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History Is Written by the Winner

Dušan Čater

The armchair did not provide much of a cover. She had hit him twice already, one time really close to his left eye. That had scared him good and proper. He had run out of rubber bands, while she, inexplicably, still seemed to have a fistful. His predicament was indeed unenviable.

- Sara, listen! - he said. - Let's call it quits! -

He only heard her laugh. There was something terrifying in the sound, or so it seemed to him.

- Sara, listen... -

Nothing. Just rubber bands whizzing past him. One of them landed quite close, and when he reached for it another one struck his hand. It hurt a great deal, and in his mind he used some very bad language. He nevertheless managed to pick it up and he loaded his »gun« by hooking the rubber band at one end of the weapon, then stretching it and fixing it taut with the clothes-pin attached at the other end. Thus equipped he bided his time, feeling like a soldier carefully saving his last bullet. Which is probably what it was.

Sara, his wife, continued to shoot at him, but that did not bother him much now. He was well-hidden, and all the rubber bands whizzed either over or past him. He was only worried in case the whole thing lasted too long, because he badly needed to empty his bladder. The thought of surrendering crossed his mind, but surrender would entail dire consequences. Last time she had tied him up really tightly and extracted all possible confessions from him by force.

He opted for a ruse.

- Sara, - he tried, - You've hurt me. I can hardly feel my hand. You're better than me. I give up! -

Sara chuckled. This time, a fraction less terrifyingly, and he also heard her rise. He did not want to lift his head, because he knew she was holding her weapon in front of her,

loaded and ready to fire. When she came up to him, he first stared at her legs and feet, until he finally lifted his eyes. She was smiling a bit like a movie star, with the corners of her lips curled up.

- What's new? - she asked.

- Actually... - he said and swung at her. With his left hand he knocked her weapon away and the rubber band zipped into the television set. Almost at the same moment he drew his own gun from behind his back and like that, from below, hit her right in the eye. Sara cried out and dropped her weapon onto the carpet. He kicked it across the room and lunged at her. When he'd wrestled her under him, he sat on her. He extricated a rubber band from her tightly clenched fist and cocked his gun. He aimed it straight at her eye and said:

- What news have you got for me, sweetheart? -

- You're a cunt, Mister Arnely, - she said, and he knew she was embarrassed about the defeat.

When they were drinking coffee a little while later, and blowing thick cigarette smoke toward the ceiling, Mister Arnely held his hand on her knee, while she held her eye.

- What else do you want? - she asked.

- Tell me what she told you yesterday! -

Sara rolled her good eye.

- I've told you already she doesn't want to speak to you, - she said.

Mister Arnely put out his cigarette in the ashtray.

- But she speaks to you! - he said.

- Not about you, though, - she said.

- It doesn't matter anyway. I never cared much for there being three of us. - he said.

- Don't say that! -

Mister Arnely rose to refill his coffee cup. When he was in the kitchen he heard the doorbell. He knew she had come to visit. Lately she came here virtually every day. Ostensibly she was a bit worried about her mother and all that. With his coffee cup in his hand he went to stand in the doorway. Sara and their daughter were seated on the sofa. A little to the side stood a burly young man.

- You haven't lost again, have you? - the daughter asked.

Sara nodded.

- What lie did he use to beat you this time? -

- He said he was hurt! -

- Again?! Oh, mom... -

- He sounded very convincing, - said Sara.

She looked at him, still standing in the doorway, still holding his cup of coffee.

- You old son of a bitch! - she said to him.

Then she turned to her big boyfriend and said:

- You'd never pull a thing like that off. You're not depraved enough! -

The beefy young man shifted his weight from one foot to the other and cracked his knuckles. She turned back to Sara and asked:

- Did you tell him anything, mom? -

Sara shook her head and gave her a secret wink.

Mister Arnely went to the sofa, sat down and lit another cigarette. He listened to them as they talked about things he knew nothing about, but he did not let that bother him. He knew, somehow he simply knew that Sara, his wife, would eventually tell him everything. After all, he was the winner.

Translated by Tamara M. Soban

Out of Order

Aleš Čar

This is a story about love. And in some ways also about happiness. In the end, a kind of happiness can also be found if a man simply knows what's in the air before he says one word. That's how it was that night. Ten minutes of silence and a giraffe on the television screen can actually say an awful lot.

»What's happening?«

»Nothing.«

A few minutes passed during which I figured out that she'd had more to drink than usual for this time of day.

»Well?«

»Well nothing.« A few more minutes. »I don't know what's with me.« After a few more minutes. »I don't know.... as if I were psychologically obsessed,« she was silent. »As if a part of me was psychologically obsessed with you.«

The stuffed cabbage I was eating stuck in my throat. I looked at her. She was seriously plastered.

»No shit...«

I threw the rest of the stuffed cabbage into the garbage and walked into the bathroom. Half a valium. I heard how she stepped toward the refrigerator to get another whiskey and then went to the other toilet. I knew she was on the verge of tears. I knew I was helpless and that made me panic a little bit. I can smell tears a mile away. The sourness of her skin, her hair, the odor from her mouth, they all spoke volumes. I thought about the last few days, weeks - nothing special had happened, no obvious mistakes. I looked at myself in the mirror above the sink. I stood with one hand in the medicine cabinet, five boxes of sedatives in my hand and I feverishly wondered where I could hide them before she flushed the toilet. The next second she was in the bathroom with me and I was still in the same position. I looked into the pupils of her

eyes: there was more than just three shots of cheap whiskey in there. There were pills too. And she really was near tears.

I shook the boxes.

»How many did you take?«

»Five.«

Five is not a dose that is life threatening . Five is a dose that is fascinating. Together with the sedatives I sat down beside the cabinet. In the ten minutes that followed, she transformed into a swaying sculpture, trembling with caustic remarks. After two rounds, she stood in front of the medicine cabinet and, still on the verge of tears, demanded if I intended to throw her out of the apartment. I answered that the door was always open, though I wasn't thinking about throwing her out right then. Even though I wasn't looking at her, I knew they were rolling down her cheeks. Big, fat, stained black with mascara... Every time I see them, I'm reminded of a squid. Ink in the enemy's eyes. I could hear she was crying. And she was waiting for me to look at her. Then it could start. Our dance.

I stared at a table. Actually at a book that was lying on the table. Actually at one spot on the book. One letter. The letter of defeat. Because I didn't have any choice: I always had to look sooner or later. I lifted my gaze.

I have a problem. Tanya cries often and copiously. She says she can't control it. She says the tears come into her throat unbidden, and once there, they simply flow. A condition that is more physiological than emotional, she says. Well, this is where the problem really begins: because every time she cries, I get an erection. I don't have anything to with it. To use Tanya's words, it is a reaction to her tears that is more physiological than emotional. Actually, the situation is much worse than that: it's enough if we're just in the trenches, if the air is tense with argument, if we lie to each other, denounce and humiliate each other. Usually, that's enough to arouse me, to make my cock stir from its Victorian atmosphere and begin to meditate on, yes, her cunt.

I screamed at her. I couldn't do anything else.

»Why do you do this to me? Why do you fucking humiliate me?!«

A second later, I was in the bathroom alone. Then I found her in the armchair, white as the wall, tears and mascara running into her mouth. Horrible. She looked right between my legs and smiled, or so it seemed to me. She allowed me to lift

her up, to lay her on the couch and cover her, to make her a strong cup of coffee. I stirred in two big spoonfuls of salt instead of sugar and, after the first sip, helped her to the toilet bowl where the contents of her stomach came flying out.

Hippopotamuses replaced the giraffes on the television and after ten minutes she managed to weakly smile and say sorry.

It was over. We searched for air.

»Fuck it. You owe me,« I said.

A few minutes later, a bloody sanitary napkin flew through the room and together with the panties it was stuck to landed on the handle of the closet door. Later, when we were smoking, pressed between the sheets, she showed me the puncture marks on her hands and the bruises on her forehead. All from the arguments of the previous days. I looked at Tanya's shadow in the dusk and strange thoughts flashed through my mind. Charles Lloyd on saxophone was the evening's guest. A scene of spider webs in the darkness, a sense of being wrung out, sweetly sleepy.

A week after the fight I walked through empty Ljubljana and looked at the shreds of fog above the river. Here and there something shuffled in the dusk and a duck flew out of the mist. A faint drizzle thickened the air, the decay of late spring. I thought about what more I could say about Tanya's past, what more I could about myself, how I could explain the reasons for our marriage, perhaps something about Tanya's fear of giving birth or about my fear of heights. It could be that it was just the usual story of two: the meeting, the successful compromises that sooner or later mean a shared life, meaning that everything becomes inanimate, inert - which I suppose also means that we actually love each other or something like that. And that's it.

Wet from the drizzle, I stepped into the Zamorec Bar where I was supposed to meet Tanya. She was already there, alone at the table in the corner, a whiskey in front of her. Other than her, there were about ten people in the little establishment, sitting around five tables and at the bar. Three were standing and talking with the waiter, two couples sat each at their own table, a middle-aged woman sat alone at a table and so did Tanya. I went to the bar. Whiskey. What kind? Any kind. I

parked myself in the space diagonally across from Tanya. Observed the people, evaluated the situation, and waited.

The middle-aged woman drinking at the neighboring table asked me for a light. She had exceptionally beautiful skin, though she was wearing far too much make-up. I lit her cigarette and added a word or two but the conversation didn't take.

The couple on the other side of Tanya stood, paid and disappeared. I ordered another whiskey, two kids walked in and sat at the table that had been vacated. The woman next to me began to talk about the film festival where she does public relations. I looked at her carefully: a lady in her mid-forties, probably a little bit drunk, otherwise well-dressed, black pullover and long black skirt with a long slit up the side. She wore a black scarf around her neck, short straight hair dyed red. She works all day and treats herself to a whisky before going home... yeah, she lives alone. Three years now. Divorced, of course. Maybe she told me her name was Laura, I don't remember exactly. I looked beyond her: the two kids had connected with Tanya, involved her in their conversation. Tanya was openly flirting. I had to ask the woman to repeat her question.

»What do you do in life?«

I told her I was a midfielder with the Korotan Club. What? National league, football. At first it didn't seem to penetrate and then, when she decided I was lying, she seemed pleased. We ordered another round. She paid.

Tanya walked into the bathroom. The boys didn't remove their eyes from her miniskirt. I tried to think of something to do, but ended up doing nothing. My middle-aged woman had been talking about her weekend house in Bovec, how she invested everything in it, how she loved walking in the Alps, well, at least until the summer of the earthquake when everything went to hell. Tanya returned from the bathroom and sat down at the table with the two boys. We caught each other's eyes right at the moment when the guy on Tanya's right went into action: first he leaned his leg against her thigh - she didn't react, just stared straight into my eyes - then he continued by pulling his leg back and pressing his knee between her legs. It had started. I stared at the guy as he rubbed his knee against the inside of her thigh: tall, thin, leather jacket, short blond hair, a military backpack hanging on the chair behind him... my mind made a quick cut.

About a year ago, while I was looking at some film I'd shot, I caught sight of Tanya flicking her red miniskirt in front of some guy. I told the editor to freeze the picture: I saw Tanya's micro-miniskirt projected on all eight screens. »Go frame by frame.« The hand in the clip slowly pulled away from the projected hip and in an abbreviated half-circle rose up to her hair, then it began to move back down to her waist and so on and so forth. After about ten seconds, I realized that all this bending and leaning was her signature coquettish laughter. »Stop.« The guy who was standing next to her in the clip was thin, tall, in wide military pants and leather jacket, with spiky short blond hair and a military backpack across his shoulder. I remember exactly. The face couldn't be made out. Only a blurred circle. She was definitely flirting. I spent the next half hour flipping through prints, looking for the precise moment when she stepped into the concert hall during the applause after the second number, then for the moment when she approached the guy. He was the only one who came in later than her. He missed a half a song more than Tanya did. At that moment, camera one was shooting close-ups of fingers on the solo saxophone (nothing could be seen of them here) and camera two showed a wide-angle shot of the whole band. The doors could be seen at the very edge of the shot. It slowly opened out further and I spotted the khaki trousers and then the black leather jacket. I still couldn't see the face.

Cut.

The woman I was with looked at me confused, waiting for I don't know what. I finished my whiskey, apologized and strode to the bathroom. I was leaning above the urinal trying to piss when the door opened for a second. Tanya looked in. Then disappeared. I walked into the women's room. Two stalls. One locked.

»It's me.«

Nothing.

A stream hit the porcelain then fell into the water.

»Tanya?« more cautiously.

Nothing.

Later waiting in the hallway, the woman appeared. At the same moment, Tanya emerged from the bathroom and, without looking at me, walked back to the bar. The woman asked me if I knew her since I'd been looking at her all night. I denied it. Then the woman looked at me with open desire. There

was no doubt. I opened the door to the woman's bathroom. She slowly walked in, turned around and looked me straight in the eye. There really was no doubt. I stepped after her, pulled a scrap of paper out of my pocket and wrote on it in big red letters: »OUT OF ORDER«. I stuck it on to the door of the stall. The words must have seemed appropriate to her because she laughed as she closed the door on us. We got to work without wasting words. I lifted her skirt. Her stockings ended at the thigh, her narrow panties presented no obstacle. She leaned her head away from me so I couldn't kiss her, which suited me fine. The first, the second, the third exhalation from the bones, from the belly and then the door to the bathroom opened. We stood still, held our breath and, fuck it, trembled. Steps straight into the other stall, the sound of the bolt. I heard the softly, barely audible, but so familiar sound of knocking against the bowl: three times, pause, and then two times. Tanya. I pushed the head of the woman down and she began to suck. Tanya's eyes appeared above the top edge of the partition. It was one of the many times that we absently stared into each other's eyes across one barrier or another: powerless, reproachful and encouraging all at the same time. Potent in our impotence. Certain in our uncertainty about whether to go ahead, the two of us, together. And always the fresh extremity of uncertainty in those moments solved the equation with the sure knowledge that everything pulling us apart came from us, from within the two of us. And if we needed three to stay together as two, then we took a third or a fourth or a fifth. Whatever it took to keep us together.

Tanya's head disappeared. I heard a man's voice. It said the name Breda, or something like that, three times in a row. I pulled myself out of the woman's mouth, still in a far from enviable state. I carefully stepped on to the toilet seat and peeked over the partition: standing outside was the guy with the leather jacket and the military trousers and there was no longer any doubt that tonight wasn't the first time Tanya had met him.

I lowered myself down again, it sounded like water falling in the toilet bowl, so loud, that it drowned out their conversation. The woman wanted to continue with her efforts to animate me down below but I stopped her and, with the tips of my fingers, closed her eyelids: she grew calm though I could see that she was confused. I leaned in toward her face, let out

a stream of spit, aiming at the ring of mascara around her eye. The spittle fell slowly so I adjusted and it hit her left eye. She opened her right eye, looked at me bewildered and then pressed the lid down again. The second time I missed and the saliva fell on the edge of her lips. The third time, I hit right below the right eye and smeared her lashes so it looked like she'd been crying and, in that instant, I was ready: I turned her around, leaned her over the toilet, braced my hands against the tiles above the seat and plunged into her. We tried to control our breathing. The woman untied the scarf around her neck and bit on it, though it probably wasn't necessary. Because on the other side of the thin partition they had started to fuck without compromise. We adjusted our rhythms to each other and ended pretty much at the same time.

For a moment after it was over, the four of us found our reflections in the large mirror above the sink: red, sweaty, fogged-up gazes, confused.

Not long afterwards, Tanya and I, holding each other tightly, headed out on to the empty street. Though neither of us had an umbrella and the rain was falling heavier now, we didn't take a taxi. For an instant, we were alone in the city, alone in the world. Perhaps truly happy. We walked through the empty streets, the rain beginning to smear the mascara around Tanya's eyes. We held each other tighter and tighter, crept into each other, pushed our tongues into each other, somehow connected with one another. Obsessed. Psychologically obsessed. Whatever it was, we had passing into next circle of exhaustion, as we must. Into the next circle of love.

Translated by Erica Johnson Debeljak

Hansel and Gretel

Polona Glavan

You are so unbelievably pretty, he says. You have such fine cheeks, and your eyes...I could eat you up, he says, and tickles me under my chin. I laugh. I tell him he must not eat me because it hurts. He laughs and says he'll do it anyway. I warn him I'll tell it all to Daddy, and then he'll see. So what, little girl, he says. It won't make any difference to you. By then you'll be inside my belly, ha ha ha. He grabs me by my waist and rolls me over on my back. Then his fingers move up-and-down up-and-down and I scream and want to pull his hair. Little girl, little girl, he keeps repeating, no you won't, no way, no way, and he tickles me and I scream until Mom comes running into the room. She is angry. I know because her nose is white. Let go of her, Andrej, she says. Go study, instead. Andrej moves his hands away and sits on the edge of the bed. He is quiet. When Mom is angry, it's better to be quiet. That goes for me, too, even if I'm little. The three of us stay quiet until Mom nods and leaves the room. Andrej turns to me. He is smiling. Shush, he says and puts his finger on his mouth. Mom has worries. Yes, I know, I say, and yet still pull at his hair. He clenches his teeth, but says nothing. Then he smiles again. It's all right, little girl, he says. Leave me alone now, OK? I have to do my homework.

I nod and watch him sit down by his desk. Andrej is already so much bigger than me. He says he was in school already at the time when I was still in Mom's belly. By now I'm already much bigger, but not as big as Andrej. He knows a lot. He writes and reads English. I know almost all the letters and I can sign myself even if my name is extremely long. It takes a whole line in my notebook to write down ALEXANDRA. But hardly anybody calls me by that name. Andrej always calls me, little girl. He says it will take some time before I can write that down correctly. He also says I have fine skin. His is full of

red spots. Sometimes he's mean to me. He hides my Barbie doll that my auntie Ursa gave me for my birthday. Then I hit him with a pillow until he gives it back to me. But I never tell this to Mom. If I told Mom anything, Andrej would call me blabbermouth and would not like me anymore.

Last time Andrej came to my bed. He said he was going to tell me a bed-time story. I told him I wanted the story of Hansel and Gretel. Fine, he said, then that's the one I'm going to tell you. Then—just at the point when Hansel and Gretel arrive at the witch's house—he suddenly became weird. He looked at me funny and started to caress my legs. I told him to go on with the story. Yes, he said, I will. After a few moments he fell silent again. He was breathing heavily and gave me that funny look again. I asked him if he felt sick. He shook his head. He caressed my belly. I asked him, what's the matter with you. Nothing, little girl, he said. I like you. I want you to know I care about you more than anybody ever will. Do you like me, too, little girl? I said I did. That I'd marry him when I grew older. He smiled. That's great, he said. Then he started breathing heavily again. Then he kissed me. But not the way he'd done before. It was a strange kiss. He pushed his tongue into my mouth. I didn't like it, and pushed him away. I told him it was icky. Fine, he said, no more of this, then. I'll do something else to you, OK? I said it was OK unless it was something icky. It won't be, he said. I don't want it to be. Because you're my little girl. Because I love you so much. I'll only do nice things to you because I want it to be good for you. OK? Yes, I said. He fixed his gaze on me, and gave me that strange look again. Then he started to shake. Listen, he said. Be totally quiet. Unless it hurts. If it hurts you have to tell me. But don't scream, little girl. Then Mom will be angry again, and we don't want that, do we? I nodded. That wouldn't be OK. Mom is angry all the time, anyway. Close your eyes, said Andrej. He caressed my belly and then below it. Little girl, he said, and then again, little girl. Then he started kissing me all over. He was panting. It tickled me in some strange way. I started to laugh. Shush, said Andrej. Be quiet, little girl. Then he suddenly put something inside me. I wanted to ask him what it was. What he was doing. But that thing was no longer there. I opened my eyes. Andrej was out of it. Did it hurt, he asked. I told him, no. I knew it, he said. He was again himself, no different than any other day. He was smiling. You are so

brave, little girl. I knew it wouldn't hurt you. It only hurts cowards. Cowards and blabbermouths. But you are not like this, are you, little girl? You are my big brave sister!

I like it best when Andrej tells me I'm brave. Lately he's been saying it all the time. He's been in my bed many times. Every time we do pretty much the same thing. He says that's what people who love each other, really love each other, do. And he loves me. And I love him. When we grow up, we'll marry each other. We can't yet, says Andrej. He says he'll never love another girl the way he loves me. That he'll never do the same thing with another girl. Last time auntie Ursa paid us a visit. She said that his hairstyle made him look so unchristian. I don't know what unchristian means. Andrej told me that what auntie meant by that is he needed a haircut. So that he'd look more handsome. I find him handsome already. He is teaching me to speak English. I can say, I Love You. He says I have to say it to him. He says it to me all the time. Then he starts kissing me all over, even on the soles of my feet. It tickles me, but I don't scream. I want to be brave so that he'll love me even more. Snowbells bloom outside. I'd like to take some to him, but I'm sure he'd make fun of me. I'll rather pick them for Mom, for her holiday. Or for Granny. Or for my kindergarten teacher, she's always so kind, even when I get into fights. Once Andrej picked me up and she asked him if he had a girlfriend. She is my girlfriend, he said and the teacher laughed and said, this is so nice. Then Andrej and I laughed, too. On the way home he took me to a pastry shop. He told me a fairytale he had made up himself. It was about a little boy who had caught a cloud and tied it on a rope like a puppy. It ended a bit sadly. I don't know if the cloud escaped from him, or what. Perhaps the cloud just took the boy with him up to the sky.

For some time now, things are totally different. I don't laugh anymore. I also don't remember everything the way it was then. I only remember the door being opened. It was Mom, and her nose was whiter than white. She just stood there and watched. Later on, her whole face became white. Then she screamed and screamed, and Daddy came running. I was scared, and began to cry. Daddy jumped on Andrej and pulled him from under the blanket by his hair. It was cold. I was scared. Mom was screaming, and then I started to scream,

too. Afterwards Mom jumped on me and hugged me so tightly that it hurt. I started to cry. I knew something horrible was going to happen. I wrestled from Mom's arms and shouted to Andrej, I Love You! He said nothing back. I started to cry loudly. I cried until a doctor came, and then there was nothing.

I haven't been at the kindergarten for a month. Mom never leaves home, either. She keeps taking some kind of pills all the time. It's very quiet in the house. Auntie Ursa brings me dolls and sweets. But I want none of that. I want Andrej. He's not around anymore. Daddy tells me Andrej went away, to some house where they keep boys like him. Mom doesn't want to tell me anything. She just keeps asking if it hurt. Auntie Ursa asks the same, and so does uncle Janez, who is a doctor. I tell them, no, it didn't hurt. I tell them I'd have hit him if it hurt. I'm a brave little girl. I cry a lot because I know Andrej is having a hard time without me. In our house no one loves him. There is no one in the world that loves him more than I do. Mom doesn't get it. Daddy, either. They say we'll never be able to marry. They say strange things. They think I'm a good little girl because I'm so quiet. But I don't want to be good. I'll never again be good. Tomorrow I'll get up when there is still dark outside, so no one will see me. Then I'll pay a visit to Andrej. I'll tell him that I love him. I'll take daffodils from the garden to him since the snowbells have already withered. I don't think he'll laugh. I'm sure he'll say, I Love You, my big brave little girl.

Translated by Sonja Kravanja