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ANTONIO'S FEATS

Short Story

“It is often said, ‘We met completely by accident,’ but if we think deeper, we will find that every chance is full of meaning,” Antonio uttered philosophically. All the men around, Antonio’s relatives and friends, tore their eyes away from the fireplace, where the birch logs crackled merrily, and looked at the host. Children’s cheers and laughter flew in from the next rooms. Sometimes one of them ran into the spacious living room to feast on the sweets from the table. A strong smell of the turkey Antonio's wife had baked for Thanksgiving enveloped the house, caressing the nostrils. "I have one story from my youth. Well, not exactly from my youth, but let’s say from early adulthood. But looking back on my past today, when the temples are covered in gray, I understand that at thirty I was still a wild child.”

"Don't dawdle, Tony, it's late, almost time to go home soon", his brother-in-law said, taking a sip of cognac while lounging in his chair.

The guest's familiar tone offended the host. But a pleasant day with family and friends, a delicious turkey, cognac, the warmth coming from the fireplace, all had a calming effect. Instead of putting his brother in law in his place, Antonio smiled good-naturedly, as if to say “you’re right, dear relative.”“Then listen.” And he slowly began. “I was thirty-two years old at the time, and I worked as an inspector in a firm, checking the

technical condition of high-rise buildings in New York. I can honestly say that I was not overworking. I was not yet married; sometimes I visited the church with a hidden desire to meet a simple, God-fearing girl and to start a family with her. Yet I admit that my soul craved something extraordinary. So, I started frequenting the nightclubs. In one of the clubs I met Jessica,” Antonio cast a cautious glance at the slightly open door to the next room, where the women, including his wife and grown daughter, were watching a popular TV show. Thus ensuring that the women did not hear him, he continued.

“Jessy... she was a singer of indescribable beauty. But as they say of these club stars, ‘her clothes are plenty, but her belly is empty.’ Although she was grazing shiny posters and in the spotlight on stage—all sparkly and glowing—she had nothing in her soul, not a dime, just debts. She was always irritable, harried, seeing herself as the next Janis Joplin or Nina Simone. She liked to be called Jazzy. We started arguing from day one, well, from the first night we fucked. But after yet another quarrel, she always called me, asked for forgiveness, said that I am the only one who understands her.

“I don’t know myself how it happened, but very quickly I lost my mind and dived into the abyss head first, as they say. Almost every night I went to the club where Jessy sang, littering money, constantly meddling in some loud, drunken companies. This new life was foreign to me, but I confess that I loved it. It's the same damn thing whether at home or at work. And there, in the night club, there is music, hot lobsters with cold ale, and half-naked Jazzy with a microphone.”

Antonio fell silent for a moment, staring out the window, where the lanterns illuminated a row of short pine trees near the garage. Experience suggested to him that all the exemplary family men, who were present in this room, would give a lot to find

themselves for a moment in that night club, first with a glass of cold ale and then in the embrace of the hot Jessica.

"But eventually everything must come to an end," the narrator continued. "The police arrested me on my way driving to Jazzy, having just bought cocaine from a drug dealer. Yes, yes, I've even stooped that low. The cops dragged me out of the car and started to search me. Right away, a usual crowd of onlookers gathered around, all trying to take pictures of me with their cameras, assuming they're witnessing the arrest of a famous Mafioso, the new Al Capone. As it turned out later, they had detained me by mistake. The police were hunting for a dangerous criminal, who, judging by the sketch, I resembled. In short, I stood in the middle of the road with my hands up, not far from Gracie Square, being thoroughly groped and probed down to my very socks. They're screaming, pointing guns. Undercover cops are rummaging through my car, ransacking it and looking for something. Meanwhile I had ten bags of cocaine beneath my seat! Holy Mother! I am thinking if they find it now, I am done. Shortly before, I already got caught drunk driving and got a DWI. Thankfully no one found out about this at work. Now, I think, they'll find the coke, and I'll never get out of this. They'll take me to the police station, then to court, and I'll get fired. They're going to put me in jail. 'Dear God,' I pleaded, 'Stand up for your sinful son. If you save me now, I swear I will live righteously for the rest of my days!'"

"Did they let you go?" Antonio's brother-in-law asked, torn by curiosity. He was even moved to hear his respected relative's story of past prowess. "Wow," he marveled mentally. "I saw myself as a hopeless party boy, and I always thought Antonio was a 'goody-two-shoes.' It turns out he partied better than I did—a night club singer as a mistress, cocaine, arrests. How poorly we think of ourselves, though!"

"Imagine, they let me go. The police checked my driver's license. They did not find the coke in my car. Fortunately, I was sober at the time. They even apologized, and the sergeant shook my hand upon leaving. I got in the car and, having driven to the embankment in Chelsea, threw all the bags of coke into the river. I shook out my hands—that's it, clean! And I headed directly to church."

"I entered the church, just as the evening service was over and everyone was leaving. Before I could put a candle, the priest, Father Bernard, came over to me. He smoothed his white beard and asked, 'Where have you, Antonio, the prodigal son, been all this time?'

"I fell in love, padre, with a lovely songstress. I lost my head because of her. I drank, got addicted to drugs, and fornicated. I did not even remember about God. My life revolved solely around night clubs, songs, and Jazzy.'

"The priest listened, shaking his head. He even wiped away a tear from his eye. He was a very emotional old man; he loved me. He loved all people very much and was able to find the right approach and choose the right word for each person. Basically, I repented. I confessed to God all of my sins and held nothing back. I was this kind of man—I didn't have limits on anything, bad or good. I promised to forget the way to Jessy's and to start going to church.

"And also, Padre, in support of my sincere remorse, I want to do some charitable deed, to perform some feat.'

"A feat, you say.' Father Bernard became deep in thought, focusing his stare at the blue dome vault. 'You know what, ye warrior of Christ, firstly, take that pretty girl home,' and the priest pointed to a young woman standing near us. 'She's in our church

for the first time, her friend died and she's come to find out how to order a prayer. She lives in Queens; she doesn't have a car and I don't want her to go home alone this late by train. That's going to be your feat.' The priest winked at me.

"That's it? It's simpler than anything,' I replied, checking her out in the meantime. She was slender, beautiful, modestly dressed. 'That's the kind of woman I need! That's what I was looking for!' I thought.

"She got in my car, and I took her home. On the way, of course, we got to know each other. We exchanged phone numbers. We said goodbye and I drove back. My intuition told me that she liked me, too. It would seem it was a chance meeting. And in fact, each of us sooner or later finds what his restless heart desires," Antonio summed up.

"And that pretty girl was Sarah, your future wonderful wife, right?" One of the guests wanted to make sure. He was deeply moved by the story.

Looking at him, Antonio shook his head. "You'll be surprised, but the answer is 'negative.' The life of even the most sane and careful person does not always go in a straight line, but is warped by unforeseen events and accompanied by bizarre zigzags. What is there to say about such a daredevil as I was in those years? Listen to how this story ended. The next morning, I called this girl and we met. We walked along the piers in Chelsea. I offered her to grab a coffee somewhere. I don't know how it happened, but my feet took me to that club where Jazzy sang. Holy moly! As soon as I saw her onstage, and heard that siren's sweet voice, I lost my head and forgot about my new girl and yesterday's oaths!" Antonio fell silent for a long while. He just shook his head and sighed heavily. "A few months later an EMS brought me from that nightclub to the hospital with a bullet wound to the stomach. There, in the Trauma Unit, I met my future wife Sarah, who worked as a nurse."

