

THE INN OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

A Blue Voice

I opened my eyes and the room was upside down; Alphonse, the waiter, was standing on the roof and the pristine white table cloths, the glasses, the candelabra were floating in the air.

Someone had snatched the Menu from my hands.

“You are making a terrible use of it” Alphonse’s voice said in my ear.

And yet, he was standing on the roof.

How could he sound so close?

The Menu was unfolding like an origami, like a garland hanging from the chandelier. My Missed Opportunities were holding on to the tables for dear life. My head was boiling like coffee.

“Here, drink.”

It was coffee.

Real coffee.

Café allongé French-style, but black and strong and hot. An electroshock to my brain.

Unexpectedly, Alphonse the waiter was sitting in my place as the child that I once was.

The room was back to its place.

But the Menu wasn’t there anymore.

I was drinking in small sips, and had the feeling that coffee was never-ending, like the donkey’s gold guineas in *Donkeyskin*. The glasses were playing a violin’s lament, but there were no fingertips rubbing their edges. Alphonse the waiter was staring at me, emotionless and tight-lipped.

I lowered my head to the darkness inside the cup; it was soothing, the darkness. Turn off the light, please. Give me peace. To sleep, perchance to dream. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your Philosophy. I come to do what you like most.

What *I* like most.

All was quiet now, in the restaurant on rue Thérèse. Slowly, the coffee was doing its job, restoring glimmers of awareness back into me. Lighting up, one by one, the rooms of my mind.

Where in my life was the crossroads that, changing direction, would have given me a new one, a happy one, without regrets or debris, blessed by the sun of fulfillment?

I had no idea of what would happen. And, all things considered, I didn’t care. I was perfectly fine with sitting on the couch watching TV, and with letting the curtains fall forever on the theatre of my life.

I shouldn’t have come here.

It was old Séverine who changed everything.

She had slithered out of her dark kitchen without neither me, nor Alphonse especially, noticing. And when the old crone placed her fat hand on his shoulder, Alphonse the waiter jerked on his chair.

They exchanged a steely glance.

Séverine wouldn't let go of her grip; I could see her knuckles turning white while Alphonse stiffened his shoulders to better withstand the pressure. They were struggling.

And I realized it was me they were struggling for.

For my life.

For the chance that the restaurant on rue Thérèse grants to the brave. But only if they *are* brave.

I must have made a mistake, and now the gods of this secret world had to agree upon which decision to make.

A formidable strength emanated from the old woman standing behind Alphonse the waiter. She was a cathedral. She was crushing stone, and naves and vaults. And Alphonse the waiter surrendered. He placed his right hand on hers, in a gesture that looked affectionate, and nodded.

I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

The old woman was rubbing her hands now, and I suddenly noticed she had still shreds of rabbit flesh under her nails. Without speaking, she nodded her head towards the door to her kitchen and I stood up.

I made my way across the tables, with my back straight and my heart beating slowly.

And then I stepped into her dark lair.

A stripped down light bulb hanged from the middle of the ceiling, tracing a circle of miserable light. The pots and pans and aluminum kettles were covered by a thick layer of brown fat. The ovens were stained and rusty. There were tools I was not familiar with, for carving, cutting, slicing and gutting, and all of those were spotless and shining, as if they'd just been polished.

It was a very strange kitchen.

The old crone had crossed her arms and was looking at me as if she was expecting me to do what I had to.

But what was it?

Following my instinct, I opened the flap of the oven. A cat leaped at me, angrily hissing, claws extended and hair puffed up.

I lifted my arm to protect my face, and the cat scratched me just above the wrist, where the see-through skin protects the heartbeat.

Now it was my blood that was dripping on the greasy tiles. And, as I watched the blood drops fall, I realized the Menu had reappeared on those very tiles.

Miraculously, it didn't get stained.

Old Séverine was quicker than me to grab it. She put it under her armpit and, at the same time, she handed me a filthy rag to wipe my blood off. Then she wrapped the rag around my wrist, and I let her. She moved her fingers with surprising gentleness, like an expert nurse. She pulled the ends to tighten the knot once, twice. She took my hand. She pried it open.

She was about to give me back the Menu when the phone rang.

I felt something breaking inside me.

Alphonse the waiter was standing in the kitchen doorway. The phone had stopped ringing.

“It’s for you, Madam.”

Alphonse was blocking the doorway, and did not appear willing to move either.

“Where...”

“I wouldn’t advise you to do that, Madam” Alphonse said.

He had now put his hands on his hips.

No, he wasn’t advising me.

“Where is the phone?”

There was an unusual resolve in my voice.

Old Alphonse must have noticed it too, because he stepped aside to let me through, and then led me past the tables to the cupboard at the back of the restaurant.

It was a bulky cupboard, after the 20’s fashion. Hunting trophies were etched on the frames: dead bird carcasses, pheasants with their neck snapped, hare heads. Up, above the plate rack, was a live boar’s head.

The black Bakelite telephone was to the left of the cupboard, inside an alcove in the wall fitted with a protruding shelf. The rotary dial was made of white porcelain, with an old-style metal finger wheel. There were, however, no numbers on it.

The handset was laying sideways on the base.

I took it. My heart was shaking.

“What’s up?”

His voice.

His beautiful, distant voice. The voice that didn’t want to hear from me. The voice that would abandon me for days. And then come back, with no warning, no rules. What’s up? A mocking tone, the bulletproof glass he used to shield himself from me.

I kept quiet. I left his voice sediment over my wounds.

Alphonse’s hand on my arm.

He was looking at me with a concerned expression, a question in his eyes. I found somewhere inside myself the strength to nod reassuringly at him. Alphonse sighed. He disappeared.

I was alone.

And there was his voice.

“How are you doing?”

“Fine.”

Meanwhile, I was crumbling.

“Work?”

“Fine.”

“I just wanted to give you a quick hello.”

Oh, no. Give me a kiss, give me a present, give me a date. Just not a quick hello.

I bit my lips to look nonchalant. As if he could see me. There was this unspoken rule between us: never show any weakness. I grasped for words while my chest was bursting.

“Fine” was the only thing I managed to say.

“How are you doing?”

He wouldn’t let go.

I swallowed, but the pebble in my throat didn't move.

"Uhm."

And I shrugged.

"Work?"

I couldn't care less about work. I care about us.

"Fine."

I was dying to ask him to see each other. Yet I knew I shouldn't have.

"Lots of paperwork?"

I hesitated.

"Some..." And then out of the blue, all in one go to avoid thinking about what I was about to say, I whispered:

"When can we see each other?"

I kept my lips glued to the receiver.

I was mortified.

There was a brief silence.

"I have to go now, they're calling me."

I searched desperately for the right comeback.

"Fine" I said softly.

I was clutching at the cord like a hanged man to the noose.

"Be good."

Click.

No, I won't be good. I'll be awful; I'll be just like any other miserable woman waiting for something that will never happen.

I was standing still, in front of all those dead beasts, holding the receiver to my chest.

Tut tut tut.

I pressed the wretched handset against the fabric of my dress, but the wretched handset kept talking to me.

Tut-tut.

Tut-tut the cupboard was saying, leaning towards me. Tut-tut echoed the boiserie. Tut-tut said the mirror reflecting me. Tut-tut.

When will you learn that love is too heavy a load to carry?