SHORT STORY

Washed Up

by Ramon Martensen



"All the Light We Cannot Hold" by Karen Fitzgerald

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I hear the ferry's final call from the darkness behind me. Waves are crashing against the rocks as I dive deeper into my coat. All the lights around the boulevard are off, leaving the plastic screens that are flapping in the wind in front of bars and restaurants to be silhouettes. There's only one light in the distance. I start to walk faster. In the moonlight I see the shadows of cats flashing by. They approach me from behind and then take me over, only to again disappear into the night in front of me. All those shadows seem to be going in the same direction, this one window of light in the distance.

I hear music as I come closer. Music and laughter. The noises seem to be dancing in the wind that blows into my face, like a playful puppy chasing a car. In front of me is a pub, illuminated by the orange aura that shines from inside. There are red leather couches on the terrace and tables with piled-up ashtrays. There's a sign next to the window that says, 'We serve until 4 am,' and two cats are staring through the glass inside; a really fat one with bald spots in his fur and a skinnier, smaller one that looks roughened up. They both let out meows as they put their paws against the window.

“Idiots!” I hear a voice say. As I look up, I see a man standing in the door, dragging at a cigarette. He has a well-trimmed beard and dark eyes. He's young, skinny, and stares at the two begging creatures that have their eyes focused on the glass.

“They are cats. They could be doing anything. Catching mice, climbing trees, jumping on laps, but no, they waste their entire life waiting at the same spot for those short moments that they get food. It's as if they have been hanging around here for so long that the world around them has ceased to exist to them.”

He shakes his head and then turns to me.

“So, where are you from my friend?”

“The Netherlands,” I answer as I join the cats in looking through the window.

“Ah, Holland. Well, you must be lost. We don't get a lot of tourists around here in the wintertime.”

“I'm not really a tourist,” I say. “I'm just traveling around.” He plucks his beard and then chuckles to himself.

“Yes, like I said, lost.” He looks at me as I shiver.

“Well, anyway, come on in. Beer tastes the same anywhere and it's cold outside. The cats have their fur, but all we got is Rakhi to keep us warm.”

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The wall in the hallway is full of black and white pictures of people holding up drinks to the camera with confetti in their hair. The pictures get increasingly clear and detailed.

“This is an old bar,” the guy says as he notices me looking at them.

“Every picture is a New Year's Eve, so you can imagine. This place is older than I am or maybe ever will be.”

“Look what I found,” he says in English to two guys at the bar as we walk into the taproom. They both stop their loud arguing in Greek and look back.

“And where did you get this one,” one of them asks, switching effortlessly to the kind of jovial English that's commonly heard in places that survive on tourism. He wears a brown leather jacket and a baseball cap with the faded word 'Las Vegas' on it.

“Oh, I just found him standing outside, looking in.”

The other man turns to his glass.

“Ah yes, that's where it always starts.” He empties his glass and puts it back on the bar.

“Give me another one, also one for the young man, and of course for my corpulent companion.” The bearded man I met outside goes behind the bar and pours the drinks.

I look around. There are vintage beer posters on the wall, and where there are none, a faded wallpaper with yellow stains. On the ceiling, there are disco lights with broken bulbs, and the two speakers leaning against the bar breathe folk music into the room. There is a black woodstove in the corner with the pipe disappearing into the wall. The orange light of a fire glows from behind its little door.

The man in the leather jacket offers me his hand.

“I am Minos and my friend over there is Giannis.” They both shake my hand and drink more. There's an ashtray in front of us with filters piled up inside. They offer me cigarettes and I smoke them. They offer me drinks and I drink them. The bartender sometimes looks at me, then shakes his head and smiles.

“So, did you come here by the Elena? The Angiliki? The Flora?” Giannis asks. Minos seems to notice the question marks in my eyes.

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“Stop confusing the boy,” he says as he lays a hand on my shoulder and turns to me. “You have to excuse him. His brain is not what it used to be. In our time, all the ferries bringing people here were named after women. Nowadays they are named after whatever. Times change I guess, just the destination remains the same.”

I drink from my beer.

“I didn't really pay attention to the name. I was just sitting at the bay watching many boats, ships and ferries come by. I just took one at random and it brought me here.”

Both men look at me empathetically. The bartender just puts another beer in front of me. He looks straight at me as he does it.

“Here, it's on the house. You're going to need it.”

All of a sudden, music starts to swell up from the speakers. A voice that trembles and the sound of a lyre crying along. The men sit still and listen. I see the wrinkles around their eyes sharpen. There's a depth in the music. It vibrates, travels: the sadness beaten out of it by the swelling sound of bells that drive the cries of the singer to a climax.

“What is this song about?” I ask Minos. He moves towards me, then lifts his hand and continues to listen. I look at the bartender but he just shrugs while he rubs the glasses with a cloth. Then the song comes to an explosion. The singer now seems to be whispering a final goodbye to the lyre that fades away, like the waves of a raging sea that swallows its last breath, leaving only its trail behind in the sand. I feel dizzy.

“So, give me another drink,” Minos exhales with a sigh when the silence has returned.

“Ah yes, you were asking me what this song is about. Well, it's about a guy on an island and he's in love with the most beautiful woman he ever saw from the mainland. He wants to marry her, but every time he tries to go there the gods create a storm because they believe he wouldn't be able to love her as much as she deserves. They give him one chance: if he tries to swim there, they will leave him alone. Of course, he doesn't trust them anymore and is too afraid he will drown, so he decides to stay on the island for the rest of his life to sing a song of longing for her.”

On the other stool, I notice that a tear runs down Giannis' cheek. Minos laughs.

“He always cries at this song because he can't swim… or sing.”

Giannis empties his glass and then looks at me.

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“You know, I always wanted to travel. See places, go around the world.” Minos looks at him again, both his elbows on the table and a broad smile around his lips.

“You couldn't even get your fat ass from the bar to the toilet.”

“Malaka,” Giannis mumbles as he stands up and walks up to me. He staggers a bit as he stands next to me. He puts an arm around my shoulder. I can smell the alcohol on his breath and feel the rough hairs of his beard against my cheek.

“Look,” he says as he takes a piece of paper from his pocket. On it is some stained blue ink that forms a scribbled address.

“This is Restaurant Penagio. It's in Amsterdam. Did you eat there?”

I shake my head. “No sorry, I can't remember going there.”

“My cousin works there. He invited me to join him so one day I will go there as well to be a chef.”

I smile at him.

“Well, in that case, I might see you there someday,” I say. He squeezes my shoulder and keeps leaning against me. When I look up, the bartender bends over to me.

“You know he is not going anywhere, right? They never do,” he whispers. I smile and tap Giannis on the shoulder.

“I'm sorry. I really need to go to the toilet.” As I'm walking away from the bar, I hear them order another drink.

The stairway down to the bathroom is only lit by a single bulb that throws its dim light on dark red walls. There are black and white pictures of cats on it, all staring into the camera. Some of them have bald spots in their fur, others stand like their ears caught a sound the moment the picture was taken. I notice that one of the frames, right before the actual toilet, is empty. When I step inside the cubicle, I see many stickers on the tiles with logos of bars, hostels, and clubs from all over the world. They could be amongst the many faceless places I have visited on my ongoing journey from distraction to distraction. My restless escape from the boredom and routine of a settled home has been going on for so long that it has tainted every place on earth with the same lack of surprise or excitement. There's no place left to go where I won´t find fog. The light bulb buzzes as I pee.

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When I get back into the taproom it looks abandoned except for the bartender. The stools are empty and so are the ashtrays. All the lights are on. The clock shows 4 am. I walk back to the bar. There's nothing on it except a full glass of beer.

“This one is on the house,” the bartender says. He stares out the window with a bowl in his hand. Outside are the cats, one of them stands up straight with his paws against the glass. He meows so loud that I can hear it. The fat one is right behind him, walking back and forth while keeping his eyes sharply focused on the bartender's hand.

I take a big sip of my beer and let the alcohol flow through my body. The bartender sighs and walks to the door.

“Stupid animals,” he says.

“They could do anything, yet they always just stay here.”

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