



PERFECT SUMMER

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Summer Story Award 2012

“Finally! It’s almost two p.m.!” *I know.* “We went to the beach, came back, went to the swimming pool, came back here again—we even stopped for a coffee on our way upstairs—and you’re only here now?” *I’d love to have a coffee,* I think.

“Is this a convenient time to clean the room?” I ask.

“In a minute!” the woman snaps, slamming the door. “Susanne, Barron, let’s go!” she yells. “Michael, close that damned laptop!”

She opens the door again a moment later, a gold watch on her wrist—she was afraid I might steal it. *Never.*

“Well, get in here!” she says reproachfully. “Just do better than yesterday. The towels, I mean. That was unacceptable! They need to be changed every day—the bed linen, too. We pay a lot to stay here—the service should match the damn price!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Vacuum the room, too” she goes on. I push my cart inside. As I’d guessed, the place is a disaster. Clothes, inflatable pool toys, shoes, buckets, and teddy bears—everything’s everywhere. Candy wrappers and empty bottles. “The bathroom needs to be polished, especially the Jacuzzi. And the mirrors!” She wags a finger threateningly. *Aye, aye,* I say—but only in my head.

They go out. I open the curtains to make sure that they’re actually on their way and won’t come back for something they’ve forgotten. I spot them at the exit. The woman is trying to cram her outraged three-year-old daughter into a stroller. The child is trying to wrench away, waving her arms. She wriggles and struggles, but the mother wins. She fastens the straps, grabs the handle, and breaks into a brisk walk. Her husband and son follow.

I go to the bathroom and pick up a flower-shaped bottle of perfume.

“Lola—excellent,” I say, reading the label. I spray some behind each ear. Nice. No cheap knockoffs at this little market. I find a container of Chanel cream on the shelf beside the basin and put some under my eyes. I stare at my reflection for a moment—not much improvement. I look like I’m fifty, not forty. I really have to dye my hair. I sigh, find a wipe in my pocket, and polish the mirror.

“Beer.”

“For you, ma’am?”

“Do you have to drink this early?” the woman asks instead of answering my question.

“Yes, I do. So should you, you’d be nicer.”

“Coke, Coke!” demand the couple’s brats. Nasty little punks, just like all the other kids who come here. It’ll just make them more hyper, but I jot it down in my notebook anyway.

Finally, they order: two pizzas, plus one chicken plate and one cod. I praise the wisdom of their choices, even though I know the fish is frozen, and deliver the order to the kitchen.

“One Capri pizza, one Hawaiian pizza, the chicken and a dead fish,” I call out over the clanging of the pots.

“Got it!” Stefan confirms. He graduated in Hispanic studies. Aneta graduated from the music academy in Gdansk, like me. Only Jadzia seems to be in the right place. She used to cook for the young people over at the *Baltic* hostel, but after it went bankrupt she couldn’t find another full-time job, so in the mornings she helps to serve breakfast at *Mewa*, then cooks with us afterward. Plus, she looks after her twelve-year-old grandson. His mom, her daughter, went to the UK. The kid spends the whole day out behind the restaurant, because Jadzia worries any time he’s out of her sight.

I deliver the dishes to the family, and just as the plates touch the table an argument breaks out.

“I’m not going to eat this!” the boy mumbles.

“I don’t like it!” the girl whines.

The woman decides to teach them a lesson and orders them to eat. I wouldn’t, if I were her—kids hate pressure, especially monsters like these two. And, just as I expected, they start to foam at the mouth. Dad decides to celebrate with another beer.

Finally, they go. The man ate his cod, then nibbled on the chicken and the two pizzas—no one else had anything. In the ashtray I find a two-euro tip—what a joke.

“Cheapskates,” I mumble as I clear the table. I bring the leftovers to the kitchen. “They didn’t touch the pizza!” I announce.

Jadzia wipes her hands on her apron.

“I’ll give it to the kids,” she says, taking the plates from me. She walks out to the backyard. “Kids, pizza!” she calls to her grandson and his friends. They run toward her, stomping and clambering.

“Cool!” they sit on the stoop and eat. I’m not going to give them the Coke, though—no bloody way.

“I want it!”

“No!”

“I do! I want it!”

“No, I’m not buying it,” the father says sternly.

“You getting cheap now?” the mother asks.

“Come on, what does she need that crap for? A hunk of Chinese plastic!”

“So what? You’re turning into a miser.”

“No I’m not! I just don’t blow my money, the way you do!”

“I earn the money I spend!”

“Yes, and you spend it all on yourself, without anything left over!”

“I want this!” the little girl butts in from her stroller.

“And I want this!” the boy says, touching a sand painting—made in China, of course. It’s a hot item this year.

I finish the text message I’ve been writing and push my phone into my pocket. My parents always grumble when I text Alicia at work.

“You’re supposed to work, not stare at that screen all the time!” they grumble. But what am I supposed to do? Until afternoon rolls around, it’s deadly boring in this place. Everyone’s on vacation but me. I have to stand behind the counter while my classmates hang out at the pool in Szczecin.

“I’m not going to buy this shit!” the father says. “Trash from China!”

He’s right—we’ve got some real crap here, but the better quality, more expensive stuff doesn’t sell.

“Want!”

“No, it’s not worth the money!” the dad says, trying to end the discussion.

“We can afford it!” his wife insists.

“We can and we can’t,” the husband says, exasperated. “Damn it , if you add up everything—the hotel, and the salmonella-laced ice cream, and the shitty fish—we could have had a trip to Italy!”

“You’re a cheapskate!”

“The hell, I am!”

I discretely reach for my phone and turn the recorder on. This is going to be something. I’ll let Alicia listen later and we’ll have a laugh.

The argument ramps up a notch.

“This trip was *supposed* to be our reunion!” the woman says, breaking into tears.

“Oh, really?” the man snorts. “I had no idea!” I hate the woman, but I feel for her when he talks to her that way. It’s unnecessary—and humiliating.

She must be thinking the same thing, because she slaps him in the face. I hold my breath. The man looks at her for a moment, then at the pavement. Then he looks around, as if he’s lost something.

“Magda,” he whispers. “Magda...”

“Oh so now you’re all *Magda, Magda*, huh?” the woman says, mocking him.

“Magda, fuck! Where are the kids?”

Shit. They’ve run away.