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The Voice

THE VOICE

by

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The Voice

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The Voice

He had almost calmed down when the telephone began to ring. He'd had no intention of killing anyone. It had been an accident—pure misfortune. His leg had been itching. He had needed to scratch his left ankle with his right foot just as the Underground train had been pulling in. He may also have been pushed. Certainly he had overbalanced. That was why he had come to nudge the wretched fellow forward.

First he had failed to grasp what the man on the phone had been getting at. He had been expecting a call from Vera and was surprised at the male voice. By the time he realized what it was all about, the speaker had rung off.

“Murderer,” the Voice had uttered—just that one word.

But why should anyone accuse him of murder? At worst it had been careless behavior, causing death by negligence, plus failing to report a fatal accident. He was familiar enough with the jargon—what else after ten years practicing as a solicitor here in Budapest?

Carelessness, yes. But still, he had only been scratching his foot. He had simply been trying to keep his balance when his hand had gone forward and contacted something soft. And then suddenly the figure in front of him had no longer been there.

The victim had been short, middle-aged. He had been wearing a cheap overcoat and holding a battered briefcase in his hand. He had disappeared as swiftly as if he had gone through the trap door on a theater stage—like a puppet almost, except for that clumsy, very human movement as he had spread his arms, grasping at air, trying to hang onto something. He was someone who didn't want to die.

He hoped the man hadn't suffered. The figure could scarcely have touched the rails before the train was upon him. He remembered one moment as the grey coat spread out—the next when the train was glittering in front of him.

He started for the drinks cabinet, then decided to make coffee instead. It would be better to keep a clear head while he thought the situation through. He was a lawyer, after all. And what if he had a client accused of murder because he scratched his left ankle with his right foot? Ridiculous. But what if he were charged? What if a real witness turned up?

The Voice

Of course, he should have owned up immediately. But he hadn't. Facing it, he'd panicked—and now it was too late, too complicated. He slipped the coffee and put down the cup. As he paced the room, it became increasingly difficult to resist taking a proper drink—until he gave up resisting.

The second phone call came to his office. He was about to dictate. Fat Monica leaned back on the chair, legs crossed, her notebook on her lap, and waited for him to finish the call. Why did her legs have to be quite so stout? They made her knees almost nonexistent.

“What does it feel like? Tell me.”

He immediately recognized the Voice, even though its owner had said only a single word the day before. It was a quite dispassionate, educated voice—indifferent even. Even on the first occasion, it hadn't thrown “Murderer” at him with a connotation of hatred or distaste. Rather the Voice implied it wanted him to be aware of information acquired that was being passed on objectively—out of interest.

“They say one experiences a satisfying sensation at such times. Is that true? You must know.”

He put the phone down long after the line had gone dead. Monica was biting her nails. She had short nails with red varnish on them, chipped in places. The notebook in her lap drew attention to her sagging skirt in an obscene kind of way.

He started to dictate. “According to the plaintiff, the defendant deliberately locked the garden gate, thus constituting—” Except that neither of them could prove it about the bloody gate. Except it wasn't a matter of life and death if neither of them could prove anything.

“I've been experimenting,” said the Voice next day, at the start of a call to the flat. “I'd never have believed one needed so much force to push someone under a train.” A chuckle followed. “Oh, don't worry, *I* haven't killed anyone. That reminds me, know who the victim was? I do. It'll be in the papers soon. He was an engineer, poor devil. Divorced, with three children. Only thirty-six. So there it is. A sadly shortened life.”

The Voice

The line went dead again. Trembling, he poured himself a large Scotch—and then another. He stayed by the phone all evening, but it was two days before the Voice called again.

“Seen the paper, have you?”

He didn’t answer. He had seen it, all right—after going through five papers daily until he found it at last, in small type, on an inside page among the insignificant short news items.

Now he listened as the Voice went on: “If one is waiting, one usually leans on one foot, the rear foot taking the weight off the one in front. Then if one’s forced into moving involuntarily, it’s going to be a step forward, not sideways. Do you follow? So, if one is pushed from the back, the weight is simply transferred to the front foot. That’s provided one isn’t pushed too hard, too violently.

“It wasn’t violent. I hardly—”

“Don’t protest, I saw it all,” the Voice interrupted. “He was standing exactly as I’ve described, poor fellow. You remember?”

He remembered, all right—the man disappearing from sight, the roar of the train, the ghastly metallic screeching of the brakes. It was afterward that the screaming had started—and the shouting and the pushing. No one had screamed as the victim went down. He recalled all that, but not a single one of the faces as he had moved back slowly, careful not to push anyone, nor to attract attention to himself. So who was it who remembered him?

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“Shall we call me the voice of conscience?” Another chuckle followed. “Or do you find it too trite?”

“How much do you want?” He’d be confident enough if he knew the price—the purpose. He wasn’t altogether surprised that the phone went dead then. Increasing the suspense was a well-known bargaining ploy.

The Voice

The Voice came on the line again at the office the following day. He had a client with him and wanted to ask the caller to ring back later, except he figured that would somehow acknowledge the relationship in a way he didn't want.

"I've never dealt with a lawyer before," the Voice explained.

"So?"

"It may be difficult. You're so accustomed to clearing other people. Will it be as easy defending yourself, I wonder? Acting as your own conscience?"

"Have you thought about what I mentioned yesterday?" He hesitated to ask the price again baldly in front of the client.

"Oh, yes. It's why I say it isn't easy for me to deal with you."

That was the end of the call.

It was shortly after this that he took to checking on whether he was being watched in the street, or followed in the car. Since the incident, he had given up traveling by Underground. Instead, he drove to work, despite the rush-hour traffic, the parking problems, and the cost of petrol. Often he took unnecessary diversions, studying the rearview mirror after every turn. When he walked, he gazed compulsively over his shoulder and backward at the reflection in the shop windows.

The Voice called regularly, every other day at least, telling him what the dead man's favorite food had been, about his having been an amateur guitarist and a classical music fan, and about his plans to take his children on a seaside holiday.

Soon he began to hate the Voice.

Life became intolerable when his persecutor started detailing new material that would prove his guilt, alleging that witnesses had been found, people who remembered his face, described his appearance, recalled his actions.

The Voice

Soon he reached the point where he almost wished the swine would inform on him and have him charged, arrested and tried. Worse cases had been dismissed to his knowledge. But the charge was only as yet being prepared—increasing in gravity while he lost weight and dark circles developed under his eyes.

He began drinking heavily, trembling when the phone rang. He took to wandering the streets at night, drinking in noisy bars—anything to avoid being at home where the Voice could reach him. For a time he kept the phone at the flat disconnected, but he plugged it back in when the calls began to come regularly at the office.

Sometimes he argued with the Voice. Sometimes he screamed into the phone that he had only been scratching his foot, that he hadn't meant to harm. But the Voice just laughed at him.

After a while he actually began to cease worrying about what was going to happen to him. Only the obsession grew within him to know who owned the Voice, how he had seen the accident, how he knew so much.

After he lost his license for drunken driving, the Voice knew about it next day, asking why he didn't take the Underground. He started using buses instead, adding half an hour to his journey to and from the office, but it didn't bother him. He even tried mounting his own investigation. He made a list of his lawyer acquaintances, then tried methodically and surreptitiously to check where each of them had been at the time of the accident. He tried to find out which of his friends and colleagues could have known so promptly about his lost license since he had told no one himself. He was largely oblivious that his interrogations gradually began irritate people, to make them wonder about him.

When he split up with Vera, he had a short and senseless affair with Fat Monica, whom he normally found so repellent. The girl was neither surprised nor, it seemed, particularly pleased about the development—just compliant. He had groped her one night at the office. They had both been working late and he had been more than half drunk. One thing led to another and it had ended with her moving into the flat. He stood that for a few days, then threw her out.

“I think the time has come when we should meet,” said the Voice.

The Voice

He wasn't surprised to learn where and when the meeting was to take place—just deeply relieved and pathetically grateful. He was to be at the same place on the same platform at the same time as before—five o'clock.

He arrived early. He watched the faces of people who passed him like figures in an animated waxworks: uninvolved faces without provenances, without three children. He moved close to the platform edge. A tiny light appeared within the tunnel, then a train was suddenly in front of him, brakes hissing. The suffering could not have lasted long.

He waited as the train pulled out and a new crowd with new faces surrounded him. The tiny light appeared again, growing bigger, mesmerizing in its intensity. There couldn't have been much time even to be frightened. Had the man dropped the bag he was carrying? He couldn't remember.

Five o'clock drew nearer. His stomach trembled whenever a train roared in along the platform. It was as though his body had taken on the resonance of the metal structure. And with each successive train, the trembling increased—and the nearer he ventured to the platform edge.

He ceased wanting to know who the Voice was as soon as it came to him what the Voice wanted.

Yet he couldn't bring himself to do it—to jump forward in front of the continuous light, to go down under the glittering mass of moving metal. But neither could he bring himself to leave.

The next time the light appeared, he bent forward over the edge. He told himself he was curious to know what the feeling would be like if he really decided to do it.

There was only the slightest touch on his back, the merest brush, or he might even have imagined it, but instantly he fell forward. His briefcase flew out of his hand and his arms reached out seeking something to grab.

He turned as he fell and fleetingly saw a shocked, a frightened face—perhaps belonging to someone who had merely scratched one foot against the other. And then, when he was in full fall, he saw a small TV camera above the crowd. They had been introduced somewhere on every platform: he'd known that all the time. It was just then that the light embraced him totally.

The Voice

But since the last moment is an exceedingly long one, he had time to think. Now he knew! His last thought was brimming with a bizarre sense of satisfaction.

He was too late to hear the pleasant, cultured, familiar Voice speaking in the measured tone of a professional announcer. “Attention all passengers. There has been an accident on platform three. Please do not congest the area. Please keep calm.”

END

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