

Robyn Sykes

DEFINING DAYS

Friday, 4th August, 1978.

Freyja: Old Norse goddess of love and beauty. Wife of Odin. Mother of Thor. Peace loving, sometimes metamorphosed into a bird. Blonde, blue-eyed and beautiful, she had many love affairs.

Pedro didn't know about his Norwegian girlfriend's namesake. All he knew was that his Freyja had at last said Yes!

"Mi amor," he whispered, wrapping her in his sculptured arms like a child embracing a teddy bear. From his pocket he produced the scalloped gold ring that he and his friends had chosen. What a pair they made! he thought. The Latin American Triathlete and the Norwegian Ice Maiden.

Vulcan: Roman god of fire and destruction. Son of Jupiter and Juno. Married Venus, goddess of love and beauty. Venus had many love affairs with both gods and men.

Freyja knew that and more. She knew that if a volcano explodes into a fjord, the pristine water is sullied. For a moment the impending doom is reflected on the mirror-like surface of the water. Then ash clouds the air and molten lava violates the deep water, creating a turmoil of writhing rapids. The volcano's emissions are quenched in a hissing of steam. Larger eruptions destroy the fjord.

Gently Pedro lifted Freyja's right hand and found her fourth finger, in his family's tradition. When they were married, he'd transfer the ring to her left hand. They'd live in Chile and have four children; all athletes like their father.

Pedro thought of his family, in their flat just down the road. Mum and his three sisters would be cooking dinner, chattering away in Spanish. Dad would be drinking mate and telling Mum about the idiots at work. His family would be so happy for him.

Her eyes sparkling like blue ice Freyja freed her right hand. "Put it on my left hand, Pedrito. That's what Australians understand."

At her parent's suggestion, Freyja had taken up a scholarship to study Arts at Sydney University. Her university friends were passionate about equal opportunity, like Norwegians, but anti-whaling. "Viking whale killer," they teased.

Her Viking ancestry embarrassed Freyja. Rape and plunder weren't an appropriate heritage for Norway's modern egalitarian society! Also embarrassing was the goddess Freyja's morals. The modern Freyja abhorred infidelity, but adored excitement.

She loved screaming for Pedro as he raced; learning Spanish; reviling Pinochet. She loved Pedro's intensity. She didn't tell him, but she'd wear his gold band on her big toe, if he insisted. It didn't fit with her ideas of equality, but she didn't care.

1st March, 1979.

Thursday. Thor's day. God of thunder.

Alternately thinking and writing, Freyja sat surrounded by photocopied pages, library books and scraps of paper with interesting facts scribbled on them. Ideas floated around the room like ochre images, tossed inside by the setting sun. Great birthday present, she grimaced. A 1500 word essay on the significance of cave art for Aboriginal society. Due tomorrow.

The security buzzer sounded. Short, long, short ... Pedro's code. He'd misplaced his key again: Freyja dropped her pen reluctantly and opened the door.

Pedro burst in, brown eyes alive with enthusiasm. "Sorry ya can't come, mi amor. I know ya havtta work," he announced, trying to be casual. "But I've gotta go shopping."

What was he up to? Freyja wondered. Of course ... a birthday present.

"Be home 'bout 10. See ya." Pedro bounded down the stairs. A car revved loudly and screeched off. His friends must be with him. "Laying rubber on the road," he called it. "Showing off," she called it.

Freyja scrambled two eggs for her dinner, and smiled wistfully. In Norway they'd top it with smoked salmon. She could nearly taste the smooth pinky-orange flesh ... but of course it was too expensive here.

She worked till 10pm ... Pedro should be home soon ... 10.30pm he was late ... 11pm ... Where was he? At 11.30pm the essay was finished, but Pedro was still not home. Freyja had an early lecture tomorrow; she needed some sleep.

An icy wind blasted in her dreams, tossing her in all directions, thumping her breath away. Powerful, irresistible, Arctic air rushed past her ears, gusting louder, softer, louder. Short, long, short ...

The security buzzer. "He's hopeless," muttered Freyja, dragging herself out of bed. She could hear Pedro and his friends outside, talking and laughing as if the whole world should be awake at 2am, celebrating with them.

"Put the kettle on Freyja," ordered Pedro loudly as the three of them stumbled inside. "We've gotta sober Jose up before we take him home."

Jose looked as though he could drown himself in coffee and still not sober up. Ricardo wasn't much better.

"Where have you been?" Freyja asked.

"Shopping," replied Pedro, too quickly. Jose snorted.

"Did you get anything?" asked Freyja hopefully.

"Nah, we walked and walked, didn't we boys? Couldn't find a thing, could we, boys?" At a glance from Pedro, Jose and Richardo nodded enthusiastically. "Look, mi amor, mi carino, goddess." Pedro's voice turned to a whine. "Get us something to eat, will ya? We're starved."

"It's too late," protested Freyja. He'd forgotten her birthday.

Pedro whispered in her ear. "If ya loved me you'd do it. Ya wouldn't want me to look weak in front of the boys."

Tossing a dark look at Pedro, Freyja headed for the kitchen. She could hear him in the lounge room, carrying on about his wonderful Ice Maiden, how she was going to learn to make empanadas like his mother, how one day she'd get the pastry right.

Freyja cooked six slices of raisin toast, made three mugs of strong black coffee, plonked it all on the table in the lounge room then returned to bed. The raucous voices in the loungeroom precluded sleep.

After a while she heard Jose say, "This's the b-e-s-t night we've had for a-ges, ever since you st-arted going out with h-er. It's gr-eat to have the te-am back together. We don't get ha-lf as many girls when y-ou're not there."

"Yeah. We appoint you official team leader," added Ricardo. "You've got the best opening lines. You chat 'em up, then we move in."

Pedro laughed. "Want my leftovers, do ya boys?"

"Ma-te," replied Jose seriously. "I've ne-ver seen a guy with such gr-eat le-f-tovers."

"They're drunk," thought Freyja. "Don't know what they're saying."

4 March, 1979.

Sunday. Sun's Day. Each day Helios drove his fiery chariot across the sky, seeing all.

The sun dallied behind a cloud as Pedro and Freyja sat on the deck and watched Sydney dawdle past them. It was cold and bleak; the grey waters of the harbour whipped into oily waves. The wind ruffled Freyja's long blonde hair and stun her blue eyes. Her old university college had organised the Harbour Cruise, and everyone was there, mostly hanging around the bar, warm inside and out, drinking, laughing, joking.

Freyja had loved the company and esoteric conversations of college life, discussing existentialism ... feminism ... relationships ... before Pedro had talked her into moving to a flat with him. Just for a while. To help with the rent. Separate bedrooms. Ha. Her Mum and Dad weren't happy, but what could they do from Norway?

Like rocky knolls off the Norwegian coast, Pedro and Freyja sat apart from the college crowd. Freyja twisted her hair one way, then the other. She waved to Janie, her best friend, a friendly girl with dark curly hair and a string of broken-hearted former lovers — like Alan, who was chatting to a girl Freyja didn't know. Janie was flirting with Greg. They all waved, smiled and kept drinking. Occasionally someone would wander past and chat with Freyja, but no-one stayed for a decent conversation. It was warmer at the bar.

What a waste of time, thought Pedro, glaring. I could be training. He flexed his muscles, relaxed them, and flexed them again.

Perhaps people didn't want to interrupt a couple so obviously bent on togetherness. Perhaps Pedro's body language warned them off.

Selfish pricks, thought Pedro. Can't be bothered with Freyja just because she's moved in with me. "This is crap," he muttered as they stopped at a low

wooden jetty to pick up more passengers. "I'm out of here." He strode down the gangway.

After a moment's hesitation, Freyja followed him, waving helplessly to Janie.

"I feel sorry for you," Pedro confided to Freyja later. "You can't pick people, can ya? That Janie is a fat slut. Didn't ya see her all over that idiot?"

A flicker of self doubt dimmed the sparkle in her Nordic eyes. Was Pedro right?

5th May, 1979.

Saturday. Saturn's day. Roman god of agriculture, honoured by the saturnalia.

Cosy camp-fire, welcoming wanderers.
Flickering flames, warm and friendly.
Freyja and friends, enjoying the moment.
Freyja the goddess, biding her time.

Everyone clapped. After a quick bow Alan sat down near Freyja. Greg strummed his battered guitar gently — as he'd just been caressing Janie's hair — and started crooning. "There is a house in New Orleans...." His rich low voice reverberated across the bay. Freyja chinked glasses with Alan, took another sip of wine and joined in the singing. "They call the rising sun...."

The air smelt good, salty and smoky, like the taste of smoked cod in Norway. The waves were gentle, lapping the soft white sand then retreating, free to come and go. Free.

It wasn't the wine that was intoxicating. It was the freedom. She was here at Jervis Bay, investigating Aboriginal middens on an Anthropology excursion, and Pedro was back in Sydney. As the music swelled, she realised how much she missed poetry, singing and dancing.

Here Pedro couldn't tell her what to think. She realised her friends were not perfect, but neither were Pedro's. Friends don't have to be perfect. Love shouldn't be a prison.

Alan's arm around her shoulder was friendly, not possessive. His kiss surprised her. Without thinking, she returned his kiss with pleasure.

"Want to come back to the hut?" Alan whispered in her ear.

"No thanks, Alan." Freyja smiled. "You're a great guy, and thanks for the poem, but you know I can't."

Alan shrugged. "It was worth a try. Any time you change your mind, let me know."

They joined the chorus again. "There is a house in New Orleans...." The singing continued late into the night, till one by one, or more discreetly two by two, people drifted away. Janie and Freyja were the last to leave. Janie was willing to forgo a night with Greg to share secrets, bare souls, with Freyja.

Next morning Freyja woke with a sick feeling in her stomach. What have I done? she panicked. Is infidelity in the mind or the body? Must it include groping, clutching and sex? Is a kiss by itself infidelity? Two kisses? Three?

Janie, waking in the bunk above her, stuck her head over the edge; her dark curly hair tousled and her eyes wide. "You haven't done anything wrong. It was only a little kiss. You're not going to tell Pedro, are you?"

"I don't know," Freyja replied helplessly. "I don't know what to do."

7th May, 1979.

Monday. Moon's day. Selene drove her chariot across the sky after Helios had disappeared.

"Did ya behave yourself?"

"Yes, Pedrito."

"Did any men get too friendly?"

"No, Pedrito."

"Are ya sure?"

"Yes, Pedrito."

"Were ya drinking?"

"Only a little bit."

"Did ya enjoy yourself?"

"I missed you." Freyja's blue eyes promised love. Fidelity. Pedro believed them. But Freyja's conscience bothered her. I can't marry him with that lie between us, she decided. And I can't live without him. So I have to tell him.

19th June, 1979.

Tuesday. Tyr's Day. Old Norse God of War.

The cold night air swished through Freyja's fingers as she clutched at the window sill. It was only a finger-length away, but may as well have been in Norway. Pedro's muscles bulged as he wrenched her naked body away from the window. Her blonde hair swung down towards the deserted concrete car park far below.

"You don't deserve to live," Pedro glowered, pressure building behind his eyes like magma under a volcanic vent.

Traffic roared from the main road, but the side street was quiet. Very quiet. No-one had answered her screams. The neighbouring apartments were black and still, like the bottom of a fjord. No help. No witnesses.

Freyja went limp. There was nothing to grab onto, no chance of a foothold. Her life depended on him as completely as it depended on oxygen to breathe. Oh please God, she thought. Don't let him drop me. If you save me now, I'll do whatever you want.

"Why did ya kiss him?" Pedro trembled with rage. He'd trusted his Ice Maiden, and she'd made him look like a fool. Pouncing around with her university friends. They're all up themselves, he thought bitterly. Sprouting poetry. Smug looks. Long words. Selfish, arrogant pricks.

Freyja's initial guilt and shame evaporated, like snow on molten lava, under the barrage of abuse and the clenched fist that split her lip. Now her life was in his hands.

Another Freyja seemed to be watching the action in slow motion, from the warm safety of the bedroom, pondering. Was Pedro right?

"You're a slut, a whore," spat Pedro. "I'd be doing the world a favour if I got rid of ya. Then ya wouldn't get the chance to hurt anyone else like you've hurt me." Pedro jerked his arms lower, then stopped, satisfied at the look of terror on Freyja's face. "I'll teach ya a lesson you'll never forget."

For an instant, Freyja thought she was falling, tossed aside like rock from a volcano. But Pedro's fingers retained their iron-like grip on her arms, his arms still supported her weight. The other Freyja, watching in safety from the bedroom, forced her to breathe again. Was it volcanic ash that clogged her nose, her throat, her chest?

"You were drunk, weren't ya?" Pedro erupted. "I can just see you, all over the men like that fat slut Janie. Making a fool of yourself. Making a fool of me."

The safe Freyja decided: it's my brain against his. My brain will win.

"Why did you lie, bitch?" thundered Pedro. After all he'd done for her. His Ice Maiden hadn't known anything about passion — about explosive, fiery love — until he taught her. She didn't have the experience to appreciate how good he was, physically. Didn't know how lucky she was.

Freyja's lips were as white as her face. The only colour came from the blood that oozed from her upper lip, trickled slowly around her mouth like a lost soul searching for truth, then dripped into the night. She prised her mouth open and started talking, slow and calm as a glacier. Her mind three sentences ahead of her lips. Her intellect against his. Determined to win.

20th June, 1979.

Wednesday. Odin's (Wodin's) Day. Chief of the gods. God of wisdom, poetry and magic.

Rejoicing to be alive, Freyja saw life blossom everywhere, like spring in Norway. Her university lectures were interesting: her friends sympathetic. (Fancy a squash ball doing that much damage!) Part of her wanted to sing for joy, but the rocks in her heart held her down.

Never again, vowed Freyja to herself. She was surprised at how quickly love had died. Fear had quenched every vestige. No coals left to fan. Gone.

She transferred his ring to her right hand. "Good," she thought. "It shows we're not engaged."

"Good," thought Pedro. "She's accepted my way."

"Does ya lip still hurt?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Not as much as my heart does," he replied. "Your lip will heal quicker than my heart."

Every morning he drove her to university. Every afternoon picked her up. Every night they stayed home. There was no escaping him. "Come to Chile with me," he pleaded. "Everything will be all right."

Chile? She'd brave the Arctic ice naked before she went to Chile with him.

Would he really kill her if she left him? She couldn't afford to find out. Her eyes lost their blue-ice sparkle; her heart felt coated with snow that refused to melt. She waited, determined to survive. Paler, thinner, a shadow of the old Norse Goddess, she waited. Scared to leave. Scared to stay.

23 November, 1979.

Friday. Freyja's day. At last.

After her final exams, Freyja fell into a deep sleep, full of dreams. She flew as a sea eagle above the Norwegian Sea, where fjords penetrate the land and grey, inhospitable islands dot the coast. The Arctic wind rushed across her feathers, but they were well preened and firm. She used the wind's power to soar higher. Strong. Free. A speck of a fishing vessel was searching for cod. Freyja was searching too. Searching for strength.

Pedro shook her awake. "I'm going Christmas shopping," he said. "Won't be long." She heard his friends laugh, then a car rev loudly and screech away. She was alone.

Did she deserve to die? Was Pedro right? Would it do the world a favour? Living like this was unbearable. Tonight she would act. Her life was no longer in Pedro's hands. It was in her own hands.

Freyja hesitated. Dear God, what will I do?

The sea eagle soared into her mind. Strong. Free. Whispering: "Grasp life. Seize it. Live it."

Leave. She had to leave now. When he arrived home late, after "shopping," there would be no-one to answer the buzzer; no-one to cook dinner; no trail to follow. Just an empty flat.

Quickly Freyja packed a suitcase. The taxi arrived. A friend of Janie's offered a bed.

"Dear Pedro," she wrote before departing for Norway. "Volcanoes and fjords can't co-exist: one must destroy the other. Apart we can both be strong. I loved you."

The fjord's surface is clear. In its heart is lava, sharp and rocky. Icy water will smooth the sharpness; erode the rocks; perhaps produce rich minerals. The fjord survives.