

Elle

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The apartment, almost empty, seemed vaster and older than ever. On the floor, one could still see the marks of missing furniture, a clearing in the dust where the sofa once stood, scratches on the wooden floor where the chair of the desk, gone too, had eroded the lathes. The silence, too, was striking. The computer's purring had gone along with the machine. The smallest movement would echo against the walls.

He had only kept a gym bag stuffed with the few clothes he had not sold. He also still had his bed, and his music instruments – for music instruments are not objects- and a couple of his favorite books. All the rest, everything he had possessed, everything that had brought life in his tiny studio, was gone.

His hand was holding an envelope swollen with banknotes. He stared at them for a moment.
- Shit, I've never been so rich.

Eighteen thousand euros. With this sum, he could go, very far away. He could make a big donation. But no. He had something to buy, and that something cost precisely eighteen thousand euros. To gather that money, he had had to empty all his bank accounts, despite his banker's protests. And since after that he was still far from having enough, he had sold all of his possessions, one after the other. Until he had turned his apartment in a graveyard of himself. Until he could finally hold in his hand that envelope full of promises. With determination, he put it in his inside pocket and left his tomb of solitude.

The store was in the old town. He walked quickly, scared of being robbed on the way. In his coat, he had more money than ever. But in truth, he was safe. The city was known for being inhabited by rich old people. And the rich and old love only two things: quiet and money; they had built a city conform to their needs.

Installed at street level of a half-timbering house, squeezed between two medieval building that looked like they were trying to reach out to each other above it, the shop was the antipodes of what one would expect from such a business. First, one would have to be a connoisseur to notice it was a shop. No store front, no sign, only a name on the intercom: Aristide Solutions. It could have been anything. Architects, financial advisors, human resources consultants... But no.

When coming in, one would discover a very modern, black and white waiting room. Large and severe sofas suggested to relax but not too much, an unremarkable coffee table offered magazines talking about nothing but for a lot of pages, and a marble counter marked the impassable border between the customers space and the seller's. In every angle, mute televisions broadcasted on a loop a shamelessly liberal news channel.

There was no voodoo doll, no venomous plant, no stakes against vampires, or anything else from the mysterious and exotic knick-knacks expected from such a place. Instead of an occult antique dealer, a flea market of magic, there was a bleached Apple Store.

As soon as he set foot in that place, the owner appeared behind the counter. He too was disappointingly unremarkable. Again, one would have hoped for an old African in a multicolor traditional outfit and a rocking, warm accent. Or a venerable Chinese with an endless moustache, followed by an eight-year-old grandson to translate into French, because of course he would only know mandarin. Come on, last try, a West Indian woman with a black smile, dreadlocks and a face carved with ritual scars. But no. In place of those likeable characters, there was a hipster colored with tattoos, a head shaved only on the sides, and a perfectly executed pony tail.

He welcomed his customer with a smile. Maybe he genuinely had recognized him, or maybe he was just very good at pretending. The customer approached, his heart beating and his hands

shaking. The determination that had guided his steps so far had apparently left him at the door, waiting in the street. With a hesitant hand, he produced the envelope out of his coat, and with a hushed voice -even though there was no one to listen – he asked what he came for, “you know, the flask”.

The seller grabbed the envelope with great professionalism, which means slowly enough not to look greedy, and proceeded to methodically count the banknotes. They stayed face to face for several, endless minutes, only cadenced by the muffled beating of the thick wad being listed layer after layer.

When finally the count was right between the seller’s full of rings fingers, he produced a small box from below the counter. And in that box was the much expected flask.

Unsurprisingly, the flask was deplorably common. A small glass bottle, that was it. Nothing to be afraid of or fantasize. No symbol carved anywhere, no stylish effect or mystery, when its content could have fittingly justified a debauchery of aesthetic tricks. The liquid dancing inside was translucent, at most with a blue sparkle once in a while warning that it was not water. He uncorked it et sniffed cautiously. A faint sweet almond smell. Nice.

- One drop or the whole bottle, the effect will be the same. But the more you pour, the faster it will work.

- Are there any undesirable effects?

The seller had a quick laugh.

- None. But I recommend to be sure of yourself. Just in case, he added with a wink.

- Thank you. He replied, concealing the flask at the very same place he had kept the envelope. Which he abandoned on the counter without a second thought. He left the shop. The nervousness had turned into a smothering restlessness.

The two hours that followed were the longest of his life. His rendezvous was not for now, so he wandered in the town, which was unfortunately not very big. He gazed at the mountains, the lake, his own thoughts.

He contemplated the ten years that had just passed. Ten years that would soon end, when Elle would drink the liquid in the flask. And he would be happy, finally.

They had love each other, so much, at first. From those two years with her, he never recovered. Still now, it seemed like a dream, of unrivalled sweetness. He who had never ever believed in anything, had found himself facing an immense certainty, almost too big for him: Elle was the soul complementing his own.

Still, she broke up, bored with his intensity. In his opinion, she had mostly been frightened by what their relationship was becoming. He never accepted the break up. He could win her back, he knew it.

From there started years of wandering, pursuit... pain. They never managed to break off all ties. They had discussed again and separated many times. He had taken advantage of her misfortunes to make himself indispensable. She had broken his heart again and again. To those who advised him to let her go once and for all, we would not answer any more. They did not understand. All those rejections, those tears, guilt and cowardness, had never eroded the love he had for her. He knew it, one day she would be back. It had to be.

In order to avoid her slipping away again, he had spent the last years passing as her friend. It meant seeing her flirting with other men, into absurd relationships that where bound to fail. He knew it, as she was the perfect woman for him, he was the perfect man for her. So, when she would cry on his shoulder after another failure in her love life, he would welcome her with the sweetness of a snake. He saw there the evidence that his patience would one day be rewarded.

Yet, for a year now, the clowns and drags she used to date had been replaced by Fred. A tall guy that seemed to make her happy. Apparently, things were serious. Trapped under his loyal friend mask, he had to smile before this alliance that was tearing his guts apart. And with a bad joy, he was thrilled knowing that this nonsense would end soon, thanks to the bottle in his pocket. Speaking of which, it was time.

He rang at her place, and the door opened almost immediately. He smiled, as always. She seemed unreal. Long dark hair, eyes that would go from washed-out melancholy to sparkling cheekiness in a flash, a teenager's breast and a woman's bottom, cheekbones when she smiled... in ten years, in had never ceased to admire and desire her, not even for one second. She was his paradise and his curse.

He entered the apartment with a beating heart. They went to the living room, and already, an obstacle stood in front of him, in the shape of a young woman, dark hair and dark eyes, tanned, sat on the couch. The obstacle's name was Sofia, apparently. They should have been alone. They were always alone.

- She came unannounced, we haven't seen each other in a while. Elle explained with a smile. What do you want to drink?

He mumbled the name of a random beverage, and Elle disappeared in the kitchen. In the meantime, him and Sofia awkwardly stayed face to face. How will I make her drink the bottle with that idiot in the way? I'll have to do it some other time. The very thought outraged him.

Elle came back with the said drink, and sat with them.

- I haven't told you! She exclaimed while giving him what seemed to be a soda.

He stared at her, and judging by Sofia's conniving smile, he knew she was about to put another knife in his heart.

- Fred and I are engaged!

He took her in his arms, more to hide his defeated face than to congratulate her. More like he wanted to keep her with him, as she was escaping him forever. I am very happy for you, he enunciated, as sincerely as he could. She believed him, absorbed by her happiness. She had no reason to doubt him.

The news was a game changer. The flask in his pocket had to be used, it was an emergency. Not because she was engaged; after all, a fiancé can be left, a wedding can be broken, that's almost the principle of it. But he had to act, he had to get rid of that Fred who was snatching away the love of his life.

The rest of the afternoon was tensed. The young women were chatting like two overjoyed birds, while him, like a predator, was nervously on the lookout for the opportunity to empty his bottle. Sofia's presence outraged him. Had she not been here, he would already have had a thousand opportunities. But at two against one, it was almost impossible to be alone with the drinks. Yet, there had been some openings.

The first one was when Elle went to the bathroom. Sofia took this opportunity to make a phone call. He took his bottle out, opened it, and was just about to empty it when a flushing sound forced him to retreat. One second later, Elle was standing before him, with this smile that usually dazzled him, but today was burning him. She was smiling to the other, the fucking fiancé, who was with her even when he was not here.

The second opportunity was when Sofia showed Elle the pictures of a trip she had just made. Her smartphone being low on battery, the two women went looking for a compatible charger. Their search led them out of the living room, to Elle's bedroom. Unfortunately, they found the said charger way too fast, and he had to hide his flask again at the last second.

The clock was ticking, and every tick was one more nail in his coffin.

Suddenly, epiphany. He finally got the idea that would unblock everything. The young women were still plunged into the admiration of some exotic landscape, joyfully babbling. He noticed their cups were empty.

- Can I get you some more tea? He asked, with the most cheerful tone he could muster.
- Yes please. I'd like a Christmas tea.
- Same for me, Sofia said.

And just like that, in an unhelped-for manner, he found himself alone in the kitchen with their two cups. The panda head mug was Elle's. The other one was decorated with a parody of Starbucks' logo. "Starbooks", it read, and the woman on it had an open book instead of a face.

He started to heat up some water, and waited, with a consuming impatience. They both reached their boiling state at the same time, and he hurried to fill the cups. The water jumped there, sputtering and smoking furiously, as if unhappy with the quality of the transferring. Then, with feverish gestures, he could at last open the bottle. I hope she will not notice the almond smell, he thought as he watched the liquid ready to be poured.

At the very second the first drop was about to dive, he stopped. A feeling of uncertainty held him, and without even knowing why, he knew he would never disregard it.

- Come on, you're not stopping there, are you? You paid eighteen fucking thousand euros for that bottle!
- I know... but I can't.
- You're crazy! You want her! Shit, ten years you've been wanting her! You love her!
- Exactly. I love her too much to do her such a thing. Take her free will. I want her to choose me, freely.
- That will never happen. She will NEVER choose you. This Fred dickhead will have her.

He did not answer to himself. This time, that was it. Something had finally break inside of him. He could not go on like this.

From the other room, he heard Elle laugh. He shivered. She is getting married. She won't laugh for you anymore. An immense fatigue overwhelmed him. He was beyond pain. In ten years, his heart had become too dry to produce a single tear. All he could do was give out a one-ton sigh. Still in his hand, the flask was waiting. She could be yours. For ever. You'd be happy together, you know it.

He closed the bottle, and lost himself a few seconds in the blurry and smoking liquid that was falling asleep in the cups. She will never want me. She does not belong to me, he bitterly admitted. And his heart, already shattered, found a way to break one more time, in a cloud of icy ashes. It was not in pieces, it was powdered. How could he live without her? How could he ever fill the immeasurable void she would leave in his life?

So, under the effect of a sudden inspiration, he unbottled the flask, and poured half of it in the Starbucks mug. The other half, he poured between his lips. Then, without giving himself time to back out, he came back to the living room.

- Finally! Said Elle with a mischievous smile. You took your sweet time.

Doing his best not to lay eyes on her, he put the cups in front of them, making sure they took the right one. Then, at the moment Sofia was about to drink, he said to Elle, still without looking at her:

- By the way, I heard your phone buzz.

She got up, and they were alone. This is the best solution, he thought. Sofia was objectively a pretty girl, smart and complaining about being single. She had ignored him so far, but it did not matter. I'll finally be happy, he thought bitterly. Like a depressed person eventually yielding to the void, he watched her drink her tea. When Elle came back to the living room, she found them absorbed in a mutual contemplation.

A few days later, he came across Elle and Fred at a café, holding hands, softly speaking to each other. Not so long before, such a sight would have broken him. But not anymore.

He remembered, though, that he still had in his pocket the infamous flask, in which few drops still remained. He came closer to the couple. Elle welcomed him with an enthusiasm that was inversely proportional to her fiancé's. Fred was not crazy, and he had always felt in him the old lover in ambush, who reappeared at every fight with his girlfriend, always there to whisper deceitful advice to sabotage their relationship. They had often had arguments about him.

- Can I buy a drink to the soon to be married?

Fred stared at him with disbelief, and Elle accepted. He went to the bar, ordered two beers, and emptied the flask's last drops in Fred's glass. Then he brought the drinks to them, and looked with a mixed pleasure while Fred was emptying his.

At least now I know you will never abandon her, he thought.

And deep inside, with a dark smile: And if she breaks your heart, you will never recover from it. Just like me.