

BAIL

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.33

The sound of the telephone ringing coincides exactly with the moment when Matthieu Zéla presses the switch on his bedside lamp to plunge the room into darkness. His finger still on the button, he turns it back on and reaches for the receiver.

'It's me,' mutters the voice on the other end.

'Tom,' replies Matthieu with a sigh. 'Do you know how late it is?'

'It wasn't my fault,' he says quickly, the voice of an injured child coming from the throat of a damaged boy. He explains what has happened – some nonsense about a ball, too much champagne and another man's wife – and gives his location as the local police station. He needs someone to bail him out.

Matthieu replaces the receiver, steps out of bed and opens the curtains a little to look out at the lights on the Chain Bridge, crossing the Danube towards Pest. There are still people crossing it this late at night; he can hear the traffic.

As he dresses he wonders how much it will cost him this time. 50,000 forints? 100,000? He's not sure he even has that much here; his nephew might have to stay in the cell until the morning when the banks reopen. He smiles; it might teach the lad a lesson after all. He longs for his bed and is torn between duty and self-interest. Even as he continues to dress. And search for banknotes. And find his keys and leave his flat and lock the door behind him.

It's cold out, wintery; he suspects that snow is coming. The prostitutes along the river bank are wearing fur wraps and pulling them tighter around their fat breasts, although they loosen them momentarily as he approaches, watching his face for signs of interest, the flicker of lust which never comes and he leaves them huddled in conversation instead, a horde of whores preparing for bored intimacy. One is standing provocatively close to the police station where Tom is incarcerated. He glances at her, surprised by her youth, the dominance of mascara laced across her wide eyes, a stare that suggests she knows not why she has been thrust into this miserable life, needing to turn at least two more tricks tonight if she is to pay her overlord his due and return home with enough money for tomorrow's brunch, not as sophisticated as it sounds, just something that deflects the need for both breakfast and lunch.

'Please,' she says, her eyes desperate for whatever he can offer.

His nature is to ignore her, to pretend she doesn't exist, but he hesitates, not out of desire but pity, the knowledge of what it is to have one's life in debt to another. The lights of the police station beckon, his nephew will be cell-pacing anxiously, desperate for release. He reaches into his pocket for the bail money and hesitates for a moment, glancing at the prison, looking at the girl, and smiles.

This, he decides, was worth getting up for.