SHORT STORY

Breathtaking

by Gosia Rokicka



"Haunted" by Vanesa Erjavec

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Mrs Sartori was lucky in her death, almost as much as she was unlucky in her life. During the two years she spent in her flat undiscovered, she neither leaked through the floor to the shop below, nor did she release a sordid, suspicious smell that would've alerted neighbours and freak out local cats.

She just got mummified like an Egyptian priestess. Queen Cleopatra of Rentonbury.

That was what Raymond thought upon entering Mrs Sartori's flat via the kitchen window at the back of the building, hidden behind an overgrown apple tree and an old jeep that had travelled across Africa in the 1960s if inscriptions artfully painted on its rusted door were anything to go by. It didn't drive anymore, obviously, given the tyres were missing, but it turned out to be an excellent ladder to Mrs Sartori's kitchen window.

Raymond was after what he'd always been after — something suitable to pawn to get money for meth. He owed Vance a shitload and was growing desperate. Like everyone else in Rentonbury he was sure Mrs Sartori had gone to visit her daughter in London and never came back, but now he thought she probably hadn't had a daughter at all. Or else the daughter would have found her earlier rather than forgetting about her mother for two years and leaving the discovery of her mummified corpse to a local methhead.

As expected, Mrs Sartori didn't have many possessions and certainly no valuables. Raymond was rather prepared for that, but he hoped for a miracle, as usual. And lo and behold, it looked like a miracle did happen after all. There was something that piqued Raymond's interest: a visibly old, ornately decorated gramophone sitting on a small wooden table, the horn and all. He knew a picker crawling car boot sales and dead people's houses in search of sellable items of value their owners were unaware of. A rumour had it that he once bought a ring for a fiver and sold it later for a hundred thousand as it happened to have a real diamond in it.

Raymond had no such luck whatsoever. But this gramophone could be worth a couple of hundred quid.

He threw an apologetic look in the direction of Mrs Sartori, reassured himself that she certainly hadn't been listening to music for a while anyway and proceeded to get out of her flat in the same fashion he entered, which turned out to be much trickier with the cumbersome gramophone in his arms.

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The gramophone looked out of place in Raymond's dark, shabby flat. It was golden, shiny and ornate and — truth be told — hadn't matched the interior of Mrs Sartori's flat either. Was it an inheritance? A treasured possession of generations? Or an expensive luxury bought on a whim?

Raymond decided that it didn't matter after all. It looked expensive and that was what counted. He'd been involuntarily clean for far too long (about three days to be precise) and tomorrow that was about to change. He texted Fat Richie hinting on something valuable to have come his way and invited him over for 2 p.m. tomorrow.

He rolled up some weed he still had stashed in a drawer, opened a can of lager and with a sigh of relief situated himself in a rickety armchair. It was a long day and the encounter with Mrs Sartori left him unsettled. He thought briefly he should have suggested someone go check on her, but there was no way to know if the gramophone business wouldn't surface in the course of action. Anyway, she was resting in peace so who was he to disturb her eternal rest?

He kept staring at the golden horn of the gramophone, puffing away and thinking it was high time he paid a visit to his own mother. He hadn't seen her for almost a year and it dawned on him that the same thing could have happened to her and he would have been none the wiser.

Not that he missed her. She drank her way through life, permanently intoxicated on cheap wine and cider and turned her house into a smelly warehouse of all things discarded by the local community. But among the rubbish, there were bound to be some vinyl records from the days of her youth and it would be ace to play them on the gramophone before Fat Richie would take it away.

Actually, there was already some music coming out of the horn: a sweet violin and a lonesome piano. It was quiet and dreamy and brought tears to Raymond's eyes. Somehow it reminded him of a lullaby his nan used to sing to him to calm his nerves and send him to sleep when his parents argued their heads off. It never worked though, he still had nightmares in which alien creatures tried to suffocate him with cosmic dust.

The violin got louder, overpowering the feeble piano. The sudden urgency of music jerked Raymond upright. How on earth could a gramophone ever play music without a record? Was the weed stronger than he assumed? Was it laced with something else?

Raymond had no idea what time it was, but the night was surely in full swing. The last unbroken streetlamp provided a faint, sickly yellow light. The 24-hour liquor store's neon flashed red and blue through Raymond's curtainless window.

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Raymond stared nervously at the gramophone. The music was still playing. He was absolutely sure it wasn't a drug-induced delusion. What's worse, something was seeping out of the horn. It seemed gooey and discoloured, turning red and blue with each flash of the neon.

He blinked a couple of times. "What the fuck!?" he thought. He would need to have a word about this weed with Gemma's brother, whats-his-face… Damn, his memory was failing. What was this guy's name?

The gooey matter started to resemble something. Here and there it became translucent and stretchy, luminescent with blue and red light like a weird neon skin.

Raymond closed his eyes and counted to ten. Then once again in German, remembering his nan and her heavy accent: *eins, zwei, drei.*…

The music suddenly stopped. Thank God, all good now, thought Raymond and slowly opened his eyes. The blue and red light flashed like mad. Someone was standing in the middle of the room, upright, stiff and motionless. It was a young woman, a girl perhaps, slender, long-limbed, silky smooth and translucent. Her eyes transfixed on Raymond's face; her long arms hanging loosely alongside her body.

For three seconds that might as well be an eternity, an absolute silence enveloped Raymond. Then, in a split second, the girl's bony fingers touched his face. Her skeletal arms, longer than physically possible, were stretched out across the room. He started to scream, but her hands were faster — they swiftly reached his mouth and began pushing handfuls of air inside.

Air like goose dawn; air like crumbled biscuits; air like cosmic dust.

He tried to fight. He gathered all his strength and went for the monster head-on. He hit, kicked, scratched and punched but to no avail. The malicious entity was transparent and untouchable.

And it kept stuffing hot and cold air into his airway passages. Until it was just too much for Raymond to breathe in.

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Fat Richie's nickname was an understatement. He was ginormous, with a basketball player's height and a sumo wrestler's weight. For this reason, he chose to wait for Jock in the car — he was too memorable and with all the shady businesses he dealt in, he usually preferred to remain in the shadows. Not easy with such looks.

This time the business seemed semi-legit though. Raymond texted yesterday claiming he had some cool antiques or what not. He was a methhead alright, but from time to time he managed to lift something worth having a look at. He had a good eye, Raymond-the-Wreck.

Jock was late as usual. Fat Richie made a mental note that if he ever considered orchestrating a bank robbery, Jock wouldn't be an accomplice to pick. But he was strong and wiry and useful for carrying the load around and looking for ways to pass the goods on.

Ah, there he was, walking down the street with hands stuffed in the pockets of his blueish-grey pants, shuffling his feet, his eyes fixed on the pavement. He was entirely forgettable and really, that was one of the reasons Fat Richie worked with him.

"Right, mate, off we go," Jock didn't mince words. "No time to waste."

And what about the time I wasted waiting for you thought Richie, but he wasn't in a mood for quarrels. He climbed out of his SUV and followed Jock up the stairs of the council block Raymond lived in. A young woman with a dog shot them a curious look so they nodded politely. She nodded back. No point in scaring the local community. Anyone could be your future customer, that was Fat Richie's motto… regardless of his current line of work.

Raymond's door used to be bottle green, but time and a lack of care both on the part of its owner and the council turned it shitty grey. Fat Richie knocked. No response. He knocked louder and looked around in search of a doorbell but there was none in sight.

"Pulled out, arsehole." Jock was quick to judge. Fat Richie turned the handle. The door gave in.

"Let's go in. Maybe he's just stoned."

The flat was dark and smelled of pot. The furniture was assembled from whatever people in the neighbourhood got rid of. Although from time to time Raymond lifted something pretty with an intention to keep it for himself, ultimately the need for drugs always overrode the desire for aesthetics.

Fat Richie knew this time was no different. When his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he looked around in search of Raymond and his mysterious antique. He noticed the latter first — an elaborate gramophone with a horn that looked gold-plated. It was so classy and unique that Fat Richie whistled. And he was not a man easy to impress.

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His marvelling was interrupted by Jock's high-pitched scream which — as Fat Richie noticed — was highly unusual. He broke loose from the exquisite gramophone and moved his huge body towards the source of the sound.

Jock was standing motionless in front of a dirty armchair on which Raymond was half lying and half sitting with his eyes closed and his mouth wide open — which was not an unusual position for this often stoned guy. This time was different; however, Raymond was clearly dead. His skin looked pale and papery, befitting a 3,000-year-old pharaoh whose sarcophagus had been disturbed and desecrated.

"Aye, he kicked the bucket," said Jock, still in high pitch with a pang of a Lothian accent. Fat Richie looked at him strangely. Jock had lost his Scottish tilt a long time ago.

"Too much meth," observed Fat Richie with authority. "Poor sod, God bless his soul. Anyway, we need to make ourselves scarce. We don't want to be associated with a dead body, do we?"

Jock looked nervous though. "Phone! We need to find his phone. He texted you last night and we were meant to come over, right?"

"Good thinking," said Fat Richie. Locating the phone didn't take them long — an almost new iPhone 14 was lying on the floor next to Raymond's body.

"He must've just pilfered it." Jock looked at the smartphone with appreciation.

"It's yours, if you want," said Fat Richie, lifting the gramophone with his huge paws.

"Are you seriously taking it?" Jock looked dubious. "He's dead. What if pigs trace us?"

Fat Richie only rolled his eyes. "And since when have the cops ever been interested in dead junkies? An overdose, that's it. Easy, man, they won't even bother to investigate it for longer than half an hour."

"Maybe." Jock didn't look convinced. "Something stinks here, though. I don't like the feeling. Where did he get this piece of art from anyways? Buckingham Palace or what? Listen, mate, keep it. I'll help you take it out from here but then I'm off. I won't even squeak about it, but I don't want to see this damn gramophone anymore. It's on you. OK?"

It was more than OK for Fat Richie. He already had a plan. After they got out from Raymond's flat and placed the gramophone gently in the boot of Fat Richie's car, Jock disappeared with the iPhone in his pocket, shuffling away slightly faster than on the way in.

Fat Richie looked lovingly at the golden horn nested safely in the depths of his SUV. He wasn't going to sell it. It was a perfect gift for Savannah who would turn 18 next week. Her

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bitch of a mother hadn’t let him see her since her first birthday but now the girl was an adult capable of making her own decisions. Fat Richie couldn’t wait to get to know her. He might have been a thug but he loved his only daughter with his whole big heart.

It could also come as a surprise for an average bystander judging Fat Richie by his scary looks, that he was deeply in love with old, beautiful items. He trusted that his daughter took after him and that she would appreciate a gift even the Queen would have been impressed with.

Before closing the boot he touched the heavy and elaborate body of the gramophone. It seemed warm and full of vibrations as if it was alive.

Little did he know what treasures it contained: almost a hundred years worth of music and memories, including the piano and violin wailing Mrs Sartori loved so much and all the German nursery rhymes Raymond’s nan used to sing to him at bedtime to soothe his nerves and send him to sleep.

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