

MAXIMILIANOⁱ

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translated from the Bulgarian by Eireene Nealand

“Hey, you, what’s your name?”

“Maximiliano, but call me Max!”

The girl took a long drag on her cigarette, moved closer through the smoke in the bar.

“That’s no good. Shorten your name, shorten your luck!?”

“ ... ”

“So, what are you doing here?”

“Making plans.”

“Oh, cool! So am I!”

“Unfortunately, most of my plans are still just plans,” Maximiliano said. His voice trailed off. “Lately, I’ve left life to lead me. When I try to lead it, it doesn’t work.”

“Oh god, I could never live like that!” said the girl. “No matter what happens, if I don’t have plans for the future, I’m an anxious mess.”

“Well, that’s normal!” Maximiliano said. “That’s how it is at first, until you get used to it. Wait long enough and the chaos becomes routine.”

His companion thought for a moment, exhaled some smoke, and asked:

“Who are you here with? Where are your friends?”

“I’m here with everyone. Everyone’s my friend. Everyone in this bar is equally close and equally a stranger to me,” Maximiliano said dramatically.

The girl waved away cigarette smoke with her hand as if she had not heard the last remark.

Abruptly, she said:

“Well, I want to write a book!”

“Interesting! And what will you call it?”

“*The Women of My Life!*”

“Oh, you go in for women?”

The girl smiled.

“No, no, it’s not like that. It’s something completely different. My book will tell the story of all the women in my life, those who impressed me somehow. I’ll start with my grandmother. Her story’s amazing! At the age of fifteen her future husband stole her from her father’s house and they married in secret. Off he went to war and never returned. My grandmother, pregnant with his child, gave birth to my mother, who at fourteen was raped by her stepfather. As a result, I was born. And she became a terrible lush. It’s crazy, isn’t it?”

The girl raised her eyebrows.

“Next will be two chapters, one for each of my best friends.”

“Cool! A writer!” Maximiliano said admiringly.

“Almost! I haven’t yet written a single line!”

“Sure, you’re in the planning stages,” joked the boy. “But the chapters for your friends. What’ll you write there?”

“Oh, these will be no less interesting than the first! In one I’ll tell the story of my friend’s first love. She fell in love with a Spanish guy. He invited her to Spain and there—romance, passion, red wine... That’s just the boring part. They started living together and, shortly after, he left her. A pretty good story, huh?”

Maximiliano nodded, not quite convinced.

“Because do you know what she did out of desperation? Started going around with any guy she met, just like that, out of spite. Then, she was invited to all kinds of parties. She began to ride around in expensive cars, you know how it goes.”

“I guess I don’t,” said the boy.

“Yeah, sure. How could you know? Well, to make a long story short, she went on to become a prostitute. And I’m grateful for it because through her story, she earned a place as a character in my book.”

“And the other?” inquired Maximiliano.

“Which other? Oh, my other best friend! Well, that’s a completely different story. A virgin nymphomaniac. Do you know what that is? You don’t! Okay, well, you can read about it in the book! Stop asking. If I tell it all, you won’t buy the book!”

Together they doubled over in laughter.

“By the way, your rolled cigarettes are terrible!” Maximiliano said.

He reached into his pocket for a store-bought one, lit it up.

“That’s not true,” said the girl. “Store-bought cigarettes are awful. They let off too much smoke. See, yours smokes like a chimney, but look at mine. I rolled it myself!”

“Yeah, but the stink of self-rolled cigarettes lasts forever,” Max said.

“That’s what’s good about them, Maximiliano, my dear! Say, by the way, how old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Well, you have time!”

Max looked sullen. “For what?”

“To learn how to roll your own cigarettes instead of spending money on factory-made crap, for one. Actually, you have time for everything!”

“What is everything?”

“Successes, failures, successes, love... everything!”

“If that’s it, then I’ve already had everything,” the boy said. “*J’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans.*”¹

“Oh, I get it! Someone broke your heart?”

Maximiliano looked around the walls of the smoking room. They were isolated at the back of the bar.

“Hey, check out the cool graffiti in this dump,” he said.

“Yeah, the ratty old sofa you’re sitting on makes the place even cooler!”

“Authentic misery!” said the boy.

“Yeah, what more do you need at twenty-two?”

“What about you, how old are you?” Max asked.

“Hey, you should know better than to ask a woman her age. But fine, I’ll tell you, my dear, because you’re nice. I’m twenty-seven.”

¹ “I have more memories than if I’d lived a thousand years,” from “Spleen” in *Flowers of Evil* by Charles Baudelaire.

“Hmm, a dangerous age! Aren’t you scared?”

“Of what, Maximiliano?”

“Uhh....The 27 Club? Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison... You know?”

The girl laughed.

“Oh, no, I don’t think I’m talented enough to die at twenty-seven. That has not entered into my plans—at least for now. But, yes, I admit it, twenty-seven’s a precarious age. Something like a turning point in your life. Once you cross this line, you will be in the game for a long time. I mean, in life.”

“That’s dumb! No matter what we do we’re always fucked!” said Max.

The girl took another drag of her cigarette.

“Besides this, what do you do? Do you study? Do you work?” she asked.

“I study, but I’ll never finish. I don’t even know why I’m studying. I guess because of what comes after!”

“Sure, after, those will be good times!” joked the girl. “But what’s before ‘after’ is better, you know! So you better enjoy it while you can, because ‘after’ ... ”

“It doesn’t matter! I don’t care, even if I have to spend the rest of my life on this dirty sofa with beer stains and vomit.”

“Oh, I get it! So what did you say her name was?” the girl asked, laughing.

“Who?”

“The one who broke your heart?”

“Oh, come on, really, you’re the same as every writer. You mix up reality and fantasy and think everything should be like in your stories.”

“Unfortunately, these are things I do not mix, Maximiliano. My stories are made of realities!” said the girl. Her face was serious. “Well, if you don’t want to tell me her name, then at least tell me, was she a blonde? Those are the most dangerous, you know!”

“She has no name! You’re all the same, you, who bear the name woman,” Max said dramatically.

“Of course, I knew it was a woman! My writer’s intuition never lies!” the girl exclaimed.

“So, what happened?”

“Nothing, which is what usually happens with women. Just nothing! The women in your book—are they also bitches?”

“Hey, come on! Don’t insult my characters.”

“Characters!” Max said. “My heroine, can you really include her in your book?”

“Of course! But there must be an unusual story about her”.

“Well, here I am! How much more extraordinary of a story can one have? I was her story and she left me! Can you imagine? A girl who quits her own story?” Maximiliano said bitterly.

“Wow!” The girl’s attention was suddenly drawn to the distorted inscription on the wall. “What’s graffitied there on the wall: ‘Only God can judge!’”

“Yes, and below that it says, ‘Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine...’” Max said.

All of a sudden the girl turned around and looked at him.

“Maximiliano! You have beautiful eyes!”

“So what?”

“Well, nothing, just so you know!”

The girl took a last drag on her cigarette and put it out in the already full ashtray next to the couch.

“Well, my dear, my cigarette is done too. So, I’ll go back to my friends. But remember, never abbreviate your name, okay? Shorten your name, shorten your luck, Maximiliano!”

ⁱ “Maximiliano” is included in the short story collection *Small, Dirty and Sad* (Riva Publishers, 2014).