

## **LITTLE ESCAPES**

**by Olya Stoyanova**

translated from the Bulgarian by Diana Stoykova, Lyublyana Atanasova and Nataliya Yaneva

He is a completely normal guy. Every week, he reads his horoscope, but it's usually wrong. Most times it says that no major catastrophes, long journeys, love affairs or problems at work await him. In many respects he is completely normal. No nightmares plague him, his wife doesn't cheat on him, his kids aren't half-bad.

But as a matter of fact, magnetic storms and solar flares sometimes affect him.

Sometimes he can't fall asleep during the full moon. Sometimes he startles himself awake in the middle of the night and contemplates strange cities, far-off trips and a different script for all this. That's all.

In many respects he is completely normal. He's thirty-three. A little dull. A little predictable. He is not the adventurous type. He is not a womanizer. He doesn't dream of conquering peaks and doesn't eye women. He has no special talents to speak of.

Sometimes it gets too heavy. Once or twice a year he feels like there's not enough air in the room and the bedroom ceiling is pressing down on him. At times like these he can guess everything his wife is about to say. At times like these – once or twice a year – he feels like he just doesn't have the strength to go on. Somehow he can't bear the thought of making coffee every morning, waiting for the bus, paying the electricity bills, going to all those future parent-teacher meetings.

Suddenly he gets the feeling that he's simply going to crack under the pressure of it all. Suddenly he gets scared and doesn't know how to react, whether to run, to not come home after work, to go on a business trip, to have an affair, to...

He has to do something, has to go somewhere, but everything is so damn predictable. His horoscope foretells meetings with old friends, love affairs and problems at work. As luck would have it, these two or three days there are no solar flares and magnetic storms, which so frighten old people. There's nothing, not even the slightest thing that he can use as an excuse. His wife is nice. His kids are alright. Looking in the mirror, he is quite alright, too.

It's just that... once or twice a year he remembers that he doesn't have all that much to look forward to anymore. At times like these he gets dressed, grabs his coat and says "I'm gonna run to the store. Do you want some ice-cream?"

And softly he closes the door behind him.

And that's the moment he is afraid of. He is not afraid of earthquakes, natural disasters, muggings, car accidents or any form of violence. He is afraid of these first few seconds, standing in the dark and asking himself – where to now?

In theory he can go anywhere. He can catch a late train, catch a plane, bury himself somewhere and take his life in a completely different direction. He can live quite comfortably

somewhere and wake up every morning with a clear head. He could become a Buddhist monk or a farmer. He could be a computer specialist, living in his own imaginary world. He could still find another woman to entertain him and keep his mind off any negative thoughts.

Yet he sits in the dark, the dog catches his scent and wags its tail at him. He just stands there – 10, 15, 20 seconds. Maybe longer. Sometimes it's all harder or takes more time. Then he turns up his collar, steps into the dead leaves, signaling the dog to be quiet, and goes into the backyard. As if he is just out for a cigarette. Yet nothing is that simple; standing awkwardly in the dark, he stares at the bright windows.

His wife is dusting, his kids are watching TV. He looks at the rows of books in the library, the ficus with the enormous leaves that reach the ceiling, the cupboard's chipped paint, the table and the four chairs. He stands there hypnotized, as if seeing it all for the first time. It's like watching TV. He thinks to himself – my whole world is locked up in this room. All these books, objects, the chipped bookshelf, the fern, this particular woman and these kids.

They are talking but the words can't reach him. Their movements seem slowed down, his wife is laughing yet he is standing in front of the window, watching them. Five, ten, fifteen seconds. Sometimes more, sometimes less. Then his wife smiles or strokes the kids' heads absentmindedly. Sometimes she does nothing, just stares blankly into space. Other times she stretches slowly and bites into an apple. And, strangely enough, that sound reaches him and brings him back.

He stands there for another second or two, maybe five or ten, maybe even an hour, then goes back inside.

He takes off his shoes and coat, as if nothing has happened.

"They didn't have any of that ice-cream," he says.

"Oh, you're back," his wife remarks. "That was fast."

"Yes," he replies.

Once or twice a year he comes back from very, very far away. It's not even worth talking about.