

## The Mannequin's Tale

I never understood why I had been put there.

It certainly wasn't comfortable, nor was it the best place if they wanted me to be seen and admired. It was even rather embarrassing for me; but then I had no capacity to decide, nor even to move.

The ladies' toilet. That was my place, that was my punishment for something I did unintentionally, a punishment for my simple curiosity.

It was a small room, at the end of the corridor of a restaurant, with all the elements you would expect to find in such a place, though it was decorated in a quite unconventional – some would even say daring – way: the walls were bright red, there was a small washbasin, also red, in a corner, the toilet lid had flowers painted on it, and a fish tank stood on the cistern. And there was I, next to the loo, on a wooden shelf attached to the wall, mid way between the ceiling and the floor. As my size was considerable, I had to be hunched over with my legs dangling.

To explain to you the extraordinary events which had brought me to this situation, I must start from the beginning, with the story of the last months of my life.

I worked in the restaurant. For some years I had been a fisherman, but finally I had sold the old boat which my father had left me in his will, and I had looked for other jobs which would keep me on dry land. I was single, I lived on my own, so I had no one to maintain apart from myself. My hobbies were not expensive. I had a quiet life in which my passion was to read as many books as I could get from the library. Novels, plays, history, legends. Anything.

When they took me on as a kitchen assistant in that small but expensive restaurant, I reckoned that things started out well. I liked cooking, and I thought it might be an enjoyable job, not too demanding, with a stability which a fisherman's life didn't have.

But soon I realised that my boss was a bit odd. To start with, the place itself had an unusual look. It aspired, without achieving it completely, to be a mixture of the old and the new, with an irrelevant oriental touch which probably pretended to add a touch of sophistication, more appropriate for the big city than for a small village by the sea. And yet the restaurant seemed to be successful, drawing in customers at lunchtime and at dinner. At the weekends, you even had to book. If not, better go somewhere else.

As well as the owner – my boss – his wife and me, there were two more people working in the restaurant. A young waitress – Polish, I think – and a waiter, a lad from the village, who combined school with a job which gave him some extra money. Both had a melancholic appearance; you would guess they weren't very happy there. I thought they could surely have found something better; but maybe their aspirations in life were quite limited.

The girl was very pretty. Blonde, with long and flat hair and a wonderful body. She had long and curved lashes which – I don't know why – I always felt tempted to touch with my finger, convinced they would have the touch of a butterfly's wings – if I had ever been allowed to touch a butterfly's wings. Sometimes, when I got into the kitchen to take the dirty plates or to pick up those which were ready to serve, I couldn't help looking at her. She smiled at me, and her smile seemed to seal an agreement between us. A silent agreement which remained in my memory for the

rest of the day and warmed me inside.

My boss was a tall and slim man, with a long face into which his small and dark eyes seemed to disappear. He was not at all handsome, but he had that charm which unattractive people sometimes possess. He was, as I said before, odd, and had an unpredictable character. Sometimes he was silent and absent-minded, working in an automatic way, without a word for any of his employees. Sometimes he became angry over nothing, becoming particularly infuriated with his wife. It was easy enough to see they didn't get on well. However, in the kitchen he was an artist and his cooking, always imaginative and well prepared, made the restaurant the success it was. I heard him once saying he would sell his soul to the Devil to create the perfect dish. I thought he was exaggerating.

He wasn't especially kind to me, but he did inspire me with respect. Perhaps I was afraid that in one of his bad moods he might sack me. I made an effort to do what he expected from me, to avoid complications.

When the two of us were alone in the kitchen, surrounded by pots, with the two big ovens on, there was frantic activity: chopping, frying, tasting. At those times our conversation was reduced to a few brief words, just what was necessary to keep the communication going.

Apart from his work in the restaurant, my boss was interested in other, more spiritual subjects. He believed he had a gift to practise oriental, 'alternative' therapies, designed to achieve well-being and harmony in the body and the soul. I wasn't completely sure what it was all about, but it seemed to boost his income as he had regular customers, people – especially women – from the village and from other villages nearby, who came to him convinced that he could sort out their problems.

I remember it was a spring day. We all seemed particularly cheerful in the restaurant, as if the sun which now streamed through the windows had filled us with energy. My boss was in a good mood and that made me more relaxed.

We were preparing the lunch menu.

Maria – the Polish girl – had conferred on me one of her wonderful smiles before leaving the kitchen to go to the dining room to clean and prepare the tables, and I took that smile as one more sign that things were going well between us.

When a little bit later I realised I was alone in the kitchen, this didn't surprise me. The morning had passed by nearly unnoticed, and I guessed that everybody was busy with other activities. What did surprise me was the sudden noise which seemed to come from outside. It was as if somebody was banging the wall with something solid.

I stopped what I was doing and listened. The noise seemed to continue. It was a dull and intermittent noise followed by a sort of moaning.

I was curious. And I was afraid too, I have to confess. But I couldn't help it. I left the kitchen and went out into the corridor. The dining room was empty, with the curtains drawn and everything in order as usual.

The bangs continued, louder now.

When I left the dining room I understood where they came from: the ladies' toilet.

At that moment I didn't know what to do, nor did I realise what was happening. The only thing I know is that I looked through the door – which unexpectedly was not locked – and I could see my boss with Maria. He had his trousers down, she was completely naked as he pressed her against the wall.

Then I knew that my boss had seen me. And in his eyes I saw an expression of pure hatred. It was a look full of words which at that moment I did not understand.

I ran without knowing where to go. I sweated. A tear dripped down my cheek. A tear of sorrow, perhaps for Maria, perhaps for my wonderful illusion in which she would have agreed to be one day my companion in my lonely life. But the Maria I had just seen was not the Maria I had dreamed of, but a cheap and ordinary woman, giving herself to that disgusting man. How could she? But maybe I had imagined something which did not exist, an emotion which was not real, a happiness which was fictitious. Maria was simply a girl who slept with her boss, for fun, love, pleasure or whatever it was. And he was just a macho who cheated on his wife with a waitress. His airs of 'the great chef' and his oriental mysticism could not disguise this banal truth.

After that incident things were never the same again. I worked as before and tried to act as if nothing had happened, busy in the kitchen without thinking of anything else.

For some time I did not see Maria. Perhaps the boss was afraid because his infidelity had been discovered and he had sacked her. Or perhaps she had decided to leave, not to mix her job with her personal life. I was not the person to judge her, but I thought that at least she could have said goodbye to me. I missed her.

But one day she came back. She said she had been ill and I didn't pursue the matter.

It was a big mistake for me to stay in the restaurant. Now I know. If I had left on time, everything would have been different.

My boss became even more odd, if possible. His looks made me afraid and his smiles had something sinister about them, as if he were laughing at me or enjoying a joke I did not share.

I thought the routine might make me feel better, but it didn't. And suddenly, my boss started being kind and amicable, treating me with more familiarity instead of his previous coldness. He even offered to teach me some recipes. I deserved to be a good chef one day, he said.

We were alone, he and I, in the kitchen. For some reason his wife had not come in that day, which made little difference because I never had the opportunity to have a good relationship with her.

I had just finished preparing a chicken while my boss put a sauce on the hob. Stirring the pot, he looked like a wizard preparing a secret potion. And I've no doubt that a potion is just what it was, though I didn't know what sort of ingredients he had put in it.

'Come on, Martin, taste it. It's delicious... Tell me what you think.'

Because of his change of attitude his words didn't surprise me, though as a rule he never asked me for my opinion about his cooking. However, I would have liked to run away from there and not come back. Surely I could have found a job somewhere else.

But I did not run away. And I tasted the sauce.

What happened afterwards, I don't know if I can describe it properly. After a while I started feeling strange. My legs trembled. I had finished what I was doing in the kitchen, so I sat down. My boss saw me but said nothing, not even asking if there was something wrong with me. He moved towards to me and then I understood that whatever was happening to me, he was the one who lay behind it.

Had he poisoned me? Was I going to die? He could then get rid of my corpse so I could not reveal what I had seen.

But that would have been too simple, too ordinary.

I did not dare to look in his eyes. A very curious sensation was gripping me, going up from my legs and expanding through the rest of my body, like a cold stream

which contracted my muscles and froze my bones.

A few minutes later I noticed I was numb, paralysed. I could not move. My eyes were still open and I could see. Yet my mouth had twisted and become still, as if made of stone.

I tried to muster the strength to move, even just a finger, but it was impossible.

A statue, a puppet. I could not guess how he had done it, what dark and malignant power he possessed to transform a person in this way.

When he came back I saw him smiling. It was a smile of satisfaction and triumph.

‘Do you feel better, Martin?’, he said. Ironical, isn’t it? Perhaps in his disturbed mind my new state was indeed ‘better’: fixed, incapable of any movement. I would not be a witness to his behaviour any more.

He took hold of me under my arms and dragged me out of the kitchen. I don’t know how he managed it, as I was a big man, with robust arms and the belly of a person with a good appetite. Perhaps in my metamorphosis I had lost part of my weight, becoming a light husk of something from which the inside had been removed.

And then, still pulling, he took me to the ladies’ toilet and placed me in a corner, sitting on a shelf, with my stomach taking up most of the space.

And there I remained. Alone. Condemned to see, feel, hear and smell – particularly smell – without being able to move, without being able to say a word. It was as if I were a character in an ancient Greek myth –one of those heroes in the books I had read, dreadfully punished for seeing a goddess naked. But Maria was no goddess and this was no heroic myth, just a sordid, accidental moment of voyeurism. The only thing which removed it from the ordinary world was the eerie mystery of my transformation.

Each day I saw women of all ages, customers of the restaurant who came to answer the call of nature and wash their hands. I could think of nothing more awful, more disgusting. A cruel punishment.

But one day I started being aware of the impression I caused in the women. I even wondered if anyone would recognise me –one of the usual customers of the restaurant, but I didn’t look like a real man any more, just a kind of puppet of human size, like those used by ventriloquists, or a peculiar mannequin conceived not to exhibit clothes in a fashion shop, but as a naturalistic art work, provocative and unconventional.

All of them without exception felt surprised and screamed with astonishment at my presence, doubtless wondering what I was doing there, what sort of decorative object for a toilet I was.

Some seemed embarrassed to show their most intimate acts to a man – even though he was just a puppet.

Others, the youngest, looked at me with amusement, thinking it was a joke or an eccentric and bold decoration.

But there were some who gazed at me with real horror, perhaps guessing that inside what looked like a puppet hid a human being with the capacity to see, think and reason.

More than one would have run away if I could just have moved my lashes for a second. That thought amused me.

Once, trying to profit from my situation, I entertained myself by admiring the round bottom of a girl and imagining the smoothness and softness of her skin. But I was not a pervert. I preferred not to look, respecting as much as possible the intimacy of all those women who did not know my identity and my dramatic destiny.

Then one day, at lunch time, I heard a scream in the neighbouring gents' toilet. And it surprised me. Was my boss again with a woman, this time in a different place? But no bangs, no moans. A bit later another scream, a brief one, of surprise. Then another one. They sounded like the screams of the women who came to the room where I was, but they were men's voices.

Some rapid steps and a laugh. A new scream of astonishment.

And then it came to me. The cause of all this uproar. Maria. Transformed into another puppet, another motionless mannequin. In the gents' toilet.

Before this last turn of events my only consolation had been the thought that at any moment Maria might come in and see me in my prison –I was sure she would recognise me!- and perhaps find a way to make me human again. But now that hope had gone. Separated by just a thin wall we shared a grotesque fate. For ever.