

The Burning Bride

On the next day, I'm sitting in a hotel room. It is impossible to tell if it is night or daytime; the thick blinds hold back the light. I would be able to tell the time from the TV display, if only I wanted to: if I didn't know for certain that internal time has stopped. I switch my cell phone on and off again; then lie back on the bed, fully dressed. As I start to feel cold, I cover myself with the blanket from the bed next to me. Later on, I pull off the unwrinkled bed-linen, and make a nest out of it, covering my head with one of the big pillows. I can't fall back asleep. Then I realize why: I'm hungry. I already ate all the nuts and the bit of chocolate from the mini-bar. The external time now reads as 9:45, certainly there will be breakfast now.

I go down into the hole that they call the dining room. A blonde woman in a suit standing by the glass entrance asks me for my meal voucher. I hand over one from the last two days' worth of coupons. Surprised, she looks me up and down, picks out a lilac-coloured one and gives back the rest. Musingly, I totter in the direction of the buffet table. I don't see any plates anywhere. Finally, I put a croissant on a coffee-saucer, that will be enough.

It could be approaching eleven when I walk out in front of the hotel: the sun is shining implausibly. I head off in the direction where I sense the fewest other people to be. I cut across a light-splotched park; cyclists whizz by. A little girl picks up a chestnut from the ground, hands it to her mother, who puts it away. I look down. The asphalt is covered with chestnuts. There's a smudge on my shoe; I lean down to wipe it off. Ugh. Jam. Only then do I notice that my sweater is also covered with jam. The nametag dangling from my neck might have slipped into the bowl at breakfast, and since then the goo has been trickling down. No matter, it could have been worse. There were also bowls of mustard and sardine paste on the buffet table.

I stand on the curb, like someone who's alive, then I cross another bicycle path and head deeper in among the trees. We're well into autumn, in the park the fallen leaves have been swept into large mounds. I lie down into one of the piles, pulling the dead leaves over myself. Only my head is uncovered. This way it's good. I'm preparing to leave myself. I have left so much behind already in life, so many people, it's not possible that I wouldn't also be able to leave myself behind. We're not far now from the geographical centre of Europe, therefore it must be an ideal place for a central European to step out of his or her self. It is simply a question of time, when and by which path I will step out of my body. It shall be a slow promenade, as slow as the movement of the clouds in the empty and breezeless sky.

I close my eyes, in my mind I distance myself from the blue planet and step onto the surface of the smaller planet known as Xanax. In earlier times, beings lived here, the citizens of Catatonia, however they were swept away by the edge of a long dream, and since then the heavenly body is completely uninhabited. Its surface is covered with silence and fine white powder. I am about to set off on my spacewalk, when unexpectedly the cell phone in my pocket begins to beep.

This is not going to work. This is no way to go on a spacewalk. I take it out of my pocket and turn it off. I realize that with the phone off, the cellular information will not make identifiable my exact position. The pile of leaves, where I am abstaining from any further involvement. Oh yes, the cellular

information. If there's a God, then He must be a huge cold satellite. I, however, have extricated myself from His transmission range.

I enter into the spirit of being my own switched-off cell phone, lost in the pile of dead leaves. My display does not function, I no longer emit or receive any waves, my speaker unit is clogged with sand. Once again, I head off towards the little white planet, but in order to do so, I need to cross the warm cloak of autumn air. In the midst of my flight, something disturbs me: I open my eyes, and in front of me appears a face.

It is a face no longer young, yet nonetheless still delicate. An aging doll. Her eyes are very blue, her skin is white, her hair is straw-yellow, and most curious of all, a large rose-coloured flower is on the crown of her head. Like a circus equestrienne. Then, when I look more closely, I see that it's not even a flower, but one of these plastic-foam roses used for showering. The kind that swells in water, or something. The doll can't realize that I am on a spacewalk, as she is speaking to me at length in melodic Lithuanian, with fine movements of her head. Suddenly, however, she suspects that maybe I don't understand, as she switches to English:

Are you OK, Cleopatra?

I nod yes, if I can just return to my little planet. But she continues:

What are you doing here?

I don't like long explanations, so I thrust the little nametag from the congress out from among the leaves, near my stomach. She reads my name, but seems to find it to be too difficult, so she continues to address me as Cleopatra.

You going to catch a bad cold, Cleopatra.

Her solicitude is endearing, but I finish the conversation. The pink boots disappear among the rustling leaves, but one minute later another bunch of shoes appears around me.

Come with us!

I shake my head, and a boy with a backpack crouches down and takes my hand:

Please! Very please.

All right. I brush the pile off myself, and reluctantly stand up. There are four of them. Next to the doll stands a girl in a beret, on the other side a boy in a cloth coat with lots of teeth. The young lad with the backpack is still crouching, as if examining the place where I'd been lying, then he stands up and repeats his request:

Come with us!

I nod and brush the leaves from myself. We start off across the park, I've no idea where we're going. They chat, they giggle, they wait. We suddenly stop in front of a massive white block, and from here we proceed to the left on a winding street, then step into a place with a sign that says *Coffe inn*. The doll immediately takes command, pulling chairs about, organizing. Somebody asks her for an autograph, which she quickly signs. The waiters all know her, everyone is bustling around us. She

puts a slice of chocolate cake and a coffee with milk in front of me, and she too begins to eat. The lad in the cloth coat sits beside us and explains that the doll is a famous artist, and that everyone else here is an actor in the Lithuanian National Theatre, not him exactly, he works in the management, but all the others are actors. The doll nods, and eats her cake from the spoon. It's easy for her, dolls always eat, little girls always sit them down and press the mush into their mouths. But I can't eat. I'm choosy. I stare at my plate, when as the guy with the backpack comes over and repeats, yet again:

Very please!

The others refer to him as Darius. I say that unfortunately I have no money with me, the guy with the backpack motions to show that it doesn't matter. Well OK, if his name is Darius, let him pay. I drink the coffee, while the doll flurriedly confers about something with the waiter, who shortly thereafter brings out an English-language newspaper. They spread it out in front of me on the table, and point to a picture. The doll is in the picture, next to a woman with brown hair, and above her are the letters BABA. I knew that, I saw it immediately. It turns out that the rose-headed girl sings in a Lithuanian group named BABA: all of their songs are parodies of the former group ABBA, and that they very recently won the Eurovision Song Competition. Otherwise, the girl's name is Daria, and all of her other appearances are mentioned in the article. You can see her dancing at home, without her wig, sitting in an armchair. My eye keeps straying to the other column, however, which describes an incident in which extremists set a bride on fire. There were demonstrations, but somehow the whole thing remains murky. I'm not able to finish reading, to find out what happened to the bride, because the doll decisively folds the paper together, as if someone had asked her to, and gives it back to the waiter. She motions for us to leave. My coffee is still too hot, so I take it with me.

We stroll along, heading downwards along the same winding road, until we reach the white building. Here we stop, because the girl with the beret has to make a phone call. She stands in front of a phone booth with a Plexiglas roof, her cell phone by one ear, by the other the receiver of the public phone. I ask her if she is addicted to telephones, at which everyone begins to squeal with laughter. But the point of the joke wasn't so good, because I only notice then that the metal cord of the public telephone is not connected to anything; the receiver was only sitting on top of the box. The girl takes it with her and lends it to Daria, who, shouting into it, telephones her in the park. We stop in a clearing; the sun is burning hot. I drink up the rest of the coffee, and wait to see what will come next. The group confers excitedly, then the doll explains that now we're going to act out jokes. That I should pick a joke, and they have to figure out what it is. The boy in the cloth coat with the big teeth runs in small uniform circles and always makes a jump at one point in the circle. Then he shows two people dining, sitting across from each other at the table. The Lithuanians are doubled over with laughter, the guy with the backpack explains what the joke is all about in broken English, but the only part I get is that some kind of a record got stuck. A certain Hungarian writer comes to mind: in one of his pieces, he writes about a similar acting-out game. There are certain accidents: the writers randomly invent something, then it actually happens. The more unlikely it is, the more precisely it occurs. Meanwhile, it is the turn of the girl in the beret, she sits down in a car; the telephone is the gearshift. She suddenly brakes and rolls down the window, and hands something out of it. The spectators, in the meantime, cry something out; everyone knows what joke it is. They repeat the punch line, grabbing their stomachs in laughter. Now it is my turn. The joke I want to act out is about an aggressive little piglet, who sits at the top of a tree as his snot dangles to the ground.* The snot part goes pretty well, but I somehow cannot act out at all that I'm setting at the top of the tree: I

would have to climb up one. I drudge on with the scene for a disproportionate length of time, when the guy in the cloth coat cries out: *Pig depressed*. I decide to accept this solution. In the meantime, Daria wants to finish off with the jokes, because she's thought of something else. Now we must act out various objects or people. The guy in the cloth coat starts, saying something to the one with the backpack. He goes off to the side, then crawls with his backpack into the middle of the clearing. He wriggles here and there on the ground, while the others try to guess:

- Soldier!
- Reconnaissance party!

The boy stands up, shakes his head, and again lies on his stomach. He places his two index fingers at his temples like a bull. The guy with the cloth coat says that he's a reconnaissance party with a telescope, but the boy gestures no. When, after five minutes, no one has guessed that he is a snail, he resentfully stands up and points to me to follow. He whispers the words *Christmas tree* into my ear.

I step into the middle as the others look at me expectantly. I take off one of my boots and chisel away at my right leg for a long time. Then, standing on tiptoe, I try to slide back and pull up the zipper. The guy in the cloth coat cries out:

Somebody can't do up their shoe!

The others cast withering looks of scorn at him. I, however, cautiously stand myself up. I balance on one leg, my two arms spread out.

Christ? asks the girl with the beret.

I gesture no. It seems I should not dangle my hands from my wrists; I extend my fingers out to the side.

Ballerina?

Stork!

I shake my head. No. It's harder than I thought. Of course, the idiotic piece of the contemporary writer is already practically written: how that chick couldn't act her way out of a paper bag. Suddenly, I get an idea. I gesture for a moment of patience, and gather my hair up into a chignon. Then I step to the tree and place the empty cup of Nescafe onto my head as a decorative finial. Thus I stand on one leg, as the others musingly survey me. To help them even more, I hang the nametag dangling from my neck onto my index finger, and gape expectantly. On the distant paths, figures come and go; the thought of the burning bride, however, increasingly invades my thoughts. I imagine how she runs between the trees, how the dry leaves burst into flame. In the meantime, I change legs, and continue to hold my pose.

Are you a scarecrow?

This can't be true. I'm beginning to think about suspending a few chestnuts from myself, when something else comes to mind. I take out my lighter, stretch out my arm with the conference nametag, making a candle out of my right arm. At this, Daria smacks her forehead:

Christmas tree!

I look at her in gratitude, as my calves were beginning to go into spasms. I go back. The boy in the cloth coat steps next to me.

You are a squirrel, I whisper the truth into his ears.

He hardly has time to jump around in circles with the imaginary chestnut, they're already crying out the solution. His job was easy, in my opinion the others as well could have seen the squirrel in him long ago. Then it's the turn of the girl with the beret. She gives her telephone and the bag to the boy in the cloth coat. They quickly guess that she's a detective dog. Daria is bored with the game already, and it has begun to drizzle. We stand among the trees; the sky is cloudy. The girl with the beret, who however is no longer the girl with the beret, as she has taken it off, motions that we should set off for lunch. The boy in the cloth coat smiles, and explains that our enactments were too complicated. I ask him why. What does he think we should have done? Smiling derisively, he sketches the form of a Christmas tree in the air, then the contour of a snail. Aha. I really overcomplicate things. But if they tell me that I'm a Christmas tree, then I want to be a Christmas tree. And the boy with the backpack, a snail. But it just would have been enough to show something. To do it like that. So I ask him, how would he enact a burning bride.

Not at all, because there's no such thing.

Fine, but if there was.

He thinks, hands over his paraphernalia. And then, with a movement of his hand, gestures that he has a long veil that is fluttering after him. Finally, he lies down on the ground and rolls about. I dispatch the coup de grace:

That is not a burning bride. That is a snail with long hair.

He smirks, and stares at my chest. Precisely at that spot where, underneath the jam-smeared sweater, you might imagine my breasts to be. He gives me his card, and it turns out that he's staying in the same hotel as I. Circuitously, he explains that the actors, as well as the BABA group, will have a concert tonight in a place known as Kolonada. That I should go, but call him first, if I think of it: he'd be happy to accompany me. Then he expounds on how the telephones work in the hotel rooms, and how in order to call, all I have to do is press 1 and then the room number, when Daria steps between us:

To room to room, says the guy in the cloth coat.

Do you mean from room to room? I ask.

Yes, yes. To room- to room.

Turum-turum, turum-turum! Daria begins to sing, and then the others join in. Everyone laughs, pulling me along, holding my arms, to go have lunch with them. By the telephone, I try to show that I have to take a shower, my hair is filled with Nescafe. Daria magnanimously gives me the shower-rose from her head, as then they set off in the opposite direction. I promise to be there that evening at the concert.

By the time I get to the hotel, it's raining heavily. I sit for a little in the lobby, exhausted. I smell like coffee and jam. I'm still holding the broken-off telephone receiver in my hand. It's really too bad. This was probably the last telephone in the world that the burning bride could have used to call her fiancé, to tell him that she is here somewhere, in the middle of Europe, to come and save her. But the connection was broken off.

At seven in the evening, I set off across the park in the same direction where I suspect the restaurant converted from the old swimming pool lies. The streets are unfamiliar to me, the watery asphalt glistens in the light of the streetlamps. It's as if I'm moving through a completely different city, I don't see the bike paths anywhere, or the clearing. I go in a straight line farther, farther. I reach the other side of the park, and suddenly I come out where the large white building is, where the winding road begins. This is where we drank our coffee in the morning.

I stroll up, seeing that the door of the coffee-bar is open. I step in. A man in jeans stands with his back to the counter, tinkering with the machine.

There's no coffee, he informs me curtly. The machine's broken.

I ask if they could give me an English-language newspaper. The same girl who was there in the morning shows up. She looks at me with incomprehension. I tell her that I'd like to look at the same newspaper that I read in the morning. Coldly, she points to a shelf where the newspapers are. I repeat again that I was already here in the morning and I make reference to Daria. She doesn't remember me: but of course, I am choosy. She warms up a little when I mention the doll; she goes in and then brings out the English-language newspaper, placing a glass of cola in front of me. She also says that unfortunately there's no coffee, because the machine has broken.

No problem, I say, and I begin to leaf through the paper. I find the article about the Eurovision broadcast, and next to it is the other one. I begin to read. There is no burning bride in it whatsoever: extremists burnt up a bridge in the state of Orissa in eastern India. I thank the girl for the cola, and ask her where the concert will be tonight. She mentions the place called Kolonada, and points towards the park, exactly in the direction from which I came.

I proceed on the path between the trees, deeper and deeper into the park, there's no building anywhere. Only trees, bicycle paths, mud and darkness. And yet suddenly I see a light. I come closer. A fountain, lit up in red, shoots its sprays into the cool evening air. The water dances in circular forms, like a huge scarlet bonfire; in the middle, however, in her garments of light, there is a statue: the burning bride.

Not far from the fountain, the benches loom in the darkness. Next to them are the piles of leaves raked up and smelling of rain. Beneath one ruined pile, there is a broad, wide, human-sized empty space. There, where I had lain in the morning.

**An aggressive little piglet sits in the top of a tree, wearing eyeglasses and staring blankly into space. Its snout dangles all the way to the ground. Somebody passes by, and asks:
Little piglet, don't you have any paper handkerchiefs?*

*The little piglet answers:
I do, but I'm not giving you any.*

Translated by Otilie Mulzet