

SHORT STORY

Saturday

by Margo Gritt



"Abandoned" by Guilherme Bergamini

The last cigarette in a packet is like the last bullet in a gun you keep when night falls on a desert island. Death is slow and tastes like melon.

I take a drag, passing a cigarette to her. She smokes in silence.

Twelve hours ago, I was shaking her awake. She stared at me like she was playing *Where's Waldo*.

“You won't find it,” I said.

“What?” She was rubbing her eyes, looking so childish, I felt like I was going to throw up.

“Get out!” I shouted from the bathroom, wiping my mouth. Better, but the provincial orchestra in my head was still rehearsing a military march. The little drummer tried especially hard.

I was scrabbling for aspirin on the shelves. She clung to the door.

“Can I take a shower?”

“Get out,” I repeated.

She arched her back on the conquered scrap of the dance floor. Someone had spilled a cocktail, and my shoes were sticking to the ground. I couldn't hear her words over the roar of electronic music, and she made the peace sign in front of my face.

“Per hour?” I barked into her ear.

She nodded.

“And per night?”

“What? I can't hear you.”

“Night,” I depicted the circle in the air, nearly knocking over a glass of whiskey. Half-empty, fortunately, with melting ice.

I read the answer on her lips. A short nod to the exit and we caught a taxi idling on the edge of the sidewalk.

She followed me up the stairs. She dropped off her shoes and looked helpless.

“I need the bathroom,” she said.

If we were the lead characters in a romantic movie, I would have pulled her up by her hair, popped the top button of her jeans, and pushed her onto the sofa. But in fucking real life, she had to piss first.

The blue light from an ambulance passing outside the window highlighted the lamp's silhouette and a row of dirty mugs on the desktop. A folding Ikea sofa shamelessly exposed a torn belly with crumpled sheets. God blessed some of humanity with the power to lose their memory when they drink. When I'm drunk, I remember every detail.

“The flush doesn't work,” she said.

I guess that's how normal people begin foreplay.

She took off her T-shirt. There was nothing underneath. No seductive lace, rough and itchy, that leaves prints on the skin. No expensive lingerie that you take off without even looking at it. Nothing like what M used to put on for me.

She avoided looking into my eyes like I was a wild beast. She pulled off her jeans. I thought there might not be anything underneath those either, but practical seamless cotton panties came into view.

A practical seamless cotton body approached, kneeled. Alien, unfamiliar, bought in a hurry, like another item on sale just because someone crossed out the price tag.

Putting my hands on the nape of her neck, I couldn't look away from the wrinkled face of Mickey Mouse on the T-shirt that remained on the floor. He seemed to be winking at me. When she withdrew, spreading white, sticky, and paid liquid on her lips, there was a roar; the wind opened the window, and lightning ripped open the belly of the darkness surrounding us. I came in time — she could have bitten me.

In the morning, eleven hours ago, when I crawled out of the bathroom, she was sitting on the sofa, staring at the TV.

“Are you still here? I paid off. Get out.”

“I can't.”

“Listen, I don't have more money. I already gave you extra. I have plans, so be a good girl...”

“But I can't,” she repeated and pointed to the screen. “A storm warning.”

A comparative analysis of the image outside the window and the pictures on the TV told me the truth of it: I was fucking sunk.

“Call a taxi.”

She burrowed back into the sheets.

“I tried. There’s no connection.”

“So, go on foot!”

“The streets are flooded.”

“I don't give a shit! You have to leave.”

I had plans. I had to stay alone.

While she was looking for her seamless cotton panties under the sofa, I went into the kitchen. I put on the kettle, pressed the pre-wash button on the washing machine, turned on the tap. Purring, gurgling, and hissing sounds filled the kitchen, but even this hastily-created band couldn't drown out the thunder and sickening thoughts.

A hostage in my own apartment.

I didn't want to touch her anymore. But negotiations are not my thing. She didn't resist when I grabbed her by the shoulder and pushed towards the exit.

“Wait on the staircase,” I muttered and slammed the door.

Ten hours ago, I stirred my coffee and watched the wind intensely bend the roof of a neighboring house. I drink coffee without sugar, but I threw in two cubes anyway. I wanted to remember the taste of the coffee that M used to drink in the morning.

M would have laughed at me: “There's no need to look so woebegone.”

I don't know what dusty dictionary she found this stupid word in. M repeated it often. And, of course, about me.

M would have opened the door, I know. It seemed as if I could feel her reproachful look. I cursed silently. I don't like to change plans.

“Come in.”

The bronzed, hunched up, gnarled testament of yesterday's weakness was sitting on the top step and playing Angry Birds on her phone.

“Don't touch anything,” I said. “Sit quietly. Not a single sound.”

“A coffee?”

“The kitchen’s through there. I'll say it again: not a single...”

“Cookies!” I heard from the kitchen, and regretted letting her back in.

Eight hours ago, she was watching the news. State of emergency, flooded tunnels, power lines down, two deaths...

The anchor might as well have said: “My friend, you’re stuck here.”

“Turn it off, for God's sake!” I couldn't stand it.

Wearing just her T-shirt, she wandered around the room, making me nervous. I expected her to steal something.

“Oh, is that yours?” She noticed a black case in the corner. “Is that a double-bass?”

I wanted to joke — wow, a prostitute *and* she knows music — but restrained myself. I didn't want to give her any reason to tell me about her life. Music school, ‘my ex-boyfriend was a musician’, or whatever. No, thanks. I don't care.

“Yeah. I played in the orchestra. Not anymore.”

“Why?”

“Kicked out.”

“Why?”

“Because I got drunk.”

“Why?”

“You're like a child. Why, why. None of your business.”

She walked to the desktop and looked at the picture pinned to the lamp. “Who is this?”

Me and M, entirely happy after she whispered in my ear, “I will love you until our fuck-drome turns into a death bed.”

The lady in a lilac dress, not understanding why we were laughing so loudly, mumbled, “You may now kiss the bride.”

I clearly remember her brooch looking like a dragonfly on her bulging chest, which meant I was already drunk.

“Don't touch!” I exclaimed, adding, “None of your business. Sit down and shut up.”

I smoked, trying to read something by Pelevin. M read it, and I wanted to understand why. I read the same line again and again and still couldn't understand what it was talking about.

Of course, she sat quietly for no more than five minutes.

“What are you reading?”

“Why do you keep asking questions?”

“I want to get to know you better.”

“God, I fucked you in the mouth, how much closer could we even get?” I wanted to reply, but said nothing.

Six hours ago, she asked, “Maybe we could have sex?”

“I don’t have any cash.”

She put her hand under her T-shirt, stretching Mickey Mouse's face into a mischievous grin.

“Free.”

“Don't.”

She took her hand away, sitting in silence for a while, then spat out, “Bogota.”

“What? Bogota?”

“Now you need to name a city that begins with the letter A.”

I groaned.

“Okay,” she said. “You don't want to play city names, let's play truth or dare instead.”

“Okay. I dare you to get out of my apartment.”

“What if I choose truth?”

“You want me to start asking, don't you? Why do you have such a life? You'll tell me what a poor, unhappy, innocent victim you are, that you sell your body only because of a sick mother or a drug addict father, and I'll be sorry for you, save you, and it will end like in *Pretty Woman*.”

“No.”

“You’re not Julia Roberts, and I’m not Richard Gere. I'm not interested in you and your shitty truth, okay? I'm not going to save you. And I don’t want to know anything about you.”

“Don't you even want to know my name?”

“Why the hell would I need to know the name of the first hooker I met? This fucking hurricane will end sometime and I’ll never see you again.”

She was silent for a minute, then said softly, “Amsterdam.”

It seemed for all the hours spent in the same apartment, I looked into her eyes for the first time. They were the exact color of beer. I wanted a dark non-filtered beer so bad. There was

nothing else in her eyes. I sighed.

“Madrid.“

“Dublin.“

When we got to Rome, the power cut out.

Two hours ago, we lay in the dark on the folding Ikea sofa. It was our uninhabited island, where we'd escaped from two different vessels. I'd escaped from a pirate ship loaded with rum, she'd escaped from a passenger liner that collided with an iceberg.

“I want to eat,” I said.

“Why don't we just order pizza?”

We both burst out laughing.

I held a phone's flashlight above a saucepan. She stirred pasta found from the back of the kitchen cupboard. There was a dried up piece of Edam and a half-empty bottle of ketchup in the refrigerator. Such a feast.

Then we tried to find clean mugs.

“Lightning looks like disco lights in a club.” She smiled and began to dance, moving in a rhythm that she could hear only in her head. She didn't need music. She was spinning, jerking her arms and legs ridiculously. No sexy curving like in the bar last night, but easy, free movements. I thought she didn't want to be saved at all. That was me. I wanted to be saved.

Behind the glass spangled with raindrops, the light scattered as in a strobe.

She lost her balance and sideswiped a mug. It was an ugly mug M had made in a ceramics class. The mug with M's sweet coffee in the mornings. The mug with M's lipstick mark. The mug broke and I yelled.

I yelled, yelled, repeated that I'd wanted to kick her out from the very beginning, that I shouldn't be sorry for her, that she had already ruined all my plans, and now she had ruined the last thing...

Bitch, bitch, bitch! I raised my hand, wanted to hit her but saw her face — small, wrinkled, frightened. I'd seen a face like that before. M had worn the same expression.

The battery on the phone died and the flashlight vanished.

The last cigarette in a pack. Melon-flavored. Disgusting. M smoked these, so I smoke them, too.

I scan her in the weak illumination of a lighter. Shaved legs. Ink roses on her lower abdomen. Washed out T-shirt, nipples sticking out of Mickey Mouse's pupils. And her eyes are the color of dark non-filtered beer. What color were M's eyes?

I take a drag, passing a cigarette to her. She asks, "What were your plans?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said I ruined your plans. What plans?"

Thank the electric god for turning off the light so I don't need to look at her.

"I was going to kill myself," I answer. "Now I have to reschedule for tomorrow."

The flame on the tip of the cigarette flinches.

"Tomorrow is Sunday," she says. "I have no plans."

She leaves as soon as the rain stops. To buy cigarettes. I know she won't come back. I wouldn't.

I catch up with her on the stairs, ask her name.

Her name also begins with an M. I don't know anything about her, either.