

“Happy Ending”

by

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The rain woke me up. It intervened in my dream, and at first I didn't know where in the world I was. Then I was swimming in the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. I know it was the Pacific, because I recognized it from shows on TV. I swam through turquoise and crystal. That's what they say in the travel pieces, turquoise and crystal. From my hips hang decorative beads attached to my bathing suit. I remember it from photographs. My first bathing suit, a kid's one. The clouds burst as I fix the ties on my bathing suit. Heavy drops plop onto my scalp on my and my outstretched hands. They grow thicker and heavier until water covers the entire world. It envelops me like an endless hug, an impenetrable womb. I kick my legs around so that I can swim vertically, and at that point I wake up. That was a shame. I would like to learn how to swim. But I was certain, at least, that the ocean wasn't the answer.

My dreams have been intense since childhood. Complex. Convincing. Exciting—in contrast to my daily life. Nothing but numbers there. Precise accounting operations. Ledgers and audits and tax receipts. Netto and brutto. Percentages for health insurance and social security. Part of it on the books, part of it in an envelope. Decades had passed since I'd been paid all on the up and up. I try not to think about it. I wasn't much of a thinker thirty years ago, either. I was like everybody else. At the end of a wasted day, I always looked forward to sleep. That morning I'd had to get up as soon as my alarm went off. One more load of laundry had awaited me, and

packing, paying my overdue bills, and one more itinerary confirmation with the travel agency. Irena—the agent who had sold me the package tour—repeatedly reminded me of all the preparations I need to take care of before the trip. She showered me with useful tips, and she recommended insurance companies I could rely on and health insurance plans that would be worth buying. She retreated subserviently whenever I snapped that I didn't need any insurance package and that she should stop browbeating me, because I could always just switch travel agencies. I had a similar reaction when she mentioned that they were offering some fine cruises at a similar price to my trip. She looked at me with concern, as if she weren't sure that a stay in the tropics would agree with me. I cut her off brusquely. Since I don't have daily communication with people, my tolerance for such bullshit is pretty low. But this isn't easy for her, either. I could slap the hell out of her and then she would just incline her head sweetly and say "I understand" and "Excuse me for meddling—I just wanted to help," because that's how you treat someone who has just paid for a trip to a destination the agent herself had picked. I remember our first meeting, and how skeptical Irina looked when I asked her to price out one of the most expensive offerings the agency had. I'm sure she expected me to write her a check for Bečići in Montenegro or for Chalkilidi. When I had gotten Irena's attention, her face turned the color of a maximum monthly bonus.

The windows rumbled with rain. I staggered over to the terrace and peeked out through the blinds. On the other side of the street Marina's shadow was adjusting the drapes in her window. Of course she's already awake. My friend arises dutifully every morning at 6:45 . While she airs the room out, Marina swishes pumpkin oil around in her mouth to detox. She established

this alternative therapy for herself. She believes that techniques exist for preserving the body. Not too long ago, I thought this might be true. But it did not hold my interest for long.

I still have half an hour till Marina finishes her morning rituals. She typically listens to the weather forecast, does the exercises her chiropractor has recommended, and fixes holes or tears in her clothing. She'd gone on early retirement because of a back injury, but she never gives up. She believes in happy endings and willingly waits for them. Whenever she goes out for bread, groceries, or flowers, she's made up, has her nails painted, and holds her chin high. Her earrings go with her outfit, her purse match her shoes, and her smile fits with the gaze of whomever she's talking with. And when she comes back from her errands, she places the fruit into a woven bowl and the flowers into a vase, and she washes the vegetables and puts them on low heat to stew. If she's going to wreck her health, she says, she's going to do it in a bar. She never misses the monthly nights out with her former colleagues, male and female, which last till dawn. And then again there's her balanced diet, getting up early, daily walks, and pumpkin seed oil. She's twelve years older than I am, but no one would ever think that. She has sunk her claws into this world and has no intention of letting it get away. For better or worse, Marina also won't relinquish me, either; whenever she does something she calls me, whether it's by scoring tickets on Facebook for the theater, or going on a free walking tour of the Roman tunnels beneath Belgrade. She goes everywhere, and she always comes back home stronger for it. She invariably contacts me to tell me what it was like. Last night she called me to see if I remembered how an old *chanson* went. It had been popular when we were little girls. It's the one about the city and the waves. She wanted to look it up on the internet, but she couldn't recall any of the lyrics. It

was on the tip of my tongue, but for the life of me I could not remember it. That made me a bit sad, more for her sake than for mine.

Marina is my reason to get up on in the morning, to brush my teeth, to answer my telephone—because anything is easier than making excuses to her for my messiness and negligence.

Last month I found a dead dog behind the garage. Dogs, when they sense death coming, isolate themselves. They hide from people and spend their last hours on earth away from curious eyes. This one had curled up between a prefab garage and a dumpster. His jaws were crusted over with dried mucus, as if they had locked up in the middle of his last gasp. Around his pear-shaped head swarmed flies, and green wings protruded from his nostrils. If we ignore all that, the dog appeared to be sleeping. I pulled the phone out of my bag and took a photo of the dead dog, making sure not to attract attention. Later, Marina, horrified, refused to look at the picture; she just pursed her lips in an expression of squeamishness and said: “I don't know what you find so fascinating about that. Animals, in contrast to humans, have no influence on anything.”

“But people are animals,” I replied.

This was my customary act of petty spite towards rational, calm, precise Marina. I sow a bit of unease into her orderly world, as if, without her knowledge, I'm preparing her for the surprises that lurk around the corner. About everything that is to follow, Marina knows, for now, only that I've sold my apartment and am going on vacation.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and started getting dressed. The new medicines were making me nauseous and left my head feeling heavy. I had learned to live with the invisible octopus that clings tenaciously to my insides and the tentacles that tie up my limbs. It was my

heavy ten-year old child that I couldn't detach from myself. So I walk around, sleep, and think with that weight, like things had never been any different. But there were new moments now. Recently my circulation had grown weaker, and I was putting on mittens and two pairs of socks. I struggle to put on a sweater over my head. The bottom part of my pyjamas I took off last. When I raised my butt up from the bed, I saw an unpleasant surprise on the sheet. A wet red spot. If in this hell of a body that's changing and decaying, there is anything approaching a happy circumstance, it's the cessation of my monthly cycle. So now, after many months, I am bleeding again. My organism is reprogramming itself, getting me accustomed to non-stop changes. It's screwing with me, to put it bluntly. Hashimoto's Disease has always been a demanding guest, but my condition had worsened over the past month.

I located a forgotten package of sanitary pads. I unpacked the little green bag and stuck the thin sheet to the cotton bottom of my worn-out underwear, which I had retrieved from a bag of old clothes. It's not like me to keep things I don't need. I'm not a hoarder. There are people who don't throw anything away. Their shelves and cabinets are full of items that just gather dust, but throwing them away is simply not an option. I'm not one of them. I don't collect; I remember. Material recollections suffocate me. They are demanding, they take up space and fill up your everyday life; they demand care, they fall apart, and then their end is one more little affliction. Memory is my discipline and every day I replenish my collection. Maybe that's why this departure is not all that difficult for me.

I've already packed up a good portion of my things and taken them down into my rented space in the basement. The drawers and dressers are properly empty. The table contains only a book, a detective novel that caught my attention, and some documents. A passport, a folder of

medical records, prescriptions for medicines I need to pick up, and a report from the State Office for Labor and Social Services:

Age: 53

Sex: Female

Marital Status: Unmarried

Children: None

Parents: Deceased

Education: High school qualification in the field of business

Employment Status: Unemployed

Level of Seniority: 8.2

Years of Overall Work Experience: 32

Decision of the Commission: Unemployment and other benefits not approved

Marina is a tiresome and suspicious old goat. She asks me what I do by myself all day long. She speaks quietly, but the words come out sounding clipped and business-like. We've known each other well for a long time, and she has surely sensed that something important is going down behind her back. I didn't dare tell her the truth, and I didn't know how to lie to her. I gave a vague answer: I'm finishing up some errands before my trip. Marina thinks I've paid for this vacation so I can make up for at least part of what I've missed out on in life, and that after three weeks I'll come back as good as new—and more like her. I'll be motivated and have a newly found sense of peace; and I'll move into a studio apartment purchased with my left-over money.

I'm no longer afraid of pain. Nothing is harder for me than being awake but powerless in this bed, in front of the flat-screen TV, under the cracked ceiling. Uphill hikes through the woods are going to hurt, and the cold water of the sea is going to hurt, as will the backpack on my shoulder and the stones on the soles of my feet. My swollen stomach is going to hurt, and so will my lungs and my spine and the tongue in my mouth, but that's nothing. It's all temporary. For me nature is an unexplored planet, and now I want to go get out into it as much as I can. I have no stronger desire.

My nodule is my home, sweet home. If it hadn't appeared on the screen of the CAT scan and proclaimed the existence of millions of its ravenous offspring, perhaps I never would have left this old apartment. Actually I'm not even sure how long they've been there; for years, I have not done UV treatments on my thyroid. When problems began showing up, I got in touch with my doctor because I thought I needed a different kind of treatment—it wouldn't have been the first time.

I thought the ache in my throat was a virus, since Marina is forever bringing me parasites from the outside world. Then I encountered a new diagnosis: anaplastic carcinoma of the thyroid gland. The doctor said we had wasted enough time and we needed to react quickly. And I reacted.

I don't believe in God. I believe in Marina and in that dark-skinned man in plastic sandals who waits at the entrance to the village for people arriving from the west. His presence is their guarantee for security from pickpockets and guerrilla forces. He leads them to the local soothsayer, counts the money and lets them into the dark, low-ceilinged rooms with a dirt floor. I believe that this man, gaunt and trapped in his own village, knows how one can acquire a pistol.

He'll try to haggle with me; he won't know that I'm prepared to give away everything. When I can no longer enjoy the water and the rain, when it gets difficult for me to open my eyes or swallow a mouthful of tea, everything I have will become his.

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I slept almost the entire day. Sometimes exhaustion bowls me over for an hour or two, and sometimes it lasts longer. Nevertheless I stick to my habit of making the night-time rest the main one, when I take a shower, change my underclothes, and brush my teeth. I go to bed right when I see that the light's gone off in Marina's bedroom. The air smells like rain; waves are going to swamp this city. I remember the lyrics: and they'll return me to my dream. I'll call Marina up as soon as dawn breaks.

THE END

Translated by John K. Cox

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