

JUST LIKE A MAN KISSES A WOMAN HE LOVES
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translated from the Bulgarian by Christopher Buxton

I couldn't believe that my wife loved only me. I thought that she was telling me lies. I was obsessed with the thought that if not now then sometime later, she would cheat on me. I was happy enough when she said she loved only me. But the idea that other men could want to have sex with her drove me mad. Not only that. Even some man's mere inclination to look at her beautiful face drove me into a wild rage.

To tell the truth, apart from my anger, there slept within me a perverse sexual pleasure in the thought of her cheating on me. Sometimes I even found myself fantasising about how she would have sex with another man.

She wouldn't have done it. But I did it. And it's exactly from this that my fears come from.

Five years passed from the time we realised that I was incapable of having a child. I thought that this would crush her. I thought she would want a divorce. But no. She continued to believe. I don't even know what she believed in. Maybe on her own she wasn't convinced that there was something to believe in. I don't know whether she believed out of sheer cussedness. She said: "I believe." I said: "OK." But in reality I continued to lie in my old way.

That's when Mirella turned up. Five years and a few months ago. Now I don't feel like counting. That's why I'm not precise about the number of months. "Nice to meet you." I realised that I would connect with her. Then I didn't describe these relationships as connections. I do now.

Thus I am sitting now in this cell and when I feel bored I begin to clap my hands. Three sequences - three times. One, two, three - hop! Just like what happens in *The Prisoner* by Kurt Vonnegut. But there a song is sung. I think it was some dirty song. But I'm not trying to be like a Vonnegut hero.

Sometimes I think that it will be good to die as myself. Sometimes it's difficult for me to rationalise the past - just like the present. I don't think about the future. When I try to imagine what will happen in days to come, I feel fear. That's why I don't think about the future at all.

When I look through the bars of the cell, I often think that I have never loved. Maybe because I wasn't able to love, I poured all my dissatisfaction with the world and myself over

Kristina. I blamed her for not satisfying me sexually, for not being able to cook, for not being able to take care of our home. I said: "You're a terrible cook." She said: "OK." I said: "You're a slut." She said: "OK."

When Kristina realised that I couldn't get her pregnant, she fell into a deep depression. I thought the next step would be divorce. But obviously I was mistaken. She very much wanted us to have children. She lived with that idea. The fact that I was incapable of creating a child crushed her. But only for a moment.

One, two, three - hop!

Once after I had sex with Mirella, she asks me if I would give money to a beggar. I say: "No." She says: "Even if it's a cold winter night?" I say: "No." She says: "Even if it's Christmas." I say: "No." Certainly she became sad after that. She said nothing for a moment. After that she made an effort to look at me. She said: "You are losing your humanity." I got angry and got up to get dressed. She reminded me horribly of Kristina. Everything infuriated me.

I still cannot understand Christmas.

Even now, when I have to sleep in this narrow cell, I try to get rid of this disgusting question - what if it's Christmas? These words reverberate in my head. Here in the cell, it's night time. This makes me feel alone. I've been like this all my life. I admit it to myself. I've always been alone. Up to now, it's not been a problem for me, but today, at this hour, in this cell it affects me. Once I tried talking to myself. But no conversation followed.

Sometimes a guard comes to my cell. He's old, with white whiskers and blue shirt, he looks sad. He never talks and I don't want him to talk. I have no inclination to chat. I don't even know if it's allowed for me to chat to him. I don't know the rules.

The guard came today. He hadn't come for two whole days. He walked slowly. I heard how his rubber soles approached slowly. They stopped. I got up and looked through the bars. He looked at me again with that same sadness.

She says: "Victor, I want to share something with you." Her voice sounds worrying. "I want to tell you something important." I say: "OK." "It's a difficult story. But it's important. Please don't interrupt me. If you do that, I may not be able to carry on. So be patient, please. Don't interrupt me."

We both went out onto the terrace. It was summer. The town shone below us. We sat on the wicker chairs. Mechanically I put her hand in mine. She pulled it away.

"My mother died when she had me. You know that. Dad suffered. But apart from that he was glad I had come into the world. You've seen my mother in photographs. I look like her. When I was 17 years old, one night Dad came to me. He sat on the bed next to me, put his arms around me and said he loved me. He said: 'Can I kiss you?' I said: 'Yes Dad, you can kiss me.' But he kissed me in a different way. He kissed me just like a man kisses a woman he loves. After that he asked me whether he could lie down next to me... And it happened..."

What had been destroyed in that 17-year-old girl, at that moment when the father kissed his daughter "just like a man kisses a woman he loves"? Was the girl turned into a prematurely grown up sad woman? Was it then that the girl in her died? Or could it be that the girl in her had never died? Kristina was always calm. I know that she conceals deep down within herself a great bitterness. When I found out about this event, in my mind Kristina still had the face of a girl.

I wonder whether these men, who do these things with young girls or with their daughters, are attracted by their youth and fresh flesh and their emotional lack of self confidence? In fact can you make love against one's will? I cannot. I don't know whether I have ever made love. But, even so does the freshness and softness of flesh awaken the desire or the fear of being tied down by female maturity?

I'm not talking about Kristina's father. He looked for the warmth of his deceased wife in the flesh of his daughter. Was it the scent of the girl that Kristina was then that reminded him of the scent of his wife and that was what aroused his sexual hunger, which lies peculiarly dormant in men whose wives have died? I have always been repelled by the idea of loving a widow or widower because there is no doubt that in their souls there remains a particle of death and of the loved or unloved partner. I don't say that I wouldn't love a widow, but I am afraid because she has lived through the death of her loved one and I will be living, I'm never going to die and someone else will again receive more attention and respect. Egoism again. Absurd or not, there's something basic in this fear, because to love a man or woman who has touched death even through love is really terrifying.

"Even if it's Christmas?" - asks the inspector, pointing an automatic at me. He says: "Answer me! Even if it's Christmas?" And he approaches slowly. He enters my cell and nudges

the metal muzzle into my stomach. It's seven thirty. I wake up and realise that I'm very hot. Not even a month has passed since I came here and I experience my death in countless variations. Time passes slowly. I don't have a watch to measure it. I miss the sun.

If someone were to ask me now, at this moment, what is the most important thing that I have to teach my child, if I could have one, I would say - to love.

It's always interested me why he did that with Kristina. I'm curious whether it was the lust which I feel for Mirella and for secretaries who have just left high school or a deep lack of love. I wonder whether coupling with his own daughter imparted the feeling of coupling with his real flesh and blood wife. I have never thought about my own couplings. I thought, planned and worked out how to accomplish them. But nothing more.

Was there any point in his penetration of the virgin flesh of his own daughter? How ugly is the image of a grown man huffing and puffing over a young girl. I've never asked Kristina whether it deprived her of that romantic inexperience in that first sexual encounter with a boy. I had that feeling when I still dreamed that I could have a family.

Sometimes I felt that same anger towards Kristina's father that I felt towards the men who turned to look at her in the street. I asked myself whether desire and thoughts of her newly mature body passed through his head when she was on the stairs and the beautiful curves of her shoulders were most visible.

If I had a daughter, I'd be scared. I'd be afraid lest I repeat the actions of Kristina's father.

Ironically or not, my parents died in a car accident after a heavy meal. They were on holiday. Something unusual. They were coming back. They stopped for lunch. After that they sat in the car, my father turned the starter key and the engine grumbled. He put it into first gear and drove the car slowly out onto the road, there wasn't much traffic. And they fell down that ravine. At the end of the road. I was already working at that time. And they were suitably old.

One, two, three - hop!

I went there a number of times, to the edge of the ravine and I don't know why it wasn't difficult for me. But in fact, now I can't remember whether it was sad and difficult, but I remember I almost had a nervous breakdown when I tried to imagine how my mother's horn-rimmed spectacles had continued to rest on her nose even after the fall. And they continued to sit

there. They didn't even remove them when they got her out - firemen, ambulance, police - all those who turn up at such events.

A number of times I went there and gazed downwards. It was full of bushes. And I'm sure with snakes that have their holes under the scrub and stones. If my mother's glasses had been broken in the accident, I would have climbed down to gather the fragments of glass. I would have looked for the horn-rimmed frame which sometimes would have been wet from rain or tears. But her glasses sat on her nose. That's how it was at the burial. And both of them looked as if any moment they would get up and go to the bathroom to brush their teeth. They looked as if they had never had an accident.

One, two, three - hop!

The thought that I am pointless is a leftover from my blunted conscience. When I was six or seven years old, everything hardened in me. Had I accepted my mother's indifference? She didn't talk to me. So sometimes I regretted that I wasn't there at that moment when they flew down the ravine - to hear what her last words were. So I want to climb down among the bushes and rocks, with no fear of snakes, to open the door to my mother, to take her glasses in my hand, to wipe them, just untouched as they are and put them back on her nose. I'll kiss her on the forehead and I'll say: "Farewell." I'll look at Dad, I'll touch his hand and I'll say: "Farewell." Just like that - one, two, three and I don't have the strength for hop. Just like that: "Farewell."