

THOSE DEAD BIRDS ON THE PORCH

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translated from the Bulgarian by Kalina Filipova

All those dead birds on the porch. When I opened up the house after being away for three months. It seems death hadn't left this place.

I left the suitcases in the hallway and methodically began to pull down the paper with which I had plastered all the windows. I took off the sheets that covered all the furniture, mirrors and pictures in the house. It was then that the smell hit me. The same smell from three months back, only perhaps that little bit stronger and more pervasive. Little whiffs of Lydol, Tramadol and morphine were still escaping from the vials and pill-boxes on the shelves; there were unused syringes in the drawers, unopened packets of Vilcacora, capsules of shark-liver oil and various other drugs that boost the immune system. I kept finding gauze, surgical scissors and methylated spirits in the most unexpected places. In my frantic efforts to get rid of everything as quickly as possible, I almost threw away the photo tacked to the kitchen cupboard, a photo of a much happier time.

I'm about four, in Granny's back yard, leafing through a picture book; sitting at the garden table beside me – my mother and father, playing cards. I have no idea who took the photo but they managed to capture the duck-yellow colour of my dress, the sun-bleached strands in my mother's hair, my father's delicate musician's fingers and his pleased smile of a winner. I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday, that summer's day, and the card game. All of a sudden my mother turns to me and asks: "Would you like to have a little brother or sister?" Angry, almost in tears, I say no; that if that happened, I'd run away, far away from them; that I'd hate them. My parents calm me down and go back to their game. Neither the question nor the answer have entered the shot in any way. And in the next twenty-five years there is no one else in our family photos.

Even in high school I regretted my selfish outburst which stopped my parents from having any more children. Much later, when they were ill and bed-ridden, I even blamed myself for having denied us all the chance of a bit more love and attention at such a hard time.

I dusted the photo carefully and put it back. Then I started on the floors and walls, and the cobwebs in high corners of the ceiling. It took me a whole day to rid the rooms of the smell

and restore some of the colours. Late in the afternoon the bedroom looked bright and cheerful again with its Persian blue chest of drawers and the bed-covers with colourful pansies embroidered all over; even the faces in the photos seemed happier and kinder than before. Finally, I scraped the dry coffee caking the bottom of the coffee-pot with such ferocity, you'd think I was scraping away a painful memory; then I filled it with coffee and fresh water and turned on the hob.

Those past three months had done nothing to change anything in me, despite my huge efforts to run away from my recent past. Istanbul, Venice, Naples, then Tunisia and Morocco; and then the long return journey: Madrid, San Sebastian, Bilbao, Biarritz, Andora and many, many more – places that left no trace except in dry travel notes, poor photographs and my unfortunate liver. Sex – whether because it was too casual and incidental, or because of the thin crust of ice which seemed to cover me from top to toe – fell far short of my expectations, except, perhaps, for that one night when I got high on pot on deck and then woke up in the cabin of that Slovenian couple, feeling all over that something wonderful had happened, even though I didn't have a clue what it might have been.

I think it was that night that I decided to stop running, to come back, collect all my stuff, find a buyer and take the first decisive step towards solving the problem of my past. By turning my back on it. In the home I grew up in. And now I was about to spend my first night in a house which was well disinfected and no longer belonged to anyone.

I had supper: bread and cheese, and ham, and half a bottle of Merlot. Then I watched a film and finished the wine. After midnight I started flipping channels frantically: old concerts I had seen, or had on video; CNN and the BBC's three-day-old news; porn, which I wasn't in the mood for. I had a glass of whiskey, turned off the TV and decided I would sleep on the couch in the living room. I went out like a light.

I was woken by the dog whining at my feet. I jumped out of bed, only to realise that I hadn't had a dog for at least ten years now. I moved to the easy chair but I could still hear the whining. I began to doze off again. This time the sound came in straight through the window, flooding the quiet living room. My skin grew taut, my ears started buzzing, I could feel my veins turning phosphorescent in the dark. The sound was that of someone weeping feebly, meekly. I went up to the window and looked out. There seemed to be some sort of white snowdrift right next to the bed of lily-of-the-valley. It moved almost imperceptibly. Numb with fear, I opened the

door and found myself staring at the vague outlines of a body. It was a girl, eighteen or nineteen, her calf-length dress stained and torn, her knees and elbows sticking out; she was all skin and bones. At first I thought she must be a young vagrant who'd sneaked in to find some shelter. But how could she have sneaked in: the only way out into the garden was through the house....

The girl looked up at me and started sobbing more loudly. I bent down to lift her. She was very light: as though there was something missing in her, something lacking – organs, bones, fluids, a past.... Lately, light bodies seemed to me particularly sinister. I carried her into the room and put her in one of the chairs. Her head lolled sideways.

“Who are you? How did you come in? Did anyone hurt you?”

The girl went on sobbing.

“Ida. My name is Ida,” she managed to say. “I’m on my own.”

“Have you run away from home? Have your parents hurt you?”

“I got thrown out. I was caught stealing and – .

She couldn't have had a normal home. She looked undernourished, there was a sour smell coming from her, she hadn't changed in days. I decided not to ask any more questions. Instead, I gave her a clean towel and took her to the bathroom. Ida just stood there, though: she was too weak to take off her dress. I helped her. She had nothing on underneath but her panties. Her breasts were almost boyish: I doubt she'd ever worn a bra. I pushed her gently under the shower and turned on the hot water. When I began to lather her, her hands started trembling uncontrollably. A minute later she was trembling all over and it was all I could do to keep her from collapsing onto the tiles. I couldn't hug her: I felt pity for her but also disgust.

I took Ida back into the living room and settled her into the easy chair. I put down a mug of tea and some sandwiches and biscuits beside her. She ate everything up within a couple of minutes, then rushed to the bathroom and vomited. When, pale and trembling, she came back into the room and sank down into the easy chair; I could no longer contain myself and asked:

“How did you get into the garden?”

“I just climbed over the wall; I had to hide.”

What kind of superhuman strength did this scrawny child possess, to be able to climb over a six-foot wall?

“What did you steal?”

“Things – coffee and cigarettes from the supermarket, alcohol, nice underwear sometimes, jewellery.”

“Who makes you do that?”

“No one. I sell the stuff. I want to get away.”

“From your parents? From home?”

Ida burst into tears again and I decided I shouldn't ask any more questions. I took out what clothes and underwear I had left from my high school years, dressed her in them, and put her to bed on the sofa. I went into the bedroom and, just to be on the safe side, shut the door to the living room firmly.

The next three days I hardly came out of the house. I would only go out early in the morning to buy fresh bread and vegetables, and a newspaper: every day I expected a note to appear in the “Missing Persons” section, announcing a girl had gone missing and was wanted by the police. Then I would bolt the front door and go on cleaning the rooms, and cooking meals for Ida. The little thief hardly spoke to me. She did mention, though, and several times, that she wouldn't be bothering me for much longer. She said she'd managed to bring some of her money along and was planning to go to the seaside where she hoped no one would recognise her and she'd find a job more easily. I wondered where she could have hidden the money, having come in that tattered dress and without any luggage. It turned out she'd left it with a high-school friend who'd keep it for her until Ida rang her.

“Aren't you afraid your family or the police might knock on the door any minute? What should I tell them? I can't hide you here forever....”

“I ran for a long time before I got here. They won't find me.”

“Don't you miss your parents?”

“I don't have any parents,” Ida said calmly.

I could see her regaining her strength by the hour. Gradually a brave, confident body took shape inside those old school clothes of mine; the colour returned to her cheeks, her lips became full and beautiful, her ankles grew strong and her knees stopped trembling. I kept plying her with food and vitamins. I gave her milk and broccoli, carrots, and spinach, and buckwheat. I made her eat nuts and poured her a glass of red wine every evening. The rest of the bottle I would finish on my own, in my bedroom. On the third day Ida offered to help me with the cleaning and packing. Gradually, she became completely absorbed in her work. She would handle the silverware with a

devotion that revealed respect for a past she didn't share. She carefully packed away the photographs, asking me about the people in them, trying to memorise who they were. I could hear her softly repeating their names later as though she was trying to file them away in her memory so that she'd be able to return to them when necessary. She polished the glasses before wrapping them up in paper and arranging them in boxes – glasses she would never drink from. She sorted my father's notebooks by date, sticking little pieces of paper in their upper lefthand corner. I was grateful to her because I still found it difficult to enter into and explore the world which, three months ago, had abandoned me so painfully.

“Why don't you let me live here for a while after you leave? It's not very likely you'll find a buyer that quickly. I'll pay you rent,” Ida said, taping another cardboard box closed.

“I'm hoping I will find a buyer quickly.... But, of course, you can stay until it's sold. You don't need to pay anything. I'm just worried someone will recognise you and then we'll both be in trouble.”

“They won't. I mean, you didn't, did you? Why should the neighbours? And anyway, I'll make sure I don't go out much.”

I couldn't say no. She seemed so badly hurt, I just couldn't find it in me to turn her out.

That evening I had rather more to drink than usual. Ida was still very quiet but seemed absorbed in my stories and kept wanting more. I went on and on – about my travels, the ships, the men I'd met. I would often burst out laughing at the memories of all my silly flirting and the empty mornings after a night of shabby, uninspiring sex.

“Perhaps you shouldn't drink every night...” Ida said and there was concern in her eyes. “How long have you been like that?”

“And how long have you been going around supermarkets, stealing?!” I snapped back at her.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to offend. But you're so pretty. And clever. You should take better care of yourself. But – I do apologise....”

“I've been drinking since I lost them. I can't sleep otherwise.”

“I can't sleep much either. Not for years now. And I don't even know who I might have lost, or when.”

I felt bad about snapping at her: she couldn't have had it easier than me. For the first time I felt the need to touch her. I stretched my hand and gently caressed the inside of her hand. She smiled and blushed slightly.

It was well past midnight when I turned out the light in the living room and wished Ida good night. This time I couldn't bring myself to shut the bedroom door behind me.

It wasn't long before she came. I was still awake and heard her soft barefoot steps across the wooden floor.

“May I sleep in your bed?”

“Yes, child.”

I lifted the blanket and Ida crept in beside me. There was hardly any trace left of my former disgust. Now she seemed cleaner and stronger than me. Her arms and her legs were supple and warm. Her belly, pressed against mine, no longer repelled me. Her skin glowed as if it had been rubbed with lemon peel and milk. Her hair smelled of pine, and this was not due to the expensive shampoos in my bathroom. I was surprised and moved, despite myself, and soon I could feel my whole body vibrating. Ida seemed to become aware of this: she looked up in the dark and then she lowered her lips towards my breasts. She began to kiss them and there was nothing shy or inexperienced about it: she kissed them as I would have kissed hers. Without even asking her. Without expecting her to answer. I felt dizzy with wine and excitement. I closed my eyes for an instant.

...I dreamt I was riding my first bicycle in our back yard. It's small and red, and it's actually a tricycle. Our back yard isn't very big, so I go round and round in circles by the walls. Tall white walls. I'm peddling harder and harder. A fine paste of white plaster and green ivy looms before my eyes. Any moment now I'll fly off my bike but then suddenly I see something strange and indistinct on the porch. My mother, my father and – something else. A child. It looks like me and has a shiny new red bicycle, just like mine. Is that me? But how could it be: I'm over here? And if it isn't me, then who is that other girl? I can feel the horror rising in my throat, I let go of the handlebars and smash into the white-and-green paste....

I wake up drenched in sweat. I'm feeling sick. I try to keep my head still, as though it's a bowl of the last soup I'm ever going to have in my life, and I shouldn't spill a single drop. Ida is sleeping quietly beside me. I somehow have to reach the toilet. Swaying, I manage to get through the door into the living room, and then into the bathroom. I sit on the toilet and pee in the dark. I

splash some cold water on my face. Then touch my lips to the faucet and drink thirstily, letting the water run down my face and neck, and between my breasts.

I go back through the living room. The alcohol seems to have sharpened my senses because once again I can smell the odour of various medicines in the air. I can even tell their different dosage by the smell. The strongest ones are taught like bowstrings and when they snap, they directly pierce my nose. A wave of nausea comes over me and I have to lean against the wall so I don't collapse. There are empty white squares in white frames where the photos used to hang. One of them is very, very large. We've never had such a large photo in the house. Then it turns out that's my bedroom door. Why don't I remember closing it? I tiptoe inside and head for the bed. Ida is still fast asleep. She looks so tiny. As though she has shrunk terribly in her sleep. I want to look at her for a while before I go back to bed. Standing above her, I lift the cover. Suddenly it all comes to me in a flash. And I recognise her. That child's body framed by the white of the sheets. A tiny three- or four-year-old. And she looks just like me, as though she's come straight out of one of my childhood photos. Or as if she's only just entered one. Except she's slightly fairer, slightly smaller. She's wearing the same duck-yellow dress. The one I wore that afternoon twenty-five years ago. I don't know who took the photo but he seems to have missed something extremely important. And now it's too late to rewind the film – and let that other one enter the shot.

I reached over, grabbed my pillow, and pressed it down as hard as I could over the poor sleeping child's face; I pressed and pressed until my wrists started turning blue.