

## „What can I do for myself?“



## Chapter I

SHE was sitting peacefully at home and talking with her friend.

“I talked to the boss today about getting me officially employed”, said her friend.

“Oh, what did he say?” SHE tensed up.

“Well, he won’t do it... He says he can’t afford it now. Then...” – she made a pause – “he told me that, if I don’t want to work here, he’ll find someone else who agrees to these conditions. He’s not forcing me to work here, ... as always–”

“But didn’t he tell you last time that you could work out a situation, that works for both of you?”, SHE asked carefully.

“He changed his mind. If he ever really meant it...”, her friend was breathing heavily. SHE felt that SHE should say something immediately not to let her friend cry.

“Listen, my dear, I also was in a situation like this before, you should stop it, if it doesn’t work for you right now. I remember...” Her thoughts went deep into memories.

## Chapter II

Telephone rings...

“Hello, my sweetheart. How are you doing, everything’s fine?” said the voice, which can belong to a mother only.

“Yees, I guess.” SHE answered with a tone, that sounded clearly enough as “No”.

“Honey, I know you don’t like to speak about it, but I was talking to your aunt, about your situation and ... you know being unemployed... I mean we don’t want you to struggle cause of this COVID situation. You don’t have support from your employer, and I just want you to consider other possibilities too... I can support you, you know, just say... Or we can find another job for you. You just need to accept help...”

“I’m fine!”

“Hey, I know it’s painful for you to talk about it. But please, don’t deny that your job, even though it’s only temporary, is not an opportunity for you or anyone else. We should play by the rules... And at least, this is something that makes you unrecognizable in society, sorry my sociologist diploma, but I should say that. And you as a smart girl understand that too, I guess. You’ve tried it – it was an interesting experience, but you’re done with it. Do you hear me?”

SHE put the phone away from her ear. SHE knew what will come next anyway. For the next five minutes SHE just stares out the window with the phone in a hand. Slowly SHE moved the phone to her ear again.

“... he opened a bookshop and is looking for someone to help him out.” – continued her mother – “Or your sister. She always has something to propose, you know this better than me. I mean there is a thousand opportunities. You just need to find it! You know “Who seeks” – ”

“ “Will find”, mama! Ok, I got you. I’ll think about it.” SHE interrupted her angrily.

“Don` t think! Do!”

“Alright, alright! I call you later.” SHE hung up.

Again five minutes staring out the window. Thousands of papers on her table and thousands of thoughts in her head.

## Chapter III

SHE had never liked that job very much. But SHE also was not ready to choose something else. SHE was working as a waitress in a lovely café. Unstoppable human flow, laugh, the smell of croissants, an alluring window with an impressing variety of eclairs. For clients her cafe was an unspoken showroom, but for her... For her, it was a sign of broken dreams. That was how SHE thought then. SHE adored the inside of her café. Because everything there looked like, as if SHE made it on her own. Every piece of the visible and invisible interior was an expression of her comfort: vintage furniture with secrets inside, books on the shelves, which nobody had read probably for years, a spiral dark wood staircase, and what what was the most important - a profound coffee smell, which have filled every crack of the interior. That was probably also a reason why people liked it so much – it was an expression of comfort. It was a space created with love.

SHE didn't like when it was warm. Because going to the terrace and somehow showing up more than needed was not her favorite thing. Narrow tables, sudden passersby, twenty hands raised at once. Chaos. The street was too crowded always, and she felt lost serving the clients there. SHE adored her city, but not from the perspective of the terrasse of the café, drowning in the crowds of strangers, traffic and noise. She wanted to work in a safe place. She wanted to feel safe.

SHE opened up the café. It's eight in the morning, Saturday, nobody inside, nobody outside – peace. SHE drank a coffee and got to work – preparing everything before the guests would come. Four of her colleagues came a couple of minutes later. Small talks, laugh, music. The team was prepared. “Today will be a busy day”, - SHE thought while watching how the street suddenly became full.

12:00. SHE came out of the café with a tray full of drinks. A second later everybody stared at her: spoiled coffee, an apologizing runner. Who was at fault? A situation that happened over and over again, but everybody was still looking over and over again until the last drop of the spilled drinks was wiped away. SHE felt that somebody was gazing at her. SHE looked around and a mute dialogue unfolded between her and two visitors sitting at the table in the farthest corner. They were observing each move of the waitress. SHE could read empathy in their eyes. Or was it only in her imagination?

Encountering such situations SHE always went deep in her thoughts: „Why is that?“. SHE was a student, wanted to be independent or just to look like the independent one? The awkward situations, like this one with the tray, depicted her vulnerability. SHE felt like she should apologize for something. But should SHE actually do that? Asking this question in her mind and not finding the answer, SHE quickly came back to her duty. Wipe, serve, smile. Some friends of hers have joined at a free table. They are greeting her, and SHE does not feel that vulnerable any more. SHE is just doing

## Chapter IV

One of the observing men raised a hand. SHE moved quickly, smiling toward the table. SHE did not like such guests. SHE did not know what to expect from them. SHE didn't like not to know what to expect.

SHE moved toward the table.

“Ja, bitte!”, asked SHE with an a bit exaggerated politeness.

“Sorry, do you speak English?”, one of them answered very gently.

“Sure! What can I do for you?”, SHE answered being already relaxed.

“Basically for us – nothing. The question is – what can you do for yourself?”

“I'm sorry?”. Her face lost the polite mask for a second.

“Please, do not consider our question as an offense. But I am pretty sure that you have something to say and more definitely, just a small bit of advice – you should say.”

The waitress was staying confused because of this weird empathy: SHE knew what the man ment, and SHE knew, that he knew that SHE knew that... but the confession that something was still not working for her would be the sign that something was really not well enough.

“I'm sorry I should get back to work. Can I get you anything?” SHE said after a couple of seconds SHE have needed to recollect herself.

“Yes, the confession.”

The waitress – a young small woman, trying so hard to live a perfect life, to work for being independent, to finish her degree and at least to get the opportunity to become who SHE wanted to be... or SHE didn't want it anymore?... SHE ran confused from the table and thought „What can I do for myself?“.

When she was about to go inside, a passerby pushed her with her tray again.

## Chapter V

Depending on her working hours SHE worked on the early shift or the late-night shift, which she preferred. Her early shift began at 08:00 o'clock in the morning. SHE got up early, came to work, drank her coffee with a cigarette, spoke with her colleagues for not more than ten minutes, made a shopping list, went with that list to the supermarket, which took half an hour, bought newspapers, thinking "Who has time to read them?". Then SHE returned to the café, put everything in its place, set up all the tables, menus, turned on the dishwasher, put the reservation notes on the tables, prepared her wallet and the café opened up. Welcome dear guests!

When SHE came home after the long day of work, the question of the two confusing men was still circling in her head: „What can I do for myself?“

She tried somehow to outline the time and space where and how everything happened, that she lost the possibility to speak out. She tried to grasp a particular piece, a particular situation. What have triggered her to the place and the situation that SHE is in right now.

Maybe it was the time when her parents once said: „You should stand still, whatever happens.“ Those words dived so deep into her soul that she lost the focus and the possibility to reflect right on the situations. In fact, she lost the understanding of what was that „right“. And when she came here, at this café, to get a job while studying, she did not ask anything. She took everything for granted, she couldn't change anything, she had no right to do that. Did she?

And again the question appeared in her mind: „What can I do for myself?“

## Chapter VI

SHE is back. It is a warm afternoon in spring, and SHE finally had the courage to come back. SHE never really got to the bottom of it, why it felt so difficult and so wrong to come back to her old workplace as a guest. SHE thought SHE would feel uncomfortable and out of place, but today she was in the area and had some time to kill. So SHE sits down at a corner table in the sun. The street is calm and the few other guests are immersed in their phones, newspapers and conversations. The waitress comes out and sees her. She walks over.

”Hi, what can I do for you?” asks the waitress.

”Hi! I would like an espresso please.”

”Ok, coming right up!” The waitress smiles and makes her way back inside. She seems so confident and happy, not like SHE felt while working here. SHE wonders if guests realized the pretending emotions or if SHE was able to hide it too. Does the new girl feel the vulnerability over and over again? SHE suddenly remembers the two mysterious visitors and their question: “What can you do for yourself?”

Quitting was hard, and the time afterward even harder... but it got better, and now being here again she realizes that it was really the right decision for her. SHE felt so useless for a while, looking for a new job. And now SHE sees that her old boss had been right: he immediately found a new waitress to replace her. Someone, who was happy with these conditions, maybe because of the flexible hours and vacation days. Maybe someone too young to worry about health insurance and pension funds and feels okay without the right papers to work legally...

A tray falls to the ground with a loud clank followed by the splatter of shards and snaps her out of her deep thoughts. SHE turns around, even though SHE knows exactly what happened. Everyone is watching the waitress apologizing to a passer-by. Everyone looks at her picking up the tray and pieces of porcelain and glass. At a table nearby are two men, looking at the waitress with empathy.



\* This is a work of fiction. We have tried to recreate events, that represent the problems, with essential workers (a waiter in this particular case) of public life face in their everyday working life in a fictional manere. Characters and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.