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# Fruit

*Nina Kokelj*

In the milky evening, when orange lamps burned in the palace and refined ladies lifted coffee cups to their lips with two fingers, and black slaves dressed in white embroidered with gold poured coffee from a large terracotta jug, the woman approached her tree.

*- My tree bears no fruit.*

The tree was beautiful, with succulent leaves and the swelling desire of plants; she touched the crusty trunk, lovingly poured fresh water until it had drunk up all the pain, so bitter that she sat by the tree and did not move; the woman.

Her eyes searched for a star, but she was gazing into the hazy twinkling of the distance, that promises and persuades. Torches burned in front of the palace and there could be heard peals of laughter, the chirping of caged birds and the dull sound of a bear on a chain that had been brought for this very occasion by a gypsy who it was said was in contact with the dead and whose tin whistle could send to sleep even the most enraged snake.

She was breaking away. She was breaking away from the chain of her own life and in the palace could be heard drum beats. She was looking back;

*- My tree bears no fruit.*

She got up with difficulty, hovered uncertainly near the tree and heard footsteps.

*- The magician!*

He came in coat tails, with a case in his hand and he was a wise man. At least, that's how it seemed. He stared at her and smiled, but did not speak, although he knew a great deal. He knew how to revive a sick horse and how to change a crescent moon into a biscuit.

They contemplated each other as people do when they have been gripped by foreboding, until she tore away from the dark reliability of his gaze and crouched back in the tempo-

ral bubble of personal experience. And the magician opened his case, pulled out a red headscarf and gave it to her. She merely stared at it. He brought his hand near and took it from her, as well as the little wooden horse and the ball and then she felt something.

In the palace a female dwarf gripped the diamond chandelier and swung on it; the Woman in the garden waited concealed until the Magician handed her a scented vellum pad on which a lamb was drawn with black ink. It could have been a goose with a golden beak, but it was a lamb, a placid animal, that she suddenly took upon her lap.

And from that moment on she knew that he *knew*.

He would give her everything, everything, her arms were too small for his gifts and, sucking her thumb, she arranged them beside her and once more buried her face in the leaves of her tree. She took the terracotta vessel full of clear water between her palms, watered her tree and in that moment was gentler than fairy down.

- *My tree bears no fruit.*

But she was the Woman and knew passion. And they had known her for a long time.

They were red, dull red and mercilessly demanding, as earth is demanding. And time. She thought of the gigantic bull's head and the body of the centaur, of the fever of red blood. When she waded between the memory of the ancient meeting of the thighs of woman and man and of that feeling when you do not, not want to die, the Magician, as he was dumb, lowered his gaze.

And she dreamed a kiss.

In spite of everything. He scabbled among the colourful balls, metal rings and ice cubes until he found the feathers. White ones and scattered them over her, which was all he could do then for her, who was again circling the tree, and in the palace someone died without anyone even noticing.

Love is not, not enough, it can be too little or too concentrated into itself,

she thought and called a flame of memories upon herself, even those that were not yet born. The Magician was not short of white feathers and he could hardly catch his breath there were so many for her. So that passion would not tear, so as to beg no longer for touch.

A lot had already happened; the landslide had been let loose, the kiss had lasted and he had promised her a white horse. On the train when he was drinking spirits from an elegant flask, from his pocket he had pulled a king of hearts and on the other side of the window shone large yellow pumpkins. The grass, that received them like an old man receiving a visit from his children, smelled sweet and she really did come to the palace on a white horse as she had received a letter of one sentence -

- *Come riding home on him. I will decorate his neck.*

But passion does not bring happiness. Passion only fills the blood, so that the red is red and that it flows. And unravels the silent weave of life. For this reason, for this very reason the Magician threw on her a newly conjured up cloud of snow white feathers that he drew from his shoe, a giant all-knowing kaleidoscope and a twisted kerchief.

In error, he also conjured up a gold coin that did not, however, interest her, as she had returned to the tree; there gold does not count.

- *My tree bears no fruit.*

There still trembled in her mind a long satisfied wish. Straw men that she had been setting on fire in the palace garden to light his way and at the same time to swing with her on the swing.

And playfulness came that reminded her of honey. She stomped around the tree and as if by chance threw a glance at the Magician, who was unwinding a silver ribbon and smiled. They chased each other, passing the balls and in one moment the Woman threw in an elegant arc the wound ribbon at an imaginary audience. She stared into an imagined mirror, coquettishly stroking her hair and at the same moment the Magician conjured up a flower that she skilfully put behind her ear and waited for symbols of relief in the newly conjured up beauty.

They played like happy puppies but the tree bore no fruit, no. It is a tree and remains so.

Somewhere far off could be heard the pining of a train, while in the palace, barely audibly, there moved long snowy curtains, from which there peeled off a minstrel who sat at the piano and played and played. He was surrounded by already slightly tipsy ladies, who charmingly behaved as if they did not know each other, as if they had just met.

The Woman's compassion was so forceful that she lowered herself to her knees and remembered, remembered her birth.

*A small white baby lay between ironed sheets, her chubby little body covered in creases, sucking her thumb. From her navel wound her umbilical cord. The umbilical cord was long and disappeared on the far side of the window. Like a creeper it crawled across the town and gripped...*

*the rotating metal wheel,  
the stones in the river,  
the hot earth.*

Thus the strings of life vibrated.

From the depths of this vulnerable unselfsatisfied, small white baby there emerged a quiet voice; ...come to me. They fed her with soya milk, covered her with newspaper and fondled her transparent body. She rode a little horse named Rodi. The hair on the back of her head curled. And they cut it. They put lipstick on her lips and drew a heart on her forehead.

*They gave her a name.*

The Magician stiffened; from so much compassion for everything that was and would be he for a moment forgot about himself, about his virtues, but a moment later a snow white cloud appeared between his hands and floated in the air as floats a long vanished memory of fear.

*- My tree bears no fruit.*

She sat to one side and concentrated on the wrinkles of a hypothetical old woman.

In the palace a young boy from Arabia, dressed in white with red embroidery, stood at the large window. Hidden behind the curtain.

That is how she was sitting when she heard the rough voice of the Coffee Mamma, a woman who smelt of coffee and from whose deep bag-like pockets on her colourful skirts, long jackets and crocheted shawls poured still warm roast coffee beans.

A woman who left no trail in the sand.

- A prophecy!

More to herself than anyone else the Woman whispered. From the coffee mill behind her back the smoke rose high.

The Coffee Mamma coughed and told that which only snakes know just before they shed their skin. She spoke of the Woman, of how she would return to the source, to the hot

core of the world. To the tree. And then she would write. Tiny sheets of paper covered with her writing would flutter in the air, like flocks of tiny chirping cockatoos. She will write everything. She will never tire. Even when the Book of Life is written, the Woman will keep on writing. She will sit beneath the tree, on the warm golden earth, as old as parchment and all will be well with the world. All will be well, even that which is wrong and misshapen and sickening and distorted.

The smoke from the coffee mill twirled in clouds of reliable relief; the Woman had *changed*. She started to mumble and to run her hands through her hair.

*Her hips spread.*

She stood up. She turned to the tree on which there now glowed orange fruit. And then she joyfully circled it; once, twice, three times. The Magician smiled;

- Is barren earth not a woman? She harbours the seed of some other time. Only a few understand this.

And then they left.

*Translated by David Limon*

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# A Very Simple Story

*Miha Mazzini*

*For Manuel Bravo*

I'd like to tell you a very simple story. It probably won't seem anything special to you and I don't want to waste your time, so I'm going to make it as short as possible.

I enrolled on a university course in psychology because my best friend did. We'd been going to school together since kindergarten and I'd always copied everything she did. In the third year at university she met this guy and left to study abroad. That was the first time I couldn't go with her. I passed all the exams and one of the lecturers asked me if I was interested in writing my degree paper on the psychological profile of participants in reality TV shows. Even though I didn't watch television much because I spent my evenings reading text books, I accepted the offer as it meant I didn't have to think of another theme. I soon discovered that the lecturer had signed a contract with a particular television station and that he would make money from my work, but this didn't really bother me. A degree is a degree and you've got to get it somehow. I conducted tests with applicants and selected the ones that would spend a few months together. As the show was made under foreign licence, the producers knew exactly what viewers wanted and I had instructions about which psychological profiles don't fit together well in a situation where they are living in isolation from others. I had to select people who were different from each other, but still within the average, never anybody who was really special. After I graduated, my evenings were free and I suddenly had a lot of time and could have watched the show, but it had already finished. I heard it had been very successful and that children in particular liked the candidates I'd chosen.

For the first time in my life I had no revision to do and I was at a loose end. I visited my parents more often and we

watched television together. They didn't like the show I'd selected the participants for, but admitted that they were probably too old for it.

I was bored and wished I had a boyfriend. I'd broken off all my relationships in the past when revising for exams took up all my time. I decided to start my master's degree the next academic year and then do a doctorate.

An acquaintance told my father about a job he thought would be suitable for me, at least in the interim. The employer was willing to take on psychologists without any working experience.

That's how I started working at the asylum centre. In a refurbished former stables, immigrants from China, Africa and Eastern Europe spent months awaiting a decision on whether they would be deported or given asylum. I can remember the distinct smell when I entered the building for the first time, which I can still vividly recall even today. But I soon got used to it and after a while it didn't bother me. The premises were in a terrible state, but the work wasn't very demanding. My role was of a supervisory nature, only occasionally advisory: I listened to the immigrants, making notes in their files and with most of them I very quickly recognised the signs of depression. At first I used to refer them for a check up at the medical centre, where they could get a further referral for an appointment with a psychiatrist and a prescription for antidepressants, but transporting them there demanded so much preparation and incurred so many expenses that in the end I started going to the medical centre once a week by myself and the doctor simply gave me a whole bundle of prescriptions, made out to the names on my list.

During my second month there, one of the asylum seekers hung himself. The video taken by security cameras showed how the man had kissed his sleeping son in the evening, gently and slowly stroked his cheek, then taken a towel, gone to the bathroom, locked himself in a toilet cubicle and committed suicide. After this incident, the management fitted cameras above the toilets, too. The investigators were very nice and only had a very short talk with me. One of them regretted that the man should have killed himself on the eve of his deportation back home, as only a day later his depression would have become a problem to be dealt with by his own country rather than ours.

The son was fostered after being given his father's letter telling him to study hard and make something of himself. He, the father, couldn't go on any longer, he was too miserable and weary. This agreed with the diagnosis I'd entered in his file. I didn't want to go and see his body, but when they showed a small and unclear picture of his face on television, I couldn't remember having seen him in my office. I have to admit that I find it hard to distinguish the faces of people from other races and I need a lot of time before I can remember them.

Thus I was surprised to find out that he had left an envelope for me. In it, there was a sheet of squared paper torn from a notepad on which it said 36/3.

I didn't understand. I put the bit of paper among my study material and stayed in the job until the autumn, when I started the master's course. This time, the television people called me themselves and I tested all the candidates for the new season of the reality show. When we were negotiating my pay and I told them the sum I wanted, their rapid exchange of glances and satisfied smiles didn't escape me.

I had more time now and was able to actually watch the show. As the show's psychologist, I went to visit the participants, became friendly with them, fell in love with one of them and covered the walls of my rented bed-sit with his posters. When he was eliminated from the show, I comforted him and we became a couple. Two weeks later, I found him with another woman. He then took some time off to think and I promised I'd wait for him.

I got a call from another television station and then from another. I was becoming an expert on selecting reality show participants.

One evening, I was sitting at home, studying, when the bit of paper left for me fell on the floor. I looked at the numbers 36/3 and couldn't think of any sensible explanation. The next day on the bus, I heard the radio news and the newsreader was talking about some paragraphs from an article of a law that had just been adopted by the parliament. At first, he described each paragraph in a bit more detail and then just referred to them by one number slash another number. I suddenly had an idea: what if 36/3 referred to a paragraph in a particular article of a particular law? But which law? The only one I had ever read in my life was the law on refugees and I even had a copy at home.

The third paragraph of Article 36 stated that underage persons who don't have any living relatives or whose relatives can't be found cannot be deported, but are automatically given the status of refugee and put into foster care.

I felt strangely odd the whole of the following week. I thought I was coming down with something or that I must have eaten something bad. Not bad enough to make me sick, I just felt this pressure and at times I found it hard to breathe, while at the same time I felt hot. And then suddenly all the strength just left my legs and I collapsed onto a chair, nearly breaking it. Luckily, this happened while I was at home rather than out.

Suddenly I understood everything.

It's hard to describe the hours that followed. I displayed all the symptoms of a nervous breakdown, but all the time I knew it wasn't a nervous breakdown. That I wasn't cracking up, but awakening. I fell asleep from exhaustion and woke up refreshed as never before. Colours were clearer and my sense of smell was stronger. It seemed that before this I had spent all my life under an anaesthetic.

I called the asylum centre and they told me where they buried those that died there and I went to put some flowers on the grave marked with a wooden cross, even though the body lying in it probably didn't belong to a Christian; on the cross, there was only the name and the year of death. I looked at the soil covered with weeds and in vain tried to remember the face of the man that must have sat in front of me on a number of occasions, talking about himself. Talking about war, misery and persecution, like all the rest. Only this man had a son with him and had read the law. He understood that they would both be returned back to the place they were trying to escape from unless... his son no longer had living relatives. Him.

How long had he known this? How long had he spent preparing for death? He had waited until the last evening so that he was with his son for as long as possible and could put him to bed one more time that would be the last, and then carry out his plan.

I couldn't remember his face, but I kept seeing the grainy shot of a man bending over his son, gently kissing him.

I knew where I was standing. Over the narrow and deserted grave of a hero.

I started thinking and I'm still thinking. About my state of general anaesthesia that disappeared the moment I came into contact with a heroic deed. About how I chose the most average people of all average people for reality shows so that not one would really stand out, because otherwise there was a danger that a viewer may awake from anaesthesia. Suddenly, I saw everything - television programmes, music blasting out of loudspeakers and radios, film posters, shopping centres and the masses in them, everything - as a strong anaesthetic keeping us in a permanent state of sleep. I realised I was studying something that helped compartmentalise all that is different. The only hero I knew didn't die as a mark of the highest possible sacrifice, he was just depressed, sick. I correctly advised him to take pills, but he refused to, they found no trace of antidepressants in his blood. All the heroes who had throughout history sacrificed themselves to avoid this anaesthesia and who were at the time a model for the young are now, from our viewpoint, just depressives. By attaching a medical diagnosis we turn everything that's best and worst in man into something pathological. And what's left is just the average.

And the average makes people sleepy; especially children.

My former boyfriend from the reality show came to tell me that it was me he wanted, at least for that night, but I wouldn't let him speak. I slapped him and slammed the door in his face. I opened it again after a few minutes, but he was gone and I threw all his posters after him.

I went on thinking: was it only me who was anaesthetised or is the whole western world asleep? Sunk in the safe grey-ness of the average, without any contact with the extremes of good and bad, in an anaesthetic depression that would have long ago disappeared were it not for the balancing effect of shopping therapy, made possible by cheap labour in China? Should I just sit in front of the television, like my parents? Was I capable of walking by myself after having been carried through life by this anaesthetising impulse?

I took the bit of paper and looked at it again.

36/3

He had chosen me. Probably only because I'd been there, and because of my profession and the education that should have prepared me for looking into people's souls. But of course it hadn't: I'd seen nothing, not even his face. Whereas he had

seen me and he wanted to leave a mark. He wanted at least somebody to know what he'd done and why. He couldn't tell his son because it would have given him a life-long feeling of guilt. He had chosen me. It took a while, but he did reach me in the end.

Thank you.

*Translated by Maja Visenjak - Limon*

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## a night in ljubljana

*Lela B. Njatin*

as i turn the key in the lock i can't feel the springs give way. in the bunch of keys hooked onto the same ring i press in my palm this one is the lightest, aluminium. there seems to be no resistance in the lock when i turn it. the door is locked, but it can be unlocked as if one were drilling with look into thought, neither one nor the other has any real weight, and when they meet, the distinction between them is hardly noticeable as they have no shape, no colour, no density, one can only feel they exist, and that the look is piercing through the thought. and more often than not it is the thought that gives way, and the look remains somewhat suspended in the air.

when i press down the handle, the door opens. for a few moments the aluminium key sticks out of the bunch in my fist like a feather-light miniature shark which, with a single toothed jaw, is waiting to snatch its prey; when i close the door behind me after i enter, i appease it, i put it back into the lock and leave it there, hanging off the spring hook along with the others. while it is firmly clasped in the lock, the others, like worthless corpses, dangle for some time, just like the chain i fix in the slot above the lock a moment later.

without turning on the light i let the bag fall on the floor by the door, bend over and take off my shoes. the hall is filled with heat which immediately laurels my forehead with beads of sweat. the paint smells of burning. i walk to the windows, open them, leaving the blinds lowered, i only turn the metal bars and they make a squeaking noise after having been motionless for months, left to the mercy of the sun and the rain.

it's just as hot outside. the heat rushes through the blinds into the flat, i feel it on the sweaty forehead like a whiff of gentle breeze, but a moment later the air is still again, humidity spreads into the rooms, sticking to walls like suffocating slime. it penetrates my shirt, my trousers, permeates the up-

holstered seat of the chair which i sit on, saturates the table cloth on the table which i rest my elbows on and, with the dust caught into its texture, forms a gauze-like web sticking to my fingers.

through the grid of the blinds i look at the town, the building across blocks the view, it's dark, the open windows gape at me like burns, they're darker than the facade, behind it there's another rampart of buildings, with fiery hollows staring out; some of the tiny eyes are illuminated, and i gaze over there in search of human figures. the night is thick, it intensifies the heat with its substance, and the people inside are motionless, burnt by the hotness of the day, inert like running sores splitting up with every move, exuding pus in the summer of stifled acts, sediments of desiccated desires and deposits of stale aspirations.

the night out there doesn't emit any sounds, i can hear it pulsate like the swelling pouches of frogs dug in the mud from the period of chaotic time, not articulated to the measure of man, but impregnated by human thirst. the adventures people have prescribed for them in this season are being swallowed up by the heat. the dark sky is tailored to fit the endless farewells made to shattered plans. i'm calmed by the impotence of my fellow-burghers - when the temperature of their bodies is defeated by the temperature of the environment - to capture the fleeing time and draw it into the mills of their vanity. whenever i return in such weather i feel fine. only then do i feel that i'm not here because i was ordered to be.

i sit still until all the patches of my skin showing from under the clothing are covered in drops of sweat as if sprinkled with the finest shower. i shake them off, walking through the flat: the fridge, switched off, with the door ajar, the armchairs covered in sheets, the bed made, the carpet rolled, the phone with the answering machine switched off, the fuses unscrewed, a pair of tongs in the sink by the valve ... i first plug in the radio, so that the lights on the panel light up and i can hear music from afar, but i immediately give it up. the silence of the night is more pleasant.

i look through the window once more, this time across the neighbouring buildings. behind them is a wooded hill, behind it more houses. in a house, far away, in another town at the other end of the globe, where it is day now, is boštjan. a traveller like me, he must never cross the border separating

night from day, the change of time must be experienced on a single spot, when you die without expiring. boštjan, tomaž, another tomaž before him, ivo and i - dashing like comets leaving behind a trail of expectations, rushing towards knowledge, trying to overtake the moment of our death, sick of evasive answers we find refuge where there are no more questions. while the people in the towns of our lives speak of us: "they're gone", we, in the places we inhabit, appear in the windows of houses. they see us, but never ask who we are, where we are from, what we do, where we are going; we are images framed by the windows of neighbouring buildings which, even more often than we appear in them, remain empty. we stage up stories in fragments, too unpretentious to tell a story.

which window should i stand in: kitchen? bedroom? i stay where i am, in the kitchen. i pull the string of the blinds, it's all greasy from the air, for most of the year the only occupant of the place, motionless, thick, giving in to pressure, smooth, waxy. when i pull the string, the blinds squeak, the sound rebounds from the opposite wall to me, and back again. the charred hollows in it gape, and nothing disturbs the evenness of the light penetrating here and there. i lean on the windowsill and poke my head out: the night remains still. as if the people were resting with their backs against the world.

now i switch the lights on. in the kitchen the table stands just below the window, the people living opposite can't see it. the other time boštjan and i shouted at each other, fighting for the table to attract the glances of the people, to imprint ourselves in their consciousness as something that exists, and thus get an excuse for them to keep us in their midst. when i'm alone, it's harder.

a stream of sweat pours down the nape of my neck, i feel moisture between my breasts. i lean above the table and smoothen a crease running down the middle of the cloth like a trace of resistance to the iron. the surface of the table is smooth, the cloth feels slippery under my fingers. i cling to the edge and mount the table, knees first, in a co-ordinated movement i remain there squatting, take hold of the post. i lean out, my shirt sticking to the torso with the liquid squeezed from me by the heat, and remain dangling. the building across echoes as if it were dead. i turn my head, and steer my gaze along the pool of houses; it stumbles on no eye.

then i let go.

propelled towards the asphalt of the bottom of city indifference, with the corner of my eye, through the drop of sweat on the lash, in the numb night i catch a glimpse of a tiny red dot - the burning end of a cigarette in the window across.

*Translated by Lili Potpara*

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# Aegeus

*Veronika Simoniti*

Even Sundays are not what they once were - gloomy, I mean - people swarm around the shops, which are of course open, and have forgotten about contemplation, about the spiritual. Oh Filip, my Filip, walking along the old coast path today I bumped into the custodian of the Coastal Gallery and he said that the exhibition will take place. How pleased I was, but to tell you the truth I'm also a little scared: if it happens so quickly, I thought, then my final goal will soon be fulfilled and I'll have no more reason to live. Then this young art historian tells me that he needs to look through a lot more material, that the gallery programme is fixed for some time ahead and that the exhibition will take place only in November of next year. I was so relieved, Filip, don't be offended, but I said to him, oh dear, not until November next year, what if I don't survive that long? You will, of course you will, he said, you have to - now you have a reason to live at least until then. As if he had read my thoughts; it did me good, though I shook my head.

Thus we jump from one goal to another: these goals make our lives scan, like hurdles in a horse race. For me, the highest and widest hurdle was your confinement. At the time I said to myself that I had to survive the war only to see you at least once more - that's what I lived for. And when that was achieved I set myself a new task: you know which, it's as painful for me to talk about as it was for you to think about Pino. This hurdle that I could not get over I call a blind fence. As if I had to jump over a pole and at the last moment the groom removes it. Here we go again with banal philosophising, saying that a person can't have everything.

And it was of Pino that I thought during my Sunday walk, when the waves foamed and splashed the cracked asphalt. It wasn't your fault - get that out of your head - Pino went of his own accord. But he was like you, challenging both natural

and supernatural forces. "As if he wanted to challenge life itself and to cross the line, to risk being swallowed by the dark unknown somewhere beyond safety, which most of us fear like death", is what it said in the Biennale catalogue in 1970. Do you remember?

I don't know if the dead remember: it would be nice if they did, if it wasn't only the living who were tormented by the past; when we are, it means that we're no longer jumping over hurdles, not even blind ones. But I have one more goal in front of me: your exhibition, your last present to me, for which I thank you, Filip. You'll get precious little from it, only posthumous fame, and I don't know if that means much to you. You were always above all that: you said they didn't understand you and that they wouldn't even after your death, as if in the end you didn't really care. Do you remember that charcoal drawing that you called *Evolution*, with five human figures, gradually ageing, the first a child and so on, the seventy-year-old still quite dignified, but the last, the centenarian, looked like a Neanderthal. *Evolution* in the wrong direction. And then that critic who misinterpreted it all - you didn't have much luck with the critics. But the young man I met today filled me with hope, especially regarding the care that he will devote to you and the time he will take. November next year!

It was very windy today, the first chilly September *Bora* was cutting like a knife, and I thought of that time in Dalmatia when we were angry with the whole world and went on holiday in October instead of August. And it was somehow dead, yes, the dead holidays we called it later. Not a soul around, just some sullen locals, the *Tramontana* and sour wine. But a number of good canvasses resulted that sold for a tidy sum. Even the following year you didn't paint the sea. Yes, because of him. He sailed off in just such a tempest, like the storm on that Dalmatian painting. I loved him like he was my own son, in time even more, because you would not have children with me. That was the punishment for Pino's death: don't tell me that you simply couldn't have any more offspring, as it would be a kind of betrayal of Pino. I paid for your stormy enchantment with risk; it bound the two of you together more than anything.

Oh, Filip, will I live to see next November? The retrospective is intended to exhibit the best canvasses, even though

they will be hard to gather together. Some have been sold, some given away, thirteen of them are at home and two very good ones are at Lucija's house. I never really understood why you married her: she was too ordinary for you, too predictable. Lucija is like a mist, you said, drifting around slow and grey. So I wanted to be that much different; at the beginning I was scared to death that you would leave me. And at first, I admit, I was jealous of Pino, but of Lucija never. Of course, I only saw her three times, the last when she brought Pino a birthday present. Ha, that birthday, it seemed more like yours than his: you invited more of your friends than he did his schoolmates. This is my Pino, you shouted, when you were really topped up, look at him, my masterpiece! At the time your riotous behaviour didn't embarrass me, on the contrary I joined in, I liked your bohemian nature, I wanted to be like that too - me, the unfulfilled artist who contented herself teaching fine art. I replaced my "ordinariness" with your "differentness", that's what I said to myself, I impregnated myself with it, otherwise I wouldn't have survived, I loved you so much, I still do: you were my guide, my Picasso, the son I never had. You were everything. So in spite of everything I was able to accept Pino that easily: he was joined to you, he was the blood that ran through your veins. During the marvellous revelry at our home you went to wake him and in front of your friends stood him, all sleepy and blinking in the sharp light, on the rotating base for models. This is my son, look what a Paris he is! He stood there, poor thing, a boyish figure, a gummy-eyed Greek god in pyjamas, and he didn't know what to do with himself. A good thing that Lucija died before him - you didn't have that good fortune.

A posthumous retrospective, that's how the young custodian of the Coastal Gallery that I met on my walk today referred to the exhibition. It sounds awful: posthumous. I can already see what the opening will be like: first a short speech by a local art critic, then a few words over a glass or two with friends and acquaintances. But a celebration without the one being celebrated is sad, like a wake. Do you remember Pino's wake? So many friends had never gathered before. Actually, in the end it turned into quite a party, at which you of course sparkled when you threw back some bottles of red almost at one go. The air is hot, the sky cloudy, the earth silent, the sea murky, you boomed like a tragic actor, and the sailors steer

their laden boats into the harbour before the storm, Sirk replied, lonely white sails in the murky distance, you rumbled in response like Triton, rudderless she sails and without anchor across the waves, each mumbled to themselves the ending of Murn's poem.

No poem suited him more - rudderless and without anchor. He forced his way into danger, shipwreck, self-destruction. I never told you that I caught him at the age of fifteen swigging turps left in a bottle in your studio. No, he hadn't made a mistake, he knew it was poisonous. I immediately called an ambulance; the doctor yelled at me, are you completely mad, your son... He's not my son, I wanted to say. They washed his stomach out, I was with him the whole time. Don't tell father, promise me you won't, he begged. He wanted to be worthy of you, he didn't want to appear a coward in front of you, he didn't want to turn out to be someone who couldn't even get himself to the next world, who didn't have the courage to end it all and thus prove himself to his father... Well, now I've told you, now I've come out with what I've always kept silent about, his burden, the heavy sack across his shoulders that dragged both of you into an unknown darkness, although it was always clear that you would slip into it - only Pino and I knew that he dare not cross the edge. And when he sensed that I knew that, he convulsively clung onto me, without a word, asking me only with his eyes to help him. I have never experienced before such merciless silent pleading; his weight lay also on me, pressing on my neck, gripping me with its tentacles.

Then we took him on that unfortunate holiday to Crete. He wasn't interested in seeing the sights and so we didn't insist, saying let the boy have fun in his own way. He hired a small sailing boat that didn't look particularly safe, but who would have expected the worst? And while you were painting your famous Minotaur in the labyrinth and I was sunning myself and reading Greek art history, we gave him total freedom, we who saw ourselves as such progressive and modern educators. Will you mend my sail, he asked, we're going on a night regatta this evening. It's the first time I've heard of a night regatta, I said. I thought it up with the French lot from the next bungalow, he replied. Then from God knows where that sculptor turned up - what was his name, the one you shared the room with as a student - by coincidence he was also on

holiday on Crete with his family. He invited us to his tent, we started drinking, and it was only towards the evening when a strong *Sirocco* blew up that I remembered my promise to Pino and in a befuddled state, drunk on wine and sun, I cynically thought now's the chance for him to prove himself and to cross the line. The *Sirocco* brought with it a real storm; we hid in the sculptor's tent and carried on carousing.

I never told you this, I never dared to speak of the broken promise that drove both of you there, beyond, to the other side. The next morning they came to say that they had found the empty boat; it's funny how a hangover doesn't go away, even when you get some news like that, only worse intoxication, first because of the confusion, then because of the pain. There's no reason to assume that the torn sail was to blame I told myself; perhaps they'll still find him, I tried to convince you. They never did find him, although deep inside I feel he's still alive and that he didn't have the courage to throw himself in for once and for all. You believed to the end that he was swallowed up. Think of Theseus: when he returned home the sailors forgot to raise the white sail and although he was actually still alive his father Aegeus, thanks to their stupid forgetfulness, threw himself into the sea.

Thanks to my stupid forgetfulness you threw yourself into drink, you dug your own grave because thanks to my stupid forgetfulness you lost a son. And now you ask me how I can go on living? I can, Pino and I were always somehow joint culprits, comrades in the search for a solution for him. I can live because I always have in front of me those hurdles and fences, because I don't grasp at life in the dark unknown as you did, because I don't yearn for death in the dark unknown as did Pino. The hurdles that I have not cleared I call blind fences, but my unkept promise to Pino I somehow don't count as a blind fence. My next task is your exhibition, Filip: such goals make my life scan like hurdles in a horse race. November next year! Yes, the young custodian filled me with great hope: I am convinced that he will make a good job of it.

*Translated by David Limon*

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# The Boat in the Mountains

*Dušan Šarotar*

**T**he cold, heavy rain that was falling steadily for the third day running drove the last person from the lake. New banks of heavy cloud were slowly rolling down from the surrounding mountains into the valley holding the grey lake. Among the tall spruces crowded together in the narrow band between the shore and the overhanging rocks there was snow. The water that fell percussively from the sky and the suffocating dampness trapped in the rotting wood, with a strange sound like a landslide in a dream, was filling the basin of the lake. And yet the surface looked completely still. There were no circles, no lines or ripples. The lake, that now looked even smaller, as if its shores had been compressed by the force of the water and the pressure of the clouds, remained at peace. It could somehow be felt like an invisible glow, or a blinding light, caught in the line that separated the shore from the sharp mountains on the other side. These unusual, eye-catching lines, that in a moment concentrated into one large white spot and then rapidly spread over the whole surface, were flashing like supernova inside Tomislav's head as he drove through the curtain of rain. He was used to the road: even though he had only driven it a few times he knew every bend. From his early years he retained a capability of rapid recall and orientation: he was an experienced slalomist who knew that the key to success lay in a close examination of the course before the competition and then during the run one only needed to follow the internalised set up of the gates and the configuration of the terrain. The real competition is in your head, he always repeated to himself the night before.

The roadway adhered to the rock wall that hung above it on the right, while on his left it hung above a ravine, as if a rough hand had torn off a hunk of bread. Below, there rushed a mountain torrent. On the other bank, also squeezed against overhanging rocks, ran the railway line. He was struck by the

thought that it would be nice if a train came rushing by and blew the mist away, or at least if he could catch up with another car so that they could drive together out of this hellish gorge that any minute would be overwhelmed by angry water and blanketed in freezing mist. With every manoeuvre that took him over the white line and onto the other side of the road so that he could see into the river channel, he could feel the water eating away at the white rock and creeping beneath the roadway. The incredible feeling that he was actually sliding above an invisible current filled him with fear, but at the same time he went with the feeling. He thought only how to get out of the gorge as quickly as possible and flee the crazy thoughts that were increasingly closing every exit. Just a few more bends and then carefully across the bridge, there I will have to slow down, was his first sober thought since he had hurtled from the lake.

From the mountaintop ski slopes of Vogel he descended the steep Žagar's dike; he knew that the snow at the bottom had melted, but he could not shake off the idea that he could ski at least the upper part one more time this season. Soon it will be gone, perhaps there won't be any more, he said to himself, thinking of the snow that he so loved to look at. Especially first thing in the morning or if he had the opportunity to stay in the mountains until early evening when the sun sank behind rocky walls and he could watch the burning line that illuminated the sharp edges. He stared into the profound darkness that lay across the hollows and that was rising towards the peaks, as if all the darkness of this world arose from the earth. He never knew how long this magical line would flicker in the midst of the heavens before it shone with that supernatural beauty or, even less, when it would disappear. Before he even thought of that moment the night had already swallowed all the fire that burnt without a flame. Then between him and the world that had awoken somewhere on the other side stood an unseen and mighty mountain that screened half the sky. But high up, far above everything, tiny stars were shining. Often he tried to imagine a person standing at that precise moment on the other side, marvelling at the first morning explosion of sunlight. There was something both beautiful and terrible in that feeling, and even more in the thought that wanted to cross this invisible, silent, cold and powerful border that only light could cross.

He had to stop even before he had skied halfway. A few times he tried to reach the snow that lay on the edge of the woods or on the outer edge of the piste, right beside the slippery drop, but he remained cautious, in spite of the fact that he was in a great hurry. From experience he knew that he could not get down in less than an hour, especially with this mud and with skis on his back. If everything went smoothly and, of course, without falls, and if he did not have to keep going from one edge to the other, he would be about half an hour late, at worst about an hour, which wasn't so bad, he told himself. What he most regretted was missing the view of his mountain, which would soon be walled around by darkness. In the next moment, perhaps even in the same moment, as if these were two aspects of the same essential thought he carried inside him, he thought of Norina, who was perhaps already waiting for him down below. Or perhaps, it suddenly came to him and touched his heart, she was that person of whom he often thought, who was waiting for the sun to caress her forehead. He could feel himself getting warmer, his muscles relaxing and the cramps in his legs disappearing. He lowered his eyes to the ground and, gripping his sticks, tried to speed up, but still within reason, so as not to go over the edge.

During his descent, which with each step was becoming crazier and more like a senseless race against time, as in one of his most important appearances, his thoughts kept straying far away. He thought of Norina as he descended ever further into the dark. Once again, the last few days before his departure for the mountains flashed before him. He did not pause at any one detail for more than a moment. Everything was as it usually was: the days ran smoothly for them, with their usual affection for each other and the sense of calm that each sought in the other. He would get up early, make a large pot of tea, and tackle the articles and papers he needed to deal with before work. He was a research and teaching assistant in the section for geology. Although the department was a small one and the number of responsibilities similarly limited, he still felt a sense of obligation. For the students, a mere handful, who were all conscientious and driven, and all with real talent, the subject they were studying was a part of their life: they had all been born and grown up in the mountains. All of them had started their studies bearing an unusual maturity, as

if that which must be gone through by each young person for them to grow up had happened to them before they left for Ljubljana. With the other students that was the exception rather than the rule. Tomislav had immediately sensed this, so he took his work that much more seriously. Norina preferred to lie in bed for a long time, thinking about things. She was involved in searching for and uncovering young talent. Currently she was involved in a large research project on this subject. She was putting together a theory on the connections between environment, early childhood experience and hereditary factors in the formation and development of talent. She wanted to emphasise the strong influence of the spatial element, the living environment, not least the landscape, on a number of skills inherent in particular activities. In general she spoke of character, temperament, a feeling for things that seemed stronger in people from certain geographical environments, but the road to any conclusions seemed still to be a long one. For it was still not possible to prove anything statistically: it was necessary to find new approaches and new concepts with which it would be possible to shape a satisfactory theory. She was focusing in particular on artistic talent, because here the differences seemed particularly striking and important. But the area she was dealing with was basically too wide and she somehow needed to restrict it - there was too much material even for a thesis.

They had talked about this a great deal over those last few days. Although he was concerned with a completely different field he was somehow intuitively convinced that there must be a deeper connection between things. He believed in the gift that man carries inside him and above all in the profound decision to preserve it, apply it and carry it forward irrespective of the circumstances or of the time required. She was looking for the lock to match a key that she only sensed was there. The night before they left, with the weather forecast for the next few days not very promising, they had polenta for supper, made with flour that Norina had brought from a mill at which they had stopped on their last field trip. There must be something wrong with the recipe they both agreed, when they had had to put their spoons down before they had even started eating. They went to sleep late, embraced on the too-narrow bed, each with their own thoughts and hopes. Tomislav

with images of the snowy, shining mountains that he would possibly see in the morning; Norina with the wish that the weather would be nice and that she could read and reflect in peace over a cup of coffee on the terrace with a view of the mountains.

He instinctively stepped on the brake and quickly changed to third, turning tight on the inner edge of the road, right up against the overhanging rocks, and then slowly drove out of the bend towards the bridge. For a moment now he thought of nothing, but stared at the road which in the regular movement of the wipers was being drawn on the windscreen. Then he caught his breath. At the start of the bridge in the rain and mist someone was hitchhiking. He changed gear again, this time straight to first, the engine stuttered and the car reluctantly slowed to a crawl. He recognised her immediately, in a long white raincoat with a red shawl over her head. In fact he recognised only the long red shawl that he had bought her in Spain. Before he could say or even think anything he stopped and opened the door. The windscreen wipers whined and the glass immediately misted up with the intake of cold air so that he could see nothing. She slammed the front door and sat on the back seat. The car was still in first, so he merely released the clutch and pressed the accelerator. They quickly went across the bridge; the windows were still misted up so he only knew they were across from the rumbling of the river deep below them. He looked for her in the rearview mirror. He could see no-one.

For the first time he stopped and moved from thought to reality when he caught sight of the grey lake that lay completely still and calm at the foot of the mountains. The rain had somewhat diminished and the mist had broken, and was waving in long strands above the still, mirror-like water. Perhaps he only imagined it, but in that moment he saw the most beautiful reflection of the glowing mountain. He watched the slow movement of light over the sharp edge, which was followed by a darkness, pure and deep, that in a moment would touch the sky. He shuddered at this view that removed the ground from beneath him and threw him across the edge of space. He felt himself falling towards some cosmic mirror. In a moment, when he fell into the lake and broke the surface on which rested the essence of the mountain, it would be the end of beauty, of him and of the apparition.

He lost any sense of time, merely following the internal image of the road that opened before him. Although he turned the fan and the heating full on, and kept wiping the windows with his hand, they were still completely misted up. He drove with only his left hand on the wheel and with his right he kept fiddling with the gearstick and the rearview mirror, looking for Norina lying on the back seat. His concentration waned and he remembered again the reflection of the mountain on the lake, feeling that he was looking at that supernatural image rather than in the mirror. Once again he was in Žagar's dike, staring at the lake; he would have stayed there immobile for a long time if he had not caught a glimpse of the boat, that disturbingly large passenger boat that some fanatic had brought here in order to make a rich killing and that looked like a foreign body, something that belonged on a totally different picture postcard. Now, with the boat tied to its moorings like the lake's guard dog, he at least experienced some compassion as well as nostalgia for the sea, which he, to be honest, did not value all that much. He and Norina were supposed to meet there on the pier: they had agreed that as soon as they drove past the boat early that morning.

He waved and winked in the mirror as he had before from the mountain towards the lake although he knew that she certainly could not see him. He also sensed that Norina had fallen asleep. Only then, when they were about a kilometre or two from the spot where he had picked her up - he could not say exactly as he had no sense of speed or time - did he wonder what she was doing here at all, far from the place they had agreed. Maybe she had been cold and wet through and had had enough of waiting and had decided to start hitching, or perhaps she had been held up and thought that I had, god forbid, gone ahead, or perhaps something had forced her to flee - something wrong with the boat perhaps? No, no, he tried to reassure himself, it was more likely a misunderstanding, a coincidence - but then why hadn't she called his mobile? In short, Tomislav felt he had made a mistake, as in some important competition in his younger days, after which he had finally decided to take a different direction in life.

He came down from the mountain much later than he had intended. The descent over slippery, treacherous and steep terrain had taken it out of him - he was exhausted and wet

through. The rain, laced with flakes of ice turning into late snow had strengthened again with nightfall. At first he thought he would head straight for the weekend house belonging to his writer friend, who normally spent the winter here writing wonderful stories about the sea. The house stood beneath the cable car, a stone's throw from the military cemetery, where Tomislav had dragged himself off the mountain. He ran towards the house, thinking that he could make out from a distance a faint light behind closed curtains. But when he stepped onto the terrace and knocked the house remained silent. Once more, he rang Norina to ask her to come to collect him with the car. But the mobile phone also remained silent. With the last of his strength he went along the dark, wet road towards the boat that was two kilometres further along. He was angry with himself for making her wait there so long. Now his only wish was to see as soon as he could the boat at the edge of the lake that had been swallowed by this crazy night.

A powerful headlight appeared as out of nowhere, in a moment lighting up the ravine. The light poured through the misted up windows, illuminating the inside of the car. A train, he said out loud, as if he wanted Norina, whom he still had not seen, to hear. For a moment he shielded his eyes with his right hand and looked to the left, where through the window a train was rushing past as if it was riding right beside him. In spite of the speed of their encounter he saw every face peering out into the night, as if he was looking at a film negative, a frame at a time. It only lasted a second and then he was in darkness again.

The boat, where has that strange boat disappeared to he asked, once more out loud, hoping that someone would answer from the back seat. Again he shuddered at the thought of that moment when he came to the mooring where the boat was supposed to be and, even more, where Norina should be waiting for him. But the boat was nowhere to be seen, neither on the water nor the dry land. Nor was there any sign of her. The car was in the car park, a little higher up, but empty. He pulled his key from his pocket and rushed through the curtain of rain. Then on the road in front of him he once again saw that which had before driven him away from the lake.

Now the spirit of the lake was far behind him, and though that invisible force was trying to make him look back once

more, this time he would manage to resist. He knew that he should not succumb to looking at the mysterious beauty that had almost killed him. He was afraid that he would never be safe from it. He felt as he had before on the mountain, as if he were falling towards that cosmic mirror. In a moment, when he fell into the lake and broke the surface on which rested the essence of the mountain, it would be the end of beauty, of him and of the apparition.

*Translated by David Limon*