

## **Be for the Day**

a short story by Andrea Franceschini

Today I will die.

The TV told me. I woke up with a sore foot and some snot that dried on my nose while I slept, I went into the kitchen, and like every morning the first thing I did was turn on the TV. I watched the news and I understood. I had my breakfast, took a shower trying not to think about the cold of a half-warmed house, dried myself, dressed and then went out with all my stuff without needing to remember it.

When I reach the advertising agency where I work, I expect everyone to repeat the same thing. Instead, nobody does. But it is even worse. Because nobody looks at me. No one greets me, as if I was not there.

“Hi everyone,” I say. And the first thing I recognize is not even the silence of my colleagues, but the memory of how many times I repeated that phrase. I sit down without much attention to these thoughts, I turn on the computer and I am going to continue the only thing that seems to matter today: work. I have to finish an advertising campaign for a children’s sports event that takes place before Christmas.

And I have to hurry, because today I will die.

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Sometimes I hear them laughing. My colleagues, I mean. They take a first coffee break, second coffee break, cigarette break, pee break, break break, laugh break, you like the work you do? break. The yes break and the no, I don't give a shit break.

No breaks for me. I'm not behind with work, but I have to do it. I go at it for a long time, almost until lunchtime, with the heart that beats to the rhythm of wireless mouse clicks. It slows me down only when I realize I'm done. I repeat to myself that it is impossible, but that's how it is. I move the chair back just enough to see the result of the campaign in a comprehensive way, and I can't help but tell myself I'm satisfied.

I look around for someone who I could ask for an opinion. We'll focus on women, I tell myself. The only one I could trust is Simona. She says hello in the morning, I don't ever deny. But today, no, think about it well. And since I'll die today, I say, Valeria will be depressed.

And then it occurs to me that maybe none of them gossips or laughs at me, of my boredom and my silences. At least I'm just sad, and until this morning they prefer not to talk to me to familiarize themselves with the idea that soon I'll be gone.

Simona will not be coming to me, I think. So I might as well call her myself.

"Simo? Could you come here for a sec?"

Almost everyone turns toward my workstation with a questioning look. I look at them, and for once I turn to them not to greet them, but to invite them.

“Come along if you like. I want to know what you think.”

In a minute, the positive comments are over. They are all happy with my work. Thanks to it, I suddenly remember what it means to be a child, feeling different and isolated. Instead, what I remember is because I had to continue to behave in the same way even if others were maturing.

Today I die, and was the perfect occasion to demonstrate that they have learned the lesson.

I take my jacket, I greet everyone with a pat or a hand on the shoulder, and I leave giving everyone a smile. I want them to remember me for what I did and for what they are, even if I lost many opportunities to prove it.

It won't have been my fault, even a bit?

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Since I don't have much time left, I head to the Brera bakery where I spent the afternoon with Nina, my high school girlfriend, and it occurs to me that I could enter and stuff myself with pasta, to spend all twenty Euros I have in my wallet. It was with Nina that I spent the two best years of my life. There weren't other girlfriends, or other years like that.

If you're wondering why the story is over, you force me to admit I am a jerk. At 17, I thought I could live all the amorous experiences that wanted. But it was not like that. I dumped her because I wanted more, and this gave me the

impression of being sick of her. But more than being tired, I was greedy. And I was a boy of seventeen in line with his age, because at that stage of life you don't realize how much you already have, and you think you have everything to gain elsewhere. The truth is I never stopped loving Nina.

I'm going to die, but -- while I think -- I feel pleased with myself and happy to have learned this lesson. The problem is you don't know to whom to pass it. You'd understand, but I don't know about Nina. Better to let it go. For another person it may be too late, though.

One of the people I usually work with out of the agency is Francesco. I've known him since we were in primary school. Then he decided to become a theater director, and he did it. Not working at the highest level imaginable, but he does what he loves, and every time I think about it I like to give him respect.

He was my best friend, once. The problem is that Francesco has no balls. Or maybe he doesn't want to use them more. Because once, at least once, he used them. With a very beautiful actress who worked on the first play that he directed. Francesco could not even call himself a director, had his first experience and must have got caught by a kind of delirium of omnipotence, because he took advantage of the attraction she felt for him and got her pregnant.

Francesco made a mistake. I tried to tell him many times, but always in uncertain terms, always without the right courage, without telling him what I thought and what he needed to hear.

But today I decided to do something more. Even if I'd do without it, I have to discuss with Francesco regularly about work, because the advertising agency where I work takes care of the communication for the theater where he works, though it is obvious that we avoid talking about what has happened.

When I enter his house, I have a new plastic bucket in one hand and three different types of detergent in the other.

"Where you going?" the sly one asks me, when he has opened the door and led me inside.

I shrug my shoulders. "It's something I want to demonstrate in practical form, but it's not my idea. It's something that occurred to you. A long time ago."

Francesco opens his arms and walks into the living room. "Shit, I thought! It came into your mind and I don't even think about it!"

"I'll make a nice paste to wash your brain," I reply.

"Why don't *you* think about my son, as you think it's so easy?"

His words have overcome me. All the anger that I've held for years arises in me and I feel like I have to leave it before it's too late. While I realize that, I see that my hands are already tight around Francesco's shoulders.

"Listen to me!", I scream in his face. "Because I'll tell you only once! You have a son, a life that is waiting for you out of here, at any time. From dickhead

that you are, you still feel that it was a mistake. What you don't understand is that sometimes mistakes are the best things that happen to us. You keep pretending that nothing happened, you do a job that you enjoy so much that you do more than necessary so as not to feel the loneliness. And actually you feel this loneliness so much that you realize you are no longer alone." I breathe and then finally release it. I feel dizzy. "Now tell me this is not true, you want to be alone, you're so happy and I just walk through that door with detergent and my bucket of shit and I promise I won't get more from this story."

Francesco looks at me stunned, silent. Then he sits down, with a slowness that seems to hurt his legs.

I sit down too. My head is better.

"I can't," he tells me.

"I didn't say that you have to do now. I know it's difficult."

My former best friend lies down with his back on the couch, closes his eyes and tells me: "You don't know shit."

"Fine," I say, standing up. "Probably I'll go from there to ignorant. But you try not to stay like that forever. I can't do more than that. It's your turn."

The tremor of my legs continues until I arrive at the front door. I have not even taken off my coat, and it's already time to go.

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Having finished the advertising campaign today makes me feel good as I did not feel so bad, like maybe I was lonely when I was giving Christmas gifts to all my relatives without having to remember, how I felt when Nina said I love you to me at the moment when I needed to hear it most.

I know I'll never have the chance to work. However, make plans and dreaming is the healthiest of pastimes. Perhaps for all human beings, certainly for me. When you don't have dream, you don't even know if you can ever realize. You live in a kind of temporal limbo where things do not age, where thoughts stop the hands of any clock, where the fashions go hand in hand with the values you believe in, and so never disappear, where the certainty that I can do is concert enough for the illusion of being immortal.

Having faith in something is a little like being already able to achieve it.

My sister Romina is a nurse. But above all she is a wonderful mother. Until she was seventeen she had other ambitions, and -- as happens to many other people -- never dreamed of going to work in a hospital. Nor how happy she would be to do so.

However, her life was not always so. The fact is that I think of it every time I am in front of her house, and now I have to deal with reality and with the fact that she doesn't want to speak about it. Much less when Paolo is there.

And it is for him I'm here.

“Have you got a present?” Paolino asks me as soon as I am in the door. His smile is better than any greeting that he could make for me. It looks like a cherub, one of those that as a child I saw painted in the churches -- the same churches that in this city seem to have been or may be hidden -- as I waited for the end of the Mass because I was too young to know that God exists.

I grab Paolo under his armpits and I take him in my arms. “Of course I have!”

Romina reached him.

“What is it? What is it?” repeats Paolo.

I open my bag and pull out a package. The little one tears it from my hands and begins to unwrap it before he’s been seated to be comfortable.

“You shouldn’t have ...” Romina tells me. But I understand from her voice that she is pleased with the gift. And probably even more happy to see me.

“A car!” says Paolo, who has a plastic model with a net of railroad tracks and trains as billions of children would like.

“This isn’t just any car,” I pick up the car and gently lift the roof.

Inside there is a letter written on several sheets of reduced size, linked to each other and rolled up so as to keep them in place.

Without touching them, I show them to Paolo.

“What is it?”

“It’s a letter,” I tell him.

He frowns, but he understood very well. “And what does it say?”

Romina also looks at me puzzled.

“Well, you don’t know how to read yet, and really it doesn’t matter whether you know it right away.”

“Why?”

“Because there are things in there that can help you only when you feel alone and sad. As long as that car is closed, it will mean that you are happy, you’re fine. So it’s better that letter stays where it is, and you should not read it. But,” I warn, returning to a smile, “if by chance one day you wanted to go back to being as happy as you are now, you can read it.”

“Ah, ah,” he says.

“But remember you would as you would like to hope for a penalty kick to win a game. You know, Paolino?”

He nods.

Paolo laughs and looks at his mother. “Can I go play?”

Romina nods. “Of course, love. But only half an hour, then to bed. Okay?”

Paolo grabs the car and shoots up the stairs with a huge smile. It is with that that I want to remember him.

Romina invites me to sit in the kitchen and offers me a slice of pie.

“What’s written in that letter?”

"A series of jokes," I lie. "Those sheets would only give him back his smile. But I don't think he'll ever need them. Tomorrow morning it will be already forgotten."

"Come on, don't say that."

I wish I was joking. But I wasn't joking at all.

I give Romina all the time I gave to Paolo. Then it's time to put him to bed, and I'm about to leave with a smile that I don't know how the hell I keep on my lips.

I have a hand on the doorknob when Romina tells me: "Francesco called me."

I remain stuck, as if somebody was blocking every limb. This it was her pulling out the speech. I don't want to take advantage of it, though I realize I will not have another opportunity to do so. "Look, Romina ... I know ..."

"He wants to see me."

I look her in the eyes. "And do you want to?"

Romina wraps her arms around herself as if she was cold, and looks down. The skin of her face is as if it was pulled under the influence of a cramp. "I'm dying from it," she says.

I hug her, and she stops rocking herself. "Alright then," I reply.

"Six years," she croaks through her tears. "God, how did I do it?"

I shake my head because I don't know what to say.

"I forgive him."

I sigh. "If you were not ready to do so, you probably would not want to see him."

Romina moves away from me and wipes her tears with her hands. "There are moments like this that make me realize I could never be an actress. Nobody can pretend to feel this way. No one. They are all lies. And people are stupid to believe that actors can."

"Maybe we do not believe, actually," I reply. "They want to do it, and that's why people go to the cinema and theater. It's the inability to let hope die."

My words ring in my head like an echo from a gorge of rocks, and I shudder.

"It's a good thing," says my sister.

"Do we believe it if I leave you by telling you that everything will be fine?" I ask her.

She fakes a smile, but shakes her head. "Paolo is about to meet his father six years late, discovering that he's been a piece of shit and that despite that his mother is still in love with him. How could it all go wrong?"

I laugh happily. "Then you're ready."

"You too," she says.

I blow her a kiss, and I shut the door behind myself struggling against the moving of my lips.

Because instead, I'm not ready.

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Dear Paolino, here the mystery of the pages from the car is revealed. These were: a story that I wrote you to let you know that one should not expect others to be better. The thing to which we all aspire is good, but there's not only one way to get there.

If you happen to read this letter, as I said to you the day before you knew your dad Francesco, it is because you felt the need. That said, I don't know that my words can help you. This is only the experience of a person, what I experienced in this city that challenges you, when I had to pretend not to have more time to focus on better things to notice to be able to do them all in a day.

It doesn't mean that you must also do it. It means that if right now you're feeling so down by being recalled to resurrect this letter, then you are also able to remember that you needed to be happy. Some of those things you try, some are, and some are not worth bothering to think about it. They always come, even though it's true that they exist.

Because things are too often tainted by a concern, but things always go better than they seem. I pretended I did because I did not know, and when I realized that I really started to believe it worked without having to rush to do everything at once.

Now it's up to you. No matter if it takes some time. Be convinced of it, even though the TV, movies and all the books that you will not have time to watch and read, alarm clocks and watches that blind people will put on your

wrists, you would have avoided the mistakes, the smiles that come in late and more bad stories you will hear will try to prove otherwise.

Don't get caught up quickly. And if someone makes you be rhetorical, remember and remind him that it is always better to feel the miracles than to stick a magic wand up your ass.

Do you promise?

Pretend to die tomorrow.