

**из “Превъртане” от Петър Денчев**

**from "Overwinding" by Petar Denchev**

**Translated Angelina Alexandrova**

### **Was she?**

There was one question that bothered her a lot.

Had she ever been a child? Was I? She wondered. Was she really a child? She watched the tiny petals of her flowers fade from purple to red, hovering over her favorite pot. She was sinking into the fascination of the sight. But that question came almost every day, because even if she found pictures of herself as a young girl, there were none as a child. Were these memories real? Was there anyone who could prove that she really was a child? Then the memory of falling from a tree or wolves howling in the woods confirmed the memories. This question came back often, but was quickly banished by the pangs in her body.

She ached with almost everything. The aged teeth, the worn out joints, the weakened muscles, the stretched tendons, the spikes in her heels, the twisted vertebrae, the water collecting joints. Her body was slowly betraying her, and the pain didn't impress her. She only worried that the world was getting smaller. Still, one is quite capable of understanding that the world is getting smaller and being happy again. Or at least - peaceful. Over the years, she'd come to realize that happiness was something that accompanied serenity. And now, even though she inwardly resisted the shrinking of the world, she was at peace. She knew that whatever she did, chance was something on which everything depended heavily. She cocked her head. She stood behind the pot and looked out at the street. She was getting used to the diagnosis and the daily exercises that were supposed to keep her movements in close amplitude. As if that made sense. As if she would live forever.

The very thought, however, frightened her. The progress of the disease made her nervous. The space around threatened to squeeze her. It was as if the walls were going to move, shifting the furniture, piling it on top of one another, knocking the small furniture to the floor, the wood and shavings would start cracking until they broke. Then all the small objects lined up on the ledge would be crushed. The small mirror would be ground into salt, the plates would crack, the glasses would shatter into small sharp pieces. Until finally, the walls would crush her body and reduce it to pulp. It would go on until it turned to bloody liquid and body juices that wouldn't let the walls peel away when they reached the point of full contact. Her remains would act like glue. The walls would never be able to separate again.

Then the world would truly disappear.

## Things repeat themselves

And she sets out to break down the approaching walls of the world. She knows she must walk her steps. She paces her feet right there in the hallway. She paces as she gathers the clothes from the terrace. Laundry dries quickly even in autumn. The sun is crisp and this morning promises a beautiful day. Then she takes her small steps in place to stretch her stiff feet. She spreads her arms. Moves them. Repeats the movements several times. She steps from foot to foot. It's as if someone has said that the life of 1965 can return with the same vitality in 2019. She moves with increasing confidence because she knows she doesn't want anyone to be watching her. She is herself only in this mono-spectacle of moving, of stretching her limbs. This vitality she acquires is both hers and that of the role she plays. It is a play on inhabiting one's own personality.

Mary is practicing the peace of being herself.

How else could she die in peace?

She goes to arrange the washed clothes. She carefully folds them with trembling hands. This activity takes her twice as long as it did a year ago. Still, she ends up doing that too. She dresses carefully. The tights, the orange ribbed skirt, the blue sweater. She combs her hair. Carefully bends down, puts on the shoes, then puts on the green jacket. Prepares for the battle with the walk, with those heavy steps he has to take. Again he takes his small steps in one place. This is her exercise in real movement. This is the preparation for the next one hour in which she has to defeat her own body again. She looks expectantly into the mirror where she sees her own reflection. The mirror is old, now speckled. Not only people get age spots; mirrors do too. She reaches for her makeup to smear some green on her eyelids. Then she puts on some of that lipstick, the raspberry one. She smudges some on her lips, careful not to let her trembling fingers wiggle up or down. It's not like the Ida of days gone by, but still tolerable. But who's gonna watch your lips now? She reaches for the *Fa*

deodorant, rolls up his blouse, points the spray at her armpit. Then the other. She's always liked that fresh fruity smell of luxury; because that's what luxury used to smell like. That scent she remembered from her years at Corecom, and then it passed for something special until at least '1997. The light was dim. She couldn't see if it smudged the green of her eyelids well at all. She never bought a strong bulb for the hallway because she was well accustomed to that dusk. It allowed, once upon a time, guests (when they came over) not to be ashamed of their shabby coats, or worn-out shoes.

She unlocked the interior door, then the exterior.

There are two doors because she was always afraid of burglars.

She closes them tightly behind herself, trying to find out by force if they are really closed. She lets go with the weight of her own body. If they don't give yet, then they are closed tight. Then she locks them. Both of them. She steps out onto the floor in between. Here are the front doors of the others. You can see the sky; this is where they hang the washing out when they run out of room on their own terraces. In the summer the neighbours smoke cigarettes here. At other times they open their doors so that the dwellings don't smell of fish, veal and onions. It has always been like this. She's also in a hurry because she doesn't want to meet that boy who comes home with his big bag after work. She felt some unease at his presence. There was more than just awkwardness in this mismatch. He exuded a kindness she didn't get to feel from other people. Along with that, he was overly polite, and overly polite people always created a sense of suspicion in her. Once upon a time, snitches were overly polite when trying to pry information out of someone. They weren't enemies in that sense, but she felt them as her own enemies. Was she supposed to be bothered by this amiability in his character?

He still remembers which neighbor listens to what radio.

There were times when it was necessary to know who was listening to what. She could remember what even those who were gone were listening to. As if the memory

of the sound of the radio station could outlive the owners themselves. She remembered what Yanchuleva from the first floor was listening to. She could recall what Nasko from the third floor was listening to. It was useful to know who was listening to what radio. Only those who listened to Romanian or Turkish radio sometimes shut their doors tight in the summer. Headphones used to be an expensive commodity (if headphones for radios were available at all) and there was no way to disguise the sound. She gets as far as the next door. She opens it, steps through, and continues on. She takes ten steps, then ducks to the left. Door again. She walks down the corridor. She descends the marble staircase carefully, because she's afraid of falling, as she did one winter. She was coming down, and her shoes had gotten wet from a puddle on the mezzanine. How could she have guessed that just a little moisture would carry the soles down the curved marble steps and drag her down?

It was good that her bones were (still) strong.

Then she stood up, brushed herself off and all was well. If she were to fall now, she wouldn't know if she could get up again. She would sit as she fell until someone would find her. Now she gets down while holding onto the railing and looking out the windows that are along the staircase. She can still see the patios that look like hers - where the front door is, with the many stepped terraces. There is no elevator. There never was. And that somehow reassures her, because she knows she won't get stuck. She won't burden her bones with the stagnation of this body. The only thought that worries her is what will happen when she stops moving? What will happen when she no longer has the strength to get out of bed? When she doesn't have the strength to cross the threshold of her home? Who will take her outside? Who will take care of her? People are not used to living in solitude and she knows it. Because living sometimes feels like it has a real dimension. And then maybe the bones won't hold? They'll start to crunch under the weight. But that doesn't matter much now. She banishes her thoughts as she steps onto the mosaic of the landing in between. Second floor. There's still a little more to go. She breathes calmly and doesn't worry about anything. Every day is like the other anyway. There's nothing unusual about that.

Things repeat themselves.

The days do too. Breakfast, a walk, an afternoon nap, dinner, TV, difficulty falling asleep and so on until the next day. She remembers faces as well as names. She hasn't forgotten anyone. She knows she has to keep her brain alive. She knows that the more she reads and listens to music, the greater the chance of keeping the cerebral cortex fresh. So she had read somewhere. Not that she does. Neither listens to music beyond what they play on the radio, nor reads. All she does is talk. She likes to mentor others. She hopes she won't become like Clementina, who couldn't remember her children's names before she died. Or rather, she couldn't get them back into her memory. Clementina, who in her younger years knew so many terms in Latin and made everyone around her ashamed of their underachievement in front of her exquisite manners of a highly educated medic. No one had her knowledge of music, theatre and paintings. Everyone admired her talent to recognize with certainty from the first minutes on the record whether the work was by Tchaikovsky or Brahms. She, who so carefully looked after her health, and died before everyone.

*Was that fair?*