

AYLÉE TARHA

AN UNEXPECTED DINNER

News One
of
the
'Lost News'



Éditions Aylcée-Tarha@Aylcée-Tarha Éditions

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dualities, a romantic novel
- Clara, a Witch's Love, a fantasy tale
- Clara and the Stone Circle, a fantasy tale
- Advent Farandole, a calendar
- The Watchtower, a fantasy novel
- The Elemental Peoples, a collection of tales
- Lost Stories, a text collection
- Epidamus, a fantasy novel

DEDICATION

This short story is taken from a collection of short stories: Lost Stories, to create free downloads for adults. Each story is complete and original.

This text can be downloaded FREE of charge directly from my website by adults, parents, family members, friends, etc., who remain solely responsible for opening the minds of their children (specifically, those between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, in their teens).

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-It's 6:00 PM? Already? Are you sure, my friend? Really?
-Yes, absolutely sure, I just checked my clock.
-Yes, I believe you, I have to hurry and get ready then.
-I'll let you know in thirty minutes if you want...
-Yes, you're right. I have to push my speed!
-You're always lively and diligent, I have to face the facts.
-Thank you for that compliment; it goes straight to my heart today!

The young woman speaking on the phone sits on the chair in her apartment. She ends her call and finishes her makeup, little by little. She looks at herself one last time in the mirror and smiles before getting up and hastily putting on a blazer. Quickly, her cell phone in her bag, her keys in hand, she closes her door. She heads towards her elevator, waiting for the car to stop, tapping her fingers.

First of all, returning from a stressful weekend, she has to do some more shopping: pick up clothes at the laundry, buy groceries at the convenience store, pick up the book she ordered from the bookstore, pay for natural products at the health food store, confirm a therapeutic massage session, stop by the tobacconist for stamps, then the newsagent for her magazines...

She has an appointment with an old friend on the street leading to her building. She enters the planned establishment and spots him easily. She sits down, affable and laughing, opposite him on the banquette of this Parisian bistro, greets him, and places her hand on his shoulder. Geoffrey still has the annoying habit of biting the edge of his upper lip as a sign of obvious stress.

'He's nervous and worried, it's obvious...'

Yet, he represents the new wave of young, highly promising business executives. After several years of graduate school in administration, economics, social work, and finance, with Sciences Po emphasizing his political vision, he recently opted for real work. With tenacity, he managed to get hired without any special treatment, based solely on his academic

abilities and merit.

"This position is a miracle for me," he confided to his relatives.

He holds a management position in a logistics unit within an international foreign trade company. This firm had extensive branches worldwide and practiced the "new faces" regime, or the march to success! It was the famous "whatever the cost." Otherwise, the door or the closet inevitably found itself in front of the promoted candidates.

-Hi, how have you been, young man, for the past week?

-Good, and you? By the way, why are you in such a hurry?

-I have to be back in front of my phone in less than twenty minutes at the earliest, or my mother will worry! She's become so emotional lately...

-But you're such a big girl! You act like a real child sometimes! You have to tell her!

-I know that, but I don't want to cause her any more trouble than is possible since her partner disappeared. She's having a hard time getting over it, so...

-Little Sophie, that comes from a good place, but think about yourself a little more! Your life is right there in front of you, damn it! I'm sure your mother wants the best for you above all else. Tell her and she'll understand that you need unsupervised freedom! You're almost thirty now, after all... That's it!

-Thanks, Geoffrey! You're a true friend to cheer me up like this, but I have to go for now... unless you'd like to accompany me home? Then I'll invite you to a Chinese restaurant to finish our conversation?

-Okay, both invitations, I'll settle the bill from here.

-Oh, my, so much hassle for nothing with her.

Her mother didn't realize her hold on her daughter and was unconsciously taking advantage of it, not maliciously, but zealously.

A deep sigh of exasperation can be heard coming from him, but he smiles nonetheless. He's just seen the bags spread

around his friend's feet, then near her, and his eyes become more tender, affectionate: she knew how to manipulate him, gently and suavely, a touch guilt-inducing. He's aware of it, but it gave her a crazy charm he couldn't tire of. He thought, 'Who was manipulating the other one?'

-You know I won't leave you like this, loaded down like a little mule! Did you just raid the stores?

-No, it's just that I don't want to leave home for a whole weekend anymore: the gray weather, the solitude, the work, I want to find a little peace and quiet... To make a real transition!

-All right, come on, I'll escort you! You won't be able to tell me that I'm leaving you to fend for yourself, like a lost soul, will you?

A wink from one, a bright smile from the other, and they leave the shop. A light rain awaits them outside, and they quicken their pace: the people they pass are lost in thought, cloaked in a latent anonymity. The slightly wet sidewalks gleam beneath their shoes, making their progress difficult. Humidity seeps everywhere. Nevertheless, they walk smoothly to their destination.

She clicks three numbers, inserts a magnetic card, and then presses the entrance button to her residence: the sliding double doors open, inviting them into the lobby filled with green plants. The visitor feels as if they're in the middle of a tropical forest! Taking the mailbox route, they head toward the elevators, hoping that one of them will finally land in front of their crowded silhouettes.

They finally squeeze into the cabin and progress weightlessly toward the young woman's apartment. Geoffrey fills the space with his broad shoulders and tall stature. He reassures her with his mere presence. Suddenly, she senses her own fragility. She extricates herself from there and runs down the lit corridor, opening her door, only having time to run to her landline: her mother was calling as agreed!

-Hello, darling! How are you? Did you get home safely?

-I'm fine, Mom, thank you. And you, today?

-Like the weather. Since that accident, I can't write anymore, can't put my thoughts together. But tell me about it. It must be much more interesting than my wanderings.

-No more than that, don't think so! The routine is settling in between work and my apartment. By the way, tonight I'm going out with a friend. We'll have dinner at the Chinese restaurant down the street.

-A friend? A boyfriend? I'm so glad you're going out.

-But no, Mom! What are you imagining now... He's just a good work colleague, that's all! You're incorrigible!

-Taratata! This man is very nice, I'm sure of it, and you're old enough to be in a relationship. You should have already done it elsewhere... It's so nice when there's just the two of you, the sharing, the gaze, the little romantic meals, and then the children... Being a grandmother, do you realize? It's fabulous, don't you think? Above all, have fun tonight.

-Yes, Mom! But we're not there yet! Slow down a little and tell me what you do with your days... there.

-Meh! Not much, alas! I'm thinking of joining an organization to take my mind off things, make myself useful, help others... Maybe that will help me forget my grief! Since I can't write anymore at the moment... who knows? It will give me something to think about?!... And I need it to move more.

-Yes, you're probably right. You need to keep busy, to feel something else, to get back to your old job. You have to move on now. Yes, there you go, I dared to tell you. You have to hear it. And don't forget that he would have wanted you to be happy, even without him...

-I know, yes, I know. But loneliness is so hard! I miss him so much! I think I can still hear him, there... in front of me...

-Come on, it's over, my dear mom! Make plans, pick up the torch, and continue to exist... He'll applaud you from on high.

-And you, are you still drowning yourself in your job, Sophie?

-Yes, and I'm very happy with the way things are going! I might well have a great opportunity soon.

-Here in France? In what position? What salary? Abroad?

-Who knows?!... All doors are open, I'm waiting for a sign, a green light for there or a red light for there, somewhere else.

-But it's wonderful for you! I have to sign right away!

-Yes, but I really don't know if I'd say yes. There's you, my apartment, my habits, my friends... There you go...

-Isn't that okay? You have to say yes, come on! You won't get a chance like this twice... There's no arguing! You'll come back with lots of discoveries, you'll be enriched by everything you've learned, read, seen, known...

-If you were in my place, would you say yes, Mom? Do you think so?

-Without hesitation, believe me! Remember the times we thought about settling in Quebec...

-Oh yeah, we didn't know if we'd get in or not... And then it all came to nothing after several months and various options! We were both so disappointed...

-You have to jump on the bandwagon, my darling, and then I'll come join you one day soon... I have no other connection in this life since he's no longer here, by my side...

-Enough with the sadness or nostalgia, and let's move on to the holiday season! Do you think you'll carry out the family rituals and traditions, between the nativity scene and the Christmas tree, then the spinning wheels?

-Yes, I'll feel less alone in the face of festive rites, the decorations, the candles... the prayers... the departed souls.

-That's good, Mom. We have to restore these festivities despite everything. If you want, I'll be there, and we'll celebrate together.

-By the way, will anyone come see you for New Year's Day?

-I don't know yet. Why? Unless I'm the one who shows up at one of the other's houses... Nothing definite yet.

-If you want, come see me, it'll do you good to get a change of scenery. I'd probably be alone too then...

-And your brother and his wife? Any news from them?

-Leave him where he is, please! He's not missing.

-Still on bad terms? After all this time...

-Yes, he'll never change, unfortunately for all his family!

-Oh dear! What has he come up with now? A rude thing?
-Just being true to himself, as always! Yes...
-It's true he's annoying, even unbearable! Hélène has a lot of patience with him. It's stupid that he's like this.
-He's disgusting, you mean. He gorges himself, complains about everything and everyone, insults and grumbles... or worse... Pfft...
-He's the incorrigible member of the family, an immutable and hard standing stone... a party animal in the most terrifying sense of the word! Poor thing...
-What can you do? That's how it is, and nothing will change it now! How about we say goodbye so you can get ready for your dinner... together? I'm kidding...
-You're truly hopeless, you know that, don't you, Mom?
-That's why you love me, isn't it? My originality... my joy!
-Just one last word, please. Would you have gone alone?
-Yes, and I even almost left for Greece on foot with a group at school. We were crazy, we were out of it, but it was freedom!
-Really? But you never told me about that trip...
-Well, we got held up at the border, so it wasn't glorious!
-Kisses, and take good care of yourself! See you soon, Mom...
-You too, and above all, have fun! I'll hang up now!

When the receiver was placed back on its cradle, Sophie suddenly became aware of her guest and stammered, suddenly embarrassed by the length of her verbal exchange, spoken freely. She had simply forgotten it, erased it, caught up in a whirlwind of maternal words! He, for his part, had become embedded in this feminine place he was discovering, attracted by a certain independence of life that he himself had struggled to acquire.

He listened with delight but surprise to their uninterrupted mother-daughter chatter. He formed a different opinion of this woman he found so terribly endearing. 'There's an element of mystery to be identified,' he mused. He thought for a moment that she held a nostalgic, rather selfish old

soul, and has now detected the opposite! 'So I'm not infallible!' he said to himself.

They unpack the young woman's groceries in a shrill silence, punctuated by light jabs. Like a friendly hostess, Sophie settles Geoffrey into a comfortable armchair, listening to ambient music, with orange juice and seeds. Thus pampered, he rests his body while she takes a shower and changes into her clothes for the Chinese self-service restaurant at the bottom of her building.

-You look so pretty dressed like that! Sophie, you amaze me!

-Thank you for your compliment. We know each other well, though.

-You're welcome, really, I mean it, you look radiant. And I'm proud to be seen in your company. You stroke my ego!

-We've been seeing each other for a while, are you coming out of your beautiful reserve? I'm teasing you... And you're a friend, a real one for me.

-Yeah, well, you know, it's mutual, I'll always be there.

Sophie blushes at the double compliment and chooses not to reply. She turns toward the door, puts on a hooded jacket: she's ready to leave, putting her papers in her inside pocket. Geoffrey gets up from his seat, places his glass in the kitchen sink, and simply follows her obediently. Hands in his pockets, he has the air of a confident young man, well-behaved in every way.

He falls in step behind her, walking a few steps behind her, vigilant. A hushed silence falls between them in the elevator. They step out quietly, heading towards the building's exit. Outside, a mixture of showers and a chilly air envelops them, making the young woman shiver. Geoffrey keeps pace with his partner, chatting about this and that.

A brief account of their last day at work!

The Chinese cafe had several tables in the back room for customers to eat in and enjoy the deli items on display. It was run by an extremely courteous Asian couple. Their age was unbelievable; their business flourished thanks to their

always smiling and warm welcome, the exemplary cleanliness that reigned from the moment they walked through the door, and the tasteful decor.

This place remained beyond time and eras, skillfully cultivating the intimacy it cherished. The serenity with which this duo welcomed their customers offered a haven of peace and gourmet delight in the heart of the city. It was a place the young woman often frequented when she wanted a break from her rather routine schedule. She had never been accompanied since becoming a loyal customer of this business.

Once acknowledged and introduced, the little man, dressed in reception attire, entirely of embroidered green silk, indicated them with a broad smile to a table a little to one side. He aspired to gain their approval above all, with a simple affirmative nod. Sophie greeted him, her eyes shining, matching her gesture to her words, thanking him for his kind attitude and infinite thoughtfulness.

-Good evening, are there two of you? How are you, young lady?

-Well, as you can see. And you, dear host? And your lady, is she always so jovial?

-Dear Mademoiselle, I return the words spoken. Thank you for bringing a guest on this sad, rainy day. It cheers me up when I see such a pretty woman in the company of a charming young man. You are stylish and of good repute."

-We thank you for the compliment and graciously accept it." Could you bring us your own aperitif? It'll whet our appetites. We've had a trying day, at least in terms of stress.

-Do you work together? Dinner with colleagues?

-Yes and no. We're in the same company, but not in the same department. However, we've been friends for a long time. From kindergarten to college!

-Oh, and you still managed to connect and bridge your academic and professional backgrounds? A very nice journey in that case; few could have strengthened or mastered it.

-Yes, we knew how and were able to keep in touch, right up until the evening of the company's inauguration at a welcome cocktail party. The atmosphere being stiff and sufficiently heavy, we settled in the back of the reception room to escape the almost obligatory socializing...

-And your eyes were hooked! What a beautiful beginning to a romance! Everything is so fascinating in a love story!

-It was rather our feet... that united in the pain of our new, worn shoes! Burlesque, isn't it?

-Oh, oh, oh! Too bad it wasn't during a dance! I'm being ironic, my dear children, don't get offended!

-No, not even! I'm quite disconcerted, actually. Do you remember, Geoffrey? What a painful memory for our toes!

-Yes, of course, it's been about six months now. It's etched in my memory as if it were yesterday! How desperate you were to get out! So much so that you bumped into me, and then a vital shock hit my entire body!

-Yes, against a real wall! You in this case, my dear friend.

-What a beautiful collision! Never again! Oh no, really!

-Come sit over here, you'll be at peace.

-Thank you, dear host, that will suit us very well, have no doubt about it.

-I'll be right back with your order and a surprise!

-We have plenty of time, don't hurry!

-Yes, we have plenty to keep us talking...

They both relaxed, laughing, as did their host, who handed each of them a catering menu and quickly slipped into the kitchen to serve their appetizer. Everything was in place for a wonderful evening among well-bred people. In a low voice, a classical ode welcomed the many guests around a central buffet and small tables with orange, yellow, and silver tablecloths.

Sake and two Chinese beers, accompanied by piping hot green tea with mint, were served on a lacquered tray containing peanuts, cashews, pistachios, soft sesame nougats, a sweet and savory mix of dried fruits, plates of small spring rolls, and a very spicy brown sauce. A bowl of

large green salad leaves completed the meal. All served affably.

The young people tuck into the dishes with delight and happiness, voluptuousness and enthusiasm. The evening promises to be a joyous one. They chat freely about a variety of topics. The duo becomes more distinct as the minutes pass. At the end of the dinner snacks, when the little man returns to their table, they order the chosen dishes, surprising or succulent, reflecting their basic personal tastes.

She turns out to be rather surprising and flavorful, while he positions himself more towards a very restrained traditionalism.

-Are you really going to eat all that? Are you sure?

-No, of course not, you stupid idiot: they'll put the rest in takeout containers for me. I'll enjoy them tomorrow night at home, quietly on a solitary tray, in front of the television. They've gotten used to it with me by now.

-I was afraid for a moment that you were becoming bulimic. Although if you'd had a crisis, I would have massaged your stomach with great pleasure... as a therapist, of course.

-And you think I would have let you do it? No way!

-I'm sure you would have asked for more!

-Will you stop teasing me like that? It's gone from you.

-And if I didn't want it, if I kept going, what would you do, tell me... You like it as much as I do.

-I'll only know if I face the problem, na!

-Well then, I'll do it again: I'll point and I'll strike!

-Irresistibly playful... What can I come up with against you?

-Yes, you don't know me well enough yet, but if you leave the door open, I'm a man full of humor and wit... an absolute must-see!

-Yes, certainly, but in moderation, like alcohol!

-You have a quick wit, but you're intrigued... despite yourself.

-I won't accept your challenge and give up!

They're enjoying their desserts and steaming herbal teas when an unfortunate incident unexpectedly occurs, marring the atmosphere.

In the room where they're sitting, other customers are seated, mostly regulars, whom Sophie has already glimpsed. Three men of Asian origin enter very noisily and resolutely surround the frightened but tenacious little man. They appear friendly at first, but the atmosphere quickly becomes charged and electric. The tone gradually escalates, and threats emerge, uttered in a foreign language.

They articulate their tirades so violently that it becomes overwhelming.

The stunned customers don't know what to think or how to react.

One of them reaches for his cell phone to call the police and is interrupted by one of the three men pointing a revolver at his head. He stops his gesture and sees his cell phone fall to the floor, breaking. The anguished murmurs of women suddenly stop. Fear spreads from table to table. The merchant duo is sitting next to a cartel member: the little man is turning pale under his tan.

Sophie falls silent, and Geoffrey observes the surreal scene. He tries to argue gently, to negotiate slowly, to parley with these mafiosi, but he receives a slap to the chin, interrupting him abruptly. His wife behind the counter is trembling, frightened, confused, and panicked, a nervous tic appearing on her gaunt face. The teapot and coffeepot are heard, having completed their circuit. The saucers and cups await the requested hot liquids.

-Let's be quiet. Above all, don't make any ambiguous gestures.

-My God, what's going on? Are we real hostages?

-thing out of the ordinary, alas. It's a fact of society.

-Really? You really think so? Isn't this a news story?

-Yes and no. As soon as a business is doing well and generating profits that become lucrative, the gangs come and offer their 'protection' in exchange for a certain sum of money, which increases as the revenues increase. -But this practice is illegal in France! Bandits!

-Yes, but that's how it is. Since our host certainly didn't want their first and then their second offer, the local 'godfather' has just sent his henchmen to make him change his mind. He risks amputation or worse, death.

-But this could get out of hand! Look at the hostage, he has a revolver to his head! It's awful... Criminal even!

-That's why we must remain calm and completely inactive so as not to end our lives here with each one.

-How cynical! We have to try something, challenge them... right?

-I'd say realism for my part. Especially since I firmly intend to get to know you better and who knows... not remain single forever! I want to be in a relationship... with you!

-And what do I think then? And if I don't want to? What will you do?

-I'll ask you when the time comes, beautiful child. -Well, well, then? That doesn't solve our problem in this case, but it does increase it somewhat.

-Yes, because we now have a positive goal that we didn't have ten minutes ago. Let's stay alive to live it.

-What can we do? We can't let these people brutalize others... and watch them do it too.

-Let's be clear: others are better than us: everyone in these circumstances saves their own skin. That's clear and precise.

-What? You dare say that kind of thing? You're joking, I hope! Are you ready to witness carnage?

-Not in the least. Assess the situation calmly. The bad guys are few in number, but they have handguns and most likely bladed weapons hidden under their clothes, ready to be used. What can we hope for but to remain calm? We keep quiet.

-I don't know! Argue with them. Make verbal contact so that this lunatic stops pointing his weapon at this man who at least tried something for all of us. We must act against these lunatics.

-I apologize, but I'm not part of the race of heroes who die in the end. It's a no, and you don't try anything, I tell you.

-What? You dare say that kind of thing? You're joking, I hope! Are you ready to witness carnage?

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-Well, I can't stay like this without trying...

-Hello, gentlemen? Yes, me! Come over here! Thank you very much. "Who are you to speak to me like that? Madam wants a bullet in the head or the stomach? Too bad, isn't it?"

-What do you three want? Hey, do you speak French?

-Yes, but only when necessary. Stay seated.

-That you stop pointing a gun at that man.

-Why? He made an action that is unacceptable to us.

-Is it unacceptable or unreasonable? According to you and all your codes of decency, honor, and foreigner on free soil.

-The second is certain, but that doesn't change the fact that he shouldn't have done it. He is punished and will be executed first.

-Who's to say this gentleman didn't want to call his family instead, just in case things went wrong? If they're waiting for him... they could burst into these walls by surprise. What will you do in the face of yet another unforeseen peril?

-Well done. So we'll take you as a second hostage just in case. We'll cover our bases.

-Why would you need another hostage? Waste of time, waste of energy, direct loss, loss of action-reaction.

-So that the others will finally be quiet.

-Violence doesn't solve anything, logic does. And besides, sir has the right to his opinion. We're in a land of freedom.

-Good. We're wasting our time with you. Unless you can make this real mule see reason. Otherwise... you could all be killed, quickly and easily!

-Threats? You're going to get the better of you! Fever will get the better of you and make you lose it at some point.

-Yes, for all your lives here. We generally leave no survivors in this type of operation. Unless they sign the pledge of allegiance... which is here. Pen included.

-Can I read it? I'm an international lawyer."

-That's none of your business. He signs it, and that's it.

-I know the law well; it's my area of expertise.

-Here, this is an 'official document'... from our 'lawyer'!

-Just a second, let me grab my glasses from the table.

-Okay, I can see them. Go ahead and read it, then call him over so he can sign.

-Wait a minute, you. I have to read it while concentrating, okay?

-So that's it? He has to sign it, or I'll blow up the store and you with it! I'm sick of it now!

-Yes, you're right, let's get this over with... it's settled!

Sophie puts her glasses back on the table, relaxed and smiling. She seriously reexamines the famous contract. Geoffrey, imperturbable, stares at her intensely. She lifts her head from the paper and, relaxed, hands it back to them. 'Dear gentlemen, we will find common ground.' She asks the little man in a deep voice to come to her. He complies quietly, leaning forward to hear her words better.

In a low voice, she tells him bluntly: 'All you have to do is sign this contract without initialing the pages here. You'll render it null and void, as this agreement contains some rather significant legal loopholes. In front of any lawyer, it won't mean anything at all. Quite the opposite. You can even take them to court, if you wish.' When he understands the message, he nods and signs.

Wordlessly, his face impenetrable, he looks at the page.

The atmosphere is miraculously lightened: the air is released from the constricted lungs. The lout who seems to be the leader checks the signature, folds the page in four, then whistles at the henchmen and leaves into the night. They go directly to their boss, who is more than furious... He knew! And Geoffrey too. Meanwhile, the clients leave without asking for anything more.

-Sophie, you're playing with fire. I know what you've done. You're risking a lot now. The gang will turn against you. And they're not easy to deal with, believe me.

-Geoffrey, at least I bought some time and saved some people.

-Yes, but at what cost! It's your life that's at stake right now.

-The cost of my courage. The restaurant has emptied of hostages.

-What are you going to do when they crowd around you? When you least expect it, or no longer expect it at all, tell me?

-I'll think about it then. Right now, I'll pay the bill and we'll go to my place. We'll be safer there than here. Unless you go straight home?

-Are you kidding me or what? I won't be able to leave you alone after this. You'll have to put up with me for a while.

-I'll try to moderate my temper and my fickle impulses."

They got up together and went to the counter to pay and collect their belongings. The owner refused to acknowledge their bill and warmly thanked the young woman for her helpful intervention and her courage. Some customers were gradually leaving the premises, nervous, shocked, and disturbed. Adrenaline fueled their hasty departure; most of them hadn't finished their dinner.

Their reactions were normally human. Everyday life had caught up with them somewhere: violent words and actions. Fear still gripped them, the terror of surprise in the midst of peace, the terror engendered afterward: jerky gestures, drawn features, racing hearts, sidelong glances or backward glances... the courageous hostage had fainted with emotion

just after the thugs' hasty departure.

Geoffrey took her hand authoritatively and immediately led her into his building. They passed through the sliding doors and deftly entered the elevator: Sophie's door was... wide open! When he saw this, Geoffrey ordered her to be silent and pointed down the hall to the broom closet. Sophie nodded, proof that she had understood his silent message.

She knew full well that she had acted impulsively without having fully managed, calculated, or weighed the consequences. It's flying in all directions, exploding in her face, right this second! She opens the door, sliding silently shut behind her. The space is small, but enough to stay holed up in until her friend returns. He's the man for the job; she's been stupid and frivolous.

Geoffrey enters the dark apartment on velvet footsteps, soundlessly, only silence answers him. He shines a light inside and then... he is dizzy... he is literally gripped by the stomach when he sees this... upheaval, this... disaster! Before, it had been a decent and stylish home, just like its owner. Now, it was... pitiful, unbearable, almost intolerable.

They violated her privacy, her femininity, her integrity: her underwear slashed and then thrown here and there in the space, her clothes torn, cut, and scattered in places, her makeup used to write obscenities on the mirrors. On the refrigerator, a piece of paper with a final message for her. They offered Sophie a slim chance: to drop the matter.

'I really need to force her to leave, she can't see this, at least not until I tell her about it at my place, without going into too much detail about tonight.' He took a step back and bumped into a piece of furniture. That's when he realized the horror of their situation: a dead rat, its guts hanging out! It was crystal clear! They couldn't go to the police to report the theft and damage for the home insurance!

How cruel and vulgar to put on such a show!

Otherwise... the police and the insurer would be aware of the aggravating circumstances that triggered the current hostilities. In the bathroom, at his feet, were two bloody rooster heads. The thugs were truly giving them a serious ultimatum. Stop this game or die! He thought for a moment, turning off the lights one by one, then slamming the front door, finding Sophie at bay.

-My God, what a storm! How can I tell her, not upset her too much... I'm tired from this evening: it's dizzying!

-Geoffrey? Are you there? Is that you? I have cramps...

-Yes, I'm coming, please stay where you are.

-It's hot in here, it's stifling after a while... I'm sleepy...

-I know. But don't come, it's worse than I thought it would be. Unimaginable, unheard of, it's astounding!

When he joins Sophie in the hallway, he slams the door shut so as not to startle Sophie or her neighbors, out of pure discretion. He removes the keys from his friend's fingers before putting them in his pocket. He wraps his arms around her, and the duo heads back the other way: through the elevator, through the entrance, and out onto the street. Sophie is now reeling from the aftermath of her day: mute, a mere shadow of herself.

A teenager who has touched something that burns inside her. She has stopped reasoning, thinking.

She follows him like an automaton, without energy, disoriented, almost lifeless, as if inert. He escorts her to her bachelor pad: opening her door, he flicks the switch that lights up the entrance hall, letting her in. He carefully places her on the sofa he has just unfolded, and she flops down onto it, exhausted. He goes to his room, takes a pair of pajamas and slippers and hands them to her.

As she returns from the bathroom, he offers her a mug of herbal tea and hot toddy he made and brings it to her. She gives him a weak, forced smile, and he reassures her by sitting next to her with his own. Once drunk, he pampers her and tucks her into a cozy bed so she can finally rest. Sophie

curls up against him, trusting, defenseless, and he forces himself not to take advantage of the opportunity created by this bizarre situation.

Geoffrey places their cups in the sink and, desperately needing a shower, makes himself comfortable. They chat, and then, tiredness setting in, they fall asleep against each other, one protecting the other, calming her with his presence, his arms around her, the words they hear rocking her. A night of intense rest works miracles of energy. A ray of sunlight wakes them from their deep sleep.

They struggle to get back to reality!

-Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm...

-Yes? Are you coming back from your dreams? No? Sleep a little longer.

-Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm...

-Did you sleep well? You're taking a long time to come back to earth.

-Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm... Mmm...

-Okay, fine. I'll make a good black coffee to start the day off right, which promises to be somewhat difficult to tackle together.

Their eyes wide at first, surprised to be there together, then reality patiently imposed itself on them. They suddenly remembered the previous day, and Geoffrey tried to temper what he had seen firsthand. Sophie sensed the danger of this man: virile, slender, kind, considerate... he was affecting her own nerves like a devastating tornado. She knew he was minimizing the act so as not to frighten her too much early in the morning.

She chose to stretch to distance herself slightly from this sweet and nagging temptation. She was a woman, after all, and he emanated such sensual energy that she felt it physically. Deep inside her... in the small of her back. They would reflect and decide on their present later: this enormous problem thrown in their way by her recklessness. She blushed with confusion.

The impulsiveness she displayed truly surprised her deep down: she didn't see the consequences at all, other than saving others from a dead end. Geoffrey, on the other hand, sensed danger and tried to tell her. It was a waste! And that's where we were, due to a lack of reason: what a personal waste! She truly doesn't feel at fault. She did what she thought was right!

And for her, Sophie, that alone mattered. Period.

Her apartment devastated, her daily life turned upside down, her life in peril, nothing was as important to her as having managed to save lives other than her own. 'Mother would have done the same thing; she'll be proud of me when she finds out. As soon as this is over, I'll let her know, but not before so as not to worry her.' Sophie glanced briefly at her charming host for the night.

She struggled to restrain an affectionate impulse toward him. A delicious, tortuous shiver ran down her spine, making her blush strangely. She encountered two eyes burning with suppressed desire, two pleas veiled by the modesty of not being able to take the first step, two bottomless pits into which she would lose herself, body and soul. He waited, hoped, desired a simple gesture, a barely audible 'Yes,' an attitude offering her the possibility of opening the door to happiness!

They implicitly suggested the discovery of their two bodies, still foreign and yet all too present.

Sophie didn't know what to say or do, tense, prostrate, like a consenting victim, consumed by secret, restrained, private passion. A desire was perceptible, latent, existing. The urge was felt, palpable, but no one dared to cross the line, probably out of modesty. Emotions overwhelmed her beyond all other considerations. Affection, friendship, love, passion: what exactly was it?

Geoffrey was captive to Sophie's questioning eyes: they were mutually hypnotizing each other. The young woman made a gesture that broke the spell, and they found themselves

bewildered, a little embarrassed. A smile on both sides, somewhat strained, then Geoffrey, gathering his thoughts, sporting a good sport, headed to the kitchen to prepare a hearty breakfast. Sophie lingers a little longer on the soft sofa, lascivious.

As soon as she smells the aroma of coffee coming from the living room, she stretches and quietly slips out from under the sheets and blankets. She approaches him with small, soft steps. He jumps, lost in thought, when he hears the sound of her voice, so close to him. He remains absorbed in his task, regaining his normal reflexes. Sophie has noticed his posture but ignores the flinch.

'I have an effect on him... like he has on me...'

He places two steaming mugs on a tray and toasts slices of day-old bread. There's also a knob of butter, sugar, jam, strawberries and crème fraîche, milk, and applesauce. Sophie gives a mocking smile at this display of victuals. She immediately thinks of Little Red Riding Hood with her basket, heading towards her grandmother, who has become the lair of the Big Bad Wolf.

-You eat breakfast alone like this every morning? Well...

-No, but I thought you needed it, and so did I on this new day. I need to talk to you seriously afterward.

-You know, though, that sometimes I only have a cup of coffee before going to work because I'm pressed for time. I don't like being late, it's a matter of politeness."

-Well, with me, expect that to change a little."

-Why? I'm doing well. I'm maintaining my figure and my health." -Yes, but you're consumed by stress... and I want to change your perspective, so you feel better about yourself.

-And you too! You exercise, but I don't, so what? I walk.

-Yes, but I at least have buttered or unbuttered toast with my cup of coffee, and at 10 o'clock, fruit juice.

-It's true that it's energizing. But during my morning break, I eat a cereal bar at the office with water.

-Good. Now, come eat. Would you prefer it on the set in front of the television, facing the news, on the couch, or here at the table? It doesn't matter to me; I adapt to everything and everyone.

-Don't bother so much for me, do as you usually do. I take up enough space as it is this morning.

-Then it will be a pleasant experience here, living in the present moment.

-Thank you for the inconvenience, and let's get started on this royal feast.

-Yes, let's get started, and we'll really need it, believe me.

-Is it that bad? Is my apartment so... trashed?

-It's an understatement; you have to see it to believe it. But have lunch and build up your strength without having to think about it. Everything has its time, and every time has its things to take care of.

-You're right, let's eat first. We'll see later.

Once restored, he paints a terrifying picture of the current state of affairs. She struggles to believe it all, to digest it all, and hangs her head, devastated. Her strength of character forces her to raise her head and face reality. He comforts her, assuring her of his support. Her world is fragmented: she must rebuild everything from A to Z. 'Perhaps this is an opportunity given to me so that I have another purpose!'

Jokingly, they dressed up in sportswear so Sophie would feel comfortable, and then headed to the Chinese cafe. They found the door ajar and called out to the owners as soon as they entered. The place was in disarray, completely ransacked. They didn't dare go any further, there was so much broken glass, smashed tables, and destroyed furniture: the counter was also devastated...

From the back of the shop, the little man explained to them what had happened since the morning: he had received another official visit from the boss himself and his bodyguards. He had had to capitulate to the even more virulent threats from this gang that apparently ruled the neighborhood. His wife had the gun to his stomach and

signed her death warrant. He was leaving his business and was only getting his last month of business back.

The young duo told them what they had received in retaliation: they had come back to them to find out whether they should take legal action and involve lawyers, police, and insurance companies on their side: all this over a cup of tea. They were ready to support them, but the Chinese couple preferred to leave for a quieter place. Each huddled in their corner, hoping for a better place elsewhere.

He apologized for all the trouble he'd caused them, and they all said goodbye, their hearts set on both sides, their throats tight. The young people were both relieved and sorry for this kind and welcoming couple. It had all been a stupid setback, a true injustice. Everything was ending in a fizzle. Running away isn't a solution, but with some of the victims defrocking themselves...

... Nothing would happen legally!

Geoffrey had warned their colleagues that an unfortunate event had occurred, requiring them to take a few days off work to resolve the dispute. She did the same. He accompanied her to her devastated home: he pushed open the front door to record the carnage. The young woman shuddered with apprehension and, as soon as she could, began to pack and move things. Geoffrey assists her until the evening, with a break in the refrigerator around one o'clock. They agree that Sophie should come back to sleep at his place again that night, as the rooms aren't quite in good condition. Furthermore, Geoffrey has been able to contact a locksmith who will come late the next morning. So far, there's been no way to secure the said home. She's been thinking about selling the property.

They sort, wash one room after another, methodically moving forward, replacing the furniture that's still intact, and taking down what's in a sorry state. That evening, she packs clean laundry into a travel bag and they return to the young man's loft. 'How much has changed in just under two days!'

thinks Sophie, happy not to be alone in this mess. 'He's here for me...'

After a good shower, her own clothes and a fresh fruit juice cocktail await her: she's regaining her zest for life! He follows her example and smiles at each other as they peck at the aperitif mixes like children, chatting peacefully. The ice breaks between them, and the day had passed quickly. Their work of restoring the apartment has brought them closer: Geoffrey is thinking of offering her a shared apartment.

He felt so lonely sometimes. And besides, she'll be under his care... Something to seriously consider! Sophie stared at him from beneath her long, curled eyelashes, looking deeply absorbed in her drink. She pondered her life, her daily routine, her job, her next promotion: how was she going to organize her existence? Should she really start a relationship with this man or prioritize her professional career?

She won't be able to reconcile the two parties anyway. Only the future will provide an answer. What if I let myself go for once? Let fate choose for me... The story was only just beginning... He's handsome... I like him... I seem to suit him... why not? Once... Just once... Who knows? Is happiness there? With him? Or somewhere else? With her eyes closed, she offers herself to his greedy looks, his kisses, his hands... We'll see tomorrow... abandoning herself completely, sometimes assisting him...