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Alone by the Sea

1.

At first the island is just a sign on a yellow board with a drawing of a vessel and the letters saying “Car Ferry,” then it is a grayish silhouette in the blue of the sea, and then, later still, an acquaintance working on the ferry, who just nods briefly in greeting. Jablanac, ferry port, its pleasant lobby, and then, from the upper deck, a giant rock approaching. That is the object of a year-long desire: the moment of stepping off the boat and smelling the rosemary, diesel and sheep droppings, seeing the sharp rocks looking at the Strait of Senj, coarse limestone in sharp opposition to the signs that say: Benvenuti, Welcome, Willkommen!

At home, on the terrace, in the shade of the oleander, there’s no wish to eat. Only swimming trunks are put on and then, barefoot, without a towel or sun-tanning lotion, off to the beach.

“Why won’t you eat something?” grandma asks.

She knows that there’s an exciting world waiting out there, but she knows nothing of the details. All friends went on a boat trip. And suddenly one step from the shade of a path covered with oleanders and acacias leads into the burning sun of the afternoon. The light screams, just like children in the water, just like white objects that radiate as if there are some powerful light bulbs within. The feeling of freedom of someone who has just arrived in a foreign place and can now do anything. There’s no one familiar on the beach, they all got in the boat and left. The seafront leading to the camp is full of people, naked children with dirty faces licking ice cream, young families pushing strollers, groups of teenagers who have just woken up from their last night’s party. But there’s no one that must be greeted. The feeling of freedom that’s at the same time close to death. Suddenly, all paths are open. That there are no obligations or friends waiting, this afternoon, until they come back, is a complete boon.

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At the pier, by the sewer, a middle-aged woman is sunbathing. She's between forty and fifty, as far as it can be guessed when one's three times younger. And as he walks towards the camp, they just exchange glances. But when he comes back, she's lying on her stomach, her bra undone, and the white tits have fallen out and spilled over the cups of her swimming suit. He sits on a bench by the promenade, right above the woman. A branch of an old pine gives a pleasant shade. He doesn't think of anything, he feels free to go left or right. To hum, to make a few dance steps, to feel the lightness that helps see through things, that helps see atoms and electrons, everything. And the sea is, naturally, calling for a swim. All that has to be done is to pass by the woman on a towel.

2.

And suddenly he went down, walked from the promenade to the paved surface of the beach, passed by her and she lifted her eyes from the book, hidden by a large straw hat. When he came back from the water, she was standing. Her bra was clipped, her figure trim, posture of a younger woman, her pose upright. But she couldn't hide that she was wide in the hips, she couldn't hide her cellulite, her bony feet with the protruding bones of the big toe. She held a tube of sun-tanning lotion in her hand and said something. He thought it was Slovenian, but it was Slovakian. He realized she wanted to put some lotion on him so that he didn't get sunburnt.

"Sure!" he said and she, standing like that, began doing his back. She pushed some of the lotion on his hands so he could do his chest. She kept repeating one word: "Izgoriti! Izgoriti!"

But as she did his back, he noticed that the freedom from a couple of minutes ago was slowly vanishing. The foreign town was again turning into home, into a place where he knew everyone, and anyone could just walk by and see some unknown old hag put lotion on his back, right here on the beach. Then she gave him the lotion so he could do her back. They could communicate well, he spoke Croatian, she spoke Slovakian. She asked him if he went to school or worked.

"I'm in high school," he said.

"Are you a good student?"

He thought for a second and then told the truth. "No," he said as he slowly spread the lotion on her back. It surprised him how soft she was under his hands. Her back was still relatively firm,

muscular and bony, but as he went down, above her behind and around her lumbar part, she was getting softer. Until now he mostly put sun-tanning lotion on the girls his age, or a little older, but a woman this old under his palms was something completely different. He knelt next to her and coated her skin all the way to the edge of her panties. She then lowered her panties and the white line of her skin showed.

“There too,” she said.

He obliged.

As if by accident, she ran her elbow across the front of his swimming trunks. And then she asked if there was something going on in town later in the evening.

“Is there a dance?”

He replied that there was a dance at the terrace of every hotel, that there were several going on and that everything lasted until midnight, and after midnight she could dance at the disco at Internacional. Then she asked if he would take her dancing in the evening because she was here alone, staying at a private place not a hotel, and didn’t know the town. And she wanted to dance. He would never even consider taking the old hag to a dance, but he nevertheless said: “Sure.”

At that moment, he would’ve promised anything. He wanted her savagely, so much so that he had to lie down on his stomach to hide his want. But he would never take her dancing.

“You have a girlfriend?” she asked again.

He said no.

“Such a handsome young man?”

He knew she was lying. He felt embarrassed that she was humiliating herself so much.

3.

They talked while he lay on his stomach and she sat on her towel. People on the beach watched them talk to each other, perhaps thinking he was her son. At one moment she lifted his hair that fell to his shoulders and put some lotion on his neck. A mother’s gesture. He saw little children getting buckets of water and filling a small inflatable pool. That game was something he would remember when winter comes. He glanced around the beach but there wasn’t anyone he knew. Yet, there

was less and less of his freedom. Then, by her bag, he noticed a neatly folded black dress. Why is she wearing a black dress? Is she in mourning? Or she just wants to look skinnier? However, this didn't bother him long. He suggested they could swim to a small island in front of the beach, some three hundred meters away. She observed the island, then him, measuring the distance, estimating, and then she said: "Let's go!"

This wasn't a consent, this wasn't a simple yes, this was a cry. Some sort of victory. She got up, put her book and her sun-tanning lotion in the bag, and then covered it all with her black dress. She looked suspiciously around the foreign land that hid many dangers.

"Don't worry," he said. "No one's gonna take it."

She trusted him. But he wasn't sure, he wasn't sure anyone would.

4.

She removed her hat, took an inflatable swim ring he thought belonged to the children next to them, pulled it down over her chest, and put her hat back on so that her face did not burn in the sun. The top of the ring was pink, its bottom white. It was a simple, cheap swim ring he'd seen since he was little. Now she stood by him: an old hag with a hat and a swim ring. And she waited. However, that giant detail, that pink swim ring for children, ruined everything. It crossed his mind to turn around and leave, he must have thought about it, time passed and she just kept waiting, fully equipped.

"So, you're going or not?" she asked and any moment someone he knew could've happened along.

Still, it took some time for instinct to win over shame.

He thought about Slovakia, a country without a sea, about the town of Modry Kamen, where she lived, he could imagine her walking into a department store, its shelves half-empty, picking a swim ring in the children's department, and the shop assistants thinking she was buying it for a child. And he felt sorry, but he wanted her so badly. What he did at the verge of disgust for her was a sensation: the warmth of the sea, the rippling of waves, the clatter of boats, the faint smell of sewage. They got in the water, he took hold of her waist and slowly pulled her towards the island.

5.

You could tell that a couple of years ago she had been beautiful. Perhaps even just six months ago. One evening, there in her Modry Kamen, she fell asleep a beautiful woman and woke up an old hag. That's what he was thinking about as he pulled her towards the island where he would finally experience what other boys had talked about so much. He pulled her, holding her around the waist, and then a boat passed by and raised the ripples. It seemed he was no longer holding her, as if between his fingers, instead of her, a sea current swayed, a mass of water moved, not a human being. That's how soft she was.

And then the foreign town and the foreign sea turned into home again. Just next to them, a wooden boat came to a halt, holding his friends. His cousin was first to recognize him, he stood at the till and stared at him as if he couldn't believe his eyes. He saw a sixteen-year-old kid he had known his whole life dragging behind him some old hag of at least fifty, with a pink straw hat and a pink swim ring around her chest. And his face showed he felt embarrassed because of him.

"Leave the hag and get in the boat," he said.

It didn't even cross his mind that she might understand the language.

He let go of her for a moment, swam to the boat and said quietly: "I'm going to lick her!"

Then he swam back and took hold of her waist once again.

For a moment, it was dead quiet, all that could be heard was the gurgling of the sea and the yelling somewhere in the distance. And then laughter exploded. Ugly, youthful, vicious laughter. And that's where he lost his virginity, not with her. Something snapped, something broke through, and the blood reddened the sea around them. And he thought that laughter cures shame. He felt sorry for laughing at her, but those were the rules. Under his breath, he told her: "I'm sorry!" And then continued laughing.

6.

It was a particularly strange feeling that his friends saw her, that he saw her too, but did not feel her in his arms. That's how soft she was. She was as soft as saltwater, as a swamp, as something you cannot say is soft because it is more liquid that soft, because fingers pass through it like they

pass through an illusion. Today, when he thinks about it, he is grateful to those kids and the fact that they saw it all because otherwise for him she would've been like some sort of a dream that is not exactly terrifying, but nor is it pleasant and that you occasionally want to go back into because you know it is a dream. The eyes saw the reality of that old Slovakian woman with cellulite and slightly sagging breasts, but the fingers did not feel her. And how can you fuck water, how can you fuck a mirage?

"Are these your friends?" she asked.

He said yes.

"Nice boys," she said.

They continued swimming and the boat left. He could see them laugh and turn back to look at the Slovakian woman whom he was hauling behind him through water like that old man hauling his catch – a giant swordfish.

She let him grope her breasts, first over her bikini, but then he removed her top and it was left hanging around her neck. Her breasts were as soft as children's balloons when you fill them with water and squeeze. From the moment when they were still unattainable until now, when he was touching them, no even half an hour had passed.

7.

With every meter they swam, there was less and less innocence left. When they reached the beach on the island, first he looked around to see if there were any neighbors, and only then allowed her to stand up. He led her through a grove on the southern part of the island, where the steep cliffs descended into the sea and where usually there weren't many swimmers. Occasionally, as if by accident, he would touch her behind and thought it very strange that he was grabbing her ass and they hadn't even kissed yet.

He took her to the paved terrace at the foot of the lighthouse and showed her the panorama of the town. The scene was beautiful: a hot summer day, clouds like white cotton drifting above the Velebit, bell towers sticking up into the sky, yachts and their masts rocking in the harbor. The sight must have been quite different from anything she'd seen before. She stood there and looked at the town, and he wedged her panties into the crack of her ass, like a thong, even though back then

thongs didn't yet exist, and watched her soft buttocks. She just kept looking at the town. Occasionally, she would stroke his swimming trunks absentmindedly.

She wouldn't cave. She wanted her night out with him. She knew that if she allowed him what he wanted, she'd have nothing to bargain with. He coaxed her for two hours, fondled her body, but she wouldn't take her panties off. He sucked first on one, then on the other breast, put her hand on his member. At that moment he thought that he was her dead son's spirit. For a dead son this was a good hard on. And the second he thought that, everything around them suddenly became sharp: the urchins in the water, the green pine needles above them, the brown needles under their feet, prickly weeds, rocks. Even her long manicured nails.

He imagined that he was fucking her from that world into this one, that he was jumping over some boundary no one had ever jumped before, that the horror taking place then and there was something grand, that's what he thought. That story he told himself about her dead son excited him even more and then, when he became even more forceful, she squatted and took his hardened member, licked it once, and then put it under her moist armpit. He fucked her armpits and they didn't even look at each other. First the left one, then the right, left, right, left, right . . . To the cawing of gulls, the clattering of boats, to distant cries from the jetty, they added yet another quiet but interesting noise: squishing like when a child splashes the muddy puddle with its hand.

When it was all over and when she stood up, he imagined her, crumpled with pain, standing above a coffin, while her son's classmates, expressing their condolences, stared at her cleavage. Later he walked her to the little beach, she put on her swim ring, he directed her towards the shore and told her to wave her hands and she'd make it back safely. He watched as the pink inflatable ring with the pink hat grew smaller. And smaller. And smaller. And he remained on the little island and could not find his way back to the living.

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