

**BLACK MAPLES by Elvira Horompoli**

sample pages 139-146

In 1956 Maria fell ill. The condition was diagnosed as Thrombangiitis obliterans or Winiwarter-Buerger disease. In the years that followed she was twice threatened with the amputation of her right leg. Each time however she managed somehow to avoid the operation. She experienced the worst of her illness at Christmas time when everyone in the family, Valerie, Norbert, Grandfather and little Artur stood around the festive oval table and, as Grandfather wished, solemnly prayed. Maria despised prayer. Any kind of sanctimoniousness irritated her with its seeming pointlessness and she merely opened her mouth mechanically whilst her soul was deeply submerged in her bodily pain. Meanwhile, she asked herself if next Christmas she would still be able to stand at the table on her own two legs or would she be standing on one only.

Three years later, Christmas 1959, the drama of her right leg reached its climax. For the last few months of that year the pain had been making her life unbearably miserable. It was at this time that Norbert's self-imposed period of nightly waking began. During these autumn months he rose regularly around two o'clock in the morning, filled a hypodermic syringe with sedative solution and quietly, so as not to wake Maria's husband, entered their bedroom. Maria was never asleep at this hour. Lying on her bed, she developed the greatest patience that she had ever been forced to develop in her life. It was only this endless patience which sustained her until she spied the awaited silhouette of Norbert in the doorway with the syringe in his hands.

He sat on the edge of the bed looking compassionately into her tormented eyes. (Later he told them that her eyes were so pleading yet so quietly humble that his soul ached to see them). He stroked her thinning hair then pressed the sharp point of the syringe against her skin. Maria always waited for this liberating moment with a quivering longing. Norbert's syringe, that tiny, clever, technical device saved her sanity night after night. Thanks to its clear contents, for a few short hours her life became bearable. Her gratitude was unbounded. Without pain she saw reality in its entirety, its contradictions and its unity simultaneously but as soon as the pain returned, all the variety and the unity narrowed down again to one aspect of agony and suffering.

Norbert pulled out the needle. Maria inwardly thanked him and her guardian angel, as she now called him, went back to bed. Norbert's nightly act of mercy at Maria's bedside went on for several months and the injections became their common channel

of communication. During this time Norbert got to know Maria better than any member of her family had known her throughout her life. Moreover, their late-flowering friendship was born out of great animosity because formerly Maria had not accepted Norbert happily as her son-in-law, the husband of her daughter and father of her grandchild. And faith was to blame for this, uncompromising and explosive faith which can cause war and death and sometimes also divides a woman from her son-in-law.

But what was faith? Maria whispered to herself in bed and admitted that she was almost without faith. She felt that one loses faith to some extent on learning that one may lose a leg! She imagined her severed limb and called up an image of Christ on the cross. And because Christ, as the Son of God, was more human than his vague and faceless father she asked him, 'Is this what you wanted? You sent me pain to turn me into a better human being? Did you really think that would work? '

The many months Norbert spent as the nocturnal angel with the blessed syringe in his hand came to mean so much to him that he gradually developed an inner clock which unfailingly woke him up a few minutes before 2 am. Then one night in January, 1960, he lifted his head sleepily from the pillow and understood immediately that this was the last time he would have to administer the sedative injection. Maria's operation was imminent. Quickly, he left his warm bed and went to fill the syringe. His eyes were still blurred with sleep when he sat on the edge of Maria's bed.

'So, today is the last time, Mama.' He smiled reassuringly as he said this, hoping to lessen the agony. Then he adjusted the point of the syringe to a vertical position and pressed the plunger slightly to release excess air. He placed the point against her skin. Maria, trembling in her eagerness, again absorbed the clear fluid which took away the pain from her blue and swollen legs like a gift from heaven. The circulation in her legs was as cramped, as restricted, as the circulation of her own life.

In that moment of sudden clarity, which carried within itself the traces of all their past nocturnal meetings, in which was reflected the seal of spiritual services and a painfully sweet nostalgia which suggested that something profound was ending, in that moment Maria turned quietly to Norbert and said,

'My son, I don't even know what words to use to describe my spiritual being and the way it has been tested over these past months. I only know that you have helped me with a great deal of self-sacrifice on your part and for that reason it is much harder for me to find the words that will fully express my gratitude to you.' Maria smiled gently.

She placed her hot palm on the back of Norbert's hand, asking, with this intimate gesture, for a little patience on his part. She wanted to prolong this precious moment despite the lateness of the hour and the fact that Norbert had to be up early in the morning. She rested her hand on his and went on,

'I am at a crossroads, son, and this is a painful awareness for an old and ailing person like myself. At this point in life there are not many paths to choose from. One begins to take stock of life. The Lord reminds one of all the injustices that one has subjected other people to in the past. These injustices return to haunt one, they rap on the gates of conscience. I remember my malicious glances, my insulting words, the way I behaved towards my mother after an ugly argument on Christmas Day in 1930 or what I did to my neighbours in '58... and just now, the moment I saw your shadow in the doorway, my mind was invaded by a memory, banal in itself but nevertheless one which had a profound effect on a certain servant girl who worked in our house when I was a young woman. I behaved meanly towards her. You see, every morning this simple creature, wearing a starched apron tied around her thin waist, would serve breakfast to my mother and me. She was an ill-proportioned creature, thin as a chicken bone picked clean of meat. One morning she accidentally knocked over a cup of cocoa. The hot liquid narrowly missed staining my brown velvet dress from Vienna. At first, I was very angry. I got up from my chair. I had an irresistible urge to hit the poor girl across the face with my napkin. But the expression of unimaginable fear on her white face stayed my hand. I would even say that it excited me. It gave me a sudden feeling of power which overwhelmed me. It was strong and pungent, like the acrid smell of ammonia in your nostrils. It was unexpected and riveting. Power over another person. I was stunned. The intensity of the feeling swept away every theory of civility and humility which I listened to ever Sunday under the mighty dome of our church. Priestly dictates would never fill my soul with the powerful feelings I experienced that morning over breakfast. I decided I would take revenge on her, take revenge by frightening her even more. The girl believed profoundly in God. So I told her that she would go straight to hell if she ever poured a full cup of cocoa on the table again. Do you know what it's like in hell, I whispered to her. The poor girl stared at me, she was struck dumb. A famous artist painted hell. His name was Hieronymus Bosch. The pathetic creature shook with terror and ran off into the kitchen. My mother and I laughed. That simple, uneducated girl could not have

known Bosch's famous painting but the very idea that hell was mapped, that someone had actually seen that dreadful place was enough to terrify her in her naiveté.

The next morning I could sense her fear even from behind the kitchen door. I got malicious joy from watching her nervous movements as she carefully placed the tray with the cups and the pot full of hot liquid on the table. She grasped the pot clumsily in both hands and very slowly poured the cocoa into my cup. I was enjoying myself immensely. I sat stock still, deliberately watching her every move. So of course she was so tense that as she moved my cup towards me it toppled over and spilled its contents on the damask tablecloth.'

Norbert laughed. Maria went on with her story.

'The girl stared at the table with her grey-green eyes. A blue vein began to throb in her forehead and she broke into hysterical tears. She fell to her knees before me and clenched my hands in hers, begging me not to be angry and to ask God's forgiveness for her so that she would not have to go into the dreaded hot cauldron in which, so her grandmother had told her, human bones and excrement are boiled together in hell. I looked at her there, so small and broken, at her enormous terrified eyes. I was twenty at the time, she was a little younger. I was wealthy, with dresses and shoes from Vienna and Budapest, suitors galore, no fear of the future. All she had in the world was her conscience and her well-thumbed prayer book.'

Maria stretched in the bed. Her features were relaxed and her colour had improved. She went on,

'And now here I am at sixty, and this little story seems so sad to me. I regret my cruelty. I would like to stroke that maid's hair and ask her forgiveness. But who knows whether she is even alive now. At the time I pushed her away coldly and she shuddered at the thought of hell's cauldron. Over the next few months I gave her no peace. I went on enjoying my power over her, terrifying her by reminding her of the torments in store for her. Then one Sunday evening, (Sunday was her day off) the girl went to church as usual but she never returned to our house. And I glowed and saw it as a great victory.'

Maria sank back into her pillow and closed her eyes. Over her bed hung a picture of the Virgin and Child with a tawdry sunrise in the background. Maria appeared to have exhausted herself with her story and fallen asleep. Norbert turned to leave but Maria suddenly spoke again, her voice hoarse but low in the dim light.

'Don't go, son. There is something I owe you. Give me five more minutes of your time. Please.'

Norbert sat down.

'What do you owe me, Maria?'

'An apology. I want you to forgive me. I can't face the operating table without your forgiveness.'

'What should I forgive you?'

'You know very well,' said Maria, wearily, remembering the day in April, ten years ago, when she had asked, almost ordered, Norbert to visit her at home. At the time Norbert was still her daughter's suitor, not yet her husband. When he arrived she asked him to sit down on the plush, purple sofa and she seated herself opposite him, her swollen legs crossed, and gazed earnestly into his questioning face. She offered him coffee and poured it before he could answer. He asked for one lump of sugar then watched as Maria, with a pair of silver tongs, dropped three lumps into her own cup.

'You shouldn't use so much sugar,' Norbert said gently, remembering her recent diabetes tests which showed that her glucose tolerance was worsening.

'I can't live without sugar,' said Maria tersely. 'One way or another, this body will cope, don't you think?'

'No, I don't think so,' said Norbert firmly. Her flippancy upset him.

'Leave me my beloved sugar. I won't give it up. Anyway, I want to talk to you about a much more urgent problem.'

'Don't you think the onset of diabetes is an urgent problem?' said Norbert, colouring up.

Maria got up from the sofa nervously.

'I am not saying it is a minor problem but I want to talk to you about something that is occupying my mind much more than my health.'

She returned to the sofa with a fat cigar in her hand. Playing for time she explained that she wouldn't offer Norbert a cigar as she knew he didn't smoke. She took her time lighting the cigar. Finally she spoke.

'I am sure you will agree that the family is the basis of society. Married couples, parents, relatives, their harmony... I am sure you will agree that all this is very important.'

She added more sugar to her coffee and stirred it.

'So let me tell you why I invited you here today.'

‘You began by speaking eloquently about the family,’ said Norbert.

‘Be patient,’ said Maria. She drew deeply on her cigar. (Later on it was her heavy smoking which brought about the necrosis of her right leg.) She was playing nervously with the sugar tongs.

‘So... now... every family, in addition to the basic principles of relationships, is guided by an even higher principle. What I would call a spiritual principle. We must follow these principles daily, impart them to our children, all our behaviour must be guided by them, unquestioningly...’

Maria looked Norbert directly in the eye.

‘I’ve been watching you, doctor. You have been courting my daughter for two years now.’

She began pacing nervously about the room. Suddenly she stopped and looked down at him.

‘Doctor, I believe you are of a different religious faith from that of my daughter. My daughter was raised in the Catholic faith but you are a Protestant, I believe.’

‘That is right, Mrs Gall,’ said Norbert.

‘Then my concerns are indeed real,’ said Maria. ‘And as a mother, my concerns are with the upbringing of any children you and my daughter may have. How are you going to raise them successfully in such a confused environment? These differences which go back several hundred years are still relevant today. They can’t simply be ignored. I suspect that...’

Norbert could contain himself no longer.

‘And I suspect that the simple fact of religious differences can in no way interfere in my relationship with your daughter, Mrs Gall. Your daughter and I will resolve this difference together. Valerie and I plan to raise our children with no faith. They will form their own worldview and adopt whatever religious faith they choose.’

‘Faithless, you mean,’ retorted Maria. ‘Heathens. Hedonists. Belonging nowhere and knowing nothing of the higher powers...’

‘They will know nothing of the terrors of the Catholic Church and other wicked rituals,’ said Norbert swiftly.

His words stung her sharply.

‘I am talking to you about higher principles, spiritual principles,’ she said.

‘The highest spiritual principle is love, Mrs Gall. Love for one’s dearest. And surely God loves all of us. In his eyes Catholics and Protestants are equal. In my opinion, you are living in the past.’

Maria could take no more.

‘Get out of my house,’ she cried. ‘You will never see my daughter again.’

‘I am leaving now,’ said Norbert. ‘The atmosphere in this place is stifling. But we will see each other again.’

‘We will see about that,’ whispered Maria as he left. ‘We will see about that,’ she shouted after him.

Hearing her raised voice and sound of the door closing her husband came looking for her. She wasted no time in telling him the details of her conversation with Norbert. Her voice rose in fury.

‘He can’t do this to me,’ she cried. ‘It’s blatant.....’

She fell silent, hearing quiet footsteps in the adjacent hallway. It was Valerie, returning from work.

‘Who are you talking about so loudly,’ she said. ‘I could hear you from the street.’ She laughed and threw herself on to the sofa. She stretched luxuriously. Her work at the kindergarten had tired her and she was relieved to be home.

A strange quiet prevailed. She looked at her father’s downcast face. She saw that her mother was avoiding her eyes. Maria lit a cigar. She was hoping to avoid a confrontation with her daughter. Valerie stretched again.

‘Oh well, if you’ve got nothing to say to me I’ll go eat..., I’m starving.’ She got up from the sofa.

‘Stay where you are,’ her father said angrily. ‘Your mother wants to talk to you.’

Maria glanced anxiously at her husband’s face then turned her attention to her daughter. She still could not look her in the eyes.

‘Valerie, I did what I had to do. I didn’t want to do it, but I had no choice.’ Valerie sat down again.

‘What happened today?’ she asked, curiously. So Maria told her. About her anxieties concerning the religious differences between the two of them and her dawning realisation that the relationship between Norbert and her daughter was becoming more important to both of them. Finally she had to say that she and Norbert had disagreed adamantly, that she had told him to leave the house, that she had virtually thrown him out.

‘My daughter, all I really wanted was for him to return to Catholicism in all its breadth and beauty. And he simply insulted me. What could I do but throw him out of my house.’

Valerie leapt up from the sofa. Her face was contorted with such fury that her parents flinched momentarily.

‘What have you done?’ she shrieked. ‘How dare you talk to him behind my back? How could you throw him out of the house?’ She paused and stared at her parents in dismay. Her voice fell but her tone was chilling now.

‘Listen,’ she said. ‘I love Norbert. If I lose him because of what you have done today, will kill myself.’

Standing there, in her neat white blouse, flared skirt and sensible shoes, her own words terrified her. Then her anger swept back.

‘I mean it!’ she cried. ‘And you will only have yourselves to blame.’

‘To threaten to throw away your life for something so meaningless,’ said Maria. ‘And then to blame us! How can you be so hard!’

‘I will kill myself if I lose him because of you,’ Valerie said again. She might have said more but at that point her father rose.

‘You have said enough,’ he mumbled, and slapped Valerie hard across the face. The girl fell to the floor. She got up slowly. With a great effort she pulled herself together and left the room in silence.