

Of Belonging, Life and Death, and True Love

by Kishore Asthana, MSPE

“We have been married for 50 years,” the man pleaded. “You cannot ask me to do this.”

Schicksal was unrelenting. “I am sorry, you will have to choose. Think of it as a privilege. Others do not get this choice.”

“But we cannot live without each other,” he said, still hopeful. “If I die, she will be devastated. If she dies, I will not find life worth living.”

“But one of you must die before the other,” Schicksal replied, tapping his chin. “I have come to offer you a choice.”

“Does it have to be soon?” the man asked.

“Indeed. The time has come. One of you has to end your life very shortly. It is so written.”

“But ... isn’t it written who it will be?” he asked.

“Usually it is; but in your case, they decided to give you a choice. The date has been assigned, but the name has been left blank. They have asked me to tell *you* to choose which one it will be: you or your wife.”

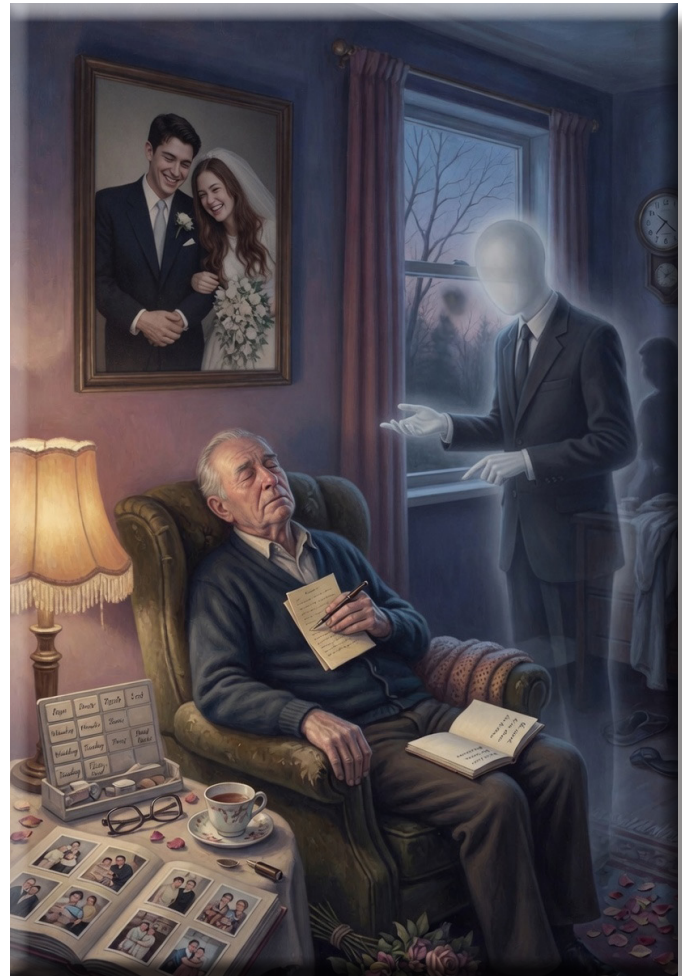
“Who are *they*?” he asked, wondering if he could appeal directly to them.

“*They* are who gave me my existence. Beyond that, I do not know anything about them. They contact me when they wish. I cannot contact them on my own.”

“Ah, so they made you?” he asked, trying to delay the choice as much as he could.

“No. I am just an idea. I am different for different people. Each person gives me a different form, and I reflect what they envision me to be.”

“I do not understand,” the man said. “So, my wife also has a different Schicksal?”



(Illustration created by Kishore Asthana via AI.)

“Yes, she does,” Schicksal said.

“I wonder what that Schicksal would have to say about my choice,” he said, seriously contemplating his situation.

Schicksal smiled. “We are related, you know, her Schicksal and me. I met him before coming to see you. He is waiting to adjust his form depending upon your decision and her reaction to it.” Schicksal paused and said, “So, who will it be—you or her?”

The man did not like the topic coming back to his choice, but he could not find a way out. Still, he had to try.

“What happens if I refuse to make a choice?”

Schicksal did not look happy. “Then things will be very difficult for both of you. I am sorry. That’s what happens when they find that their will has been defied.”

“Can I write both our names at the same time?” he asked.

“No,” Schicksal said, “there is place for only one of your names on that date.”

“And the other date, for the one who survives, is it a long way away?”

“I cannot tell you, but I know it is not very near.”

“But we are both already over 75 years of age. How far can it be?” the man asked.

“Sorry, I cannot say,” Schicksal answered.

“Can I discuss this with her?”

“No. This must be your choice only.”

“Give me 30 minutes, please. I have to think about this,” the man explained.

“Sure,” Schicksal said, smiling. “Take 30 minutes. After all, it is a matter of life and death. I will leave you in peace now and will be back in half an hour.”

And just like that, Schicksal faded away.

The man leaned back and closed his eyes. *What to do? What to do?* All their life together flashed in his mind—the shy girl he had married ... the way they grew together, in time and in wisdom, in sickness and in health, always in togetherness ... her tears and smiles, her pain and ecstasy, her passions and her fears, some of which he understood and some he didn’t, all a part of him, now ... how she was so capable in so many things and so naïve in dealing with so many others ... how they relied on each other throughout these

years. So many things both would miss when either one was no more.

Such a simple decision, really. What was there to think about? Of course he would write his own name. Then he tried to imagine what her existence would be like without him, and he shuddered. *Not so fast. If only I loved her less, this would be so easy*, he thought. *I would summon Schicksal right now and ask him to write my name. But it would kill her.*

This thought made him smile for the first time since he had met Schicksal today. *How she would grin at this pun*, he thought. He smiled again while recalling the many shared jokes at which they had laughed together, some good, some bad ... and some very bad, indeed. But the man sobered again when he tried to picture, in some detail, what would happen to her if he was not there.

Whom will she touch when she turns in her sleep at night? Whom will she snuggle to when she is feeling cold? Whom will she look for when she is not sure of something? Who will arrange her medicine organizer every week? Whom will she ask to fix small and big things? Who will make her laugh? Who will support her when she feels unsteady? In whom will she confide her deepest thoughts without fear of being misunderstood? So many things were done for each other out of caring yet were taken for granted by both till now. *Who will do all these things for her?* He winced, thinking about it.

Suddenly, the man realized what he must do. He also knew only she—and perhaps very few other couples who had also grown together and become inseparable, and who cared so deeply for each other—would understand his decision. Most would not understand, but he did not care about them. She was the only one who mattered to him at this critical juncture of his life—and of hers.

Heartbroken and eyes wet, he waited for Schicksal and tried to strengthen himself for the coming years of utter desolation, loneliness, and unimaginable loss. **Ω**