

из “Малкият бог на земетръса” от Петър Денчев

from "The Little God of the Earthquake" by Petar Denchev

Translated by Angelina Alexandrova

We have been unable to leave the city for a week now.

Not because a disaster or anything else is keeping us here. Nothing extraordinary has happened. The past, like the last utopia, had soaked into Laura's skin. That's why we couldn't move. You've probably seen those environmental movies where they show freshly skinned mink on farms, and all sorts of other animals left without their skin; sometimes they show the skinning process. This is what Laura would look like if she hadn't carefully let go of everything that was holding her here. These films try to convince you, rightly in fact, that if you stop buying fur and fur products you will save the lives of these creatures. But are you certain that while reducing the number of carcasses the industry discards you will provide conditions for such a large natural population of mink? Or of polar foxes? You've hardly thought about it, but I'm certainly not advocating violence. I just want to use this paradox to illuminate some unpopular views about the existence of life and its purpose. I mean, since I'm not seemingly attacking the industry, I'm actually hoping to gain your indignation. I need your outrage at injustice. It's always good to take aim at people's sense of moral entitlement because you sharpen their focus. Thus, they begin to feel personally involved in every case that is offered to them because they need to be in solidarity with their sense of justice; which is irrational to begin with. Justice is a human invention (or social construct as many liberal intellectuals would call it), it does not exist among mink or polar foxes. Or maybe it doesn't, but am I just not being properly informed? Bottom line, I just want to provoke you, I have no claim to moral rectitude, nor to enlightenment. I have left these things to the school, which should be doing this work anyway, a long time ago. So: Laura thought it only fair to cut my suit into little strips to throw around in the bottom of the wardrobe. Her grandmother had thus thought it fair to expel her mother from her home; to isolate her from her natural social environment. It was also how my father felt it was fair to let the house fall apart on its own. By cutting up my suit, Laura had exercised her natural right to revenge, and her deep inner conviction gave symbolic meaning to her actions. I may well be mistaken.

But that's not important at all.

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Don't get me wrong.

I wouldn't buy Laura a mink coat. Nor one made from a polar fox. I wouldn't rebuild that house my dad let fall apart. I'm not the kind of person who thinks justice is an absolute value, nor that this logic is consistently correct. Often in the modern world it seems that when we criticize the establishment, we are actually criticizing everyone else who identifies with society. At other times it seems that we are simply criticizing that which we do not like and is in our way. It's all a matter of perspective, but again, I repeat, I am not advocating the killing of innocent animals for human industry, nor am I advocating aggression. But I am sure that when we criticize violence and pain we do not always create a life that is bearable. Therein lies the practical paradox of moral rightness and natural right. Even if we want to improve the condition of life within certain limits by ending certain human activity, we do not always create possibilities for life. We are not even talking about a better life, but about life in general; a life that is bearable. In our foolish human dimension, we try to live justly, but never address the natural consequences that flow from choice and action. And instead of looking from the perspective of pain, we often try to dull it. It has nothing to do with the mink anymore, it has to do with the pain.

I think Laura had cut my suit out of pain.

I'm even almost convinced of that statement. Insofar as anyone can ever be convinced of anything. And if there's one thing that certainly exists in humans, it's pain, and any swallowing of it, any consuming of it, is far more human than any dispensing of justice. That's why I didn't want to actually throw the suit away, because I knew that the pain contained in the act of slicing it was a sign that Laura was alive. However, I threw it away because I didn't want to remember that mind of hers anymore that rejected pain and tried to simplify any complex reflection of the world. However, instead of speaking, instead of making her pain available to me or anyone else, she materialized it into destruction. In the destruction of my suit. So I was frightened of her mind, which had gradually become a calculating machine of self-destruction; a machine that possessed the ability to kill, if not instantly, then gradually. Her urge to death had overwhelmed her urge to life, and nothing seemed able to distract her from that inner drive. And while she hoped to nail down evil, to destroy pain through the rituals of superstition, and to feel she belonged to something important through the modern religion of fear, she was actually slowly killing herself.

We didn't leave immediately at all, as I had hoped.

We had no chance of getting out of this town quickly. Every day we would go out, take a walk, and she would resurrect past memories or present fantasies, but never talk about the present, about her plans. She never talked about what she would like to do now. Never opened a word about what kind of person she was now. She sat stuck in the space of dream and memory and I'm not sure if she found comfort there. It was a long tale of the infinite past rushing with a light bite towards the present to

show us how the future is disappearing. I have never had the drearier feeling of being caught in a loop from which I could not escape. I hoped we could walk away with at least a few bruises. Only so much.

Nothing more.

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We distributed the packages we'd found in the chest of drawers to those they were intended for. Apparently none of us believed in the end of the world, or at least the nearness of it, so everyone rejoiced in the money and the preposterous care her grandmother had secretly exercised for many years. It was one of those nice hidden discoveries we all make after someone's death. Laura and I kept going around. We walked among the city, among everything that surrounded us, and inwardly I struggled with the understandings of today's world as I observed its inhabitants. I had a hard time understanding these puffed up men who weren't putting their testosterone to its intended use and were filling the obnoxious coffee shops around town. Nor did I quite understand the women who sculpted their bodies into bizarre shapes that could hardly be called elegant. According to modern understandings, a life filled with pain can quickly be overcome with easy and immediate pleasures; it even has to be that way. I struggled because I could see how Laura didn't want to hurt; and she needed to. She didn't want to be in pain for the past, for the mistakes, for the gaps, and she was superstitiously trying to fill in all the gaps by photographing the remnants of her memories; photographing the places, the things, the objects. She had to ache for other people's pains too; she had to collect as much pain as she could bear and process it into experience. I could not agree that unhappiness could be quenched with alcohol, mental emptiness with the consumption of commodities. Actually, I could agree it wasn't hard at all. The point was that drinking was not quenching unhappiness. Drinking was always a developmental pain that few people realized; even when they got drunk. My father, for example, understood it.

That's why he used to say that few achieve solace.

What about the fact that ignorance isn't even among the lacks anymore, so we don't have to look for it among the pains at all. It can be compensated with self-conceit. We can also find it among the strengths of personalities. Laura didn't even know enough about the town she was born in and that was the irony of the situation. She felt she belonged there, and there was no way she could explain that. She related to the city, it made her feel powerful, but she didn't know why. What was she doing here? What did she want from the city and herself? What did she expect to happen?

Could she really count on sentiment being memory?

Happiness today is now about travel, which moves a person's body several thousand miles to drink cocktails with names they can't remember; to places they can't connect with; and often to have sex with people whose names don't matter. Today's social sciences are constantly trying to impose their notion that people are the same and equal. And I don't think that was the case at all - there were some who were inevitably, even irredeemably stupid; and the culture of equality guaranteed them the right to insist that this was the natural state of affairs. Laura hadn't travelled enough, and this homecoming was coming to remind her that her life had its beginnings somewhere, after all.

In that, though, she found some comfort.

If one is poor and unable to travel, one's only choice remains television, which will very quickly impress upon one that one must still travel to find oneself. Just compare this with the life of a medieval man who is illiterate and knows that pain is part of life, and an invariable part at that, and the pleasures of the flesh are in warm soup and a nap under the afternoon sun; the absence of restlessness and contemplation are unknown. It seems to me that I must give my sympathies to the medieval man. Though he may be, and probably is in many respects, a swine, but a human swine with his base passions; it seems to me that it is better to be a primitive human swine than a high-tech swine. So my sympathies go to the medieval dumbasses who dined on reheated soup over modern wholesome creatures who can't express the spectrum of their sensibilities if they wanted to.

These days, even those with enough free time don't contemplate enough. Freedom equals being stupid and that impresses no one. No longer are there worthless opinions, there are different points of view. So did Laura's friends - they traveled to stupid resorts and talked about how they found themselves; they, along with their differing points of view, were usually offended by differing opinions. So she was trying to convince me we should live that way too. Despite my stubborn resistance to tolerate the encounters in which they talked about how they liked or disliked something, to tolerate the tales of trips to Mallorca or Barcelona (because that's mostly where they went), to tolerate looking at travel magazines and memorizing terms from hotel catalogues; Laura kept insisting that this was a life filled with awe. So I couldn't fully understand her infatuation with the past, that clinging desire to preserve something that no longer existed in the form of a spiritual experience. Even the fact that she was doing it that way didn't irritate me as much as the feeling that she was trying to revive something dead long ago. I'd never assumed before that she might be experiencing spiritual needs - ones that would connect her to other people in a more serious network, explain the world or the past to her. The spiritual was unfamiliar territory to her, it had been completely replaced by the superstitious, the occult and any other experience that could be used for utilitarian purposes. The

interest in the past and its documentation, the preservation of memory and emotions, was a completely new moment in her behavior. Laura liked simple answers.

Any elaboration caused her annoyance.

This drive to simplify, coupled with her dramatic display of emotion, was terribly arousing to me. I had thus fallen prey to her longing for desire. I had fallen in love. She wanted to fulfill herself as a woman. Her longing for desire was to fulfill the function that had been instilled in her and she felt was her duty. She sought a mate, as every other woman does; there was nothing unusual in that, and at a certain point I had clearly become attractive in her eyes. Maybe, a compromise, maybe not, but in any case a real partner. Which was what I had become. I'd gotten to know, bit by bit, some of the pain she held inside, and for the first time I was seeing her in a situation similar to this. She was trying to make sense of the past in a completely unusual way for me. She couldn't accept that its preservation was not just a matter of photographing places, but also a way of life, a relationship to events, to history. But I wasn't going to talk. I preferred to remain silent. She walked around with her phone camera, snapping pictures, taking photos, and sometimes crying when certain memories surfaced. In a way, it was an exercise of memory too, checking the freshness of her emotions.

Laura couldn't peel herself away from here without leaving scars.

I was sure of it. If a month ago she'd been just a bored, life-weary young woman who'd fallen prey to my desire for her image (which I called love), now, in early October, the attraction to events already past had manically revived her own physical stamina. So there was no way we could leave without at least a bruise. She insisted we walk the city streets incessantly. As if life was only possible here. Under the sun's rays, among the sludgy humidity and the immortal mosquitoes. We would roam this hot city. I wanted to see it drenched in water for once, the rain quenching its glowing streets for a moment. The heat that was building even in late September was remarkable. But there was no rain, and neither were we. We had merged into the timelessness that enveloped everything like a thick morning mist. We could not easily peel ourselves from that embrace. The city was steeped in the sweet ruralism of the past, extolling the superficial merits of others; and this could quite easily be registered in the way people talked about the place. There was something special about the intonation, a peculiar commitment that insisted invariably that if you lived in a place with a great past you were heir at least to the importance it exuded. But it wouldn't. Unfortunately, qualities, fame and freedom were not inherited and few knew it.

And those who knew it kept silent.

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From the moment we set foot in this city, the embrace of timelessness gripped us.

It enveloped us gently. It tightened around us and showed us that we had to like it. It was strong, uncompromising, and we didn't have the strength to fight it. It was as if beyond the confines of the last apartment blocks stretched fields of barbarians that would kill us and rip out our intestines. Then they would eat them, and we would be but a memory in the thoughts of those who remained untouched by the barbarian invasions. So intense was the fear Laura felt that if she left the city before documenting everything, she would be destroyed. Too bad the buildings couldn't remember because people would surely forget us. That was what she was afraid of; that they would forget, and then she would be forgotten. A fear quite natural, by the way. But the barbarians were inside us. And we were barbarians ourselves. Outside the lines of the streets, in the fields, among the grasses, the real death was beginning. Where the memories ended with the outline of the last street marking the savage, the alien - that which is capable of rejecting you - began. There began that space that defies being domesticated. This is the territory that can shelter us and then spit us out - the way the river dumps the bodies of dead fish on the surface. And we hide that we are barbarians. We are the ones who don't understand tradition, don't understand knowledge, but are just trying to accumulate information to become something other than those people who have no purpose. We mask our essence, we make up our intentions in order to survive. Anyone who has left their birthplace has long since overcome the internal separation between the alien and the self. To the alien he was a *barbarian*, to his own a barbarian; until sooner or later he decided that he should be a slave to nothing but himself. So everyone who has left the homeland carries with them a sense of the plebeian, carries that pleasant feeling of *not belonging*.