

All Our Ancestors

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Translated by Teya Dancer

I had known M. for a year. She was a bashful but staunch girl. She didn't talk much. Although the colour of her skin was oddly pale, and her mouth sometimes smelled like rotten plums, I doubt I could have ever wished for more. We both came from a small, suburban town; my parents were government officials, hers worked in a factory for plastics. I was a shy and timid child, self-effacing, as they say, which gradually turned me into an oppressed and dule young man. The women existed only in my fantasy world; I couldn't even think to go near them, to touch, to suck, to bite, to do all of those things that blasted my imagination. But M. let me do whatever I wished: she would undress her skinny, pale body and would let me salivate all over her, to stick my tongue in her, to thrust my phallus between her tights, to tremble, to scream. She just lied there and smiled, gently stroking my sweaty hair, waiting for me to come, then she would wash herself for a long time in the bath, saying: "That's all right. Everything's fine." It was the same thing every time, we both wouldn't talk much, and would remain shrunken into each other, trapped like in an amber in our steamy universe. I never believed that she was capable to experience true pleasure, that her face could twist in orgasmic grimaces the way mine did, but I knew she did everything for me, put up with my moments of sexual delirium the same way I would put up with her breath or the rotten peach taste of her lips. Isn't this after all what marriage is all about, the cohabitation, the love?

We got married in May, and in June we went on holiday to a sanatorium for balneotherapy, it was our honeymoon. We were both sickly, skinny, consumptive-looking, so our parents decided that the mineral water, the saunas, the steam baths and all the other procedures would have a miraculous effect on the newlyweds. "There's children to be born", they'd say, "The health is the most important thing." So, there we were, at the sanatorium. We got a double room with a spacious king-size bed. We had cheese sandwiches and macaroni for breakfast, and for dinner they gave us compote. Lunch was limited to a pack of biscuits since we spent the daily hour sweating in the sauna or wearing shades under the

quartz light amid the smell of ozone. The rest of the time it was infrared light therapy and sleep.

Already on the first day there I noticed something strange. At first, I didn't pay it much attention, but eventually thinking about anything else was an effort. In the bushes outside I saw an animal, a cat or a dog, I thought, but it was difficult to forget its features that I found more and more disturbing. Rusty-orange fur and black stripes, a long muzzle, a tail, sharp and pointy at the end like a fish's. It wasn't a fox, and it wasn't a dog. It resembled a hyena a little, but it wasn't that either. I had a glimpse at the creature again after dinner, it was like a stain, stuck here from somewhere, dropped ugly on the world, on me, on the silence of the sanatorium. The animal haunted me like a nightmare, I could hear it at night on the roof, I stalked it in the garden outside – the sudden dismay from its appearance never left me.

Then Dr Vlazoyadski prescribed us a hot bath, every morning. We would go to this dark and humid room where we could hardly make each other out in the darkness, and we soaked in the heated water that stung our skin. "Here is the key to happiness, health and the fulfilled life", said Dr Vlazoyadski, urging us to the hot and narrow pool, "Heat and darkness, that's what you need." Then he would leave us alone and we would hear him repeating quietly in the corridor outside, "Heat and darkness." Only, I couldn't relax the entire time. It kept seeming to me that in the black water right in front of us something unravelled. It looked like a water lily, like a giant white flower that wouldn't stop growing, wouldn't stop awakening in the darkness around us. I never mentioned this to M. But every morning, I would stare into the darkness, peered through the tarry water and I observed the leaves, the moss, the many offshoots, the buds and the flowers, the swelling maw of this hellish plant. It glowed at the bottom, barely noticeable, like a horrifying eye that never let us out of sight. I couldn't get rid of the sensation that we were placed there to feed it, that we would soak in the black water until it had sucked all the life out of us.

On one of those nights – I had already started to lose track of the days, I didn't know how long we had been there – I stretched powerless on the bed. Everything floated in a weird fog, I could barely lift my limbs, it was like I was losing my strength with each passing day, my memories, I was shrinking, melting away. Who was that woman with marks on her face and her chest, what was she doing in the canteen, naked and lifeless, and yet she wasn't dead – her eyes were staring at me, cold, poisonous eyes. Suddenly, the marks on her skin turned into scales – that's what that was – they started peeling off her body and face like dirty rags,

revealing a grainy texture underneath. Red, fish face, with mouth closed in a mute horror. Along her body, large, shiny scales formed, and underneath, phosphorus bones showed through. At that moment, I recognised her, it was M. But it wasn't just her. In her eyes, similarly to old family photographs, I saw all our ancestors, children, the families of our families and their misshapen offspring covered in scales and colourful moss and whiskers, bony, scared, and pale. I saw all of mankind, as if we were its original birth givers, floating in the infinitude, terrified to death but decisively craving more heat, more darkness.