

BERGAMOT

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A SHORT STORY

BY

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It's after work and I'm sitting by the window of my favourite café; it's getting dark and the waitress is smart and interesting... and I'm on my second drink. Can there be anything more pleasurable and civilised than the second drink? The first is, after all, just pure greed.

Everyone has their own mind disease. Mine is creating life. I've named the waitress Jean, after a wonderful but dissolute actress from the glory days of cinema. I cup my hands and peer out of the large plate-glass window. Outside, is the vast half-there world of dusk. Ask yourself this: Has any great uprising, love affair or assassination taken place at this hour? It's my opinion that the world is dull and morally sleepy at seven of an evening and they certainly don't perform the love duet from *Butterfly* at seven. By the way, I'm known to the waitress as Jesse.. 'You slouch like a cowboy...' she said, on my first visit.

'You should eat, if you've nothing better to do', Jean says, handing my third drink.

'When you have a break, can we walk down to the pier?'

She laughs, '*You've* never been on your feet all day!'

*I watch her as she drifts off to serve other oddities. Warren, the chicken man, pats her bottom. Jean wears green a lot. I dream of her all the time. Tonight, she's floating naked in seaweed, laying across a rock under the sea. Then as she panics, trapped by the fronds, I rescue her and we float gently to the surface where I kiss her salty mouth, twisting her long hair around my neck.*

I call for a sandwich. 'Salmon with egg mayonnaise.'

The other inmates of the café - and they are *prisoners* of habit, mostly sit in isolation. At night, very few strangers come in. I think about my day; its frustrations and boredom.

Jean brings me a tuna and avocado baguette. 'You *really* want to take me to the pier?' Outside, cars sparkle in a shower of rain. 'Only if you wear your emerald raincoat.' She asks how I know she has an emerald raincoat and I answer that I often follow her home when I've nothing better to do.

'Nothing better to *do*!'

Warren goes to the juke box and chooses a tune from *La Ronde*. After all, this is a love café. Warren loves chickens. And I love caterpillars, by the way. Anyhow, Warren works with chickens and always smells awful but no-one has the heart to ban him.

*I run after her and realise that I don't know how long the pier is; I've never been to the end. Suddenly, she collapses, breathless... A missile crosses the sky – its intense turquoise tail streams out across the night. I grab her by the shoulders, she pushes me away and holds her name badge out at arm's length – protecting herself, like in those old-fashioned vampire films. I reach out...*

'Jesse, old sport...' Warren sits opposite me, his plump, nactrotising body so tragically different from his handsomeness of a month back. 'Don't look now but yonder Jessica is the stuff of dreams tonight.' He refers to the mystery of our little fraternity. Jessica is a young woman who pretends to be other people. Once she was my first wife, another time Jean's dark night of the soul, Peter's slimy boss and most successful of all, Warren's *mad* blind mum. 'I'm going to the harbour tonight,' Warren speaks softly, 'I'm telling you this because if anything bad happens to me you can collect my things.' I look at him, bored: 'Do you have anything of value, then?' He leaves the café banging the door.

Jean immediately brings out her spray. We all love the scent. 'You lot only really tolerate poor Warren so that when he goes you'll know I'll get out my disinfectant.' Kim, who has a long sea-horse like face and who's always perched on a bar stool, says: 'Bergamot! That's what you should use. Clean and fresh with a hint of sultry.'

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The disease is what depresses everyone but talking about is not done, well not in public. In the few month's I've been coming to the café, we've lost three.

I'm now at the critical stage of my reverse drinking. After the seventh, the point of no return, I get Jean to bring me weaker and weaker drinks until the last one for the night is pure water. That way I stay sober, solvent and healthy.

Jessica is hovering by my table. 'I know I was being talked about just now.' She is speaking as my first wife. 'Were you rude to Warren? Is that why he left in a huff? You always do this!'

‘He told me you were the stuff of dreams.’

But at that moment there’s the loudest rooster call you’ve ever heard, then again and again. Jean rushes to the door and runs out into the road. ‘He can’t have got far,’ I say to no-one in particular. Jean is white as a sheet and I see that Jessica is hanging onto her arm and looking even worse. Then the rooster call again but fainter with much less bravado. Then a gun shot.

It’s now just past eleven and because I broke the terms of my ‘little arrangement’, I’m quite pissed. Jean and Jessica have been in *cahoots* ever since Warren’s demise – for we take it for granted the poor sod’s dead. Once, I called over to Jessica, *who* she was tonight, *what* role she was playing, that perhaps she was giving a whirl to being poor Warren’s old Mum at his funeral, I even got up and gave my imitation – well, these people can’t take a joke. I try to read the paper but there’s too much bloodshed.

Jessica approaches me warily. She seems not so antagonistic, even has a nice smile. Her eyes have altered because I’d swear that normally her eyes are flinty and malicious, now they’re definitely misty with half-formed tears. That sort of thing turns me on. But what do I know about normal. Her hands are clean as well. ‘I’m so tired,’ she says, reaching across the table. ‘I just want to go to bed.’

‘Don’t let me stop you,’ I say.

She pulls away. Jean comes over and tells me that Jessica doesn’t want to go home. Most of the café is now empty. ‘Anyhow, I can’t go to the pier but Jessica will.’

‘No, I bloody won’t!’

‘Jessica, you promised.’

I stand up and Jean helps me on with my overcoat, whispering: ‘She can’t go home, her husband’s a *shittite*.’ I laugh at the word; tell her that she’s being overly dramatic and that we only have Jessica’s word that her husband’s a bastard. There’s a shout from the *patron* – something’s burning. Jessica has already left. Jean looks at me thoughtfully, ‘If you were really in love what would you do? How would you conduct yourself?’ The jukebox is playing a Viennese Waltz. Time for me to go.