all on me. (pause) The heroine lives. *(draws his dagger, places it in her hands)* It is the tragic hero only who must fall.

Judith *(stepping back)*

Oh! You miserable Christians! You set fire to the entire blessed world and then think you can atone for the conflagration by falling on a knife?

Klaus

No. I just want out of a burning building.

Judith

Then what---? (*finally gets it*) Ah...then this is *Julius Caesar*.

Klaus (*nods*)

Only without the honor.

Judith (*holds the dagger out to him*)

Find yourself another Strato, Brutus.

Klaus

Too late. You auditioned for the role six years ago.

Judith

No! I walked out on the production.

Klaus

It's not that easy!

Judith

I will **not** do this!

Klaus

Why not? You had no trouble cutting the throats of those five Gestapo men in Bucharest.

Judith

They weren't running up to me, eager to taste the blade. It was combat.

Klaus

So is this, my little commando! Look around you! This is how wars end! The losers bleed out their little lives in bathrooms or courtrooms and the rest of you march off to write smug history books.

Judith (*buries the dagger blade in the armless chair*)

Write it yourself! My inkwell is dry.

Klaus

You need motivation, then? A superobjective? (*goes to desk, takes another knife from a drawer*) How about survival? Hot blood instead of cold?

Judith

And I thought the situation was as surreal as it could get.

Klaus *(walking toward her)*

I will **not** be a rag doll dancing on Russian bayonets.

Judith

And I will not make this easy for you! If you want to open your veins to cheat them, then do it! Don't cry to me to help you along.

Klaus

No crying, no begging. If it's the shock of combat you need... *(slashes at her, misses)*

Judith *(jumping back, away from the chair and the dagger)*

Are you out of your mind?

Klaus

Not any more. I had a six-year mad scene, but it just ended. *(thrusts; she evades it)* Come on, Dark Angel! Miss Freedom Fighter! *(gets between her and the SL door)* Earn your liberty.

Judith

And get shot two steps out that door.

Klaus

I gave the guards written orders to let you go. There's a car behind this building. Take the road west. I left a signed pass on the seat. Go west and get into the American lines.

(He cuts at her. She controls his wrist, pulls him past, and makes for the door. He catches her from behind by the hair, hurls her at the chair where her dagger waits. He thrusts. She parries with the chair, still unwilling to use the dagger)

Judith

This is lunacy!

Klaus

And just how are we judging madness these days? Is this crazier than filling pits full of sobbing, writhing civilians? Than enslaving tiny children? Than boiling your family for soap?

Klaus

Ah, finally some heat. You'll have to try harder. I won't just stand still for you. You see, this isn't so much *Julius Caesar* as it is *Macbeth*...Jew bitch!

Klaus

Pretty good for a Christ-killing harpie! Let's go! You only get out this door over my dead body! Don't pretend that distresses you.

Klaus

I hunted your people with a religious fervor when you left. Like I was on a mission from God. Shot cripples in the head, buried babies alive, burned expectant mothers naked and shrieking in their miserable synagogues!

Klaus

Remember...go west. There lies the freedom you've been seeking all this time.

Klaus

I'll be there, waiting for you. (*kisses her, falls*)