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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Chairs and Company

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The opening of the Chairs and Company store was to be explosive.

TV ads, newspapers, an avalanche of e-mail; there was no escaping the event. Jean Paul had decided to go several days after the opening. He likes to make his occasional purchases in peace.

Advertisement had been shouted from the rooftops. What chairs! He acquired some notion that for promoting chair sales, decorative characters had been placed on them. Immediately upon entering he saw a great many chairs, each with its stationary character seated on it. He thought “certainly another way of awing clients, but at my place it would likely be a commonplace chair”.

– You’re thinking it’s a publicity stunt”, said the salesman.

– Not really.

– It’s normal. The product is new, allow me to explain.

– Thank you.

– They’re virtual characters. Buy a chair and the character is yours. You may even choose the character you prefer. Feel free to look around.

Circumspectly, he made a round in the aisles of the store. There were so many chairs, stools, armchairs... and a wealth of characters seated on them, all so different from each other! Here a bar stool with a perfect young woman in a red dress, there a dynamic young professional slumped in a vintage armchair, and also an elderly Englishwoman very erect on her bamboo chair. Miss Marple I presume...?

He stepped forward to touch the stool. The young woman disappeared before his hand could stroke her. He stepped backwards in surprise. The salesman was just behind him and gave me his little speech.

“It’s normal. The integrated chip disconnects if you are within a few centimetres of the chair. They’re decorative. We don’t seek to satisfy all of the clients’ desires. But in your home, chairs and characters will ‘furnish’ your interiors. Many people who live alone can no longer bear empty chairs; no guests, friends, family, a buzz... On the other hand, we want to avoid from the start that holograms eat and chat amongst each other or with you. Maybe in the future... For now they’re simply decorative objects, they’re there and not there, allowing you to battle monotony.”

– I see, said Jean Paul.

– You can also deactivate them. In any case, the price is the same with or without them.

He did not tire of contemplating them, seated perched upon the selves. He decided on the rattan chair, with Miss Marple. That would definitely harbour him from fantasies.

– Excellent choice sir.

The blasted salesman probably used the same line on all clients.

Jean-Paul crossed the doorway of his home chair in hand. He placed it near the window and took a step back. The impeccably dressed woman appeared, impassive, highly respectable...

He said : “for the same price in the end!”.

It seemed to him that the more he observed her, the more she seemed interested in him. He tried to act as always, but if he went out he imagined her alone; if he turned out the light he knew she was in the dark. Every evening, after his spot of rum, he could not avoid bidding her goodnight.

For her part, the too kind Jean-Paul – with his bland life void of surprises – irritated Miss Marple’s British nerves.

She, who had lived so many adventures, solved so many crimes, bored out of her wits on a chair. Of course at night she was able to move about a bit, but during the day, his constant insignificant presence to be tolerated!

Seeing him getting up, eating, going out for a walk, eating... At evening, eating, and then his blasted rum before going to sleep! Following the few curiosity visits by neighbours, boredom weighed upon her. She was aware that the situation could not continue, with an idea slowly developing in her mind...

That night she did research on internet sites dedicated to satisfying the desires of all evildoers: poison, torture apparatuses, special services...

She chose one of the products, ticking the box of purchase payable by barter (no bank trace or VAT). The ivory ornaments were accepted immediately. Satisfied, she sat back down.

That Friday, Jean-Paul was to be out all day. He barely noticed the more intense gaze of his tenant. Meticulously, he double-locked his door, and left very early.

Near half past noon, when the eyes of most retired persons go strictly from the plate to the television screen, a discreet delivery man approached the entrance and took a small box, leaving one a bit larger. She half-opened the door, took the package and placed it under Jean-Paul's bed. In the near-empty bottle of rum she emptied the contents of a small sachet of white powder. That night, noticing the disappearance of the three Buddha statuettes, he panicked and raged, giving Miss Marple aggressive glances. He was so upset that he took a double ration of rum. He left the empty bottle in the sink before tumbling under the bedspread. She got to work immediately, took the package and spread it out on the bed beside Jean-Paul; it looked like a plastic slipcover for clothes. On it was a large label:

95% liquefaction bag - Maximum 100 kg

Delivered with 6 m of drainage hose

Keep out of reach of children

She opened the slipcover wide, undressed the sleeper, folded his legs, and toppling him over and was able to put his body into the mouth of the bag. After a few firm shoves, the bald head entered also. She hermetically closed the bag, tore off the label, unwound a little hose up to the shower drain and gave a sharp pull on the red cord labelled 'activate'. The chemical products and the bone-devouring bacteria excitedly scrambled on the body asking no questions.

She said to herself that the process for the seventy eight and a half kilograms would take a good three hours, time enough for her to have a cup of tea and to set the stage for Jean-Paul's disappearance.

When she returned, the last of almost clear liquid was pouring into the shower; the sack had lost almost all its volume... After the last drop of liquid emerged there was less than ten kilograms of powder in the bag, which she distributed among several plastic sachets.

She discretely left the house and emptied the bags while walking in the park, smiling at the possibility of rain. Her second sortie had the purpose of getting rid of the plastic sack, in pieces, and the bottle, in different waste bins which would be emptied near dawn.

Finally, she took a suitcase and filled it with clothing, and cut into very small pieces Jean-Paul's identification card. Like a shadow, she went to a traveller's camp, leaving there, one by one, the minuscule pieces of plastic, before finally depositing the suitcase near the first trailer.

The police came only three days later. The inquiry of the vicinity confirmed the disappearance of the statuettes, the suitcase and the missing clothing. And the computer showed an e-mail message from an unidentified person setting up a rendezvous with the disappeared man at the railway station.

In short: Leave with the shower running? Only Jean-Paul's fingerprints in the house. A stranger's message... It was particularly the e-mail message that troubled Inspector Maurice, for discovering the sender was impossible. The specialised services had never seen such artistry for avoiding finding the sender, all for a date! In the blasted living room he saw over and over this Miss Marple, walked in circles, scratched his head; there was something definitely wrong, which escaped him.

Colleagues teased him, 'Disappeared or murdered by a hologram?', 'Make her talk at all cost', 'Wheedle her, sleep with her'. He began talking aloud at Jean-Paul's home and decided to sleep over to seek understanding.

In the living room, when trying to skim her with his touch, Miss Marple disappeared, and reappeared when he stepped back. From a distance he threw a newspaper which passed directly through the lady stately seated. He finally declared himself defeated by the hologram.

He decided to spend at least three nights in the damned house. He chose the guest room, took a stroll in the garden, saw what there was left to drink, and waited, waited... Before lying down, he thought he surprised the old woman gazing at a beautiful sculpted tusk, completely apart, atop the library.