

SONIA'S GANG OF BOMBERS

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translated from the Bulgarian by Svetla Dyulgyarova, Zhenya Gundasheva and Radostin Zhelev

I came downstairs in Ewan the Fatty's penthouse. No sound there. The Fatty had tiptoed out to his workshop. My ears were still ringing from my conversation with Graziella. It was as if I had been scalded by salt water, my teeth were numb and I felt hungover even though I hadn't had too much to drink. I wanted to make myself a cup of coffee and take advantage of my mate's crammed fridge, but that meant I would be late for work. If I wanted to avoid the usual rows with the manager of the crappy restaurant where I worked, I had to dash immediately to my place, squeeze into my waiter's uniform and, mustering up the last of my energy, head for work.

Out on the street I felt the disapproving stares of several passers-by. Apparently they didn't quite share the opinion I had of myself. I mean, I was quite a sight: I had stubble, bags under my eyes and my clothes were stained, I was limping slightly, though I was supposed to be a nice normal young man, with an almost intelligent look. This was a rude awakening for me, but I had no time to dwell on it, because what I needed most now was to get to my final destination before my shift started. I knew I had to do it, despite the fact that I could always use the pretext that they had called me at the very last minute. The funny thing was that they kept closer tabs on the more experienced staff like myself than on the rookies, while I thought it ought to be the other way around.

I got home at nine forty-five. I started undressing the minute I shut the door behind me. I put on the black trousers, which hadn't been ironed for ages, and the shirt, and then rushed into the kitchen to make myself a mug of coffee that I intended to drink on the way to work. I was still able to move, but I knew that in exactly an hour, when the customers' orders started rolling in, my batteries would run out. I felt disgusted with life yet again when I found out I had run out of coffee. Cursing, I vaguely remembered spooning the last bit of instant coffee out of the jar and promising myself to buy a new one. Alas, it had slipped off my mind, so I buttoned up my shirt and ran outside.

My senses tended to be sharper in the morning. I could smell the scent of homemade espresso that came from the houses facing the main street. As a rule, the people who lived there

were well-to-do, had good jobs and could afford a tranquil breakfast with their windows open. Lucky bastards!

I was deep in thought when a guy who had parked his retro bike on the pavement blocked my way. He gaped at me and began apologizing in broken English. He had a strange accent that reminded me of the people from the Dutch colonies, but when I had a closer look, I decided he was most probably a sailor, which wasn't surprising at all, because lately the Tulips had started coming to the island. He wore a woollen turtleneck and a corduroy jacket, with his weather-beaten face half-obscured by a beard and a sailor's beret covering his flattened blond hair.

"I gather the mister is not awake yet?" said the Dutchman.

"Sorry, I'm in a hurry," I snapped.

"No time to show nice café?"

He kept smiling at me, and I saw the deep wrinkles around his eyes. He grabbed me by the sleeve and began dragging me aside.

"Lemme go, what're you doin'?" I shouted.

"Come, come, will like."

The sailor started dragging me toward an alley that ran between the houses, and which dead-ended, as I recalled, in a space where the residents kept their garbage bins. Before I could even resist, a hot wave surged over me, I felt weak in the knees, and I had a funny feeling, a mixture of fright and overwhelming pleasure. I pulled back sharply to break free from my assailant's firm grip, but he had already loosened it. I lunged at him, but I somehow lacked the strength, and no matter how hard I strained, my hand moved forward as if through some sticky mass. I gave up the idea of attacking him instinctively and let my muscles go slack. At first my body passed through a warm and elastic membrane, but soon everything resumed its original shape. Gravity weighed down my limbs, I felt the air and the surrounding space, and I suddenly realized what had changed. The damp morning air in that narrow Maltese alley was replaced by a vast, dry, cool expanse. I heard soft classical music, I shook my head and looked around. The Dutchman had disappeared without a trace, I found myself standing inside a large café. Men in elegant suits and top hats, canes at their sides, were sitting alone at the tables, sipping coffee from china cups and reading the morning paper.

Feeling awkward, I stood there for some time – I mean, there I was in my messy clothes, with a stupid expression on my face and all, while the gentlemen looked wide awake and certain of what they were doing. I had no idea where I was and what I ought to do. Before long I snapped out of my stupor, and started walking over the thick red carpet, which felt like a good stand of moss under my feet. I was here in any case, so why not simply walk over to the bar and ask for a cup of coffee, I thought to myself. I was halfway there when one of the waiters in starched white aprons came up to me.

“Can I help you, sir?” he asked in a strange-sounding Bulgarian, sizing me up from head to toe. Again I felt confusion sweeping me off my feet at the speed of light.

“I, er, we... was hoping to drink some coffee.”

That was pretty much everything I could come up with in my funny Bulgarian, so I gave him an embarrassed grin.

“I am afraid we have no table for you, sir. You’d better leave,” said the waiter.

“I just come,” was all I could say.

“This way!”

The waiter who had addressed me in Bulgarian grabbed my shoulder and tried to steer me toward the door. I took a step back, looked at him, and started yelling that I had money and all I wanted was a cup of coffee, which I wasn’t even planning on drinking inside. But the man kept urging me to leave. Some kind of strange stubbornness surged up inside me, so I kept saying that I had money, that I would pay, if only they would let me have my coffee. It became a real scene when another waiter joined the effort to throw me out into the street. Meanwhile, all the customers had turned their heads and were eagerly watching the spectacle. Some were outraged, others whispering, and still others, their newspapers on the table, were enjoying themselves at my expense.

I had already swallowed my pride and decided to leave of my own accord when I noticed a young lady in a dress talking to a dark man with a bowler hat and a black cloak, who was taking notes at a table in the back. The woman was Sonia, my sister. The waiters kept yelling at me, trying to push me outside, but by that point I was ignoring them completely. Sonia and her

companion had grave expressions and did not seem to notice the havoc I had created inside the café. She continued giving instructions to the man, who kept writing hastily, nodding his head.

“Sis!”

I tried to attract her attention, but all of a sudden a bulky male figure dressed as a bell-boy loomed up in front of me and grabbed me. I was gasping for breath as he lifted me six inches off the ground and carried me outside to the sidewalk. I couldn't take my eyes off my sister, but was unable to shout at her again; I tried, but all that came out of my lungs was a bit of wheezing. I was then pushed out the door with such force that I fell backwards and landed on the sidewalk. The company withdrew back into the café, leaving me sitting in the dusty road, unable to digest everything that had just happened to me.

People from another age passed by, doffing their hats in greeting. Carriages drove down the street. I realized that I was no longer on the island. I had somehow been transported somewhere else. I stood up and looked around, and all of a sudden old memories rushed into my head: the little garden to the right, the church with the gilded domes, the yellow paving stones. I was in downtown Sofia. I started walking along the sidewalk. For some reason I was so obsessed with the idea of having coffee that I was unable to think of anything else, even though a number of odd things were happening around me. I had not gone very far when I heard quick footsteps behind me. Before I could look back, a hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. It was the man with the cloak who had been talking to Sonia inside the café.

“Come with me, I'll take you to a place where your clothes won't be a problem,” he said out of the blue.

“I wants to have a coffee and goes to work.”

I sounded docile. Somehow I felt respect for this man, I trusted him. He could probably take me wherever he wanted and do whatever he pleased with me.

“It's no problem, don't worry about it. We'll go to the Armenian café, they're all friends there. Come on!”

The man smiled under his bushy moustache and gave me a friendly pat on the back. Then we headed for the Palace. My mind was consumed by a single thought: “I must go to work, just a cup of coffee and I'll go to work... remember your work.”

The bright light almost blinded me, and I saw blurred images, which suddenly became sharper. A lamp, a map, a table, empty bottles...

“What the hell!”

I jumped off the sofa and stared at the clock on the wall: ten fifty-six. I began firing off curses and looked for my shoes. I put them on – first the one, then the other, then I smoothed down my work shirt with my hands, and felt my pockets for my wallet, phone and keys. Inside the ashtray a cigarette butt had burned to ashes in a grey arc, which reminded me that an hour ago I had meant to light a cigarette on the way to work.

I slammed the door without locking it and dashed off.