

Little Song

by Luke Albao

Josh had told me a month in advance that he planned on leaving. He wouldn't tell the boss for another two weeks, but he was going to retire early once his settlement came through. He was suing the county morgue for two million dollars because they accidentally sold his mother's corpse to medical research. Apparently, they had mixed her up and thought she was a hobo. I'm not sure how they made such a big mistake, and I wondered if she had a slight beard or a stick with a handkerchief sack tied to the end, but I thought it was best not to ask him whether this was the case.

This meant that our boss would need to hire a new store manager. We worked at Dolce Passo, an upscale shoe store that carries exclusive Italian shoes. I figured that the owner would hire either me or Vincenzo, the other sales associate, to replace Josh. Vincenzo was the owner's nephew, but he was lazy and smelled too strongly of pomade, so I decided I had a good shot at making manager. And with my new insider information on Josh's retiring, I had a couple weeks to set myself apart. So, when we were alone in the stockroom, I decided to ask Josh if he would teach me everything he knew.

"About what?" he asked.

"About being a good manager. I'm not too proud to admit there are a lot of things I need to learn. But I'm a quick study," I urged. "And I'm eager to learn. I won't be too much trouble, I promise."

He shrugged and said, "Sure."

I looked through the door and could see Vincenzo out front kneeling in front of a middle-aged woman customer. He said something and flashed a big smile. She replied with a laugh and playful smack in the air. All Vincenzo had was smarm and dark eyebrows, but the lady customers loved him. He came back to the stockroom and started wandering, looking a little lost, between the shelves of plain brown boxes.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"I need a Spazio in a thirty-nine."

"Then why are you in the men's section?" I tried to squeeze as much disdain into my voice as possible.

He looked up at me, then back to the boxes, and he laughed. He saluted me and said, "Right you are, sir. Thank you for showing me my errors, Peter, sir."

Vincenzo always tried to mock me for taking work too seriously, but I never got offended. We would see who would be ashamed when the promotion was handed out.

I voluntarily took on new responsibilities to gain experience and to prove to the boss how well I could manage the store. Josh taught me to open the store in the morning and cash out at night, and I was soon manager in practice, though not in fact. Josh took to coming in late and leaving early, but he would buy me lunch, since, as he said, money was soon to be no object. Vincenzo continued to hide in the stockroom, doing nothing until a female customer arrived.

It was the first of the month, which meant that the boss would come to pay a visit in the afternoon, wearing a white polo shirt with the buttons undone and a pair of oversized sunglasses. Josh planned to give his two weeks' notice, and I planned to be a shining beacon to the boss in need of a new manager. I was there extra early, I wore a tie, I combed my hair down, and the store I had been taking care of looked great.

Vincenzo strolled in fifteen minutes late, his eyes bleary. He smiled at me and said good morning. I leaned my hand against the checkout counter and huffed.

"It's nine fifteen," I said.

"Peter, my friend. I had a late night." He grinned.

I told him that was no excuse.

"Let me say one word," he replied. "Threesome." He put his hand in the air, I guess expecting a high five. I didn't move.

I retorted: "Maybe next time you could save some time and just make love to one woman so you won't be late for work."

He laughed violently and put his arm around my neck, rubbing my hair. "You're crazy, man," he said.

I pulled myself loose from his half-hug and patted my hair back into place.

"Make love," his laugh faded, but his smile stayed. "Do you like girls?" he asked, seeming genuinely curious.

"Of course," I scoffed.

I went to the display wall and started to center the shoes on their individual shelves. I could feel him staring at me, and when I looked back, he was still standing there, his head cocked like a terrier, his eyebrows furrowed.

"I'm not an animal," I explained. "I believe in true love, and I'm saving myself for it."

A laugh burst from his mouth before he caught it.

“You are saving yourself for your wife?” he asked, trying to hide his amusement.

“No,” I said. “I’m not a prude. I just want to save it for true love.”

“And how will you know when you find true love, Romeo?”

I could tell he was mocking me. But I wasn’t ashamed to admit it.

“You just do. Fate.”

He nodded slowly. “Well, I tell you. I think I found true love last night.” He laughed again and began to rock his hips back and forth, waving his hand back and forth as if wafting away a foul smell.

When I was washing the windows, I got an unexpected text message. I pulled my phone off my belt and read it. It said:

I got the night off. What r u up 2?

I didn’t recognize the number, but my phone had been stolen recently, and I didn’t have all my contacts in my new one. I replied:

Working. Who is this? I got a new phone.

I sprayed the glass door, around the handle, and began to wipe off the fingerprints but was interrupted by another text message from my anonymous friend.

This is Laura. Working? At the Health Zone?

Laura. I knew a couple of Lauras; one was a girl I’d had a crush on while I was still in school. But I didn’t know how either of them would have my number, let alone why they would be interested in my plans for the night. I decided to double check.

This is Peter. Sorry, do I know you?

I began to wonder if somehow this was the Laura I had been in love with, the Laura I sat behind, whose hair smelled like gardenias, who scrunched her eyes whenever she looked up from her desk to read the chalkboard. Fate, they say, comes unexpectedly.

Around lunch time, the boss arrived. I straightened my tie and my hair; the display shoes were already lined up perfectly. He swung the door open and spread out his arms, as he always did when entering his store, and let out a beautiful operatic wail. I think he always sang hello in Italian, but I don’t know for sure.

“Hello, Mr. Giordano,” I said.

“Peter, you are looking handsome today,” he said with a laugh.

Vincenzo came from the stockroom where he had been for the past half hour, doing god knows what. He was carrying a box of shoes for no apparent reason, other than that he always seemed to be have one when the boss was around.

“Hello, Zio!” he called, acting surprised as if the boss had caught him in the middle of some very important box-carrying.

“Vinny! Come here, boy.” The boss took Vincenzo in a big Italian embrace and kissed him on both cheeks. After some general family reunion behavior, Vincenzo took his box back into the stockroom. Mr. Giordano yelled for Josh, who was in the back, unpacking a shipment.

Josh came out and spoke to the boss quietly for a minute. Then, Mr. Giordano called to me and said they were going to lunch, leaving me and Vincenzo for a while.

Sometime later, I was in the stockroom looking for a size forty-five Destino, when my phone chirped. I unclipped it and saw that I had a text, no longer from an anonymous number, but from Laura.

Oh. This is the number for my friend Jen.

I admit, my heart sank a little. In the past hour my romantic fantasies of gardenia-scented true love had begun to preoccupy my thoughts. This Laura had the wrong number. I thought it would be the polite thing to reply and offered a possible explanation.

I’ve had this for years. You wrote it down wrong?

I hurried back out to the balding man who was waiting for me and kneeled before his socked foot, apologizing for making him wait. I barely had the Destino laced all the way before I got a new text message. I apologized again and put my phone on vibrate without looking at it.

As the chime rang and the door closed behind the balding man, Vincenzo peeked out from the stockroom, where he was pretending to straighten boxes.

“You are popular today,” he said, his trimmed eyebrows doing a little dance.

I looked at him before I realized what he was talking about. I hurriedly took out my phone and read the message there:

That’s so weird. I’ve had this one all along.

Vincenzo whistled. “Is it your true love, Romeo?” he asked with a laugh, and his head disappeared from the doorway without waiting for an answer.

I thought about this new Laura, the old Laura, and about the two girls who had been with Vincenzo the night before. I suddenly had a flash of pity for the new Laura. What if this Jen person, whose number she had lost, were her only friend? How lonely and tragic it would be to lose a friend just for losing a number. I typed a reply:

Sorry my dear. Good luck finding your friend.

Throughout the day, my mind kept conjuring a picture of some mixture of the Laura I had known in school and the one projected from my fateful text messages. I was lost in these thoughts when Josh and Mr. Giordano came back from lunch. In my reveries, I had left two boxes of shoes out. Or, rather, Vincenzo had left two boxes out when his lady customer decided to buy something else. But I had forgotten to clean up after him. I hoped that the boss wouldn't notice.

When Josh passed me, he winked at me and smiled. I took this as a good sign. A beautiful young woman came through the door, and Vincenzo, almost as if by magic, was already on his way to help her.

The boss said to me, “Peter, come with me.” He smiled and put his hand on my shoulder as he led me to the break room.

I sat down in one of the two chairs, and he did the same.

“It seems, Peter,” he began, “that Josh has found a new position. Which means there are going to be some changes around here.”

I leaned forward and nodded.

“I must replace him, as manager, of course,” he sighed.

I cleared my throat and prepared to thank him sincerely, humbly, but eagerly.

He continued. “Vincenzo is going to take his place, which will make you senior sales associate.”

I felt my cheeks go numb. I was confused, and the boss picked up on it.

“A promotion,” he smiled proudly.

A thank you fell inertly from my mouth.

I walked slowly back into the showroom, which now looked brighter and seemed louder. Josh was helping an elderly couple and Vincenzo seemed to be massaging the young woman's foot.

"Peter," Vincenzo said to me, "can you get me a black Volta in a thirty-six?"

I nodded and went back to the stockroom. I had the feeling that the shelves of boxes might topple over and crush me. I came back with the Volta and saw Josh, who was looking at the clock on the wall every thirty seconds; I saw Vincenzo, saying something to the woman about how small her feet were; I wanted to throw the box at him, but I restrained myself. I went back to the stockroom.

The walls seemed unusually far away from me, and for once I had no idea what task I should do. Usually I could find something to sort, clean, or fix. I felt alone. It was then, I felt fate tugging at my pant cuffs. I pulled out my phone and typed a message:

I get off early. What r u up 2?

I pressed the send button. Almost immediately, I got a reply:

Dinner with the fam. Lets meet up at malone's.

Laura! My dear! Fate does work in mysterious ways, as they say! Let Vincenzo be the manager, let him have flings with random women; love was knocking on my door. The chances were just too slim that this random wrong number could lead to this. Fate, Love, Laura, my dear! I spun around on one foot and replied:

Okay. Tell me how to get to Malone's.

The door chimed and a new customer walked in. Josh called for me, but I yelled to him that I was busy. Again, quick as a wink, true love replied:

Who is this? Is this that guy i talked to?

I chuckled. Was she kidding? Of course she was kidding. This was fate. Maybe she wasn't aware of what was happening, so I thought it best to play it cooler than I felt in my heart, which was burning with excitement.

The boss came from the break room and saw two customers out front who were not being helped. He looked at me, his eyebrows creeping up into his hairline.

"There are customers, Peter."

"I know," I said. "I was busy. Now I really have to go to the bathroom." I rushed into bathroom and shut the door before he could respond.

Right. Play it cool, I thought. Love is patient, and this was true love. I typed a reply and hit send:

Duh. It's Peter. U know, your newest friend?

I smiled at that one. It was coy, playful. I decided it was a good tone to begin with. Laura and I would have all the time in the world to explore the intimate ecstasies of love. For now, especially while she was unaware of the forces of fate that were at work, I could be more subtle. Still, my heart was soaring, and I hummed a little to myself while I waited for a response. When it came, I opened it before my phone stopped chirping. It read:

Please lose my number. This has got 2 end.

I got dizzy. Was this a test? It had to be. I flushed the toilet and went out to the showroom.