

Hot stuff
(short story)
Aglaia Bouma

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Hot stuff

In the glowing light her face shows slight fear. Yet she snuggles closer to me. Absentmindedly rubbing the scar on her forearm she reads one of the leaflets that were in the mail this afternoon.

“*Cheap credit!*” headlines one of them. At the bottom it reads in big red letters: “*Apply for our credit program today!*”, together with a phone number. I smoke, while she gets up to close the window in the kitchen. Then she walks around the sideboard, which is no longer there and turns down the heating. Just when she comes back to sit with me, the doorbell rings.

*

Her ex-husband enters the room, the keys to the BMW chinking loudly in his fingers. He nods at me and says: “Nice,” to her while he sits down on the couch, his arms broadly over the back. She prefers a chair near me.

“Don’t I get any coffee?” the ex asks, resting an ankle on his knee.

She nods, gets up and walks to the kitchen at the end of the room. In passing, she casts a meaningful glance at me, in which, among other things, fear still can be read. Of course it’s only right that she’s wary, but she shouldn’t forget that I offer her warmth and coziness too. Moreover, without me there wouldn’t be a fried chop on her plate tonight.

“How’s what’s-her-name? Your new girlfriend?” She’s scooping coffee in a filter and doesn’t look at him.

“Marielle? Doing great, she’s pregnant.”

Now she looks up. “That’s quick.”

“Well, it was an accident. But I don’t mind.”

She throws the coffee back in the tin and starts again counting spoons. Not until the coffee maker is turned on, she says: “An accident? And you believe that? She’s a physician!”

That’s what I like about her. Feeding the fire, stirring things up a bit. Suddenly I burn with desire for her. The ex shrugs and puts his other ankle on a knee, then he points to the trickling device: “Why not buy a Senseo? With one of those, we’d already be drinking coffee.”

“Don’t have the money. I’ve got to buy quite a few things that you’ve taken with you, remember?”

Her eyes are blazing, but her movements - getting cups, spoons, fresh milk, sugar and sweeteners - are very calm.

“Then buy another brand. There are many cheap coffee machines for pads.”

“Low quality ones, probably,” she replies, while the device announces with one last sigh that it has done its job.

I love her. When I was utterly burned out, it was she who brought me back to life, fed me and gave me air. In return for this care I keep calm now that she places the tray with attributes on an inverted cardboard box, on the spot where once the coffee table stood. She’s doing fine without me.

“I wanted to talk about the car,” she says as she pours. “One weekend every other week is far too little. I need it more often to buy new stuff. It's my car too.”

The ex scoops four sugars. He slowly reddens.

“More often isn't possible. I need it to drive to work and sometimes I need it on weekends as well.”

“Doesn't that Marielle of yours own a car?”

“Yes she does, but a grown man can't be seen in that thing.”

“So you have two cars at your disposal, almost all the time, and I have only one, occasionally. Is that your idea of share and share alike?” She's stirring her coffee like mad. I smoke some more.

“You know what your problem is,” he starts in a scornful voice, “you just can't accept that I'm happy now. You're trying to get back at me. Very childish.”

“Childish? Me? You're the one trying to surreptitiously snap up more than half of our things! Do you think that's mature?” Her voice rises in both tone and volume.

He gets up. She does the same. They bend their upper body slightly forward, hurling reproaches at one another increasingly louder, during which she tries to lend weight to her words by stamping her feet, and he by wagging a finger that almost pops out her eye. I shoot a spark, which, in the middle of all this hubbub, lands on the carpet smoldering quietly and insidiously heads toward the carton.

“With all the new stuff I need to buy, I can only go on vacation twice this year! And I won't even be able to afford to go by plane,” she shrieks.

“Oh, poor you! You think only of yourself! With a child coming, we can only afford to go once, you realize that?”

“You should have thought of that before fucking that whore!”

A loud slap marks a sudden silence, which reveals astonished gazes of the quarrelers. Then she raises her hand and hits him back, at the very moment that the spark has grown into a gentle flame licking the edge of the box. He sees it first.

“Fire!” he yells.

“Help!” she answers.

The disagreement forgotten, they both take action. She's rummaging through the hall closet while he nervously taps some keys on his cell phone without actually calling anybody. When she finally emerges, still digging up hard sponges and chamois from the bucket she found under Robomops, antistatic cloths, the bagless vacuum cleaner and other alleviating domestic appliances, he is holding on to the unused phone and kicks at the flame, which is feeding on the cardboard and slowly growing.

“What are you doing?” she gasps, as she rushes to the tap and starts to fill the bucket.

“Stamping it out! I couldn't find the number of the fire brigade.”

His movements merely give my little creation more air and the little fire matures. It now begins to gnaw on the sadly drooping plastic tray.

With a big splash she ends the commotion. A few drops hit me, but I only hiss warningly, keeping quiet otherwise. Panting and appalled, they look at each other. Then he says: "I love you."

He takes a hesitant step toward her and I'm fuming, raging, when she doesn't take an equally large step back. She raises her head to look him straight in the eye.

"I never loved you," she replies in a powerful voice.

For a few seconds they stand there staring at each other, he with disbelief and dismay, she with admirable indifference. He raises his hand, rearranges his hair and strides out of the apartment. When the door slams shut behind him with a loud bang, she screams: "And if I don't get the car more often, I want half of its value!"

*

There she is, on a dripping rug, next to a half burnt box collapsing soggily under the weight of the coffee supplies and the eaten away tray. Clanging, the cups regurgitate the now tepid coffee on the rug. A single tear accompanies her when she puts them back on the tray and brings them to the kitchen. More tears follow when she comes back with a garbage bag, in which she stuffs both the box and the rug, her gestures frantic. Then she sits on the couch rubbing her scar, apparently unaware of my languishing existence. Foolish of her. She knows I need attention and that bad things can happen if she doesn't take care of me.

*

She stops rubbing and gets up, takes a quick glance at the thermostat while walking to the bedroom and comes back wearing a thick sweater. Picking up the stack of leaflets that went through fire and water, she sits close to me. The cheap credit she puts on her lap, as well as an advertisement for a shop offering Senseos and digital photo frames at good prices. Me, she feeds a flyer of a discount store, but not one with the latest mobile phones. Of course, hers is almost a year old. The brochure laced with gold ornaments featuring an iPod, a Nintendo DS and a giant flat screen TV lands on her stack, after which I get thrown the local newspaper in bite-sized pellets, followed by a Walmart leaflet. Greedily I consume them and when I take a large gulp of air, I can't help releasing some gas.

The phone rings. She puts the pile that still needs to be sorted on the floor. On top is the announcement of the new collection of her favorite brand of lingerie, that looks delicious.

"Hi Mom," sounds her tired voice. In the silence that follows I smoke some more. Then the chatter on the other side of the line is interrupted by: "Mom, I'll call you back later tonight, okay? I've got a splitting headache and need to puke." She hangs up without waiting for an answer.

Of course I don't get the lingerie, nor the brochure with all kinds of perfumes and ointments, or the jewelry advertising. I do get a leaflet with cheap pillows, because she chooses an ergonomic one from a posh shop.

Me, me, me. She's such a selfish bitch. Suddenly I've had enough.

An old flame once accused me of being suffocating. I agree with him now, release some more gas. She starts to gag, gets up with difficulty, but doesn't make it to the bathroom because she's staggering like a drunk.

The pile she wanted to keep for herself is still sailing to the floor when she falls. She gasps and a spasm causes the flyer with the ergonomic pillow to be clasped firmly between her fingers. The jewelry just floats up to me and I readily consume it. The lingerie brochure lands next to her foot. If only I could reach it.

About the author

In addition to being a writer, Aglaia Bouma (1970) is an entrepreneur, empathic misanthrope, emotional rationalist, light-hearted pessimist and a social *einzelgänger*.

Her Dutch novel 'De dwaling' was reviewed positively and her short stories often win in contests. The Dutch versions of 'Self-portrait' and 'Unleashed' were published in literary journals. 'Heaven on Earth' she read to the audience attending the presentation of an anthology the story was published in. Some other short stories were published in collections as well.

When writing, she tries to describe the characters roaming her fantasy in a way that the resulting story keeps hanging around in the head of the reader for a while. Because you, dear reader, is what it's all about!

If you enjoyed reading this story as much as I did writing it, I'd really appreciate you leaving a review at your favorite retailer.



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