

A SEA of words

3rd YEAR

JUSTICE, EQUALITY AND INCLUSION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND IN EUROPE

Short stories by 20 young writers

IEMed.
European Institute of the Mediterranean



A Sea of Words - 3rd year

Justice, Equality and Inclusion in the Mediterranean and in Europe

Short stories by 20 young writers



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A Sea of Words

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Foreword

Senén Florensa. President of the Delegate Committee of the European Institute of the Mediterranean

The project “A Sea of Words”, organised jointly by the European Institute of the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation, began in 2008 with the aim of contributing to fostering dialogue between societies and citizens, men and women, especially youths, from the countries of Europe and the Mediterranean through exchange of knowledge and experiences between local and cultural traditions. The short story contest seeks to show the different realities and sensibilities that coexist in the Euro-Mediterranean region from the point of view of its young people.

After the great reception of the first two short story contests, the third was dedicated to social progress as an effort to construct more just, egalitarian and inclusive societies. 336 short stories were received, far more than in previous contests. The number of participants has continued to grow since its first year, a pleasing demonstration of the rich creativity of the minds of youths when exploring the weight of historical memory, describing the contradictions of contemporary societies and imagining a shared future of hope and opportunities.

Today’s more plural youth show some fractures and, in order to avoid conflicts, can only relate to each other through intercultural links. This interculturality must not only be exercised in the countries themselves and between those countries that share a linguistic closeness, but also between the youths of the countries of the South and North, with the aim of facilitating understanding of diversity and fostering exchanges that make it possible to get to know each other better. Youths, their dreams, realities, potential and actions, can open fresh ways of resolving and preventing new conflicts, which are very difficult to develop from other ambits.

Literary language allows us to confront and interlink these issues of such different natures. Moreover, the literary message makes it possible to enter into the everyday, to get to know the particular, the individual, together with the collective and the political. The short story enables us to enter into the complexity of differences without generalising them, but rather by simply describing them. From this point of view, literary production is a fundamental means of expressing and describing events, ideas and emotions that can be directly transmitted to and by young people from all over the Euro-Mediterranean region.

This book is a collection of the 20 winning short stories. All of them reflect individual or collective experiences of dialogue and trust and of the search for peace, justice and mutual awareness. This is the basis for an egalitarian society.

Foreword

Andreu Claret. Executive Director of the Anna Lindh Foundation

The contest “A Sea of Words” is now in its third year thanks to the determination of the IEMed in believing in the potential of this programme and the collaboration of the Anna Lindh Foundation. “A Sea of Words” represents a unique format of cooperation, known as an “inter-network initiative”, between the Secretariat of the Foundation and one of its national networks, in which the two partners share the design, coordination and implementation of the programme.

This third Euro-Mediterranean short story contest, whose best titles make up this collection, was dedicated to social progress as an effort towards the construction of more just, egalitarian and inclusive societies. The organisers received 336 stories and 20 of these were selected by an international jury. The number of participants in the contest has continued to grow since its first year, which shows the desire of youths in the region to transmit ideas and thoughts and contribute to a vibrant literary landscape.

Their stories follow the evolution of the times and mentalities and help us, in the adult world, to observe events with an appropriate distance, beneficial curiosity and critical spirit. Looking at the plots of the winning short stories, the work of Alfredo Zucchi, Ayelet Gundar and Ana Pessoa, we can trace a bridge between the two shores of the Mediterranean to help see the events from this distance, beneficial curiosity and critical spirit. They offer a space for dialogue that goes beyond the traditional and explores the voice of fiction, creativity and fantasy. The barriers and frontiers between peoples are taken down word by word and sentence by sentence, creating spaces of participation and opportunities for sharing different visions.

The literary art has this extraordinary capacity to take situations to unimaginable limits and for readers to compare their everyday experience with the opposed extremes of good and evil. “A Sea of Words” is a tool that helps all of us to understand the importance of challenges such as managing diversity, overcoming violence, hatred and wars, and opening our internal circles to other groups, cultures or nations. This is one of the most important missions we must confront and commit to.

The work of the Anna Lindh Foundation focuses both on the development of social solidarity and the consolidation of democracy with the objective of creating spaces and meetings that foster participation. How can we involve citizens of the Euromed region so that they can develop democratic rights and liberties? “A Sea of Words” prioritises this development to contribute to better understanding, respect and trust in constructing the future. This was the purpose of launching the contest three years ago and I am proud to see that, in this third year, “A Sea of Words” has come of age as an important initiative in the panoply of Euromed cultural programmes.

Literary Language, Instrument of Dialogue

With the issue *Towards Greater Equality in the Mediterranean*, we present the best titles for the third year of “A Sea of Words”, the short story contest for men and women aged between 18 and 30 living in the Euro-Mediterranean area. The topic deals with the promotion of social progress and struggling towards more just, inclusive and fairer-minded societies.

“A Sea of Words” has reached its third year in 2010 thanks to the efforts and convictions of the European Institute of the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation and their strong belief in this programme. “A Sea of Words” represents a unique method of cooperation, known as a “network initiative”, since the selection of stories involves all the Anna Lindh Foundation national networks.

336 short stories from 37 Euro-Mediterranean countries were received in 2010. The high level of involvement is due to the fact that participants can write in any of the official languages of the Euro-Mediterranean zone.

The broad scope of the call was possible thanks to its promotion by the more than 2,000 organizations that make up the 43 national networks of the Foundation, as well as other networks in the Euro-Mediterranean area, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Non-Governmental Platform, the European Youth Forum and the Euromed Permanent University Forum. Diverse organizations linked to some of these networks also strengthened the call through their own websites, newsletters and journals.

In order to carry out the selection and translation process of the 20 winning stories, there was a pre-selection at national level conducted by the network coordinators of the Anna Lindh Foundation in each of the 37 states. Later, the organizers called an international jury comprising Elisabetta Bartuli, translator and professor at Ca’ Foscari University in Venice; Jamila Has-soune, Moroccan writer and librarian; Pere-Antoni Pons, Catalan writer; Najwa Barakat, Lebanese writer; and Pierre Joseph Mejlak, winner of the second contest.

In the 20 selected stories, a variety of circumstances and key issues such as social invisibility, radical behaviours, social violence and ostracism come to light showing the different realities of our societies.

The jury members gave a special mention to three of the contest winners for the high quality of their stories and the originality of the subject matter: Alfredo Zucchi, with his piece *Milena is a Sex Bomb*, won the first prize; Ayelet Gundar, with the story *Sunset* won the second prize; and Ilija Đurović achieved third place with *The Stutterer*.

Through their stories, the three winners analyze the different aspects of how societies react when a death occurs: from the discriminated Indian who is left to die with no help, to the child who is mocked by his old friends because of a murder he committed, ending with the most tragic one, when a son indirectly kills his father while searching for money to celebrate his birthday.

In Alfredo Zucchi’s *Milena is a Sex Bomb* the main character reflects a cross section of youths in Naples and, more generally, the issues emerging in a difficult society like that of the

Italian city. Ayelet Gundar's *Sunset* clearly expresses the meaning of fear and prejudice as a couple knocks down a man with a motorcycle and, out of panic, decides to leave him dying since he is a foreigner and they fear persecution by the law. Finally, in Ilija Đurović's *The Stutterer*, the simple life of a coastal holiday town, and in particular of the story's main character, is overturned by the murder of some parents by their own son.

We would like to thank the company Mediterranean Editors & Translators (MET) for their special and voluntary participation in translating two of the winning stories.

The awards ceremony to present prizes to the 20 contest winners took place on 13th December 2010 at the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, which the participants were able to visit.

The next day, the 20 winners participated in the workshop "Literary Language, Instrument of Dialogue", during which the jury talked to the winners about the literary perspectives of the stories and their themes. In the second part of the workshop, Peter Bush, a university professor and translator, explained the complexity of translation and its importance in communicating the original message.

The following day, as a shared intercultural experience, there was a two-day trip to the town of Granada, including a visit to La Alhambra, the Pabellón Al Andalus and the Parque de las Ciencias.

The European Institute of the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation wish to thank all the people who have contributed to the success of "A Sea of Words": firstly, the 336 participants of the contest and the 43 national networks of the Anna Lindh Foundation; the members of the International Jury for their magnificent work and unfailing devotion; and the El Legado Andalusi Foundation for organizing the cultural visits in Granada. Special thanks to all the members of the work team of the European Institute of the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation, especially their directors Senén Florensa and Andreu Claret.



Group photo of the jury and the winners of the 2010 contest.

Atje ku rritet ulliri

Edlira Osmani. Shqipëri

Deti kishte kohë që kishte filluar t’i shoqëronte, por ata nuk e kishin vënë re. Ishte vapë, diell dhe një fllad i lehtë përkëdhelte flokët e Artës që po përgjumej e ulur në ndenjësën e parë të makinës. Ishte bashkë me Daviden, mikun e saj Italian, i cili dukej i sigurt në timon, teksa përshkonte rrugët e Shqipërisë. Deti dhe era e portokalleve tregonin se dalë nga dalë po i afroheshin vendit të pushimeve. Në një ditë të vapshme Korriku ideja që po shkonin me pushime i qetësonte, por ditët me diell iu silln kujtime, e kjo ishte një tjetër shkak që kishin ndaluar së biseduari dhe po përumbeshin në mendime e kujtime, mbase edhe të përbashkëta.

Ishin njohur në një ditë të tillë të nxehtë në Venecia. Ajo, gazetare e dërguar të mbulonte një lajm të rëndësishëm ato ditë, ai, historian arti. Takohen rastësisht në një galeri arti dhe interesi i përbashkët i përfshin në bisedë. Bisedë që zgjati e vazhdoi edhe në brigjet përballë të Adriatikut. Tani ishin në Shqipëri dhe kishte kaluar një vit nga takimi pllot diell dhe ujë i Venecias.

Fëshfërimat e gjetheve të ullinjve që dëgjoheshin nga matanë rrugës dhe tingujt e lehtë të një kënge franceze u ndëprenë zhurmshëm nga sigla e një edicioni radiofonik lajmesh. Arta ngriti kokën, pak e trembur por e gatshme të dëgjonte të rejtat. Kishte disa orë që ishte larguar nga Tirana dhe vetëm një ditë që kishte marrë pushimet, por të qenit gazetare dhe mbi të gjitha dashuria që kishte për profesionin e mbanin të lidhur me lajmin. Davide e vuri re një gjë të tillë dhe i buzëqeshi.

Ishte kohë pushimesh dhe kronika politike nuk zinte shumë vend. U fol gjatë për turizmin, mundësitë që ofronte Shqipëria dhe nismat e marra nga qeveria për të pasur këtë vit një numër sa më të madh turistësh. U fol edhe për vendet e rajonit, plazhet e Turqisë ku kishin filluar të shkonin shumë shqiptarë, ishujt grekë e deri tek piramidat e Egjiptit. Davide megjithëse ishte historian arti kishte një interes gati të adhureshëm për arkeologjinë.

–Po flitet për Piramidat e Egjiptit? – pyeti ai duke thyer heshtjen. Kishte filluar të kuptonte disa fjalë shqip por nuk mund të kuptonte shumë nga një edicion lajmesh.

–Po, po, për Piramidat po flitet, ke ndërmend të shkosh pasi të vizitojmë Himarën? Unë gati jam, – tha Arta tashmë pa shenja përgjumje.

–Jo, unë kam qenë në Egjipt para dy vitesh, sigurisht që do të shkoja prap, e aq më tepër nëse ti ke dëshirë, por kisha menduar të vizitonim Tripolin, – tha dhe u kthye nga Arta.

–Me sa di unë një vijë e drejtë harte ndan Libinë nga Egjipti?! – tha Arta me një vështrim gati lutës.

–Ok, ok, e di unë që ti nuk do të lësh pëllëmbë Mesdheu pa shkelur.

–Pa vozitur deshe të thuash?! Epo jam gazetare, kultura është një ndër fushat që mbuloj dhe që dua më shumë.

–Përveç meje – buzëqeshi Davide.

–Bashkë me ty – tha Arta, ndërsa i tërhoqi vëmendjen lajmi i fundit që sapo dëgjo.

Parlamenti në Katalonjë kishte miratuar heqjen e ndeshjeve me dema në rajon dhe kjo falë 68 votave pro, 55 kundër dhe 9 abstenimeve.

–Ky po që qenka një lajm i mirë, – tha Arta. Nuk i shihja dot ato kafshë të shkreta që gjakoseshin e madje që vriteshin ashtu, shpresoj që të ndalohet në gjithë Spanjën.

–Jo, mos qoftë e thënë, jo të paktën sa të shoh unë një ndeshje me dema – bëri shaka Davide. Çudi që ty nuk të pëlqejnë arenat, toreadorët, fluturimet e pelerinave të kuqe, është gjithçka shumë, shumë ..., – ndërpreu mendimin Davide.

–Artistike, deshe të thoshe, – ja ktheu Arta.

–Po, artistike dhe vlerë kulturore, historike e Spanjës.

–Sa për vlerë kulturore mua më kujtojnë vetëm Operën Carmen. Vlerësoj më shumë vlerat për të drejtat e kafshëve, pa harruar që aty mund të vriten edhe njerëz, – e tha ajo këtë të fundit me keqardhje.

–Mirë, mire, po më thuaj dhe sa kemi për të arritur në Himarë se nuk është se po shoh shumë tabela orientuese, me përjashtim të atyre tabelave që si më the se u thonin në shqip? – pyeti Davide.

–A po, e ke për “tabelat” ku shkruhej “mos hidhni mbeturina”? – tha ajo me shpoti.

–Po, por që fatkeqësisht kishte ca mbeturina në ato vende. – tha si me droje Davide.

–Shpresoj që jemi në rrugën e drejtë për t’i eliminuar, ka marrë nisma edhe qeveria, por edhe qytetarët do ndërgegjësohen.

–Qenke optimiste sot, shpresoj të jenë të gjithë si ti. – vërejti Davide.

–Do jemi, them se do të jemi sepse edhe ne e duam Shqipërinë si gjithë Europën, – tha Arta ndërkohë që hodhi vështrimin jashtë dhe pa Himarën e bukur. Kishin arritur. – Nuk po të mbaj më fjalime politke po ndiq atë rrugicën aty, se arritëm, – tha e gëzuar dhe e lodhur.

–Ja dhe Himara, buzë muzgut e buzë detit, – tha Davide ndërkohë që kishte gjetur një vend për të lënë makinën dhe po bëhej gati të zbriste.

–Shpresoj të mos jetë larg vendi ku do të qëndrojmë, – tha ai duke i marrë nga dora Artës njërën nga çantat.

–Jo nuk është larg, do të ecim te kjo rrugica përballë dhe për pesë minuta arrijmë tëk shtëpia e gjyshes.

Do të qëndronin në një shtëpi të vjetër por të mirëmbajtur, që mbante mbi vete veç peshës së viteve edhe peshën e kujtimeve. Në atë shtëpi ishte rritur mamaja e Artës, por pas vdekjes së gjyshit e gjyshes ajo kishte mbetur e pabanuar. Ishin fqinjët ata që kujdeseshin disi por edhe prindërit e Artës nuk e linin pasdore.

Ndërkohë që arritën tek dera, Artës i erdhën në mendje shumë kujtime dhe nisi t’i tregonte Davides. Edhe ai dukej se ishte i mrekulluar nga historia por edhe bukuria unike që mbarte peizazhi mbrëmësor i përzier me aroma dehëse deti.

–Si të duket? – pyeti Arta ndërsa u futën brenda në shtëpi.

–Bukur, shumë bukur, se me kë më ngjan ky vend, por prap ka diçka unike, – tha Davide.

–Të ngjan me fqinjët tanë? – shtoi Arta.

–Jo, më ngjan me ... – bëri një pauzë dhe pastaj tha: – po më ngjan me Mesdheun, përdor të njëjtin parfum, – bëri shaka ai.

Edhe ajo qeshi, e ashtu siç ishin të dy të gëzuar do të prisnin një ditë të re plot diell e det.

Të nesërmen Arta u zgjua herët, jo vetëm për të parë agimin e diellit por edhe për të takuar fqinjët që në sezonin e verës kishin më shumë punë se kurrë.

U përshëndet me ta, u fjalosën sikur kishin dekada pa u parë e jo vetëm një vit dhe pinë kafënë e mengjesit. Pasi mori edhe një filxhan me kafe për Daviden, Arta u kthye në shtëpi.

Davide ishte zgjuar. Ndërkohë që ai po pinte kafënë, Arta po i tregonte për zakonet shqiptare të një fqinjësie të mirë dhe po kërkonte nëpër shtëpi enët e kafesë që t'i kishte për të nesërmen. Do bëheshin gati dhe do të shkonin në breg. Davide kishte dëgjuar se në brigjet e Himarës kishte vlera të çmuara arkeologjike.

–Do ndërtoni ndonjëherë ndonjë muze nënujorë ju shqiptarët? – pyeti ai ndërkohë që po dilnin nga shtëpia.

–E po ne shqiptarët me shpresa i kemi gjithë gjërat, po derisa të bëhemi ne për mbarë shko më mirë në Bodrum, – tha Arta, ndërsa shtoi: – megjithëse kam dëgjuar për një ekspeditë që merret me arkeologjinë nënujore, se janë të interesuar e diç duan të bëjnë, shpresojmë të gjejmë mbështetje, se do t'i vishnin kësaj perle edhe më shumë shkëlqim.

–S' do largohesha nga Himara unë pastaj, ose më mirë Himarë-Romë do e kasha intinerarin – tha Davide ndërkohë që po hapte një çadër plazhi.

Nuk zgjati shumë dhe pranë tyre erdhën edhe pushues të tjerë. Një vajzë bashkë me të vëllain u afruan pranë Artës e Davides dhe pasi u përshëndetën dhe u prezantuan, vajzat filluan të flisnin si dy shoqe të vjetra. Ajo quhej Bora por nuk ishte nga Bora Bora e Spanjës ishte nga Gjirokastra e Shqipërisë. Lëkura e Borës në kontrast me emrin kishte marrë një ngjyrë çokollate të lehtë gjë që tregonte se kishte ditë që kish ardhur pranë detit dhe rrezeve të diellit.

–Ti ke ardhur për të zbuluar enigmën e plakut të mistershëm? – i tha Bora, Artës në bisedë e sipër.

–Ç'është ky “plak i mistershëm”? – u habit Arta. – Unë kam asrdhur për pushime e vetëm për pushime.

–Nuk mendova se s'e dije, – tha Bora – Duke njohur dellin tënd prej gazetaresë thashë ku i dihet, me një gurë dy zogj, – vazhdoi ajo.

–Jo, me të vërtetë që nuk di asgjë nga këto që po thua, ç'është kjo historia e plakut të çuditshëm, se na çuditë, – qeshi Arta.

–Është një burrë i moshuar që askush nuk ja mban mend moshën, por thonë se është shumë i vjetër. Atij i ka dalë nami kohët e fundit se na ditka një histori të lashtë por që nuk ja thotë njeriu po nuk gjetën gjagjzën që ai thotë, – tregoi Bora.

–Ua sa interesante, qenka si përrallë, po ti e ke dëgjuar gjëgjzën? – pyeti gati mosbesuese Arta.

–Të intereson ë? Thashë unë gati për artikull ti! – bëri shaka Bora.

–Po dhe artikulli nuk do ishte ide e keqe, po më thuaj të paktën ku rrin ky plak i mistershëm? – pyeti sërish Arta, tashmë me një ide dhe plot kureshtje.

–Nuk e di shumë saktë – tha Bora. – Njerëzit thonë se banon atje ku rriten ullinjët, – shtoi si me mëdyshje.

–Atje ku rriten ullinjët?! – përsëriti Arta. – Do të shkoj të pyes Athinanë, fqinjen, ajo me siguri e di, – dhe bëri në të ngritur.

–Me të vërtetë po ikën ti, po shiko se po nuk e gjete gjëgjzën nuk ta hap derën ai, – bëri shaka Bora.

Arta u afrua te Davide dhe e pyeti nëse do të vinte të shkonin të hanin drekë e se gjatë rrugës do t'i tregonte diçka që nuk kishte për ta besuar.

U veshën dhe u larguan në drejtim të shtëpisë. Edhe sot do të hanin drekë nga Athinaja dhe Arta do të përfitonte nga rasti edhe për ta pyetur për atë çka i tha Bora.

Era e mirë e gjellëve ndihej deri në oborr dhe të krijonte një ndjesi ndjellëse për tu futur brenda. Teksa po provonin ëmbëlsirën, Arta e pyeti Athinanë për plakun misterioz.

–Të them të drejtën, – tha Athinaja, – unë nuk mendoj se ai është në gjendje të mbajë më mend histori, them se do të shkojë mundimi kot.

–Ti më trego ku është ky vendi i ullinjëve se unë me pushime jam e më pëlqen të bëj ca eksplorime, – tha Arta.

–Ta tregoj unë se ku ndodhet e pstaj bëj si di vetë, – tha Athinaja si me mëdyshje.

Pas asaj dreke të shishme me gjellë tradicionale, të cilat edhe Davide i pëlqeu, dy të rinjtë u nisën bashkë me Athinanë për tek vendi i ullinjëve.

–Ja tek është, – tha Athinaja, – paska dalë të marrë pak rreze.

Mbështetur bri një ulliri rrinte një burrë i motshëm, me një bastun pranë vetes. Teksa e shihte, Artës iu kujtuan disa vargje që kish lexuar në një libër të fëmijërisë e saj të hershme, “Dielli i lodrave”, titullohej libri, ndërsa dielli mbi atë qiell të kaltër pa asnjë re i solli nëpër mend: – Ky ulli mbi kodër, dimër verë bleron, drurët rreth e rrotull katragjysh i thonë ... – filloi të belbëzonte me zë të lartë teksa iu afrua edhe më shume plakut, e vërejt i pandarë me ullirin. Edhe burri i moshuar i pa, e lëvizi si për t’i përshëndetur.

–Ç’ë mirë u solli deri këtu në këtë vapë? – u tha ai.

–Kemi dëgjuar për ty se din shumë histori, – tha Arta ndërsa po ulej pranë tij. – Duam të na tregosh ndonjë – vazhdoi ajo.

–Shoh që qenke vajzë e zgjuar, kështu që nuk do ta kesh të vështirë të arrish të dëgjosh historitë e mia, pasi të kesh gjetur gjëzën që unë do të them.

–Do përpiqem Babëgjysh, – tha Arta që po priste me padurim të dëgjonte gjëzën misterioze.

Plaku vazhdoi: – *Qiej lavdie ka mbi të, kurorë ulliri mban mbi kokë, degë palme i bëjnë hije, gotën e verës e mban në dorë që prej shekujsh, historie!* – kush mundet të jetë vallë? – shtoi duke pyetur plakun.

Një shenjë habie vihej re në buzët e Artës, e pasi nguroi një hop ia përktheu të gjitha Davides. Të dy heshten pak si për të dashur të kuptonin më mirë misterin që fshihej në ato rreshta, u panë në sy dhe më pas panë plakun. Ai rrinte i mbështetur pranë ullirit me një qetësi të mahnitshme, në pritje të një përgjigje e kushedi mbase edhe me padurimin e dëshirën për të treguar një histori.

Dy të rinjtë u larguan pak më tutje dhe përsërisnin me mendje dhe me zë duke perifrastuar çdo rresht.

–Qiej lavdie ka mbi të, – tha Arta, e më pas vazhdoi me pjesën tjetër, – kurorë ulliri mban mbi kokë, degë palme i bëjnë hije, gotën e verës mban në dorë që prej shekujsh, historie. – ndërkohë Davide përsëriste bashkë me të.

–Duket sikur përshkruan ndonjë pikturë, ti duhet të kesh ndonjë mendim? – ju drejtua ajo Davides.

–Duket si peizazh pikturë, por nuk e di, është edhe shumë e përgjithshme por edhe e veçantë, – tha ai, – se kisha menduar kaq të koduar, s’kam as aftësitë e Z. Langdon si te Kodi Da Vinçi, – nuk mund të rrinte pa bëra shaka Davide.

–Qiej lavdie mban mbi kokë, kush? – pyeste më kot Arta.

–Gotë vere, shekuj, histori, kurorë ulliri, – thoshte Davide, – po palmat ç’duhen, – shtoi ai.

–Për hije pra, – thotë Arta, meqë me siguri ka shumë diell, – tha ajo duke kërkuar të zinte një vend më nën hije të pemëve përreth.

–Mua më kujton shumë gjëra nga Italia e gjitha kjo, – tha Davide.

–Edhe mua më kujton shumë gjëra nga Shqipëria, përveç palmave, – shtoi Arta.

–Se ku kam lexuar diku për “qiejt e lavdisë”, se ç’kishin lidhje me ajrin e thatë përvëltonjës të Saharasë dhe që mund të shiheshin vetëm këtej nga viset tona, po nuk mbaj mend më shumë, – ndrëpreu mendimet Davide.

–Sipas teje “qiejt e lavdisë” kanë lidhje me Saharanë? – tha Arta.

–Nuk e di, por mbase kanë lidhje me palmat, – shtoi me mëdyshje Davide.

–Më duket se po zbulojmë ca gjëra, – po vetëgëzohej Arta.

–Po ullinjte, vera? – pyeti Davide – nuk më duken nga Saharaja, – shtoi.

–Jo, nuk janë nga andej por mund të bëhen njësh, – tha Arta me një pamje që dukej sikur kishte zbuluar diçka. – Kam dëgjuar se dikur ajo pjesë toke e deti që shtrihej që nga ullinjte e parë e deri tek palmishtet e shkretëtirës quhej, Mesdhe, – thua këtë të këtë menduar plaku? – pyeti ajo.

–Mesdheu shtrihet deri atje ku rritet ulliri, – tha se kishte dëgjuar të thuhej, Davide.

–Por është më shumë se kaq, duhet të jetë më shumë se kaq, ndaj janë edhe palmat, – shtoi Arta.

Shkoi pranë plakut dhe i tha: – “Mesdheu!”.

–Mesdheu, – përsëriti plaku, – ulli plak kështu si unë – shtoi.

U kërkoi të uleshin pranë tij që tu tregonte historitë e mistershme e të lashta që mbante në kujtesë. Plaku dukej i gëzuar që më në fund do të mund të rrëfente, Davide ishte kureshtar e ndërsa Arta po mendonte edhe për lexuesit e saj, të cilëve një ditë do tu tregonte historitë e atij plaku të urtë që kishte jetur gjithë jetën atje ku rriteshin ullinjte.

Where the Olive Tree Is Grown

Edlira Osmani. Albania

It had been a long time since the sun had started to accompany them, yet they had not noticed it at all. It was too hot; the sunny light breeze kept caressing Arta's hair as she was nodding in the front seat of their car. She was together with her Italian friend, Davide, who seemed safe driving along the motorways of Albania. The scent of the sea mixed with the aroma of orange plantations indicated that they were gradually approaching the holiday resort. The idea of going on holiday on such a scorching July day was very soothing, but sunny days brought back memories to them. That was another reason why they had stopped chatting and were lost in thoughts and memories, maybe the same memories were crossing their minds.

They had met one another on a similarly hot day in Venice. She had been on a mission as a journalist covering an important event that day, whereas he was an art historian. They met by chance in an art gallery and their common professional interest led to conversation. This first conversation lasted until the Adriatic coastline. Now, it had been a complete year from that meeting full of sunlight and water in Venice.

The rustle of leaves along the street and the light sounds of a French song were noisily interrupted by the signature tune of the radio news. A little scared but very attentive, Arta started listening to the news. She had left Tirana only one day to go on holiday but, as a journalist deeply passionate about her job, she had to listen to the news. Davide noticed this and started to smile.

It was the holiday time, so political news did not take up much space. There was

a lot about tourism, the opportunities that Albania could offer and the initiatives being taken by the government to boost tourism that year. Even the regional resorts were mentioned, such as the beaches of Turkey which had also started to be frequented by many Albanians, the Greek islands and even the pyramids of Egypt. Despite the fact that Davide was an art historian, he had a special fondness for archaeology.

"Are they talking about the pyramids of Egypt?" he asked, breaking the silence. He had started to pick up some words in Albanian, yet he could not understand much in a news bulletin.

"Yes, they are talking about the pyramids. Do you intend to go after we visit Himara? I'm ready to go," Arta replied without a sign of sleepiness.

"No, I was in Egypt two years ago. I would go again if you want to come but I was thinking of visiting Tripoli," he answered looking at Arta.

"As far as I know a straight geographical line divides Libya from Egypt!" Arta said, almost with a pleasing look.

"Ok, ok, I know you love walking on every inch of the Mediterranean."

"Without paddling, you mean? Well, I am a journalist and, above all, culture is one of the domains that I cover and love so much."

"Apart from me," Davide said smiling.

"You as well," said Arta, at the same time becoming curious about the last news story.

The Parliament in Catalonia had passed a law against bullfighting in that region, thanks to 68 votes in favour, 55 against and 9 abstentions.

“That’s good news,” Arta said. “I could not stand seeing those poor animals bleeding and being slaughtered like that. I hope this law is passed for the whole of Spain.”

“I hope it isn’t, not before I see the first bullfighting match,” he said joking. “It is weird that you do not have a fondness for arenas, toreadors, the red cloak. It is all so, so...” he stopped in his thoughts.

“Artistic, you wanted to say,” suggested Arta.

“Yes, artistic and cultural and historical values of Spain.”

“As for cultural values, they remind me of the opera Carmen. I have more appreciation for the rights of animals, not forgetting that even people might be murdered there.” She said the last sentence with deep compassion.

“Ok, ok, but tell me how long it will take to reach Himara because I have not seen any signs so far. All I can see are only the signs that in Albanian meant...?” asked Davide.

“Well, you are talking about the sign which says ‘do not throw rubbish’,” she said slowly.

“Right, but unfortunately there was some rubbish in those places,” Davide said, feeling intimidated.

“The government has issued some policies. Citizens should be made more aware, though.”

“I see you are optimistic today. I hope all Albanians are like you,” said Davide.

“I believe all of them will be because we all want Albania to become like the other European members,” Arta said while contemplating the beautiful resort of Himara. They had finally arrived. “I won’t make any more political speeches because we have arrived now, just follow that path,” she said happily but tired.

“There is Himara, next to the seaside, next to the sunset,” Davide said parking the car and getting ready to get out.

“Guess our place is not that far from here,” Davide said, helping Arta with the luggage.

“No, it is not that far, we walk up this front road for five minutes and arrive at my grandmother’s house.”

They would stay at an old but well-maintained house that had borne not only the burden of years but the burden of memories as well. Arta’s mother had grown up in that house, but ever since the death of her grandparents it had been abandoned. The neighbours looked after the house, but Arta’s parents did not neglect it either.

As they were approaching the doorstep, many memories crossed Arta’s mind and she started telling them to Davide. He seemed to be as fascinated by the unique history and beauty of the evening landscape intertwined with the heady fragrance of the sea.

“Do you like the house?” Arta asked while they were going inside.

“Nice, very nice. This place looks familiar to me, yet it has something unique,” Davide added.

“It resembles our Balkan neighbours,” said Arta.

“No, it resembles...” he paused and then said: “Yes, it looks like the Mediterranean countries, it releases the same perfume,” he joked.

She laughed too, and they happily looked forward to a new day full of sun and sea.

The next morning, Arta woke up early, not only to enjoy the sunrise but to meet the neighbours.

She greeted them, talked as if they had not seen each other for ages and drank morning coffee. Afterwards, Arta went back home with a cup of coffee for Davide. He was up. As he was drinking the coffee, Arta told him about the Albanian tradition of a good relationship with neighbours. She started looking for the coffee pots to invite her neighbours the next day. They would soon get ready and

set off to the shore. Davide had heard about the precious archaeological values of the Himara seaside.

“Are you Albanians going to build an underwater museum in the future?” he asked, leaving the house.

“Well, we Albanians have great hopes, though till we are ready you can go to Bodrum,” Arta said, adding “though I have heard about an expedition on submerged archaeology. I hope they can achieve it.”

“In that case, I would not leave Himara or, rather, my itinerary would be Himara-Rome,” Davide said, opening his umbrella by the shore.

Many other tourists came near them after a while. A girl and her brother approached Arta and Davide, greeted them and introduced themselves. Later, the girls started conversing like two old friends. She was called Bora and was from Gjirokastra, like the Bora Bora islands of Spain. Unlike Arta, Bora already had a suntan and her complexion was the colour of light chocolate.

“Have you come to discover the enigma of the mysterious old man?” Bora asked Arta.

“What is this ‘mysterious old man’?” Arta was astonished. “I am only here to enjoy my holidays.”

“I thought you had heard about it,” Bora replied. “I thought you aimed to kill two birds with one stone, being aware of your special gift as a journalist,” she continued.

“No, I know nothing about it. What is this story of the bizarre old man? Are you are kidding me?” Arta laughed.

“There is this very old man, and nobody knows his real age. He has recently gained some popularity for knowing an old story. However, he will not tell anybody that story unless people first solve his puzzle,” Bora explained.

“Oh, that is something, it sounds like a fairy tale. What about you, have you ever heard his puzzle?” Arta asked mistrustfully.

“It interests you, I knew it. So, you are ready to write an article about it!” Bora was joking, though she was eager and curious about the story.

“Why not, the article would not be a bad idea. Where does this man live?” Arta asked again.

“I do not know precisely,” replied Bora. “People say he lives where the olive trees are grown,” she added doubtfully.

“At the olive place?!” Arta repeated. I will ask Athina, my next door neighbour, she must know,” Arta said, about to leave.

“Hey, if you are going, make sure you solve his puzzle first, otherwise he won’t even open the door,” Bora said joking.

Arta went to Davide and asked him to go for lunch because she had something incredible to tell him.

They got dressed and headed towards their house. Today, they were going to have lunch at Athinaja where Arta would take the opportunity to ask her about the mysterious old man that Bora had just told her about.

The tempting smell of the food wafted through the yard inviting you to head inside the house. While enjoying the dessert, Arta asked Athina about the mysterious old man.

“Speaking frankly,” she said, “I do not think he is capable of remembering any stories. I think it will be pointless going to him.”

“Just tell me where this olive place is. After all, I’m on holiday, and I love exploring,” Arta said.

“I will show you the way, and then you can do as you wish,” Athina replied with some hesitation.

After that delicious lunch with traditional food, which even Davide enjoyed greatly, both of them went to the olive place with Athina.

“There he is,” Athina said. “He seems to be sunbathing.”

Sitting next to an olive tree was an old man with a walking stick close to him. When

she looked at him, Arta was reminded of the lines she had encountered in one of her childhood books. That book was entitled *The Sun of Toys*, and the sun in that clear sky reminded her of the lines: “This olive tree at the top of the hill blooms through summers and winters...” she started whispering loudly, approaching the old man. She studied him carefully and he seemed inseparable from the olive tree. The old man noticed them, and moved a little to greet them.

“What good deeds brought you here in such heat?” he asked them.

“We have heard that you know many stories,” Arta said sitting next to him. “We want you to tell us some of them,” she continued.

“Well, you seem a clever girl, so you won’t find it hard to listen to my stories, once you have solved my puzzle.”

“I will try grandpa,” Arta said, looking eagerly forward to his mysterious puzzle.

The old man continued:

“Skies of glory lie upon him, he wears an olive coronet on his head, palm branches throw shadows, the glass of wine held in his hands for centuries!”

“Who could that be?” asked the old man.¹

A sign of astonishment could be seen on Arta’s lips, and after hesitating for a while she translated everything to Davide. Both of them went silent as if trying to better grasp the mystery beyond those lines. They exchanged views, and in the end they looked at the old man. He remained leaning on the side of the olive tree with an impressive calmness, waiting for the correct answer and, maybe, finally to start his story. Arta and Davide repeated it in their mind, even repeating every verse out loud.

“Skies full of glory lie upon him,” said Arta and then moved to the second part, “he wears an olive coronet on his head, palm branches throw shadows, the glass of wine held in its hand for centuries,” Davide repeated together with her.

“It seems as if he is describing a picture. You must have some idea,” she said to Davide.

“It seems like a picture landscape. It seems too general but too specific at the same time. I had not imagined it so coded and I don’t have the skills of Mr. Langdon in *The Da Vinci Code*,” he replied, lightly.

“‘Skies full of glory lie upon him’: who might that be?” she asked randomly.

“Glass of wine, history, coronet made of olive leaves,” Davide repeated, “what about the palms?” he added.

“To get some shadow from them,” Arta said. “For it must be too sunny there,” she replied trying to sit beneath some trees.

“All this reminds me of many things from Italy,” Davide said.

“It reminds me of many things from Albania as well, except for the palms,” she added.

“I have read somewhere about ‘the skies of glory’. They were related to the hot scorching air of the Sahara and could be seen only from our countries, but I cannot remember that much,” Davide said.

“According to you ‘the skies of glory’ are connected with the Sahara,” Arta said.

“I am not sure, but maybe the palms could be related too,” Davide said without any doubt.

“It seems we are getting somewhere,” Arta said, happily.

“What about the olive trees, the wine?” asked Davide. “They do not seem like the Sahara.”

“No, they are not from there, but I have heard that long ago there was a huge piece of land covered by the first olive trees up to

1. In the original Albanian language, it rhymes: *Qiej lavdie ka mbi të, kurorë ulliri mban mbi kokë, degë palme I bëjnë hije, gotën e verës e mban në dorë që prej shekujsh, historie!*

the palms of the desert called the Mediterranean.”

“You mean maybe the old man was talking about that in his puzzle?” Arta asked.

“The Mediterranean stretches up to the olive plantations,” David said.

“Moreover, it is more than that, which is why there are the palms too,” added Arta.

She went close to the man and said:

“The Mediterranean!”

“Mediterranean,” murmured the old man. “Yes, old olive trees, as old as me,” he added.

He asked Arta and Davide to sit next to him, to listen to his mysterious ancient stories kept in his memory. The old man seemed very glad that he could finally confess his stories. Davide was curious, while Arta was thinking of her readers. One day she would tell them the stories of the clever old man who had been living where the olive trees are still grown.

Dudek je na vrijeme sišao s vlaka

Marko Gregur. Hrvatska

Prvo čega se Boris sjetio kad se probudio bilo je da je ostao bez posla. Stavio je jastuk na glavu i poželio opet zaspati, ali je unatoč sklopljenim očima i jastuku bio sasvim svjestan, ni blizu sna. Pred očima mu je bio direktor i njegove riječi kad mu je rekao da je višak. „Nisi jedini. Ima vas četrdeset. Pitanje je što će za mjesec dana biti s ostalima. Sa svima, uključujući i mene. Ovo je ‘93., na slobodnom smo tržištu i situacija je teška. Još imamo i taj nesretni rat. Kad stvari krenu nabolje pozvat ćemo te natrag“. Nakon tih riječi direktor je ustao, ispružio ruku i Borisu je bilo jasno da je njegovo vrijeme isteklo.

„Slijedeći“, rekao je kolegama kad je izašao, ali nikome nije bilo do smijeha.

Zatim su mu na pamet došla djeca, dvojica sinova i žena. Maknuo je jastuk s glave i ustao. Pola sata kasnije biciklom je išao prema zavodu za zapošljavanje. Nije očekivao da će tamo naći posao, išao je samo zato da sredi zdravstveno osiguranje. Kad se vratio kući sjeo je pred televizor i ostao sjediti skoro čitav dan. Zita je odlučila ništa mu ne govoriti. Ne davati mu savjete i ne govoriti mu što bi bilo dobro. Odlučila je dati mu neko vrijeme da dođe k sebi prije nego što se pokrene.

Navečer, kad su legli i u tišini gledali svaki svoju točku u mraku, dugo je razmišljala i onda ipak rekla: „Možda bi mogao otići na neko vrijeme sa Srećkom“.

Ništa nije odgovorio. Stavio je jastuk na glavu i pokušavao zaspati.

Dva je mjeseca Boris neuspješno tražio stalni posao, a onda se jednog dana početkom ljeta dok je sjedio na balkonu, ispred kuće preko puta zaustavila Opel Ancona njemačkih registarskih oznaka, čiji je zadnji kraj bio spušten gotovo do ceste. Iz automobila je izašao Srećko, protegnuo se i počeo iz prtljažnika vaditi torbe i vrećice.

„Šogore, auto će ti ostrugati cestu. A tek smo je nedavno dobili“, viknuo mu je Boris s balkona.

„Šogore, bok“, rekao je Srećko. „Neka je sjeo. Hvala Bogu da je tako! Za svakog ponešto i auto je taj čas pun. Srećom ima velik prtljažnik“, smijao se Srećko, sretan što je stigao kući.

„Trebaš pomoć?“

„Ne treba, hvala. Vidimo se večeras?“

„Ne znam. Tek si stigao.“

„Samo dođite. Donio sam mlinac za kavu kojeg je naručila Zita“, rekao je Srećko i ušao u kuću.

Kad je stigla s posla Zita je već znala da se Srećko vratio. Javila joj je sestra i rekla da obavezno navrate navečer.

Nakon Dnevnika su prešli cestu i ušli u dvorište Srećka i Sanje. Dvorište je bilo puno. Kao i obično kad bi stigao Srećko, tamo su bila sva Sanjina braća i sestre, ukupno osmero njih. Po dvorištu su trčala djeca naganjajući novu kožnu loptu. Srećko je upravo pokušavao otvoriti petolitarnu bačvicu pive. Boris nije uživao u druženju. Pribojavao se da će mu netko svakog

trenutka predložiti da bi i on mogao sa Srećkom u Njemačku. Nije mu se išlo u tuđinu. Želio je biti doma, sa ženom, i gledati djecu kako rastu. Iako mu se i samom tu i tamo na pamet dokotrljala pomisao da bi možda zaista trebao otići jer nikako nije uspijevaio pronaći posao. Kad su se vratili kući Boris je odahnuo jer makar su čitavu večer pričali o Njemačkoj, nitko nije spomenuo da bi i on mogao otići na bauštelu i da je to baš super.

Legli su u krevet i Zita je zamišljala sestru kako puni kuhinjske elemente prazneći sve one silne vrećice koje je donio Srećko. Pitala se dokad će izdržati samo s njezinom plaćom, jer to što je Boris tu i tamo zaradio slučajnim jednodnevnim poslovima bila je zanemariva sitnica.

„Možda bi mogao otići na neko vrijeme sa Srećkom“, rekla je ne očekujući odgovor.

Boris ju je primio za ruku i tako su, držeći se za ruke i misleći na budućnost, uskoro zaspali.

Početkom nove godine Boris je uzeo sportsku torbu, napunio je najpotrebnijim stvarima, očistio snijeg pred kućom, još jednom, valjda stoti put, provjerio do kad mu vrijedi putovnica, izljubio ženu i djecu pa prešao još neočišćenu cestu, sjeo u Opel koji je pod teretom domaćih delicija opet sjeo gotovo do kolnika i zajedno sa Srećkom krenuo put Njemačke.

Sjetio se Gruntovčana, epizode kad Dudek odlazi u Njemačku i došlo mu je da izađe iz auta, kao što je Dudek sišao s vlaka, i da se vrati kući, ali je znao da to neće učiniti. Nije imao izbora, jednostavno je morao na bauštelu. Zažmirio je da ne gleda kako se njemu dobro poznati krajolik mijenja u nešto nepoznato, strano i već je gotovo zaspao kad je čuo Srećkov glas.

„Plaća je petsto maraka.“

„Super“, odgovorio je Boris i opet pomislio na Dudeka.

„Već sam ti to rekao, zar ne?“ Srećko je želio razgovarati jer ga je vožnja uspavljivala.

Boris je samo kimnuo glavom, a Srećko je nastavio pričati o čarima Njemačke, pričati priču koju je Boris već znao napamet i dok je Opel klizio cestom, a Srećko pričao, Boris je maštajući o tome što će sve kupiti ženi i djeci polako utonuo u san.

Bila je to prilično velika, iako pomalo oronula dvokatnica. (Očekivano, jer majstor sebi posljednjem napravi ono od čega živi radeći to isto drugima. Tako valjda i zidari žive u oronulim kućama). Izišli su iz auta i Srećko je počeo razgovarati s čovjekom koji je stajao pred kućom. Po naglasku je mogao biti slavonsac. Zatim su ušli u kuću. Pokazujući Borisu kuhinju, dnevni boravak i kupaonicu, Srećko je usput pričao o ljudima koji žive u kući. Svi oni rade za istog gazdu. Popeli su se na kat te stali ispred jednih vrata. Srećko je iz džepa izvadio ključ i otključao ih.

„Evo naš“, pobjedonosno je rekao ulazeći u sobu.

Boris je kružio pogledom po sobi, ali koliko god krugova napravio, uvijek je vidio samo jedan krevet. Na taj je krevet sjeo Srećko i počeo raspakirati stvari.

„Pokažeš mi moju sobu?“

Srećko je nakratko pogledao Borisa, rekao: ovo je tvoja soba, a onda opet stavio pogled u torbu i počeo vaditi nešto, kako se Borisu činilo, sa samog dna.

„A gdje je moj krevet?“

„Nema ga. Za početak ćeš morati spavati na podu. Dat ću ti ja poplun za ovu noć, a sutra bi možda mogao kupiti luftmadrac.“

„Što?“

„Luftmadrac. Luftić“, kopao je i dalje Srećko.

Dudek je sišao s vlaka, na stanici koju Boris dobro poznaje, i pješice se po pruži zaputio kući u Gruntovec. Boris je vrtio scenu u kojoj Dudek stigne kući i u dvorištu govori kako ne bi mogao živjeti, a da ne vidi svoju kuću, da ne vidi svoje dvorište i kokoši čim se ujutro probudi. Srećko je rekao da će zamoliti gazdu da im pošalje jedan krevet.

Svakog su jutra ustajali u šest sati. U sedam bi bili na gradilištu i nakon kratke kave počinjali raditi. Iako je bio naviknut na fizički rad Borisu bi ponekad postalo teško. Onda bi se sjetio svoje obitelji i to bi mu dalo snagu da progura dan. Nakon tjedan dana, kao što je bilo dogovoreno, dobio je predujam od sto maraka.

„Ovo ti šalje gazda“, rekao je Srećko dajući mu novac.

Dok je novčanicu pažljivo stavljao u džep pomišljajući kako će u subotu nakon posla otići u dućan kupiti svojima nekoliko sitnica koje su poželjeli, Srećko je miješajući cement rekao: „Ne govorim ti ovo zbog sebe, nego zbog ostalih dečki; znam koliko ti je potreban novac ali običaj je da se od prvih novaca počasti društvo. Ipak su to sve naši ljudi, naviknuti su na to. Ništa otmjeno, piva i čevapi“.

Borisu je došlo da sam sebe pojede i zatim se zalije betonom.

„Ne brini. Što je to sto maraka? Sitnica! Ovdje se vrti prava lova. Zamisli kad dođeš kući s preostalih četiristo maraka“ bodrio ga je Srećko i bilo mu je malo lakše.

Kad su se navečer vratili kući Boris je iz džepa izvadio preostali novac. Nabrojio je deset maraka i četrdeset pfeninga. Odmah se otrijeznio i skupo plaćenu dobru volju zamijenio lošom. Tih mu je novaca bilo žao kao psu.

„Na sve to još ću sutra biti mamuran“, pomislio je tonući u san.

Dani su bili ispunjeni poslom što je Borisu odgovaralo jer nije stigao osjećati nostalgiju i mjesec je brzo doklizio kraju. Počeo se spremati kući.

„Ostani još mjesec dana“, nagovarao ga je Srećko.

„Ne, idem kući. Dogovorili smo mjesec dana.“

„Što ćeš doma?“

„Javio mi je Zoran da mi je sredio neki posao. Moram samo otići na razgovor.“

„Kako hoćeš.“

„Nego, kad će mi gazda donijeti novac?“

„Sutra“, odgovorio je Srećko.

Sutra je prošlo, no gazda se nije pojavio.

„Sutra“, opet je odgovorio Srećko na Borisovo pitanje.

Malo morgen. Sutra. Prošla su još dva dana u kojima se gazda nije pojavio i Boris je počeo gubiti strpljenje. Bio je to njegov zadnji radni dan.

„Pođi s nama sutra na posao. To će ti biti plaćeno, a ionako moraš čekati gazdu.“

Boris je nosio vreće, miješao beton, ubacivao lopatom šljunak i dolijevao vodu, stalno gledajući uokolo nadajući se da će ugledati kakav skupocjeni automobil, Mercedes ili BMW, gazda je sigurno vozio jednu od takvih makina, no dan je prolazio, a prošlo je doduše i nekoliko limuzina, ali nijedna se nije zaustavila. Postalo mu je sumnjivo što nijednom nije vidio gazdu.

„Nešto mu je iskrsnulo pa je morao hitno otputovati. Dat će ti lovu za desetak dana, kad se vrati s puta“, rekao mu je navečer Srećko kad mu je Boris rekao da mu je čudno što gazdu nije čak ni upoznao.

„Što si sumnjiv čovječe! Pa nije ovo Hrvatska, hej! Ovo je Njemačka!“

Radeći na gradilištu Boris je čekao još tri dana, a onda mu je prekipjelo i odlučio je da sutradan odlazi kući. Od Srećka je posudio sto maraka, jer nije imao ni prebijenog pfeninga.

„Luftić vam ostavljam“ rekao je na odlasku. Hodajući prema željezničkom kolodvoru u jednom je dućanu Ziti kupio broš. Svakom je sinu kupio autić i čokoladu. Znao je koliko željno iščekuju poklone. Sebi je kupio kartu za vlak. Ništa drugo nije želio.

Vlak se polako povlačio prema Krociji, a Boris se opet sjetio Dudeka.

„Baš sam Dudek. Ovo se čak ni njemu ne bi dogodilo.“

Nije znao bi li nad tom mišlju plakao ili joj se smijao. Na koncu se ipak nasmijao, jer išao je kući, a to je već bilo nešto.

Kad ga je ugledala Zita ga je zagrlila i zatim zaplakala. Plakala je od sreće. Tek mu je kasnije te večeri, kad su već ležali u krevetu, oprezno prigovorila da je trebao energičnije tražiti zarađeni novac.

„Energičnije?“ ponovio je Boris njezinu riječ i razgovor je bio gotov.

Zita je odlučila ne prigovarati mu zbog toga. Boris je u Njemačku otišao zbog nje i ona je to znala.

„Srećko je rekao da će me nazvati kad se gazda vrati“, rekao je Boris i počeo je milovati (razgovor je tu za jedno vrijeme završio).

„Zaboravila sam ti reći“, progovorila je Zita kad su već gotovo zaspali, „zvao je Zoran i rekao da je netko već nažalost dobio posao o kojem ti je pričao“.

Prošlo je mjesec dana, a Srećko još uvijek nije zvao. Da mu nije bio šogor Boris bi bio uvjeren kako može zaboraviti na novac. Da mu nije bio šogor bio bi pomislio da je šogor, a ne gazda, bio bi pomislio, ma, to je ki bi da bi, što bi Boris pomislio. Ovako se još uvijek nadao. Onda je jedne večeri Srećko okrenuo njihov broj. Boris se osjećao kao da je dobio sedmicu.

„Rekao je gazda da dođeš po novac.“

„Kud?“

„Što: kud? U Njemačku.“

„Zar mi ga ne možeš nekako poslati?“

Srećko je kratko vrijeme šutio.

„Gazda je rekao da moraš sam doći po novac“, rekao je nakon kraćeg razmišljanja.

Boris je uzeo sportsku torbu, utrpao u nju stvari za nekoliko dana, kupio kartu za vlak, na peronu izljubio ženu i djecu i ušao u vagon. Ovaj mu put odlazak nije pao tako teško, iako je bio ljut što mora trošiti novac da opet stigne do matične bauštele po nešto što je trebao dobiti odmah.

Kad se mrtav umoran dočepao kuće u kojoj su živjeli radnici, momci su se baš spremali na pivo.

„Kad ću vidjeti gazdu?“

„Sutra. Sad odi s nama na pivo, malo se opusti, a sutra pokupi lov“, savjetovao mu je Srećko.

„Volio bih to odmah riješiti. Rekao si mi da će to biti danas. Rekao si mu da stižem?“

„Naravno da sam mu rekao! Otišao je na nekakav sastanak. Sutra će ti dati lov, nemaš brige. Istuširaj se na brzinu, pa idemo. A za spavanje ne brini; možeš spavati u mojoj sobi, tvoje luftmadrac još uvijek čeka.“

Ljuljajući se u mamurluku, osjećajući uzbibanost u čitavom tijelu, u nogama, želucu i mislima, Boris je slijedećeg jutra nervozno očekivao gazdu. Kad ga do kasnog popodneva još uvijek nije dočekaio misli su mu se još više zapjenile i osjećao je da ovaj izlet neće dobro završiti. Gazda se nije pojavio.

Opet je navečer legao na luftić i proklinjao dan kad se zaputio na bauštelu.

„Izgleda da švabo zna *naša posla*“, rekao je Srećku no on nije ništa odgovorio. Spavao je. Ili se samo pravio da spava.

Tri dana kasnije Boris je otišao do željezničkog kolodvora. Preznojio se isprobavajući na šalteru učinke raznih riječi s djevojkom koja ih je teško hvatala, pomislio je da je i ona možda stranac u toj velikoj zemlji, bio je gotovo siguran da bi ga razumjela da je na hrvatskom upita za cijenu karte, ali nije imao volju raspredati s neznankom o „starom kraju“ pa se čvrsto držao njemačkog i kad je na koncu saznao cijenu karte sa strepnjom je otvorio novčanik i izbrojao novac. Znao je koliko ima, svatko tko nema novac zna koliko ga ima, ali je brojao nadajući se čudu, no čudo se nije dogodilo. Bilo ga je koliko i posljednji put kad je brojio. Zita će ostati bez mikrovalne. Novac koji mu je dala morao je dodati za kartu.

„Ein, bite, fir Zagreb“, zamolio je na šalteru.

„Što ne kažeš da ideš za Zagreb?“ očekivano je rekla prodavačica.

Boris se umorno nasmiješio, kimnuo glavom i bez riječi joj pružio novac.

Vratio se do kuće, ispuhao luftmadrac pa ga spremio u torbu, na komadić papira napisao Srećku da odlazi kući i da ga moli da mu on donese novac, te se opet odšetao do kolodvora i čekao vlak koji je polazio za pet sati.

Četiri je mjeseca Boris tražio stalni posao, a onda se jednog dana početkom ljeta, dok je sjedio na balkonu, ispred kuće preko puta zaustavila Opel Ancona njemačkih registarskih oznaka, čiji je zadnji kraj bio spušten gotovo do ceste. Iz automobila je izašao Srećko, protegnuo se i počeo vaditi vrećice i torbe.

„Šogore, bok“, viknuo mu je Boris.

„Bok.“

„Auto ti je sjeo gotovo do ceste.“

„Nek je sjeo, stara raga. Za svakog ponešto, sitnice, i auto je začas pun. A i malen je to automobil, napuniš ga samo tako.“

„Vidimo se večeras?“ pitao je Boris.

„Ne znam, malo sam umoran. Ako ne danas, onda sutra“, odgovorio je Srećko.

Boris ga nije pitao za novac. Osjećao je da to nema smisla. Ušao je u kuću i sjeo na kauč. Tek što je dohvatio daljinski, u boravak je uletio stariji sin.

„Tata, napuhneš mi luftić?“

Prvo je pomislio izderati se na dijete, viknuti da mu taj luftić miče s očiju, a zatim je pomislio upitati ga što uopće misli raditi s tim luftićem, ali niti se izderao, niti ga je pitao što će mu luftić kad vode nema niti blizu, osim ako ga ne misli ugurati u pipu. Samo je uzdahnuo, uzeo luftić u ruke i počeo puhati iz sve snage. Kad ga je napuhnio, opet je uhvatio daljinski i upalio televizor. Ljetna shema upravo je, kao i obično, prikazivala Gruntovčane.

Dudek Got off the Train on Time

Marko Gregur. Croatia

The first thing Boris remembered when he woke up was the fact that he had lost his job. He put the pillow over his head and wished that he could fall back to sleep but, despite his eyes being shut and his pillow over his head, he was quite awake, nowhere near a dream. He kept seeing his manager and hearing his words:

“You’re not the only one. There are forty of you. The question is what will happen to the rest of the staff, including me. It’s 1993 and this is a free market, and the situation is not easy. And then there is this unfortunate war. When things start looking better, we’ll call you back.”

After saying those words, the manager stood up, held out his hand and Boris knew his time was up.

“Next,” he said to his colleagues when he went out of the room, but no one was in the mood for laughter.

Then he started thinking of his kids, his two boys, and his wife. He removed the pillow from his head and got up. Half an hour later he was bicycling in the direction of the Employment Service. He wasn’t expecting to find a job there; he just went to take care of his health insurance. When he returned home, he sat in front of the television and remained there for the entire day. Zita decided not to say anything to him. She didn’t want to give him any advice or tell him what would be good for him. She decided to give him some time to come to grips with the situation before acting on it.

In the evening, after they went to bed, each watching in their own spot in the dark, she thought for a long time, and then finally said:

“Maybe you could go and be with Srećko for a while.”

He didn’t reply. He placed the pillow over his head and tried to get to sleep.

For two months, Boris tried to find a steady job, but to no avail, and then one day, the beginning of summer, while he was sitting on his balcony, an Opel Ancona, with German registration plates and its rear end almost touching the ground, parked in front of the house across the street. Srećko got out of the car, stretched his legs and started taking out bags and luggage from the trunk.

“Hey there, brother-in-law, your car will scrape the road! And we just recently got it,” Boris shouted at him from the balcony.

“Hi, there, in-law,” said Srećko. “Oh, yes, it sinks alright. And thank God for that! A little something for everybody, and before you know it, the car is full. Luckily, it has a big trunk,” Srećko was laughing, happy to finally be home.

“Do you need any help?”

“No, thanks. See you tonight?”

“I don’t know. You just got here.”

“Oh, just drop by. I brought that coffee grinder that Zita ordered,” Srećko said and went into the house.

When she returned from work, Zita already knew that Srećko was back. Her sister had called and told her that they should drop by in the evening.

After the 7 o’clock news, they went across the street to enter Srećko and Sanja’s patio. The patio was crowded as usual in these situations. Every time Srećko was back, all

of Sanja's brothers and sisters, all eight of them, would come to visit. Children were running through the patio chasing after the new leather ball. Srećko was just trying to open a 5-litre beer keg. Boris wasn't enjoying this little get together. He was afraid that someone could have proposed that he leave with Srećko for Germany. He didn't want to go abroad; he wanted to be at home with his wife, and watch his children growing up, although the idea crossed his mind a couple of times, mainly because he couldn't find a job. After they came back, Boris felt relieved because, although they spent much of the evening talking about Germany, no one even mentioned the possibility of him going to Germany to find a job on some construction site because it was such a great opportunity.

After they went to bed, Zita pictured her sister filling the kitchen cabinets with the contents of all those bags that Srećko brought home. She wondered for how long they would be able to endure with her salary alone, because what Boris earned moonlighting with random one-day jobs just wasn't enough.

"Maybe you could go away with Srećko for a while," she said not expecting a reply.

Boris took her hand, and soon they fell asleep, holding hands and thinking about the future.

At the beginning of new year, Boris took his sports bag, filled it up with the most necessary things, cleaned the snow outside his house, checked the expiry date on his passport again for the hundredth time, kissed his wife and children goodbye, crossed the road and got in the familiar Opel, which was now weighed down with homemade delicatessen making it almost touch the ground again, and headed for Germany with Srećko.

He remembered the old television show *Gruntovčani*, and the episode in which the

main character, Dudek, leaves for Germany, and he wanted to get out of the car the same way Dudek got off the train, and go back home, but he knew he wouldn't do it. He didn't have a choice anymore; he simply had to go to the *baustellen*. He closed his eyes so as not to see the all too familiar landscape change into something unknown and foreign, and he almost dozed off when he heard Srećko's voice.

"The salary is five hundred German marks."

"Great," Boris replied and thought of Dudek again.

"I told you this already, didn't I?" Srećko wanted to start a conversation because the drive was making him feel sleepy.

Boris just nodded his head, and Srećko continued talking about the charms of Germany, the same story Boris already knew by heart, and while the Opel glided down the highway and Srećko continued with the talk, Boris fantasized about all the things he would buy for his wife and children and slowly fell asleep.

It was a rather big, run-down, two-story house, as was expected, because the shoemaker always forgets to mend his own shoes. They got out of the car and Srećko started talking to a man who was standing in front of the house. He gathered by the man's accent that he was from the Croatian Slavonia region. Then they went in the house. While showing Boris the kitchen, the living room, and the bathroom, Srećko told him about the people living in this house. They all have the same boss. They went upstairs and stopped in front of one of the doors. Srećko took out the key from his pocket, unlocked the doors, and said in a victorious tone:

"Here we are!"

Boris looked around the room but, as many times as he looked, he kept seeing just

one bed. Srećko sat on that bed and started unpacking.

“Can you show me my room?”

Srećko looked at Boris briefly and showed him his room. He turned again to his bag and started taking out things, as it appeared to Boris, from the bottom of the bag.

“And where is my bed?”

“You don’t have one. You will have to sleep on the floor for now. I will give you my quilt for tonight, and tomorrow, maybe, you can go out and buy yourself an air mattress.”

“What?”

“An air mattress, you know, an inflatable one,” Srećko kept digging through his bag.

Dudek got off the train at the station Boris knew well, and started walking on the railway tracks back home to Gruntovec. Boris kept rewinding the scene in his head in which Dudek comes home and in the courtyard talks about how he couldn’t live without his house, his garden, and his chickens being the first things he would see in the morning. Srećko said that he would ask the boss to send them one extra bed.

They got up at six am every day. At seven they were already at the construction site, and after drinking coffee they would start work. Although he was used to manual work, Boris found it really hard at times. Then he would think of his family, and that would give him strength to make it through the day. After a week, he got an advance payment of one hundred marks, as was previously agreed.

“This is from the boss,” Srećko said and handed him the money.

While he was carefully placing the bills in his pocket, he thought about how on Saturday after work he would go to the store and buy some knick-knacks his family asked him for. Srećko was mixing the cement and said:

“I’m not telling you this for me, but for the rest of the guys; I know how much you

need the money, but it is customary when you get your first pay to treat the guys. They are, after all, our folks, and they’re used to it. You know, nothing fancy, just beers and shish kebabs.”

Boris wanted to scream and pour cement all over himself.

“Don’t worry. What’s a hundred marks? Change money! There is some real money coming in here. Imagine when you go home with the remaining four hundred marks,” Srećko was being supportive, and immediately Boris felt at ease.

After returning home later that evening, Boris took out the remaining money from his pocket. He counted ten marks and forty pfennigs. He got sober in an instant, and his expensive good mood was instantly replaced with a bad one. He felt as sorry as a dog about the money he had spent.

“And on top of everything, tomorrow I’ll have a hangover,” Boris thought as he was falling asleep.

Days were filled with work, which suited Boris just fine because in that way he didn’t have time to feel nostalgic, and the month passed quickly. He started packing for the return home.

“Stay for another month,” Srećko tried to persuade him.

“No, I’m going home. We said one month.”

“What will you do back home?”

“Zoran called and said he’d arranged a job for me. All I have to do is show up at the interview.”

“Suit yourself.”

“By the way, when will the boss give me my money?”

“Tomorrow,” Srećko answered.

Tomorrow came and went, but no boss.

“Tomorrow,” Srećko replied again when Boris asked.

Tomorrow's not happening. Tomorrow. Another two days passed, and again a no-show from the boss, and Boris started to lose his patience. It was his last day at work.

"Come to work with us tomorrow. You'll be paid for it, and you have to wait for the boss anyway."

Boris carried bags of cement, mixed the cement, added gravel with the shovel and poured water, constantly looking around hoping to see some expensive car like a Mercedes or a BMW, because the boss was bound to drive a car like that, but as the day passed, several limos passed as well, but none of them stopped. He became suspicious about never seeing the boss.

"Something came up and he had to leave. He will give you the money in ten days when he returns from his trip," Srećko told Boris after he confronted him about how strange it is that he had never even met the boss.

"Why are you being so suspicious? Come on, this is not Croatia! This is Germany!"

Boris spent three more days working at the construction site, waiting, until finally he was fed up and decided to leave the following day. He borrowed one hundred marks from Srećko because he didn't have a pfennig on him.

"I'll leave the air mattress here," he said while leaving. On his way to the train station, he stopped in a store and bought a brooch for Zita. He bought a small toy car and a chocolate bar for each of his boys. He bought a train ticket for himself. He didn't want anything else.

The train was moving slowly for *Kroatien*, and Boris once again thought of Dudek.

"I'm a real *Dudek* (a naive person). This wouldn't even have happened to him."

He didn't know whether to cry or laugh thinking about it. Finally, he laughed, but

only because he was going home, and that was at least something.

When she saw him, Zita hugged him and started crying. She was crying from happiness. It wasn't until later that evening, when they were already in bed, that she carefully remarked that he should have been more energetic in asking for his money.

"More energetic?" Boris repeated after her, and the conversation ended there.

Zita decided not to nag him about it. Boris went to Germany because of her, and she knew it.

"Srećko said that he would call me when the boss returns," Boris said and started caressing her (the conversation stopped there for a while).

"I forgot to tell you," Zita said after they'd almost fallen asleep, "Zoran called and said that, unfortunately, someone already got the job he was telling you about."

A month has passed, and still no call from Srećko. If he wasn't his brother-in-law, Boris would be convinced that he was never going to see his money but this way he was still hopeful. Then one night Srećko rang. Boris felt like he had won the lottery.

"The boss says you should come and pick up the money."

"Where?"

"What do you mean, where? Germany."

"Can't you send me the money somehow?"

Srećko was silent for a second.

"The boss said that you have to pick up the money yourself," he answered after a while.

Boris took out his sports bag, put a few things to last him a couple of days in it, bought the train ticket, kissed his wife and kids at the station and got on the train. The departure

wasn't so hard on him this time, although he was a little bit mad for having to spend money again to get to the *baustellen* and pick up something which he was supposed to get right away.

After finally arriving at the house where the workers lived, he was already dead tired, and the guys were just going out for a beer.

"When will I see the boss?"

"Tomorrow. Go on, have a beer with us now, relax a little bit, and then tomorrow go and get your money," Srećko advised.

"I would like to resolve this now. You said it would be today. You told him I was coming?"

"Of course I told him! He's at some meeting. He will give you the money tomorrow, don't worry about it. Go on, take a quick shower, and we'll go. And don't worry about the sleeping arrangements; you can sleep in my room, your air mattress is still there."

Swaying in a hangover state, feeling the heave in his entire body, in his legs, stomach and thoughts, Boris was anxiously waiting for the boss the following morning. When in the late afternoon he still hadn't come, his thoughts became even more feverish and he could now sense that this outing was not going to end well. The boss never showed.

In the evening he was laying on the air mattress again cursing the day when he came to work at the *baustellen*.

"It seems that the Kraut is familiar with *our ways*," he told Srećko, but Srećko didn't reply. He was either sleeping, or pretending to be asleep.

Three days later, Boris found himself at the train station again. He was sweating while trying out different words with the girl who had difficulties understanding him, and he thought that maybe she was another foreigner in this big country, and he was almost certain that if he asked her for the price of

the ticket in Croatian, she would have had no problems understanding him, but he had no desire to discuss the "old homeland" with a complete stranger, which is why he held on to his German, and when he finally found out the price of the ticket, he took out his wallet with a tremble, and counted the money. He knew how much money he had, everyone who hasn't got any money knows how much money they have, but he still counted, hoping for a miracle, but the miracle didn't happen. The wallet contained the exact same amount of money as there was the last time he checked. Zita won't get her microwave. He had to spend the money she gave him on the train ticket.

"*Ein, bite, fir Zagreb*," he asked at the ticket counter.

"Well, why don't you say you're going to Zagreb?" the lady at the counter said in Croatian.

Boris smiled tiredly, nodded his head and, without saying a word, handed her the money.

He returned to the house, deflated the mattress and packed it in his bag, and on a piece of paper he wrote a note for Srećko saying that he was going home and asking him to bring him the money. He then went to the train station, and waited for the train that was due in five hours.

Boris spent four months searching for a steady job, and then one day, at the beginning of summer, while he was sitting on his balcony, that same old Opel Ancone with German registration plates and a rear end lowered almost to the ground, stopped in front of the house across the street. And Srećko got out of the car, stretched his legs, and started taking out bags and luggage from the trunk.

"Hi, there, in-law," Boris yelled across the street.

"Hi."

“Your car is practically sitting on the street.”

“Let it sit, that old thing. A little something for everybody and the car gets full in an instant. And it’s a small car, it’s easily filled.”

“So, see you tonight?” Boris asked.

“I don’t know. I’m feeling a bit tired from the trip. If not today, tomorrow then,” Srećko answered.

Boris didn’t ask him about the money. He knew that it wouldn’t make much sense. He went back into the house and sat in front of the TV. As soon as he took the remote, his older son came running into the living room.

“Dad, can you inflate the air mattress?”

At first he thought of yelling at the child and telling him to get the mattress out of his sight, and then he thought of asking him what he needed the mattress for, but he neither yelled nor asked what he would use the mattress for when there was no water around, unless he was thinking of shoving it into the tap. He just sighed, took the mattress and started blowing as hard as he could. When he finished, he grabbed the remote again and turned on the TV. The summer schedule had started, and, as usual, there was a rerun of *Gruntovčani*.

The Island

Mahmoud Mansi. Egypt

“All I hear is the shuttling of the waves. They are like thoughts; with each crash they chant, they tend to be newer than ever. The bubbles that the sea whispers are as moody as myself; some bring hope while the rest of the sea brings doom. My silence is oppression. My loud cries are null compared with these of the vast sea. It is either one who speaks to himself or to his God. It’s a strange state that one becomes a connection between his deepest core and the farthest of the universe. Yet, from time to time, we might be blessed with this soothing sound, the one which awakens a certain kind of beauty within one’s heart. This voice is the only medicine that heals my heart, the tranquil voice of a She... Why should we be granted such wonders when one loses everything? Unused wonders they are...” Thus the Prisoner shut his eyes to the surrounding the darkness around. Vigilantly, he kept listening to the surrounding universe, hoping a different sound would strike his attention. Finally, he gave in to sleep, with much hope of fake dreams embracing his night, and only worrying about the knocking on his door that wakes him from his Utopia each morning.

* * *

The dungeon was dull, the same as every day, the Doorkeeper thought. As he knocked on the door of the only prisoner there, carrying the food whose smell he could not handle anymore, he wondered how long the same day would be repeated over and over again. The knocking on the door, feeding the poor creature in there was his nightmare during the night and an ugly reality throughout the day. He felt that he was feeding the Prisoner poison instead of food, a source of death instead of a source of life, yet such poison is not enough to kill.

Feeding him every day was keeping the creature alive, only to witness the slow death of hope. It is either he or his heart that should die. For one to bear such pain and still keep the heart alive, someone like Jesus is needed, yet life still manages to crucify us endlessly, every single day! Like the immortal liver of Prometheus eaten by the Eagle. The irony of life sometimes forces us to act the role of the Eagle, feeding on the livers of one another, and leaving the rest of the body to rust within the seas of darkness that lie within our dull memory. The Doorkeeper sighed, and knocked on the door...

* * *

A banging like the drums of a destined war is what the Prisoner heard. It was too loud for his mind to handle. Sadly, he felt how they were similar to the ones of his heart. He was still alive!

He never blamed the Doorkeeper, as they were both prisoners on the same island without a boat to take them away. Indeed there was one that only visited them quarterly to provide them with semi-rotten food and expired medicine. And even if they had built their own boat, they would have only escaped to another island, except food, medicine and shelter would not be guaranteed. It is just a shame how Humanity had become such a slave to security, safety and

other things that corner one within the bars of fear and psychological illness. We have become slaves to the things that make us suffer and bring us ultimate misery!

Both of them, though alone on this island, were excelling perfectly in their duties. Though they were not free, being slaves to their routine duties gave them identities. But why does one become so keen to have an identity? Does it give us the right to live, perhaps? Or probably since everyone has an identity then being without one is considered as a distinctive quality: unique and against the earthly rules, so that it may lead to a different destination; a new place!

Perhaps having an identity is more like a label, just another shirt we wear, change and throw away. It only reflects a small part of who we are, what our moods and lifestyles are like, and what we are capable of. It reflects the capability of one's purchasing power and ability to understand the surrounding environment. It is the shield we wear in the battle field.

They both pondered over all that. What if one walked naked without wearing any limiting identity? To be more like an objective book that embraces endless theories for artists to anticipate and shape. Like this all will fathom us in their own way. We will find something deeper than the shallow identity we used to wear and hide underneath, we will find a definition!

We will be meanings rather than names and customs. Yet what are the values of meanings when they are static, dead and useless?

"Having an Identity to shelter us is much better than being exposed to freedom that would handicap us!" the Doorkeeper always deemed.

* * *

Sometimes they would both fall silent for weeks, other times they would curse one another for being there, and for being a reason for bringing the other to this static pyramid. At a certain point, they would share and empathize. Forgiveness in the realm they lived in was a major curse! It was just another wave, just another trend, a part of a seasonal cycle, endless as the ocean, countless as the secrets embraced by the seven seas.

Forgiveness was only a blessing in one condition, if it is immortal.

* * *

"What good do they bring, when thoughts are my only friends? They don't keep my company; rather they make me realize how lonely one can be! What is the value of thoughts when the body is chained to incapability, weakness, silence and repulsiveness? The only value thoughts bring to me is hushing my earthly desires. My cursed desires rise more whenever I discover how helpless I am within the dark walls of my prison cell. My destiny is within the key that lies within the hands of the Doorkeeper."

The keychain melody was like a blade moving back and forth as a bow slaughtering the strings of a violin. Such a blade was one of the most outrageous poisons he tasted daily, yet it was the drug that he could no longer live without. Why was not he like the Doorkeeper? At least he would have had the chance to hold something, control it. He longed to own something else rather than only thoughts and feelings...

"I am condemned to be a prisoner under the mercy of a sinner like myself."

* * *

“I sit amongst the rocks, watching the motion of the waves as they never change every day, bringing me the same thoughts they do with each one or, to be more accurate, reminding me of the same thoughts I forced myself to forget with each night’s bottle of liquor. I find within their soothing whispers the vocals of the Sirens, tempting me to go away, thus I embrace the secrets of their beauty. They will always be the distant lovers I will never touch... Gardens of roses are not yet enough to grant the distrustful sea as a loyal messenger to deliver to the other side.”

He longed to hush those whispers, see the waves not speaking any thoughts... he wanted to wake up to find the sea sleeping, static and solid as a glass sheet. He longed to walk on this sheet to find the thoughts he always desired, and not being fed with what was always available. He only longed for freedom of choice, justice for having a suitable identity rather than the one forced on him by both; his society and his earthly desires.

“Here comes the dark night. I am nothing but an empty stomach filled with nothing but a sea of alcohol eating the wall of my stomach as salty water eats the surface of metal. I must sleep now, to find myself conscious, witness my birth once again on this island, and watch my new life, as it ends like the previous one, like the coming one, like the motion of the moon and sun... endless, merciless,” he shut his eyes and slept as silent as death.

* * *

“I know you are there somewhere, behind the dead walls of the castle. I listen to your lively sighs each night. Forgive me, for sometimes I get confused and think that it is the voice of my thoughts. The question that confuses me the most is why a heavenly Mermaid like yourself would bother loving me, whereas you have a vast sea of Sailors, Fishermen, Knights, Pirates and Captains to long for? I feel guilty because this is unjust for you, or maybe you know me so well, maybe you know that being a Prisoner is not my real identity? You deprive me of your divinity, yet you do not deprive me of your existence. I understand you now, I see you more clearly. You want me to break the curse I found myself enveloped in. You want me to venture out and find my reality. You want me to rise to your divinity, and become equal to you! You are waiting for that to happen. You definitely see something different in me other than the colours you see every day. You must have believed in me so much to define me as a very distinctive one! I feel my real value whenever I think of you or listen to your voice. Damn you for believing in me that much... while I am nothing but a Prisoner!”

* * *

At first they used to talk through the door of the dungeon, but later on, they wondered what good would it bring when one reads a book that has already been memorized? People change and even the environment changes, but they were slaves to their routine and to their identity. They never asked for their rights. They never worried or struggled. They never changed; thus, they have always seen one another as static books that are only there to fill in the missing space of a library. They barely spoke, but they knew the reason behind that. At least there was telepathy between them. They were still alive, unfortunately, they thought.

* * *

Through the day, soliloquy was their only rehearsal. It had all the books they ever needed. It carried all the past and future, all the memories and dreams, all the ones they knew and the ones they wanted to know. It was the endless land that they longed for.

The Prisoner wrote on the wall: “I have abandoned the universe and dedicated my life to myself only. I thought this must be the end of my misery, but, confusingly, I found another universe inside me.”

Another night landed on the island.

* * *

One day, as the Doorkeeper contemplated among the cliffs of the island, he found at the far end two figures standing silently and steadily. The man was terrified of their customs and stability, of their identities. He rapidly galloped toward the prison cell. He unlocked the door, told his fellow Prisoner about the Intruders. The Prisoner smiled and thought it must be salvation. They went to speak to them.

The Prisoner said, “Why are you so late? We have been waiting for you for too long!”

The First Intruder, overwhelmed, responded, “Really! And what do you expect us to give?”

The Prisoner said, “Freedom, salvation, wings to fly... Death!”

“Unfortunately, we are here to bring you Life!”

The Doorkeeper, sighing with relief, said “Life!”

The Second Intruder said, “Yes, we are here to bestow upon you Justice and Equality.”

“Oh finally!” looking toward his friend, the Prisoner.

The two Intruders asked them to return to the castle and then they anonymously disappeared.

* * *

Both companions felt extreme relief and happiness, but they found themselves alone with the same motionless rocks, the same waves and thoughts. They were still trapped. They were still slaves, with unbroken handcuffs chained to their spirits. The Prisoner walked back to his cell, and locked himself in. The Doorkeeper went back to the rocks, where the waves were waiting for him.

* * *

Two weeks later, the boat carrying the supplements did not show up and both of them started to starve. A few hours later the door of the prison cell was unlocked and together they endeavoured to search for water, fishing and hunting tools, and new survival methods. They both became equal partners with new identities. The boat never showed up again. Two months later, they locked the cell from the outside, threw away the key and watched it eaten by the waves.

* * *

They adored their new identities. They cherished such freedom. They even spoke to one another. The Prisoner was able to sleep peacefully through the night, and the Doorkeeper tasted wine occasionally. Finally, the waves spoke a different language!

* * *

He missed his Mermaid so much, the Prisoner. She visited him shortly after his release, and he felt blessed when he heard her voice again. This time there was no prison wall to separate them. He finally saw her, and how beautiful she truly was. His happiness was finally complete. They spoke for hours. With each word they were both astonished by the amount of experience the other possessed. Her last words struck him even more, regardless of how logical they were!

She said, "You always had the chance to come for me, to be who you really are, yet you never moved. You always had the chance to excel, but you chose to stay in your dark room, enshrouded by the mere safety of the darkness. You only changed because you were forced to!"

She dived as her eyes were dwelling with tears. He never saw those eyes again...

* * *

The Doorkeeper walked to the waves with his feet touching the tip of their tongue. Their whispers did not change much. They were only rephrasing their sentences. He found out that he and his neighbour were still trapped on the island. Nothing changed, they only turned into Survivors. That was even worse, he thought. He met his companion in the brotherhood of survival sitting on a rock by the sea. He sat beside him.

The Prisoner looked around him with shadows full of misery and said, "They brought us life, and life brought us nothing but misery, ugliness and sorrow. The curse either lies within us or within this island. We will never know, I guess."

They both started drinking.

* * *

"It's not our fault," the Doorkeeper said. "On this island, Justice and Equality hardly intersect! Same as communism that claims equality but surely rapes justice. Perhaps we are also deprived of being one of Nature's exceptions..."

* * *

"What's your deepest fear?" one of the Survivors asked the other.

"If the distrustful sea spits back the key of the cell... What is yours?"

"The return of the supplement boat!"

"We are always trapped between choices."

Kuplia

Tiia R. Junnonaho. Suomi

Äiti meni jo nuorena tyttönä naimisiin, ja kaikki ovat sitä mieltä, että se johtui hänen hiuksistaan. Ne ovat mustat ja aaltoilevat ja menevät helposti takkuun, ja siksi ne pitää kammata huolellisesti joka ilta. Isä sanoo takkuja solmuiksi. Hän sanoo myös, että niitä tulee siksi, että äiti miettii liikaa.

– Ei tämä murehtimalla miksikään muutu, isä sanoo, ja katsoo äitiä muka ankarasti. Mitä minä oikein olen tehnyt, että sain vaimokseni noinkin suuren ajattelijan?

– Jonkun tässä perheessä täytyy kai sekin tehdä, äiti murahtaa hymykuopat poskillaan, painu sinä siitä renkaita vaihtamaan. Siinä kun liikaa viivyttelet, joku silvio tulee myöhässä kotiin rakastajattarensa luota, ja vaimo ja lapset joutuvat ahtamaan paksut poskensa täyteen makkaraa, ettei se jäähdy ja mene pilalle.

Isä hymyilee ja vilkuttaa meille korvillan hyvästiksi. Hän on ainoa mies koko leirissä, joka osaa vilkuttaa korvillan. Korjaamon muut miehet pitävät isästä, sillä hän viihdyttää heitä usein panemalla korvat tanssimaan rätisevän radion tahtiin sillä välin kun muut miehet polttelevat tupakkaa lounaaksi. Kiki kysyi kerran äidiltä, mitä jos korvat rasittuvat liikaa ja tippuvat irti moisesta hurjastelusta. Jos poliisit tietäisivät, että korvilla on hauskaa, saisivat pampusta ne ja koko mies siinä samassa, äiti tokaisi ja vaivasi leipätaikinaa otsa rypyssä ja korvakorut helisten. Kiki on vasta 11-vuotias, eikä siksi aina ymmärrä näitä asioita niin kuin minä.

Äiti istuu risti-istunnassa lattialla ja minä seison hänen edessään ja kampaan. Kiki käy makaamaan äidin viereen ja painaa päänsä hänen syliinsä. Kampaan ja kampaan ja kampaan hiuksia auki ja takaa eteen niin kauan, että sekä äidit kasvot että Kiki ovat piilossa niiden alla kuin hiusmetsässä tai teltassa. Teltta on minun suosikkikampaukseni. Kun kuulen äidin aloittavan tarinan mummosta ja hänen lumotusta mustasta hevosestaan, pujahdan äkkiä telttaan omalle paikalleni pää äidin oikealla reidellä. Makaamme kasvot vastakkain, mutten enää näe Kikiä sillä vauva äidin mahassa on kasvanut niin isoksi, että sillä on oma paikkansa teltan keskellä. Äidin ääni on käheä kun hän matkii hevosen hirnunta. Minäs suljen silmäni ja näen tähtien välissä kuinka mummo ratsastaa hame hulmuten läpi kaupungin, ja vauva potkii laukkaan tahtia.

* * *

Elämässä täytyy silloin tällöin pysähtyä pohtimaan perusarvoja. Terveys ja läheisten hyvinvointi ovat paljon tärkeämpiä asioita kuin raha ja menestyminen. Työ ei voi olla koko elämä, mutta sen tulee toki olla mielekäästä ja haastavaa. Vaikka lapset ovat kaikki kaikessa, etenkin naisen täytyy huolehtia myös omasta hyvinvoinnistaan arkirumban keskellä. Itseen voi hemmotella vaikkapa kuntosalikortilla tai lasillisella kuohuvaa ystävättärien kesken kunnon shoppailukieroksen jälkeen. Minua auttavat jaksamaan arjen pienet ilot, jotka nykyihmiseltä tuntuvat olevan kateissa. En usko laatu aikaan enkä suorittamiseen, vaan aitoon läsnäoloon tässä hetkessä, vaikka se onkin ristiriidassa ajassamme jylläävien kovien arvojen kanssa. Yhteisöllisyyttä on todella

kohdata toinen ihminen joka päivä, hyväksyä sekä hänet että itsensä puutteellisena mutta silti arvokkaana yksilönä.

Minä ja Kristo erosimme sovussa. Emme riidelleet vaan keskustelimme, emmekä nähneet eroa loppuna vaan uutena alkuna. Laitoimme yhdessä hyvän päivällisen, ja kerroimme Lindalle. Oli tärkeää, että Linda näki meidän työskentelevän sopuisasti ruuanlaiton osalta kohti yhteistä päämäärää, ennen kuin kuuli erosta. Halusimme, että hänelle konkretisoituisi meidän yhä olevan perhe ja että minulla ja Kristolla on toimiva kommunikaatiosuhde, vaikkei enää rakkaussuhdetta olisikaan. Linda suhtautui uutiseen murrosikäisen tyyppillisellä mustavalkoisuudella: huutamalla, itkemällä ja karkaamalla yöllä ystävänsä kanssa kaupungille. Kristo löysi hänet seuraavana aamuna kylpyhuoneesta oksentamasta uhmakasta alkoholikokeiluun. Kasvatustilofiamme mukaisesti Kristo ei raivonnut eikä rangaissut, vaan istui Lindan viereen keskustelemaan hänen kanssaan nuorten pahoinvoinnista ja sen syistä. Kristo kertoi minulle myöhemmin, että heillä oli ollut hieno lapsi-vanhempi-hetki, vaikka Linda oli tietenkin käskenyt Kristoa ”painumaan vittuun” ja voivotellut ikä kautensa mukaisesti, ”kukaan ei rakasta mua”. Vaikka olin ylpeä Kriston jämäkkyudesta tilanteessa, jossa moni curling-vanhempi olisi antanut periksi, tunsin piston sydämessäni. Eräskin ensipäivystäjä on kertonut pukuhuoneesta niistä sadoista ellei tuhansista 14-vuotiaita tässäkin maassa, joilla ei ole ketään turvallista aikuista.

* * *

Keskiviikko on vesipäivä. Äiti lähettää aina silloin minut, koska olen kaksi vuotta Kikiä vahvempi, ja pärjään jonossa paremmin. Keskiviikkoisin tulevat hyvältä tuoksuvat naiset punaisissa liiveissään, joissa on valkoinen risti, ja jakavat vettä letkulla isosta autosta. Ihmiset ojentelevat kuppejaan, kippojaan ja ämpäreitään ja huutelevat naisille vieraalla, laulavalla kielellä. Äiti ei itse koskaan mene keskiviikon jonoon, koska häpeää niin, että oma kansa opettelee vierasta kieltä vain kerjätäkseen. Minusta laulukielä kuulostaa ihan mukavalta televisiossa, kun sitä puhuvat iloiset ihmiset, jotka hymyilevät toisilleen. Matkin sitä kerran Kikille ja isälle, kun äiti oli lähdössä Miriana-tädin asuntovau-nulle ihastelemaan heidän uutta vessaansa, ja otti mukaansa meidän viimeiset teemme tuomisiksi. Isä ei käsittänyt, miksi yhtä vessaa pitää oikein matkan päästä lähteä juhlimaan ja ihastelemaan. Äiti tokaisi, että vessa on kolmas koko leirissä, ja se vasta juhlan paikka olisikin, jos miehet joskus välittäisivät siitä miten perheelle vedet kannetaan ja kusiämpärit tyhjenetään, ja jos isä joskus hankkisi äidille jotain tätä helvettiä helpottamaan niin se olisi juhlan paikka se. Kun äiti marssi ulos ja isä istui murjottamaan sitä, ettei ehkä koskaan pääsisi vessajuhliin, minä levitin suuni ammollen, otin sen täyteen aakkosia ja huusin television kanssa peeer favooore, per favooore, kaara miiia! Isä nauroi, ja Kiki nauroi, ja minäkin nauroin, kunnes äiti yhtäkkiä seiso i edessäni ja löi minua kämmenellä suulle. Hänen silmissään oli kyneleitä kun hän läväytti vaunun oven perässään kiinni. Siksi en välitä puhua laulukieltä, en kotona enkä jonossa kun ei minulle kukaan nainen kuitenkaan hymyile.

* * *

Tutustutimme Lindan yhdessä Kriston uuteen naisystävään, vaaleaan ja aurinkoiseen Katriin. Kokoonnuimme kaikki minun luokseni. Jälleen kerran laitoimme yhdessä ruokaa, sillä kiireetön yhdessäolo tosiaan on se meidän perheen juttu. Linda yritti alkuun kiukutella, mutta kun emme palkinneet häntä huomioimalla huonoa käytöstä, hän keskittyi kiroilun sijaan tomaatti-mozza-

rella-salaattiinsa. Pääruoalla hän pyysi saada myös lasin viiniä. Kehuin häntä: hän oli selvästi oppinut läksynsä, eikä enää halunnut läträtä alkoholin kanssa. Kannustimme mielellämme häntä omaksumaan sivistyneitä juomatapoja turvallisesti kodin seinien sisällä, eikä mallioppimaan humalahakuista ördäämistä kavereiltaan tai heidän vanhemmiltaan. Hän joi toisenkin lasillisen ja pyysi sitten kohteliaasti lupaa nousta pöydästä. Katrikin oli ihmeissään, kuinka kypsä ja hyväkäyttöksinen tytär meillä onkaan.

En itse etsinyt aktiivisesti uutta suhdetta eron jälkeen, sillä halusin tutustua paremmin itseäni; tietenkin oli myös tärkeää olla Lindan tukena hänen kasvussaan naiseksi. Ikonimaalauskurssilla Valamossa tapasin kuitenkin hurmaavan taiteilijan. Välillämme oli heti uskomatonta eroottista värinää, joka purkautui kypsäksi suhteeksi kahden aikuisen ihmisen välillä. Tapasimme silloin tällöin eri hotelleissa, eikä kumpikaan ollut epätietoinen siitä, missä mennään tai mitä toinen suhteelta haluaa. Yritin houkutellessa Lindaa mukaan uuteen harrastukseeni, mutta hän ilmoitti, ettei halua tehdä kanssani mitään. Kunnioitin hänen mielipidettään ajatellen, etten ehkä itsekään olisi halunnut kertoa koulussa maalaavani äitini kanssa. En hae hyväksyntää tyttärentyttärensä kautta, eikä minun itsetuntoni ole niin heikko, että yrittäisin olla hänen kaverinsa. Ei elämässä kaikkea pidä ottaa niin vakavasti.

* * *

Matkalla vesipaikalta kotiin kuljen ihmisaitauksen ohi. Sen takana on iso harmaa talo, josta tulee silloin tällöin ulos ulkoilutettavia miehiä. He kuljeskelevat haalareissaan ympäri aitausta ja näyttävät olevan kovin ajatuksissaan tai vihaisia, sillä kukaan ei juttele tai naura, eikä missään näy koskaan naisia tai lapsia. Isä kutsuu paikkaa vankilaksi. Minun ja Kikin pitää kiertää se kaukaa. Isä on huolissaan vankilasta. Kuulin kerran yöllä hänen puhuvan äidille siitä, kun esitin nukkuvaa meidän isossa sängyssämme. Minusta on mukavaa maata heidän välissään silmät puoliummessa ja kuulla heidän puhelevan yöasioista, joita lapset eivät saisi tietää, Kikin tapansa mukaan kuorsatessa jalkopäässä.

– Ajattele, isä huokasi ja käänsi raskaasti kylkeä, niiltä miehiltä on viety kaikki. Perhe. Ystävät. Vapaus. Vaikka meillä olisi asiat muuten kuinka huonosti, saamme sentään olla yhdessä.

– Sinä ja sinun runoilijan sielusi, äiti hieroi otsaansa toinen käsi vatsakumpunsa päällä. Tasan ei käy onnenlahjat. Meille kun sen sijaan sitä ensimmäistä tulee koko ajan lisää, ne keskimmäiset käyvät vähiin ja sitä kolmatta ei ole koskaan ollutkaan. Kuka tässä vankilassa on? Se aitahan suojelee niitä meiltä, eikä päinvastoin.

Tunsin isän nousevan istumaan ja kumartuvan äidin vatsan ylle.

– Siinä tapauksessa vaadin aitaa välittömästi korotettavaksi, isä saarnasi mahtipontisella äänellä ja kopautti kevyesti rystysillään äitiä vatsaan kuin tuomari nuijallaan.

He molemmat räjähtivät nauruun. Puristin silmäni kiinni, etten paljastaisi olevani hereillä. Kiki ynähti unissaan äidin naurusta sätkiviä jalkoja. Isän nauru tukehtui yskään. Tunsin isän käden poskellani.

– Voi tätäkin viatonta ihmislasta. Katso nyt. Nukkuu kuin enkeli.

– No niin sinunkin siivekkään pitäisi, äiti sanoi pehmeästi, herätät vielä koko talon. Pian isä puhisi paikallaan ja äiti pihisi omallaan. Minä kikatoin hiljaa tyynyyni. En minä voi olla enkeli; minähän olen vaarallinen.

* * *

Pari viikkoa sitten sain työpaikalleni ikävän puhelun. Rehtori kertoi vaivaantuneena, että liikunnanopettaja oli löytänyt Linda jonkun pojan kanssa liikuntasalin pukuhuoneesta koulun jälkeen ”sopimattomasti.” Kiitin ilmoituksesta ja suljin puhelimen. Rehtorin epäammattimainen asenne ja ongelmallinen suhtautuminen täysin luonnollisiin ja viattomiin seksikokeiluihin hämmästytti minua. Miksei lasten anneta olla lapsia? Päätin kuitenkin, että Lindan olisi ehkä hyvä jutella jonkun turvallisen aikuisen kanssa. Onneksi olin varannut hänelle ajan kasvatusneuvolaan varmuuden vuoksi jo ennen eroa taatakseni kokemuksen siitä, että hänen tunteensa otetaan vakavasti, vaikka ne meidän aikuisten silmissä ovatkin naurettavia ja lapsellisia. Lisäksi hän ei välttämättä haluaisi keskustella minun kanssani avoimesti seksiasioista, sillä edustan hänelle paitsi sukupuolista roolimallia, ennen kaikkea auktoriteettihahmoa. Psykologin kanssa Linda voisi ottaa puheeksi myös emotionaalisen ailahtelevuutensa, joka mielestäni oli alkanut vaikuttaa negatiivisesti kiintymyssuhteeseemme – äitinä täytyy uskaltaa olla rehellinen myös itselleen. Sain hänelle tapaamisen torstaiksi. Voisin hakea hänet matkalla zumba-tunnilta, ja autossa hän voisi kertoa miten aikoo työstä ongelmiaan. Nuori puhuu silloin, kun itse haluaa, ei silloin kun vanhemmalla sattuu olemaan aikaa.

* * *

Me emme enää käy koulua, sillä siellä olemme perkeleitä, jotka kuulemma valehtelevat ja varastavat ja saavat äidin jälleen kerran itkemään. Poliisi haluaa katkoa meiltä sormet. Isä sanoo, että höpöhöpö, sormenjäljet ne teiltä haluaa, että teidät voidaan kirjata ylös ja että tiedetään, kuinka monta teitä lapsia on, mihin äiti huutaa, että minun lapsiani ne eivät helvetinrekistereihinsä pane ja että tämä perhe ei niiden kanssa asioi edes sormenjäljen vertaa.

Isä pudisteli päätään ja piteli hetken kättä kasvoillaan. Kiki hyppäsi hänen syliinsä ja laski sormenpäällään isän kesakot; me nauroimme äidin istuessa hiljaa tupakansavunsa keskellä, silmät yksinäiset, särkyneet ja kiiltävät kuin hyinen lampi.

Minä en muutenkaan tykännyt koulusta. Haluan isona tanssijaksi, eikä koulussa opeteta tanssia kun ei siellä edes saa tanssia; vähän jos käytävällä pyörähti niin heti oli joku karjumassa. Kikiä kyllä harmittaa olla mustalainen ja pääsemättä kouluun, sillä hänestä tulee vaatesuunnittelija, ja koulussa oli paljon värikyniä ja paperia, joihin Kiki piirsi mekkoja, mekkoja ja taas mekkoja.

Minun on välillä vaikea löytää tanssipaikkaa, koska tanssiin tarvitaan tietenkin musiikkia. Jos laitan telkkarin musiikkikanavan päälle ja yritän harjoitella vaunussa, äiti ponkaisee sängystä mahoineen, käskee nyt herran tähden panna pois tuon typerän rynkytyksen eihän tuo edes mitään musiikkia ole jumalauta. Jos menen katsomaan isää korjaamolle ja tanssin radion tahtiin, muut miehet hermostuvat, kun eivät kuulemma voi tehdä työtään minun ketkuessani ympäriinsä heidän tiellään. Siksi joudun usein menemään vankilalle, vaikka tiedän, että he pelkäävät minua eikä ihmisiä saisi säilytellä, mutta vartijoilla on myös radio, ja he varmasti rauhoittelisivat miehiä sähköllä, jos heille oikein hätä tulisi. Itse asiassa minusta tuntuu, että miehet pitävät minusta, sillä he katselevat usein tanssiani ja hymyilevät. Valmistaisin heille kunnan esityksen, mutta se on vaikeaa, kun ei koskaan tiedä, millainen laulu seuraavaksi tulee, joten pitää vain mennä sydämen tahdissa ja tunteessa, mummo sanoo päässäni.

Kiki tulee mukaan ja repii roskiksista löytyneistä lehdistä mekkojen kuvia ja yhdistää niihin päitä, tukkia, kenkiä. Hän yritti kerran asetella naisten palasia vankilan verkkoaitaan koska

halusi että häntäkin ihasteltaisiin, mutta minä kielsin, sillä aitaan ei saa koskea. Siitä varmasti tulisi joku hälytys, kun ne luulisivat, että me yritämme karata, ja silloin ne aivan varmasti katkoisivat meiltä sormet.

* * *

Kesällä päätin, että pieni loma voisi tehdä Lindalle hyvää, joten varasin meille matkan Italiaan. En halunnut hänen kuvittelevan, että yritin ostaa hänen kiintymyksensä elämyksillä tai palkita häntä emotionaaliseen piittaamattomuudesta, joten pidin huolen siitä että hän sai kuulla matkasta vasta lähtöpäivän aamuna. Samasta syystä olin reagoinut todistukseensa mahdollisimman laimeasti; ei hänen numeroillaan tosin matkoja ansaittaisikaan. Yllätyksekseni hän suhtautui tilanteeseen rauhallisesti ja alkoi pakata.

– Ihan sama, kunhan pääsee vittuun täältä. Onko sun pakko tulla? Jos tää on joku sun epätoivonon yritys bondaa ja viettää jotain laatu-aikaa mun kans, ni voin kyl sanoo, et vähän myöhästä.

Siinä vaiheessa vihelsin selkeästi pelin poikki. Löin matkalaukun kannen kiinni vaikka hän niskuroikin ja jätti sormensa väliin, istutin hänet sängylle ja keskustelimme pitkään laatuajan tuhoisuudesta. Lisäksi kerroin, että hän oli loukannut minua kuvittelemalla vanhemmuuteni olevan hakusessa. Hän lietsoi itsensä hysteeriseen tilaan itkullaan, jotta voisi ottaa käyttöönsä jo tutuksi tulleen en-saa-henkeä-esityksensä.

Hain keittiöstä paperipussin, johon hengitellä, ettei hän voisi viedä melodraamaansa päätisteeseensä, jossa hän muka hyperventiloi ja oksentaa ja minä aivan oikeasti siivoan.

Menin ulos patiolla soittamaan, ettei taksikeskus kuulisi hänen epäkypsää huutamistaan.

* * *

Serkkuni pyytää meitä mukaan rannalle. Kiki innostuu heti, mutta minä epäröin, sillä rannalle on pitkä matka. Sinne mennään junalla, ja junassa pitää olla piilossa ja hiljaa, jos ei ole rahaa lippuun, mitä meillä ei koskaan ole. Serkku avaa kassinsa ja näyttää pieniä, puisia kilpikonnia, jotka hän on itse veistänyt. Minä silitän yhtä sen kaljusta päästä; Kiki on löytänyt irronneita tekokynsiä ja haluaisi liimata konnalle niistä punaisen aurinkohatun.

– Lapset.

Serkku sanoo, että hän haluaa myydä rannalla ihmisille. Äidille hän sanoo, että turistit ostavat varmasti mieluummin näteiltä pikkutytyiltä kuin häneltä, kun on näitä arpiakin. Äiti toteaa, että oikeassa olet, ei sinua kyllä nätiksi voi haukkua, ja jos tytöt saavat työstään jonkun palkan niin olkoon menneeksi. Minusta punaiset kynnet ovat kauniit eikä kilpikonnia saisi myydä, kun ne ovat vielä ehkä ihan pieniä, mutta jos Kiki lähtee ja saa palkkaa niin minä lähdän myös.

Rannalla on paljon ihmisiä. He ottavat aurinkoa, uivat ja nauravat. Serkku lähtee asioille ja käskee meidän myydä sillä aikaa monta kilpikonnan. Rantaihmiset eivät ole kiinnostuneita näteistä pikkutytyistä eivätkä pienistä kilpikonista. Valkotukkainen vanha nainen ostaa yhden, mutta suurin osa ei näe meitä; he lukevat lehtiään tai puhuvat puhelimiinsa tai nipistävät silmänsä kiinni niin kuin nukkuisivat rantatuoleissaan. Lopulta Kiki hermostuu ja alkaa kiroilla, ja silloin ihmiset kyllä huomaavat meidät, huitovat meitä kauemmas ja varmaan kiroilevat takaisin.

– Tuollaiset ihmiset eivät ansaitse kilpikonnia, minä huudan, ja syljen jalkoihini. Sylki valuttaa varpaiden väliin hiekkaa ja saa linnat kaatumaan, näkinkenkiä ei ole ja minun kantapäitäni kirvelee.

– Lähetään uimaan!

Kuljemme kauemmas aurinkotuoleista, jottei serkku tule paikalle ja pääse haukkumaan meitä laiskottelusta. Minä jätän punaisia kynsiä hiekkaan. Tulemme pienille kallioille, ja Kiki tahtoo kiivetä. Minä jätän kilpikonnat oman onnensa nojaan ja kiipeän perässä. Ylhäällä kallio ei enää tunnukaan niin pieneltä vaan huumaavan korkealta. Kiki seisoo reunalla. Tee perässä, jos uskallat, hän nauraa, ja hyppää veteen. Minua huimaa, ja kestää aikansa ennen kuin uskallan edes hivuttautua reunalle, saati että hyppäisin, mutta äiti onkin aina sanonut, että Kikillä on linnun sielu. Katson alas, aallot näyttävät sinisiltä ja kylmiltä. Kikiä ei näy missään. Hän on sitten ärsyttävä kiusaaja ja naureskelee jossain kallioiden alapuolella piilossa minulle, joka en uskalla. Pakottaudun seisomaan, tuuli tuntuu sydämessä asti. Otan nenästä kiinni kun hyppään.

* * *

Hotelli on kelvollinen, baari kohtuullinen ja ranta mukiinmenevä. Lindasta ei oikein ole vieläkään stimuloivaksi juttuseuraksi, joten soitan työkaverilleni terveisiä aurinkovarjon katveesta. Puolen tunnin kuluttua Linda alkaa valittaa pitkästymistään. Onko hänen keskittymiskyvysäänkin jotain vikaa? Kerron, että liikunta on hyväksi ja kehotan häntä lähtemään kävelyille. Ihanaa saada hetki itselleen ja rentoutua. Muistinko tyhjentää tiskikoneen? Onko sitä typerää palloa potkiessa pakko huutaa noin kovaa? Urpot! Silkkarit! Valkoista vehnää! Minä en antaisi lapsen juoda limsaa, kohta on lounasaika. Ovatkohan nuo miehet pariskunta? Miten noin lihava viitsii esiintyä julkisesti bikineissä? Ei, en halua kilpikonnia, menkää nyt helvettiin siitä.

* * *

Seisomme mummon kanssa rannalla, Kikin käsi hänen vasemmassa, minun käteni hänen oikeassa kädessään. Mummon hevonen kuopii hiekkaa kauempänä ja odottaa meitä. Ihmiset ottavat aurinkoa, uivat ja nauravat. Poika syö jäätelöä ja katsoo, kuinka miehet kantavat merestä kaksi tyttöä. Heidän kasvosensa peitetään vihreällä muovilla. Minut tunnistaa nilkkarensa.



Bubbles

Tiia R. Junnonaho. Finland

Mother was a young girl when she got married and everybody thought it was because of her hair. It was black and wavy and got easily tangled and that's why it needed to be combed carefully every evening. Father calls them tangled knots. He also says that they are produced because mother thinks too much.

"Worrying isn't going to change anything," father says and looks at mother with a fake stern face. "What have I done to deserve such a great thinker as my wife?"

"Someone needs to do it in this family," mother grunts with dimples on her face, "go and change tyres. If you linger here, some Silvio will arrive home late from his mistress, and his wife and children will have to fill their fat cheeks with sausages so they won't get cold and ruined."

Father smiles and waves us goodbye with his ears. He is the only man in the whole camp who can wave with his ears. Other men in the garage like father because he often entertains them by making his ears dance along with the rattling radio when the other men are smoking cigarettes for lunch. Kiki once asked mother what would happen if the ears got too weary and fell off from such a thing.

"If the police knew that ears were having fun, they would get beaten and the whole man would receive the same treatment at the same time," mother said kneading the dough with her forehead creased and earrings tinkling. Kiki is only 11 years old and doesn't always understand these things like I do.

Mother sits with her legs crossed on the floor and I stand before her and comb her hair. Kiki lies down next to mother and presses her head on her lap. I comb and comb and comb

her hair, from back to front, so long that both mother's face and Kiki are hidden under it like in a forest of hair or a tent. The tent is my favourite hairdo. I hear mother starting a story about grandma and her enchanted black horse, and I sneak into the tent to my own place, my head on mother's right thigh. We lie face to face but I can't see Kiki because the baby in mother's tummy has grown so big that it has its own place in the centre of the tent. Mother's voice is hoarse when she mimics the horse's neighing. I close my eyes and see in the middle of the stars how grandma rides with her skirt fluttering through the city and the baby kicks rhythm into the gallop.

Sometimes in life you need to stop and think about basic values. The health and the well-being of the ones you love are more important than money and success. Work can't be your whole life but of course it needs to be meaningful and challenging. Although children mean everything, women especially need to take care of their own well-being in the middle of the everyday hustle and bustle. You can pamper yourself with a gym membership or with a glass of bubbly with your friends after a shopping trip. My source of energy consists of the little joys of everyday life that seem to be missing from modern people. I don't believe in quality time or continuous accomplishment but in real presence in the moment even though it clashes with the hard values that are dominant in our time. A sense of community is meeting another person every day, accepting them and yourself as lacking but as a valuable individual.

Kristo and I parted in concord. We didn't argue but we discussed and we didn't see separation as an ending but as a new beginning. We prepared a nice dinner together and told Linda. It was important that Linda saw us working amicably with cooking towards a common goal before she heard of the separation. We wanted her to see concretely that we were still a family and that Kristo and I had a working communicative relationship, although we no longer had a love affair. Linda reacted to the news with a typical pubescent black and white view: by shouting, crying and sneaking away during the night to the town with her friend. Kristo found her the next morning in the bathroom throwing up her defiant alcohol experiment. Following our philosophy of bringing up kids, Kristo didn't rage or punish her but sat next to Linda to talk to her about how the young were hurting inside and the reasons. Kristo told me later that they had had a wonderful parent-child moment although Linda had of course told Kristo "to fuck off" and moaned in accordance with her age that "no one loves me." Although I was proud of Kristo's assertiveness in a situation where many parents would have given up, I felt a sting within my heart. One nurse had talked about those hundreds if not thousands of 14-year-olds in this country who don't have any stable adult by their side.

Wednesday is water day. Mother always sends me then because I'm two years stronger than Kiki and can hold my own better in a queue. On Wednesdays the ladies come, smelling nice in their red vests that have a white cross on them, and distribute water with a hose from a large car. People hold out their cups, scoops and buckets and shout at the women using a foreign, melodic language. Mother never goes to the queue on Wednesdays because she's so

ashamed that her own people learn a foreign language just to beg. I think the melodic language sounds quite nice on television when it's spoken by happy people who smile at each other. I once mimicked it to Kiki and father when mother was leaving aunt Miriana's caravan to admire their new toilet and took with her our last remains of tea as a present. Father didn't understand why she had to go so far to celebrate and admire a toilet. Mother blurted out that the toilet was the third one in the camp and it would definitely be a time to celebrate if the men sometimes cared how the water was carried by the family and piss buckets were emptied, and if father would sometimes get something for mother to help ease this misery. When mother marched out and father sat sulking about the fact that he might never get to go to a toilet party, I opened my mouth wide, filled it with alphabets and shouted along with the television: "Peeer favooore, per favooore, kaara miiia!" Father laughed and Kiki laughed and I laughed until suddenly mother stood in front of me and hit me in the mouth. Her eyes were filled with tears when she slammed the door of the caravan after her. That's why I don't want to speak the melodic language, at home or in the queue, because no woman is going to smile at me anyway.

Linda and I met Kristo's new lady friend, the fair and sunny Katri. We all gathered at my place. Again, we cooked together because leisurely togetherness really is our family's thing. Linda tried to whine in the beginning but when we didn't reward her bad behaviour she concentrated on her tomato-mozzarella salad instead of cursing. During the main course, she asked to have a glass of wine. I complimented her: she had clearly learned her lesson and no longer wanted to mess with alcohol. We encouraged her with pleasure to

adopt civilized drinking habits safely within the walls of her home and not to model her learning on drunk-driven messing with her friends or their parents. She had another glass and then politely asked permission to leave the table. Even Katri was astonished at how mature and well-behaved our daughter was.

I hadn't actively searched for a new relationship after the separation because I wanted to get to know myself better. Of course it was important to support Linda when she was growing up to be a woman. However, on an icon painting course in the Valamo convent I met a charming artist. There was immediately an unbelievable erotic flutter between us that erupted into a mature relationship between two adults. We met from time to time in different hotels and neither of us was unknowing of what the other wanted from the relationship. I tried to tempt Linda to take part in my new hobby but she declared that she didn't want to do anything with me. I respected her opinion thinking that even I wouldn't have wanted to explain in school that I was painting with my mother. I don't seek approval through my daughter and my self-esteem isn't so weak that I would try to be her friend. Life doesn't have to be that serious.

On my way home I walk past a fenced yard of people. Behind it is a grey building from which men sometimes come out to be taken for a walk. They walk around the yard in their overalls and seem to be buried in their thoughts or angry because no one talks or laughs and no women or children are to be seen. Father calls the place prison. Me and Kiki need to stay away from it. Father is worried about the prison. I once heard him at night when he was talking about it to mother, when I was pretending to be asleep in our big bed. I like to lie between them, eyes half

closed, and hear them talking about night things that children aren't supposed to know, with Kiki snoring, like she always does, in the bottom of the bed.

"Just think about it," father sighed and turned in the bed heavily, "those men have had everything taken from them. Family. Friends. Freedom. Although things may be bad for us, at least we can be together."

"You and your poet soul," mother rubbed her forehead with her other hand on top of her tummy. "Luck isn't divided equally. We get more of the first all the time, the middle ones are disappearing and the last one has never existed. Who are the ones in prison? The fence protects them from us, not vice versa."

I felt father sit up and grouch over mother's tummy.

"In that case I demand that the fence be raised immediately," father preached with a pompous voice and knocked lightly with his knuckles against mother's tummy like a judge.

They both broke out laughing. I pressed my eyes close so that I wouldn't reveal that I was awake. Kiki made a sound in her sleep when mother's laughing feet touched her. Father's laugh was suffocated by a cough. I felt father's hand on my cheek.

"Look at this innocent child. Just look. Sleeps like an angel."

"So should you, you winged thing," mother said softly, "you wake up the whole house." Soon father was puffing on his spot and mother wheezing on hers. I giggled silently to my pillow. I can't be an angel, I'm dangerous.

A couple of weeks ago I received an unpleasant phone call while I was at work. The embarrassed head teacher said that the PE teacher had found Linda with some boy at the gym

changing rooms after school doing something “inappropriate.” I thanked him for the information and ended the phone call. The unprofessional attitude and problematic reaction of the head teacher to completely natural and innocent sexual experiments astounded me. Why won’t they let children be children? However, I decided that Linda might benefit from speaking to a safe adult. Luckily, I had already booked an appointment for her in the child guidance clinic before the separation, just in case, to assure her that her feelings were taken seriously, although they might seem ridiculous and childish in the eyes of us adults. Additionally, she might not want to have a discussion about sex openly with me because to her I represent a gender role model and also an authority figure. With a psychologist, Linda could also talk about her emotional moodiness that in my opinion had started to negatively affect our personal relationship – as a mother one needs to dare to be honest even to oneself. I managed to book her an appointment for Thursday. I could pick her up on my way home from Zumba and in the car she could start to work out her problems. Young people speak when they want to, not when a parent happens to have time.

We don’t go to school anymore because there we are little shits who apparently lie and steal and make mother cry again. The police want to break off our fingers. Father says that is nonsense; they want to take our fingerprints so that they can register us to know how many children there are. To which mother shouts that they’re not going to put her children on their register from hell and that this family doesn’t deal with them, even for fingerprints.

Father shakes his head and holds his hand on his face for a moment. Kiki jumps on his

lap and counts father’s freckles with her fingers. We laugh while mother sits alone in the middle of her cigarette smoke, with eyes lonely, shattered and shining like a freezing lake.

I never liked school anyway. I want to be a dancer when I grow up and school doesn’t teach you dancing when you’re not even allowed to dance there. If you even twirled a bit in the hallway someone shouted straight away. It bothers Kiki that she’s a gypsy and can’t go to school because she’s going to be a fashion designer and school has a lot of crayons and paper on which Kiki drew dresses, dresses and more dresses.

Sometimes it’s hard for me to find a place to dance because to dance you obviously need music. If I put the television music channel on and try to practise in the caravan, mother bounces up from the bed with her tummy and tells me for God’s sake to turn that stupid thumping off, that it’s not even fucking music. If I go to see father at the garage and dance to the music on the radio, the other men get annoyed because they apparently can’t do their jobs when I’m swinging around in their way. That’s why I often have to go to the prison, although I know that they’re afraid of me and you shouldn’t scare people but the guards also have a radio and they would probably control the men with electricity if there really was a need. Actually, I feel that men like me because they watch me dancing and smile. I would prepare a proper performance for them but it’s difficult when I never know what kind of song is coming next, so I just have to follow the beat and feeling of my heart, grandma says in my head.

Kiki comes along and tears out pictures of dresses from the magazines she’s found from the garbage and attaches heads, hair, and shoes. She once tried to attach pieces of women on the prison fence because she also wanted to be admired but I said no because you’re not supposed to touch the fence. It would certainly

sound some kind of an alarm if they thought we were trying to escape and then they would certainly break off our fingers.

In the summer I decided that a little holiday might do Linda some good, so I booked us a trip to Italy. I didn't want her to think that I was trying to buy her affection with experiences or reward her for emotional indifference so I made sure that she found out about the trip only on the morning of the departure. This is why I had reacted to her half-year report as mildly as possible. Then again, with her grades she wouldn't deserve any trips anyway. To my surprise, she took the news calmly and started to pack.

"Whatever, as long as I can get the fuck out of here. Do you have to come? Is this some desperate attempt to bond with me and spend some quality time with me? If so, I can say that it's a bit late for that."

At that point I called the game to halt. I closed the luggage, made her sit on the bed and we discussed at length about the destructiveness of quality time. I also told her that she had insulted me by thinking that I was struggling to find my parenthood. She worked herself up into a hysterical state, with crying and the all so familiar "I can't breathe" performance. I got a paper bag from the kitchen for her to breathe into to stop this melodrama reaching its peak, when she would pretend to hyperventilate and throw up and I would have to clean it up.

I went out to the patio to make a call so that the taxi centre wouldn't hear her immature yelling.

My cousin asks us to go to the beach. Kiki gets excited straight away but I hesitate

because the beach is a long way off. You need to take a train to go there and on the train you have to stay in hiding and silent if you don't have money for the ticket, which we never have. My cousin opens his bag and shows the wooden turtles he's made himself. I caress one of the bald heads. Kiki has found detached fake nails and would like to glue a red sun hat to a turtle.

"Children."

My cousin says that he wants to sell things to people on the beach. To mother he says that tourists prefer to buy things from pretty little girls rather than from him because he's got scars. Mother agrees he's right, he's a far cry from being pretty and if the girls get some money for their work then that's fine. I think the red nails are pretty and the turtles shouldn't be sold because they might still be really small but if Kiki goes and gets paid I'm going as well.

There are a lot of people on the beach. They're tanning themselves, swimming and laughing. My cousin leaves to do some business and tells us to sell lots of turtles while he's gone. Beach people aren't interested in pretty little girls or little turtles. A white-haired old woman buys one but most of them can't see us. They read their papers or talk on their phones or close their eyes tight to seem to be asleep on their beach chairs. Finally, Kiki gets annoyed and starts to curse and then people do notice us, signal us to go away and probably curse back.

"Those kinds of people don't deserve turtles," I shout and spit at my feet. Spit trickles sand between my toes and makes castles fall, there aren't any shells and my heels are burning.

"Let's go swimming!"

We walk further away from the beach chairs so that cousin won't come and start shouting at us for being lazy. I leave red nails in the sand. We come to the little rocks and

Kiki wants to climb. I leave the turtles to fend for themselves and climb up after her. The rock doesn't feel so small any longer but stunningly high. Kiki stands on the edge.

"Follow me if you dare," she laughs and jumps in the water.

I get dizzy and it takes time before I dare to move to the edge, even to jump but mother has always said that Kiki has the soul of a bird. I look down, and the waves look blue and cold. I can't see Kiki anywhere. She's such an annoying tease and laughs somewhere below the rocks, hiding from me. She laughs at me because I do not dare. I force myself to stand up; I can feel the wind all the way in my heart. I hold my nose and jump.

The hotel is acceptable, the bar reasonable and the beach moderate. Linda still isn't a stimulating conversationalist so I phone one of my workmates to say hello from the shade of the parasol. After half an hour Linda starts

to complain about being bored. Is there also something wrong with her concentration? I tell her that exercise is good for her and encourage her to go for a walk. It's lovely to have a moment to myself and relax. Did I remember to empty the dishwasher? Do you have to shout so loud when kicking that stupid ball? Idiots! Silicones! White wheat! I would never let my child drink soft drinks, it's almost lunchtime. I wonder if those two men are a couple. How does a person that fat still dare to go out in a bikini in public? No, I don't want turtles, get the fuck off.

We stand on the beach with grandma, Kiki's hand on her left hand and my hand on her right. A bit further away, grandma's horse is pawing the sand and waits for us. People are tanning themselves, swimming and laughing. A boy is eating ice-cream and watching when men carry two girls from the sea. Their faces are covered with green plastic. I can be recognized from the ankle bracelet.

שקיעה

איילת גונדר גושן. ישראל

הוא חשב לעצמו שזו השקיעה הכי יפה שראה בחייו כשפגע באיש ההוא עם האופנוע. וברגע הראשון אחרי שפגע בו הוא עדיין חשב על השקיעה, המשיך לחשוב על השקיעה ואז הפסיק בבת אחת, כמו נר שנשפו עליו.

"אלוהים, יותם, אתה פגעת בו, אתה פגעת בו". הקול של עינת היה גבוה בצורה משונה ולמרות שלא הביט אחורה הוא ידע שהיא רועדת. הוא ירד מהמושב ושמע את חספוס החצץ מתחת לרגליו. ארץ אחרת. כמעט חמש שעות נסעו בלי לעצור. בדרך עברו כפרים ושדות וגוויה אחת של פרה שריחה ליווה אותם לאורך קילומטר. במקום שעזבו בלע החול את הצעדים. עכשיו חצץ. הוא התקרב אל האיש ששכב על הדרך. זה היה הודי בן ארבעים, אולי חמישים, אף פעם לא הצליח לקבוע בוודאות בני כמה האנשים האלו. בסוף הטרק בלדאק נתן טיפ לגבר שהוביל את הסוסים. אסירות התודה של הגבר החמיאה לו והוא הוסיף כמה שאלות תפלות בחביבות שבאותו רגע האמין בה. שאל איך קוראים לך וכמה ילדים יש לך ובן כמה אתה. קראו לו טנזין והיו לו שלושה ילדים והוא היה בגילו למרות שנראה גדול בעשור. האנשים בארץ הזאת נולדים זקנים ומתים צעירים ובאמצע מה. כששאל אותו לתאריך הלידה המדויק גילה שנולדו בהפרש של יום. לא היתה לזה שום משמעות ובכל זאת. עכשיו הגבר הזה, בן ארבעים או אולי חמישים, שוכב על הדרך בעיסה מרוסקת. הוא כבר ראה דברים כאלה במלחמה, אבל אז הם היו ערבים.

עינת הקיאה מאחורה. השמיים היו אדומים קצת יותר ממקודם ואפשר היה לשמוע את הציפורים קוראות זו לזו בהיסטריה. "הן לא לעוף בחושך", הסביר להם בטרק המדריך שכעת לא זכר איך קראו לו, "חייבות למצוא מקום לפני שהשמש הולך אחרת יכולות למות". הם צחקו הרבה על האנגלית של המדריך. בשיחת הטלפון הביתה עשה חיקויים לאימו. היא צחקה ושאלה מתי יחזור והוא אמר שיתקשר שוב בעוד שבועיים.

"תסתכל אם הוא נושם".

"הוא נושם".

"איך אתה יודע מכאן"

"אני יודע".

"אבל יותם "

"אם את לא מאמינה לי תבדקי לבד".

הוא שמע אותה מתנשפת מאחוריו. אולי בוכה. שלושה צעדים על החצץ והיא כורעת לצד האיש הזה, שיערה השחור הפזור תמיד מרפרף על הקרקע ועל פניו של ההודי. "נושם". עכשיו שנא אותה והעריך אותה ובא וכרע לידה. ההודי לבש חולצה מכופתרת עם הדפס משבצות ומכנסיים חומים רכוסים בחגורה. הוא נראה כמו כל אלו שראו ברכבות, באוטובוסים, בדלפק הקבלה שבפתח הגסט האוס. כל כך זהים שגם כשביקש לדעת את שמם שכח אותו עוד באותו יום, או שהיה קורא בו לבן דודם או לאחיהם או מי שזה לא יהיה שהחליף אותם בדלפק הקבלה. כן, הוא היה בדיוק כמוהם רק שעצם הלסת שלו היתה מרוסקת. וגם האף.

"תיקח אותו על האופנוע לכפר ואני אשאר פה".

"את נפלת על השכל?"

"אתה צודק, אי אפשר להזיז אותו, אני אשאר איתו פה ואתה תרכב לכפר להזעיק עזרה".

"אין סיכוי".

"למה לא? זה סך הכל שעה מכאן לכפר, אתה אמרת".

"את מתכוונת שעה מכאן לכלא ההודי".

עינת הביטה בו. השפתיים שלה היו פסוקות מעט ואפשר היה לראות את הרווח הצר בין שתי שיניה הקדמיות, שבימים רגילים הביך אותה וגירה אותו ועכשיו לא עשה בו דבר.

"הם יזרקו אותנו לכלא עינת. זה בטוח. הם יזרקו אותנו לכלא".

"משרד החוץ יתערב. או שנשחד את השוטרים כמו שעושים פה עם כל דבר אחר. אם לא נעשה משהו האיש הזה ימות".

וכשהיא אמרה את זה, את המילה המפורשת, הוא הרגיש בבת אחת איך כל האיברים בבטן שלו מתכסים בקרח. שכבה של כפור לבן התפשטה מהכבד אל הקיבה, מהקיבה אל המעי, דרך הפיתולים הנחשיים שהכיר מספרי הלימוד. פיתולי המעי הדק נמתחים לאורך שישה עד שמונה מטר. יותר משלוש פעמים גובהו של אדם. קוטרו כ 3 ס"מ, אך הגודל אינו אחיד בכל הגילאים, והוא ממלא את רוב חלל הבטן. המעי הדק מתחלק לתריסרון, מעי ריק ומעי עקום. יותם שאב שלוה משונה מהמידע הזה, שלוה לבנה וקפואה. הוא התעכב על המעי הדק. הוא בחן אותו. שטח הפנים שלו, למשל, מוגדל על ידי בליטות דמויות אצבע הנקראות סיסים. מבנה זה מכפיל את שטח הפנים של המעי הדק פי 500, עד לכ 250 מטר מרובע. מדהים. פשוט מדהים. ולחשוב שפעם זלזל בכל המידע הזה, לא הבין למה מבזבזים עליו זמן יקר בקורס חובשים. כעת הוקיר באמת את לימודיו. חומה בצורה של ידע שעמדה בינו ובין המילה הזאת, הכל כך מטונפת, "ימות". אם הם לא יעשו משהו ההודי הזה ימות.

עינת הסתכלה עליו במבט נוקב. הוא ידע את זה למרות שלא הביט בה. זו היתה האיכות המיוחדת של העיניים שלה, שלא היו גדולות במיוחד או יפות במיוחד, אבל יכלו להביט בך ככה שהרגשת אותן מהקצה השני של החדר. עינת ידעה איך להסתכל על דברים, להסתכל ממש. והדברים ידעו כשהסתכלה עליהם, וזה גרם להם להתנהג קצת אחרת. חתולים, אנשים, עננים בשמים. אפילו תמרורים. עכשיו היא הסתכלה ככה עליו. הוא היה רוצה שהיא תפסיק, היה רוצה ממש שהיא תפסיק. אבל אם יגיד לה את זה יצטרך להסתכל עליה, ואם יסתכל עליה לא יראה יותר את פיתוליו היפיפיים של המעי הדק, ולזה הוא לא יכול להסכים. לכן התרומם וצעד חמישה צעדים לכיוון התהום, מביט בכביש המתפתל מתחת, מטפס במעלה ההר בעיקולים תלולים, צפופים פחות מאלו של המעי הדק ואף על פי כן מספקים בהחלט. בהחלט.

השמיים עברו מאדום לסגול והציפורים הפסיקו לצווח. יותם חשב על כל המקומות שהספיקו לבקר בהם. על כל המקומות היפים שהספיקו לעזוב. בחודש הראשון עוד אמרו לעצמם שבטוח יחזרו לפה, וזה אפשר להם לעלות על האופנוע ולהמשיך הלאה. משאירים מאחור את הבקתה על שפת הנחל, את הרמה המושלגת, את הכפר הקטן עם המקדש למרגלות הגבעה. אחר כך הבינו שכבר לא יחזרו לפה, וגם אם כן לפה אז לא לכל השאר. אי אפשר לחזור לכל השאר. ברגע שהבינו את זה נסעו לאט יותר. צילמו פחות. הסתכלו הרבה. אי אפשר אחת עינת אמרה שאולי בכל זאת יגשימו את ההבטחה ההיא, אולי בעוד שנים, אחרי התואר והילדים שפניהם העתידיות מטושטשות בתוך ראשם, אולי בכל זאת יחזרו. יעשו את אותו מסלול בדיוק. כפר אחרי כפר. טרק אחרי טרק. והוא ידע שזה יהיה נורא

ותפס את ראשה בין שתי ידיו ואמר לה שאסור אסור לחזור למקום שפעם אהבת כי זה אף פעם לא אותו דבר, רק הד. הוא הביט שוב בהודי. דם זרם מראשו והכתים את צווארון החולצה המשובצת. שלום ללימודי מזרח אסיה באוניברסיטת תל אביב. שלום למפגש המיתולוגי עם אוהד ותמיר בעוד חודש בקטמנדו. וההודי המשיך לדמם, כאילו הוא עושה את זה בכוונה.

"זה לא שיש להם כאן בית חולים, את יודעת, יותר כמו קצביה עם תחבושות".

"אתה לא באמת מציע שנשאיר אותו פה".

"זה בדיוק מה שאני מציע. אין טעם להביא אותו לכפר, הוא ימות על כל מקרה".

"ואם זה היה ישראלי?"

היא הסתכלה ממש עליו עכשיו, והוא היה חייב להסתכל עליה בחזרה.

"אבל זה לא ישראלי. זה הודי בן חמישים במדינה שתוחלת החיים בה היא חמישים ושבע".

"איך אתה יודע?"

"כתוב בלונלי פלנט".

עינת שתקה רגע. נאנחה. "תבדוק לו דופק".

היא לא הביטה בו כששם שתי אצבעות מתחת לכף ידו הימנית של ההודי. גם לא כשעשה עצמו סופר את הפעימות. השקר הזה שתיכף ישקר לה עדיף שייגע בה כמה שפחות. ואחר כך, כשיספר לה שוב על לבנון והיא תשאל עוד ועוד עד שיבכה והיא תחבק את ראשו במיטה ותרגיש אימהית וחזקה וקצת מרוגשת, תוכל לחשוב שהוא טוב וטהור. מלאך מתולתל וטהור.

"חלש מאוד. אין לו סיכוי". הוא דיבר בקול שקט ובטוח וידע שהוא משקר. גם בלי לאמוד את הדופק ידע שהוא משקר. ובכל זאת דיבר בקול שקט ובטוח, כמו אז, במלחמה, כשאמר לערן "המסוק בדרך, בחיי שהם בדרך" וידע שאין שום מסוק כי מכשיר הקשר לא עובד, וחזר בראשו על השילוש הקדוש 'עינת, אופנוע, הודו, עינת, אופנוע, הודו' מגביר את הווליום לפי הצורך בהתאם לצרחות של ערן.

עינת התרוממה. יותם הניח את ידו של ההודי בחזרה על הקרקע והתרומם גם הוא. הם ילכו עכשיו. הם יעלו על האופנוע ויסעו מכאן הלאה. הם ימשיכו לטייל. כשיימאס להם לטייל הם יחזרו לארץ. אולי בעוד הרבה שנים הם ידברו על זה. על האיש ההודי. אולי ירגישו אשמים. זה בסדר להרגיש אשמים בעוד הרבה שנים. זה לא כמו עכשיו. אבל באותו רגע פקח ההודי את עיניו. הם קפאו על עומדם. האוויר הרב דליל יותר וטעם הלשון בפה כמו נייר זכוכית. לרגליהם, ממש לצד נעלי הטיולים העמידות למים, שכב הודי מדמם שאפו שבור, ופניו מרוסקות ועיניו פקוחות לרווחה.

הוא לא הביט בעינת. גם לא ביותרם. רק שכב שם ובהה בשמים, בהה בהם בריכוז כזה שעינת לא יכלה שלא להגניב מבט מלוכסן למעלה, לנקודה אליה הביט, אולי בכל זאת יש שם איזה משהו. לא היה שם כלום. רק שקיעה מהממת, שמיים זוהרים בצבע סגול עמוק, כאילו מישהו עבד עליהם בפוטושופ. מאז שנחתו ניסתה למצוא תמונה שתשתווה לאלו שבמדריכי הטיולים, והנה מצאה אחת. הנזירים שפגשו תמיד נראו אותנטיים פחות מאלו המצולמים בספר, וההרים תמיד נראו נמוכים יותר. כעת דיממה השמש בצבעי גרפיקה ממוחשבת והאיש שתחתיה נצבע בסגול.

טעם האגודל בפיה בא לעינת בהפתעה. כבר ארבעה חודשים שלא נשכה את אצבעה, מאז שנחתו בהודו. שנים ניסתה להפסיק עם ההרגל הזה, שהופיע בכל פעם בה היתה לחוצה. לפני תחרויות ספורט ביסודי. באמצע בגרויות בתיכון. בטירונות. חודש אחרי ההלוויה של יובל עוד היו לה סימנים של שיניים. אבל מהרגע שנחתה כאן אפילו לא פעם אחת. כאילו השאירה את נשיכת האגודל בבית

כשארזה את התרמיל, ומאז היא מחכה לה בחדר, ליד ערימות הבגדים והספרים. וקיוותה שכשתחזור תשליך אותה כליל, כמו שתפנה מהחדר בגדים שיצאו מהאופנה או ספרים שעבר זמנם. ופתאום האגודל הנשוך הזה, כאן, מול ההרים והשקיעה הסגולה הזוהרת. כאילו המתניה נשיכת האגודל כל הזמן לרגע המתאים, אורבת לה. הרי לא באמת תוכל להשיל מעליה את עברה כפי שהנחש משיל את עורו. ולפתע שנאה את ההודי שנאה עזה, יוקדת. ההעוויה הלעגנית שעל פניו. העיניים הפקוחות האלו, חומות, נכלוליות, כמו אלו של בעלי הגסט האוסים בבואם לקבוע את המחיר.

כמעט בכוח שלפה את האגודל מבין שיניה. עכשיו עמדה כשידיה תלויות מצידי גופה, מאוגרפות. עמידתו של יותם לידה כמעט זהה, אצבעותיו המאוגרפות נצבעות לבן במפרקים מעוצמת המאמץ. לו הביטו זה בזה היו נדהמים לגלות מה דומה עמידתם. אך עיניהם דבקו בעיניו של ההודי, הם לא יכלו להסיר אותן ממנו גם אם רצו. רגע ארוך הביט ההודי בשמיים. רגע ארוך הביטו הם בהודי.

כשהפנה ההודי מבטו מן השמיים אליהם פלטה עינת אנחת הפתעה, שלא היתה שונה במיוחד מזו שהשמיעה ברגע החדירה. צליל קטן של שאיפת אוויר ברגע בו פולח הגוף בנוכחות החדשה. כי כעת חדל ההודי מלהביט בסגלגלות השמיים והביט בפני האנשים שמעליו. צעיר ששערו מתולתל וזהוב ועיניו כחולות וגדולות ופניו פני נער. צעירה ששערה פזור ושחור ועיניה חומות ואגודלה לעוס בפי. לבנים ויפים. שוב הפנה את עיניו לשמים.

יותם ידע שכעת ידבר וידע מה יאמר. הוא רק לא ידע איך לעשות את זה, איך לעזאזל לצוות על הגוף לקום ולעשות את זה. למעלה מדקה נאבק עם הלשון עד שצייתה, וגם אז נשמע לו קולו מרוחק ומזר כשפנה לעינת ואמר "תעלי על האופנוע". עינת לא זזה. "עכשיו". היא הסתובבה והלכה אל האופנוע. הוא הלך אחריה. היא פתחה את התיק והוציאה את של הצמר שקנה לה לפני יומיים בדרהמסלה. היא סגרה את התיק. הוא פתח את התיק והוציא חבילת עוגיות כמעט מלאה ובקבוק מים. הוא סגר את התיק. הם כיסו את ההודי בשל והניחו לידו את העוגיות ואת המים. הוא הביט בהם. הם לא הביטו בו. יותם שב וניגש לאופנוע. הוא הוציא את הארנק ושלף ממנו שטר של מאה רופי. במחשבה שניה מאתיים. הוא ניגש להודי. הוא החליט להביט בו. ובאמת, נראה היה שההודי משלים עם מצבו באותה שלוה בודהיסטית מפורסמת, כי עובדה שעצם את עינו, ורק נשם בשקט, כשעל פניו העוויה שלא היתה שונה הרבה מחיוך. יותם הניח את השטרות בין בקבוק המים והעוגיות. כעת כבר היה בטוח שההודי מחייך אליו, מאשר בעיניו העצומות. הוא ניגש לאופנוע. עינת הלכה אחריו. הם עלו על האופנוע. היא רצתה להביט אחורה, אבל ידעה שתהפוך לנציב מלח. אז היא הביטה קדימה. גם יותם. רק קדימה. הוא אחז בכידון ועינת אחזה במוטניו, והיא עשתה את זה חזק כל כך שצלקות ציפורניה נשאר על מותניו ימים רבים אחר כך. השמיים עברו מסגול לכחול. כעבור שעה היו בכפר.

הוא שכב איתה בחדר בגסט האוס למרות שהיא לא הציעה והוא לא באמת רצה. היא בכתה קצת ואחר כך הם נכנסו למקלחת. לא היו מים חמים אז הם התקלחו מהר ויצאו לאכול. המלצר במסעדה שאל מה ירצו. הוא לבש חולצה מכופתרת בצבע בז' ומכנסיים חומים. הוא נקב במחירים גבוהים מאלו שהיו בתפריט ויותם התמקח איתו.

"את רוצה פסטה או פיצה?"

"אני לא רעבה".

"את צריכה לאכול. את רוצה פסטה או פיצה?"

"אני רוצה הביתה".

"יש להם שקשוקה. את רוצה שקשוקה?"

"בסדר. שקשוקה".

הם אכלו שקשוקה, שהיתה לא רעה בכלל, וקינחו בפנקייק שהיה רע כרגיל, ושכבו לישון. בוקר אחר כך עלו על האופנוע ורכבו הלאה. לאט, לאט מאוד. המחשבות היו צמיגות ודביקות והלחות והאבק כיסו אותם. אז הם נסעו מהר. מהר מאוד. הכביש התפתל בין ההרים, פיתולים תלולים, יפיפיים. הרוח הפכה קרירה. השקיעה היתה מהממת. ממש מהממת. הם צילמו אותה ושלחו הביתה באי מייל.

Sunset

Ayelet Gundar-Goshen. Israel

He was thinking it was the most beautiful sunset he'd ever seen when his motorcycle ran into the man. And in the moment after he'd hit him he was still thinking about the sunset, kept on thinking about the sunset, and then stopped suddenly, like an extinguished candle.

"My God, Yotam, you hit him. You hit him."

Einat's voice was strangely high and, though he didn't look back, he knew she was trembling. He got off the seat and heard the crunch of gravel under his feet. A different country. They had driven almost five hours without stopping. On the way, they had passed villages and fields and one carcass of a cow whose stench stayed with them for a kilometer. In the place they had left, the sand swallowed one's footsteps. Now there was gravel.

He drew close to the man lying on the road. It was an Indian man of about forty, perhaps fifty, he could never tell for sure how old these people were. At the end of the trek in Ladakh, he'd given a tip to the man who had led the horses. The man's gratitude flattered him and he'd added a few non-committal questions with a friendliness that at the time felt genuine. He asked his name, how many children he had and how old he was. His name was Tenzin and he had three children and he was the same age as Yotam, though he looked a decade more. The people in this country are born old and die young, and what's in between? When he asked the man for his exact birth date he discovered that they were born a day apart. Nevertheless, it was meaningless. Now this man, forty or perhaps fifty, was lying in the road in a pulpy

mess. He had already seen such things in war, but then they were Arabs.

Einat threw up in the back. The sky was a little redder than before and one could hear the birds calling each other hysterically.

"They no fly in the dark," the guide had explained to them on the trek, a guide whose name he couldn't remember now. "They must find a place before the sun go, or they can die."

They had laughed a lot at the guide's English. He did imitations for his mother when he called home. She laughed and asked when he'd be back and he said he would call again in two weeks.

"See if he's breathing."

"He is."

"How can you tell from here?"

"I can tell."

"But Yotam..."

"If you don't believe me, check for yourself."

He heard her huffing behind him. Crying, perhaps. Three steps on the gravel and she was kneeling beside this man, her loose black hair fluttering over the ground and the Indian's face.

"Breathing."

Now he hated her and admired her and came and knelt beside her. The Indian was wearing a buttoned shirt with a plaid print and brown pants fastened with a belt. He looked like all those men they had seen on the trains, on the buses, at the reception desk at the entrance to the guest house. So similar that even when he asked their name he forgot it the same day, or he would use it for their cousin or their brother or whoever it was who came to take over for them at the reception

desk. Yes, he was exactly like them except that his jawbone was smashed. And his nose.

“Take him to the village on the motorcycle and I’ll stay here.”

“Are you nuts?”

“You’re right. He can’t be moved, I’ll stay here with him and you drive to the village and get help.”

“No chance.”

“Why not? It’s only an hour from here to the village, you said so.”

“You mean an hour from here to an Indian jail.”

Einat looked at him. Her lips were parted slightly, showing the narrow gap between her two front teeth, which on normal days embarrassed her and aroused him and now did nothing to him.

“They’ll throw us in jail, Einat. They’ll throw us in jail.”

“The Foreign Ministry will intervene. Or we’ll bribe the policemen as they do here with everything else. If we don’t do something this man will die.”

And as she said this, the explicit word, he suddenly felt all his internal organs icing over. A layer of white frost spread from his liver to his stomach, from his stomach to his intestine, through the snakelike bends he knew from his textbooks. The bends of the intestine go on for six to eight meters. More than three times the height of a person. Its diameter is three centimeters but it is not the same at all ages, and it fills most of the abdomen. The small intestine is divided into the duodenum, the jejunum, and the ileum. Yotam drew a strange calm from this information, a white and frozen calm. He focused on the small intestine. He examined it. The area of its interior surface, for example, is increased by finger-like protrusions called villi. This structure makes the surface area of the small intestine 500 times as large, up to about 250 square meters. Amazing. Simply amazing.

And to think that he was once contemptuous of all this information, did not understand why they were wasting so much valuable time on it in the medics’ course. Now he truly appreciated his studies. A fortified wall of knowledge that stood between him and that filthy phrase, “will die.” If they didn’t do something, this Indian would die.

Einat gave him a piercing look. He knew, although he didn’t look at her. This was the special quality of her eyes, which were not particularly large or especially beautiful, but could look at you in a way that would make you feel them from the other side of the room. Einat knew how to look at things, really look. And the things knew she was looking at them, and that made them act a little differently. Cats, people, clouds in the sky. Even traffic signs. Now she was looking at him that way. He would have liked her to stop, he really would have liked her to stop. But if he said that, he would have to look at her, and if he looked at her he would no longer see the beautiful bends of the small intestine, and that was something he could not agree to. So he got up and walked five steps toward the cliff, looking at the twisting road below, climbing up the mountain in sharp bends, less close to each other than those of the small intestine but nonetheless definitely satisfying. Definitely.

The sky changed from red to purple and the birds stopped shrieking. Yotam thought about all the places they had already managed to visit. All the beautiful places they had already managed to leave. The first month they were still telling themselves they would return to this place, and that enabled them to get on the motorcycle and move on. Leaving behind the cabin on the banks of the stream, the snow-capped ridge, the little village with the shrine at the foot of the hill. Later, they understood that they would not be coming back to this place, and even if

they did, it wouldn't be to all the other places. It was impossible to go back to all the others. The moment they understood that, they started driving more slowly. They took fewer pictures. They looked a lot. And once Einat said that maybe, nevertheless, they would keep that promise, maybe years later, after graduation and children whose future faces were still blurry in their minds, maybe nevertheless they would come back. They would follow the exact same route. Village by village. Trek by trek. And he knew that it would be terrible and grabbed her head between his hands and told her that it was forbidden, forbidden, forbidden to go back to a place you loved because it is never the same, only an echo. He looked at the Indian again. Blood oozed from his head and stained the color of his plaid shirt. Goodbye to East Asian studies at Tel Aviv University. Goodbye to the great meeting with Ohad and Tamir in Katmandu. And the Indian kept on bleeding, as if he was doing it on purpose.

"It's not like they have a hospital, you know, it's more like a butcher's shop with bandages."

"You're not really suggesting we leave him here?"

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting. There's no point in bringing him to the village, he'll die in any case."

"And if he was an Israeli?"

She looked right at him now, and he had to look back at her.

"But he's not an Israeli. He's a fifty-year-old Indian in a country where the life expectancy is fifty-seven."

"How do you know?"

"It says so in *Lonely Planet*."

Einat was silent for a moment. She sighed.

"Check his pulse."

She did not look at him when he put two fingers under the Indian's right wrist.

Nor when he pretended he was counting the heartbeats. It was better that the lie he was about to hand her should touch her as little as possible. And later, when he would tell her again about Lebanon and she would ask more and more until he would cry and she would hug his head in the bed and feel motherly, strong and slightly aroused, she would be able to think that he was good and pure. A pure angel with curls.

"Very weak. He doesn't have a chance."

He spoke in a quiet and confident voice and knew that he was lying. Even without checking the pulse he knew he was lying. But still he spoke in a quiet and confident voice, like then, in the war, when he'd told Eran "the chopper's coming, I swear they're coming," and knew there was no chopper because their radio wasn't working, and he'd repeated to himself the holy trinity of "Einat, motorcycle, India; Einat, motorcycle, India," raising the volume as needed to drown out Eran's screams.

Einat got up. Yotam laid the Indian's hand back on the ground and got up too. Now they would go. They would get on the motorcycle and drive on from here. They would continue their trip. When they got tired of it they would return to Israel. Perhaps many years later they would talk about it. About the Indian. Perhaps they would feel guilty. It would be okay to feel guilty many years later. That was not like now.

But at that moment the Indian opened his eyes. Einat and Yotam froze. The air became thinner and their tongues tasted like sandpaper. At their feet, right next to their waterproof trekking shoes, lay the Indian whose nose was broken, whose face was smashed, and whose eyes were wide open.

He did not look at Einat. Nor at Yotam. He just lay there and stared at the sky, stared at it with such concentration that Einat could not resist a sideward glance up, at the point

he was staring at, perhaps there was something there after all. There was nothing. Only the amazing sunset, the glowing deep purple sky, as if someone had Photoshopped it. Since they'd landed she'd been trying to find a picture that would be as good as those in the travel guides, and here she'd found it. The monks they encountered always looked less authentic than those in the pictures in the book, and the mountains always looked lower. Now the sun was bleeding in computer-graphic colors and painting the man below her purple.

The taste of her thumb in her mouth surprised Einat. For four months she had not bitten her finger, since they'd landed in India. For years she'd tried to break the habit, which recurred whenever she was under stress. Before sports competitions in elementary school. In the midst of matriculation exams in high school. In boot camp. A month after Yuval's funeral she still had tooth marks on it. But from the moment she'd landed here, not even once. As if, when she'd packed her knapsack, she'd left the thumb-biting at home, waiting for her in her room, next to the piles of clothes and books. And she'd hoped that when she got back she would toss it out altogether, as she would clear out the clothes that were no longer in fashion or the books that were out of date. And suddenly, this bitten thumb, here, with the mountains and the glowing purple sunset. As if the thumb-biting had been waiting in ambush all along for the right moment. After all, she couldn't really slough off her past as a snake sloughs off its skin. And suddenly she hated the Indian with a powerful, blazing hatred. His contemptuous grimace. Those open eyes, brown, deceptive, like the eyes of the guest-house owners when it came time to set the price.

Almost by force she pulled her thumb out from between her teeth. Now she stood with her arms hanging at her sides, her hands

clenched. Yotam's posture was almost identical, his clenched fingers white at the knuckles from the strain. If they had looked at each other they would have been amazed at how similar their postures were. But their eyes remained fastened on the eyes of the Indian; they couldn't turn them away even if they wanted to. For one long moment the Indian gazed at the sky. For one long moment they gazed at the Indian.

When the Indian turned his gaze from the sky to them, Einat let out a moan of surprise, which was not particularly different from what she let out at the moment of penetration. A little sound of the intake of air just at the moment the body is penetrated by a new presence. Because now the Indian had ceased gazing at the purple of the sky and was looking at the faces of the people above him. A young man with curly golden hair and large blue eyes and the face of a boy. A young woman with loose black hair and brown eyes and a chewed thumb in her mouth. Again he turned his gaze on the sky.

Yotam knew that now he would speak and he knew what he would say. He just didn't know how to do it, how the hell to command the body to get up and do it. For more than a minute he struggled with his tongue until it obeyed, and even then his voice sounded distant and strange as he turned to Einat and said:

"Get on the motorcycle." Einat did not move.

"Now."

She turned and went to the motorcycle. He went after her. She opened her bag and took out the wooden shawl he had bought her two days before in Dharamsala. She closed the bag. He opened his bag and took out an almost full package of cookies and a bottle of water. He closed the bag. They covered the Indian with the shawl and laid the cookies and water next to him. He looked at them. They did not look at him. Yotam went back

to the motorcycle. He took out his wallet and pulled out a hundred-rupee note. On second thoughts, two hundred. He went over to the Indian. He decided to look at him. And in truth, it appeared that the Indian had resigned himself to his situation with that famous Buddhist equanimity, because indeed he had closed his eyes and was just breathing quietly, and his face showed a grimace that was not very different from a smile. Yotam laid the rupee notes between the bottle of water and the cookies. Now it was certain that the Indian was smiling at him, expressing approval with his closed eyes. He went to the motorcycle. Einat followed him. They got on the motorcycle. She wanted to look back, but knew that she would turn into a pillar of salt. So she looked forward. So did Yotam. Only forward. He held the handlebars and Einat held on to his waist, and she held on so hard that the scars from her nails remained on his waist for many days after. The sky changed from purple to black. An hour later they were in the village.

He lay with her in the room in the guest house even though she had not offered and he didn't really want to. She cried a little and

then they went to the shower. There was no hot water, so they washed quickly and went out to eat. The waiter in the restaurant asked what they would like. He was wearing a buttoned beige shirt and brown pants. He quoted prices that were higher than those on the menu, and Yotam bargained with him.

“Do you want pasta or pizza?”

“I'm not hungry.”

“You have to eat. Do you want pasta or pizza?”

“I want to go home.”

“They have shakshuka. Do you want shakshuka?”

“Okay. Shakshuka.”

They ate the tomato-and-egg dish, which was not bad at all, and for dessert had a pancake, which was as bad as usual, and went to sleep. The next morning they got on the motorcycle and drove on. Slowly, very slowly. Their thoughts were viscous and sticky, and the humidity and dust covered them. Then they drove fast. Very fast. The road twisted between the mountains, in sharp, beautiful bends. The wind turned cool. The sunset was amazing. Truly amazing. They took a picture and sent it home by e-mail.

The Exchange

Nathalie Ester Alyon. Israel

Azmi thought about calling home as he buttoned his shirt. The home he was thinking of was his parents' house in Edirne. He now lived in Madame Rodrig's old house in Istanbul's Jewish neighbourhood and had called it "home" ever since the day he moved to Istanbul to study at the university. Back when he was a ten-year-old boy, his entire family used to call home a beautiful house in Jannina, Greece. That was before the population exchange, before Sophie's family arrived on a ramshackle carriage with their beaten suitcases and miserable faces. After that, Azmi's house became Sophie's home.

He would have to call his parents eventually. It had been over one month since Madame Rodrig installed a phone in the house, available for her three boarders, but Azmi had not used it once. He feared the questions the most. How is school? Did you find a job? Are you coming to visit us soon?

He finished getting ready to leave and tiptoed down the squeaky wooden stairs of the old house to avoid alerting Madame Rodrig. The clings of cutlery meeting porcelain plates and the smell of fresh tea brewing on the stove infused the air in the kitchen.

"There's cheese and bread for breakfast," said the stout woman in her seventies. He mumbled something about being late for class and walked past the kitchen. The other two boarders eating the stale bread and white cheese were having the daily, morning chitchat led by Madame Rodrig. She usually blathered about the weather or mused about the Spanish Civil War or lamented the deteriorating state of Jews in Nazi Germany. Yesterday she read out loud an article about an American organization that gave an award to Atatürk and then sighed over his ill health.

Being the only Muslim in a household of Jews did not unnerve Azmi since Madame Rodrig was an old family friend. Before moving to the Jewish neighbourhood of Kuledibi in Istanbul, the Rodrigs used to be Azmi's neighbours in Jannina but they immigrated to Istanbul years before he was born. Azmi was a young man of twenty when he realized that his grandmother's famous dish with leeks and ground beef was actually a Jewish recipe from her old friend Stella Rodrig. The two families didn't reconnect until Azmi decided to go to Istanbul, prompting his grandmother to find her old friend's address scribbled on a faded letter. Azmi and Madame Rodrig shared a past that both preferred to forget, so they didn't talk much. Not about Jannina, anyway.

Azmi had been skipping class for three weeks. He left the house every morning with his notebook under his arm, but instead of taking the second-class tramway to the university, he walked in the opposite direction, wandering around Istiklal Boulevard. Istiklal was a tricky street. Most foreigners would never imagine that small entrances to buildings led to big passages and courtyards that housed eccentric shops, Russian girls selling flowers, and lively taverns. Passing through its line-up of adjacent buildings, European consulates and shops selling everything from antiques to silk fabrics, Azmi searched for reminders of Jannina's markets in Istiklal's nooks and crannies.

Leaving the house that morning, he felt the cold wind in his face. He walked with his head down to get his ears as close to the collar of his jacket as possible. When he entered Istiklal, the dings of the tramway leaving the station slowly faded away. He evaded eye contact with shop owners cleaning their windows and setting up their merchandise for display, fearing they might find out that his presence is without a purpose.

He walked towards Abanoz Street, the infamous red-light district that university students saved money to visit. In his pocket, he felt coins mingling with a broken necklace – that was the cross that Sophie had given to Azmi when they realized that they would never see each other again. He pushed the cross to the corner of his pocket and counted the coins. He had enough money. Abanoz and its line-up of “public houses” looked different. At night you saw curious men trying to peep at half-naked women, transvestites walking to the kiosk to get tobacco, and the occasional well-dressed men with enough money pushing others aside to go inside. They were all missing at this early hour.

Azmi knocked on a door next to an empty glass window. His stomach growled with the thought of Madame Rodrig’s bread and cheese. He felt a rush of heat reaching his neck and stretched his collar to let in some air; it was the heat of loneliness. He could still turn around to go home. The heat intensified with the sound of female heels descending the wooden stairs of the house.

“Yes?” An older woman said through the chain locked door. She had an accent familiar to Azmi.

“I guess you’re closed?”

“We are always open honey.” She didn’t open the chain lock.

“I have money – two liras,” he said taking the coins out of his pocket.

She closed the door and Azmi heard the metal sound of the chain lock release the door. Chairs lined the wall of the large salon next to the entrance and she motioned him to a chair. Under his feet was a hand-woven, woollen rug with red and blue geometric shapes. It looked like the rugs they used to have back in Jannina. For years he listened to his mother mourn the “one of a kind rugs” she left behind. “Your great aunt had woven them with her bare hands and now all I have as a keepsake is this little piece I cut from the corner of one of them,” she would say holding a little piece of rug with faded colours. Azmi thought about home.

“Come on, this way. What are you waiting for?” A younger woman appeared at the door of the room and stood with one hand on her hip. Azmi followed the woman wearing a short skirt and a laced shirt revealing her black bra-strap. Her messy blond hair was tied high above her head.

Halfway up the stairs, the older woman called out to her in Greek. He wasn’t meant to understand, but he did. They exchanged a few words, in Greek, and then the blond woman continued up the stairs.

He remained silent, afraid that any word would give away his secret and the women would find out that he understood their fifteen-second conversation. So what if they knew? Perhaps he was trying to dissociate from the actuality of the situation, trying to conceal the absurdity of his moral superiority as the client of a prostitute. If he were to reveal his true identity, the silent rules that demarcate the appropriate would disintegrate like crumbs of a stale cake.

The room was furnished with one rumpled bed, one wooden chair, and a large metal basin filled with water. The crinkles of the sheets gave the room a temporal atmosphere but it looked clean. She faced Azmi and the silver cross on her neck reflected the morning light glaring from the window.

He handed her one lira. She began taking her clothes off.

“What’s your name?” Azmi said in Greek with an accent different from hers. Hours later, he would wonder why he didn’t keep his cover, why he didn’t just pretend to be a regular Turkish guy.

“You are not *Rum*,” she told him in Turkish. What she meant was, “I know you don’t belong to the Greek Orthodox community of Istanbul so why the hell are you talking in Greek and with a strange accent.”

He stuttered: “Ugh... yes... no... no, I am Muslim,” he said, feeling as though he failed her because of who he is.

“Ah. So you are one of the newcomers!” she said with the pleasure of figuring out the puzzle.

Newcomer. Other people called him *muhacir* – refugee; and yet others called him *mübadil* – one who has been exchanged. Like broken furniture taken back to the store or words between two friends, he too was exchanged. She was lucky, the exception that beat the merciless rule. Orthodox Christians from Istanbul like her were exempt from the compulsory population exchange. Azmi wanted to tell her that he’s not just one of the hundreds of thousands of immigrants forced to leave their homes behind and move to Turkey, that he’s not just a nameless “newcomer”.

Instead he nodded “yes” with his eyes fixed on the cross that hung on her naked body. He wanted to rip it off her chest. He couldn’t stand the way it swung one millimetre up and down the chain and the way the cold metal pierced her skin and the way it reminded him of Sophie. The daughter of the family that came from Edirne to live in Azmi’s house back in Janinna, Sophie was his friend. She used to wearing long colourful skirts that she held up while going downstairs. Her long braided hair hung over her right shoulder under the thin cloths with flower designs that she used to cover it. Her family had arrived in Jannina before the war ended almost fifteen years ago, yet Azmi still remembered Sophie as the twelve-year-old girl he used to play with.

Sophie and her family left Turkey as traitors like hundreds of thousands of other *Rums*. They took with them whatever their carriages could carry: blankets, beddings, sewing machines, animals tied to broken carts, babies... Edirne, on the border between the two hostile countries, turned into a gateway of sorrow as thousands of people walked in a silent procession into Greece, their new country.

Their sorrows didn’t end once they arrived in Greece either: Sophie’s family had nowhere to live. As negotiations for a population exchange proceeded at the Peace Conference in Lausanne, the Greek government found the solution in placing them at Azmi’s house, and then the same fate befell his family.

Sophie’s brother had died from malaria while marching from Turkey to Greece and her parents did not speak much during the three months that they lived in Azmi’s house. Sophie, her two surviving brothers, her grandfather and parents shared a bedroom upstairs. They avoided running into Azmi’s big family as much as possible. Azmi’s mother woke up before everybody else to finish cooking for her family. Whenever Sophie’s mother entered the kitchen, she would make an excuse like “I have to get more onions,” and leave the kitchen to Sophie’s family.

Azmi hadn’t yet comprehended why this strange family suddenly appeared in their house. He hadn’t understood why his father went into the city every Monday and returned at once disappointed and relieved. Nor had he understood that his family was to leave their home, never to return, and that once they left, this house that he grew up in would become Sophie’s.

While the adults in the house padded along the corridors of the house, evading one another, Azmi and Sophie snuck outside to explore the hills of Jannina, picking flowers and chasing wild animals.

Azmi loved listening to Sophie's stories about Edirne; she told him about the rivers that enclosed the city, the bazaar merchants that set up shop next to the big Selimiye Mosque every week, and how they went to church every Sunday.

"In the summer, it gets very hot, so we go swimming in the Maritza under the stone bridge that goes to Karaağac. But you have to be very careful because the water flows so fast and people drown," she said one afternoon while they played in a stream near the house.

"My father says we are going to go to a place called Karaağac too. Is that where you are from?"

"No. Our house's in a different place but Karaağac is real close, just over the bridge. We used to go to Karaağac all the time because my uncle lived there. He left during the war and never came back. It means 'black tree' in Turkish." Sophie always explained everything in detail and Azmi thought she knew everything.

"Are there black trees there?" Azmi asked curiously, imagining a big forest filled with black trees.

Sophie looked down at her fingers making circles in the water and paused: "No... There's a train-station."

One Monday, Azmi's father returned from the city holding a paper with the date of their departure. The sequence of events following that Monday remained a blur. Azmi's father took him to the city to sell their belongings and that week, he barely saw Sophie. Within days, it was at the same train station with no black trees, which Sophie's family had departed from, that Azmi and his family arrived.

* * *

Sitting on the bed of the barren room, staring at the cross hanging on the naked body of a strange woman, both Sophie and that village where he was born seemed to Azmi like a fairytale in an unreachable land. Azmi still hadn't taken off his pants and the naked woman was getting impatient – a one-lira tip could only buy him an extra ten minutes. She unzipped Azmi's trousers. The faint laughs of two women from the street penetrated through the closed window. Their voices were blurred yet the intensity of their hooting echoed in the room. He slid back in the timeworn bed and felt the weight of her body over his hips. His feet no longer touched the ground but remained erect with his big toes looking up at the ceiling.

"You are a nice fellow. Dreamy, but nice. I'll take good care of you," she said. He felt the wind of her words in his face. Her blond hair, released from its elastic chains fell towards his chest. The cross hanging from her neck swung in a slow, erratic motion, suspended in the air like dust in a ray of light. The mosque behind Abanoz Street broadcasted the call for prayer in Turkish: "*Tanrı Uludur*" – "God is Great."

"It's been over a year since they changed the *ezan* from Arabic to Turkish, but it still rubs me the wrong way," she said tucking her hair behind her ears. "It just isn't right."

He didn't reply nor did she expect a reaction. In another five minutes, he will put on his clothes and leave, never to see this woman again. He will be back in Istiklal, contemplating

the words he'll say when he calls his father. He will arrive home and pretend to return from university.

Yet those five minutes stretched out to five hours as the silver cross flew back and forth in front of his face, as if to remind him of all that he was not and could not be. It had neither mercy nor pity. He couldn't bear seeing the cross anymore. The spasmodic laughs of the women outside entangled with the muezzin's glorious voice: Azmi closed his eyes and thought about home.

Milena è una bomba

Alfredo Zucchi. Italia

I

“Giova’ non ti preoccupare i soldi in qualche modo pure li trovo. Prenota a nome mio, mi conoscono. Pago io ti dico, io non sono come te, quando c’ho qualcosa in tasca ci faccio campare tutti quanti”.

Eccoci. Una truffetta, un falso incidente – di espedienti ce n’è sempre a morirne. Così: prendi un povero cristo, per cinquant’euro quello al prossimo suo gli da il culo. Ecco, daglieli. Lui in cambio ti da il suo nome. Apri un conto in banca, stai mettendo su un’impresa. Di che vi occupate? Gru, cantieri. Ma se non si può costruire più un cazzo qua intorno...No, allora, stavolta fate tipo catering, tanto il cibo sotto al Vesuvio o a Nairobi c’è sempre spazio. Catering quindi. Giustamente vi servono cellulari *business*. Le offerte non mancano, l’alta tecnologia nemmeno. Bene. Butta la scheda, rivendi il cellulare a tre quarti del prezzo di listino se ti va bene. Guadagno netto, meno la scheda e quei venti euro scarsi necessari ad aprire il conto in banca. L’impresa è fallita. Quante ne avete create e suicidate nell’ultimo mese? 2.500 euro, 5 imprese fantasma, 7 pezzi d’alta tecnologia rivenduti al nero. Ah la mano invisibile del mercato! Sotto il Vesuvio lo spirito del capitalismo è un acrobata.

“Eh ti dico dobbiamo trovare i soldi sabato paghiamo per tutti, troiette e lecchini compresi. Sì, sì, voglio festeggiare. Non esiste, il mio compleanno, Antonio Ottaiano fa 21 anni!...poi il Napoli è arrivato quarto, fra un mese ci giochiamo l’ingresso in Champions, l’ultima volta tu non eri nemmeno nato, coglione...!”

I soldi? Eh come vuoi fare, ci dobbiamo un attimo organizzare, una cosa veloce, non c’abbiamo il tempo di aspettare la banca o l’avvocato...stavolta facciamo una cosa in casa, tu non ti preoccupare, al negozio c’hanno derubato già due volte sto mese, una volta in più’ vuoi vedere che...capisci a me...

Avvisa tutti quanti, tavolo per venti nel privé, champagne. Digli a Ciccio di farsi dare pure la polverina dal compare suo.”

“Anto’ svegliati! Svegliati t’ho detto!”

“Che è mamma? Oh stai calma stavo dormendo...Che è? E’ scoppiato il Vesuvio?” “Magari Anto’, si sarebbe portato tutta sta gente di merda...C’hanno rapinato di nuovo Anto’! Manco un rumore stavolta...”

“Stai calma mamma, quand’è successo? Ieri sera?”

“Sì! La terza volta in un mese...”

“E vabbu’ ma voi st’antifurto serio quando ce lo mettete? Che ti credi di vivere in Svizzera? Comunque non ti preoccupare, mo’ chiedo un po’ per strada, quello Giovanni sta sempre fuori al bar di fronte, chiunque è passato fuori da noi stai sicura che l’ha visto, pure glieli facciamo sputare i soldi a ste merde...ti faccio sapere a mezzogiorno.”

“Oh Giova’ tutt’a posto, nessuno mi ha visto. Senti, io mo’ parlo con mia madre, se lei ti viene a chiedere, tu digli...esatto, che hai visto uno uscire in una macchina nera andare verso Napoli... ‘na Twingo? Eh sì, se veramente ci stava fuori al palazzo ancora meglio...inventati quello che vuoi basta che non esageri se no ci cantiamo da soli...”

Ci vediamo sabato a Napoli. Tutto a posto, sì sì, Vincenzo poi ha prenotato, Ciccio pure ha fatto il suo. Ci manca solo la fica, esatto, e un po’ di pesce per Gennaro che gli piace così, cazzi suoi...Questo se lo vede pure Vincenzo.”

L’impresa di famiglia, una camiceria, da tre generazioni. Vicina al fallimento quando Ciro Ottaiano ne prende definitivo possesso vent’anni prima. Con un certo fiuto intuisce i costumi che cambiano, quella fetta di campagna mezza urbanizzata vuole scordarsi di essere provincia desolata.

La semplicità non è certo il suo dono: colli alti, colori sgargianti; le iniziali sotto il taschino manco arabeschi. Questa provincia vuole mostrarsi bella di inconfutabile bellezza – sfarzo contro deserto, così comanda.

Così negli anni si fa un nome la camiceria Ottaiano, cavalcando la rivalsa estetica della provincia. Da piccolo magazzino che era ad atelier al pianterreno del palazzo dove la famiglia – Anna e Ciro, ed Antonio figlio unico – da sempre abita.

Quando i primi clienti da Napoli ordinano quattro nido d’ape il più grande ostacolo è già dietro le spalle. *Sdoganati* – e a casa si stappano bottiglie.

“Mamma ci stai? Senti ho visto Giovanni...”

“Vieni a mangiare mo Anto’, poi ci pensiamo...Pasta e piselli freschi, me li ha dati tuo zio Gino li ha appena colti dalla terra sua qua vicino, senti che profumo...”

“Maro’ ma’! Ma che è una crema, squisiti! Comunque...Giovanni mi ha detto che ieri sera ha visto un tipo uscire dal cancello, di sera, c’aveva una Twingo nera, parcheggiata a una ventina di metri da casa sul marciapiede di fronte. Andava verso Napoli...io mo’ non so, pero’ potrebbe essere una pista...Papà lo sa?”

“Eh come non lo sa...mo’ senti quando torna domani...”

“Tu digli sta cosa qua di Giovanni, io chiedo pure a qualcun altro...”

“Anto’ tu devi pensare a laurearti! Non ti mettere in mezzo agli impicci...quando torna papà tu non dire niente, ci parlo io e vediamo quello che dobbiamo fare. Senti, che fai poi al tuo compleanno?”

“Niente di che ma’, una cena con gli amici stretti, sulla riviera di Chiaia, basta che ci sta il mare...”

“Eh bravo che non è proprio il momento di spendere soldi...”

I soldi. Ciro Ottaiano se li è sudati uno ad uno: spirito d’iniziativa, intuizione e fatica.

Ma chi ha messo radici sotto al Vesuvio, per esperienza od opposizione, conosce il sapore del sopruso – raggio e violenza.

“Ciro siediti, lascia là le valigie me lo vedo io. T’ho riscaldato il riso con le patate...”

“Grazie Annare’, senza di te...certe volte proprio...un mese di lavoro in bocca a chi sa quali pezzi di merda...teneva ragione mio padre...tutte le lote del mondo si sono concentrate in cinquanta chilometri quadrati...”

“Aspetta Ciro, non fare così, mo vedi che troviamo chi è stato e magari recuperiamo pure una parte... stavolta è diverso, quello Antonio...”

“Anna Antonio in questo fatto non ci deve entrare!”

“Ma io gliel’ho detto, pensa a studiare, se lo vede papà... però lui dice che Giovanni, quel suo amico muratore, ha visto uno uscire dal palazzo proprio quella sera...”

“Ma che mi stai dicendo...!? Quant’è vera la madonna stavolta glie la faccio vedere io, chi è stato è stato...”

“Eh sì Giovà un sacco di soldi... Mò digli a Vincenzo però che fa la parte tua: Ilenia, Martina e quell’altra brunetta... esatto, Milena, tutt’e tre domani mie, capito?”

I soldi. Per i giovani i soldi sono altro; non la fine di un lungo incubo di miseria, non solo, ma emancipazione estetica. Non solo rivalsa sociale, ma attraverso depilazioni, ciglia ritoccate e lampade abbronzanti, affinamento del corpo e dello spirito. Terrigno eppure androgino il ragazzo vesuviano sta; dalla fame dei padri ha imparato a spingere e non chiedere scusa.

Così Antonio due notti prima le mani nel ripostiglio, le chiavi della sala della cassaforte, il codice dall’agenda, giù per le scale ed in negozio, le sale deserte, la serratura i rumori del buio – la porta si apre. Tremando solo d’essere scoperto spinge, prende e esce meticolosamente.

II

Sabato. Proprio là parcheggiata di fronte a casa Ottaiano, ‘na Twingo nera, tale e quale a come Giovanni l’ha descritta – ma chi si credono di essere questi a tornare qua tre giorni dopo la rapina.

Vendetta si cova: Ciro si apposta, getta un occhio, aspetta. Niente polizia stavolta – e quando mai è servita a niente. La compagnia di un vecchio amico di certa esperienza basta e avanza.

Quando un tipo magrolino entra nella macchina scura Ciro si mette all’inseguimento, *sperando* che la macchina davanti, come da identikit di Giovanni, vada verso Napoli. Una vendetta sola le laverebbe tutte.

Antonio slanciato di raso grigio: “Eccomi qua, i migliori si fanno aspettare...” Il locale è zeppo di gente ghindata a festa. Sopra, nel piano ammezzato, il tavolo a nome Ottaiano felicità il campione suo generoso. Si stappa la prima bottiglia – quel vino frizzante che ubriaca persino agli astemi. Le ragazzine invitate all’uopo già si danno da fare; ma un uomo vero detta lui i tempi. Che aspettino, allora: prima bisogna passare in rassegna gli amici buoni.

Vincenzo, già al tavolo, grosso ansimante verde pistacchio. Ciccio, fatto da ore, a distribuire razioni solo a chi dice lui, gli altri elemosinino. Gennaro, grosso pure lui e allupato, il telefono suo mappatura di tutti i trans della provincia. E Giovanni, duro di spigoli, affamato; alter ego di Antonio ed unico vero suo complice. Il resto del gruppo è numero, seguito.

Poi un cenno al DJ, e questi ruffiano di rimando – “ragazzi il nostro uomo stanotte è Toni Ottaiano, un applauso alla Napoli che conta”.

Verso Napoli va la macchina davanti – svanisce l’ultimo dubbio, loro sono – e Ciro a ruota. L’adrenalina monta. Poi prende a destra, verso uno dei complessi di case popolari alle porte

di Napoli – meraviglia urbanistica d’assenza di servizi e spazi vitali, moltiplicatevi con dolore e rubate per fame. Ciro e il suo compare parcheggiano a pochi metri dall’ingresso, bloccato il cancello pedonale – lasciarsi aperta la via di fuga – entrano. Il tipo della macchina scura infine si accorge di loro, fa per voltarsi intorno lancia grida d’appello alle coorti amiche. Il compare di Ciro gli si avvicina masticando minacce, lo acchiappa per il cappotto – “caccia i soldi della rapina o ti ammazzo sul posto, a casa tua”. Ma ecco il soccorso arriva, l’orda si muove sui ritmi sincopati di un rap sanguigno sparato a tutto volume dal cellulare high tech di un fante nelle retrovie, la cavalcata delle valchirie versione *banlieue*.

Il compare accerchiato si dimena, fa per scappare, incespica. Ciro è già in macchina.

La Napoli che conta – Chiaia, due passi dal mare sporco. Tutt’intorno gli edifici a ricordare trascorsi di grandezza. Tufo in alto, a terra basalto: tutti ci fece il vulcano. Dentro, la discoteca parla una lingua ormai globale; solo la spessa umanità dei suoi abitanti gli rende dimensione propria: i visi levigati di creme e rasoio, orecchini e catenine degli uomini sballottano la luce in ogni senso; i trucchi rosso e porpora delle donne, densi come maschere antiche, a suggerire ai corpi mezzi nudi come un sacrificio imminente.

Tutti fatti alcuni sballano in pista. Altri più corpulenti al tavolo s’atteggiano a vecchi boss: chiunque voglia di loro viene a cercarli a domicilio; altrimenti muovere ritmicamente la testa e le mani lanciando intorno occhiate da padroni di casa. Varie opzioni c’ha Antonio stanotte, una pippata alla volta vuole prendersela tutte. Ilenia è scollatissima ma in faccia non si può guardare, buona per i pompini. E nemmeno, quelle cazzo di unghie lunghe ma chi glie lo fa fare. Da dietro sì, però. Martina ci gioca, beve a sbafo e non te la dà. Ma Milena, la bruna, è una bomba.

Gli stanno dietro, due macchine. E corrono cazzo. Uscire dalle strade principali, portarli nel labirinto di vicoli del centro antico – salite e discese, stendini e ambulanti a otturare le vie. Però corrono cazzo, già gli stanno addosso. Ciro accelera e pure quasi già lo tamponano da dietro. “Finalmente st’incrocio, è rosso, qua me li faccio”.

Fino in fondo è lecito sperare, Ciro.

Milena è una bomba. La più difficile a farsi prendere, ad aumentare la febbre da caccia. Sa giocare, la stronza; e Antonio non può più aspettare. Per le mani la trascina nel bagno degli uomini – tutti devono sentire. E a pezzi, con la bocca e con i denti, uno ad uno tra scottex inzuppato e pozzi di piscio si adagiano i vestiti di entrambi. Soli infine coi corpi – la schiena di Milena nuda sulla parete fredda freme due volte, le cosce sospese tra gli arti di Antonio. Questi la fatica non la sente, la dà.

“Anto’ so Giovanni! Apri un attimo!”

“Che è Giova’, vuoi pure tu un pezzo? Devi aspetta’! Anzi, vaffanculo, trovatene un’altra, questa è mia...”

“Anto’ tua madre ha chiamato dieci volte sul tuo cellulare, mo’ m’ha chiamato a me, per forza ti vuole parlare...”

“Ma che cazzo vuole mia madre mo’...passa sto telefono ja!”

Senza uscire dall’antro della bruna – non c’è posto più caldo – e solo con la madre:

“Mamma?”

“Antonio...io glie l’avevo detto a tuo padre di lasciare stare, quello per forza ha voluto fare da solo...i ladri lo inseguivano e lui scappando in macchina...Anto’ papà è morto!”

“Ma che stai dicendo? Che cazzo stai dicendo?” La bruna di colpo per terra la tana sua calda un ricordo. E l’uccello dritto ancora di terrore – lacrime e sangue:

“Mamma se è vero che so’ figlio a te io sti ladri li trovo e li ammazzo!”

Milena Is a Sex Bomb

Alfredo Zucchi. Italy

I

“Giovà, don’t worry, somehow I’m going to find the money. You can book on my behalf, they know me. I told you, I’ll pay. I’m not like you, when I have some cash in my pockets, you know I will feed anyone.”

Here we are. A swindle, a mysterious accident – there’s always plenty of expedient methods to take care of matters. For example, take into consideration a poor devil that would sell his own ass for 50 euros. Come on, give it to him. In exchange, he will give you his name. Open a bank account, you are building a business. What kind of business? A crane operator or even some sort of construction? Why? It’s impossible to build something over here. No? So this time you could try something like a catering service. Anyway, for food, under Mount Vesuvius or in Nairobi, there’s always space. So, it’s catering services. Reasonably, you are going to need business cell phones. There’s a lot of offers and new technology. Good. Throw away the SIM card, sell the cell phone for three quarters of the list price. Net profit begins after the simple expenses of the SIM card and 20 euros to open the bank account. But, the business failed. How many of these businesses did you create and kill in the last month? 2,500 euros, 5 phantom businesses, 7 pieces of high technology sold on the black market. Oh, the invisible hand of the market! Under Vesuvius, capitalisms’ spirit is an acrobat.

“I told you, we have to find the money; on Saturday we’ll find everyone, bitches and brown noses. Yes, yes, I want to party. No way,

it’s my birthday, Antonio Ottaiano is 21 years old! Besides, the Naples football team made it to fourth place. In one month we’ll play the match to enter the Champions League. The last time you weren’t even born, asshole...!”

“The money? What do you want to do? We have to organize, fast, we don’t have the time to wait for the bank or the lawyer... this time we arrange it at home. You don’t have to worry, they robbed the shop twice this month, just one more time and... you have to understand...”

“Tell everyone, table for twenty of us in the disco... champagne. Tell Ciccio to get the magic dust from his friend. He’ll know what you mean.”

“Antò, wake up! I told you to wake up!”

“What’s the matter mom?! Come on, I was sleeping! What’s wrong? Did Vesuvius blow up?”

“I wish it had... at least it would have taken all these fucking people with it... They robbed us again Antò! But this time, not even a noise.”

“Calm down mom, when did it happen? Last night?”

“Yes, the third time in one month...”

“So, when are we going to get a serious anti-theft system? Do you think that we live in Switzerland? Anyway, don’t worry. I’m going to ask someone in the street. Giovanni always stands outside the bar in front of our house. He sees everyone who passes by. We will make them spit the money back, these motherfuckers... I’ll let you know something around midday.”

“Oh Giovà, is everything ok? Nobody saw me. Listen, now I’ll talk to my mother. If

she comes and asks you something, you have to tell her... exactly that you saw someone in a black car going to Naples... A Twingo car? Yes, and it was parked outside the building... Make up whatever you want, but do not go too far, 'cause we'll get fucked up...

See you on Saturday in Naples. Yes, everything's ok. Vincenzo booked, Ciccio did his part. We just miss the pussy, and a little bit of fish for Gennaro, 'cause he likes it like this... Vincenzo will take a look..."

The family business is a blouse shop, for the past three generations. It was about to fail, when Ciro Ottaiano took over 20 years ago. Figuring out that fashion was changing, that part of the countryside, half-urbanized, wanted to forget about being a provincial town.

The simplicity wasn't a part of him; high collars, bright colors; the letters under the pocket looking arabesque. This provincial town wants to show itself to be marvelous and of unique beauty – luxury against desert. This is how it has to be.

That's how, through the years, the name of the Ottaiano blouse shop grew up, going through the aesthetic revenges of the town.

Starting as a little warehouse and becoming an atelier situated on the ground floor of a building, where the family – Anna and Ciro, and Antonio, as an only child, has lived ever since.

When the first costumers from Naples ordered four honeycomb blouses, the biggest problem was under the shoulders. Free. And at home everyone cracks open bottles more than they work.

"Mom, are you there? Listen, I saw Giovanni..."

"Come and eat Antò. We'll think about it later... Pasta and fresh beans. Your uncle Gino just harvested them nearby. Smell them..."

"Come on mom, what's that? Cream? It's perfect... anyway... Giovanni told me that yesterday he saw someone going out the gate, in a Twingo black car. Parked about 20 meters from our house, on the sidewalk in front of us... He went towards Naples... I don't know, it could be a useful trace... Does dad know about it?"

"Sure... tomorrow he'll be back..."

"You have to tell him about this stuff... about what Giovanni said, and I'll ask someone else."

"Antò, you have to think about the university! You can't get yourself into trouble... When dad gets back, you don't have to talk. I'll tell him what happened, and then we'll see what to do. Listen, what are you going to do for your birthday?"

"Nothing special mom. Just having dinner with my close friends, on the Chiaia coast. Anyway, we just need the sea."

"Good idea. It's not the right moment to spend money..."

The money. Ciro Ottaiano earned it little by little sweating blood; being enterprising, having intuition and lots of effort.

But whoever put down roots under Vesuvius, either for experience, or for opposition, knows the meaning of abuse of power – deception and violence.

"Ciro, sit down, leave the bags where they are. I warmed up the rice and the potatoes for you."

"Thanks Annarè. What would I do without you? Sometimes... a month of hard work, and shitty money... my dad was right... the motherfuckers are concentrated within 50 square meters..."

"Wait Ciro. Don't say it. We'll find out who robbed us, and maybe we'll get a part of the cash back... This time it will be different... and Antonio..."

“Listen carefully Anna. Keep Antonio out of this issue!”

“I told him to think about the university... but Giovanni, a friend of his, saw someone coming out of the building that night...”

“What are you talking about??? This time I’ll take my right, I’ll...”

“Yes, a lot of money... tell Vincenzo that he has to take your part: Ilenia, Martina, and that brunette... yes, Milena... all of them... mine... tomorrow, understood?”

The money. For the young generation, it’s the most important thing. Not just the end of a terrible nightmare of misery, but also simple yet enlightening independence. Not just social revenge, but through depilation, touched up eyelashes, sunlamps, body and soul refinements. Dark and androgynous, that’s the Vesuvius guy: from the father’s hunger he learned to push and not to say “sorry”.

Antonio, two nights before, hands in the closet, with the keys of the strongbox, the secret code from the diary, down through the stairs and in the shop, nobody inside, the lock, the noise in the dark, the door opened. Shaking, scared to get caught, he pushed, and went out secretly.

II

Saturday. Right over there, in front of the Ottaiano family’s house, a black Twingo car, just like the one Giovanni described. Who are they?? Coming back here three days after the robbery.

The revenge is being prepared: Ciro lays in wait, takes a look, then continues to wait. No police this time; anyway, they’ve always been no use at all. Along with an old friend with experience when a thin guy gets into the dark car Ciro starts chasing after him, hoping that the car ahead, as Giovanni described, will take the direction towards Naples. Just revenge.

Antonio, slender in grey satin, “Here I am, you always have to wait for the best...”

The club is crowded with people dressed for the party atmosphere. Upstairs, on the mezzanine, the booked table in Ottaiano’s name greets the generous champions. They open the first bottle – that bubbly wine that can even get the teetotalers drunk. The invited girls start to get ready but a real man lays down the law. So, let them wait, first of all, he has to take care of good friends.

Vincenzo, sitting at the table, huge and breathing heavily, dressed in pistachio green. Ciccio, stoned since 2 hours earlier, distributing rations only to the people he chooses while the others beg. Gennaro, huge too, and horny... on his cell phone there’s a map of every transsexual in the town.

And then, too, there is Giovanni... hungry as usual; Antonio’s alter ego, the only real accomplice. The rest of the group is merely a crowd of numbers.

Then, with just a wave to the DJ, and a shout of “Guys, tonight our man is Toni Ottaiano, clap your hands for the Naples that matters”.

Towards Naples the car keeps going – there are no more doubts – Ciro right behind.

The adrenalin flows faster. Then turns right, to a bunch of council houses, and Naples is just around the corner; an architectural beauty, without services or space, but with increased pain and stealing due to the prevalent hunger. Ciro and his friend park the car a few meters from the entrance, blocking the gate – getting themselves ready for a quick and easy way out – they enter. The guy of the dark car eventually becomes aware of them, turns around, seeking help. Ciro’s friend gets closer to him, chewing threats, catches him by the jacket – “Give back the money from the robbery, or I will kill you right here.” But suddenly, some help started arriving, the

horde is moving to the rhythm of bloody rap, played at a high volume from the brand new high-tech cell phones, as if a modern version of the “Ride of the Valkyries”.

The surrounded friend wiggles, wants to run away, stumbles. *Ciro* is already in the car.

Naples, that Naples that matters. Chiaia, two steps from the dirty sea. All around, buildings to remind us of a glorious past. Over there is tuff, on the ground, basalt. Inside, the disco talks a global language; just the humanity of its inhabitants makes the place important. The smoothed faces thanks to creams and razor blades, earrings and chains are shining everywhere; red and purple make-up of the women, as ancient masks, suggesting half-naked bodies as in an imminent sacrifice.

Everyone is stoned, dancing on the dance floor. Others, fatter, sitting at the table, behave like old bosses. Anyone who wants to see them comes directly to the disco. Then, too, there are others who are shaking their heads and hands, looking around pretending to be landlords. *Antonio* has a lot of choices tonight. He wants to get everything. *Ilenia* is dressed over-sexily, but her face sucks, good for the blow jobs. And those fucking nails, come on. Butt-fuck her from behind, why not? *Martina* plays, drinks, but she doesn't offer up her pussy. But, *Milena*, the brunette, she's a sex bomb.

Two cars behind him. And they run fast, shit. Leave behind the main roads, take them into the labyrinth of little streets in the ancient downtown, go up and down, drying racks and stallholders, blocking the way. Fuck, they run. *Ciro* speeds up, and they almost crash

into his car. “Finally the crossroads. The traffic light is red. I'm going to fuck them up.” Hope, hope until the end, *Ciro*.

Milena is a sex bomb. The hardest girl to get keeps up the fever, the excitement. She knows how to play, she is a bitch; and *Antonio* can't wait. He takes her by the hand, drags her into the men's bathroom. Everyone has to hear. And piece by piece, with the mouth and the teeth, among wet tissues and puddles of pee, their clothes fall to the floor. Just bodies – *Milena*'s naked back on the cold wall shakes twice, her legs over *Antonio*'s limbs. He doesn't feel tired, he keeps going.

“Antò, it's me, *Giovanni*. Open the door!”

“What the fuck *Giovà*, do you want a piece?? You have to wait. No, screw you, go and search for another girl, she's mine...”

“Antò, your mom called you ten times, then she called me. She has to talk to you...”

“What the fuck does she want now... give me the cell phone!”

Without leaving the insides of the brunette – there's no warmer place – he talks with his mother.

“Mom?”

“*Antonio*, I told your father to forget about this issue, but he insisted... the thieves were chasing him... and he was running away... Antò, your dad died!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Wha... what the fuck are you talking about?” he stammers. Suddenly the brunette falls to the floor. With his dick still erect, terrified – tears and blood, he coldly says:

“Mom, I'm your son, I'm going to find these motherfuckers and kill them!”

Sudraba staru klusumā

Andris C. Habermanis. Latvijas Republika

Kā mazā tikko mirušā paradīzē, viņi sēdēja upes līkumā; vērojot kā augšteces krasti lēnām izzūd miglā.

Vēja šeit nebija. Novakares gaismā pasaule šķīta tālu prom. Visi trīs viņi bija klusējuši jau kādu pusstundu, ik pa brīdim pakasot vai lēni parīvējot neredzamos dabas kodumus & nobrāzumus. Miglas priekšā pāri upei kustējās tumšs paugurs kā akmens mugura ūdenszāļu kažokā.

– Tas bebrs... izskatās it kā viņš staigātu pa ūdens virsu. – Teica meitene, ar plaukstām apņēmot mīksto upes kraujas malu. Šeit viņai sava vārda nebija. Pārējie sekoja meitenes skatienam.

– Ja nu tas ir bebru Jēzus... – Sākumā cīnoties ar aizsmakuma rūsu balsī, ierunājās Patriks. Pārējie zināja, ka tas nav viņa īstais vārds.

– Varbūt šī upe ir robeža, un viņš ir pārcēlājs starp divām pasaulēm. – Noteica Adrians jeb tas, kuru šeit sauca par Adrianu.

– Tagad viņš jau ir pāri. – Meitene sacīja.

Kad kāds ko runāja, viņi zināja, *par ko*. Kad kāds ko vaicāja, viņi *zināja*, kuram jautāts.

– Laikam mums būs jāpaliek šeit kādu brīdi. – Arī abi pārējie klusējot piekrita Adrianam. Pēc dienām ilgā *pārgājiena*, pēc daudzām dzīves smagajām naktīm, rītu viegluma, mākoņu segas biežā smacējuma, ķermeņu izgarošanas saules gaismā, viņi bija nokļuvuši vasaras pievakarē pie upes. Viņiem blakus, no upurālas zem klints pārkāres, iztecēja svētavots, kas tecējumā uz tumšo straumes lielceļu apjoza milzīgu, lāčbrūnu laukakmeni.

– Kad ieradāties, debesis vilkāms uz lietu. Tagad *tur* ir skaidrs.

Viņi vēroja, kā zem ielejas egļu virsotnēm šurp slīdēja miglas mākoņi.

Starp lielo koku mugurām uz upes virsmas lēni kustējās arī viņu ēnas. To iekšpusē upe likās dziļāka & ūdens tumšāks, bet skaidrāks.

Adrians domās sev teica: „Ēnas nav uzticamas... bet patiesas. Tā ir vienāda gan baltajam, gan tumšas ādas cilvēkam, mazo var padarīt goliātisku un garo saīsināt līdz pundurim. Nekāda izvēlīguma vai sagādīšanās. Bet miglā. Tur nav pat ēnas. Viss ir beidzies. Viss ir pavisam jauns & nebijis.”

„Miglu nevar izpētīt ar gaismu. Skaņas, krāsas & smaržas tajā izplūst. Tu nesāc šaubīties par svešo – tu baidies no tā, ka nevari izjust pat sevi. Jo apkārtējā pasaule ir pazudusi. Un pats esi pazudis. Cilvēki sevi pazīst tikai reizē ar *savu* pasauli.” – Domās pauda Patriks.

Upes daudzo, gandrīz nejutāmo skaņu klusumā Adrians atcerējās:

„Agrāk man bija tā sajūta, sajūta, ka brienu pa pļavu. Ar stiebriem kādu pēdu virs acu augstuma, varbūt arī vairāk. Kad tu tā brien, neredzot neko citu. Visa tava pasaule ir pļava, vēl tās debesis, bet tikpat labi izplatījumā iztvaikojošs okeāns. Tu ej pa to pļavu un redzi tikai pļavu, jūti tikai pļavas pieskārienu; ausīs arī, pat ja noliecies pie pašas zemes, mēģini tajā iebāzt degunu vai izgaršot to – arī tā ir pļava. Un tad tu nonāc uz šosejas, mežā, upes krastā vai pilsētas nomalē. Bet tā joprojām ir pļava. Tu joprojām jūti tās garšu mutē, smaržu & izskatu savās atmiņās, ausīs tās švīkstoņu gar tavu ķermeni, kājas turpina niezēt no tās pieskārieniem. Pilsētā tu varbūt ieej

dušā, varbūt ienirsti upē, mežā varbūt tevi sagaida lietusgāze. Pēc tam pļava ir pazudusi – citreiz ātri, citreiz pamazām. Bet kur? Vai pļava tagad iesūkusies sūnās, vai tā turpina plūst pa kanalizāciju; varbūt tā tek līdzī upei?”

– Šī migla. Varbūt tā aizskalo pasauli. – Pēc brīža Patriks ierunājās.

– Ja nu ārpus šīs miglas pasaule vairs nepastāv? – Teica meitene. Un domās sev piebilda: „Līdz ar miglu sarūkot līdz mums pašiem...”

– Tā noteikti mainās, kamēr esam šeit. Es domāju... „gan pati šejieni, gan tā pasaule, no kuras esam uz brīdi atrāvušies prom.”

– Kad migla atkāpsies, tā atkal parādīsies... savādāka. – Piebilda meitene pirms ilgāka brīža klusuma.

„Vēl tikko migla elpoja & kustējās, bet tagad šķiet apstājusies kā dziļā miegā.”

– Tā šķiet... Kā pamostoties no dziļa miega, vēl pirms rītausmas. „Sākumā pasaule tev šķiet sveša & nesaprotama. Tad apziņa ar to sāk aprast, lēnām visapkārt zīmēt pasauli. Sākumā tuvāko apkārtni, dabu, priekšmetus, cilvēkus, tad arī atmiņas par to visu.”

– Iekurināšu ugunskuru... – Patriks piecēlās ar skatu koku dziļumā. Kādu laiku staigāja lokiem apkārt. Krāva kaudzē zarus.

– Es nekad nejūtos droši dziļi dabā, ja tuvumā nav gaisma vai uguns. Ugunskurs ir vislabākā lieta tumšās naktīs.

– Varbūt tā ir visiem cilvēkiem. Visās kultūrās, tautās, mentalitātēs. Mēs nekad nejutamies labi, pasaule apkārt nav *pareiza*, ja neredzam savas plaukstas vai otra acis. Kaut vai puskrēslā ar acs kaktu. – Adrians teica. Patriks meklēja uguni.

– Tā ir jāpieradina. „Kā mežonīgs savvaļas radījums. Par to ir jācīnās, bet nedrīkst to darīt ar naidu vai dusmām. Sākumā dodot labāko – izmeklētu, sausu, viegli apēdamu maltīti. Pēc tam tā augs, paļausies & ēdīs vairāk. Kad uguns beidzot apmetas kā mājās, tā vairs tikai viegli jāpieskata. Un tikai tad cilvēks ar tās palīdzību *var* gatavot savu maltīti.” – Patriks pēc tam domās stāstīja sev. Adrianam līdzī bija prāvs gabals sēņu pīrāga, ko bija saņēmis kā atgriešanās sveicienu šejienē. Viņš sadalīja uz trijiem. Pēc brīža meitene sāka runāt:

– Jā... gluži kā mūzika... – Norīja pēdējo kumosu & teica: – Arī mūzika ir jāpieradina... sevī. „Pat tad, ja tā jau uzreiz liek dvēselei skraidīt pa iekšieni kā ar bezgalīgi mazām gaismas skudriņām, pat tad tā sākumā ir tikai gaidīts & tuvs *ciemiņš*. Kad to klausies vienatnē, paceļot galvu zvaigznēm vai noliekot miegam; klausies naktīs, kad nespēj aizmigt. Tad tā kļūst tuva.” Labākā lieta ir tā, ka tā nekad nekļūst tāla. Arī šeit tā skan manī. Visa, kas jebkad kļuvusi tuva. Tas ir *dīvaini*, jā, bet es pirmo reizi šeit gribēju ņemt līdzī pleijeri ar mīļāko mūziku. – Šajā mirklī visi sāka smieties tā, ka vēl jaunais ugunskurs sāka viņņoties kā ūdenszāles upes straujumā.

– Es pirmajā reizē gribēju paņemt visu bērniības & jaunības albumu, ar kādām 500 bildēm varbūt. – Patriks izsacīja, spēlējot lielību smieklu saraustītā balsī.

– Tas vēl nekas, es *gribēju* savu suni „vai kucēnu pilnīgi vienādā krāsā ar to”. – Adrians smaidot teica.

– Man nesanāca paņemt līdzī pat „*Ezīti Miglā*” hologrammas failā.

– Es šoreiz domās tomēr paņēmu līdzī „*Mēnesnīcas sonāti*”. Kā es varētu jums to nospēlēt? – Adrians zināja, ka meitene to vaicājusi viņam.

– Tas ir patiešām jauki, bet tev vajadzēja līdzī ņemt arī klavieru vai vijoles pagatavošanas recepti.

– Pieņemsim, ka man tā ir...

- Varbūt ej & sāc grebt koku?
- Jums vajadzēs meklēt zirgus ar visiem astriem.
- Arī mūsu mati būs labi.
- Tātad nekas nesanāks.
- Jā nav laikam īstā vieta... – Adrians mierīgi noteica. Meitene, ar nodurtu galvu smaidot, piekrita.

– Bet tomēr... tas nav dīvaini. Paņem arī uz šejieni līdz tuvāko, kas ir bijis. – Patriks teica gan sevis, gan pārējo aizstāvībai.

„Jā, dīvaini varbūt ir tas, ka pat šeit es nedaudz baidos no trakām lapsām vai tiem vilkaču trikiem pilnmēnesī.”

– Dīvainības ir kultūras pazīme. Lai arī dīvainības katram ir savas, tās apvieno. „Ja tiek sme pēc gaismas, redzamās pasaules piemīt visiem; arī cilvēku sabiedrībā pieņemtais nesēsties pie kopējā galda ar netīrām rokām. Tad tieksme neēst pie galda ar slapjām rokām piemīt tikai mums – tiem, kas dzīvo pie upēm, kuru mājas mēdz iekļūt miglās & lietavās.”

„Ja pirms gulētiešanas esam samirkuši, ar slapjām drēbēm; ja atguļamies mitrumā, sasezdam ūdens smagumu savākušās segas; nekad nebūs patika paļauties mājīga miega aizgādībai. Bailes noslīkt – aukstumā, sliktos sapņos, mitruma dvakā... kā miglā tumšākajā naktī.”

– Mēs izjūtam bažas, ka tās drēbes, segas neizzūs līdz rīta rasu dzestrumam. Un bieži jūtamies neomulīgi ar aukstuma sasietām, miklām plaukstām. Šādos rītos pati labākā palīdzība no otra ir liela māla krūze ar karstu aveņu tēju. „Mēs apņemam to plaukstām, piekļaujot pirkstus, cik cieši vien varam & pateicīgi izdzeram siltumu. Sākumā tikai ar plaukstām. Tad paceļam acis, lai arī to otru kaut mazliet sasildītu ar savu skatienu.”

– Runājot par dīvainībām, ir tā, ka... man garšo tēja ar pienu, bet es viņu nedzeru. – Meitene teica, brīdi aizmaldījies pagātnes tālumos.

- Kā tu zini, ka garšo, ja neesi dzērusi? – Patriks sāka smieties.
- Es esmu dzērusi, kaut kad agrāk, īstenībā nu jau pavisam sen atpakaļ...
- Tomēr tev garšo, bet nedzer?
- Jā! – Meitene ar vieglumu noteica un visi smējās.
- Ak, nabaga tu. Tas droši vien ir grūti...?

– Ne-e. Nu jā... Vēl tāda lieta, ka viena no tuvākajām man ir *Godspeed You! Black Emperor* mūzika. Bet es tā arī neesmu noklausījies nevienu viņu lielo plati no sākuma līdz pašam galam. Nekad vēl. „Gluži kā tuvākos sapņos, to vienmēr kas pārtrauc. Pēkšņa apziņa par nomoda pienākumiem, dziļais miegs, cilvēks blakus, elektrības kā tā sapņu pavediena pārrāvums. Daba. Tās klātbūtne & īstums. Ar visu aukstumu, svelmi, odiem, lietu, vētru, uguni vai pēkšņu apmaldīšanos nakts dziļumā.”

„Ejot vienam dabā, man ir neērti satikt svešus cilvēkus. Tu vari būt vientuļš pilsētas centrā, bet tikai dabas tuvumā vai savās mājās spēj būt viens pats par sevi. Tā viantnība & pirmatnība.”

– Jā... Šī pagājusī pasaule kļuvusi tik tuva, vai ne..? – Meitene noteica ar ilgu sajūtu balsi. Sākumā viņi kādu brīdi to *apdomāja*.

– Tā ir laba vieta, laba pasaule. Jā *dīvaina* laikam...

„Šī pasaule. Viņa... tā taču ir pelnījusi labākus cilvēkus. Bet tā nekļūs labāka, kamēr cilvēki nicinās savas dzīves, dabu sev apkārt, kultūru, kurā tiem jāpavada savs laiks.”

„Pasaule mainās kā gadalaiki, tie nekad neatkārtojas tādi paši. Pēc katras jaunas rītausmas tā ir jau cita. Citāda. Cituriene.”

„Cik gara būs šī nakts..? Kā dažas minūtes vai gads? Vai tā beigsies...kā tā beigsies? Kāpēc tās siltumā mani pārņem šīs trīsas.” Meitene pierāva sev tuvāk ceļgalus, tad izstiepa plaukstas pret pulsējošo ogļu čupiņu, kas kā maza saule viņu tumšajā pasaulē uzturēja smalku pavedienu, gaidot rītausmu.

– Arī šeit tā ir tikai nakts. Arī šeit tā beidzas. – Vēl vienu garu klusuma brīdi ieēnoja Adriana balss.

– Kas īsti ir... šī vieta? Es joprojām jūtu savu drēbju mājas smaržu. Bet taču esam pavisam prom... – Meitene tomēr vaicāja.

– ...bez savas pasaules kā bērns bez mātes vistumšākajā naktī. Jā, sajūta mazliet uz to pusi. – Adrians noteica & tad turpināja domās:

„Glūži kā visās kultūrās, it īpaši senatnē, cilvēkiem bija jāiziet iniciācijas, iesvētīšanas jeb uzņemšanas rituālu. Tu nevarēji tikt pieņemts ciltī, kopienā, sabiedrībā un kultūrā, ja neizgāja tam cauri. Pirms tam tava miesa bijusi kaila, dvēsele jauna & gars tukšs bez Gudrības. Ar gribu & ticību tajā izdzīvo cauri aizsaulei. Tu nomirsti & atdzimsti, lai būtu gatavs turpināt savu senču dzīvības plūdumu, lai spētu attīstīt sevi; vai arī atgriezies sākumpunktā un sāc no jauna. Iniciācijas rituālā nomirstana bija simboliska, šeit tā ir reāla vismaz bijušās pasaules robežās.”

„Arī šī vieta ir simboliska savā ziņā, bet tomēr īsta. Mēs paliekam paši; kādi esam bijuši. Uz šejieni dodamies ar svarīgāko, kas mums ir. Ar sajūtām, kādās jūtamies vislabāk, esot tādi, kā sevi iztēlojamies. Ar cilvēkiem, kas mums palīdzējuši šeit nokļūt. Tāpēc arī šeit neesam vieni, man šķiet.” – Domās runāja Patriks.

– Mēs neesam vieni...

„...vai arī mūsos ir cilvēki, kuru tuvumā, laika klusumā ar savām sirdīm esam zīmējuši bezgalības.”

„Mēs pazīstam viens otru jau tūkstošiem gadu, man šķiet. Es būtu apmaldījusies & ļoti viena, ja nu pēkšņi viņu šeit vairs nebūtu...”

– Viņi... tie nekad vairs nepazudīs..? – Patriks jautāja.

Adrians smaidot, ar acīm apstiprināja Patrika teikto, tad domās turpinot: „Mēs zinām tikai par pasauli, ko esam atklājuši sevī. Un iepazītam citu, ja cilvēks mums blakus to atklāj. Ja uzticam šim cilvēkam to atklāt.”

„Glūži kā toreiz. Nakts priekšā mēs sēdējām pie upes, miglas skavās. Un šķita, ka visa pasaule pazūd. Šķita, ka visa pasaule esam palikuši mēs. Un tā bija laba sajūta.”

„Vakardienas pasaule vairs nespēs piepildīt tagadni. Jau sen iepriekš uznāca tā sajūta, ka esmu bijis visur – Lieldienu salās, Tibetā, Grenlandē, Tasmānijā vai Vatikānā. Šai pasaulei bijušas robežas, rītdienas iespējams vairs nebūs.”

„Tikai šeit robežas ir arī aizspriedumi pret cilvēka ceļu, naidis pret svešādu kultūru, mēs karojam & ciešam aiz vēlmēm, ciešam pasauli, jo nespējam tajā vēlēties neko labāku.”

„Tomēr tai ir izredzes. Vai ne?”

„Tai ir izredzes.”

„Jā ir... koku dēļ... lietus. Miglu.. Zvaigžnotu rudens nakšu. Rasās sabristu basu kāju. Salnās sadzeltu roku, ko sildīt ar avenu tēju. Mūzikas. Dzīvot tajā, lai sacerētu dziesmas pie ugunsкура. Kalnu galotnēs sagaidītu saules lēktu. Un lēni slīdēt platā upē, guļot laivā. Divatā pārpeldēt klusu meža ezeru. Un mākoņu dēļ. Meža & tās vasaras pļavas smaržas. Saules vēju aprautām sejām sagaidīto saulrietu. Un rītausmu dēļ.”

„Un to visu vai nedaudzu, kas spēj visas tās *lietas* novērtēt.”

„Ar kuriem kopā to novērtēt & atklāt.”

Viņi pamanīja laivu, kas līgani parādījās no augšteces upes vidū.

– Es laikam ceru atgriezties kā indiānis. – Pēc *ilga* klusuma pirmais teica Patriks.

– Es vēl pēdējo reizi būšu šajā pasaulē. – Meitene klusu sacīja.

„Sajūtu, ka vairs neatgriezīšos.”

Viņi abi pateica tikai to & pēc tam vairs nerunāja. Bet reizē pamanīja rītausmu. Abi reizē gatavojās tam brīdim, kad mēs visi pieaugam, atkal atgriežoties pie savas bērnības. Un atceramies to tikai šeit, sudraba staru klusumā.

In the Silence of a Silver Light

Andris C. Habermanis. Latvia

They sat in a bend of the river as if in a small recently lost paradise, watching the bank up-river melt into the mist.

There was no wind here. The dusk made their former world seem far away. The three of them had been silent now for almost half an hour, now and then scratching or slowly rubbing nature's bites and scrapes. Just before the mist, across the river, a dark hillock moved like the back of a boulder wrapped in a coat of seaweed.

"That beaver yonder... looks as if he's walking on the surface of the water," the girl said, clasping with her hands the soft steep bank of the river. In this place, the girl had no name. The others followed her gaze.

"What if it's the beaver Jesus..." Patrick remarked, at first fighting the rust of hoarseness in his voice. The others knew it wasn't his real name.

"Perhaps this river is a boundary, and he's the ferryman between two worlds," Adrian, or the one who here was called Adrian, observed.

"He has already crossed to the other side."

When any one of them spoke they all knew what was meant. When any one asked a question, they all knew of whom it was being asked.

"Maybe we'll have to stay here for a while," Adrian said and the other two agreed silently. After many of life's hard nights, after the ease of mornings, after their daylong trek under the stifling thick blanket of clouds, their bodies perspiring in sunlight, they had arrived at the river in the early summer evening. Beside them, from the sacrificial cave under the overhanging cliff, rose a sacred

spring; on its way to becoming a dark coursing highway of water it girded a gigantic, bear-brown boulder.

"When we arrived, the sky was puckering up for rain. Now it's clear," Patrick observed.

They watched how the clouds of mist slid toward them under the valley's canopy of firs.

Their shadows, visible between the large trunks of the trees, also moved slowly on the surface of the river. Within the shadows, the river seemed deeper and the water darker, but clearer.

Adrian thought to himself: "The shadows aren't dependable... but they're genuine. They're the same for a white- and a black-skinned person; a small man may become a goliath and a tall one a midget. No process of selection or coincidence. But in the mist, over yonder, there are no shadows. Everything is at an end. Everything is totally new and is as never before."

"The mist cannot be analysed by light. Sounds, colours and fragrances pass right through it. You don't start to question what is strange... You are afraid of losing a sense of yourself. Because the world around you has vanished. And you yourself have vanished as well. People only know themselves in conjunction with the world," thought Patrick.

In the silence of the many almost imperceptible river sounds Adrian started to remember:

"Earlier I had the feeling, the feeling that I was wading through a meadow, with long grass reaching about a foot above my eye-level, perhaps even higher. When you

wade like that, not seeing anything else, your entire world is the meadow, even the heavens, but this expanse could also be an evaporated ocean. You walk through this meadow and see only the meadow and feel its caress; even on your ears, even as you bend right down to the earth itself, you try to shove your nose into it or to taste it – that is also the meadow. And then you arrive at a highway, a forest, a riverbank or the outskirts of a city. But this is still the meadow. You still feel its taste in your mouth; its fragrance and image are in your memory, the swishing of the grasses on your body, your feet still tingling from its touch. In the city maybe you take a shower, perhaps dive into a river, or maybe in the forest a rainfall awaits you. Then the meadow vanishes, sometimes quickly, sometimes bit by bit. But where to? Has the meadow now been absorbed by the moss? Does it continue to flow through the canals, or perhaps it flows towards the river?"

"This mist. Perhaps it washes away the world," Patrick said, after a while.

"What if beyond this mist the world does not exist," the girl said. And in her thoughts, continued to herself: "And as the fog diminishes we ourselves are diminished."

"It certainly has changed while we've been here. I think..." Patrick concluded in his head: "both this here and now, and the world, from which we have for a moment pulled ourselves away."

"When the mist recedes, it will again reveal itself... as different," the girl added just before a longer moment of silence.

"Just a short while ago the mist breathed and moved, but now it seems to have stopped as if fallen into a deep sleep," Adrian said in his thoughts.

"It seems... like waking from a deep sleep before dawn," the girl said to the other two and then thought to herself: "In the beginning the world seems strange and incom-

prehensible to you. Then consciousness begins to comprehend it, slowly sketching in the details all around. In the beginning, one's immediate surroundings, nature, objects, people, then the memory of everything."

"I'll make a fire..." said Patrick and he got up looking deeper into the trees. For a while he wandered around the forest, piling up tree branches.

"I never feel safe in the depths of nature, unless I have light or a fire nearby. A campfire is the best thing on dark nights," the girl said quietly.

"Perhaps it's the same for everyone. In all cultures, all countries and for all individuals. We never feel good; the world around us doesn't feel right if we can't see our own hands or another's eyes. Even if it is in a dim light through a corner of the eye," Adrian said while Patrick looked for kindling to light the fire.

"A fire must be tamed like a wild creature," Patrick said, thinking, "but you can't do it with hate or anger. In the beginning you must feed it well with a select, dry, easily digestible meal. Afterwards, it will grow, will trust you and will eat more. When the fire settles in as if at home, it will only have to be minimally watched. And only then can a man with the help of the fire prepare his own meal."

Adrian had brought with him a good-sized piece of mushroom pie, which he had been given in welcome for his return here. He divided it up for the three of them. After a while, the girl began to speak.

"Yes... very much like music..." After she had swallowed the last bite, she said: "Music must also be tamed... within oneself." She continued further in thought: "Even when from the first note it makes your soul race around inside you as if there were an infinite number of small light ants scurrying about, even then the first sound of

it is like the arrival of an expected and dear visitor. When you listen to it alone, as you lift your head toward the stars or lay your head down for sleep or when you listen to it at night at times when you can't fall asleep. Then the music draws close."

"The best thing," the girl continued, "is that it will never grow distant. I also hear it in me in this place. All the music that has ever been dear to me. It's odd, yes, but I for the first time wanted to bring along a CD player with my favourite music."

At this moment, everyone started to laugh, so much so that the flames of the just lit fire began to undulate like seaweed in a swift river's current.

"The first time, I wanted to take along a photo album of my childhood and my youth, with about 500 pictures in it," Patrick said, pride discernible in his laughter-shaken voice.

"That's nothing. I wanted to bring my dog," Adrian said, smiling, "or a puppy in exactly the same colour."

"I didn't even manage to bring along a hologram file of '*A Porcupine in the Fog*'," Patrick admitted again.

"But this time, in my thoughts I managed to bring along '*The Moonlight Sonata*'. How could I play it for you?"

Adrian knew that the girl had asked him to.

"That's really lovely, but you should also have brought along a how-to for making a piano or a violin."

"Let's assume that I have it..." the girl stubbornly persisted.

"Maybe you should go and begin carving the wood," Adrian encouraged her.

"You'll have to find some horses so you can use the horsehair to make violin strings," the girl said.

"Our hair should also do," Patrick spoke up.

"So, nothing can come of this," she said reluctantly, her voice dragging.

"Yes, this probably isn't the right place..." Adrian added calmly. The girl, with her head bowed, smiling, agreed.

"But still... it isn't so odd. To bring your dearest past possessions to this place," Patrick said in defence of himself as well as of the others. Then, he thought to himself:

"Yes, perhaps what is odd is that even here I am somewhat afraid of foxes or werewolf curses under a full moon."

"Oddities are a cultural sign. Even though everyone has their own, their mere existence unites us all," Adrian said and then thought: "If the yearning for light and a material world belongs to all then so does the social taboo of sitting down to a communal table with dirty hands. But the need to not sit down to eat with wet hands is ours alone – we, the ones who live by rivers, whose homes are often beset by fog or rainsqualls. Also, if before going to sleep we're drenched, our clothes soaking wet, if we lie down in dampness, cover ourselves with sodden and heavy blankets, we won't ever be able to sink into the comfort of sleep. We will fear drowning – in the cold, in bad dreams, in musty dampness... as if into fog on a dark night.

"We worry that our clothes and blankets won't dry until the dew-fresh morning. And we often feel uncomfortable with clammy palms seized by cold. On mornings like this the best remedy is the offer of a large mug of hot raspberry tea." Adrian continues in thought: "We cup the mugs in our hands, wrapping our fingers around them as tight as we can, and gratefully drink the warmth. In the beginning only our hands feel the warmth. Then, we lift our eyes so that another may also be warmed somewhat by our glance."

"Talking about oddities, it's like this... I like tea with milk, but I don't drink it," the girl spoke up once more, after having for a moment got lost in distant memories of the past.

“How do you know that you don’t like it if you haven’t tasted it?” Patrick asked, beginning to laugh.

“I tasted it some time ago, to be truthful, a very long time ago...”

“But you like it, and yet you don’t drink it?” Adrian asked.

“Yes!” The girl replied light-heartedly and everyone laughed.

“Oh, poor you. Surely that must be hard...?” a curious Patrick questioned.

“No-o. Well, yes... Another thing, one of my favourites is the music of Godspeed You! Black Emperor! But I have never listened to any of their albums from start to finish. Not once,” the girl said, and then thought: “The same as the most recent dreams, something always interrupts them. A sudden recall of duties on waking, a deep sleep, a person alongside, the thread of the dreams disrupted like electricity. Nature. Its presence and its reality. With all of its cold, sweltering heat, mosquitoes, rain, storms, fire or suddenly getting lost in the depth of night.”

“Venturing out into nature by myself, I feel uncomfortable when I meet strangers. You can be lonely in the centre of the city but only close to nature or at home can you be alone with yourself. That is solitude and a primordial condition.” Adrian said in his thoughts.

“Yes, our former world has become so dear to us, is that not so?” the girl asked in a yearning voice. At first they thought for a moment about her question and then Patrick agreed:

“It was a good place, a good world. Yes, odd probably...” He then thought to himself: “It’s strange not to be there anymore. Its dearness is also present here.”

“How long will this night last...? A few minutes or a year? Will it end... *and how?* Why am I getting the shivers in its warmth?” the girl thought, drawing her knees up close,

then stretching her hands toward the pile of embers which, like a small sun awaiting dawn, maintained in their dark world a trace of fire.

“Here it is also only night. Here it also ends,” Adrian said introducing another long moment of silence.

“What is this place... really? I still smell the aromas of my home on my clothing. But we’re so far away from it...” the girl persisted.

“... without our world like a child without its mother in the darkest of nights. Yes, a feeling akin to that,” Adrian concluded and then continued in thought: “Much the same as in all cultures, especially in ancient times, people had to go through initiation – a consecration or an acceptance ritual. You couldn’t be accepted in a tribe, a community, a society or a culture, if you hadn’t gone through this. Before that, your body was nude, the soul new and the spirit empty without wisdom. With determination and belief in this acceptance you survived the nether world. You died and you were reborn, so that you could continue the ancestral life force, in order to be able to evolve to a higher plane or else return to the beginning and start all over again. In the initiation ritual, dying was symbolic; here it is real, at least within the past world’s boundaries.”

“Also, this place is symbolic in a sense, but the sense of reality is hidden. We remain ourselves, what we have been. We come here with what is most important. With the emotions with which we are most comfortable, being what we imagine ourselves to be. With people who have helped us to get here. That’s why it seems to me we are not alone here,” Patrick said to himself, and then quietly to the others:

“We are not alone...” he continued thinking: “...or else we carry within us people in whose presence, in the silence of time, in our hearts, we have faced eternity.”

“We have known each other for a thousand years, it seems. *I* would have got lost and been very alone if the others were suddenly no longer here...” the girl said.

“They... these people, will they never again get lost...?” Patrick asked.

Smiling, Adrian answered yes to Patrick’s question with his eyes, and then continued in thought: “We only know the world that we have discovered in ourselves. And we get to know another world if a person beside us reveals it to us. If we trust this person to reveal it to us.”

They were silent. But in their thoughts they continued to talk to themselves and to each other:

“It’s exactly like that time. When in the dark of night we sat by the river, embraced by the mist. And it seemed that the entire world vanished. It seemed that we had become the world. And it was a good feeling.”

“Yesterday’s world will no longer fulfil the present. Long ago I already had the sense that I had been everywhere – to Easter Island, Tibet, Greenland, Tasmania and Latvia. This world has had limitations; there possibly won’t be a tomorrow.”

“Only here the limitations are our prejudices against human destiny, despair about our identity and animosity towards a foreign culture. We make war and suffer from desire; we suffer the world as it is, because we are unable to wish for anything better in it.”

“Nonetheless, there is hope, isn’t there?”

“Yes there is.”

“Yes there is... in the trees. In rain. Mist... Star-filled autumn nights. Wading barefoot through dew. Hands stung by frost, being warmed by raspberry tea. Music. Living in it, composing songs around a campfire. Awaiting sunrise in the treetops. And lying in a boat to slowly drift in a wide river. In a twosome to swim across a silent lake in a forest. And in the clouds. The woods and that meadow’s summer fragrance. With sun and wind caressed faces to wait for sunset. And for dawn. ”

“All of it or a little of it, who knows how to value these *things*.”

“And with whom to value and reveal them.”

They then noticed a boat, which appeared drifting midstream upriver.

“I hope maybe to return as an Indian,” said Patrick, after a long silence.

“Yet I’ll be in this world for the last time,” the girl said quietly.

“I sense that I won’t ever come back here,” she added.

Having said just this, they spoke no more. But they both noticed at the same time that dawn had come. The two together prepared for that moment, when we all grow up, returning again to our childhood. And we remember it only here, in the silence of a silver light.

Evoliucija: prisitaikai, arba...

Donara Barojan. Lietuvos Respublika

Kūnas

– Jums reikia persodinti širdį – ramiu balsu ištarė pliktelėjęs ir žilstelėjęs, mano mažomis dovanelėmis mintantis kardiologas, su kuriuo bendravau jau keletą metų. Jam tai buvo žodžiai, kuriuos jis taria bent kartą per savaitę, net man pačiam teko girdėti jam juos tai sakant kitam eiliniam nelaimėliui – literatūros profesoriui, mano palatos „draugui“. Bet aš nebuvau eilinis. Aš buvau solidus verslininkas, mano banko sąskaitoje tupėjo kelios dešimtys milijonų eurų, kurios turėjo garantuoti man šelmišką senatvę Ibizoje, kur mane būtų supusios vietinės gražuolės, puolančios į glėbį kiekvienam pasiturinčiam senjorui. Aš buvau neeilinis pasiturintis būsimas senjoras. Kai išgirdau tuos nelemtus gydytojo žodžius man buvo keturiasdešimt aštuoneri. Turėjau tylią žmoną ir tris tylilius vaikus. Buvau savo šeimos ir savo verslo galva ir kaklas. Buvau svarbiausias.

– Kiek man liko laiko? – paklausiau savo ištikimojo patarėjo.

– Jei nepersodinsime Jums širdies – metus, gal dvejus. Sunku pasakyti. Kiekvienas atvejis būna vis kitoks.

– Kada gausiu donorą?

– Na, visų pirma turėtume užpildyti visus reikiamus dokumentus, kad pastatytume Jus į eilę. Jums tai nekainuos, šias operacijas paprastai finansuoja valstybė.

– O kas koordinuoja tą „eilę“? Gal būtų galima su tuo žmogumi susisiekti? Palengvinti ir pagreitinti šią procedūrą?

– Organų transplantacijos centro direktorius labai sąžiningas žmogus, garsėjantis savo nepaperkamumu – labai ramiai, lyg nesuprastų, kad kalbame apie mano gyvybę, dėstė gydytojas. – Patarčiau nešvaistyti savo jėgų ir nesigadinti santykių su juo. Jis ne toks, kaip mes, – tarė jis ir jo skruostus užliejo raudonio banga.

– Hm.. – susimąščiau. Dar niekada nebuvau susidūręs su nepaperkamuoju Don Kichotu. Visi jie turi savo kainą. Bet jei jau net mano papirkctasis pataria nesivarginti, gal iš tiesų nevertėtų gaišti laiko. – Darykite viską, ką reikia, kad tik greičiau. Jei kartais reikėtų finansuoti Jūsų veiksmus, negaišdami skambinkite. Juk mes kalbame apie mano gyvybę.

Ant stalo švystelėjau jam savo vizitinę kortelę ir baltą voką.

Atsistojau ir šiek tiek luktelėjęs, kol praeis raibuliavimas akyse išėjau iš jo kabineto ir grįžau į savo palatą. Ten manęs laukė meilužė ir žmona. Abi raudojo apsikabinusios... Gydytojas joms jau pasakė diagnozę. Ak tos moterys... Ką jos supranta. Moka tik ašaroti, gaminti valgi ir auginti vaikus.

Nieko joms nepasakiau ir su savo asmeninio slaugo pagalba iširopščiau į lovą. Įsijungiau savo i-pod'ą ir pasinėriau į Jimio Hendrikso sukurtą muzikinį tranžą. Paprašiau sanitaro, kad jis iškviestų mano vairuotoją ir parvežtų tas nusikamavusias verksnes namo. Tuo metu man nereikėjo asmeninių raudotojų. Man reikėjo susikaupti ir apmąstyti savo tolimesnę veiksmų planą.

Prabėgo keletas savaitių. Mano savijauta negerėjo. Eilė lėtai slinko. Gydytojai sakė, jog reikės palaukti pusmetį, ar net daugiau. Aš nenorėjau laukti. Aš niekada nieko nelaukdavau. Nelaukdavau vasaros, kad būtų šilta – tiesiog skrisdavau pailsėti į Meksiką, nelaukdavau žmonos, jei ji per ilgai ruošdavosi vakarienei – į restoraną pasiimdavau savo visuomet pasiruošusią meiluzę. Nelaukdavau vėluojančių savo verslo partnerių, tiesiog užrakindavau kabineto duris ir vienas pats kurdavau nutrūktgalviškiausius verslo plėtros planus. Aš nemokėjau laukti. Aš nenorėjau laukti. Aš nelaukiau.

Nusprendžiau aplankyti transplantacijos centro direktorių. Mano komandai nebuvo sunku suorganizuoti susitikimą su juo. Tiesiog pasakiau, jog norėčiau paremti centrą solidžia sumele ir jau kitos dienos popietę man buvo paskirtas susitikimas su direktoriumi.

Jis į susitikimą vėlavo. Planavau jau išeiti, kai staiga prasivėrė duris ir pro jas įėjo jaunas kostiumuotas jaunuolis. Iš pradžių pamaniau, jog tai direktoriaus asistentas, tačiau, kaip vėliau paaiškėjo, tai buvo pats direktorius. Nebūčiau davęs jam nei trisdešimties. Jis buvo labai aukštas bei išvaizdus, atrodė energingas, tvirtas ir labai gerai nusiteikęs. Vos įlėjęs į kabinetą jis pradėjo merkti akį ir merginti mano asistentę, kuri, kaip kvaila vištelė mintyse jau buvo susipakavusi daiktus ir pasiruošusi eiti paskui jį kartu ieškoti pasaulio krašto. Tos moterys...

Paspaudę rankas ir apsikeitę vizitinėmis kortelėmis, prakalbome apie reikalus. Kai direktorus suprato, kur link lenkiu kalbą, iš sukalbamo jaunuolio jis tapo nuožmiu, bekompromisui žvėrimi. Jis leido man suprasti, kad mano dosni dotacija bus priimta, bet tai nei kiek nepagerins mano situacijos toje prakeiktoje eilėje! Tai taip nesąžininga.

Nusivylęs grįžau namo. Savijauta negerėjo. Bėgo savaitės, mėnesiai, praėjo metai. Jaunasis donorų centro direktorius padarė iš manęs daržovę. Tiesiog gulėjau ir vegetavau lovoje. Laukiau. Laukiau, kaip eilinis mirtingasis. Niekuo neypatingas. Kaip koks bejėgis šuo, partrenktas mašinos ir paliktas nustipti. Parašiau testamentą. Padalinau savo turtą į penkias lygias dalis. Žmonai, vaikams ir meiluzėi. Kad nelikčiau niekam skolingas.

Dar po savaitės sulaukiau skambučio. Tai buvo mano gydytojas. Atsirado širdis.

Širdis

Mano tėvas buvo paprastas žmogus. Tikras čigonas. Tėvelis nepripažino žodžio „romas“, su pasididžiavimu vadindavo save tikru čigonu – klajokliu, neprisirišančiu prie daiktų, ar vietų. „Svarbiausia – žmogus“, – dažnai kartodavo jis. Jis išmokė mane didžiutis savo kilme. Jis išmokė mane gyventi.

Tėtis rūpindavosi visais, padėdavo kaimynams, pažįstamiems, ar tiesiog paeiviams viskuo, kuo tik galėdavo. Kai kurie jį dėl geros širdies išnaudodavo, pavyzdžiui, vieną vasarą kaimynas paprašė jo pagalbos dengiant stogą. Mano tėtis dirbo be atlygio ištisus du mėnesius, grįždavo pavargęs ir tyliai skųsdavosi sąnarių skausmais. Bet buvo ir tokių, kurie už darbą norėdavo atsidėkoti, bet jis pinigų niekada neimdavo. Pinigai jam buvo tik popierius, suteikiantis perkamąją galią. Galią, kurios jam nereikėjo. Tos galios reikėjo man, mano mamai bei močiutei. Norėjosi gražiau pasipuošti, nusipirkti skanesnį gardėsį, ar nueiti į kiną su draugais. Deja, pinigai mano tėvui buvo tik beverčiai spalvoto popieriaus gabalėliai. Jis buvo idealistiškas

komunitaristas. Bendruomenės gerovė visuomet buvo aukščiau jo asmeninės. Ir tai buvo gražu. Tai buvo gera. Tai buvo kilnu. Ir tai negalėjo tęstis ilgai.

Kai išmušė jo paskutinioji, jam buvo vos penkiasdešimt metų. Mirė jis dėl savo geros širdies. Padėjo savo senam draugui iškrauti baldus lietingą vakarą, grįžo namo kiaurai permirkęs, susirgo gripu, nesigydė ir numirė. Gydytojas pasiūlė paaukoti jo organus. Mudvi su mama net nedvejojome, tėtis tikrai būtų to norėjęs. Tai buvo paskutinė jo auka.

Kūnas

Po širdies persodinimo operacijos, atsigavau labai greitai. Donoro širdis man puikiai tiko. Tai buvo būtent tai, ko man trūko. Jaučiausi kupinas energijos, kaip naujai gimęs. Tik vienas klausimas man nedavė ramybės. „Kieno tai buvo širdis?“. Gal kito jauno verslininko, ar kokio inžinieriaus, o gal aristokrato. Negalėjau galvoti apie nieką kitą. Nusprendžiau, kad privalau žinoti, kieno dalelę nešioju savyje.

Po operacijos praėjus mėnesiui sukviečiau savo komandą ir liepiau jiems suorganizuoti dar vieną susitikimą su donorų centro direktoriumi. Šį kartą jokių dosnių dotacijų nežadėjau. Nepaisant to, jis mane vis tiek priėmė.

Po visų mandagysčių – rankų paspaudimo bei apsikeitimo pozityviais būvardžiais – susėdome prie stalo.

Paaiškinau jam savo situaciją. Jis mane puikiai suprato. Paaiškino, kad ši informacija yra konfidenciali ir jos negalima atskleisti. Tačiau šį kartą viskas buvo kitaip. Direktorius brūkštelėjo ant lapelio keturženklę sumą ir paaiškino, kad tai tik mano smalsumas, tai nėra sukčiavimas ir niekas kitas nuo to nenukentės. Tad jis už dosnių dotaciją donorų centrai gali išduoti mano paslaptingojo donoro duomenis.

Susitarus dėl sandorio sąlygų jis iš savo užrakinamo stalčiaus ištraukė mano donoro kortelę ir įdavė man į rankas.

Vos perskaitęs savo donoro pavardę, supratau su kuo turiu reikalą.

– Aš turiu čigono širdį?– nesavo balsu sukriokiau aš.

– Ne, jis buvo romas,– ramiai atsakė jaunuolis.– Nusiraminkite, Jums negalima nervintis, dar sveikata pablogės.

– Jūs juokaujate... Kodėl man taip padarėte?! Norėjote atkeršyti?! Už ką man taip?! VAJE!- pradėjau dusti, jaučiau, kaip užsiliepsnojo mano veido oda, pradėjo drebėti rankos. Jaučiausi, lyg manyje būtų išsiveržęs Etnos ugnikalnis.

– Liaukitės!- suriko direktorius.- Koks skirtumas, kieno širdį Jums persodinome. Svarbiausia, kad Jūs gyvas. Ar bent nutuokiate, kaip Jums pasisekė, kad ši romo širdis Jums puikiai tiko?

Aš nebegalėjau kalbėti. Manyje viskas užvirė. Jaučiausi toks pažemintas. Mano kraują po organizmą varinėjo purvina, purvino čigono širdis! Nė pats nepajutau, kaip mano rankos ėmė kilti aukštyn, ieškoti po-operacinio rando ir draskyti jį. Prie manęs pripuolė direktorius ir mano asmeninis padėjėjas. Netekau sąmonės.

Atsibudau ligoninėje. Prie manęs tyliai raudėjo etatinės raudotojos – žmona ir meilužė, kampuityje „Monopolį“ žaidė vaikai. Negalėjau net pagalvoti, kaip jiems turėtų būti gėda turėti tėvą,

romo širdimi. Negalėjau žiūrėti į savo mažylius. O mano moterys! Kaip reikės gyventi joms, jei mylėsiu jas romo širdimi?

Ne... Nieko nebus. Geriau mirsiu, bet romo širdis manyje netuksens.

Jo nekrologą sudarė vos vienas sakinys.

Širdis priėmė jo organizmą, deja, jo organizmas nepriėmė širdies.

Evolution: You Adapt or...

Donara Barojan. Lithuania

The Body

“You need a heart transplant,” uttered my balding and greying cardiologist in a quiet tone. I had already been visiting him for several years and regularly feeding him with small presents. For him, they were only words he used to say at least once a week and even I have heard them being said to the other ordinary unfortunate one – professor of literature, my ward “fellow”. But I was not an ordinary man. I was a solid businessman, and in my bank account there were several tens of millions of euros, which had to guarantee me a roguish old age in Ibiza, surrounded by local beauties that were running into the arms of every wealthy señor. I was a remarkable wealthy future señor. When I heard those doctor’s words, I was forty-eight. I had a quiet wife and three quiet kids. I was the head and the backbone of my family as well as of my business. I was the most important.

“How much time do I have?” I asked my faithful adviser.

“If we do not give you a heart transplant, then a year, maybe two. Difficult to say. Each case is different.”

“When will I get a donor?”

“Well, first of all we should fill out all the necessary documents to get you on the waiting list. It will cost you nothing; this type of surgery is financed by the state.”

“And who is coordinating this ‘waiting list’? Would it be possible to get in touch with that person? To facilitate and to accelerate this procedure?”

“The Director of the Organ Transplantation Centre is a very honest man, with an

incorruptible reputation,” said the doctor very calmly, as if not understanding that we were talking about my life. “I would advise you not to waste your energy and not ruin your relations with him. He is not like us,” he said and a blush came over his face.

“Um...” I pondered. I have never met an incorruptible Don Quixote. They all have their price. But if my bribed one is advising against it, maybe it is really not worth wasting my time. “Do everything that is necessary to speed it all up. If at some point there is a need to finance your actions, call me immediately. After all, we are talking about my life.”

I dropped my card and a white envelope on the table.

I got up and, after waiting a while, I left his consulting room and returned to my ward. There my mistress and my wife were waiting for me. They sobbed, embracing each other... The doctor had already told them the diagnosis. Oh, those women... What do they understand? All they know is how to weep, cook and care for kids.

I did not say a word to them and with the assistance of my personal nurse climbed into bed. I turned on my iPod and dived into the musical trance created by Jimi Hendrix. I asked the nurse to call my driver to take those exhausted weepers home. At that moment, I didn’t need personal weepers. I had to concentrate and to think over my further action plan.

A few weeks have passed. I wasn’t feeling any better. The waiting list was moving slowly. The doctors were saying that I might have to wait for half a year or more. I did not want to wait. I had never waited for anything.

I never waited for summer to enjoy warm weather – I just flew on holiday to Mexico. I never waited for my wife, if it took too long for her to get dressed for dinner. I went to the restaurant with my mistress, who was always ready. I never waited for business partners if they were late, I used to lock the door of my office and create reckless business development plans myself. I didn't know what wait was. I didn't want to wait. I didn't wait.

I decided to visit the Director. My team had no difficulties in arranging a meeting with him. I just said that I was willing to donate a substantial sum and an appointment was fixed for the afternoon of the following day.

He was late to the meeting. I was already planning to leave, when the door opened and a young man entered. At first I thought he was the director's assistant, yet, as it turned out, it was the director himself. I guessed him to be less than thirty. He was very tall and presentable, looked energetic, resolved and was in a very good mood. Shortly after entering the office he started blinking his eyes and flirting with my assistant, who, like a fool, in her head had already packed her things and was ready to leave with him. Those women...

After shaking hands and exchanging cards we started talking business. When the director understood where I was heading, from an amenable young man he became a ferocious, uncompromising beast. He made it clear that my generous subsidy would be accepted, but this would in no way ameliorate my situation in that damned queue! It was so unfair.

I came home frustrated. My health was no better. Weeks and months flew by, and then a year had passed. The young Director had made a vegetable out of me. I was just lying and vegetating in bed. I was waiting. I was waiting like an ordinary mortal man. Nothing special. Just like some helpless dog, hit by a car and left to die. I wrote my last

will. I divided my fortune into five equal parts. For the wife, for the kids and for the mistress. Just not to be indebted to anyone.

After another week I received a phone call. It was my doctor. A heart had been found.

The Heart

My father was a simple man. A real Gypsy. Dad has never acknowledged the word "Roma" and with pride called himself a real Gypsy – a nomad, not attached to things or places. "The most important is the man himself," he often said. He taught me to be proud of my origin. He taught me to live.

Dad was always taking care of others, always helping neighbours, acquaintances or just passers-by in all he could. Some took advantage of him because of his good heart. For example, one summer a neighbour asked for his assistance in covering the roof. My dad worked without pay for two entire months, coming home tired and silently complaining about his aching joints. But there were also those who wanted to repay him for his work, but he would never take money. Money for him was just paper, giving purchasing power. Power he didn't need. This power was necessary just for us, my mother and grandma. To dress up, to buy a tasty delicacy or to go to the cinema with friends. However, money for my father was just worthless pieces of colourful paper. He was an idealistic communitarian. The wellbeing of the community always came before his own. And it was beautiful. It was good. And it could not last forever.

When his time had come, he was fifty. He died because of his good heart. He was helping an old friend to unload furniture on a rainy day, came home completely soaked, caught the flu, refused treatment and died. The doctor suggested donating his organs.

We both, me and mother, did not hesitate a moment. Dad would have wanted that. This was his last offering.

The Body

After heart transplant surgery I recovered very fast. The donor's heart suited me perfectly. It was exactly what I was missing. I was feeling full of energy, as if born anew. Just one question haunted me. "Whose heart was it?" Maybe it was the heart of some other young businessman or engineer, or aristocrat. I could not think of anything else. I decided that I needed to know whose particle I was carrying within myself.

One month after the surgery, I gathered my team and asked to organize one more appointment with the Director. This time I didn't promise any generous subsidies. Regardless of that, he agreed to meet.

After all the formalities, shaking hands and exchanging positive words, we sat down at the table.

I explained my situation to him. He understood me perfectly. He explained that such information is confidential and was not to be disclosed. However, this time everything was different. The director wrote on a piece of paper a four-digit sum and explained that, as it related only to my curiosity, it was not cheating and nobody would suffer. Thus, for a solid donation to the Transplant Centre he would disclose the data of my mysterious donor.

As the arrangement was made, he took the card of my donor from his locked drawer and gave it to me.

Just by looking at my donor's surname, I understood.

"Do I have the heart of a Gypsy?" I yelled.

"No, he was a Romany," the young man calmly answered. "Take it easy. You should not get stressed as you are risking your health."

"You are kidding... Why have you done this to me?! You wanted to take revenge on me?! Why was this done to me?! Good gracious!" I became short of breath, the skin on my face was burning, my hands shaking. I felt as if Etna had erupted inside of me.

"Stop!" shouted the director. "What difference does it make whose heart we have transplanted into You. The most important is that You are alive. Have you any idea how lucky You are that this Roma heart suited You so well?"

I could not speak. Everything was bursting inside. I felt so humiliated. The blood in my body was being pumped by the filthy heart of a filthy Romany! I didn't even notice how my hands started moving up to the surgical scars and tearing at them. The director and my personal assistant dashed to me. I lost consciousness.

I woke up in a hospital. There at my bed the regular weepers were sobbing – the wife and the mistress, and in the corner children were playing Monopoly. I could not bear to think how ashamed they would be to have a father with a Roma heart. I could not look at my kids. And my women! How will they have to live if I love them with a Roma heart?

No... Nothing will do. Better to die, a Roma heart will not beat in my body.

His obituary was just one sentence: "The heart accepted his organism. Unfortunately his organism did not accept the heart."

Descending the Stairs of Downfall¹

Justin Fenech. Malta

Of course I remember the event, how could I not? They truly were hard times back in those days. I don't know if I'm lucky or cursed to have lived through them. To hell with it! The experience I've acquired cannot begin to compensate for the personal loss I've suffered. For what is a hurt man to do with experience? Experience is meant to keep you from getting hurt, so it's a bit redundant.

The 1980s were a very active time on our Islands, politically, culturally, socially. Yet no less historically, which is what interested me most, seeing as how I was a history professor at the University of Malta. New discoveries had been coming to light, and older discoveries were leading to new knowledge. At the time I had just travelled abroad to acquire my Masters degree in Arabic History from the University of Tripoli. Ever since I was young I have been fascinated by the Arabs. The first thing that lured me was their written language; a mosaic of words that flowed like waves caressing an empty page. My child-like mind began to conceive a sort of superiority between the Arab world and my own, seeing as how our own alphabet had no magical quality to it.

So imagine my surprise when I learned about the recently discovered *Il Cantilena!* The oldest surviving text written in Maltese; a 15th century poem! The shock my senses witnessed, when reading the text in ancient Maltese, I recognized a myriad of similarities between Maltese and Arabic languages. That Sunday I felt I had conquered the clouds, I didn't want to do anything, my father wanted to take me to San Anton, but all I wanted to do was stay in my room and read those mystical words over and over again. We've all had that feeling, when we feel life beginning to make sense under the umbrella of our newly discovered dreams. My young mind, struggling to find its feet between childhood and adolescent responsibility, had never known such excitement, such clarity!

After returning to Malta from my stay in Libya, I felt like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. My tongue had learned the language of knives. How could it not? I had lived in Libya for a year, and for a year all my childhood fantasies came true, I was surrounded by mosques, *suqs*, the North African sun, and of course, everywhere I turned, the poetry of the Arabic language flowed. It was as if I drowned in a salient river and found heaven deep within its soil. It was there that I met my future wife, Kadia. Every weekend we would spend the day in the cafes of Tripoli, and every time it was an adventure. We would play chess on dirty tables, in cafes rife with the smell of Sisha. At times we would get into conversation with some old men that frequented the cafes. They would tell us stories of their youth, voice their opinions of the Koran, with long white beards, and bristle dark hands that seemed carved from the crescent moon itself. I learned more in those cafes than I ever learned in class.

I returned to Malta determined to come out of my shell for the sake of this new found knowledge that now burned within me. I was going to use my new occupation as professor as a stepping stone for my mission. This obscurity of our people to forsake our true roots was harm-

1. Quote from the 15th century poem *Il Cantilena*, written in Medieval Maltese by notary Pietru Caxaru.

ful and plebeian. The Arab period in our history was seen as a dark age, to be buried in the false righteousness of time.

It was so much harder than I thought it would be to promote my cause, however. I began trying to use the media, I contacted several radio stations and also the Public Broadcasting Authority in order to speak on TVM. Nothing. As soon as they heard my proposals about what I wished to discuss, they wouldn't come near me with a ten foot pole. The subject was too controversial. That was the one thing no one was willing to question: it was so obvious. We were Christian, that was indisputable. But my interest did not lie in religion, it lay in truth.

In the face of all that adversity, I changed tack. I started giving lectures wherever I could. It was mostly in secondary schools around the Island. All I would normally have for an audience was some of the banal teaching staff of the school itself, the occasional interested parent, and maybe a local here and there who had nowhere else to spend their evening. In order to try and amass more of an audience I was extremely diplomatic with my choice of lecture titles: "Professor Pace Gives a Lecture about Malta's Forgotten Past", or "Professor Pace's Lecture on Malta and Its Neighbours". I must say, it worked! Slowly, I began to garner a larger audience. They would always be interested in what I had to say, and I dare say I taught them something about their past. I always liked to make my lectures interactive, and most of the time was devoted to the audience's questions. I made them teach themselves.

Perhaps the worst mistake I made was to move my lectures to the village Band Clubs. In those clubs the air was rife with political fervour, especially in those times. I tried to adapt to the atmosphere, I would try to point out the similarities between Maltese partisans and North African ones, I recounted my memories of the Libyan cafes and how similar they were to our Band Clubs, I even let them ask me questions about Gaddafi. Some even assumed I knew him. All was in vain. They reverted everything back to politics.

Needless to say my outspoken opinions and visible frustrations and their single-mindedness earned me a reputation, and not a favourable one. I was beginning to be seen as a ruffian, a terrorist sympathizer, a communist sympathizer, a Muslim... I don't know what I wasn't labelled! It didn't help my case when Kadia's family came to visit and started attending my lectures.

It was this precise atmosphere and context that led to the events at the secondary school in Sliema. The memories still make my hairs stand on end. Anyway, there I was in one of the classrooms with an audience of around thirty people. They were mostly men, they looked like some of my friends from the Band Clubs, which I realize should have been a telltale sign at the time. At the front sat my wife Kadia and her three brothers, her sister, mother and father, and two aunts. They always enjoyed my lectures and were in fact quite proud of their son-in-law's views and knowledge of their own culture. It was funny, to indulge me they always insisted I spoke in Maltese to them. I always obliged them, and we communicated splendidly.

The lecture of the day was about three Maltese poets who lived in the 12th century and wrote poetry in Arabic. It was a topic near and dear to my heart. I always found it significant that the oldest known Maltese poets wrote in Arabic. Naturally, I was trying to impart this significance to my audience. But they were less than receptive. Halfway through my lecture, I wrote down one of the poems by Ramadan al-Maliti, and as my back was turned I start hearing sneering comments, like "why doesn't he write something from his beloved Koran," "he knows these by heart, I wonder if he knows the Hail Mary by heart," and some sarcastic comments like "at least he's not writing backwards" and so on. I decided to ignore them, and when I finished

writing I carried on with my lecture as if I hadn't heard anything. But that became harder and harder as the lecture drew on, as the comments began getting worse, being reduced to vulgarities "puf^{ta}", "purcinell", "gahan"!

I ended the lecture prematurely, in anger, and made the mistake of going ahead with the questions as I normally do. Everything began to escalate.

"Tell me something mister, if I told you to get out of this classroom, what would I say as you were going out? Ciao! What Arabic word does that come from?" Asked a gruff man with dirty moustache and a chequered cap.

"Fair enough. But if you were to follow it up, and wish me well, you would go on to say: *Sahha*, or *Hu hsieb*, would you not? Both expressions of purely Arabic lineage. It is the warmer, southern Mediterranean that endows our language with its warmth... Sir."

"Why then is half the Arab world constantly at war, while we are always at peace with everyone?" jumped in an obese woman with the voice of a wounded raven.

"Our nation is never at war, but our mentality is no less one of aggression, especially when it comes to defending ourselves and our country. If half the Arab world is at war, then half of it is doing so to defend its territory and its culture from warmongering bigots! And is that so different from what you are doing now, madam? Your hostile attitude towards me, with a voice louder than bombs, was brought on by a sense of being under threat. In your eyes I am insulting your culture, so here you are jumping out of your seats assaulting me as any Jihad soldier would. Such is our passionate nature, the same aggressive nature that breeds the ferocious rivalry even in our religious feasts."

"This is stupid, our nature is intrinsically opposed to the Arabs, our religion has always separated us! Our nature could never reject our Catholicism. Even after hundreds of years under Arab rule, Christianity still reigned and still reigns today. Or have you forgotten that, professor?" This upfront gentleman clearly thought he knew it all.

"You believe we remained Christian even under Arab rule? How high an opinion you have of our faith, sir! Yet you overlook the fact that when the Arabs came to Malta they found, as Al Himyari states; an 'uninhabited ruin'. The few locals that remained would have either instantly converted to Islam to save their skin, or would have been taken away as slaves. For well over 200 years of Arab rule Malta was a Saracen Island. And do you also overlook the fact that even when the mighty Christian army of Count Roger 'liberated' Malta, the Island was still described as Saracen Island by Norman historians? You do not judge the roots of a civilization on its religion, no civilization is suited for Islam or for Christianity."

"Then what do you judge its roots on?" he asked again.

"You judge it primarily on two aspects: its language, and its folklore. Language always evolves with its civilization. Folklore then evolves out of a civilization's evolution. Take England for example, genetically a Germanic race, an Anglo-Saxon civilization. Take its language, a mixture of Germanic, Swedish, Danish and the occasional traces of Romance. With folklore I will take a banal example: observe their 'beer' culture. What other country drinks more beer than the English: Germany! And of course I need not inform you of the Semitic roots of our language, nor of the Arabic elements of our folklore."

Then an absolute hero butted in, a dangerous looking man with the intelligence of a centipede. "And you see how the English like the Germans don't you? They only slaughtered each other in two World Wars. You're right then. We should do like them, start a war with two

clear-cut sides: the West and the East! They are all a bunch of primitive barbarians who torture anything that moves, including their own women! They're dangerous bastards the lot of them!"

As he said that, he was pointing to the front row, where Kadia and her family were sitting. Kadia's brothers and father stood up from their seat and started defending themselves, insulting the man for his stupidity. At that, two friends of the man rose out of their seats and started swearing back at them as only the Maltese know how. It was then that it dawned on me: this was planned! It was all a set up, an ambush. These men needed an excuse to start a brawl, and Kadia's brother, in his rage, provided it, "*Fox ommkhom*" he yelled in all his naivety.

Needless to say those three men pounced on him and started beating him to the ground. The rest of Kadia's brothers then jumped in, and all of them were locked in a violent punch up. I felt like I was witnessing the Crusades before my very eyes. At one point, Kadia's father took a chair and was going to throw it at the youngest man. Kadia was holding him back, fearing for the youth's health. At that instant that same young man grabbed a bottle of Hopleaf that he had strategically placed at the foot of his table and struck Kadia's father with it.

It was not him that he hit, it was Kadia.

She was standing between the two martyrs and it was her face that took the blow. She fell helplessly to the ground, her white veil bloodied and her dark cheeks withdrawn. Everyone stopped. The three Maltese men quickly ran away from the classroom, as Kadia lay helpless on the floor. I will never forget what I heard them say as they ran out of the room, I caught the last echo of a blaspheme "...Allah." The devout Christians in their moment of turmoil showed their true Arab identity, it was the name of Allah they called, not God, not *Dio*, but Allah. I was proven right, and yet I could not savour it.

My wife was lying on the floor, almost lifeless, all because I tried to point out the obvious, all because of the misguided hatred my countrymen bore for our own brethren. In that moment, I hated myself.

Thankfully, Kadia survived the ordeal. But her eyes did not. She was permanently blinded as the glass had struck her eyes directly. A few months later the gravity of that awful truth really sunk in. Kadia gave birth to our beautiful daughter, whose beautiful Mediterranean skin, and dark hazel eyes, and tiny hands her mother could never see. The birth of my daughter and her mother's blind tears at her woe will always remind me of the danger of ignorance, an ignorance that caused my wife so much pain. I hate how every night I sleep uneasily with my Libyan wife, for I constantly remember she cannot see the beautiful woman her daughter has become and that, like me, so many of my countrymen sleep uneasily with the new Arab heritage they've been forced to accept. My words have been proven true, and our awareness has improved, but tolerance has yet to evolve completely.

Mucavac

Ilija Đurović. Crna Gora

Priču o Maksimu, dječaku koji je ubio sopstvene roditelje čuo sam kad za to nisam bio spreman. Teret spoznaje zločina obrušio se na moju svijest u devetoj godini života, tokom jednog od tada uobičajenih i živopisnih ljetovanja na moru.

Maksim je bio jedan od dječaka sa kojima sam provodio dane tokom odmora. Maksim je bio mještanin. To je značilo da on i njegova porodica osim sunčanih i toplih dana moraju podnijeti i ono o čemu sam do tada slušao samo najgore – jesen i zimu na obali. Nisam uspijevao da zamislim kako izgledaju plaže i ulice nakon što vreline prođu i turisti napuste zaliv. Uprkos zimi koju je provodio na moru Maksim je tokom ljetnjih mjeseci bio kao i mi – dječak koji se raduje ljetu. Jedina razlika bila je u tome što je njegova koža uvijek bila tamnija od naše i što se u vodi snalazio bolje od ostalih. Bez toga, Maksim je mogao biti samo jedan od nas, ali ipak je samo on učinio to.

Priču su mi prenijela djeca sa plaže, a jedan od kapetanovih sinova kod kojih smo odsjeli potvrdio je svaki detalj. Naravno, ne meni, već mom ocu koji se raspitivao nakon što sam mu ispričao ono što sam čuo. Zahvaljujući ocu koji se prema meni oduvijek odnosio kao prema odrasloj osobi saznao sam da Maksim sada živi sa sestrom, a da je njihov djed u čijoj kući žive sada u zatvoru. Baba je umrla nedugo nakon tragedije. Kapetanov sin rekao je da je Maksimov djed preuzeo krivicu i lokalnoj policiji iznio verziju priče po kojoj je on ubica dječakovih roditelja. Svi ljudi u gradu, kao i svi ljudi u policiji, od početka su znali da je jedini krivac dječak. Ali svi su pristali na igru, uz obećanje da će sestra dječaka držati u kući, podalje od ostale djece.

Tog ljeta Maksima sam vidio nekoliko puta. Uglavnom na prozoru sa kojeg je posmatrao uličnu gužvu i mahao prolaznicima koje je poznavao. Jednom me je pozvao po imenu. Nisam se odmah odazvao zato što nisam bio siguran da izgovara moje ime. Slogovi su bili nekako razdvojeni, kao da između svakog pokušava da udahne vazduh koji mu izmiče. Kada sam se okrenuo i pogledao prema prozoru vidio sam Maksima kako se osmjehuje i mahaše prema meni. Te večeri otac mi je rekao da Maksim teže govori od kad se to dogodilo. Maksim muca, rekao je. Ljutito sam odgovorio da ne muca prisjećajući se Maksimovog glasa dok je ispod skakaonice izlagao tehničke elemente svojih skokova prije nego bi se popeo na najvisočiji stepenik. A onda sam se sjetio sopstvenog imena izgovorenog kao iz usta čovjeka koji se guši. Maksim je vezao slogove trudeći se da ih izgovori što je moguće brže. Da, rekao sam ocu, Maksim muca. Mucavac, govorila su sljedećeg dana djeca na plaži. Neki od njih su se smijali. Jedan je pokušao da prikaže kako bi sada Maksim hvalio svoje skokove. Izgovarao je rečenice vješto oponašajući dahtanje i grimase osobe koja se muči da izgovori riječ, toliko vješto da nisam mogao da izdrazim. Dok sam odlazio čuo sam jednog od dječaka kako najavljuje *do sada neviđen skok poznat kao skok Maksima Mucavca*. Otišao sam do parka prije nego sam krenuo na večeru. Narednih nekoliko dana nisam odlazio na plažu.

Često sam bio u prilici da vidim Maksima. Dvorište kuće u kojoj je živio sa sestrom vidjelo se sa prozora moje sobe. Nekoliko puta dnevno posmatrao sam ga kako se igra u dvorištu.

Kopao je minijaturnom lopatom kanale kroz baštu a onda u njih sipao vodu. To je bio jedan od njegovih omiljenih pomora mrava. Ostala djeca iz grada više su uživala u ispunjavanju rupa vatrom. Vatra je bila i moj omiljeni način. Tri puta dnevno u dvorištu bi se pojavljivala njegova sestra i pozivala ga unutra. Odmah nakon obroka ponovo bi izašao u dvorište i posvetio se mravima. Jedina pauza u igri bila je nakon ručka, kad bi Maksim i njegova sestra zajedno izašli u baštu i sjeli u ljuljašku ispod drveta gdje bi mu ona čitala. Posmatrao sam Maksima kako pažljivo sluša sestrine riječi. Ona je sporo govorila, slabašni vjetar ponekad bi nanio njen glas do prozora, a on je slušao njene riječi i pomjerao usne kao da ponavlja. Jednom prilikom pogledao je prema prozoru sa kojeg sam posmatrao. Odmahnuo sam i ušao unutra.

Nakon večernjih šetnji ostajao sam do kasno sa roditeljima na terasi okrenutoj prema moru i slušao očeve priče o brodovima. Ponekad sam posmatrao lice moje majke koja je čežljivo gledala prema obalama na drugoj strani. Držala je cigaretu u visini očiju i kroz dim posmatrala suprotnu obalu i barke. Bio sam siguran da ona ne sluša očeve priče. Samo bi ponekad spustila pogled prema meni i lijepo se nasmiješila. Jedne od takvih večeri otac je preskočio uobičajene priče i počeo da govori o Maksimu. Pitao sam ga zbog čega neko počinje da muca nakon potrebnog događaja, a on je počeo naširoko da mi objašnjava čitavu problematiku ljudskog mozga i promjena koje se u njemu događaju prilikom šoka, sve to jezikom koji je za mene bio u potpunosti nerazumljiv (već sam rekao da se prema meni nije ophodio kao prema dječaku). Dok je on govorio majka me pogledala i spustila ruku na moju glavu. To je radila kad god poželi nešto da mi kaže a da ne upotrijebi ni jednu riječ. Spustila bi ruku i sporo me milovala po kosi. Pokušavao je da mi objasni šta se događa sa djecom koju osude. Govorio je o domovima, o maloljetnim kriminalcima i okruženju koje dječaku kao što je Maksim ne može donijeti ništa dobro. Govorio je i o psihologu koji bi morao razgovarati sa dječakom i pomoći mu da prevaziđe ono što mu se dogodilo, iako je to, vjerovao je, nemoguće. Uprkos temi ubistva Maksimovih roditelja koja me izuzetno zanimala, obamrlost koja se spustila nakon šetnje i odmora na terasi udaljila me od očevog glasa i usmjerila pogled prema barkama koje su se jedna po jedna pojavljivale na sredini zaliva. Majka je uvijek govorila da je ribolov najbolji noću i da je najljepše zoru dočekati u barci punoj ribe. Govorila je o tome kao da je djetinjstvo provela na moru, a ne u istom gradu u kojem sam i ja rođen.

Iz polusna kroz koji sam posmatrao barke čuo sam oca kako govori o autopsiji koja je otkrila nezaliječene prelome na rukama i nogama Maksimove majke kao i ljekarskim kontrolama koje su na dječakovim kostima pokazale niz unutrašnjih modrica koje bi mogle biti posljedica zlostavljanja. Nakon toga otac je govorio o nezdravom duhu u velikom broju porodica i o muškarcima koji fizički zlostavljaju svoju suprugu i djecu. Nisam uspijevaio da shvatim da li misli na Maksimovog oca kada govori o nasilnim muškarcima. Takođe nisam uspio da saznam kako je dječak koji je imao godina koliko i ja usmrtio dvoje odraslih ljudi. Nekoliko puta usudio sam se da pitam oca o samom činu ubistva na šta bi on uvijek ljutito odgovorio i naglasio da oko toga ne bih trebao da se motam. Znao sam da moja snena majka neće govoriti o tome pa sam se te večeri na terasi konačno prepustio snu.

Tog jutra sam već po navici pogledao kroz prozor. Maksim je bio u dvorištu. Sa svojom lopaticom i kofom vode. Vjerovao sam da u zemlji nema više mrava ali da on jednostavno ne prestaje da se igra. Tada sam prvi put ugledao ženu koja ih je posjetila i koju ću posmatrati svakog dana za vrijeme odmora. Sjela je sa Maksimom u ljuljašku ispod drveta i nekoliko sati provela u razgovoru sa njim. Ona je govorila mnogo više od njega, ali kad bi začutala čulo se

Maksimovo dahtanje i rečenice koje su izlazile isprekidane. Otac mi je rekao da je ta žena psiholog i da će nekoliko mjeseci svakog dana razgovarati sa dječakom. Bilo mi je žao što ne mogu da čujem razgovor. Tek ponekad do prozora bi stiglo vjetrom nanaseno Maksimovo mucanje, ali višesatni govor žene koja je boravila u dvorištu nisam uspijevao da čujem.

Na očevo insistiranje ponovo sam počeo da idem na plažu. Priča o *Maksimu Mucavcu* nije više bila aktuelna, a skokovi su se odvijali kao i ranije. Sve je bilo isto samo među nama nije bilo tamnoputog dječaka koji bi se uspentrao na najvišočiju skakaonicu i svojim potezima oduševljavao turiste koji su u vodu ulazili spuštajući se niz stepenice ili skokom sa visine od pola metra, držeći se za nos i grčevići noge. Maksim je za njih bio atrakcija sa plaže. Nadmetanja u vodi bila su zanimljivija od kad nije bilo nekog ko bi od početka bio bolji od svih. Jedan od dječaka upitao me vidam li Maksima. Znao je da je kuća u kojoj boravim blizu kuće Maksimovog djeda. Bili smo u vodi kada me je to pitao, a ja sam pokušao da izbjegnem odgovor rekavši da ga ponekad vidim sa terase, ništa više od toga. U tom trenutku osjetio sam nostalgiju za toplim limom prozora sa kojega bih, da nisam otišao na plažu, posmatrao Maksima kako okopava svoje dvorište i puni ga prvo vrućom, zatim hladnom vodom, sve dok se iza njegovih leđa ne pojavi žena koja će ga prihvatiti za ruku i smjestiti u ljuljašku ispod drveta. Lopta me pogodila u glavu dok sam ležao na vodi i zamišljao razgovor i izrovareno dvorište. Pitao sam se da li traži od njega da joj govori o ubistvu. Dječaci su mi rekli da sam previše zamišljen. Napravio sam se da ih ne čujem i otplivao nekoliko metara uz obalu. Kada sam se dovoljno udaljio od buke i lopte koja je letjela iznad vode ponovo sam se ispružio na leđa sa namjerom da nastavim sa razmišljanjem. Namjestio sam se tako da mogu da posmatram ljude na obali. Umotana u peškir plažom je sporo hodala Maksimova sestra. To je značilo da je on još uvijek u dvorištu zaokupljen razgovorom sa ženom koja im dolazi u posjete. Ako bih požurio mogao bih da uhvatim kraj njihovog razgovora, pomislio sam i od toga ubrzo odustao. Nisam imao snage za brzo plivanje do obale, a i odmaranje na vodi mi je previše prijalo da bih ga prekinuo.

Ipak, ručak je uvijek bio razlog svršetka prijepodnevnog kupanja i na to sam već bio navikao. Izlazio bih iz vode tješeći se razmišljanjem o popodnevnom odlasku na plažu koji je obično dolazio nakon ručka i kratkog odmora. Kao i svakog dana ljetovanja na moru za ručak smo imali ribu. Nisam pretjerano volio ribu, ali moja je majka bila uporna u namjeri da treba iskoristiti priliku da ribu jedemo odmah nakon što je stari ribari ulove. Takođe je bila uporna da u moj život unese naviku popodnevnog odmora kojoj sam se ja svom snagom opirao. Često je govorila o tome kako je nekoliko sati sna nakon ručka veoma korisno za želudac i moždane ćelije koje se tokom sna obnavljaju. Ja sam vjerovao da je ona u pravu ali nisam uspijevao da prebolim sate koje bih izgubio spavajući. Ipak, dogovor je bio da na moru budem poslušan i bez riječi bih odlazio u sobu da tamo provedem uzaludno vrijeme. Naravno da nisam spavao. Najčešće bih samo ležao na krevetu sa rukama ispod glave, zagledan u plafon. U tome bi mi prolazili dragocjeni trenuci ljetovanja na moru.

Ali sada mi je bilo prijatno. Sjećanje na prizor Maksimove sestre koja šeta plažom i pomisao na Maksima i ženu sa kojom razgovara u meni su izazivali radost. Znao sam da ću se kroz nekoliko minuta ustati i oslonjen o topli lim posmatrati razgovor u bašti. Najsigurnije je bilo sačekati nekoliko minuta. Toliko je bilo potrebno da se moja objedom omamljena majka pripremi za popodnevni odmor. Čuo bih škripu parketa što je obično značilo da je počela da se svlači. Ona je uvijek spavala gola i nije se brinula da li ću je vidjeti ako nenajavljen uđem u njenu sobu. Zatim bi zaškripao krevet, a to je bio znak da se uvukla u postelju. Na kraju bi se

začulo tiho hrkanje koje je ona uvijek poricala i tada bih već mogao da preskočim iz vlažnog kreveta na prozor. Tog popodneva, kao i svih ostalih, ležao sam ispružen u postelji. Posmatrao sam muvu kako preskače sa mog stomaka na koljeno. Bila je neodlučna. Ono što ju je privlačilo bile su još uvijek svježije ogrebotine. Ogrebotinu na stomaku zaradio sam prilikom rvanja u vodi sa jednim od dječaka, a ona svježija, na koljenu, bila je posljedica skoka u plićak. Muva je skakala sa jedne ogrebotine na drugu pokušavajući da utvrdi na kojoj je krv još uvijek svježija. Ja sam znao da je svježija ona na koljenu ali muva to nije primjećivala. Uporno je obigravala oko skorčale krvi na stomaku pokušavajući iz nje da iscijedi posljednje hranljive kapljice. Osjećao sam peckanje u predjelu rane, skoro kao blago golicanje. Tada sam prvi put pomislio da su muve glupe. Gluplje čak i od mrava koji uvijek iznova grade kućice koje im mi porušimo ili natopimo slanom vodom.

Uprkos radoznalosti koju sam osjećao povodom posmatranja razgovora u dvorištu riblji obrok koji sam bio primoran da pojedem odvuкао me u san. Nesposoban da odredim koliko dugo sam spavao i šta sam tokom spavanja sanjao, teško da mogu utvrditi sa kojim slikama se u mojoj svijesti pomiješao vrisak koji se uvukao u popodnevnu tišinu. S početka nisam bio siguran da li je to što sam čuo bio vrisak bola ili radosti. Otvorio sam oči i čuo glas koji je dopirao iz dvorišta. Nekoliko trenutaka tišine i onda ponovo glas. Glas koji sam dobro poznao i koji je bio dokaz da vrisak nije izašao iz mog sna:

– Ubio sam ih! – čuo sam Maksima kako izgovara riječi bez daha koji bi ih prekidao. Čuo sam Maksima koji nije mucao. Onog Maksima kojeg sam pamtio sa podnožja skakaonice i vlažnog pijeska. Hitro sam se izvukao iz kreveta i provirio kroz prozor. Vidio sam Maksimov profil i osmijeh koji je otkrivao čitavu stranu zuba. Držao je ispruženu ruku i u šaci gomilu umorenih crvenih mrava. – Ja sam ih ubio – dodao je i ispružio ruku prema ženi. Žena je stajala nekoliko koraka udaljena od Maksima i posmatrala crvenu guku u njegovoj šaci. Niz njeno lice tekle su suze krupne kao kraljica mrava koja je sporo hodala po rubu Maksimovog palca.

The Stutterer

Ilija Đurović. Montenegro

I heard the story about Maksim, the boy who had murdered his own parents, at a time when I was not ready to hear it. The weight of learning about a crime hit my mind heavily when I was nine years old, during one ordinary and vivid summer by the sea.

Maksim was one of the boys I used to spend my holidays with. Maksim was a local. Being a local meant that, besides sunny and warm days, he and his family had to endure what I had heard only the worst things about – autumn and winter on the coast. I could not imagine how beaches and streets would look once the heat stopped and tourists left the Bay. Despite the winter he spent by the sea, during summer months Maksim was just like us – a boy enjoying summer. The only difference was that his skin was always darker than our skin and he was better in water than others. This aside, Maksim could have been one of us, but still, he was the one who did it.

I was told the story by children on the beach, and one of the captain's sons we were staying with confirmed every detail of it. Not to me, of course, but to my father, who asked around after I had told him what I had heard. Thanks to my father, who had always treated me as an adult, I found out that Maksim lived with his sister, and that their grandfather, in whose house they lived, was in prison. Their grandmother died shortly after the tragedy. The captain's son said that Maksim's grandfather had taken the blame and told the local police a version which made him the murderer of the boy's parents. Everyone in town and everyone in the police knew from the start that the boy was the only one to blame. But everyone agreed to the game with a prom-

ise that the sister would keep the boy in the house, away from other children.

I saw Maksim a few times that summer, mostly at the window from which he looked at crowds on the street and waved at passers-by he knew. Once he called my name. I did not respond immediately because I was not sure if it was my name he called. Syllables were somehow broken as if he was trying to catch his breath, which was slipping away from him. When I turned and looked at the window, I saw Maksim smiling and waving at me. That night, my father told me that Maksim had had difficulties speaking since it had happened. Maksim stutters, he said. I angrily replied that he was not stuttering as I recalled Maksim's voice explaining under the jumping platform the technical elements of his jumps right before he would climb up to the highest step. And then I recalled the sound of my name pronounced as if it was coming out of the mouth of a man who was suffocating. Maksim was putting syllables together trying to make them come out of his mouth as quickly as possible. Yes, I told my father, Maksim stutters. The stutterer, children were saying on the beach the following day. Some of them were laughing. One of them tried to demonstrate how Maksim would brag about his jumps. He pronounced sentences by deftly imitating the puffing and faces of a person who is stumbling over a single word, so deftly that I could not stand it any longer. As I was leaving, I heard one of the boys announcing *the jump never seen before, the jump known as the jump of Maksim the Stutterer*. I went to the park before I headed off to dinner. I did not go to the beach in the next few days.

I often had a chance to see Maksim. The garden of the house where he lived with his sister was visible from my room window. I would watch him play in the garden several times a day. He would use a miniature shovel to dig canals through the garden and then he would pour water in those canals. That was one of his favourite ways to kill ants. Other children in town took more joy in filling holes with fire. Fire was my favourite way as well. His sister would come out to the garden three times a day to call him inside. Right after a meal, he would return to the garden and concentrate on ants. The only break he would take from playing would be after lunch, when Maksim and his sister would go out into the garden together and sit in a swing under the tree where she would read to him. I watched Maksim as he listened carefully to his sister's words. She spoke slowly, weak wind would carry her voice to the window, and he listened to her words and moved his lips as if he was repeating what she was saying. Once he looked across to the window from which I was watching them. I waved and went back inside.

After evening strolls, I used to stay up late with my parents on the balcony facing the sea and listen to my father's stories about ships. Sometimes I would observe my mother's face as she wistfully looked out to the shores on the other side. She would hold a cigarette at the height of her eyes and gaze through the smoke at the shore across the sea and barges. I was sure that she was not listening to my father's stories. From time to time she would only look at me and smile nicely. One of those evenings, my father skipped the usual stories and started talking about Maksim. I asked him why someone starts stuttering after a stressful event, and he started giving me a long explanation of the whole problem of the human brain and changes that happen to it after a shock, all in a language which I found quite difficult to understand (I already

said that he did not treat me like a boy). As he spoke, my mother looked at me and laid her hand on my head. She used to do that when she wanted to tell me something and not use a single word. She would lay her hand on my head and slowly run her fingers through my hair. He tried to explain to me what happens with children who are convicted. He spoke about homes, juvenile criminal offenders and the surroundings that bring no good to a boy like Maksim. He also spoke about the psychologist who would have to talk to the boy and help him overcome what had happened to him, although he believed that was not possible. Despite the topic of the murder of Maksim's parents, which I found extremely interesting, the lethargy that set in after the stroll and the rest on the balcony carried me away from my father's voice and guided my eyes towards barges which emerged one by one in the middle of the Bay. My mother always said that the best fishing was at night and that the most beautiful feeling was to welcome dawn in a barge full of fish. She told us how she had spent her childhood by the sea, and not in the town where I was born.

In my dozing off and gazing at barges, I heard my father speaking about the autopsy which had revealed unhealed fractures on the arms and legs of Maksim's mother, and medical examinations which revealed a number of internal bruises on the boy's bones, which could have been a consequence of violence. After that, my father spoke about an unhealthy spirit in many families and the men who physically abuse their wives and children. I was unable to understand whether he had Maksim's father in mind when he spoke about violent men. I also did not manage to find out why the boy who was the same age as I was killed two adults. I dared a few times to ask my father about the act of murder and he would always give me an angry answer, pointing out that this was something I should not be thinking about.

I knew that my sleepy mother would not talk about it and then I finally gave in to dreams that night on the balcony.

Out of habit, I looked through the window that morning. Maksim was in the garden. He had his small shovel and a bucket of water with him. I believed that there were no more ants in the ground, but he simply would not stop playing. That was the first time that I saw the woman who visited and who I observed every day while resting. She sat with Maksim in a swing under the tree and spent a few hours talking to him. She spoke a lot more than he did, but when she went silent, I could hear Maksim's puffing and broken sentences. My father told me that the woman was a psychologist and that she would talk to the boy every day for a couple of months. I regretted not being able to hear their conversation. Every now and then the wind would bring Maksim's stuttering to the window, but I was not able to hear the hours the woman spent talking in the garden.

On my father's insistence, I started going to the beach again. The story about *Maksim the Stutterer* was no longer the main topic, and jumping returned to its original course. Everything was the same except that there was no dark-skinned boy with us, climbing up to the highest platform and his moves fascinating the tourists, who would go down the stairs or jump from half a metre into the water holding their noses and shrivelling their legs. To them, Maksim was a beach attraction. Competitions in the water were more interesting since there was no one who was better than anyone else from the very start. One of the boys asked me if I was seeing Maksim. He knew that the house I was staying in was close to Maksim's grandfather's house. We were in the water when he asked me that, and I tried to avoid answering and said that sometimes I would see him from the balcony, but no more than that. At that moment, I felt

nostalgic for the warm metal of the window from which I would observe Maksim digging around his garden and filling holes with hot water first, then with cold water, until the woman came back, took his hand and put him on the swing under the tree. A ball hit me in the head while I was lying on the water and imagining the conversation and dug garden. I wondered if she was asking him to tell her about the murder. Boys told me that I was too contemplative. I pretended not to have heard them and swam away a few metres along the shore. When I went far enough from the noise and the ball that was flying over the water, I stretched out again on my back and intended to continue contemplating. I found a position which allowed me to watch people on the beach. Maksim's sister was walking slowly along the beach wrapped in a towel. That meant that he was still in the garden preoccupied with the conversation with the woman visiting them. If I hurried, I could catch the end of their conversation, I thought, and quickly abandoned that thought. I was not strong enough to swim fast to the shore, and resting on the surface of the water was too enjoyable to end it.

Still, lunch was the reason for afternoon swimming to end and I was already used to that. I would come out of the water thinking about the afternoon on the beach, which would usually happen after lunch and a short rest. As on any other day during the summer holiday, we had fish for lunch. I was not too fond of fish, but my mother was persistent in her intention that we should eat fish as soon as the old fishermen had taken it from the sea. She was also determined to introduce a habit of afternoon rest into my life, which I fought against with all the power I had. She often said that a few hours of sleep after lunch was very useful for the stomach and brain cells, which regenerate while we sleep. I believed that she was right about that but I could not

easily forget about the hours I would waste sleeping. However, we had an agreement that I would be obedient while we were on the coast and, therefore, I would go to my room without a word of protest and spend wasted time there. Of course, I did not sleep. Most often I would lie on the bed with my hands under my head and stare at the ceiling. That was a waste of precious moments of the holiday by the sea.

But I was comfortable now. The recollection of Maksim's sister walking along the beach and the thought of Maksim and the woman he was talking to made me feel content. I knew I would get up in a few minutes and lean against warm metal to observe their conversation in the garden. The safest thing was to wait a few minutes. That's how long it took my mother, who was benumbed by the meal, to prepare for an afternoon nap. I would hear the squeaking of parquet and that would usually mean that she had started undressing. She always slept naked and was not worried whether I saw her if I walked into her room uninvited. The bed would then start squeaking and that was the sign that she was ready to sleep. Finally, there would be a sound of soft snoring that she had always denied and that's when I could jump from the wet bed over to the window. That afternoon, and any other afternoon, I was lying on the bed. I observed a fly jumping from my stomach to my knee. It was indecisive. What attracted it were scratches that were still fresh. I felt the scratch on my stomach I had got while wrestling in the water with one of the boys. The fly kept jumping from one scratch to another trying to discover where the blood was still fresh. I knew that it was fresher on my knee,

but the fly did not notice. It was persistently running around the hardened blood on my stomach trying to squeeze the last healthy drops of it. I felt tingling around the wound, almost soft tickling. That was the first time I thought flies were stupid. They were even more stupid than ants, which kept rebuilding their homes that we would destroy or soak in salt water.

Despite the curiosity I felt in observing the conversation in the garden, the fish meal I was forced to have carried me to the land of dreams. Unable to determine how long I had slept and what I had dreamt about, I can hardly say which images in my head started mixing with the scream that sneaked into afternoon silence. In the beginning, I was not sure if what I heard was a scream of pain or joy. I opened my eyes and heard a voice coming from the garden. A few moments of silence and then the voice again. The voice that I knew well and which was proof that the scream did not come out of my dream:

"I killed them!" I heard Maksim say these words with no puffing to interrupt them. I heard Maksim, who was not stuttering. The same Maksim that I remembered from the bottom of the platform and the wet sand. I quickly got out of bed and looked out the window. I saw Maksim's profile and a smile that revealed the whole set of teeth. He was holding his arm out and a bunch of murdered red ants in his hand. "I killed them," he added and held his hand out to the woman. The woman was standing a few steps away from Maksim and looked at the red knot in his hand. Tears were rolling down her face as big as the queen of ants which was slowly walking along the edge of Maksim's thumb.

His Appointed Time Is the Break of Dawn

Zahra Astitou. The Netherlands

“Allahu Akbar.” Two Words. These are not just two words; these were *the* two words that I used to dread the most. The two words that had a terrifying effect on me. The two words that brought associations in my mind that made me sick to the stomach, to the extent that I even had to vomit. Associations of terrorism, holy wars, and beheadings even. These two words have now made a 180 degree turn, and somehow now strangely seem to have a peaceful, even heart-soothing, effect on me.

“Allahu Akbar,” his name is Ahmed and he is now performing one of his five compulsory prayers a day. He never misses one. Not at his very weakest, not when his family comes to visit him, not ever. The moments that he cannot sit straight, he uses his eyes. To perform the ablution, he uses a rock, because he cannot perform the normal ablution with water as his health does not allow him to. “It is a symbolic ablution,” he says, with a slight Mediterranean accent. “Allah has made everything easy for human kind. Every problem and every difficulty has its own solution.”

“Allahu Akbar,” he repeats these two words so many times during his prayers with a beautiful tone in his voice, and the music of the sound touches me deeply. It makes me almost ecstatic. He repeats it so many times, and sometimes even sings verses of the Qur’aan, I assume, that I almost start to believe that Allah is indeed Great.

Ahmed turned out to live in the same neighbourhood as I do. For 21 years now. I strangely have never met him before. He is a migrant who moved here 30 years ago as a guest worker. His wife, a charming, shy woman, with beautiful almond-shaped eyes and a mysterious glow around her, and his three children come to visit him every day. At visiting time sharp: they are never a minute early or a minute late. His children, two boys and a girl, still go to school. To the same school as my baby girl, actually. Redouan loves racing cars, Zayed is a great fan of computer games, and Aaliyah dreams of having her own horse when she gets older. Princess, she will call the horse.

Ahmed was diagnosed with Acute Myelogenous Leukemia (AML). The diagnosis came too late, the cancer had already spread all over his body. There is no remedy for his condition now. Chemotherapy and medicine will no longer be effective at this stage. And even if he had been diagnosed at an earlier stage with this type of cancer, the five-year survival rate is only 40%. I too am diagnosed with AML. And the same is miraculously applicable to me. We are now receiving drugs to sooth the pain, and we are basically waiting for the moment that we are going to breathe our last breath. The hospital did not have any single rooms left due to a weather disaster in a nearby village just recently. For this reason, many people with the same severe condition (and some even with different severe conditions) are put together in a two-person or multi-person room.

This is how I met Ahmed.

Before I met Ahmed, I had never spoken with a Muslim before, which is weird, as our country has a substantial Muslim population. There was the Arab bakery shop around the corner,

but I had never set foot in that shop. I never felt the need to, to be honest. I had a clear image of how the world worked. I always thought that they – yes, I used to think of them as *they* – were not human. *They* were different from us. *They* had inferior values to our high Western ones. *They* were barbaric. *They* wanted to destroy our decent civilization. *They, Them, The Other.*

All of them.

Before I met Ahmed, I always used to believe that I was an open, intelligent, and reasonable man. I had it all figured out. I had all the answers to the difficult questions of life or, rather, I *knew* how to deal with those difficult questions. I looked at him: dressed in a traditional Muslim garment, a jellaba. He had a Muslim rosary in his hand and weakly moved it through his fingers while whispering prayers in Arabic. He looked up, and our gaze met.

He smiled: “Dear Robert, would you like some water to drink?” and he pointed with his eyes to my empty glass.

I smiled back shyly and nodded: “Yes please.”

I was not thirsty, but I did not want him to think that I was observing him. When he was asleep, later that day, I observed him more closely. This man, in his late forties, is the embodiment of the word “peace.” I have never met a person friendlier than Ahmed, let alone in a condition like his, or like mine. And his peacefulness strangely seemed to beam its rays on me and had the same effect on me. At times, I even almost forgot about my disease, except for the tremendous pain, every time the drugs started to wear off.

I looked at Ahmed again, and a deep sense of shame overpowered me. *He* had nothing to do with terrorism – of course not! He wouldn’t even hurt a fly! It’s insane to generalize the actions of a few to a whole group of people who are some way or another associable with each other. And at the same time I felt a connection between the two of us. At first sight, we seem so different from each other, the predominant difference being the fact that he is a Muslim, and I obviously am not. But does that really matter? Do we *really* differ from each other? *Really?* And *how?*

I had to think of a famous passage in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*:

“I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? [And] if you poison us, do we not die?”

I have appreciated Shakespeare’s work for a long time now, and I have known these lines by heart for as long as I can remember. Only now, however, do I see their worth and their truth most clearly.

Ahmed is not a stranger to the universal feelings of love, hope, and faith. He is not. I saw the way he looked at his wife, and the way she looked back. They might not feel comfortable displaying their love when in company, or when the children are around, by hugging and kissing. But from their eyes, and from the small gestures they made to each other, it was very clear: they love each other immensely. It goes without saying that it is heart-wrenching for Ahmed to realize that he won’t be able to see his children grow, and that he won’t be able to protect them at all once he is gone.

Look at me now. All of that which I thought I knew is shattered. Nothing is sure anymore, and above all, nothing is certain – except death, that is. How ironic that it took an incurable

disease and hospitalization for me to get these basic insights, this epiphany. I must say that it is a great thrill to have one's quiet assumptions proven wrong, but more ironic that this had to be the setting in which the sudden revelation had to take place. We now suffer the pain of this disease together, yet we suffer alone. This is the ultimate display of human beings being one kind, one race: we were diagnosed with the same disease, despite our different backgrounds. Cancer, or any other disease for that matter, does not select people on the basis of their religion, skin colour, race, sexual orientation, or gender. It does not.

Do we really need illness, pain, and death to achieve these logical insights? We say different things, we use different words, but what we mean in essence is the same. We don't know what we are doing here on earth. It wasn't by choice that we are here. There is little that we can control in our lives. We don't know what place there is when we die, or if there is a place at all. We hope, we believe, we feel, we think. But what do we know, really? No one ever died and came back to tell us about what happens next. We are all insecure people with a void within us that we want to fill to make life bearable. And I believe everyone holds some truth but, then again, I believe so, do I know it for sure? No. But neither does Ahmed.

During the last days, hours, moments even, of Ahmed's life, his wife tried to stay strong. In front of her children, but also the last two times she came alone. She did not want to show Ahmed how sad she was, she did not want to burden him with her feelings, her pain, above the pain he is already suffering. Her eyes, however, always betrayed her. Red from all the crying and all the pain she felt because of the knowledge that she would lose her husband soon. "Alhamdulillah li Allah 'alaa koelli h'aal," I heard her continuously whisper in Arabic. The sentence had the word "Allah" in it, so I assumed it was a prayer.

Yesterday, after a long time suffering, at 11:59 pm, Ahmed passed away. I felt a deep sense of emptiness and sorrow when Ahmed breathed his last breath. He did not want to get transferred to a single room, he wanted to stay with me, and I was touched by this gesture of sharing, and the bond we developed during our joint stay here was similar to a brother's bond.

Ahmed, rest in peace.

"Remember," I told my wife and little girl during one of their last visits, "dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." My body has weakened tremendously, and I feel a pain which I have never ever felt before. I believe it is the agony of death, because its pain is unbearable. Soon, Ahmed, I will follow you. Soon. For does not the break of dawn come soon enough?

Words for the Mediterranean Sea

Kholoud Ajarma. Palestine

On Sunday 1st November 2009, we finally met. I had imagined him before and had had many dreams where he was the major theme. I had written to him but was always afraid that my words would never be read. I also sent kisses to the moon to carry to him. But on the first Sunday of November the sun came out to announce a remarkable day on which I touched him for the second time. He was warm and moving. I jumped out of the bus that carried me to Haifa, took my shoes off and ran toward him. But in the middle of the distance I stopped to wonder: what if he is not happy to meet me again? He might be sad with me that I could not come before. He might have thought that I was making excuses. I had to apply for a permit to come today; I was so happy to get it and I came as fast as I could. Of course, I had to go through many obstacles and checkpoints. Hope rose up and I felt my heart would explode. But I am finally here, even if he is angry at me, with love we can overcome everything. Many, many years have passed since I last saw him. I took a step forward; I cannot wait anymore to come face to face with the Mediterranean Sea.

I dipped my toes into the water and even though there were about a hundred people around, all of a sudden nothing mattered but the fact that the two of us were together. I was a volunteer at the Lajee Center, which decided to run a trip to the Mediterranean shores. I was born as a refugee in Aida Refugee Camp, my idea of water was the main tank at the bottom of the refugee camp where water is passed once every week for two hours from the Israeli side, the black coloured water tanks that we save the water in when it is pumped from the main tank, the many times I put the water tap on expecting nothing to come out but air, or in the best of cases the swimming pool in Bait Jala where we used to go once or twice during summer holidays. However, it was never hard for me to imagine that big blue sea behind which the sun hides when the night falls and on its waves I could imagine the reflection of the sky and the multi-shaped clouds. If I was allowed, I would walk to get there even if it took days. But sometimes reality hits you in the heart.

I was finally there and my happiness was only one of many. The old and the young were expressing their happiness in different ways. At the end of the day, the sea is not only mine.

I felt that the sea itself shared our joy. The colours of the sea kept changing, I could not decide if the sun was hiding behind the clouds or if it came from the heart of the sea. The sea should have a heart, right? Or was it because of the different colours of skin mixed together there. The sea accepts whoever visits it. It will never discriminate swimmers based on the colour of their skin or the place they were born. The waves were very high, welcoming the visitors. To normal people, they looked dangerous and an Israeli policeman ran towards people to stop them swimming. But nothing could stop them; for most this was the first time, and nobody knew when the next time would be. Seize the day: that was the only thing that came to my mind at that minute. I think it was the same for all of us.

Little boys and girls sat on the shore building castles out of sand and empty shells. It looked so normal. Who could tell that these children were born under occupation? Were these

children normal as they were born in a refugee camp with 4,700 people of three or more generations of Palestinian refugees? It looked as if they would rather play with sand forever. In my country, dreaming is the only way forward. It is what keeps us going; our hopes that tomorrow will be better than today is the motivation for people to wake up every morning, get out of their beds, go to work or school, earn their living or get an education. The future is the most important dream.

Being here reminds me of the first time I visited the sea 10 years ago. I was only 14 years old. I hardly remember the date now, but I recall every moment and every feeling of that day. We had to go through the same process. People over 16 had to apply for permits from the Israeli authorities to be allowed into "Israel", into places that belonged to us 62 years ago, places that will be ours, even if the decades pass. After long days of waiting, we received the answer of "Yes", we were to be given permission to pass checkpoints on the way to the sea. I remember the sparkling eyes of my young friends leaving the camp at 4 am to the land of dreams. That day passed, but my memories will never die.

Looking at the large map of Palestine on the wall of my family's living room, the shortest distance from Bethlehem to the sea is 8cms on the map, namely the shores of Gaza. 86 kilometres separates the hearts of the two cities. When I was a child, my mother used to tell me stories about the Gaza neighbourhoods she visited when she was my age, about how kids swam freely on the shores of Gaza; she could even remember the number of fish they caught and ate: "They were 9," she would say. They could also buy fish from Bethlehem, brought that very day from the sea. My mother used to speak of her friends living in Gaza and how they visited each other regularly. My mother's happy memories of the city remind me of almost the other side of the image I share with my mother. My memories are those of people not allowed through the borders, families separated when the people of Gaza are locked in their prison. Mohammad, a child who is now my neighbour in Aida, was originally from Gaza. His family were in the West Bank when the city was besieged. According to Israel, they are illegally living in the West Bank, still their own country. Thinking about the situation in Gaza, Mohammad's father decided they would stay in the West Bank because they could not find work in Gaza. If they were to be found in Aida Camp, they would be deported to their home city, which obviously they love but would not return to because of the current situation. However, that was the destiny of Mohammad's 21-year-old brother who was imprisoned for being found in the West Bank and deported to Gaza. One member of the family is living alone in a city to which none of his family can return.

My memories, my mother's memories, Mohammad's and those of millions of Palestinians are collective. We have witnessed the massacres being committed against fellow humans in Gaza behind TV screens. We have all seen children becoming orphaned and made homeless and hundreds of people who were killed. As I remember my mother crying, I wonder if she cried for the children, the old, the martyrs, the injured, or for the city? Does she remember her friends? Is she afraid for them? We have not heard from my mother's friends for many years now.

The land of Gaza is besieged by borders from all sides. Gaza's air is occupied by Israeli helicopters and F16s and its sea is occupied too. According to the 1993 Oslo Accords, Palestinians are free to fish within 20 nautical miles of the coast. However, fishermen were attacked within a hundred yards of the shore. This means that people cannot even earn their living. Needless to say, as people are not allowed out of Gaza, neither are fish. So, in Bethlehem, we cannot get any fish; neither people nor fish can breathe freedom.

I know the Mediterranean might be sad with me as I have not paid a visit for ten years. But out of sight is never out of mind. I remember the nights I sat with my friend Alessandra and spoke of “*il mare*”, “*al-Bahr*”, the sea. Alessandra has visited the Italian shores of the Mediterranean and was able to visit the Palestinian ones too. It is odd how strangers are given the right to travel within your own country and the people of the country cannot. Alessandra and I share the same passion for “*la luna*”, the moon and “*il mare*”, the sea. I met Alessandra for the first time two years ago. She was coming to visit Palestine, to see for herself the realities of living in a conflict area. I used to sit at night with Alessandra talking about dreams for the future and how to make changes in our two countries. Both of us liked “*il mare*”, but one of us could visit it whenever she wished to in her free country, while the other had been to the sea only twice in 23 years of her life. When I was with Ale, as I like to call Alessandra, I always wondered if I would be free one day to visit the sea. I have not seen Ale for a long time now but I always write to her. I send her wishes with “*la luna*”; even though we live in different countries, and we are separated by land and water, we share the same sky and the same moon. Even if I cannot see Ale personally, I remember her every time I see the moon. Like the sea, the moon is free, no checkpoints or borders can stop it from lighting the darkness of our nights. I wish I were free like the moon, “*la luna*”.

My friend Ahmad studies in Egypt and he is Palestinian too, but it was easier for him to study in Egypt. When he comes to visit his family in the summer holidays he speaks of his visits to Alexandria, Port Said, and Domyat, three Egyptian cities that overlook the Mediterranean. I always wonder if the Mediterranean looks the same from different ports. Is the colour of the sea the same in all countries? Are the waves alike? I have never seen the Mediterranean in any other country but I never stopped questioning. What I was aware of is that if you see the Mediterranean once, your eyes will see it wherever you look.

My dream is to visit all ports of the Mediterranean and to visit all countries overlooking it. I hope to visit Alessandra in Italy, Ahmad in Egypt, and to make friends all around the world in Albania, Algeria, Lebanon, Libya, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, and all over the world. We are all equal, and we all need to meet and to share experiences.

Everything in life has an end, and so does that Sunday. When the sun found its way into the heart of the sea, we had to return to the other side of the Wall. None of the children who were swimming in the sea wanted to leave, but we had to. It was sad to see little children trying to carry the sea in small bottles which they filled for those who could not make the journey. Five-year-old children collected sand and empty shells to carry back to Aida Camp. Everyone wanted something to remind them of this trip. I took some salty Mediterranean water back home, but I knew that I needed nothing to remind me of that day. Because even when I lose all my teeth one day, I will still sit with my grandchildren and tell them of the only thing I loved more than their grandfather, “*al-Watan*”, my homeland, Palestine, and that amazing Sunday when two lovers were united, me and the sea.

I had to make sure that all children were back on the buses before we made the journey back to Bethlehem. I touched the waves for the last time and said goodbye. “This will not be the last time, my sea. I will come again, I promise!” I did not know whether the Mediterranean understood what I was trying to say. I had to make my way to the bus and got on. Most children were already asleep after a very exiting day, smiles were on their faces; maybe because they were for once satisfied with what life offered them, maybe because this was the first time they

had achieved one of their rights as human beings, or maybe because they were dreaming of the sea and of a better future; whatever the reason, they were happy, that was all that mattered.

I sat on the second row of seats next to the window, looked at the mirror at the front of the bus as it started to move. I could see the sea getting smaller and smaller and disappearing in the mirror. I wondered if the sea would remember me the next time I visited. Uncountable numbers of people visit the Mediterranean every day. “Do you think it will remember you, Kholoud?” Tears rolled down my face, as the sea disappeared behind us. But suddenly, a smile broke out between the tears and something whispered in my ear: “Yes! Many people will touch the sea, but the sea will only see those who belong to it; the sea will always remember you. Come back soon!” and I replied, “I certainly will!”

Balik

Katarzyna Marta Nocuń. Polska

Nad miastem unosił się krzyk. Złowieszczo zagłuszał ciszę budzącego się dnia. Był jak zapowiedź katastrofy. Zazwyczaj nic się jednak nie działo. Mewy płakały jak dzieci nienawykłe do obojętnego świata.

Stambuł budził się do życia powoli. Leniwie i niemrawo prostował skostniałe członki. Było jeszcze ciemno, choć wszystkie gwiazdy spadły już z nieba robiąc miejsce dla tej największej, świecącej ciepłym blaskiem. Balik lubił chodzić wtedy po mieście. Było puste, wyludnione, nawiedzane tylko przez cienie dostojnych kotów eksponujących smukłe szyje. Lubił ciszę, z której stopniowo wyłaniały się dźwięki. Smakował je powoli zgadując, gdzie tkwi ich źródło. Cisza kontrastowała z hałasem dnia, który wlewał się do środka siejąc mętlik w głowie. Szło się wtedy na oślep, czasem pod prąd, a czasem w rytm falującego tłumy, przez który trudno było się przebić. Wszyscy pędzili do momentu, gdy nie rozległ się głos. Za każdym razem było tak samo. Od setek lat głos wybuchał zawsze o tej samej porze, słychać go było codziennie, a nawet kilka razy dziennie, znana była nawet precyzyjna godzina jego przyjscia, a mimo to, zawsze był zaskoczeniem. Zawsze o tych samych porach dnia i nocy głos wzywał na modlitwę, narzucał odwieczne prawo przodków zgodnie, z którym zaprzestanie czci równało się moralnej śmierci. Głos za każdym razem był tak przekonujący, że ścinał z nóg. Pokornie schylało się przed nim na kolana i biło pokłony.

Balik robił to jak inni, wiedziony po równo obietnicą lepszego i strachem przed najgorszym, mimo że w duchu dawno już zaczął się sprzeciwiać. Podejmował nawet liczne próby obrony przed nagłym i zawsze niespodziewanym atakiem głosu. Poczytywał to sobie za akt najwyższego buntu, myśląc, że nawet, jeśli w konsekwencji ulegnie namowom głosu, będzie w pełni świadom momentu, w którym nadejdzie. Nic z tego. Głosu można się było spodziewać, czekać na niego, nasłuchiwać, ale tuż przed wybuchem zapominało się o nim i głos zaskakiwał od nowa. Coś wybuchało nagle w środku, w głowie, w sercu, w brzuchu, i zalewało ciało niebezpiecznym gorącem. Myliłby się jednak ten, kto wiązałby ten nagły rozbłysk z pożądaniem. Mówi się o dreszczu podniecenia, który przechodzi całe ciało w momentach największej ekscytacji. Krąży od stóp do głów nie zatrzymując się w konkretnym miejscu. Ciało nie dzieli się wtedy jak zwykle na części, stanowi jedność, pulsuje całe. Można powiedzieć, że osiąga wtedy ideał, do którego zawsze podświadomie dąży.

Dreszcz wywołany przez głos miał inną naturę. Podobny był bardziej do wstrząsu ciała tuż przed zaśnięciem, który unieruchamia na resztę nocy w kamiennej pozie. Czasem jest tak silny, że ledwo uśpione ciało odzyskuje przytomność i wraca do świata. Dreszcz ciała zdarza się dość często, prawie zawsze przed upadkiem w głębszy sen, tylko zazwyczaj go nie czuć, bo przechodzi ciało od środka i nie przebija się na zewnątrz.

Modlitwa była dla Balika formą snu, majaczeniem w ciemnościach w nadziei i w lęku. Nigdy nie mógł pogodzić się z faktem, że wiara odbiera świadomość, że kruszą się przed nią filary wiedzy, a człowiek staje bezsilny, skazany tylko na łaskę. Ponieważ głos był dla niego

wciąż za dużym wyzwaniem, Balik próbował mierzyć się ze snem. Wiele razy czatował na ten moment, kiedy sen przychodzi na palcach i bezszelestnie owija ciało miękkim kocem zapomnienia. Chciał złapać ten moment, kiedy sen odbierał mu świadomość. W swojej bezsilności przewracał się z boku na bok, liczył uparcie barany, podtrzymywał powieki końcami palców, by całkiem nie opadły. Nic nie pomagało. Z wycieńczenia, a może z niewagi, sen zaskakiwał go zawsze w pół drogi. Nigdy przez tyle lat nie udało mu się nawet zobaczyć skrawka jego ciała, poczuć zapachu, nie mówiąc już o lekkim muśnięciu w czoło. Tak samo było z głosem. Śpiew muezina, niezrozumiały dźwięk, zawsze go zaskakiwał. Zastanawiał się często jak to było kiedyś, kiedy nie było jeszcze całej aparatury umożliwiającej głosowi swobodne krążenie po mieście. Muezina kojarzył z wątlm, drobnym starcem o mocnych kolanach, który sumiennie wypełniał obowiązek wspinając się na szczyt, by wysłać swoje echo w świat. Zamiast gór głos odbijał się od zimnych murów zmieniając odcień, i dalej krążył nad miastem. Był jak echo niesione przez wodę w najdalsze zakamarki ulic. Tam zderzał się z innym echem, z drugim, trzecim i czwartym, odbitym z przeciwnych stron. I zwielokrotniony znów potężniał grzmiąc na całe gardło. Meczety wybuchały nim jak bomby, jak fajerwerki wyznaczając codzienny rytm wiecznie świętującego miasta. Kiedy głos poobijał się już o wszystkie arterie przechodząc miasto od czubka głowy do nasady palców, chybotliwy rozbijał się ponownie o nabrzeże i z pluskiem wpadał do wody. Pasażerowie promów przepływający się przez Bosfor na drugą stronę miasta myśleli zazwyczaj, że to ryby, niewyraźne majacząc pod wodą, chciały znowu dać głos, ale zawsze zachłystywały się wodą. Może dlatego w Stambule było tylu rybaków. Odkąd pamiętał wydobycie się z tego ogromnego miasta szło z tak wielkim trudem, że nikt już nawet nie próbował. Mieszkańcy żyli tu jak na wyspie. Na ryby nie jeździli za miasto, lecz ostentacyjnie zajmowali całą długość mostu Galata posiłkując się nie jedną, ale zachłannie kilkoma wędkami na raz, podpartymi na specjalnie wyżłobionych, drewnianych deszczułkach. Tak spędzali całe dni, kołysani łagodnym szumem fal.

Balik lubił wyobrazić sobie mapę swojego kraju o nieokreślonym kształcie. Zawsze chciał nadać mu jakiś kształt. Uparcie wpatrywał się w mapę całymi godzinami, ale nic nie przychodziło mu do głowy. Ot, nieregularny prostokąt bez żadnych niespodzianek, niezapowiedzianych uskoków, szpiczastych narożników, morza wdzierającego się szklanym językiem w łąd kalecząc wybrzeże. Nic z tych rzeczy. Inne kraje miały kobiece buty na obcasie, zęby trzonowe, łopatki. Czasem dzieliły się na części tworząc gęste konstelacje ludzkiej twarzy rozszarpanej na kawałki przez wezbrane wody. We wszystkich tych krajach widział odniesienie do człowieka i jego atrybutów. To była dla niego odpowiednia miara. Turcja nic takiego nie miała. Może dlatego, kiedy patrzył na mapę, niepostrzeżenie wzrok jego rozmydlał się i zapadał do wnętrza. Gubił się w ciele. Był teraz w środku. Z lotu ptaka przemierzał bezkresne przestrzenie, oglądał barwne wzory dywanów, które obsiadły góry, skaliste osady pokryte pióropuszcami traw, monochromatyczne wypiętrzenia podobne białym zębom olbrzyma. Przysiadła na miodowych polach o zachodzie słońca i zastanawiał się czy cały ten rozległy kraj pokrywa głos muezina? Chciał wiedzieć czy na dalekich pustynnych terenach, na równinnych stepach, w świetle gwiazd, czy wszędzie dobiega ten głos i wybija z błógiego stanu wolności. Na tych ziemiach, jeśli w ogóle tu docierał, głos musiał być już bardzo słaby, wycieńczony przemierzaniem nieskończonych kilometrów, obijaniem się o skały, walką z wiatrem. Tu był już cichym echem, ale nigdy nie

przestawał być napomnieniem. Ten głos prześladował go przez całe życie. Nie mógł zrozumieć jak coś, co nie ma twarzy, groźnego spojrzenia, ściągniętych brwi, jak coś takiego może mieć tak zniewalającą siłę i obezwładniać całe ciało.

Balik chciał uciec od głosu. Zawsze jednak, nawet, gdy wydawało się, że teren jest na tyle odległy i bezpieczny, by go nie słyszeć, głos rozbrzmiewał niespodziewanie. Nie pomagały też długie wędrówki po mieście ciągnące się godzinami. Wycieńczyły tylko ciało i umysł, a głos i tak zawsze dobijał się do środka i nie pozwalał o sobie zapomnieć.

I jeszcze ta daleka mowa. Wszyscy wiedzieli, o czym śpiewa głos, że wzywa do modlitwy, że wychwala Allaha, tyle, że mało kto go rozumiał. Nikt nie znał arabskiego. Głos odrywał się od treści. Był jak puste naczynie słowa, z którego treść została spita już przez kogoś innego. Balik i z tym nie mógł się pogodzić. Zawsze był rżądny wiedzy, gdy coś stawało się niejasne drążył to aż do skutku, dopóki nie uzyskał odpowiedzi. Jego zainteresowanie brało się zawsze z doświadczenia, najczęściej wiązało się z widzialnym, wynikało z obserwacji rzeczy, które odkrywają pomału swoją naturę, choć wiemy, że śpią i wciąż kryją przed światem intymne tajemnice. Z głosem było tym trudniej, że był niewidzialny, miał tę magiczną właściwość bycia wszechobecnym przy całkowitej ulotności. Dlatego tak trudno było go uchwycić. Balik nie dawał jednak za wygraną, zaczął studiować opasłe księgi. Robaczkowe pismo łuskał na sylaby i perfidnie męczył jak owada, którego nakrył, jak wygodnie rozsiada się w soczystym jabłku. Od pojedynczych słów przechodził do rozbudowanych zdań. Interesowało go wszystko, gramatyka, składnia, morfologia wyrazów krojonych na części. Był pilny i sumienny, czasem tylko odpływał w marzenia urzeczony miłosnym splotem roślin wijących się w mezetach. Studiował pismo, które niepostrzeżenie przechodziło w znak graficzny i wiło się już płynnie doganiając otaczające arabeski. I znowu był w punkcie wyjścia, słowo zamieniało się w piękny obraz i uwodząc odciągało od treści.

Balik znał już dobrze arabski, ale z bólem musiał stwierdzić, że nadal nie rozumie głosu. Po wielu walkach i zmaganiach miał już wszystkiego dość. Miał dosyć głosu, nie chciał go już słyszeć. Był bezsilny. W takich chwilach również ciało odmawiało mu posłuszeństwa.

Balik od dziecka był wątłej fizjonomii. Był szczupły, miał kruche palce i smukłe kości policzkowe. Pamiętał taki moment, kiedy coraz bardziej zaczął podupadać na zdrowiu. To było nad Bosforem (a może nad Marmara, nie pamiętał dokładnie, bo nigdy nie mógł zdecydować się na jedno ulubione miejsce, zawsze miał ich kilka, wiedziony przekonaniem o niepowtarzalności rzeczy i zjawisk, i niemożności powtórzenia). Jak zwykle w takie dni ślizgał się z kolegami na łyżwach po zamrzniętej wodzie. Było piękne, zimowe słońce rekompensujące chłód lodu i dyskredytujące siarczystość mrozu. Matka zawsze ostrzegała go, że jazda na łyżwach po cienkim lodzie jest niebezpieczna. Balik jak zwykle nie słuchał, nie mógł odebrać sobie przyjemności choć kilka razy w roku. Sunąc na łyżwach po zamrzniętym Bosforze, z Europy do Azji i z powrotem, nareszcie czuł się dobrze, w końcu wyzwalał się z ograniczeń swojego wątłego ciała, które przy systematycznym, naprzemiennym ruchu wydłużonych kończyn stawało się bardziej elastyczne. W końcu był wolny, mimo że stale trzymał się lodu, czuł się jak w locie, gdy przemierzał w wyobraźni dalekie krainy. Teraz sunął atonalnie przy donośnym głosie muezina rozlegającym się z dzielnicy Sultanahmet, jak zwykle niespodziewanie. Zdążył wyprzedzić już wszystkich kolegów, był teraz pierwszy i niechybnie czekał go podbój Azji. Był już na wysoko-

ści Błękitnego Meczetu popychany stanowczym dźwiękiem głosu, gdy nagle poczuł gwałtowny skręt kostki i obezwładniający ból w nodze. Kiedy upadał i tuż potem, kiedy leżał nieruchomo na tafli lodu, nie czuł już nic, oprócz przeszywającego bólu w skroniach, i tego złowrogiego ryk. Głos muezina świdrował mu wewnątrz.

Chyba właśnie wtedy pojawiły się w nim pierwsze objawy sprzeciwu wobec głosu. Padały pierwsze tej jesieni, obfite deszcze, plecy kuliły się coraz mocniej do reszty korpusu uwydatniając zgarbione sylwetki. W takich okresach zbiorowej żałoby nad światem, szczególnie ciało odmawiało posłuszeństwa. Balik czuł to w swoich kościach, które przemieszczały się teraz w niedostępne im wcześniej zakamarki ciała urządzając sobie w najlepsze turnieje oręża. Od czasu nieszczęśliwego wypadku miał mieć już zawsze problemy z kręgosłupem. Szczególnie teraz czuł jego dotkliwą obecność. Przez wiele tygodni przykuty do łóżka, Balik czuł się bezsilny.

Ta bezsilność wróciła też teraz, kiedy był już w pełni świadom swej nienawiści do głosu. A może nienawiść to nie było dobre słowo? Jeśli nawet niektórzy tak by to nazwali, to towarzyszące mu uczucie miało też swoją drugą stronę. Miało swoją opozycję w postaci miłości. Tak, trudno było może w to uwierzyć, bo była to miłość ukryta, której nigdy nie nazywa się po imieniu. Sam Balik długo nie zdawał sobie z niej sprawy. Zaczęło go jednak nękać pytanie; dlaczego, jeśli głos go wciąż nawiedzał, męczył, prześladował, dlaczego go nie opuścił definitywnie i raz na zawsze, stawiając twarde warunki, budując tratwę z cienkich deszczulek rybaków i opuszczając wyspę na dobre? Przecież mógł tak zrobić, nic nie stało na przeszkodzie. A jednak nie, trwał przy głosie, dzielnie znosząc jego ciągle, niespodziewane wybuchy gniewu. To była skryta miłość, jaką czasem bywa miłość do rodziców, którzy wychowując narzucili liczne zakazy zniewalające ciało i umysł.

Podobnie było z głosem. Obok zniewalającej siły, głos muezina spajał przestrzeń, oswajał ją i zabezpieczał. Tworzył niepisaną granicę, które nie mieli prawa przekroczyć obcy. A jeśli nawet przychodzili z zewnątrz, z poza wyspy, tak samo jak Balik musieli podporządkować się kającej sile głosu.

Po uświadomieniu sobie tej zalety głosu, Balik zaczął czuć się na wyspie bezpieczne. Zbiegło się to z innym odkryciem. Dawno już, w czasie, gdy trwały jego nieudolne potyczki z głosem, odkrył piękno muzyki, kojący oddech spajający całą przestrzeń. Słuchając dźwięku ney czuł ciepło rozlewające się po całym ciele, od koniuszka palców do nasady uszu, gdzie zataczając spirale i witając się ze ślimakiem na powrót, nową, ożywczą falą pływało w dół, krążąc w organizmie. Dźwięk bez głosu był dla Balika odkryciem. Szybko opanował podstawy gry. W tym też okazał się pojętnym uczniem. To była jego bezsłowna zemsta na głosie. Z bezsilności wybrał muzykę, która jednak szybko zaczęła znaczyć dla niego o wiele więcej. Przestała być środkiem do zagłuszenia głosu, a stała się wartością samą w sobie. Zakochał się w instrumencie. Grając na ney, nie napinał policzków jak robili to trębacze, a tylko zasysał je delikatne, pamiętając, że nie nawykły do silnych wiatrów. Kości policzkowe pozostawały zawsze na swoim miejscu, wydatnie podkreślone. Lekko zapadnięta twarz pozwalała jedynie na subtelne pulsowanie warg. Z instrumentem rozmawiał intymnie, delikatnie przykładając wydęte wargi składające je do pocałunku. Pieszczotliwie muskał ustnik niczym usta kochanki wypełniając je delikatnie ciepłym oddechem. Umiejętnie przekazany oddech, ten prosto z wnętrza, z centrum ciała, gdzie zaplatały się wszystkie wydeptane ścieżki organizmu, wchodził w usta intymnie, wprawiając

drugie ciało w drzenie. Mówiąc do niego jakby na ucho, nachylając się i szepejąc, powodował wibracje drugiego ciała, które pod wpływem demiurgicznego tchnienia budziło się do życia kwiląc najpierw nieporadnie jak niemowlę, by stopniowo prostować się jak wstający z ziemi człowiek. Instrument miał teraz donośny głos, mówił wyraźnie, oddychał pełną piersią, w końcu złapał wiatr w płuca.

Zaczynało się od głowy kołyszącej się lekko na wszystkie strony, jakby zupełnie zapomniiała, że przytwierdzona jest do szyi, jakby chciała się wyswobodzić lekko pocierając o korpus, by w końcu samoistnie odpaść. Za głową falowały ramiona, w przeciwnych, co ona kierunkach. Za nimi szły biodra, a palce stawały się częścią instrumentu, delikatnie uderzając i przykrywając dziurki, odejmując im oddech. Były jak drobne robaczki pulsujące całym ciałem. Potem niepostrzeżenie zaczynały drgać powieki, jedna z brwi łukowo celowała ku niebu. Teraz ruch ciała nie odbywa się już tylko na zewnątrz. Dźwięk wracał do demiurga odbijając w nim swoje piętno. To zawsze podwójna relacja, ucznia i mistrza, którzy często zamieniają się rolami, za wyjątkiem momentów całkowitego spojenia, oddechu i dźwięku, kiedy są jednym ciałem, jak dwoje oczu zdobiących twarz. Kiedy jednak instrument zaczyna brać górę i dominować nad muzykiem, zaczyna dziać się coś niepokojącego. Z początku szybki, nagły dreszcz przechodzi całe ciało. Było to normalne, Balik doświadczył tego wielokrotnie porwany pięknem dźwięku. Na tym się jednak nie kończyło. Dźwięk wracał do instrumentu, po czym pojawiał się ponownie wibrując w ciele ze zdwojoną siłą. Dźwięk pieścił teraz wszystkie kości owijając się szelnie wokół kręgosłupa, który niespodziewanie zyskiwał elastyczność wijącego się węża. Nad tym już Balik nie panował. Jego ciało odmawiało mu posłuszeństwa, kręgosłup zapłodniony dźwiękiem stawał się jego przedłużeniem i unosił ciało. Lewitujące ciało krążyło nad ziemią pulsując łagodnym, ciepłym blaskiem. Nie wiadomo ile to wszystko mogło trwać, czas dla Balika zatrić już swoje prawa. Kołysany dźwiękiem kręgosłup, wypełniony po brzegi, już właściwie nie ciało a ulotny dźwięk, rozpadał się nagle w złoty pył. Teraz był już muzyką, teraz jego dźwięk mógł już konkurować z głosem. Teraz mogły połączyć się we wspólną pieśń.

Balik

Katarzyna Marta Nocuń. Poland

A cry was hovering above the city. Ominously it drowned out the silence of the awakening day. It was like a portent of a catastrophe. Usually, however, nothing happened. Seagulls wailed like children unaccustomed to the indifferent world.

Istanbul was slowly waking up to life. Lazily and sluggishly it was straightening up its stiff limbs. It was still dark, although all stars have already fallen off the sky, making room for the biggest one, shining with a warm glow. This was when Balik liked to walk in the city. It was empty, depopulated, haunted only by the shadows of majestic cats exposing their slender necks. He liked the quiet from which sounds gradually emerged. He tasted them slowly, guessing where their sources were. The quiet contrasted with the noise of the day, which poured inside him and muddled his head. He'd walk as if blindfolded then, sometimes walking in the opposite direction to the crowd, and sometimes yielding to its waving rhythm, as it was difficult to push through it. Everybody hurried till the moment when they heard the voice. Every time it was the same. For hundreds of years, always at the same time, it has been heard every day, and sometimes several times a day, even the exact hour of its arrival was well known, and yet it always came as a surprise. Always at the same time at night and during the day, the voice summoned for prayer, imposed the ancient law of the ancestors according to which discontinuation of worship equalled moral death. Every time the voice was so convincing that it knocked you sideways. Humbly, one kneeled before it and bowed.

Balik did this just like everyone else, led equally by the promise of a better life and the fear of the worst, even though it's been a long time since, deep down, he started to oppose it. He even undertook various attempts at defending himself against the sudden and always unexpected attack of the voice. He saw this as an act of gravest rebellion, thinking that even if he, consequently, succumbed to the voice's urging, he would be fully aware of the moment when it appeared. But it was no use. One could expect the voice, wait for it, listen out for it, but right before it exploded one would forget about it and the voice would take one by surprise all over again. Something suddenly exploded inside, in the head, in the heart, in the stomach, and flooded the body with dangerous heat. It would be a mistake, however, to connect this sudden flash with desire. One speaks about a shudder of desire which passes through the whole body at moments of greatest excitement. It circulates from the feet to the head and back without stopping in any particular place. The body is not divided into its usual parts then, but constitutes unity and pulsates as one entity. It can be said that at that moment the body reaches the ideal state to which it always subconsciously aspires.

But the shudder evoked by the voice was of a different nature. It was more similar to the tremor that the body experiences right before falling asleep and which immobilises it for the rest of the night in one pose. At times it is so strong that a body that has just fallen asleep regains consciousness and returns to the world. The shudder of the body happens quite often, almost always before the

body falls into deeper sleep, but usually one does not feel it because it penetrates the body from the inside and does not show through on the outside.

Prayer for Balik was a kind of sleep, hallucination in the dark filled with hope and fear. He could never resign himself to the fact that faith takes away consciousness, that it crushes the pillars of knowledge, and that man stands before it helpless, with nothing but mercy to rely on. Because the voice was still too big a challenge for him, Balik tried to challenge his sleep instead. Many a time he lay in wait for the moment when sleep tip-toes and soundlessly wraps the body with the soft blanket of forgetfulness. He wanted to capture the moment when sleep takes away his consciousness. In his powerlessness he turned in his bed from one side to the other, stubbornly counted sheep, kept his eyelids open with his fingers to prevent them from closing. It didn't work. Exhausted, or maybe not sufficiently attentive, he was always stopped halfway by sleep. Never during so many years has he managed to see even the slightest bit of his body, to smell anything, not to mention the gentle brush against his forehead. It was the same with the voice. The muezzin's cry, the incomprehensible sound, always took him by surprise. He often wondered what it was like in the past, without all the apparatuses allowing the voice to freely wander around the city. He imagined the muezzin as a frail small old man with strong knees who diligently carried out his duty by climbing to the top of the tower to send his echo out to the world. Instead of against the mountains, the voice resonated against cold walls, changed its shade and travelled on above the city. It was like an echo carried with water to the farthest street recesses. There it collided with another echo, and another, and another, also reflected but from a different direction. And thus multiplied, it

became mighty again, thundering at the top of its voice. Mosques exploded with it like bombs, like fireworks, marking the everyday rhythm of the eternally celebrating city. Having bounced against all the arteries crossing the city, from the top of its head to the base of its toes, the wobbly voice crashed against the embankment again and fell into the water with a loud splash. Ferry passengers crossing the Bosphorus to get to the other side of the city usually thought that it was fish blurrily appearing in the sea that wanted to sound their voice again but as always choked with water. Perhaps this is why there were so many fishermen in Istanbul. Ever since he could remember, getting out of this enormous city caused such difficulty that no one even tried any more. The inhabitants lived as if on an inland. To go fishing they did not travel outside the city but ostentatiously covered the whole length of the Galata Bridge equipped not with one, but greedily with several fishing rods at once, supported with specially carved wooden slats. In this manner they spent whole days, lulled by the gentle hum of sea waves.

Balik liked to imagine the map of his country and its indefinite shape. He always wanted to define it. Obstinate, he stared at the map for hours on end, but no ideas appeared in his head. There it was, an irregular rectangle devoid of any surprises, unannounced faults, spiky corners, or a sea that would penetrate the land with its glass tongue, wounding the shore. Nothing like that. Other countries had women's high-heeled boots, molar teeth, shoulder blades. Sometimes they were divided into parts forming dense constellations of a human face torn into pieces by swollen waters. In all of these countries he saw some reference to the human form or its attributes. This was the right kind of measure for him. But Turkey had nothing like that. Perhaps this was why when he looked at the map his gaze

imperceptibly blurred and sank into him. It got lost in his body. Now it was inside him. From a bird's-eye view he observed boundless lands, looked at colourful patterns of carpets that settled on mountains, rocky sediments covered with plumes of grass, monochromatic elevations resembling the white teeth of a giant. He perched on honey fields at sunset and wondered if this whole wide land was covered with the muezzin's voice. He wanted to know if in distant desert regions, on flat steppes, in the starlight, the voice reached everywhere and everywhere put an end to the blissful state of freedom. In those lands, if the voice reached them at all, it had to be very weak, exhausted by having traversed countless kilometres, by having hit rocks, having fought with the wind. Here it was only a quiet echo, but it never ceased to admonish. The voice has been haunting him his whole life. He could not understand how something without a face, without a threatening gaze, without furrowed eyebrows, could have such an overpowering force and overwhelm his whole body.

Balik wanted to escape from the voice. However, always, even when he thought that a terrain was sufficiently distant and vast for him not to hear the voice, it still resounded out of the blue. Not even long wanderings across the city, sometimes lasting for hours on end, could help. They only exhausted his body and mind, and the voice repeatedly knocked on his body wanting to get inside him and not letting him forget it.

And there was also the distant speech. Everyone knew what the voice sang about, that it called for prayer, praised Allah, yet hardly anyone understood it. Nobody spoke Arabic. The voice detached itself from the content. It was like an empty vessel made of word from which all content had been drunk by somebody else. This was another thing Balik could not accept. He always had a thirst for knowledge; whenever something

became unclear he strove to find an answer and did not stop until he succeeded. His interest always stemmed from an experience, most often had to do with the visual, and emerged from his observation of things which slowly revealed their nature, although we know that they are asleep and still conceal from the world their intimate mysteries. The voice was all the more difficult since it was invisible; it had the magic quality of being omnipresent and completely ephemeral at the same time. This is why it was so difficult to grasp it. Nonetheless, Balik would not give in and began to study voluminous books. He husked the wriggly writing to obtain syllables; he tormented it perfidiously as if it was an insect caught at making itself at home in a juicy apple. From single words he moved on to complex sentences. He was interested in everything: grammar, syntax, the morphology of dissected words. He was diligent and scrupulous, only sometimes did he drift into dreams, bewitched by the amorous tangle of plants twining in mosques. He studied writing which imperceptibly turned into graphic signs and then snaked flowingly catching up with the surrounding arabesques. And again he was at the starting point; a word turned into a beautiful image and led him astray away from the content.

Balik knew Arabic well at this stage, but it pained him to conclude that he still did not understand the voice. After many battles and a lot of strife he had had enough of this. He had had enough of the voice; he didn't want to hear it again. He was powerless. At moments like this his body also refused to obey him.

Balik had been frail ever since his childhood. He was lean, had delicate fingers and high cheekbones. He remembered the moment when his health started to deteriorate. It was by the Bosphorus (or maybe by the Sea of Marmara, he could not recall, as he could

never decide on his one favourite place; he always had several, believing in the uniqueness of things and all phenomena and the impossibility of repetition). As usual on those days, he was skating on frozen water. It was a beautiful winter day, the sun making up for the coolness of the ice and discrediting the biting cold. His mother had always warned him that skating on thin ice was dangerous. However, as usual, Balik did not listen, he could not deny himself the pleasure he enjoyed at least a few times a year. Gliding across the Bosphorus, between Europe and Asia, finally he felt good, at last he could liberate himself from the limitations of his frail body, which became more elastic in the systematic alternating movement of his elongated limbs. At last he was free, and despite being attached to the ice, he felt as if he was flying, as in his imagination he was traversing distant lands. Now he was gliding atonally by the accompanying resonant voice of the muezzin resounding from the Sultanahmet District, as always, unexpectedly. He had managed to overtake all his friends; he was in the lead now and inevitably heading for the conquest of Asia. He was already on a level with the Blue Mosque, propelled by the firm sound of the voice, when he suddenly felt a violent twist in his ankle and overpowering pain in his leg. As he was falling, and then later, when he was already lying down, still, on the ice, he didn't feel anything except piercing pain in his temples and the ominous cry. The muezzin's voice was drilling through his inside.

It was probably then that the first symptoms of his objection against the voice appeared in him. The first plentiful rain of the autumn was falling, people's backs would curl ever more into the rest of the corpus, emphasising the hunched silhouettes. During the latest period of collective mourning for the world, it was especially the body that failed. Balik felt this in his bones, which now shifted to hitherto inaccessible recesses of the body,

organising knightly tournaments there. Following the unfortunate fall he was destined to suffer from spine problems. Especially now he felt its painful presence. Bedridden for many weeks, Balik felt powerless.

This powerlessness returned now that he was fully aware of his hatred for the voice. But perhaps "hatred" was not the right word. Even if some would call it that, the accompanying feeling also had its other side. It had its opposite side in the form of love. Yes, this was probably difficult to believe, because this love was hidden, it was of the kind that is never called by its name. Balik himself had been ignorant of its existence for a long time. However, one question started to bother him: why, if the voice was constantly haunting, tormenting, oppressing him, why did he not definitively leave it, once and for all, by putting forward tough conditions, building a raft out of fishermen's wooden slats and leaving the island forever? After all, he could have done that, there was nothing that could have stopped him. And yet he didn't, he stayed within the voice's reach, bravely enduring its continual unexpected explosions of wrath. This was secret love, resembling the kind of love one sometimes feels for one's parents, whose upbringing imposes on their child numerous prohibitions constraining the body and the mind.

It was the same with the voice. Beside its overpowering force, the muezzin's voice bound space, tamed and secured it. It created an unwritten border which strangers were banned from crossing. And even if they came from the outside, from outside the island, then they had to surrender to the voice's vindictive force.

Having realised this advantage of the voice, Balik began to feel safe on the island. This coincided with another discovery. A long time ago, when his futile struggle against the voice was already in progress, he discovered the beauty of music, the soothing breath span-

ning entire space. Listening to the voice of the ney, he felt warmth running through his whole body, from his fingertips to the base of his ears, where spiralling and greeting the cochlea, it turned back and flowed down in a new invigorating wave and then circulated in the whole organism. A sound without the voice was a new discovery for Balik. He quickly mastered the basics of playing the instrument. In this he also turned out to be a fast learner. This was his wordless revenge on the voice. Out of powerlessness he chose music which soon, however, began to mean much more to him. It ceased to be but a means of drowning out the voice and became valuable in its own right. He fell in love with the instrument. Playing the ney he did not blow his cheeks like trumpeters, but delicately sucked them in, remembering the fact that they were not used to strong wind. His cheekbones always remained in the same place, strongly emphasised. His slightly sunken face allowed only for a subtle pulsation of the lips. He spoke to the instrument in most intimate tones, delicately touching it with his pursed lips shaped into a kiss. He caressed the mouthpiece tenderly as if it was the mouth of a lover, delicately filling it with warm breath. The skilfully transmitted breath, coming straight from within, from the centre of the body where all the well trodden paths of the organism intertwined, entered the lips intimately, sending shivers down the other body. Speaking as if in its ear, leaning towards it and whispering, he made the other body vibrate. Filled with life by this demiurgic breath, at first it wailed helplessly like a newborn baby to gradually straighten up like a man rising from the ground. The instrument had a sonorous sound now. It spoke clearly, breathed deeply, until it finally gathered wind into its lungs.

It started with the head swaying slightly in all directions, as if it forgot completely that it was attached to the neck, as if it wanted to free itself by gently rubbing against the

corpus to eventually fall off on its own. Next was the undulation of the shoulders, but moving in the opposite directions. This was followed by the hips, and the fingers became an integral part of the instrument, gently tapping at the holes and covering them, taking their breath away. They were like little worms causing the whole body to pulsate. Then, imperceptibly, the eyelids started to quiver, and one of the eyebrows arched towards the sky. Now the body's movement was not taking place only on the outside. The sound returned to the demiurge leaving its stamp on him. This relation is always mutual, the one between the master and the apprentice, who often exchange their roles, except the moments of total fusion of the breath and the sound, when they become one body, just like a pair of eyes adorning a face. However, when the instrument begins to take over and dominate the player, something disturbing starts to happen. At first, a quick imperceptible shudder runs through the whole body. This was normal Balik experienced this many times, captivated by the beauty of the sound. But this was not the end of it. The sound returned to the instrument only to re-emerge vibrating in the body with doubled force. The sound was now caressing all the bones, tightly coiling around the spine, which unexpectedly gained the flexibility of a winding snake. This was beyond Balik's control. His body would disobey him, his spine, fertilised with sound, became its extension and lifted the body. The levitating body would circle above the ground, pulsating with a gentle warm glow. It is unclear how long this could have lasted, for Balik time had lost its laws. His spine rocked by the sound, filled to the brims, his body now turned into a fleeting sound, and suddenly he dissolved into golden dust. Now he was music. Now his own sound could compete with the voice. Now they could unite into one song.

Prosiaki na rzeź

Małgorzata Gwiazda. Polska

„W Beijingu jest dziewięć milionów rowerów...”, śpiewa Katie Melua i to jest znak, że trzeba wstać. Kasia szybko manewruje pomiędzy pustymi butelkami i częściami garderoby w korytarzu. Heikki, jej współlokator, znowu wczoraj pobalował. W kuchni Sajgon. Wyrzuca ze stołu kilka pustych puszek do kosza i kładzie miseczkę na ich miejscu. Do miseczki wysypuje płatki czekoladowe i zalewa je zimnym mlekiem. Cukier to jedyne co ją budzi o 5 rano. Za oknem czarna noc i rozświetlony plac hakaniem. Taj zimy znowu nie ma śniegu i Helsinki nie mają tyle uroku, co dwa lata temu. Jest za to tak samo zimno. Szybki prysznic, grube rajstopy pod jeansy, puchowa, markowa kurtka (prezent od Ilariego) i już jest na dworze. Tylko kilka przystanków do kamppi a tam czeka na nią, jak co rano, spotkanie rozdawczy gazet. Dzisiaj również nie ma wśród nich ani jednego Fina. „Hej, zobacz”, Lu podchodzi do niej z otwartym Metrem, „ktoś napisał o Maliku”. Kasia czyta tekst i uśmiecha się po raz pierwszy tego dnia. „Dziękuję ciemnoskóremu mężczyźnie, który co rano podaje mi gazetę i z uśmiechem mówi ‘Dzień dobry’ za to, że przez ostatnie 3 lata co rano poprawiał mi dzień”. „Malik, jesteś bohaterem,” Kasia wskazuje palcem mały tekst i tłumaczy go z fińskiego na angielski Malikowi, Nepalijskiemu, któremu uśmiech rzeczywiście nie zchodzi z twarzy. Przez najbliższe cztery godziny Kasia również z uśmiechem podaje przechodniom poranne Metro. Może i ona dzisiaj popawi kogoś dzień.

Cztery godziny nauki języka fińskiego to zdecydowanie za dużo. Podobno mandaryński jest trudniejszy od fińskiego ale trudno w to uwierzyć. No bo jak tu sensownie wytłumaczyć, że czasowniki się odmieniają przez przypadki? Na zajęciach organizowanych przez urząd pracy imigranci z całego świata. Większość z nich, tak jak Kasia, przyjechała za miłością swojego życia. Dla Kasi miłość się skończyła jednak ona pozostała. Sama nie wie dlaczego zdecydowała się zostać w tym zimnym i mało przyjaznym kraju. Pewnie przez ambicję, która nie daje jej spać po nocach. „Wy, imigranci jesteście zbyt nieciepliwi”, z zamyślenia wybudza Kasie donośny głos nauczycielki, „chcielibyście tu przyjechać i od razu dostać pracę na stanowisku. My, Finowie, przeważnie zaczynamy od sprzątnięcia i wy też tak tu powinniście zaczynać.” Wszyscy na sali już to wiedzą, jednak to zdanie wypowiedziane na głos i to przez pracownika urzędu pracy, budzi usprawiedliwiony protest. Wśród uczniów jest wielu z dyplomami szkół wyższych. We własnych krajach mieli lepszą pracę, posznowanie i stanowisko. Dlaczego nagle mieliby zaczynać wszystko od nowa? Tylko dlatego, że ich dziadkowie nie brali udziału w wojnie zimowej, że ich ojcowie nie budowali potęgi Nokii?

Tak więc Kasia, jak większość innych, zaczyna od sprzątnięcia. Po kursie fińskiego idzie do drugiej pracy. Kiedy już większość pracowników opuszcza biurowce Keilaranty, wchodzi do nich Kasia. Kilku z nich prawie zawsze zostaje po godzinach i czasami zamieniają z Kasią kilka słów. „Mitä kuuluu?”, pyta Jari i Kasia odpowiada po fińsku, że u niej wszystko w porządku. Na chwilę przychodzi jej do głowy, żeby opowiedzieć Jariemu o tym, co im powiedziała nauczycielka z urzędu pracy ale daje sobie spokój. Po co znowu zaczynać? Jari jest jednym z niewielu

Finów, który wie o tym, że Kasia ma dyplom magistra i że przed przyjazdem do Finlandii była nauczycielką. Dla większości jest po prostu kolejnym imigrantem, który sprząta, rozdaje gazety lub ustawia wózki w supermarkecie. „Zobaczysz, ratyfikujesz dyplom i na pewno zaraz dostaniesz pracę w szkole,” pociesza ją czasami. Dzisiaj też pyta: „Jak tam papiery? Dostałaś już decyzję?” „Jeszcze nie,” odpowiada Kasia, „no ale to dopiero miesiąc a napisali, że na decyzję czeka się do trzech miesięcy.” Miesiąc temu Kasia wysłała swój dyplom do Ministerstwa Edukacji, żeby dostać uprawnienia nauczycielskie w Finlandii. Bez nich nie może tu uczyć. Ale czy nawet z papierami ktoś da jej tu pracę w szkole? W końcu ilu imigrantów uczyło was w szkole podstawowej? „Masz dyplom z Unii Europejskiej, więc na pewno dostaniesz decyzję na dniach,” odpowiada Jari, „Szkoda tylko, że nie będziesz już więcej wtedy do nas przychodzić. Jesteś najlepszą sprzątaczką, jaką tu mieliśmy od lat.” Kasia uśmiecha się. Słyszała to już wcześniej, że zawsze uśmiechnięta i taka dokładna. Nawet jej podwyżkę dali. Odkąd tylko pamięta, Kasia zawsze chciała być najlepsza. No i jest.

W domu cisza. Jak to dobrze, że Heikki wieczory spędza głównie poza domem. Szkoda tylko, że przeważnie wraca w środku nocy z jakąś cizią. No ale dopóki go nie ma Kasia może się wreszcie trochę pouczyć. Ale najpierw poczta i znowu brak odpowiedzi od pracodawców. Dyplom wprawdzie jeszcze nie ratyfikowany ale Kasia już wysłała podania do szkół. Może coś się trafi. Ale dzisiaj skrzynka znów pusta nie licząc kilku natrętnych reklam. „Użytkownik mama jest dostępny”, ogłasza skype i Kasia przez chwilę zastanawia się czy nie powinna szybko zamknąć laptopa. Jeśli nie zrobi tego szybko mama zadzwoni i znów będzie musiała uważać, żeby się nie wydać. Jej rodzina w Polsce wciąż uważa, że jest z Ilarim, mieszka w domku na Westendzie, no i wszyscy ciągle pytają „kiedy ten ślub?” Mogła im powiedzieć od razu ale nie powiedziała a teraz jest już jakoś za późno. Na gwiazdkę będzie w Polsce (tylko, kurcze, trzeba kupić ten bilet, bo za chwilę ceny podskoczą – i dlaczego akurat z Finlandii do Polski nie ma takich linii lotniczych) to im wszystko opowie. Nie będzie innego wyjścia jak już wysiądzie sama z pociągu. Ale jeszcze nie dzisiaj. Dzisiaj znowu trzeba będzie kręcić. Dobrze, że w laptopie nie ma kamery. Łatwiej udawać, że Heikki jest w drugim pokoju i, jak to często bywało, pracuje.

„No hej, mamek, co tam słyhać? No, Heikki jeszcze dzisiaj nie wrócił. Wiesz jak oni tutaj pracują,” Kasia kłamie bez zająknięcia. „Nie narzekaj, kochana. Jak mąż pracuje i zarabia to nic tylko się cieszyć,” strofuje mama i od razu dodaje, „Na święta przyjeżdżacie, mam nadzieję.” Ta dość nietypowa forma pytania daje jedną możliwość odpowiedzi. „Tak mamuś, przyjeżdżamy. Nie mieliśmy jeszcze czasu kupić biletów. Ale jak w tym tygodniu kupimy to dam znać dokładnie kiedy”, Kasia, jak zawsze podczas rozmowy na skype, w roztrągnięciu przegląda strony internetowe – nasza-klasa, facebook, pudelek. „Wiesz, myślałam, żeby w tym roku zaprosić ciocię Irenkę na święta. Ona tak zawsze pyta o ciebie jak sie widzimy”, głos mamy trochę przerywa ale to normalne na skype. „A wiesz, że ciocia Irenka założyła sobie konto na naszej klasie? Właśnie patrzę na ich zdjęcia z Mazur,” Kasia klika w kolejne zdjęcia, „ty też powinnaś sobie założyć konto. To wcale nie jest takie trudne”. „Ach, poczekam na was, jak przyjedziecie na święta to mi Ilari założy. Poczekaj chwile bo mi tutaj telefon dzwoni. Hałoo! Danusia! No cześć, ja tutaj z Kasią na skype rozmawiam...”, głos mamy dobiega coraz słabiej i Kasia widzi mamę w kuchni przy telefonie. „Chcesz pomóc – to pomagaj z głową”, czyta Kasia napis na ekranie. Tomek wrzucił linka na facebooku. Link jest do jakiejś organizacji charytatywnej i Kasia automatycznie klika. Kiva – pożyczki, które zmieniają życie. „No, już jestem. Danusia dzwoniła i kazała cię pozdrowić. Wiesz, że u nich...”, Kasia słucha jednym uchem i

czyta o mikropożyczkach. Po prawej stronie zdjęcia ludzi z całego świata, jedni przed swoimi małymi sklepami, drudzy na własnej farmie. Uwagę Kasi przykuwa zdjęcie młodej dziewczyny w dość ciemnym pomieszczeniu. Kasia klika i powiększa zdjęcie. Młoda dziewczyna to Yalda z Lebanonu a pomieszczenie, w którym stoi, to chlew. Na ziemi przed Yaldą leżą prosiaki. „Bo wiesz myślę czyby nie kupić nowego stołu do kuchni. Bo jak wy przyjedziecie i zaproszę Irenkę z rodziną to nie wiem czy się zmieścimy...” Kasia klika w jak to działa. Minimalna kwota pożyczki to 25 dolarów. Za te 25 dolarów ktoś może kupić motor, albo pomieszczenie na sklep i zacząć własny biznes. Na stronie pełno przykładów, jak to 25 dolarów zmienia życie ludzi. 98% przedsiębiorców pożyczki oddaje. Kupują zboże albo maszynę do szycia i zaczynają zarabiać na siebie i swoje rodziny. I spłacają długi. „I może moglibyście tym razem zrobić coś fińskiego. Ja wiem, że to jedzenie nie jest najlepsze ale wiesz, tak jako ciekawostkę”, Kasia powraca do rozmowy z mamą, „Dobrze, mamus, pomyślę. Może coś zrobimy. Wiesz, muszę kończyć, bo Ilari właśnie przysłał wiadomość, że wraca do domu. Muszę podgrzać obiad.” Kasia zmienia profil na skypie na niedostępny i wraca do zdjęcia Yaldy.

Yalda ma 35 lat (choć wygląda młodziej) i troje dzieci. Chce rozwinąć swój biznes uboju świń. Chciałaby kupić więcej prosiaków na ubój i zarobić na szkołę dla dzieci. Kasia idzie do kuchni i robi kilka kanapek, takich polskich, z białego chleba z masłem, żółtym serem i pomidorem. Zrobiłaby z szynką ale fińskiej szynki nie da się jeść. Bierze talerz z kanapkami i herbatę i wraca do laptopa. Klika w załóż konto w 5 min.: imię, nazwisko, adres, skąd wiesz o kiva... Komputer automatycznie wypełnia większość pól osobowych. Wybierz przedsiębiorcę, któremu chcesz pożyczyć pieniądze – Kasia klika w zdjęcie Yaldy. Przelej pieniądze – jedno kliknięcie i 25 euro wędruje z konta Kasi na konto organizacji i Kasia zastanawia się kiedy Yalda dostanie wiadomość, że przyznano jej pożyczkę. Może już jutro, choć pewnie procedury trwają dłużej. Jak dostanie pieniądze to pójdzie kupić prosiaki a potem karmę dla prosiaków. Te 25 eur poszło z oszczędności na bilet do Polski na święta ale nie szkodzi. Najwyżej kupi bilet trochę później. W końcu za tydzień kolejna wypłata. Poza tym Yalda na pewno odda pożyczkę. Jeśli prosiaczki będą się dobrze chować. Kasia uświadamia sobie, że niewiele wie o Lebanonie. Otwiera wikipedię i wpisuje „Lebanon”. Wpatrzona w ekran komputera z kanapką w pól drogi między talerzem a ustami z satysfakcją myśli o małych świnkach tuczonych na reż.

Piglets for Slaughter

Malgorzata Gwiazda. Poland

“There are nine million bicycles in Beijing...” sings Katie Melua and this means that it’s time to get up. Kasia quickly manoeuvres her way between empty bottles and elements of clothing scattered across the corridor. Heikki, her flatmate, had a good time again last night. The kitchen looks like a war zone. She removes several empty cans from the table and chucks them in the bin. In their place she puts a bowl. Into the bowl she pours chocolate cornflakes and adds cold milk. Sugar is the only thing that can wake her up at 5 am. Outside the window the night is black and the Hakaniemi market square is illuminated. This winter there is snow again and Helsinki does not have as much charm as it did two years ago. However, it’s equally cold. A quick shower, thick tights under her jeans, a good brand new jacket (a present from Ilari) and she is out. Just a few bus stops to Kamppi and there, as every morning, the meeting of newspaper distributors awaits her. Also today there is not a single Finn among them.

“Hey, look”, says Lu showing her a page in the *Metro*, “somebody has written about Malik.”

Kasia reads the text and smiles for the first time today. “I would like to thank the black man who hands me a newspaper every morning, smiles to me and says ‘good morning’ – thank you for having cheered me up every morning over the last three years.”

“Malik, you’re a hero,” Kasia points to the text and translates it from the Finnish into English to Malik, a Nepalese man who never stops smiling. For the next four hours Kasia will also be smiling and handing passers-by the morning *Metro*. Perhaps she will also cheer somebody up today.

Four hours of learning Finnish is definitely too much. It is said that Mandarin is more difficult than Finnish, but it’s hard to believe. For how does one make sense of the fact that verbs decline? The classes organised by the job centre are attended by immigrants from all over the world. Most of them, like Kasia, have come here following the love of their life. For Kasia the love is gone, yet she remains. She does not know herself why she has decided to stay in this cold and not very friendly country. Probably due to her ambition, which keeps her awake at night.

“You, immigrants are too impatient,” the sonorous voice of the teacher interrupts Kasia’s reverie, “you want to come here and get a good job and a high position straight away. We, the Finnish people, usually start with cleaning jobs and this is also what you should begin with.”

Everyone in the classroom knows this but this sentence said aloud by an employee of a job centre arouses their justified protest. Among the learners many have university degrees. In their own countries they had better jobs, positions and respect. Why should they suddenly start all over again? Just because their grandparents did not take part in the Winter War and their fathers never contributed to the building of the Nokia empire?

Thus Kasia, just like most others, begins from scratch. After the Finnish course she goes to her other job. When most workers have left the Keilaranta office buildings, Kasia walks in. Almost always a few of them stay after hours and sometimes exchange a few words with her.

“Mitä kuuluu?” asks Jari and Kasia answers in Finnish that she is fine.

For a second she thinks she might tell Jari what the teacher from the job centre told them, but then she changes her mind. What's the use of starting this discussion again? Jari is one of few Finns who know that Kasia has an MA degree and that before she came to Finland she was a teacher. For most Finns she is simply yet another immigrant who cleans up, distributes newspapers or arranges trolleys in a supermarket.

"You'll see, you'll have your diploma officially recognised by our authorities and you'll get a job in a school on the spot," he comforts her now and then. Today, he also asks her about her papers: "Have you got your decision yet?"

"No, not yet," answers Kasia, "but then it's been only a month and they said the waiting period is up to three months."

A month ago, Kasia sent her diploma to the Ministry of Education to obtain teaching qualifications in Finland. She can't teach without them. But even with the right papers in her hand – will she ever get a job at any school here? After all, how many immigrants taught you when you were in primary school?

"You have a diploma from the European Union, so surely you'll get the decision any day now," says Jari. "It's a pity though that then you won't come here anymore. You are the best cleaner we've had for years."

Kasia smiles. She's heard this before, but she always smiles and is so thorough. She even got a rise in wages. Ever since she can remember, Kasia has always wanted to be the best. And she is.

The home is silent. How fortunate that Heikki spends his evenings mainly outside. If only he did not come back in the middle of the night and usually with some chick in tow. Still, as long as he's not here Kasia can finally do some studying. But first a quick check of her email – and again there's no response from

potential new employers. Admittedly, she has no officially recognised diploma yet, but Kasia has already been sending application letters to schools. Who knows, maybe she will get lucky. However, today the inbox is empty again except for some spam. "User Mama is available", Skype announces and for a brief moment Kasia wonders if she should not quickly switch off her laptop. If she fails to do this quickly, mum will call her and she'll have to be careful not to blurt out the truth. Her family in Poland still believe that she is with Ilari and lives in a bungalow in Westend; everyone is still asking "well, when is the wedding?" She could have told them straight away, but she never did and now it's kind of too late. She'll be in Poland for Christmas (but, shoot, she has to buy the ticket soon because otherwise the prices will rise – and why are there no cheap flights between Finland and Poland?) and then she will tell them everything. She'll have no choice after getting off the train alone. But not today. Not yet. Today she'll have to act as if nothing has happened. Luckily, there is no camera in her laptop. It's easier to pretend that Ilari is in the other room, working, as often was the case.

"Hey, *mamek*, how have you been? No, Ilari has not come back yet today. You know how long they work here," Kasia lies without missing a beat. "Don't complain, dear. If a husband works and earns money then you should be happy," her mum scolds her and adds straight away "You're still coming for Christmas, I hope."

This quite unusual way of asking a question makes only one answer possible. "Yes, mummy, we're coming. We haven't had the time to buy the tickets yet. But when we buy them this week I'll let you know immediately," Kasia says, as usual during a Skype conversation distractedly browsing through internet pages: Facebook, the news, celebrity gossip.

“You know, I’ve been thinking, maybe this year we should invite Aunt Irenka for Christmas. She always asks after you when we meet,” mum’s voice breaks up here and there, but this is normal for Skype.

“And do you know that Aunt Irenka has set up a Facebook account? I’m just looking at their photos from the Masuria.” Kasia clicks on another picture, and says “You should have an account, too, mum. It’s not that difficult.”

“Ah,” her mother replies, “I’ll wait for you, when you come for Christmas Ilari will set it up for me. Wait a moment, my phone is ringing. Halloo! Danusia! Yes, hello, I’m talking to Kasia on Skype...,” mum’s voice gradually fades and Kasia sees her talking on the phone in the kitchen.

“Want to help? Then help wisely,” Kasia reads an inscription on the screen. It’s a new link on Tomek’s Facebook page. The link sends her to some charity organisation and Kasia clicks on it automatically. Kiva – Loans that Change Lives.

“There, I’m back. Danusia called and told me to say hello to you. You know that they...” Kasia has half an ear on her mother’s monologue while reading about micro-finance. On the right she sees photographs of people from all over the world, some in front of their small stores; others on their own farms. Kasia’s attention is drawn to a picture of a young girl in a rather dark room. Kasia clicks on it and zooms in on the image. The young girl is Yalda from Lebanon, and she’s in a pigsty. On the ground, in front of Yalda, there are piglets.

“Because, you know, I’ve been wondering about buying a new table for the kitchen. When you two come and I also invite Irenka with her family I don’t know if there’ll be enough room...”

Kasia clicks to see how this works. The minimum loan is 25 dollars. For this sum

someone can buy a motorbike or a place for a store and then can start their own business. The site shows plenty of examples of how 25 dollars can change people’s lives. 98% of entrepreneurs pay back their loans. They buy grain or a sewing machine and they begin to earn money to support their families. And they pay back their debts.

“And maybe you could prepare something Finnish this time. I know this food is not the best but, you know, as a curiosity.”

Kasia returns to the conversation with her mum. “Sure, mummy, I’ll think of something. Maybe we’ll prepare a dish. You know, I have to go now, because Ilari has just texted me he’s coming home. I must reheat his dinner.”

Kasia changes her Skype profile from “available” to “unavailable” and goes back to Yalda’s photo.

Yalda is thirty-five (although she looks younger) and has three children. She wants to develop her pig slaughter business. She would like to buy more piglets for slaughter and earn money to send her children to school. Kasia goes to the kitchen and makes a few sandwiches for herself, typical Polish sandwiches with white bread and butter, cheese and tomato. She’d add some ham, but Finnish ham is uneatable. She takes the plate with sandwiches and tea with her and goes back to her laptop. She clicks on “register in 5 minutes”: first name and surname, address, how have you learnt about Kiva...? The computer automatically fills in most of the personal blanks. Select the entrepreneur you would like to make a loan to – Kasia clicks on Yalda’s photo. Transfer your money – one click and 25 euros travel from Kasia’s bank account to the organisation’s account. Kasia wonders when Yalda will receive the message that she’s been granted a loan. Perhaps as early as tomorrow, though the procedures

probably take longer. As soon as she gets the money she'll go to buy some piglets and then some piglet fodder. The 25 euros was part of Kasia's savings for the ticket to Poland, but never mind. She can buy the ticket a bit later. She'll get her salary next week, after all. Besides, Yalda will certainly pay back the loan.

As long as the piglets grow nicely. Kasia realises that she knows very little about Lebanon. She goes to Wikipedia and types in "Lebanon". Staring at the computer screen, with her sandwich halfway between the plate and her mouth, she thinks with satisfaction about little piglets being fattened for slaughter.

Esteticista

Ana Pessoa. Portugal

A minha última cliente de hoje é a senhora Sonata e a senhora Sonata nunca chega atrasada. Vem da Letónia ou da Lituânia, nunca sei, e fala muito sobre a Europa e os europeus, traz pulseiras no pulso que fazem barulho, mostra muito os dentes quando ri. A senhora Sonata costuma vir ao meu gabinete fazer a depilação e as unhas de gel, mas hoje, por acaso, não vem fazer nenhuma das duas, vem fazer uma limpeza de pele, o que é óptimo para mim, porque não me apetecia nada depilar as virilhas da senhora Sonata nem tratar das suas cutículas duríssimas. Além disso, de todos os tratamentos que faço, prefiro, precisamente, as limpezas de pele, porque as mulheres não falam quando lhes toco no rosto e eu gosto de trabalhar em silêncio. Tenho exactamente dez minutos para ir à casa de banho e preparar o gabinete.

Trabalho neste cabeleireiro de esquina há coisa de três anos e gosto do que faço, apesar de o gabinete não ter janelas e de a paragem de autocarro ficar um pouco longe daqui, o que implica andar muitas vezes à chuva. A chuva em Bruxelas parece andar pelas ruas como gente: tem corpo, cheiro e temperamento. A Jamila ri-se quando digo isto sobre a chuva em Bruxelas. A Jamila nasceu no deserto, é egípcia, por isso, quando olho para ela, parece que estou a observar uma relíquia antiquíssima, um tesouro perdido das minas de Salomão. Trabalha como massagista no gabinete em frente ao meu e eu simpatizo com a Jamila, com o seu silêncio de hieróglifos. Gostaria de conhecer melhor a Jamila, mas não sei por onde começar a conhecê-la, daí falarmos só sobre a chuva em Bruxelas e sobre as nossas clientes.

Vou à casa de banho quase a correr, porque estou muito aflita. Como de costume, o rolo do papel higiénico está vazio e tenho de adiar esta vontade de alívio para ir buscar um rolo novo. Não sei que tipo de pessoa é capaz de gastar o rolo de papel higiénico e sair da casa de banho, sabendo perfeitamente que está a prejudicar o bem-estar dos outros. Ultimamente, sempre que puxo o autoclismo, lembro-me de um artigo que li sobre casas respeitadoras do ambiente. No Japão, há autoclismos que têm um lavatório por cima. Quando a pessoa puxa o autoclismo, a água que vai encher o repositório passa primeiro pelo lavatório, o que significa que uma pessoa pode ir lavando as mãos com a água que será descarregada depois. Era uma excelente ideia para poupar água. Penso muitas vezes nas pessoas extraordinárias que têm ideias extraordinárias. Imagino-as verdadeiramente felizes, verdadeiramente realizadas. Gostaria de ter uma ideia brilhante uma vez na vida, de inventar qualquer coisa inovadora, que mudasse as pessoas e o mundo.

Olho-me ao espelho. A minha franja já está muito comprida, a ver se peço à Katrien para ma cortar ainda hoje. A Katrien é a dona do cabeleireiro, mas eu não trabalho para a Katrien, sou independente. Também tenho de fazer o buço e as sobrelhas urgentemente.

Preparo o gabinete: substituo a toalha da marquesa, ligo a máquina do vapor e abro a primeira gaveta para confirmar se é necessário abrir um novo pacote de gazes ou de lenços, certifico-me de que tenho quantidade suficiente de espuma facial, de creme cicatrizante, de loção esfoliante. De repente, interrompo o que estou a fazer, porque o telefone toca. É uma rapariga com um nome impossível que não fala francês. Reconheço-a imediatamente por causa

do timbre invulgar da sua voz. Mudo para o inglês. Em Bruxelas há gente de todo o mundo, pessoas de países de que nunca ouvi falar que falam línguas estranhíssimas, como o letão e o lituano. A Katrien, que é belga, queixa-se mais dos belgas do que dos estrangeiros, porque a grande parte dos belgas francófonos não fala neerlandês, que é uma língua nacional. Felizmente não sou belga, pelo que a Katrien não exige que eu fale esta língua inacessível. Se fossemos todos egípcios, por exemplo, talvez pudéssemos comunicar por hieróglifos que, ao que parece, representam ideias e não palavras. Esta pode muito bem ser a minha ideia brilhante, mas não tenho tempo para pensar nela agora.

A senhora Sonata acaba de entrar no cabeleireiro, distingo-lhe a voz e o riso por cima dos secadores exasperados. Nunca tive oportunidade de dizer à senhora Sonata que o seu nome é uma composição musical em português e que isso acrescenta algo de intrigante ao seu ar clássico e erudito. Talvez lho diga hoje mesmo, no final da sessão.

A senhora Sonata cumprimenta-me efusiva, ri-se alto, conta-me que passou o dia a trabalhar para mim, que a União Europeia está a trabalhar para mim. Esta ideia, de que a União Europeia está a trabalhar para mim, parece-me estranha como uma pirâmide egípcia, por isso franzo o sobrolho. Nunca ninguém trabalhou para mim, incluindo as minhas colegas, que nem mudam o rolo do papel higiénico. A senhora Sonata tem este talento de dizer coisas absurdas e perturbadoras. Gesticula com convicção, diz-me que, a partir de agora, todas as trabalhadoras independentes da União Europeia têm direito a um subsídio de maternidade, coisa que não acontecia antes. A senhora Sonata está satisfeita, verdadeiramente satisfeita, garante-me que a directiva foi aprovada e que agora já posso ter filhos, que tenho direito a interromper a minha actividade durante catorze semanas para tratar dos meus filhos. A senhora Sonata sorri um sorriso de fada madrinha, como se tivesse realizado todos os meus desejos e depois deita-se na marquesa. Durante alguns segundos, fico a pensar nisso. É a primeira vez que penso na hipótese de ter filhos. Esta é, provavelmente, outra ideia extraordinária, mas eu também não me demoro muito tempo nela. A senhora Sonata pára de falar quando lhe toco no rosto.

As pessoas são muito diferentes quando vistas ao contrário. Estou de pé, atrás da almofada onde a senhora Sonata pousa a cabeça. Os lábios da senhora Sonata estão agora no lugar dos olhos, os olhos no lugar dos lábios. Não é exactamente uma mulher bonita, mas tem um rosto interessante, olhos prolongados que acabam em rugas fininhas que lhe dão personalidade e consistência. Se eu tivesse jeito para as palavras, diria isto mesmo à senhora Sonata, que as suas rugas lhe dão personalidade e consistência. Aponto a máquina para o rosto da senhora Sonata, explico-lhe que o vapor ajuda a abrir os poros. Depois saio do gabinete por alguns minutos.

Encontro a Jamila na nossa cozinha, onde temos um micro-ondas, um frigorífico e um pequeno armário com canecas e talheres. Está de perfil para mim, um perfil que podia ser feito de pedra, que podia estar gravado nas pirâmides do Nilo, tão enigmático, tão precioso. Há um silêncio antiquíssimo entre nós, um silêncio que é um deserto. Digo qualquer coisa sobre a senhora Sonata e a Jamila ri-se. Bebo um copo de água, volto para o gabinete.

A senhora Sonata pergunta-me se gosto do meu trabalho. Esta pergunta surpreende-me como uma múmia egípcia e não sei o que responder. A senhora Sonata faz sempre perguntas inesperadas em momentos inesperados, nunca sei onde quer chegar com elas. Respondo-lhe que sim, que gosto do meu trabalho, apesar de trabalhar dez horas por dia e de ter problemas de varizes por estar sempre em pé. A senhora Sonata protesta, diz que, para cuidar dos outros, também devia cuidar de mim e eu concordo com a senhora Sonata, porque efectivamente devia

cuidar de mim antes de cuidar dos outros. Abro a primeira gaveta, tiro dois lenços de papel. Depois aproximo o candeeiro do rosto da senhora Sonata. Quando as minhas mãos regressam ao seu rosto, a senhora Sonata cala-se e fecha os olhos. Começo a espremer os pontos negros que a senhora Sonata tem no nariz e no queixo. A senhora Sonata não se queixa, continua com um esboço de sorriso no rosto, parece-me uma mulher deveras feliz e realizada. Pergunto-me se a senhora Sonata é uma pessoa extraordinária, se já alguma vez teve uma ideia extraordinária e, antes mesmo de me aperceber do que digo, pergunto à senhora Sonata se gosta do seu trabalho. A senhora Sonata sorri, diz-me que, tal como eu, cuida mais dos outros do que de si, mas que o mundo só vai para a frente se aprendermos a cuidar de nós também. A senhora Sonata queixa-se, porque acabei de lhe apertar demasiado o nariz.

No final do tratamento, a senhora Sonata sai do meu gabinete com o mesmo sorriso de fada madrinha e eu não chego a dizer-lhe que o seu nome é uma composição musical em português nem que as suas rugas lhe dão personalidade e consistência. A Jamila já não está na cozinha nem no seu gabinete. Não sei o que faz uma mulher do deserto nas horas livres, se vai ao cinema, se toma café com os amigos, se cozinha uma refeição inteira para a família, se cuida de si.

Saio do gabinete e pergunto à Katrien se me pode cortar a franja. A Katrien responde imediatamente que sim, responde sempre que sim. Borrifa-me o cabelo com as suas mãos enérgicas e penteia-me com o seu pente verde fluorescente. Inclina-se neste preciso momento sobre a minha testa e está tão próxima de mim, que lhe sinto o hálito de pastilha de hortelã. Fecho os olhos e a tesoura passa agora mesmo pela minha franja. Quando abro os olhos, parece que até vejo melhor, porque já não tenho a franja a tapar-me a vista. Digo à Katrien que ela devia cuidar de si própria como cuida dos outros e a Katrien olha-me muito séria, hieroglífica, quase emocionada.

Enquanto me encaminho para a paragem de autocarros, penso na Jamila, no seu perfil antiquíssimo. Decido que amanhã a vou conhecer melhor. Que lhe vou fazer uma pergunta inesperada. Sobre o deserto, sobre o Egipto, sobre si. E acelero o passo para não perder o autocarro. Tenho pressa de chegar a casa. Para cuidar de mim.

Beautician

Ana Pessoa. Portugal

My last client today is Madame Sonata, and Madame Sonata is never late. She is from Latvia or Lithuania, I never know, and says a lot about Europe and Europeans, she wears noisy bracelets around her wrists, and when she smiles she shows her teeth a lot. Madame Sonata usually comes to my cubicle for her waxing and her gel nails, but today it so happens that she hasn't come for this, she's come for a peeling, which is great for me, because I didn't feel at all like waxing Madame Sonata's bikini line, or treating her tough cuticles. Moreover, of all the treatments I give, I actually prefer peelings, because women don't speak when I'm touching their face and I love working in silence. I have exactly ten minutes to go to the toilet and prepare the cubicle.

I've been working in this local beauty salon for almost three years and I like what I do, even if the cubicle doesn't have any windows and the bus stop is a little far away, which often means walking in the rain. In Brussels, the rain seems to move in the street like people: it has body, smell and temperament. Jamila laughs when I talk about the rain in Brussels like this. She was born in the desert, she's Egyptian, and that's why when I look at her I have the impression of observing a very old relic, a lost treasure from the Solomon mines. She works as a masseuse in the cubicle opposite mine and I get on well with her, with her hieroglyphic silence. I'd really like to get to know her better, but I don't know where to begin, so we only talk about the rain in Brussels and our clients.

I almost run into the toilet, because I've been taken short. As usual, the toilet roll is empty and I have to hold on long enough to

find another one. I ask myself what kind of individual is capable of using up the toilet paper without a care for the convenience of others. Lately, every time I flush I recall an article I've read about environmentally-friendly houses. In Japan, there are cisterns with a washbasin on top. When someone flushes, the water that will fill the cistern it first passes through the washbasin, which means that you can wash your hands with the water which will later be flushed. It would be an excellent idea to save water. I often think about extraordinary people who have extraordinary ideas. I imagine them to be very happy, truly fulfilled. For once in my life I'd really like to have a brilliant idea, to invent something innovative, which changes people and the world.

I look at myself in the mirror. My fringe is already too long, I'll see if Katrien can trim it today. Katrien is the owner of the hair salon, but I don't work for her, I'm self-employed. It's also time for me to have my upper lip and eyebrows done.

I prepare the cubicle: I change the stretcher towel, I switch the steam machine on, I open the first drawer to see if I need to open a new packet of tissues, and I check that I have enough facial foam, healing cream, and peeling lotion. Suddenly, I stop what I'm doing because the telephone rings. It's a girl with an unpronounceable name who doesn't speak French. I immediately recognise her because of the unusual timbre of her voice. I change to English. In Brussels, there are people from everywhere, from countries I have never heard of who speak very strange languages, such as Latvian or Lithuanian. Katrien, who is Belgian, complains more about Belgians than foreigners

because many French-speaking Belgians don't speak Flemish, which is a national language. Fortunately, I'm not Belgian, so Katrien doesn't require me to speak this inaccessible language. If we were all Egyptians, for instance, we could communicate through hieroglyphs. Apparently, they represent ideas rather than words. This could be my brilliant idea, but I don't have the time to think about it now.

Madame Sonata has just come into the salon; I distinguish her voice and her laugh over the exasperated hairdryers. I have never had the chance to tell Madame Sonata that her surname is a musical composition in Portuguese, and this adds an intriguing note to her classical and erudite appearance. Perhaps I'll tell her today, at the end of the session.

Madame Sonata greets me warmly, laughs heartily, tells me that she has spent the day working for me, that the European Union works for me. This idea of the European Union working for me seems as weird as an Egyptian pyramid, so I frown. Nobody has ever worked for me, beginning with my colleagues who don't even change the toilet paper. Madame Sonata has the gift of saying absurd and troubling things. She gesticulates convincingly; she tells me that from now on all the self-employed women in the European Union have the right to maternity leave, which wasn't the case before. Madame Sonata is satisfied, really satisfied, she assures me that the directive has been approved and that now I can have children, that I have the right to stop working for fourteen weeks to look after my children. Madame Sonata smiles with the smile of a good fairy, as if she had granted all my wishes, then she lies down on the stretcher. I think about this for a while. It's the first time I've thought about the possibility of having children. It's probably another extraordinary idea, but I don't linger over it. Madame Sonata stops talking when I touch her face.

People are very different when you see them upside down. I'm standing up, behind the pillow on which Madame Sonata is resting her head. Her lips are now at my eye level, her eyes at the level of my lips. She is not really a beautiful woman but she has an interesting face, elongated eyes which end in tiny wrinkles which give her personality and strength. If I were gifted with words, this is what I'd tell Madame Sonata, that her wrinkles give her personality and strength. I move the machine towards her face and tell her that the steam helps open the pores. Then I leave the cubicle for a few minutes.

I come across Jamila in our kitchen, where we have a microwave, a fridge and a small cupboard with cups and cutlery. I see her in profile, a profile that could be of stone, perhaps chiselled on the pyramids of the Nile, so enigmatic, so precious. There is a very ancient silence between us, a silence which is a desert. I say something about Madame Sonata and Jamila laughs. I drink a glass of water and go back to my cubicle.

Madame Sonata asks me if I like my job. This question surprises me like an Egyptian mummy and I don't know what to say. She always asks unexpected questions at unexpected moments and I never know what she means by it. I tell her, yes, I like my job, even if I work ten hours a day and I have problems with varicose veins because I'm always on my feet. Madame Sonata says that to take care of others, I should also take care of myself and I agree with her, because I should certainly look after myself before looking after others. I open the first drawers and take out two tissues. Then, I move the lamp close to Madame Sonata's face. When my hands move towards her face again, she goes silent and closes her eyes. I begin to squeeze the blackheads she has on her nose and chin. Madame Sonata doesn't complain, she keeps a hint of a smile on her face and seems to be

a truly happy and fulfilled woman. I wonder if Madame Sonata is an extraordinary person, if she has already had an extraordinary idea and, even before realising what I'm saying, I ask her if she likes her job. She smiles, tells me that, like me, she looks after others more than herself but that the world will only evolve if we learn to look after ourselves. Madame Sonata complains because I have pinched her nose two hard.

At the end of the treatment, Madame Sonata leaves my cubicle with the same smile of a good fairy and I don't tell her that her surname is a musical composition in Portuguese or that her wrinkles give her personality and strength. Jamila is no longer in the kitchen or in her cubicle. I don't know what a woman from the desert does in her spare time, if she goes to the cinema, if she has a coffee with friends, if she makes a meal for the family, if she looks after herself.

I leave my cubicle and ask Katrien if she can trim my fringe. She immediately says yes, she always says yes. She sprinkles my hair with her energetic hands and brushes it with her green fluorescent comb. She leans over just at this moment above my head and she is so close to me that I can feel her breath of mint chewing gum. I close my eyes and the scissors pass immediately along my fringe. When I open my eyes, I have the impression of seeing better because my fringe doesn't block my sight anymore. I tell Katrien that she should look after herself as much as she looks after others and she looks at me, very serious, hieroglyphically, almost moved.

On my way to the bus stop, I think of Jamila, her very ancient profile. I decide to get to know her better tomorrow. To ask her an unexpected question. About the desert, about Egypt, about her. I speed up to catch the bus. I can't wait to get home. To look after myself.

Dvanajstim zvezdicam naproti

Maja Cehovin. Republika Slovenija

Mrzlo veje v mali sobici, prepolni duš na prehodu. Sam sedi ob odprtem oknu. Srep pogled uprt v betonski zid, okrašen z bodečo žico. Na tla z višine pade igralna karta. Ukrajinec in Iranec se razumeta samo pri igri pokra. Pikov kralj. Slobodana predramijo klici kvartopircev. Prelena sta za spust s pograda. Z neomajnih hladom v očeh se Slobo skobaca z okenske police. Skloni se h karti. Jo pobere. Kralja z obema rokama povzdigne nad glavo. Palca in kazalca se stakneta na polovici daljšega roba. Po hitri potezi ostaneta dva dela. Prvega spusti na obrabljen leseni pod. Drugega zmagoslavno preda v igro vetru, ki ga ponese k bodečim nežam. Te rastejo na neskončnih poljih onkraj zidu. Tam je svoboda. Sanjal je o njej.

Slobodan se še ne zave svojega dejanja, ko sta kvartopirca že pri njem. Zmerjata ga, vsak v svojem jeziku. Vprašanje. Tišina. Skomig z rameni. Poljak pobesni in začne z vso silo udrihati po fantu. Romun ga prime za pas in povleče stran. Seveda prepozno. Od fantove desne arkade preko vratu do bele majice, ki jo »časti kuća«, je vse v rdečem. V bolečinah se Slobodan brez besed odvrže do kopalnice. Okrvavljen gre mimo paznika. Mišičnjak žveči zobotrebec. Zagledda pretepenega fanta, a se ne zgane. To se njega ne tiče.

Slobodanu je slabo. Primaje se do umivalnika. Se ga oprime. Podoba v ogledalu ga straši. Toliko krvi še ni videl. Vsaj ne na sebi. Skuša si oprati obraz, a rana poskrbi, da rdečina mešanice krvi in vode ne pridobiva na prosojnosti. Pregloboka je, morali mu jo bodo zašiti. Moral bo do zdravnika in potem najbrž na zaprt oddelek. Tam gredo tisti, ki niso ubogljivi. Tisti, ki iz različnih vzrokov ne spoštujejo hišnega reda. Taka so pravila.

Fant dvigne glavo nad okrvavljeni lijak. Zavrti se mu. Prvi korak proti izhodu je samo še blede senca odločnosti, drugi ga spravi na tla. Ženski glas nekje v daljavi. Sprašuje, kaj se je zgodilo. Kje je kdo? Roti naj pomagajo. Njen glas se trese. Pomešan z jokom. Fant ne razume. Z muko odpre oko. V njej se prebudi kanček veselja. Živ je. To je dobro. Mirsada si obriše otečene oči in mu pomaga vstati. Podpira ga na poti do ambulante.

Po narkotičnem spancu nje ni v bližini. Sklene, da jo poišče. Mora se ji zahvaliti. Pojavila se je kot angel sredi velike godlje. Seveda po prestani kazni. Dnevi na zaprtem oddelku so še daljši kot sicer. Zvečer, pred deseto, lahko Slobodan sliši glasne pogovore drugih domceev v prostoru za druženje. Tam je televizija. Redko tudi kakšno pretihotapljeno pivo. V tem prostoru se prebivalci doma vsaj za nekaj ur počutijo domače – ne pa ulete v tranzitu med preteklostjo, pred katero ponavadi bežijo in neuresničenimi seni tam zunaj.

Slobodan si ne predstavlja koliko dni je minilo od dogodka. Glava ga močno boli. Dnevi kot fotokopije. Kot neskončno množenje slik v zrcalu znotraj zrcala. Čas nima pomena, dokler se ne pojavi ona – odrešiteljica. Prinese mu čokolado, ki mu jo je kupila iz bornih prihrankov. Tisto ceneno, trdo, s hribčki polnjenimi z jagodno kremo. Po okusu spominja na postano cukrasto zmes. Njegovo veselje ob daru je pristno. Povedno. Skozi ozko lino zagrnjenih zaves je v temni luknji prehodnega doma prvič po dolgem času zaznal žarek topline. Postala sta prijateljca.

Po treh tednih so Slobodana premestili nazaj na odprt oddelek. Iranca so vrnili domovini. Ukrajinec je v kotu tiho igral pasjanso. Druženje Slobodana in Mirsade je bilo sprva skromno. Iz previdnosti sta se srečevala le ob zajtrku in kosilu. Usedla sta se za kakšno mizo v kotu. Nikoli en nasproti drugega. V diagonali. Tako sta se lahko skrivoma pogovarjala. Na vrtu si tega nista upala. Samske ženske in moški so bili nameščeni na ločenih oddelkih. Druženje med kosilom in v prostem času sicer ni bilo prepovedano. Ni pa bilo zaželeno. Predvsem s strani žensk. Večina prebivalk doma je prihajala iz muslimanskih držav. V Sloveniji so se zataknila, ko so bile z otroci na poti k možem v Nemčijo ali katero drugo zahodnoevropsko deželico. Mirsada, iz Bosne doma, ni bila del te skupine. Večina pribežnic je ni marala. Zdela se jim je nečista, četudi so bile nekatere njene sestre po narodnosti. Zbežala je od doma. Želeli so jo poročiti z moškim v letih njenega očeta. Na hitro so se je želeli odkrižati. Tip se ji je gabil. Bil je debel in že od daleč si videl, da je nasilne sorte.

Neke noči je v nahrbtnik nametala najnujnejše. Preko prijatelja se je dogovorila za prevoz. Iz Bihača preko Zagreba v Slovenijo. Plačala je 3000 evrov. Ukradla jih je očetu. To je bila polovica obroka, ki ga je stari sluzavec plačal zanjo. Stlačili so jo v prtljažnik. V Zagrebu so jo skupaj s približno petimi pribežniki spravili v star volkswagen kombi. Spustili so jih v nekem gozdu. Tecite samo ravno po tej poti. Tam je vaš cilj. Odpeljali so se. Mirsada se spomni mraza in črne teme. Nihče ni imel luči. Tavalji so celo noč. Se spotikali ob korenine. Padali. Se pobirali. Spremljali so jih klici namišljenih volčjih tropov. Ob svitu so prispeli do neke njive. Gospodar jih je zagledal. Tekel v hišo in že po 15 minutah so ponje prišli slovenski policisti.

Slobodan nemo poslušal pripoved. Punca se mu zdi junaška. Boli ga, da je bil zraven, ko so med vojno klali njene sonarodnjake. Bil je premlad za vojsko, a dovolj star za stražo. Koliko krvi. Tuje, ne njegove. Ponoči se je zbujal. Podobe pokolov so ga preganjale v sanjah. Preveč čuten je bil, da bi pozabil. Ta del je Mirsadi prihranil. Rekel ji je, da je proti Evropi krenil, ker je mislil, da se na tej strani ljudem piše bolje. S prijatelji so se o modri državi dvanajstih zvezdic pogovarjali kot o senzaciji. Podoba Evrope je bila enakovredna prikazu počitniškega užitekstva v turističnih brošurah. Vse se sveti, vse je mogoče tam severno od Slovenije. Tudi zaljubiti se v žensko, ki bi jo moral še pred nekaj leti posiliti in po možnosti ubiti, ker ni Srbkinja.

Slobo in Mirsada. Kmalu svoje ljubezni nista več skrivala. Bila sta srečna. Trenutki njune intimne so presegali zidove. Njuna snidenja so bila kratka, a intenzivna. Vpisala sta se na kreativne delavnice. Slobodan je bil prvi moški, ki jih je obiskoval od ustanovitve doma. To mu je laskalo. Ni se oziral na pripombe cimrov. Med ustvarjanjem sta torej tiščala skupaj in se skrivoma dotikala. Najstniško, hihitaje nad mizo. Drzno in odločno občasno tudi pod njo. Sklenila sta, da bosta skupaj spala šele, ko jima uspe pridobiti dovoljenje za azil. To dejanje bo zaznamovalo njuno zavezo na svobodi.

Dan za dnem so prebivalci doma dobivali negative. Zavrnjene prošnje. Njuna ljubezen in strast sta upali. Dokler tretjega negativa, ki mu ponavadi hitro sledi nalog za deportacijo v državo izvora ni dobil tudi Slobodan. »Zbeži z menoj,« ji je rekel nekega večera, ko sta se ob uri druženja izmuznila zadaj na vrt. Mirsada je široko razprla oči. Postajale so vodene od upanja. Zaznal je željo in še isto noč sta skovala načrt za beg.

Mare. Najzgovornejši med pazniki. Še posebej rad je klepetal z dekleti. Nagovarjal jih je z lepota, rožica ali čem podobnim. Dežurna miza deli steno hodnika med vhodoma v odprti in zaprti del. Na nasprotni steni so sanitarije in kopalnici. Zvečer je bila gneča. Mare je rad delal nočno. Njegove oči so se pasle na telesih prosilk. Koščene, z velikimi zadnjicami, prsate, obilne.

Ni važno. Že sama misel ga je napravila pohotnega. Zadrževati se je moral. Z osnovno šolo v okolici Postojne ne najdeš boljše službe, sam pa je že dvakrat sedel.

Prišel je dan D. Pet pred deseto se Mirsada sprehodi mimo Mareta s toaletno torbico in brisačo v roki. On opazi dolgonogo južno sestro in jo ustavi. Čez nekaj minut mora biti v sobi kot vsi ostali, ob zaprti luči. Strog je. Ona se skloni k njemu in mu razkrije pogled na oprsje. OK. Lahko si umije zobe in obraz. Po lisičje ga pogleda. Obljubi mu, da mu bo, če ji dovoli kopanje, kasneje delala družbo. Njen mižik. On glasno pogoltne slino. Zgolj pokima. Odloči se za nagel pregled sob. Na vsakih vratih v istem tonu ukaže naj ugasnejo luč. Danes izjemoma hiti. Ne želi si, da mu Bosankica zbeži. Prav bi mu prišlo malo družbe.

Slobodan misli na Mirsado. Ji je uspelo? Jo je poslal nazaj v sobo? Vedel je, da mora tvegati. Če ne bo izpeljal svojega dela načrta, bo Mirsada skočila čez okno, ne bo pa mogla na svobodo. Dobro sta preučila ograjo okoli prehodnega doma. Dvometrski zid z bodečo žico, je zgrajen vse naokoli, le pri kuhinji so samo žičnata vrata z železnim ogrodjem, namenjena dostavi. Ni jih mogoče preplezati, ker imajo na vrhu na gosto posejane ošiljene konice. Na ograjeno dvorišče pred kuhinjo vodijo železna vrata, vgrajena v betonski zid, ki pa za spremembo od zunanjega ni varnostno ojačan z bodečo žico.

Mladenič skoči čez okno sobe s čistilkinim inventarijem. Steče do železnih vrat. Se z levico oprime stene, stopi na kljuko in se odrine. Neuspešno. Pade, a zaradi adrenalina ne čuti bolečine. Zboji se, da ne bo zmogel. Globoko vdihne in poskusi znova. Z desnico se uspešno oprime vrha zidu. Stiska mišice, išče pravo ravnotežje. Z živalsko muko se le uspe dvigniti. Visi ta človeška vreča nekaj sekund na vrhu zidu. Noč je temna. Spustil se na smetnjak in iz njega zleze na tla. Pred njim so samo še žičnata vrata.

Mirsada se dišeča po cenenem šamponu vrne iz kopalnice. Z mokrimi lasmi. Slobodan je zagotovo že v akciji. Ne sme ga pustiti na cedilu. Izzivalno se skloni k Maretu in mu ponovno pomežikne. Njena naloga je zamotiti ga s pogovorom. Veliko ga mora spraševati, da se razgovori. O kako rad on to počne, si je mislila. Zaradi nje paznik spusti redni obhod po dvorišču nekaj čez deseto. Vsaj dvajset minut ga mora zaposliti.

Škarje za pobeg je Slobodan ukradel vrtnarju. Pomagal mu je striči vrtnice pred nekaj dnevi. Ves ta čas, jih je nosil v nogavici. Če bi ga zasačili bi moral ponovno na zaprt oddelek, od tam pa najbrž domov. V Srbijo. Misel ga je spodbudila. Ni šlo zlahka. Žica je trdnejša kot si je predstavljal. Večkrat mora vrezati v isti predel. Poseg kar traja in traja. Nima ure, a dozdeva se mu je, da bi ga morala Mirsada že dohiteti. Malce ga zaskrbi. A vseeno hiti nadaljevati. Vsak hip ga lahko nekdo zaloti. Potem bo konec z njim. Že na polovici začuti žulje. Rezati, rezati, rezati. Samo to je pomembno ta hip.

Mare Mirsadi na njeno željo začne razkazovat svojih 12 tattoojev. Tale tank je še iz JNA, to so začetnice moje bivše, ta roža je za mojo drugo ženo. In tako naprej do 11. Pri zadnjemu se zatakne. Da ji ga razkrije mora sleči hlače. In ona mu ga bo povlekla. Šali se, pomisli Mirsada in se glasno zasmije. V zraku je čutiti napetost. Mare jo prekleta resno pogleda. Dekle se zave, da ga mora hitro zamotiti. Misli so prazne. Onemi in ga gleda. Najraje bi zbežala, a tako bo izdala ljubega. Kaj naj, kaj naj. Nerazločno nekaj momlja. Razumeti je, da mora na stranišče. Nagonsko se mu ritensko umika. Debeli Mare, kot so ga klicali drugi pazniki, jo zgrabi za roko. Ve, da se ji ne obeta nič dobrega. Mare jo podivjano vleče proti moški kopalnici. Pofukal jo bo. To je rekel. Če bosanska kurbica noče fafat jo bo pa pofukal.

Slobodanu krvavih rok uspe prerezati žico na vratih. Zarezal je dovolj, da uspe zlesti skozi. Za Mirsado bo to mala malica, pomislil. Precej drobna je. Teče čez polje. Na tisoče misli

mu rešeta glavo. Prva je zaživeti svobodno. Z Mirsado se dobita na avtobusni postaji. Tam ponoči ni nikogar. Potem pa se kar peš odpravita po stari cesti proti Ljubljani. Ob svitu poskusita z avtoštopom proti avstrijski meji. Slobodan v bližini Jesenic pozna nekoga, ki ju bo pomagal spraviti čez. Nato kreneta proti Nemčiji. Tam bosta poiskala službo, si najela skromno stanovanje in imela otroka. Lahko tudi več otrok. Omamila ga lepota noči. Omamila sreča, ki jo lahko tako začuti le tisti, ki mu je bila kakorkoli kratena pravica do svobodnega gibanja in izražanja. Hodil je in hodil, brez občutka za čas.

Nekaj kilometrov stran tudi Mirsadi čas ne pomeni nič. Iz nožnice krvavi. V krču leži v tuš kabini. Ne more se premakniti. Pomisli na ljubega. Zbrati se mora. Teči do sobe, zamenjati raztrgano majico s katero spodobnejšo in se podvizati za Slobodanom. A ni lahko. Nikoli si ni predstavljala, da bo njeno skrbno varovano devištvo nasilno izpuhtelo. Zlomljena je. Toliko bolj, ker ve, da nima moči za beg za ljubim. Upa, da mu je uspelo. Do štirih zjutraj jo bo čakal. Tako sta se dogovorila. Če ne pride, krene na pot. Sam. Spomni se, kako sta sanjala o bodečih nežah, ki rastejo za zidom. Te trpežne cvetlice, ki pustijo krvav pečat, če se jih dotakneš. Zanju so bile simbol moči. Mirsada pa je ostala sama. Majhna, izrabljena, nesvobodna. Kot s težkim škornjem pohojena bodeča neža.

Towards the Twelve Stars

Maja Cehovin. Slovenia

Cold wind blows in a little room crowded with souls in transition. He sits alone by the open window. His glare is fixed on the concrete wall topped with barbed wire. A playing card falls on the ground. The Ukrainian and the Iranian get along only when playing poker. A king of spades. Slobodan is jerked awake by the card players. They are too lazy to get off the bunk bed. Slobodan scrambles from the window sill with a steadfast coldness in his eyes. He bends over for the card. Picks it up. He holds the king over his head with both his hands. His thumbs and index fingers touch in the middle of the long side. A swift move and two parts remain. He drops the first to the threadbare wooden floor. Triumphantly, he leaves the second to the wind, which playfully carries it to the thistles. These grow on endless fields behind the wall. This is where freedom lies. He has been dreaming about it.

Slobodan is not yet aware of what he has done when the card players reach him. They insult him, each in his own language. Question. Silence. Shrug. The Pole goes mad, starting to hit the boy with a vengeance. The Romanian holds him by his waist and pulls him away. Too late, of course. The boy is covered in red from his orbital rim to the white T-shirt "on the house". Aching all over, Slobodan drags himself to the bathroom without saying a word. Covered in blood, he passes a guard. The muscular guy chews on his toothpick. He sees the battered boy but does not move. This is none of his business.

Slobodan feels sick. He sways to the sink. Clutches it. The reflection in the mirror scares him. He has never seen this much blood before. At least not on himself. He tries

to wash his face but, thanks to the wound, the red mixture of blood and water does not get any clearer. It is too deep; he will have to be sewn up. He will have to see the doctor and then probably go to the closed section. This is the place for the disobedient. For those who do not observe the house rules for different reasons. These are the rules.

The boy lifts his head over the blood-stained sink. He feels dizzy. The first step towards the exit is just a pale shade of determination, the second floors him. A woman's voice in the distance. Wondering what happened. Where is anybody? She begs them to help. Her voice is shaking. Mixed with crying. The boy does not understand. He opens an eye with great effort. She lightens up with a touch of joy. He is alive. This is good. Mirsada wipes her swollen eyes and helps him get up. She supports him on the way to the clinic.

After the drug-induced sleep she is not to be found. He decides to find her. He has to thank her. She appeared like an angel in a great mess. After the served sentence, of course. The days in the closed section are even longer than usual. In the evenings, before ten, Slobodan can hear loud conversations of other residents in the common room. There is a TV set in there. Rarely a smuggled beer or two. In this room, the residents can feel at home at least for a few hours – not caught in transition between the past, from which they usually try to flee, and the unfulfilled dreams out there.

Slobodan cannot imagine how many days have passed since the event. He has severe headaches. Days like photocopies. Like an infinite multiplication of reflections in a

mirror within a mirror. Time has no meaning until she – the saviour – appears. She brings him chocolate she bought with her meagre savings. The cheap, hard kind filled with strawberry cream. It tastes like a stale sugary blend. His joy at the gift is genuine. Telling. In the dark hole of the asylum centre, he spotted the first ray of warmth through the narrow hole of drawn curtains after a long time. They became friends.

After three weeks, Slobodan was transferred back to the open section. The Iranian was sent back to his native country. The Ukrainian was silently playing solitaire in the corner. The relationship of Slobodan and Mirsada was at first reserved. Out of caution, they would meet only for breakfast and lunch. They would sit at a corner table. Never opposite each other. Diagonally. Thus they could talk in secret. They would not dare do this in the garden. Single men and women were placed in separate sections. The contacts during lunch and in free time were generally not forbidden. But they were not desirable either. Especially by women. Most female residents came from Muslim countries. They got stuck in Slovenia with their children on the way to their husbands in Germany or another Western European country. Mirsada, coming from Bosnia, was never a part of this group. Most immigrant women did not like her. They considered her impure although some were her sisters by nationality. She ran away from home. She was supposed to be married to a man the age of her father. Her family wanted to get rid of her quickly. The man repulsed her. He was fat and you could tell from the start that he was a violent sort.

One night she put the necessary things in her backpack. She arranged transport through her friend. From Bihać via Zagreb to Slovenia. She paid 3,000 euros. She stole the money from her father. It was half of the sum paid for her by the sleazy old man. They crammed her

in a car trunk. In Zagreb, she was put in an old VW van together with five other immigrants. They were set free in a forest. Just run straight ahead. This is where you want to go. The van drove away. Mirsada remembers the cold and the pitch black darkness. Nobody had a light. They were roaming about all night. Tripping against roots. Falling. Getting up. They were accompanied by the calls of imaginary packs of wolves. At dawn they reached a field. The owner spotted them. He ran into the house and Slovenian police picked them up in 15 minutes.

Slobodan listens to the narrative without saying a word. He finds the girl heroic. It pains him that he was present when her fellow citizens were slaughtered during the war. He was too young for the army but old enough to keep guard. So much blood. Other people's, not his own. He would wake up at night. The scenes of slaughter would haunt him in his sleep. He was too sensitive to forget. He spared Mirsada these details. He told her that he had set off for Europe because he had thought that life was better in these parts. He and his friends talked about the blue state of twelve stars as a sensation. The image of Europe was equal to the depiction of holiday leisure in tourist brochures. Everything glitters, everything is possible over there north of Slovenia. Including falling in love with a woman he was supposed to rape and possibly kill but a few years ago, because she was not Serbian.

Slobo and Mirsada. Soon they stopped hiding their love. They were happy. The moments of their intimacy broke through the walls. Their encounters were brief but intense. They went to creative workshops. Slobodan was the first man attending them ever since the centre was established. This flattered him. He did not mind his roommates' remarks. So they would stick together while creating, touching secretly. In a teenage way, giggling over the table. Occasionally under it too, boldly and promptly. They decided to sleep together only

after they have been granted the asylum residence permit. This act would mark their commitment when they are free.

Day after day, the centre residents were handed negatives. Rejected applications. But their love and passion kept hoping. Until the third negative, usually quickly followed by a deportation order, was handed to Slobodan, too.

“Run away with me,” he told her one night as they sneaked to the garden during the hour for socialising. Mirsada opened her eyes wide. They got watery with hope. He sensed her desire and they made the plan to escape on the same night.

Mare. The most talkative among the guards. He especially liked chatting with girls. He called them beauty, petal and the like. The guard desk divides the wall of the hall between the entrances to the open and closed sections. On the opposite wall there are toilets and bathrooms. The place was crowded in the evening. Mare liked working night shifts. His eyes would graze on the bodies of female asylum seekers. Skinny, big-bottomed, big-bosomed, voluptuous. Anything. The thought itself made him horny. He had to hold himself down. Elementary education will not get you a better job around Posojna, and he had served time twice, too.

D Day arrived. At five to ten, Mirsada walks past Mare with a toilet bag and a towel in her hand. He spots the long-legged Southerner and stops her. In a few minutes she has to be in her room like everybody else, with the lights off. He is strict. She bends down, disclosing her breasts. OK. She can brush her teeth and wash her face. She gives him a feline look. She promises to keep him company if he allows her to wash first. She winks. He swallows loudly. Just nods. He decides on a quick inspection of rooms. At each door, he orders that lights must be turned off in the

same tone. Today he is exceptionally quick. He does not want the little Bosnian to slip away. He could use some company.

Slobodan thinks about Mirsada. Did she make it? Was she sent back to her room? He knew he had to take the risk. If he does not carry out his part of the plan, Mirsada will jump through the window but will be unable to reach freedom. They studied the fence around the centre thoroughly. A two-metre wall topped with barbed wire is all around, with the exception of the kitchen where there is just a metal-framed wire door intended for deliveries. It cannot be climbed over because it is topped by a thick set of pointed spikes. The walled yard in front of the kitchen is behind the iron door set in a concrete wall, which is, unlike the inner wall, not reinforced with barbed wire.

The young man jumps through the window of the room with the cleaner’s accessories. He runs to the iron door. Holds on to the wall with his left hand, steps on the knob and pushes forward. To no avail. He falls, but cannot feel the pain because of the adrenaline. He is afraid that he will not make it. He takes a deep breath and tries again. He manages to get hold of the top of the wall with his left hand. He squeezes his muscles, looking for the right balance. He manages to lift himself up with inhuman efforts. The human sack hangs on the top of the wall for a few seconds. The night is dark. He lowers himself on the waste bin and then to the ground. Now he only has to climb the wire door.

Smelling of cheap shampoo, Mirsada returns from the bathroom. Her hair is wet. Slobodan must be on his way by now. She cannot let him down. Invitingly, she bends towards Mare and winks again. Her task is to distract him by talking. She has to ask a lot of questions to make him talk. Oh, how he likes it, she thought. Thanks to her, the guard misses his regular round in the yard.

She must keep him busy for at least twenty minutes.

Slobodan stole the scissors from the gardener. He helped him cut the roses a few days ago. All this time he carried them in his sock. If he got caught he would have to return to the closed section and from there probably home. To Serbia. The thought encouraged him. It was not easy. The wire is sturdier than he imagined. He must cut in the same spot several times. The action takes forever. He does not have a watch but he thinks Mirsada should have caught up with him by now. He gets a little worried. But he continues quickly. He can get caught any moment. Then he will be finished. He can feel blisters halfway through his work. Cut, cut, cut. Nothing else matters at this moment.

At her request, Mare starts showing Mirsada his twelve tattoos. This tank dates back from the army, these are the initials of my ex, this flower is for my second wife. And so on to eleven. Things get sticky at the last one. He has to take off his pants so she can see it. And she will give him a blow job. He's joking, thinks Mirsada and laughs out loud. Tension is in the air. Mare gives her a really serious look. The girl is aware that she must distract him soon. Her thoughts are empty. She goes silent, looking at him. She feels like running, but this will betray her beloved. What to do, what to do. She mutters unintelligibly. She makes it sound like she has to go to the toilet. She backs out intuitively. The Fat Mare, as he is called by other guards, grabs her hand. She knows he is up to no good. Mare furiously drags her towards the male bathroom. He'll fuck her. This is what he said. If the Bosnian tart won't give him a blow job, he'll fuck her.

His hands covered in blood, Slobodan manages to cut the wire at the door. The hole is big enough to push through. A piece of cake for Mirsada, he thinks. She is rather thin. He runs through the field. Thousands of thoughts rush through his head. The first is to live free. He will meet Mirsada at the bus station. No one is there at night. Then they will walk down the local road towards Ljubljana. At dawn they will try to get a lift towards the Austrian border. Slobodan knows someone in the vicinity of Jesenice who will help them cross the border. Then they will proceed towards Germany. Once there, they will find work, rent a modest apartment and have a child. Possibly children. He is intoxicated by the beauty of the night. By the happiness felt only by those ever denied the freedom of movement and expression. He walks and walks, without any sense of time.

A few kilometres away, time does not make any sense to Mirsada either. Her vagina bleeds. She lies in the shower cabin, suffering cramps. She cannot move. She thinks about her beloved. She has to compose herself. To run to her room, change the torn T-shirt to a more decent one and hurry after Slobodan. But it is not easy. She never imagined that her treasured virginity would vanish so violently. She is broken. Even more so as she knows she has no strength to run after her beloved. She hopes that he made it. He will be waiting until four in the morning. This was their agreement. If she does not show up, he will set off. Alone. She remembers how they used to dream about the thistles growing behind the wall. These sturdy flowers leaving a bloody mark if you touch them. For them, they were a symbol of strength. But Mirsada remained alone. Small, used, unfree. Like a thistle trampled under a heavy boot.

Izmenjava

Vesna Hauschild. Republika Slovenija

Stanovanje imam (če gre verjeti internetu), pogodba za študijsko izmenjavo je urejena (če gre verjeti ustnemu izročilu). Sarajevo!

– Zakaj greš pa *tja*?! A tam sploh je Erasmus?

Ne.

Pa tudi V-ja ni.

Sploh pa se grem učit, ne pit.

* * *

Na pretežko jasen dan Jasna stoji pred stanovanjskim blokom, ki opisuje vse, kar je bil tudi *V* (*kamorkoli greš, sebi ne moreš pobegniti*): v pritličju izklesan, mikaven, v prvem nadstropju rahlo poflikan, brazgotinast, v drugem brez oken, v tretjem pa ... *Lahko ta streha karkoli garantira?* Jasna pozvoni. Vrata odpre prikupen mladenič, *najbrž tisti, s katerim sem govorila*. Vodi jo v dnevno sobo, *v redu bo*, v kuhinjo *čisto taka, kot na fotografiji, še so pošteni ljudje*. Jasna odpre omaro in podrgne po polici, prah zapleše po prostoru, Jasna kihne, pravljica se razblini. Mladenič skromno skomigne in ji poda vezeni robček, na katerem so začetnice *V.Z.*

V!

V.Z.?!

A se usoda zajebava z mano?

Jasna vihravo obrne oči, roka se zatrese. *Kje je pa umivalnik?* Neprepričano sledi fantu po hodniku. Vrata se odprejo in fant ponosno pokaže veliko kopalno kad. Vehementno:

– Ovdje možete prati suđe. I sebe, naravno. (smeh) Dovoljno je velika i za prijatelje.

Kaj???

– Mislim, kad ima puno suđa...

Aha. Ne bodi fina, saj je... praktično. Poglej s svetle plati, kaj pa je ena kuhinja proti večnosti? Ko smo že pri kuhinji... zdajle bi ubijala za eno veliko solato.

Ste rekli, da je blizu McDonalds?

Mladenič ponosno pokima, stopi k oknu in z roko pokaže na sosedovo podrtijo:

Burek Bosna.

* * *

Jasna frfota po cesti, omamljena od razočaranja. *Kam bom šla pa zdaj? Ne morem tri do šest (če bo sreča) mesecev živeti v hotelu!* Jasna se znajde v ozki ulici, vanjo strmijo hiše, vsaka s svojo zgodbo. Pogled na zapuščen, slabotno obstreljen atelje, v katerem še vedno visi plašč in čaka lastnika, da ga bo peljal na sprehod, daje slutiti da njen problem še zdaleč ni največji. Jasnin pogled se povzpne na levo stran stanovanja, kjer na omari neučakano čaka klobuk. *Najbrž se vsak dan*

sprašuje, kje se je zadržal njegov razkazovalec. In kje je, kje je on zdaj? Kako je prišel tja? Žal to ni vprašanje o eksistenci, cel svet ve, kje je in kako je *padel* tja. Jasno strese, kot bi ji na hrbet nekdo narisal tatoo s pajki, ki se jih tako boji. Odhiti naprej, do trafike. Nikogar ni. Potrka po steklu kot je lakota potrkala na stene njenega užaljenega želodca. *Mogoče bi pa lahko vseeno poskusila kakšen burek, če ni tu mač masten...* Ženička v trafiki ji poda oglasnik, Jasna besno označuje hipotetična stanovanja. *Gremo proslavit!* Na mizo se pretihotapi vonj zeljanice. *Vegetarijanski!* In nobena mast se ne cedi, še je upanje zame. Jasna se nasiti in čutiti je, da postaja tudi manj sitna. Postavi se ob glavno cesto, da bi ujela prevoz. Nič. *Ne mi rečt, da nimajo taksijev?*

– Šta čekaš, dušo?

Moški, ki je primanjkljaj zob nadomestil s številom verižic.

Taksi.

– A-a. Neče ti niko doći ovako, trebaš da ga pozoveš.

Jasna pokaže svojo Nokio in vprašujoče pogleda.

– Imaš bosanski operater?

Ne še...

– Onda će ti bit preskupo. Ajde, dođi sa mnom, sredit ćemo sve.

Jasna mu sledi, ker se njegove sinje oči svetijo nekoliko srebrno in *take pravljicne oči mi že ne bodo nič naredile*. Zavijeta v ozko ulico, moški razlaga, da ima brata, ki ima prijatelja, ki ima prijatelja, ki je bil včasih taksist. Izkaže se, da moški ni bil taksist, ampak šofer kamiona. Ima pa avto in čas in denarni manjko, zato mu dovoli, da jo zapelje. Debelušen možakar to razume na oba načina, saj jo ves začaran čekira v ogledalu, zmoti ga le občasen izlet zobotrebeca med zobe. Mrcina, ki od spredaj zgleda kot kripa, od zadaj pa je bleščeč predstavnik novega modela mercedeza, na dvopasovnici tekmuje s tramvajem in vse poskakuje huje kot Jasnino veselje, da je končno prispela, kamor je želela.

A greste lahko bolj počasi, policaju naju bodo dobili.

– Hahahahaha.

Naslednje sekunde Jasna lovi sapo. *To bo moja poslednja izkušnja?*

Evo ti Otoka.

Ufffff.

* * *

Jasna skoči iz avta in polna upanja pozvoni. Izza oblaka dima počasi razbere silhueto ženske srednjih let. *Kaj me čaka tokrat?* Ženska ne reče nič, le z roko nakaže, naj vstopi. *Tiha, to mi je všeč – ne bo konfliktov*. V stanovanju smrdi kot v prekajevalnici, *mogoče pa v moji sobi ne*. Ženska s čikom v ustih napreduje po stopnicah, vmes po tleh nezavedno potresa pepel. *Kot Janko in Metka in kruhove drobtinice*. Soba je velika, topla. Jasna se raztegne po raztegljivem kavču, ki od udobja zaprede. *Kot doma (če odvonjam te čike)*.

– Sviđa?

Sviđa, sviđa.

A internet imate?

– Pa naravno.

Ženska odhiti v dnevno sobo in se vrne z ovitkom zgoščenke, na katerem se svetlika precej ubogo fotokopirana fotografija Lepe Brene.

– Sin je u muzičkom biznisu.

Še zadnji test...

Lahko vidim kopalnico?

Ženski se obrv neobičajno zatrese. Pomigne, naj ji sledi.

Dokler namesto tuša ne zagledam garderobne omare, bo vse okej...

Prideta do stranskih vhodnih vrat, ki razpirajo pogled na cvetoče dvorišče, kjer zna biti poleti prav lepo. Zdaj ga prekriva led. Ženska pokaže na prizidek na drugi strani dvorišča.

– Ima električno grijanje.

Če bi obstajal ogrevan tunel do tja, sploh ne bi imela pripomb.

* * *

Kot svetilnik v temi Jasni v daljavi mežika lučka z napisom taxi.

Da ni to snežna fatamorgana?

Taksist se gromko zasmеji.

Slovenka, ha? I šta radiš ovdje?

Študiram. Slikarstvo... sem na izmenjavi.

– Jel loše tamo u Evropi, da si trebala doći kod nas??

Jasna opazuje premikanje ustnic, trzanje kotičkov pošlje streznitveni trzlaj v male možgane: *bolje, da sem tiho*. Kolikor more prijazno se nasmehne in molči.

– Znam ja vas Slovenke.

Fak, kaj će se razburi in bo podivjal kot tisti Zobotrebec?

– Vi se volite zabavat, ne zajebavat, kao Hrvatice. Kad sam bio u vojski, na Bledu, upoznao sam ih puno. Baš su bile partyzanke – hehehe.

Ustnice se po razgrnitvi harmonike našobijo v poljub. *Fuj, nagubane so kot napol počen čoln. Naj bo že konec te vožnje!*

– Došli smo!

To je olimpijska vas, bloki so relativno novi, *kaj gre lahko narobe? Izgleda okej, ampak prvi vtis lahko laže. Preverjeno*. Jasna navdušeno kima, ko ji starejša ženska pokaže kopalnico, tudi kuhinja ustreza, ko pa stopita v »njeno« sobo, se presenečeno zastrmi v dve postelji.

Cimro imam?

Ženska jo gleda s stolpljenim nasmeškom in pokaže na levo posteljo.

– Ova je za tebe.

Mah, boš že preživela, a hoćeš spat na pločniku?

– Imaš dečka? Kad ti dolazi u posjetu, ja ću spavat u kupatilu, nema problema.

Pa kaj imaju te Bosanci z banjami?

Ženska se prešerno zasmеji in pomežikne.

– Bila sam I ja nekad mlada, znam ja, kako to ide.

O. Moj. Bog.

* * *

Samo še en časopisni oglas, samo še ura do sončnega zahoda. Bogata soseska obljublja bogato izkušnjo. Kidričeva 25. 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26. *Ja kako, kje pa je 25?*

– Jel ste vi za stan?

Jaaaa. Ja!

Veselo steče k atu in roza Vila z odprtimi okni izgleda, kot bi se smejala v znak dobrodošlice. Jasna ne opazi senčil, ki se ji predirljivo privoščljivo režijo. Ko že misli, da bosta zavila pred vhod, se ata nameni v desno, po ozki stezici ob vinski trti. *Le kam greva zdaj?* Ata se obrne in dobrodušen nasmeh prežene negotovost.

– Adam.

Dlan, katere črte izdajajo pošteno delo.

Za vilo se razprostira jasa cvetic. Buhteča, dišeča. Z neko čudno kolibo sredi trate. *To bi morali podreti, pa bi bili res v raju.* Adam velikodušno pomaha, naj mu sledi. *Koliba? Morda potrebuje samo kakšno orodje...* Ko Adam odpre vrata, ta nevarno zaškripajo, kot bi hotela reči: *Bežžžži, beži!!!* V koči ju poleg pajčevin pozdravijo razpokane stene, prastar fotelj, dve postelji za *palčke* in polomljeno, do absurda in nazaj umazano plastično korito. *Pomivala posode očitno tudi tukaj ne bom.* Adam jo posede na posteljo.

– Ako iznajmljuješ sa još jedno dkevojko, bit će ti puno jeftinije.

Edino, kar bom v bližini najemala, bo taksi, in to po hitrem postopku.

Adamov nasmeh se nenadoma spremeni v tanko rdečo linijo, zgrabi se za razporek. Jasna že pomisli na najhujše, ko se spet nasmehne.

– Izvinite, prostata – zbog rata. Samo vi pogledajte, vratit ću se...

Ali pa, če kar vstanem in grem? Kaj pa, če bo zameril? Najbolje, da kar stečem...

– Samo vi polako.

Adam odide.

Ne!

– Ali molim vas, nemojte dirati kutiju uspod kreteva.

Le kaj skriva tam pod posteljo, da je taka skrivnost? Korito?

Adam odraca, vrata so tokrat tiho, kot bi vedela, da ga ne smejo izdati. Jasna se zastrmi pod posteljo. Previdnost premaga predvidljivost. Na tleh pobriše prah s hlačnico in tudi komolci so priča, da se je stegnila po prepovedani robi. *So to bombe???*

– Ovaj put bit će drugčije!

O, fak! Od kje se je vzela?

Ata Adam stoji med tramovi in čelo mu trepeta.

Kakšna deformacija »zbog rata«, pa to je superAta! Če zna naredit bombo, zna tudi... !

– Došli su i sve je otišlo, sve! Ali niko više neće mene jebat, znaš? Niko više!!! Ubit ću ih, boga mi! Ubit ću ih!

Samo ne mene, prosim, prosim.

Adam se nenadoma nasmehne.

En trenutek priljuden, naslednji pa... poluden.

– Izvini. Ovo ću ponjeti sa sobom, ako bih slučajno došla milicija. Ovo je moje. Moje, čuješ me? Niko neće to postići, niko više!!!

Jasnin obraz se staplja s tihožitjem ledenih rož na oskrunjenem oknu.

– Samo ti pogledaj do kraja, srce. Ups, opet trebam...

* * *

Jasna teče, kot jo noge neso. Ustavi se šele, ko je okrog nje stoglava množica glavne ulice. Mrak. Pred Večno vatro si greje dlani in v mislih prešteva neuspehe. *Šele en dan sem tu, pa se mi je zgodilo pol življenja.* Mimoidoč družina se smeje in objema. *Kaj bi dala, da bi bila doma.* Jasna zavrti mamino številko. *Skupo, jeftino, v tem trenutku je vseeno!*

– Halo, Jasna?

Mami! Ne boš ver-

– Sem na sestanku.

Čaki-

... Tuuu-tuuu.

Še to?!

Jasna se s kovčkom potika po centru. *Kako so lahko vsi hostli polni!* Kar naenkrat se znajde na hribu. Kovček s svojo težo pritiska nanjo, ampak teža skrbi je še hujša. Kako naj nese njega, če še sebe ne more? Solze se vsilijo v oči, kolena postajajo gluten, srce se iz sladoleda spreminja v -led. Jasna se sesede na pločnik in brezbrizno obsedi. Klic k molitvi. *Osem je že?!* V roke panično vzame časopis, *mogoče je pa še kak flet... sicer je dražje, kot sem predvidevala, ampak nekaj moram vzeti.* Jasna povleče kovček. Kovači 7, to je tu nekje, ne? Ozira se okrog sebe, toda številke ni. Samo še ena črtica na mobiju, *zdrži še tale klic, draga moja Nokia, pa ti kupim novo oblekco.*

Zovem vezano za stan,-

– Zauzeto.

... Tuuu-tuuuu.

Jasna se skrušeno sesede nazaj na tla. Baterija na mobitelu utripa v zadnjih izdihljajih. Jasna še enkrat pokliče domov.

– Ravno na blagajni sem, te pokličem-

Piiip.

Nokia leže k počitku.

Connecting people, ja!

Solze so zapolnile že vse shranjevalne bazene, zato naenkrat začnejo liti čez rob, po licih, odbijajo se na nosu in kapljajo na trda tla, kjer jih pogoltne sneg. Toda bolečina ostane. *Zakaj sem sploh rinila sem?*

* * *

Na hribu se naenkrat prižgejo luči. Snop svetlobe jo objame in obsije z optimizmom.

Če že moram zmrznit, bi rada videla vsaj razgled.

– Čao!

Vau, kakšen tip! Snežna fatamorgana št.2?

– Šta tražiš? Treba ti pomoč?

Ne, sploh več ne vem, kam grem. Iskala sem stanovanje, pa je že oddano...

– Stvarno? Moja baka ima stan, prije tri dana ga napustila djevojka... Ideš sa mnom pa da pogledaš?

Ne verjemi.

– Ideš?

Ne verjemi.

Idem.

Mladenič prime za kovček.

– Dozvoli.

Mladenič jo kavalirsko spusti naprej. *Vsaka stvar je za nekaj dobra, mogoče sem mi je pa moralo vse to zgoditi, da sem spoznala takega kul tipa, mogoče se bova pa začela družiti, mogoče bova celo hodila-*

Si od tu?

Jasna se obrne, za mladeničem je ostala samo še hladna sapica, ki jo počasi odnaša med bele oblačke.

Kako sem bila lahko tako neumna?!

* * *

Jasna sedi na tleh. Solze se sproti spreminjajo v snežinke.

– Si u redu?

Jasna ne premore moči, da bi dvignila glavo.

– Sve u redu, djevojko?

Pustite me že na miru!

– Do you need some help?

Ne, ne morete mi pomagat. Noben mi ne more več pomagat. Samo pustite me.

Ženska sede poleg Jasne na mokra tla in zre na pokopališče pod njima.

– Those unexploited lives...

Kdo pa misli da je, saj me sploh ne pozna!

Kako?!

– Neee, nisam mislila vas. Sorry, you don't understand. I didn't mean you.

Ženska zre v pokopališče in tudi njene solze postanejo del snega. Tako sta z Jasno povezani.

– It's just ... they all died for no reason, that's what I ment.

Oh. Sem mislila-

– Razumieš bosanski?

Jasna pokima in sunkovito začuti globoko v kosteh, da je našla prijateljico.

Bodi previdna.

– I šta radiš ovdje?

Jasna razloži vse zakaje, iz nje bruhajo vse zavrnitve, nabrane temne pike strelja v nebo, ki postane še bolj črno in skoraj zakrije zvezde. Skoraj.

– Ja sam Alma. Dođi kod mene na kafu...?

Alma skuha kavo, močno, grenko. Postreže s kockami sladkorja, ki zgledajo kot objete snežinke.

– Da nam život bude sladak.

Jasna in Alma se spogledata.

– You can sleep in my daugther's room. She is... She is away.

Kako se zove?

– Melina. Osjećaš me...

Alma požre besede, pogleda proti luni in srkne vročo kavo, da bi ustavila novo pošiljko solz.

– Ostani, ako želiš.

Jasnina hvaležnost odišavi kuhinjo, postane še bolj domače.

Ti posterji, ti medvedki... vse izgleda tako staro. Le kdaj je bila njena hči nazadnje tu?

Alma sede na posteljo k Jasni. In za drobec časa, čisto droben drobec, Jasni uspe, da pozabi nase.

In na V.

Alma pove, da je dobila ponudbo za službo v tujini. Službo, ki je ni mogla zavrniti, saj je pomenila nov začetek za vso družino, pobeg pred zaostritvami, pobeg od bede. Toda papirje, ki bi omogočili nov začetek je prej ulovil konec. Konec, ki se imenuje granata.

* * *

Že en mesec sem tu, sneg je skopnel, travnik se bohota v vsej svoji lepoti. Samo rože manjkajo...

Jasna in Alma v stare kartonske škatle zlagata stare puloverje, igrače in spomine. *Še malo in namesto slik ji bom lahko nabrala živ šopek.* Potem. Potem, ko bosta s solzami zalili dovolj zemlje.

Exchange

Vesna Hauschild. Slovenia

I've got a place to stay (if Internet is anything to go by). The exchange contract is settled (if word of mouth is anything to go by). Sarajevo!

“Why the hell are you going *there*?! Is there any Erasmus at all?”

“No.”

And V.'s not there either.

“And anyway, I'm going there to study, not to drink.”

On a mostly clear day, Jasna is standing in front of an apartment block embodying all V. used to be (*wherever you go, you can't escape yourself*): carved out on the ground floor, slightly patched and scarred on the first floor, windowless on the second floor, and as for the third floor... *Can this roof be a guarantee of anything?* Jasna rings the bell. The door is answered by an amiable young man, *probably the one I spoke to*. He leads her to the living room, *quite OK*, to the kitchen, *just like on the photo, there are still a few honest people around*. Jasna opens the cupboard and runs her hand along the shelf. The dust whirls through the room, Jasna sneezes and the fairytale goes up in smoke. The young man shrugs modestly, handing her a handkerchief with embroidered initials V.Z.

V.!

V.Z.?!

Is fate playing tricks on me?

Jasna rolls her eyes vehemently, her hand shaking. *Where the hell's the basin?* Unconvinced, she follows the guy down the hall. The door opens and the guy proudly points at a big bathtub. Vehemently:

“This is where you can wash the dishes. And yourself, of course,” laughing, “it's big enough for your friends, too.”

What???

“I mean, when there are plenty of dishes...”

I see. Don't be such a prig, it's... practical. Look on the bright side, what's a kitchen compared to eternity? Speaking of the kitchen... I'd kill for a big bowl of salad.

“Did you say McDonalds was near?”

The young man nods proudly, steps to the window and points at the dump next door: Burek Bosna.

Jasna flutters down the street, dizzy with disappointment. *Where now? I can't spend three to six (if lucky) months in a hotel!* Jasna ends up in a narrow alley, houses staring at her, each with its own story. The sight of a deserted artist's studio bearing the traces of bullets and still containing an overcoat waiting for its owner to take it for a walk hints at the fact that her problem is not the worst by far. Jasna's eyes climb to the left side of the dwelling where a hat is waiting impatiently. *It probably wonders every day where its exhibitor is. So where is he, where is he now? How did he get there?* Unfortunately this is not a question about existence; the whole world knows where he is and how he *fell* there. Jasna shivers as if she had a tattoo made on her back, a tattoo with spiders she fears so much. She rushes on, as far as the newsstand. There's no one there. She knocks on the glass just like hunger knocked on the walls of her insulted stomach. *Maybe I could*

try a burek anyway, if it's not too greasy... The little old lady in the newsstand hands her the advertising paper and Jasna furiously marks the hypothetical apartments. *Let's celebrate!* The smell of spinach burek sneaks to the table. *Vegetarian! And not drowned in grease either; there's still hope.* Jasna comforts her stomach as well as her nerves. She stands by the main road to find some transport. Nothing. *Don't say there are no taxis?*

"What are you waiting for, love?"

The man made up for the lost teeth with a number of gold chains around his neck.

"A taxi."

"No way. No one's gonna just turn up, you must call first."

Jasna shows her Nokia and gives him a questioning look.

"Got a Bosnian operator?"

"Not yet..."

"Too expensive, then. Here, come with me, we'll fix it all."

"Jasna follows him because his blue eyes have a silver glitter and *such fairytale eyes can't do any harm.* They turn into a narrow street, the man explaining about his brother having a friend having a friend who used to drive a taxi. It turns out that the man wasn't a taxi driver but a truck driver. But he's got a car and time and a little money, so she lets him drive her. The fattish man understands this a bit too generously, checking her in the mirror, all charmed and being interrupted only by the occasional insertion of a toothpick in his mouth. The beast, looking like a wreck from the front and like a shiny member of the new Mercedes family from the back, competes with a tram on a two-lane road and jumps higher than Jasna's heart at the thought that she finally got where she wanted to go.

"Can you drive a bit slower, please, we'll get caught by the police."

"Ha ha ha ha ha."

Jasna spends the next few seconds catching her breath. *Is this my final experience?*

"Here's Otok."

Phewwwww.

Jasna jumps out of the car and rings the bell full of hope. A cloud of smoke slowly reveals a silhouette of a middle-aged woman. *What's the story this time?* The woman doesn't say a word, just waves her in. *Silent, I like it – no conflicts.* The flat smells like a meat smoking chamber, *maybe my room is OK.* The woman progresses up the stairs with the cigarette in her mouth, scattering ashes without being aware of it. *Like Hansel and Gretel and their breadcrumbs.* The room is big and warm. Jasna collapses on the collapsible sofa, which purrs with comfort. *Like home (if I ignore the smoky smell).*

"Like it?"

Like it, like it.

"Got Internet?"

"Of course."

The woman rushes to the living room and comes back with a CD cover sporting a poor photocopy of Lepa Brena photograph.

"My son's in the music business."

And now for the last test...

"Can I see the bathroom?"

The woman's brow shakes curiously. She beckons Jasna to follow her.

As long as I don't see a wardrobe instead of shower, it'll be OK...

They come to the side entrance offering the view of a blossoming yard, which must be quite pleasant in the summer. Now it's covered in ice. The woman points at the annex on the other side of the yard.

"It's got electric heating."

If it was connected with a heated tunnel, I wouldn't mind at all.

A light saying taxi beckons Jasna in the distance.

Could it be a snow mirage?

The driver laughs out loud.

“Slovenian, heh? So what are you doing here?”

“Studying. Painting... on exchange.”

“Is Europe so bad that you had to come here?”

Jasna observes the movement of lips, the twitching corners sending a sobering twitch to the back of her brain: *I'd better keep quiet*. She smiles her most pleasant smile, staying silent.

“I know your kind.”

Fuck, what if he goes mad and raving like Mr Toothpick?

“You like to party, not to fool around like Croatians. When I served the army at Bled I met quite a few. They were real party girls – he he he.”

After spreading out like an accordion, his lips pout into a kiss. *Yuck, wrinkled like a half-inflated boat. I wanna see the end of this trip!*

“Here we are!”

This is the Olympic village, the buildings being relatively new, *what can possibly go wrong? They look OK, but the first impression can be wrong. Tested*. Jasna nods avidly when an elderly woman shows her the bathroom, the kitchen being OK too, but when they enter “her” room she stares astonished at the two beds.

Have I got a roommate?

Watching her with a melted smile, the woman points at the bed on the left.

“This one’s yours.”

Well, you’ll survive, right, or you wanna sleep on the pavement?

“Got a boyfriend? When he comes over, I’ll sleep in the bathroom, no problem.”

What’s this thing with Bosnians and their bathtubs?

The woman laughs merrily and winks.

“I used to be young myself, I know what it’s like.”

Oh... My... God.

Just one ad left, just one hour left before the sunset. A rich neighbourhood promises a rich experience. *Kidričeva 25. 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26. Well now, where’s 25?*

“Coming about the flat?”

Yees. Yes!

She runs joyfully towards an old man and the pink villa with open windows looks as if it is giving her a welcome laugh. Jasna does not notice the shutters grinning mischievously. When she thinks they’re about to turn for the entrance, the old man continues to the right, down a narrow path by the vine. *Where the hell are we going?* The old man turns and a benevolent smile drives the uncertainty away.

“Adam.”

A palm whose lines reveal honest work.

A meadow of flowers stretches behind the villa. Blossoming, sweet-smelling. With a curious shack in the middle of it. *This should be torn down and it would truly be a paradise*. Adam generously waves at Jasna to follow him. *A shack? Maybe he just needs some tools...* When Adam opens the door, it creaks threateningly, as if trying to say: *Ruuuuun, ruuuun!* The shack greets them with cobwebs, cracked walls, an ancient armchair, two beds *for dwarves* and a broken plastic sink dirty to the absurd and back. *So I’m obviously not washing dishes here either*. Adam sits her down on the bed.

“If you rent this with another girl it’ll be much cheaper.”

The only thing I’ll rent around here is a taxi, and as soon as possible.

Adam’s smile suddenly turns into a thin red line as he clutches his fly. Jasna already thinks the worst when he smiles again.

“Prostate, I’m sorry, it’s the war. Just take a look, I’ll be back...”

What if I just get up and go? But what if he takes offence? I’d better just run...

“Just take it slow.”

Adam leaves.

No!

“But please don’t touch the box under the bed.”

What on earth does he hide under the bed to make it such a secret? A sink?

Adam shambles away, the door staying silent this time as if knowing it shouldn’t betray him. Jasna stares under the bed. Caution beats curiosity. She wipes the dust off the floor with her trouser leg and her elbows also witness her reaching for forbidden goods. *Is it bombs???*

“This time it’s gonna be different!”

Oh, fuck! Where did he come from?

Old Adam stands between the beams, his forehead quavering.

What a “war” deformation, this is super grandpa! If he can make a bomb, he can also...!

“They came and it was all gone, all of it! But no one’s gonna fuck with me anymore, you know? Not anymore!!! I’ll kill ‘em all, swear to God! I’ll kill ‘em!”

Just leave me out of it, please, please.

Adam suddenly smiles.

Affable in one moment, horrible the next.

“I’m sorry. I’ll take this with me, just in case the police come. This is mine. Mine, can you hear me? No one’s gonna get this, not anymore!!!”

Jasna’s face melts with the still life of ice lace on the desecrated window.

“Just keep looking, love. Oops, I have to go again...”

Jasna runs for her life. She stops only when surrounded by a crowd in the main street.

Dusk. She warms her hands at the Eternal fire, counting her failures in her mind. *I’ve only been here for a day and experienced half a life’s worth of stuff.* A passing family laughs and hugs. *I’d trade anything for my home.* Jasna dials her mother’s number. *Expensive, cheap, I don’t give a damn at this moment!*

“Hello, Jasna?”

“Mum! You won’t be...”

“I’m at a meeting.”

“Wait...”

Tuuu-tuuu...

After all this?!

Jasna strolls around the centre, suitcase in her hand. *How can all hostels be full!* Suddenly she finds herself on a hill. Her suitcase presses on her with all its weight, but the weight of worries is even worse. How can she carry it if she can’t carry herself? Tears press into her eyes, her knees are turning into gluten, her heart is changing from ice cream to ice. Jasna collapses on the pavement and sits blithely. A call to prayer. *Is it eight o’clock already?!* Panicking, she grabs the paper, *maybe there’s a flat left somewhere... more expensive than planned, but I’ve got to take something.* Jasna pulls at the suitcase. Kovačić 7, must be around here, right? She looks around but there’s no number. Just one line left on the mobile, *hold on for this one call, my dear Nokia, and I’ll buy you a new dress.*

“I’m calling about the apartment...”

“Taken.”

Tuuu-tuuuu...

Jasna collapses back on the floor, disheartened. The battery on the mobile flashes, breathing its last. Jasna calls home again.

“I’m at the checkout, will call you?”

Beep.

Nokia lies down to rest.

Connecting people, my ass!

The tears have filled up all accumulation pools, so they suddenly start flooding, rolling

down her cheeks, bouncing from her nose and trickling on the solid ground where they are swallowed by snow. But the pain remains. *What made me end up in this hellhole?*

Lights suddenly switch on over the hill. A beam of light encloses her, filling her with optimism.

If I must freeze I want to see the view at least.

“Hi!”

Wow, what a bloke! Snow mirage No. 2?

“Looking for something? Need help?”

“No, I don’t know where to go anymore. I went looking for a flat, but it’s gone...”

“Really? My grandma has a flat, a girl moved out of it three days ago... Wanna have a look?”

Don’t believe him.

“You going?”

Don’t believe him.

“I’m going.”

The young man lifts the suitcase.

“Allow me.”

The young man lets her go ahead like a true gentleman. *Everything is good for something, maybe all this had to happen so I could meet such a cool guy, maybe we’ll start hanging out together, maybe we’ll even date.*

“You from here?”

Jasna turns around; a cold breeze slowly drifting away among white clouds is all that’s left from the young man.

How could I be so stupid?

Jasna sits on the ground. Her tears turn into snowflakes as they come out.

“You OK?”

Jasna can’t gather enough strength to lift her head.

“You OK, girl?”

Leave me alone, please!

“Do you need some help?”

No, there’s no way to help me. No one can help me anymore. Just leave me alone.

The woman sits down on the wet ground beside Jasna and stares at the graveyard below them.

“Those unexploited lives...”

Who does she think she is, she doesn’t know me at all!

“Excuse me?!”

“Nooo, I didn’t mean you. Sorry, you don’t understand. I didn’t mean you.”

The woman stares at the graveyard and her tears are turning into snow, too. This is the connection between her and Jasna.

“It’s just... they all died for no reason, that’s what I meant.”

“Oh. I thought...”

“You understand Bosnian?”

Jasna nods and suddenly feels it deep in her bones that she’s found a friend. *Be careful.*

“So what are you doing here?”

Jasna explains all her whys, spits out all her rejections, shoots all her black spots at the sky, which becomes even blacker and almost covers the stars. Almost.

“I’m Alma. Wanna come to my place for a coffee...?”

Alma makes coffee, strong, bitter. She serves sugar cubes looking like embraced snowflakes.

“To make our life sweeter.”

Jasna and Alma exchange looks.

“You can sleep in my daughter’s room. She’s... She’s away.”

“What’s her name?”

“Melina. You remind me...”

Alma swallows her words, looks at the moon and sips hot coffee to stop a new load of tears.

“Stay if you want.”

Jasna’s gratitude scents the kitchen, it becomes even more like home.

These posters, these teddy bears... they all look so old. When was her daughter last here?

Alma sits down on the bed next to Jasna. And for a bit of time, for the tiniest bit, Jasna is able to forget herself.

And V.

Alma says she got an offer for a job abroad. A job she couldn’t turn down because it meant a new beginning for all the family, an escape from escalations, an escape from

misery. But before that, the papers enabling a new beginning were caught by the end. The end called a grenade.

I’ve been here for a month, the snow has melted, the meadow is blossoming in all its beauty. Just the flowers are missing...

Jasna and Alma are packing old sweaters, toys and memories in old cardboard boxes. *Won’t be long and I’ll be able to bring her a real bunch of flowers instead of pictures.* After. After they have watered enough land with their tears.

Eliade

Pablo J. Garmón. España

No, no quise esperar. Siempre vuelve. Ya sabes cómo es: aparece en bicicleta o sobre un caballo o bajo la alfombra, y poco importa si se arrastra hasta doblar el cielo de las ratas o si rasga el universo en dos. Porque existe, se clava en el aliento. Y, te lo digo, siempre, siempre vuelve. Como un perro. Te hablé de ellos, están por todas partes, silenciosos, hambrientos, cada uno es padre y es hijo. Y al igual que los vagabundos, que los más perdidos, se arremolinan en torno a la estación de ferrocarril. ¿Te has dado cuenta? Las estaciones siempre están en la peor parte de la ciudad. Como si sus trenes trajeran la suciedad, la miseria con sus pies embarrados de kilómetros, y se lanzaran al vacío entre las aceras. A los ladridos mudos y el frío de bisutería y la nieve incendiándose. Lo sé, tú también has estado ahí.

En mi calle todos los perros se llamaban Mihail. Al primero le faltaba un ojo, sonreía con la cuenca vacía y ladraba hacia mi derecha. Pasó el invierno, los coches quedaron sepultados bajo un gris al que llamábamos nieve y cuando ésta se derritió descubrimos un centenar de cadáveres a lo largo de la ciudad. Algunos parecían que estaban durmiendo, paseabas a su lado y dabas un pisotón fuerte en el suelo. Sí que está muerto, decías, y seguías tu camino. ¿Qué más podías hacer? Enero había sido su ataúd, el cielo entero les había llorado. Ahora desnudos y rotos, esos cuerpos eran nuestro mobiliario urbano, otra decoración atrasada de navidad en las calles secundarias de Bucarest. Ahí acababa la dignidad: esperando al camión de la basura.

Volví a ver a Mihail unos meses después. Era más delgado y huraño, su piel estaba teñida de manchas y había recuperado el ojo. Se echó en su lugar favorito, sobre un cartón al resguardo de la lluvia, y se quedó contemplando las tres aduanas que separaban la calle del centro de la ciudad. Los guardias solían bromear y lanzarle comida, y una vez el hijo del embajador japonés intentó jugar con él, pero Mihail nunca respondía a las caricias, ni se tumbaba de espaldas ni movía la cola. Tardaron en aceptar que ahora era distinto, que ya no nos despertaría a medianoche con sus ladridos desorientados, que la muerte cambia a cualquiera. Y no le culpamos. Al fin y al cabo, no era el perro de nadie. Tú das un nombre a tu mascota o a tu hijo o a tu guitarra, y crees que te pertenece. Pero con él era diferente. Mihail era el nombre de todos los perros que no tienen nombre, era uno y era todos y era la declaración de lo invisible.

Algunos le teníamos cariño, al menos de la forma en que se puede coger afecto a un desconocido habitual: como a una cafetería nueva o a una canción en la radio. Le quise la tercera vez que vino, la quinta y la sexta, y luego dejé de contar. Le veía a la sombra del monumento a la revolución, siguiendo el rastro de bebida derramada a las puertas de la estación de ferrocarril. Y era tan puntual como los trenes, atravesando las vías segundos antes de que llegara la locomotora. A veces incluso se detenía a olfatear algo bajo los rieles. ¿Qué le importaba a él? Era inmortal. Allí, en un lugar donde todo estaba de paso, en un instante entre el segundero de las horas muertas, Mihail, como muchos otros, tenía su palacio bajo la cruz más pequeña del mapa.

Nosotros siempre esperábamos a la entrada, preferíamos el ensordecedor claxon de los taxis al silencio de los andenes, otra forma de decir que preferíamos mirar a una puerta cerrada.

Y entonces ella se acercó. Una niña tan pequeña y unos ojos tan grandes. Te pregunté si alcanzaría los dos años de edad y no te dio tiempo a responder. Pasó la manga de su abrigo para limpiarse la cara y con el gesto se ensució un poco más, luego nos miró como a gigantes y apuntó a nuestras latas de cerveza. Nos pedía un trago. La familia, sentada a pocos metros de nosotros, se reía. Apartamos la mirada y caminamos hasta la esquina más próxima, donde apuramos los últimos sorbos. A lo lejos, la niña daba dos zancadas juguetonas y tiraba del pantalón de un turista. Un conocido nos invitó una vez a una fiesta en su casa, y mientras llenaba el vaso de *țuică* nos decía: «Esos son todos gitanos. El mundo cree que somos nosotros, pero son ellos. Mendigan, roban, y luego se preguntan por qué nos dan mala imagen. Me ven en Francia y me hablan como si fuera gitano. Roma, roma, cantan los italianos. Acabarán creyendo que aquí todos cocinamos en medio de la calle. ¿Os parece justo? Esto tendría que acabar. Deberíamos encontrar un lugar para ellos, un espacio propio donde no se marginen, todos juntos. Vivirían felices. No, no me refiero a perseguirlos, a ver, yo soy judío. Mi familia estuvo atrapada entre los muros de un campo de concentración. Pero hay otras opciones, hay otras naciones –aunque, de acuerdo, aunque también tengas que acabar encerrado. Hay otros muros. La libertad necesita límites para no ahogar la de los demás, ¿verdad? Es lo mismo. Les hemos dado todas las oportunidades. Lo que necesitan son límites. Como todos. Necesitan muros».

Se llegó a calcular que existían más de veinte mil perros sueltos en Bucarest. Decían sueltos, nunca libres, porque vivían entre bloques de edificios y asaltaban los contenedores para subsistir. Eran esclavos de una búsqueda incesante de alimento, de refugio, de protección. Algunas bandas de perros se disputaban entre sí el territorio, había el que ladraba y el que gemía. Y a la llegada del invierno, toda rivalidad importaba o dejaba de importar para siempre. Por eso un día Mihail se cansó de perseguir la vida y se echó sobre su cartón. Algunos seguíamos intentando lanzársela, pero nunca quiso ir detrás de las pelotas ni de los palos. Los seguía con la mirada y veía que tras la curva que hacían en el aire, después de acariciar el firmamento, volvían al mismo lugar de siempre, se estrellaban contra el suelo. Entonces desviaba la vista y se concentraba en un punto fijo en alguna otra parte. Mihail volvió muchas veces, y siempre acabó tendido en ese cartón. Esperando.

A tres aduanas de distancia, en las aceras del centro de la ciudad, todo cambiaba de idioma. Al inglés de los jóvenes, al francés de los mayores, al español de las telenovelas. *Ascultă cu orechile, see with the eyes, mais ferme la bouche*. Cambiaba de idioma, y poco más. Ni siquiera las ancianas que mendigaban un *pretzel* o las floristerías con servicio las 24 horas necesitaban pronunciar una sola palabra. O quizás era que se las habían robado todas los anuncios gigantes que coronaban los edificios y enmarcaban las iglesias. Artistas, multilingües, trabajadores incansables, paseaban y miraban hacia arriba, se detenían y su expresión recordaba a lo que algunos llaman fe. Para ellos, para muchos, eran carteles anunciando lo inalcanzable, casi empujando sus sueños por un precipicio. Para unos pocos eran el siguiente punto en la lista. Y para el resto, eran una historia, un divertimento, una fantasía adolescente. Un lugar a donde escapar cuando la calle cedía al vértigo de las miradas. Y yo necesitaba escapar. Una vez, ya sabes lo distraído que soy, confundí una pila de basura con una anciana encogida bajo el portal. Tenía trampa: ante mi vergüenza, dediqué más tiempo a la basura del que le hubiera dedicado a ella. Y me sentí aliviado.

Cuando dije adiós a mi calle, después de tres días o tres meses o tres años, miré el cartón vacío y oí de fondo los ecos de un concierto. De ser otra ocasión, hubiera buscado el origen

de la música hasta escuchar la melodía de pie en el parque o sobre las escaleras del ateneo. De ser menos cobarde, hubiera cubierto aquel cartón de poemas de Tzara y partituras de Enescu, hubiera pintado las aduanas como pentagramas, hubiera... Pero hay algo en el arte que siempre abandona: a los hijos, a los amores, a los países. Y no conocí otra calle donde soplara tan fuerte el viento. Si se hubiese escrito, uno de los peores versos de Eminescu podría haber sido,

*Y tu nombre está vacío
o escondido al otro lado del muro,
tu cuerpo hundido en el río
o en el rayo más obscuro,
y tu infinito tallado en el mármol.*

Câinele bătrân nu latră degeaba. Ante la duda, culpas a los problemas de traducción, apuntas a otro lugar y huyes con una sonrisa. Me fui siendo de noche, desde lo alto sólo se veían las luces. Y podría haber vuelto, haberme despedido, haberte preguntado tu nombre. Pero no habría servido de nada: las habitaciones, los televisores, los bares y las cervezas, todos se pueden convertir en muros. Incluso abrazando la lluvia a tu lado, ni siquiera entonces lo hubiera oído. Te habría hablado del dadaísmo y del teatro del absurdo, de las familias gitanas obligadas a malvivir junto a plantas de aguas residuales, de las predicciones económicas y del talento y de la belleza y del futuro. Y habría sido honesto, habría dicho la verdad. Habría querido darte esperanza. Pero no dejaría de estar oyendo mi propia voz, escribiendo al otro lado de la página, abandonándote. Y aunque quisiera, y juro que es así, aunque hablara de ti, acabaría olvidando tu nombre. Me odiaría a mí mismo pero no podría evitarlo, lo olvidaría. Como el de tantos otros. Y nadie sabría quién eres, quiénes sois, vosotros, los huérfanos de la calle, los hijos del aulolac; niños del comunismo, de la inmigración y la pobreza; criaturas inacabadas, peonzas, pirañas subterráneas, vagabundos, perros de la calle. Todos los Mihail.

Lo sé, estarás ahí cuando acabe, estarás incluso después de que acabe. Cuando todo vuelva. Tendido sobre el cartón, mirando un punto fijo en alguna parte, a ras de suelo. Siendo tú y él y todos. Pero dime, ¿cómo crees que acabará? ¿Cómo se completará el círculo? Fue un incendio lo que destruyó parte de la obra de Mircea Eliade –el filósofo, el historiador, el exiliado. Era 1984. Murió no mucho después, leyendo el trabajo de otros... Más de mil personas fueron a rendirle sus respetos y besaron las palabras de su lápida. Y casi puedo imaginarme cómo habría sido una de tantas conversaciones en su funeral:

Ms. Pistică: ¿Ha visto el cuerpo?

Mr. Câine: No. La cola de espera da la vuelta a la esquina.

Ms. Pistică: Ya, ha venido gente que no conoce más que su nombre y apellido.

Mr. Câine: (*mira a su alrededor*) Así se mide el éxito, ¿no? El número de flores sobre una tumba, el tamaño del mausoleo, las vistas al mar...

Ms. Pistică: Sí, tanto ruido para tanto silencio. He oído que hablaba ocho idiomas.

Mr. Câine: Era un genio. Era rumano.

Ms. Pistică: Pero se fue. Escapó del país.

Mr. Câine: Ahora está mucho más lejos.

Ms. Pistică: Sí, los funerales son un buen lugar para esconderse.

Mr. Câine: Son un despropósito, duran más que la muerte.

Ms. Pistică: Y los ataúdes son tan cómodos...

Mr. Câine: (*bromeando*) No creo que haya ahí dentro sitio para dos.

Ms. Pistică: Tampoco quiero ser el copiloto de nadie. No sabría pedir indicaciones.

Mr. Câine: (*sin entender*) Bueno, yo ladro a los coches.

Ms. Pistică: Y yo huyo de ellos. (*empieza a caminar*) Tenga cuidado, podrían atropellarle.

Mr. Câine: Hasta mi sombra podría atropellarme... Espere, ¿ya se va? ¿No se queda un poco? ¿Es que tiene a alguien esperándola?

Ms. Pistică: (*se detiene y duda*) No. Y sí. Hay alguien, pero él no sabe que a quien está esperando no es a mí.

Mr. Câine: Entonces no huye sólo de los coches. No va a volver.

Ms. Pistică: Como Eliade. Como Godot.

Mr. Câine: Al menos ellos tenían una razón para desaparecer.

Ms. Pistică: ¿Hace falta una razón? (*sonríe y sigue alejándose. Se detiene unos instantes antes de irse*) ¿Conocía al difunto?

Mr. Câine: No, sólo conocía su nombre. Pero le leí.

Ms. Pistică: (*asiente y susurra*) Debería ser suficiente para echar a alguien de menos.

Eliade

Pablo J. Garmón. Spain

No, I didn't want to wait. It always returns. You know what it's like: it turns up on a bicycle or on a horse or under the carpet, and it makes little difference if it crawls until bending the sky of rats or tears the universe in two. Because it exists, it sticks to your breath. And, as I say, it always, always returns. Like a dog. I told you about them, they're everywhere, silent, hungry, each one is father and son. And just like vagrants, the most lost, they mill around the train station. Have you noticed? Stations are always in the worst part of town. As if their trains bring the dirt, the poverty with their feet covered with the mud of kilometres, and they launch themselves into the abyss between the pavements. Into the mute barking and the cold of imitation jewellery and the snow catching fire. I know, you've been there too.

In my street all the dogs were called Mihail. One was missing an eye; he smiled with the empty socket and barked to my right. Winter passed, the cars were buried under a grey we called snow and when it melted we discovered a hundred bodies all over the city. Some seemed to be sleeping; you walked beside them and stamped heavily on the ground. Yes, they're dead, you said, and continued on your way. What else could you do? January had been a tomb, the whole sky had cried on them. Now naked and broken, these bodies were our urban furniture, another decoration left over from Christmas in the side streets of Bucharest. Dignity ended there: waiting for the dustcart.

I saw Mihail again a few months later. He was thinner and shy, his coat was covered in marks and his eye had recovered. He sat

down in his favourite place, on some cardboard protected from the rain, and he stayed there looking at the three customs houses that separated the street from the city centre. The officers usually joked and threw food to him, and once the Japanese ambassador's son tried to play with him, but Mihail never responded to affection, nor lay on his back or wagged his tail. They took a while to understand that he was different now, as he wouldn't wake us up at midnight with his disoriented barks, that death changes everyone. And we didn't blame him. After all, he was nobody's dog. You give a name to your pet or your son or your guitar, and you think it belongs to you. But with him it was different. Mihail was the name of all the dogs that had no name, he was one and he was all and he was the declaration of the invisible.

Some of us were fond of him, at least as far as you can be fond of a habitual stranger: like a new cafeteria or a song on the radio. I loved him the third time he came, the fifth and the sixth, and then I stopped counting. I saw him in the shadow of the monument to the revolution, following the trace of spilt drink at the doors of the train station. And he was as punctual as the trains, crossing the lines seconds before the train arrived. He sometimes stopped to smell something under the rails. What did it matter to him? He was immortal. There, in a place where everything was passing through, in an instant between the second hand of dead time, Mihail, like many others, had his palace under the smallest cross on the map.

We always waited at the entrance; we preferred the deafening taxi horns to the si-

lence of the platforms, another way of saying that we preferred looking at a closed door. And then she approached. Such a small girl with such big eyes. I asked you if you would reach the age of two and I didn't give you time to answer. She cleaned her face with her coat sleeve and with the gesture she made it even dirtier, then she looked at us like giants and pointed to our cans of beer. She asked us for a drop. The family, sitting a few metres away from us, laughed. We looked away and walked to the nearest corner, where we drank up the last drops. In the distance, the girl skipped playfully and pulled at a tourist's trousers. A stranger once invited us to a party at his home, and while filling a glass of *țuică* said:

"These are all gypsies. The world thinks it's us but it's them. They beg, rob and then ask why we have such a bad image. They see me in France and talk to me as if I were a gypsy. Romany, Romany, the Italians sing. They'll end up thinking that we all cook in the middle of the street here. Does that seem fair? This should end. We should find a place for them, a place of their own where they're not marginalised, all together. They would be happy. No, I don't mean persecuting them; after all, I am Jewish. My family was trapped within the walls of a concentration camp. But there are other options; there are other nations – although, I agree, you do also have to end up enclosed. There are other walls. Freedom needs limits so as not to drown the freedom of others, don't you think? It's the same. We've given them every opportunity. What they need are limits. Like everyone. They need walls."

It was estimated that there were more than twenty thousand dogs loose in Bucharest. They always said loose, never free, because they lived among blocks of buildings and attacked the rubbish skips to survive. They were slaves to an incessant search for food, refuge, protection. Some packs of dogs

fought each other over territory, some barked and others howled. And when winter came, any rivalry mattered or didn't matter forever. That's why one day Mihail tired of pursuing life and lay down on his cardboard. Some of us continued trying to encourage him, but he never wanted to go after the balls or the sticks. He watched them and saw that they curved into the air, after brushing the sky, they returned to the same place, and smashed against the ground. Then he looked away and concentrated on a fixed point somewhere else. Mihail returned often, and always ended up on this cardboard. Waiting.

Three customs houses away, on the pavements of the city centre, the language changed completely. The English of the young, the French of the old, the Spanish of the TV soaps. *Ascultă cu orechile, see with the eyes, mais ferme la bouche*. The language changed and little else. Not even the old women who begged for pretzel or the 24-hour florists needed to say a single word. Or perhaps it was that they had stolen from them all the giant advertisements that crowned the buildings and framed the churches. Multilingual artists, untiring workers, would walk and look up, stop and their expression recalled what some call faith. For them, for many, they were signs announcing the unattainable, almost pushing their dreams over the edge. For a few they were the next point on the list. And for the rest, they were a story, a diversion, and an adolescent fantasy. A place to escape to where the street ceded to the vertigo of stares. And I needed to escape. Once, you know how absent-minded I am, I mistook a pile of rubbish for a bent old woman under the gate. There was a catch: to my shame, I devoted more time to the rubbish than I would have devoted to her. And I felt relieved.

When I said goodbye to my street, after three days or three months or three years, I looked at the empty cardboard and heard

in the distance the echoes of a concert. On another occasion, I would have sought out the origin of the music until listening to the melody standing in the park or on the steps of the cultural centre. If I were less of a coward, I would have covered the cardboard with poems by Tzara and scores by Enescu, I would have painted the customs houses like pentagrams, I would have... But there is something in art that always abandons: children, loves, countries. And I knew no other street where the wind blew so strongly. If it had been written, one of the worst verses by Eminescu could have been,

And your name is empty
or hidden on the other side of the wall,
your body sunk in the river
or in the darkest beam,
and your infinite carved in marble.

Câinele bătrân nu latră degeaba. When in doubt, you blame problems of translation, you point to another place and flee with a smile. I went as a part of night, from up high you only saw the lights. And I could have returned, said goodbye, asked your name. But it would have been useless: the rooms, the televisions, the bars and the beers, everything can become walls. Even embracing the rain at your side, I wouldn't even have heard it then. I would have talked to you about Dadaism and the theatre of the absurd, about gypsy families obliged to live poorly together with the waste water plants, about economic predictions and talent, beauty and the future. And I would have been honest; I would have told the truth. I would have wanted to give you hope. But I would not have stopped hearing my own voice, writing on the other side of the page, abandoning you. And as much as I might want, and I swear I do, even if I spoke about you, I would end up forgetting your name. I would hate myself but I would not be able to help it, I would forget it. Like those of many others. And nobody would know who you are, who

all of you are, all of you, the orphans of the street, the aurolac children; children of communism, of immigration and poverty; unfinished creatures, pawns, subterranean piranhas, vagrants, street dogs. All the Mihails.

I know, you'll be there when I finish, you'll be there even after I finish. When everything returns. Laying on the cardboard, looking at a fixed point somewhere, at ground level. Being you and him and everyone. But tell me, how do you think it will end? How will the circle be completed? It was a fire that destroyed part of the work of Mircea Eliade – the philosopher, historian, exiled. It was 1984. He died not long after, reading the work of others... More than a thousand people went to pay their respects and kiss the words on his gravestone. And I can almost imagine what one of the many conversations at his funeral would have been like:

Ms Pistică: Have you seen the body?

Mr Câine: No. The queue goes round the corner.

Ms Pistică: I know, people have come who know more than his name and surname.

Mr Câine: (*Looking around*) So this is how you measure success, is it? The number of flowers on a tomb, the size of a mausoleum, the sea views...

Ms Pistică: Yes, so much noise for so much silence. I heard he spoke eight languages.

Mr Câine: He was a genius. He was a Rumanian.

Ms Pistică: But he left. Escaped the country.

Mr Câine: Now he's much further away.

Ms Pistică: Yes, funerals are a good place to hide.

Mr Câine: They're nonsense, they last longer than death.

Ms Pistică: And the coffins are so comfortable...

Mr Câine: (*Joking*) I don't think there's room in there for two.

Ms Pistică: I don't want to be anyone's co-driver. I wouldn't know how to ask for directions.

Mr Câine: (*Without understanding*) Well, I bark at cars.

Ms Pistică: And I run away from them. (*Starts walking*) Be careful, they could run you over.

Mr Câine: Even my shadow could run me over... Wait, are you going already? Aren't you staying a little? Is someone waiting for you?

Ms Pistică: (*Stops and hesitates*) No. And yes. There is someone, but he doesn't know that the person he's waiting for isn't me.

Mr Câine: So you don't only run away from cars. You're not going to return.

Ms Pistică: Like Eliade. Like Godot.

Mr. Câine: At least they had a reason to disappear.

Ms Pistică: Do you need a reason? (*Smiles and continues moving away. She stops a few moments before going*) Did you know the deceased?

Mr Câine: No, I only knew his name. But I read him.

Ms Pistică: (*Nods and whispers*) It should be enough to miss someone.

Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti'nden Birleşmiş Milletlere Mektup

Alper Abca. Türkiye

Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti tüm hayvanlar arasında kalıcı barışı sağlamak amacıyla yoğun çaba sarf ediyordu. Etoburlarla otoburlar arasındaki doğal döngüden kaynaklanan durum (düşmanlık değil) hariç tutulduğunda, tüm hayvanların barış içinde yaşamaları Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti'nin en büyük amacıydı. Bu nedenle hayvanlar arasında en göze çarpan düşmanlıkları ortadan kaldırmayı hedeflediler. Bilindiği gibi insan ırkıyla tanışmalarından bu yana kediler ve köpekler arasında ün salmış bir düşmanlık baş göstermişti. İnsanlar tarafından en çok sevilen bu 2 türün birbirleri ile bu derece düşmanlaşmaları hayvanlar arasında iyiden iyiye bir rahatsızlık oluşturmaya başlamıştı. Bu nedenle Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti bu düşmanlığı ortadan kaldırmak için bir sorumluluk üstlenme kararı aldı. Kediler ve köpekler arasındaki barış artık sağlanmalıydı. Bu hedefe ulaşmak kuşkusuz ki kolay olmayacaktı ancak imkansız değildi. Yıllar yılı bunun için hem kedi hem köpek tarafıyla görüşmeler, uzlaşma çalışmaları yapılmış ve barışın sağlanabileceği düşüncesi güçlenmişti. Ve artık ilk somut adımın atılması gerekiyordu. Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti tüm hayvan türlerinin temsilcilerinin katıldığı bir toplantıyla bir karar aldı. Karara göre kediler ve köpeklerin birlikte yaşayacakları bir şehir oluşturulacaktı. Tüm şehir halkı (kediler ve köpekler) eşit haklara sahip olacak, işledikleri suçlarda eşit şekilde yargılanacak ve şehirdeki tüm kaynaklardan eşit şekilde faydalanacaklardı.

Şehir, tüm hayvanların çalışmalarıyla kısa sürede oluşturuldu. Ve tüm kediler ve köpekler bu şehre yerleştirildi.

Birinci hafta şehirde kedi ve köpekler arasında çıkan kavga nedeniyle 12 kedi ve 3 köpek yaralanması rapor edildi.

Birleşmiş hayvanlar cemiyeti derhal bu konuyla ilgili bir soruşturma başlattı ve kavganın nedenini araştırmaya başladı. Kavganın ikinci günün akşam yemeğinde çıktığı tespit edildi. Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti kararıyla yiyecekler eşit miktarda dağıtıldığından akşam yemeğinde çıkan kavga bir grubun diğer grubun yiyeceğini haksız şekilde ele geçirmesi nedeniyle olmuş olmalıydı. Nitekim yapılan araştırma sonucunda iri bir çoban köpeğinin karnı doymadığı için 2 kedinin yemeklerini çalması sonucu ortaya çıktığı, kavganın giderek büyüdüğü ve iki taraftan da yaralanmalarla sonuçlandığı anlaşılmıştı. Hayvanlar Cemiyeti Mahkemesi hırsızlık yapan ve yaralanmaya yol açan köpeği ve kavgaya karışan kedi ve köpekleri tespit edip eşit şartlarda yargılayarak gerekli cezaları uyguladı. Ayrıca yiyecek dağıtımında yeniden düzenlemeye gidilerek hem kediler hem de köpeklere yeterli derecede yiyecek temininin sağlanması hususunda bir karar alındı. Böylelikle şehre günlük sağlanan yiyecek miktarı artırıldı.

Çıkan kavga sonucu gerilen ortamı yumuşatmak gerekiyordu. Şehre Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti'nden seçilen 3 maymun gönderildi. Maymunlar kedi ve köpekler arasındaki gerginliği azaltmak için tiyatro oyunları, akrobasi gösterileri yaparak ortamı rahatlatmaya çalıştılar. Ortamın yumuşamasıyla ilk hafta, o vaka dışında atlatılmış oldu.

Maymunlar görevlerini tamamlayıp şehirden ayrıldıktan sonra kedi ve köpekler yine başa kalmışlardı. Yapılan düzenlemeden sonra yemeklerde yiyecek kavgasından kaynaklanan

bir kavga tespit edilmedi. Köpekler karınları fazlasıyla doyduğu için kedilerin yiyeceğine dayanmıyor böylelikle herhangi bir kavga da çıkmıyordu.

Yiyecek kavgasından çıkan bir kavga olmamasına rağmen ikinci hafta yeni bir kavga haberi geldi Hayvanlar Cemiyeti'ne. Bu sefer kavgayı başlatanların kediler olduğu tespit edildi. Olayı soruşturmak üzere şehre 1 suaygırı ve 1 baykuş gönderildi Cemiyet tarafından. Bu seferki kavgada 5 kedi 2 de köpek ufak sıyrıklarla yaralanmıştı. Kavganın nedeninin ise köpeklerin gelişi güzel şekilde kedilerin alanlarını kirlettikleri olduğu tespit edildi. Köpeklere göre daha temiz ve bakımlı olan kediler, köpeklerin ortak mekanları kirlettiklerinden şikayet etmekteydiler. Kavga bir köpeğin kedilerin de ortak kullanımında olan bir yere pislemesi sonucu kedilerin buna itiraz etmesiyle gerçekleşmişti. Meclis tarafından alınan karar ile şehirde sosyal kuralları belirleyen bir program oluşturulması ve her iki tarafın da bu kurallara uyması ve eğitimler verilmesi kararı alındı. Bu kapsamda kediler ve köpekler için temizlik kuralları, eğlence kuralları vb toplumsal kurallar oluşturulup hayvanların bunlara uyması için gerekli tüm şartların sağlanması kararlaştırıldı.

Bu şekilde kedilerin ve köpeklerin bir arada yaşadığı ilk bir ay atlatılmıştı. Az önce bahsettiğimiz vakalar dışında birkaç küçük kavgayı da sayarsak tahmin edilenden daha iyi bir uyum sağlanmış olduğu görüldü. Temel ihtiyaçlar ve fiziksel şartlar eşit şekilde sağlandığında kediler ve köpekler arasında çok da fazla bir geçimsizlik olmadığı görülmüştü. Hatta bazı kedi ve köpeklerin daha ilk ayda dost olmaya başladıkları gözlemlenmişti. Bu durum Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti'nin umutlarını oldukça artırdı. Hiçbir düşmanlık doğuştan gelmezdi, şartlar düşmanlığı yaratırdı. Hayvanlar bunun farkına varmışlardı.

Bu şekilde yaklaşık 1 yıl geçti. Geçen bir yılın sonunda Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti "kedi ve köpek dostluğu antlaşması" nı resmen ilan etti. Çünkü 1 yıl önce kurdukları o şehir kedi ve köpeklerin kardeş gibi yaşadıkları muhteşem bir dayanışma şehrine dönüşmüştü. Kedilerle köpeklerin hiçbir zaman dost olamayacağı safsatasını tarihe gömmüşlerdi. Dostluk antlaşmasının ilanından sonra Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti'nin uzun yıllar insanlarla beraber yaşamış hayvanlarından oluşan komitesi Birleşmiş Milletler'e bir mektup kaleme almaya karar verdiler. Bu başarıyı insanların da bilmelerini ve dünyanın gidişatını yönlendiren bu güçlü yaratıkların buna göre hareket etmelerini istiyorlardı. Mektupta şunlar yazıyordu.

Sevgili insan ırkı,

Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti; tür, cins farkı gözetmeksizin dünya üzerindeki her hayvan arasında barışı, adaleti ve temel hakları sağlamayı amaçlayan hayvanlar arası bir örgüttür. Biz Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti olarak bu saydığımız amaçlara ulaşmak için canla başla çalışmaktayız. Son olarak sizin de bildiğiniz gibi ezeli iki düşman olarak bilinen kedi ve köpekler arasındaki barışı sağlamış bulunuyoruz. Evet biliyoruz biz hayvanlar sizin gözünüzde idraktan yoksun, akılsız, sadece güdüleriyle hareket eden, sadece sizlere hizmet etmekle görevli canlılarız. Ancak bizim açımızdan durum o kadar basit değil sevgili insan ırkı. Biz kendi içimizde son derece gelişmiş bir sistemi olan canlılarız.

İnsan ırkıyla hayvan ırkı dünyanın var oluşundan bu yana iç içe yaşamış, kaynaşmış ve bir çok şeyi paylaşmıştır. Etimizden, sütümüzden, gücümüzden yararlanmaktasınız. Bu sürecin önüne geçecek değiliz ancak size şunu sormak istiyoruz.

Biz sizin gözünüzde akılsız, iradesiz hayvanlar olarak aramızda sosyal adaleti sağlayabilirken siz üstün, zeki, güçlü, mantıklı canlılar olarak bunu neden sağlayamamaktasınız?

Biz hayvanlar yalnızca hayatta kalmak ve karnımızı doyurmak için başka bir canlıyı öldürürken siz neden zevkleriniz uğruna diğer canlıları öldürmektесiniz?

Doğadaki her hayvan kendini besleyecek bir kaynağı bulabilirken, neden insanların çok küçük bir bölümü dünya kaynaklarının çok büyük bir bölümüne sahip olduğundan diğerleri açlıktan ölmekte?

Biz hayvanlar birbirimizi kürklerimizizin siyah, beyaz, sarı vb. oluşuna göre ayırmazken siz insanlar birbirinizi neden renklerinize göre ayırıyorsunuz?

Lütfen bu sorularımıza anlamlı bir cevap bulduktan sonra üstün aklınız, mantığınız ve kurduğunuz sisteminizle övününüz.

Birleşmiş Hayvanlar Cemiyeti.

Komitede görevli yıllarca bir gösteri sirkinde çalıştırılmış daha sonra oradan kaçmış olan maymun mektubu katlayarak büyük bir incir yaprağına sardı ve komitenin postasından sorumlu güvercinin gagasına ilişti. Güvercin hızla kanat çırparak mektubu Birleşmiş Milletler posta kutusuna bırakmak üzere oradan uzaklaştı...

Letter to the United Nations from the United Animals Community

Alper Abca. Turkey

The United Animals Community was trying hard to maintain permanent peace among all animals. When the situation between carnivores and herbivores due to the natural cycle (not animosity) was excluded, all animals living in peace became the biggest aim of the United Animals Community. For this reason, they aimed to resolve the greatest animosities between the animals. As has been known since their acquaintance with the human race, a famous animosity emerged between cats and dogs. The two species, both of which were the most loved by human kind, became each other's worst enemies and began to bother the other animals greatly. For this reason, the United Animals Community took a decision to resolve this animosity. It was high time to maintain peace between cats and dogs. Without a doubt, it was not going to be easy to achieve this aim but it wasn't impossible. For years, there were negotiations and attempts to reach agreements and priority was given to maintaining peace. And it was now the time to take the first concrete step. The United Animals Community took a decision in a meeting where all the representatives of the animal species were present. According to that decision, a city would be formed where cats and dogs would live together. All the townspeople (cats and dogs) would have equal rights, fair trials if they committed a crime and equal use of the city's resources. The city was created with the efforts of all animals in a short time and all cats and dogs were settled there.

In the first week in the city, following a fight which broke out between cats and dogs, 12 injuries to cats and 3 to dogs were reported.

The United Animals Community immediately started an investigation into the cause of the fight. It was confirmed that the fight had broken out at the diner on the second day. It was thought due to the unjust confiscation of the food of one group by the other following the decision of the United Animals Community that food had to be distributed equally. In fact, at the end of the investigation, it was found that the fight had broken out because of one big shepherd dog stealing food from two cats, because he was still hungry, and the fight had gradually grown and resulted in the injuries. The United Animals Community impartially judged the dog which had committed the theft and caused injury and the cats and dogs involved in the fight and imposed the necessary punishments. In addition, the community made arrangements for the distribution of food and took a decision on the delivery of sufficient amounts of food for both cats and dogs. In this way, the daily food supply to the city was increased.

Because of the fights which had broken out, the atmosphere became uneasy and a peaceful solution was needed. Three monkeys chosen by the United Animals Community were sent to the city. The monkeys tried to placate everyone through theatre plays and acrobatics.

After the monkeys achieved their tasks and left the city, the cats and dogs were alone again. Afterwards, no other fights over food were reported because the dogs had more than enough food to fill their stomachs and they didn't have their eyes on the cats' food.

Another report of a fight reached the Animals Community in the second week, although

not because of a dispute over food. This time it was confirmed that the ones starting the fight were the cats. To investigate the incident a hippopotamus and an owl were sent by the Community. This time, five cats and two dogs were slightly injured. It was found that the reason for the fight was that the dogs randomly polluted the cats' areas. The cats, which were cleaner and better groomed than dogs, complained about the dogs' behaviour. The fight had broken out with a dog urinating in a place which was a common use area and the cats objected to this. The Council decided to establish a programme which determines the social rules in the city and decided that both sides would obey these rules. To maintain this, training would be provided. Within this concept, social rules on cleaning, entertainment, and so on, were established and had to be obeyed.

In this way, cats and dogs made it through the first month of living together. It was seen that, despite a few small fights in addition to the earlier incidents, there was more harmony than expected. It was reported that when the basic needs and physical conditions were equally satisfied, there was no significant conflict between the cats and dogs. On the contrary, it was observed that some cats and dogs started to become friends in the first month. This situation raised the United Animals Community's hopes. No animosity is innate; rather it is created, due to certain conditions. The animals had realised this fact.

And so, almost a year passed. At the end of that year, the United Animals Community publicly declared the Treaty of Friendship of Cats and Dogs. The city that had been created a year before had become a wonderful city of solidarity where cats and dogs lived together fraternally. They have consigned the myth of cats and dogs never becoming friends to history. After the declaration of the Treaty of Friendship, a committee of the United Animals Community, formed by the members which had lived together with humans for a

long time, decided to write a letter to the United Nations. They wanted to let humans know about this achievement and they wanted these powerful creatures, who directed the course of events of the world, to act accordingly.

This is the letter:

Dear human race,

The United Animals Community is a community of animals aiming to maintain peace, justice and fundamental rights for each and every animal on the earth, without discrimination of species or genus. We, as the United Animals Community, are making a full effort to achieve these stated goals. As you also know, we have managed to maintain peace among cats and dogs, which have been known as great enemies. Yes, we know that in your eyes we animals are deprived of perception; brainless creatures which only behave according to their instincts and to serve you. But, dear human race, it is not as simple to us. We are creatures which have a quite complex system within ourselves.

The human race and the animal race have been living together in unity, become friends and shared many things. You use our flesh, our milk, our power. Our intention is not to obstruct this process but we would like to ask you something.

When we, in your eyes, brainless, simple animals, can achieve social justice among ourselves, why cannot you, as the superior, intelligent, powerful, reasonable creatures, do so?

While we animals only kill to survive and to feed, why do you kill other living things only for your pleasure?

While each animal in nature can find a source to feed from, why do a small number of humans have very large amounts of the earth's resources and why are the others dying because of this?

While we animals do not discriminate according to our fur being black, white, or yellow, why do you humans discriminate against each other according to your colours?

Please be proud of your superior mind, logic and your system after you find meaningful answers to our questions.

United Animals Community

The monkey from the committee, who had worked in a circus and had run away from it, folded the letter and wrapped it in a large fig leaf and placed it in the beak of a pigeon. The pigeon started to flutter and flew off to take the letter to the United Nations...

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