

The Repulsion - a short story by Tim Lebbon

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As they rounded a bend in the road and the whole majesty of Amalfi was laid out before them, Dean knew that it was over. He grabbed Maria's hand

and she squeezed back in surprise.

It was their second attempt at loving each other. Dean had the feeling that trying to make it work again would be like buying a new version of a

favourite shirt -- the original would always be special, however much the

second looked, smelled and felt like the first. They had been travelling

for ten hours and each time he glanced sideways at Maria, he knew her less.

The minibus wound its way down the cliff road, the driver tooting at nothing, other horns blaring in response. Mopeds chased each other through

the traffic like dogs in heat, their drivers cool in shades and shirtsleeves. Pedestrians took their lives in their hands and walked along

the roads, bending sideways and holding in their stomachs to allow for wing mirrors.

"Busy place," Dean said. Maria glanced at him and smiled, but she did not

reply. He caught a whiff of her perfume, mixed in with the stale scents of

a dozen hours of travelling. Obsession. It gave him a headache.

When they had been on holiday before, the arrival at the resort and the discovery of the hotel was often something of a let-down, an anti-climax

propagated by tiredness and dislocation. Today, however, it was not the same. Maria waltzed into the hotel ahead of him, her jaunty step raising a

nostalgic desire rather than the real thing. When Dean reached her with their suitcases she was chatting to the woman at reception, laughing, joking, excluding him even more. The woman looked at Dean and smiled sadly, as if she could see through the charade.

"Please," she said, "leave your bags here. They will be brought up to you.

We have a lovely room for you, sea view, balcony with a wonderful romantic

view of the town and harbour."

Dean smiled at Maria, and she smiled back. "Okay?" he asked.

"Yep. Here at last. At last." She followed the woman.

Their room was big, sparsely furnished, floored with old marble and opening out onto a large balcony. The doors were already clipped open, outside table set for a meal as if the previous residents had only just left. Dean could smell them in the air: a hint of aftershave; the incongruous scent of pine shampoo. He tipped the receptionist and fell onto the bed, burying his face in the pillow, breathing in deeply. Old smells; soap powder; dead dreams.

"Shall we go out, have a look around?" Maria asked.

Dean was tired and jaded and suddenly, for no apparent reason, he wanted

to be back home. Hopelessness rumbled in his stomach, tingled his skin.

"Dean?"

He nodded. "Sure." He sensed her perfume again. It smelled like someone else had bought it for her, and he knew that they had already failed.

The road took them past the front of the hotel and down to the town square, where it sat facing the ocean; hundreds of people, tourists and locals alike, sat outside cafes and bars doing likewise. Waiters buzzed them like black and white bees, balancing impossibly large trays on unfeasibly splayed fingers.

Dean suggested a beer, but Maria wanted to get away from the tourist areas

immediately. He followed her lead, wishing they could be walking side by

side instead of in single file. As he was not holding her hand his own ached for something to do, so he lit up a cigarette.

"Thought you were going to give up on this holiday?" Maria said, glancing

back at the sound of the match popping alight.

"Thought we were going to be together this holiday," Dean retorted. He tried on a smile to take the edge off his voice, but the damage was already done. Maria shrugged, turned and started towards an arched walkway

between two shops.

As they strolled, the streets began to lose themselves in darkened alleyways. Washing overhung the paths like sleeping bats, dripping soapy

saliva to the ground. Traffic argued at roundabouts, and the sea purred onto the beach, constantly, relentlessly. Between buildings they could

see up to the cliff tops, where ruined churches or Saracen watchtowers commanded wise old views of the sea and town. The whole place oozed history, wallowing in its past; each slab in the path possessed a

million untold stories. And it was hot. The sun splashed from whitewashed walls and twisted its way behind Dean's sunglasses.

They saw only locals, as if this were the real Amalfi and the chaos of the

square was there only to appease marketing managers at package tour operators. Sometimes the people they passed would nod a curt greeting, other times Dean felt unseen. They walked for twenty minutes without emerging from the warren of alleys and paths. Steps led up and down

again, and more than once Dean was certain that they had crossed their own

path from a different direction.

It was strange how the wonder of the place touched them individually and

distinctly, as if its magic sought to emphasise the bad air between them.

Sometimes it was almost physical, an impenetrable barrier forcing them apart like similar magnetic poles. Amalfi had so much to offer; Dean

and Maria took their fill of different things.

"I'm hungry," Dean said. "Airline meals don't do much to fill you up. Pizza?"

"If you like." Maria stopped and leant over a fountain, its outlet concealed in the groin of a five hundred year old stone boy. Damp circles

had marked her blouse beneath her arms, and a haze of perspiration clung

to the fine hairs on her top lip. She used to sweat like that when they were making love.

They turned around, and it seemed natural for Dean to lead the way back.

At some point -- he could not really tell when -- the echoes of two sets of footsteps turned into one. When he looked over his shoulder Maria had vanished.

"Mi!" It seemed all right to use his familiar name for her now that she might not hear it. "You hiding?" He walked back up the path, glancing at closed doors. When he looked between buildings he could no longer see the cliffs; now, there was only sky. A flight of worn stairs curved down from higher up and he could hear hesitant footsteps descending, but their owner never arrived.

Street noises appeared from nowhere, and within a few strides he found himself back at the edge of the main square. He glanced back, confused, and then he saw Maria sitting on the steps of the huge cathedral. She stood when he approached and walked back towards their hotel, hardly acknowledging his presence. He was sure that if he were to stop and sit down for a drink, she would walk all the way back to their room without noticing.

"Maria," he called.

She waited for him, running her hands over strings of red chillies hanging

outside a shop. When she looked up her eyes were hard and distant.

"Where did you get to?" Dean said. "I was worried."

"Why?"

"You vanished. One second you were there, the next I couldn't find you."

"I was behind you all the time," she sighed, turning and walking away.

She

had not even tried to hide the fact that she was lying.

By the end of that first afternoon, when they returned to their room to get ready for dinner, they were strangers. Maria went into the bathroom and closed the door to shower and change.

The food was fantastic. Throughout their several years together, Dean and

Maria had always put good cuisine at the top of their list of priorities

when choosing their holidays. If they wanted a beach, it would have to be

near a good restaurant. A hotel, though it may have health suite, rooftop

gardens and apartment-sized rooms, was only as good as its chef.

Dean ate without tasting. He was thinking of those few minutes earlier in

the day when Maria had been lost to him, trying to analyse his emotions and convince himself that he had been scared, not quietly, selfishly pleased. They had come here to be together, but alone was much more comfortable. Even now Maria's mind was far beyond these four walls.

Dean

could see it every time he looked at her.

When a waiter trundled over with the sweet trolley Dean was subject to a

sudden, weird moment of utter optimism, one of those rare flushes of

rapture that strike all too seldom and are as difficult to keep a hold  
of  
as a lover's gasp. He smiled, tapped his fingers on the table, glad to  
be  
alive and confident that everything was going to turn out all right. He  
looked at Maria, grinning, and he was about to tell her how lovely she  
was  
when she spoke.  
"Have you ever come face to face with yourself?" she said. "Ever really  
seen yourself from someone else's point of view? It's the most humbling  
thing I can ever imagine."  
Dean felt the moment leave him, bleeding away like blood from a stuck  
pig.  
"Are we going to really try this week?" he said. "I mean, really? Look  
at  
this place, Maria. It's our perfect holiday. It's as if we were drawn  
here  
to ... give it one last go. Are we?"  
Maria shrugged, stared into her glass of red wine as if trying to define  
a  
truth in there. "Maybe some things are more important," she said.  
"Where did you go today? Before I found you in the square?"  
"I want to go to bed," she said suddenly, and Dean was shocked by her  
paleness. "Take me to bed." On any other occasion -- weeks, maybe  
months  
ago -- this plea would have stirred him in other ways. Now it merely  
made  
him afraid.  
They went up in the rickety lift and Maria waited for Dean to unlock  
the  
door. She leant against the wall in the hallway, fingers splayed  
against  
the cold plaster as if reading its history. She did not even undress  
before flopping onto the bed and stretching her way into a deep sleep.  
Dean opened the doors and went out onto the balcony. The thought of  
going  
inside and lying next to Maria, perhaps naked, perhaps with love in  
mind,  
now seemed alien and foolish. However much he tried to convince himself  
otherwise, their relationship was still a shadow of its former self,  
and  
coming here could have been a big mistake. If there had been some  
serious  
misdemeanour it would be simpler, but in reality it was simply a matter  
of  
things growing stale. Neither of them wanted to be the one to finally  
pull  
the plug.  
He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply and watched the smoke haze away in  
the  
dark, picked up briefly by the lights from the harbour. It was a noisy  
night in Amalfi, straining scooter motors underlying the aimless car  
horns  
that seemed to spring out of nowhere, and unknown conversations were  
shouted through the dark. He could sense rather than see bats jerking  
about in the night, dipping and weaving like points of black light  
thrown  
from a negative torch. From inside he heard the toilet gurgling its  
displeasure at someone flushing elsewhere in the hotel. Outside again,  
a

splash as something fell into, or jumped out of the water down below, confident of safety under cover of night.

He stood to go to the loo. The cigarette had burned down and fused itself

to his two fingers, but he felt no pain. In the bathroom Maria stood before the full length mirror, naked, a breast in each hand. Her nipples

were pink and risen, as if recently pinched.

"Have you ever come face to face with yourself?" she asked, turning to look at him. Seconds later her reflection followed suit. Its eyes were not

her eyes. They were eyes painted by a bad artist, unable to follow him around the room, shallow and soulless. "Am I asleep?" the reflection said.

"I've pinched, but I don't wake up."

A pain in his fingers pinched Dean and jerked him from sleep, and for a couple of seconds he did not even know which country he was in. He dropped

the cigarette butt and stomped it to death, hissing as he felt the blister

already rising on his index finger. Shaking, he went in from the balcony

and shut the doors, locking out the night. Maria was naked on the bed, covers screwed around her waist. Her nipples were soft and pink.

After running cool water over his fingers Dean stripped and climbed into

bed next to Maria. There was no warmth to share with her; not because she

was cold, but because he could not imagine cuddling as they once had.

The next day they were booked on a boat trip to Capri; Dean had thought that exploring together may encourage sparks from the dying embers of their love. Now, the most he could hope for was a smile for old times.

And he realised, in a moment of shocking clarity, that he really didn't know

Maria that well at all. He was unaware of her past, other than what she had chosen to tell him. If she had problems, maybe he had not even discovered them yet. If she had always wanted to come here, and she did not want him to know ... then he never would.

Maria rose late and readied herself as if still half asleep. They had breakfast brought to their room but Dean ate it alone on the balcony.

He kept glancing into the room at Maria, watching her move slowly across

the marble floor as she searched both suitcases for some elusive item of clothing. She looked up, saw him staring and smiled, a vague twitching

of the lips which was still better than he had had all day yesterday.

He went back to his strong coffee, unsettled by the notion that she had not been smiling at him at all, but past him.

They were already late when they left the room. Dean was a constant ten steps ahead on their walk down to the harbour. He glanced at his watch every few seconds, trying to will the minute hand back fifteen minutes

to before the time when they were due to leave. Passing through the square they heard the hooting horn of a boat, and a huge catamaran turned

gently away from the pier.

"Come on!" he shouted, hurrying towards the boat, knowing already that

they had missed it. He slowed and stopped, aware that dozens of people watching him. "Have a good time," he muttered, then turned back to Maria.

She was standing with her back to him, facing into the square. She brushed hair back from her face, her short dress stretching around her hips as she did so. She was a beautiful woman, but now Dean felt only a nebulous anger, and a certainty that she had made them miss the boat on purpose. "Well," he said as he approached her from behind, "looks like we're stuck

here today. You could have just said you didn't want to go." "I thought it was obvious," Maria said. "Besides, now we can explore the town in detail. We only scratched the surface yesterday."

"Didn't you want to see Capri?" Maria shrugged. "Maybe. But we're here now. There's so much history here.

Can't you feel it? Can't you breath in the old times? I can almost see them... Come on, Deano. We can still make a day of it." It was the first time she had used her nickname for him since they had left home yesterday morning, and it went some way to quashing his disappointment. But as she walked on ahead of him, heading for a shady corner of the square, he could not help scrutinising how she had said it.

The more he replayed it in his mind, the more he became sure that she had forced it to make him happy. He felt used, manipulated, putty in the hands of an imaginative child. He

wondered what shape she would twist him into next. They came to an alley leading off from the square, so hidden beneath the

old buildings of the town that it would never be touched by the sun. A sign screwed to the wall above said 'Follow the ancient steps', the script gnarled-looking where decades of heat had chipped the paint. The path curved out of sight no more than a dozen paces in. Without looking back Maria walked on.

For an instant, Dean considered not going after her. He would go back into the square, buy a beer, sit down and light a cigarette, watching the world go by as he waited for Maria to return. Then the moment passed, and Maria

was little more than a shadow moving away from him. He followed. "It's a beautiful place," he said, not really believing himself. Maria mumbled an incoherent reply. "I wonder who lives back here?" He did not want to know, and again there was only a vague response from Maria. The walls were swallowing her words.

He was looking down at the path most of the time, making sure he did not trip over a loose stone or step in the occasional splash of dog mess.

He should not have been surprised when he looked up to find Maria no longer there; should not have been, but was, because there was nowhere she could have gone.

He thought about going back, but feared he may be nearer the end of the

path than the beginning.  
Smells and sounds pulsed in and out, as if Dean were moving to and fro  
in reality. He guessed that it was some strange quality of the maze-like  
construction of this place, that even sound and scent would become  
momentarily lost between buildings. It became darker still and looking  
up he could see eaves reaching across the alley like long-lost lovers  
craving a final touch.  
He turned a corner and suddenly found himself back with civilisation.  
Soon he was among people again, standing at the edge of a one way street  
used by loud two way traffic, happy to hold back and watch the hustle while  
he gathered his thoughts. He had found no ancient steps. Indeed, there had  
been no steps in the alley at all.  
No side-alleys, either.  
No open doors.  
Where had Maria gone?  
He felt a rush of unreality blur his senses -- a mixture of nausea,  
dizziness and the urge to giggle at the absurdities around him. He sat  
down at a table and barked a laugh when a menu was forced into his  
hands.  
There were three women chatting away at the next table, oblivious to  
the noise around them, and when he strained to hear what they were saying  
he could not identify their language. It could have been a new one. The  
waiter wafted by with a casual glare; Dean ordered a pizza for  
appearance sake, a beer for his throat and a red wine for Maria. Then he waited  
for her to come back to him.  
He was finishing his unwanted meal when she scraped back a chair and  
sat down. She did not reach for her wine, but sat there staring through her  
fringe at the ground.  
"Maria," he said, "where have you been? I've been worried."  
"I doubt that," she said, but there was no reproach there. It was merely  
a statement of fact. Her mouth twitched, as if haunted by the memory of a  
smile.  
The three women had been replaced by a short, athletic-looking  
American,  
sitting with her back to them, mobile phone pressed to her ear like a  
field dressing. "I'm concerned about what will happen if I come home  
right now," Dean heard her say. "I worry about the kids. I don't want to  
subject you to the strangeness I'm going through right now."  
He turned back to Maria and stroked her arm, but it felt as alien as  
kissing a bus driver on the cheek. He withdrew his hand, embarrassed,  
sure that everyone in the street would see through the sham.  
"Shall we go back to the hotel?" he said. "Or another walk. An ice  
cream?"  
"All right," Maria said and, not knowing which suggestion she had  
agreed

to, Dean followed her into the thronging street.  
The American woman had left, apparently without paying. The waiter  
seemed  
unconcerned. Her table was already set for the next customer.

They spent the rest of the day by the pool, not talking, lying back and  
letting the sun slowly burn their skin. Dean tried to read but he could  
not concentrate. He kept glancing sideways at the woman he had used to  
love, watching her chest rise and fall with peaceful breaths, certain  
that  
behind her glasses her eyes were wide open. Her skin remained pale.  
Maria had always been lively, inquisitive, sometimes too much so for  
Dean.

He was happy to sit in and watch the television, open a bottle of wine,  
cook a nice meal. Maria would want to know who the director was, find  
out  
where the wine came from and search out an alternate recipe for  
whatever

they were eating. He'd often tell her to sit back and enjoy, not worry  
about things. Loosen up.

She had loosened up now. She was so loose she was almost flapping in  
the  
wind. She was not the Maria he had used to know, but then that Maria  
had

been leaving him for a long time, so that did not trouble him so much.  
What troubled him was that she was becoming a woman he had never known.  
Later, at dinner, Dean tried to catch Maria's attention and smile,  
attempted to edge her into conversation, but all talk was one-sided.  
They went straight to their room after the meal. Maria laid on the bed

and  
seemed to fall asleep instantly. Dean bent over her and lowered himself  
to

within kissing distance, trying to breathe in her scent, recall when  
they

had used to kiss. But her breath was insipid and untainted, and as  
light

as a sigh hitting his face. Her perfume only gave out a ten-hour  
staleness.

He stayed that way for a while, hoping she would look up at him, but  
there

was no movement beneath her ivory eyelids.

Eventually he moved out onto the balcony and lit up a cigarette,  
closing

his eyes and enjoying the light-headedness of wine and nicotine. He  
listened to the sounds from the town, trying but failing to pick out  
single voices.

Three cigarettes later, when he went back into the room, he was not  
surprised to find it empty. Maria had not even worn her shoes when she  
left; they lay on the floor next to the bed, looking as if they had  
never  
been worn.

Dean curled up on the bed. Maria had gone of her own accord, of that he  
was sure. He was also sure that he had let her go too easily.

He slept within minutes. A loud, insistent thump echoed its way into  
his

dreams; a door opening and shutting deep inside the hotel, or perhaps a  
trapdoor. Voices mumbled in distant rooms, or from somewhere else  
entirely. Footsteps forever promised to suddenly increase their volume

and



darken the strip of light beneath the door. It was a night pregnant with the promise of something happening, but in the end potential was aborted.

Dean slept long and deeply, and when he woke up the sun was shining through the still-open balcony doors.

Guilt grabbed him and would not let go. Maria had not returned, her suitcase still lay open, its contents hauled out like luggage intestines.

She could be anywhere, she could be in trouble.

She could be nowhere.

Have you ever come face to face with yourself?

Without changing or washing Dean hurried from the hotel, hardly sparing a

glance for the surprised receptionist. He almost ran down the road, and he

was glad that the bustle of the rush hour camouflaged his concern. The place felt even more impersonal than it had the previous day, but he put

it down to being alone. Even though he and Maria had really had no hope at

all, at least they had been in each other's company. Their time together

may be doomed, but the past still held a charge. They would always have a

history. There would always be a story to tell.

He found himself in the corner of the square without really thinking about

where he was going. 'Follow the ancient steps' the sign said, and within

thirty seconds of entering the alleyway, he had found them. They had not

been there before, he was sure, but everything lately had been all a-tangle, and he could so easily have missed them the first time. They were dusty and cobwebbed with underuse, the shadows beneath their risers

soupy with age. Dean started up them without hesitation, subconsciously sniffing at the air for Maria's perfume but knowing it had changed beyond

his ken. Even if he did find her, it could mean nothing. She may be where

she wanted to be.

He came face to face with himself. His double was as shocked as he, and they both raised their hands in fright. His opposite's eyes were sunken,

full of a deep-set hopelessness, but then he realised that he was facing a

mirrored door. He felt foolish, even though he was alone. Alone, but perhaps not unwatched.

The steps ended in a courtyard. The sun was almost directly overhead, but

the area was still swathed in shadow. It was timeless, echoing with sighs

uttered centuries ago, its walls bathed in history and stained by it.

The

graffiti of ages, chips and cracks and the words of eloquent vandals. Shuttered windows stared down like the closed eyes of the dead.

Maria was there ... but she was not. Her perfume hung heavy in the air, fresh and vibrant. He knew what she was thinking, though he could not

see

her. He knew, suddenly, of the times before they had met: the hurried  
drug-taking in train station toilets; the bursts of temper at her  
parents,  
it unreasonable but more intense because of that; kicking her pet dog when  
it had stained her carpet, kicking until it bled. He knew her mind in more  
detail than he ever had, and this made him sad. Now, of all times, he  
could try to love her fully. She had what she wanted, and he was glad,  
but  
it also made him sorrowful. It meant that they had failed. Their time  
together really was at an end.  
He turned and fled, coolness stroking his back as he staggered down the  
dusty steps. It felt like fingernails of ice piercing his skin, leaving  
him an invisible scar to remind him of where he had been, and where  
Maria  
remained. He would always be troubled by this place but he hoped,  
selfishly, that in his dreams he would somehow lose his way.  
He saw no mirrored doors.  
And as he arrived back in the square, he knew that during the loneliest  
of  
nights he would find those steps once more.

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Down