

DOWNRIVER
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translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

It was their tenth day paddling downriver. The wind was at their backs only at the start; the next day it died down and then spun clockwise until it was blustering at them head-on. They took down the small sail and kept paddling, waking up every morning in anticipation of the “downer,” as the local fishermen called the tailwind, but it did not return.

They would paddle very early in the morning if they managed to wake up on time, they would also paddle in the late afternoons, when it was cool and pleasant in the shade of the willows, especially at dusk. At midday they would dock close to a vineyard and sleep until late afternoon, their mouths sticky from the tart grapes. The vineyards smelled like brandy and wine – the harvest was already over and there was nobody on the green hills, only ravens, big and gray, who left fish scales and white droppings in their wake. Lizards and snakes swished through the sizzling grass, parched by summer. Used to their company, they had stopped paying to these creatures, they had the feeling that even their own skin was ringing, stretched out and dried in the sun. They would not have minded freeing themselves of it like the skimpy clothes they stripped off in the vineyards where they would lie for hours in indolent indifference; she on her back, her arms crossed under her head to guard her hair from the burrs that nevertheless always managed to get tangled in it, making her scream and laugh in the mornings as she tugged them out; he – watching her, narrowing his good eye, he could hardly see with the other, he couldn’t remember where his glasses were. But even without their help he still managed to make out the freckles and numerous moles dotting her dark bronze skin like galaxies orbiting black holes.

In the late afternoon they would load the boat with fruit; with it hanging from the prow, the kayak looked like a cornucopia. After days like this the evenings were exquisite and endless and he had the feeling he could continue paddling downriver forever, his whole life! The sun dawdled for hours before finally ducking behind the hills. Swarmed by mayflies at the mouth of a river, the two of them would fish until late, staring silently at the rapids as if hypnotized, and then they would go to bed and fall asleep instantly.

In places the river would grow very shallow. They quickly learned to spot the sand bars by their furrowed surface and to avoid them. When they ran aground they would drag the boat, clenching their teeth, silent. Lately they hadn't been talking much. Only the most necessary words for managing the paddles, the sail, for docking, lighting a fire or choosing a campsite for the night. It was needless to talk about things which they both knew perfectly well how to do. Only at night would they finally manage to ease out of that state of silent travelling, but even then they didn't have much of anything to say, only names – their own – repeating them breathlessly a few times in the night. He was tired, yet would let her make love to him and in the end he would come with satisfaction, too.

He preferred having her in the mornings, before he had fully opened his eyes, but she always hurried to get up, to bathe in the river, wading in up to her breasts, cleaning the thistles from her hair, giving herself over to a whole infinity of feminine indulgences and in the end they were always late getting started... The silence would take over again as the sun scaled the sky and they settled into synchronized paddling – evenly, rhythmically, for hours on end. In the beginning, before he taught her to paddle, he would worry that the seat was too hard or the paddle too heavy; he tried to make her comfortable, he encouraged her. However, she quickly caught the rhythm and he quit tormenting himself; he felt her confidence, he was content with merely tossing a glance towards her flashing paddle out of the corner of his eye from time to time, feeling the vibrations of the seat behind him and when he finally sensed her as part of the boat, each of them sank into the private world of an efficient mechanism, savoring their own movements, their own thoughts and even their own splashes. Only in the mornings, if they managed to start early, or in the evenings, when the waters were perfectly smooth, would they give themselves over to a sudden frenzy; with screams and yells, they would abruptly begin paddling furiously, intoxicated by the white foam tossed up from the kayak's prow, the wind roaring in their ears. The rest of the time – they were silent. Even in the vineyard, even though it was more pleasant there than at night in their small tent with its scent of rubber. She was ashamed to make love like that, however, right out in the sun; given over to its warmth, she preferred to be left alone until evening. Eventually he, too, got used to not thinking about anything, letting himself go, as if meditating. Her nakedness ceased to arouse him, it came to seem natural amidst the greenery, and he would try to sleep, silent.

The last few days, things had changed. First, the weather turned bad, a thin gray haze covered the sky over the river, the nights grew cooler. This forced them to sleep snuggled together for warmth, but even that didn't help. Second, they had to forget about the vineyards – they paddled silently, sulkily, the whole day in constant fear of getting caught in the rain and in just a few short days the trip downriver was transformed from pleasure to torment. Wet, angry, constantly fighting a headwind, they barely covered 10 or 15 km a day. They lost weight. The silence they had existed within was now filled with something new – dissatisfaction. Not directed at each other, no – most likely at the weather; if it was aimed at anything or anyone concrete, then it was towards him for the barbs he let slip in the helmsman's direction – little words, the suspicion that she was falling asleep while paddling. "What are you doing?" He huffed. "Don't you see that tree?"

He noticed it not just in her, but in himself as well, these states – the urge to drop the paddle, to stop thinking, to disappear... That was when he realized that he didn't desire her as much anymore, perhaps because all his energy was focused on overcoming the difficulties of the trip, on his efforts to not scream at her, on anticipating all her mistakes, because she was extremely sensitive, very sensitive and on top of everything she would get mad when she realized she'd made a mistake. If she even realized it, of course...

For this reason he began to imagine that he was traveling alone. This calmed him down. He began traveling alone in his thoughts and discovered with surprise how easy, how much easier it was to be alone on the front seat – the boat was lighter, there was no need to constantly turn around to see how she was doing. Solitude would have bothered him before, but not now, he couldn't help but prize it, as if he now craved it, this dreamed-up solitude. He regretted not setting out on his own like real kayakers do. What was he thinking, dragging her along with him, this clumsy companion, a burden that kept sitting in silence – why was she silent? As if accusing him of something. But what? He had never, ever been able to stand her muteness; he had always believed that silence was a sign of disapproval, even of reproach. And wasn't it high time to ask what the point of this whole trip was, what was he looking for in the kayak, did he still love her or did he not love her anymore?

Had he ever loved the wet woman behind him?

And suddenly, when the question was put this way, with all the calm he could muster and with the full clarity of his consciousness, he replied that perhaps he had

before – yes, but not anymore, although perhaps the fault lay with the bad weather and the exhaustion as well and – dead-tired – the two of them simply needed to wait for the trip to end to pull themselves together. Did it really matter so much?

Once, in a harbor – they were sitting in a brightly lit, uninviting little restaurant eating dinner in silence, it was still raining, the waterlogged boat was waiting at the dock – as they ate he saw tears drop from her eyes onto the plate.

That night they didn't pitch the tent. They slept in an old hotel by the river. It was shabby and deserted, perfect for the occasion. He hoped they wouldn't be given a double room, they didn't have their papers on them, but the woman at the reception desk slyly rewarded them with a key and conspiratorially wished them good night.

He didn't sleep. By morning he had it all worked out. He got up, dressed warmly, packed up his things and his fishing rods, and tiptoed out. It was a cold morning. It struck him as the most beautiful dawn of the whole trip. The rain had stopped; the water had spilled over the embankments into the riverside gardens. The wind raked the river, speckling the water's surface with goose bumps. Shivering with cold, he untied the kayak. Before getting in he went back to the hotel and left her things, having searched the boat thoroughly to make sure that nothing of hers, no trace of her, remained. No, there was no need for letters of explanation, he just did what he had planned and had been dreaming about for so long: pushing the boat out, jumping into it, getting out into the fairway and paddling downstream with all his might, swept along with the current, never to return again to that harbor.

Both the morning and the river promised a smooth trip. He hardly thought about what he had done to her, leaving her to wake up alone in the empty hotel, and when he caught a final glimpse of the shore and the white building, almost none of the usual pangs of conscious remained. To the contrary, he even felt a sort of pride that he had been free to leave – ah, the solitude of being pulled downriver! — he thought, grasping the paddle even more firmly.

Once seized by the current, the boat would surge forward and he would see the wild ducks scatter fanlike, frightened, and he would say to himself – that's a good sign! He would never forget their voices. Perhaps this was freedom? Yes, yes, exactly! — he would whisper, paddling after them feverishly, his eyes closed, without wanting to think, without remembering, orienting himself solely by the swishing of feathers...

He paddled like that for fifteen minutes or more and with every passing minute his desire to turn around and look back, to see the outline of the small harbor-side hotel became almost irresistible. And when he stopped squeezing his eyes shut and turned around to look, the second before it disappeared behind a bend in the river, he realized that he was not free to cause her that kind of pain and that there was no excuse. He abruptly jerked the rudder and pressed the paddle hard against the water.

The boat — a tourist kayak that he had bought with such rapture during a business trip abroad — despite being hardy and steady even in rapids, was too wide, designed mainly for trips downstream. For more than two hours he managed to hold the prow against the current, which was very strong in those narrow straights — even the fishermen’s motorboats were no match for it. The distance between himself and the white blotch decreased centimeter by centimeter — the cramped hotel with the hushed little restaurant, where, once he got back, he would drink the most delicious and hard-won beer in the world. The beer of reconciliation...

But his muscles refused to budge the paddle, his heart refused to pump more blood, his lungs declined to inhale and exhale more than their usual five cubic liters of air and the boat stopped... It hung for an instant in a dead zone, unmoving against the backdrop of the bank, before spinning slowing around and falling back; little by little the current mercilessly scooped it up. Seeing this, he gave up the struggle. “What’s the point?” He thought, as if in a fog. “It had to happen sooner or later...”

Two hours later, having made it back to the hotel on foot, climbing over the trunks of poplars felled by the current (he had left the boat tied up a few miles downstream), he made his way up the staircase, out of breath. He had decided not to say anything to her. Let her think he was just fishing as usual, and that he’d left her clothes behind so they wouldn’t get wet. Let her think the bright sunlight had gotten to him. That he’d fainted. That he’d almost drowned. He will cover her eyes with his palms like he used to, he will press her lips with his own, he will tear out any doubts... The wooden steps will creak treacherously, the blood will roar in his ears, he will sneak into the entryway on tiptoe, he will take off his shoes and quietly open the door...

But the room will be empty. Only her hat will be rolling on the floor. The straw hat he had given her for the trip.