

Tongue

Between the diagnosis and the operation, a little more than three months passed. Three months in which life didn't just turn him upside down, but shot him as if from a gigantic catapult straight into the open cosmos of despair. He flew through the pain and darkness of the diagnosis, near him like tiny unpopulated planets, his family, friends, colleagues, work whizzed by. Only two of the planets were habitable. One carried the name "Hospital" and the life on this planet took his. From the first check up, he didn't want to be deceived – and the doctors didn't lie to him, they didn't spare him anything. He felt as though he'd been sucked up by a gigantic vacuum pump, he wanted to move, to shriek, to run away but he couldn't. The pump swallowed him, made him helpless. Fear robbed him of his humanity, gnawed at his sense of pride with its sharp teeth. Even after the operation, he did not stop being amazed at how quickly everything happened. "Like in a film," he thought, as he walked to the bathroom on his floor, which seemed to him infinitely distant from his hospital room. With this difference that his life really was a true horror film. A film in which the leading character, on the strength of someone's whim, is transformed from a normal guy into a disgusting monster. Just that for him, there was no unexpected turning point fifteen minutes before the end of the film. no-one rescued him. "You're not going to win an Oscar, Dobromir," he thought. He laughed, his smile was pitiful and hurt; it caused him inhuman pain, his eyes swam with tears, saliva dripped from his open mouth. He didn't even notice this. He managed to muffle his cry, he heard how he groaned. He hoped that none of the night-duty nurses had heard him, so they wouldn't turn out of their staffroom and send him back to his bed. He walked slowly, down the corridor, with his left hand holding on to the wall and his right hand touching one end of the nasal feeding tube. The other end had been carefully inserted by a doctor, whose family name he forgot every time he read it on the little tag on his apron. His legs shook, but he made an effort to get past the nurses' staffroom more quickly. The door was ajar, it was lit up inside, but there was nobody - or at least he saw

nobody. As he took the last steps towards the bathroom, he asked himself what he would do if there was no mirror. He carried on because there was no answer to this question.

In the bathroom's foyer, over the double row of wash basins, there wasn't a single mirror. He saw a hole made by a nail – he came closer – underneath there was a whiter rectangle. There had once been a mirror even so, simply some merciful soul had spared the sick the evidence of imminent death. He wanted to pee, the toilet was opposite the showers, he crossed the corridor, entered. The smell of urine and lime chloride wafted over him. The mirror regarded him with its huge round unblinking Cyclops eye. He approached, pressed his head against it, part of the surface misted over from his breath. He closed his eyes, pulled back, took a breath and looked at his reflection. He opened his mouth a little, then made an effort to open it wider. He turned his head to the left, then to the right, lowered it, raised it quickly, so that something in his neck popped. He didn't blink, he carried on looking, searching. He began to put his finger in his mouth, decided against it, closed it. He sobbed His tongue was cut out.

And the other planet, around which Dobromir wished to orbit for all his life, was called Matthew.

Dobromir was a reporter for the local cable TV channel, he covered all fields, as he liked to joke about himself, and he took the lead in a weekly culture programme, which every month was under the threat of cancelation because, "there's no cinema in our town, Dobri, our theatre is an "open air stage", we have some kind of mediocre orchestra which gets by because third class Asian composers pay to conduct," that's what the owner of the channel said, but Dobromir did not give up, - here, he'd invite some local poet or writer to his programme, there, a folk dance group from a library, evening class, there again a folksong group from a pensioners' club. And once even the deputy mayoress for Cultural affairs who painted with her hands – talentless but with vim – and whose latest exhibition was called "Ukrainian Fantasies.". When Dobromir mentioned that he hadn't known she'd been to the Ukraine, she responded a little snappily, that she'd dreamt the title of her exhibition. After her participation the

channel began to transmit District Council meetings live. The position of the programme was assured. In the first week in May they sent Dobromir to the Mathematics High School, whose debating team had won some district prize. He went, interviewed the three girls and two boys and left. The cameraman said he needed to get home urgently, but he wouldn't delay and would think how to edit the material, so that it came to "no more than a minute and twenty seconds", Dobromir set out on foot for the TV station. In ten minutes, time he got a message on Messenger along with an invite for friendship. They were from Matthew. The message read: "You're really sweet, what about a coffee."

He laughed, he turned down the friendship invite, put his telephone back in his pocket, muted it and entered the TV station. The cameraman came, they edited the video, they cleaned the noise from the recording, they imported the material into the editing suite. Then they chatted, drank coffee – a normal working day in the town where customarily nothing interesting ever happened. When after a few hours he left the TV building, he turned to the left towards the food shops and bumped into Matthew. He was smoking a cigarette, he was holding it a little unsurely between his index and middle fingers. He took a deep drag, threw it aside, exhaled out a stream of smoke straight into Dobromir's face and said,

"Don't you dare ignore me, old codger

After that he added quickly, "Sorry, I'm not used to waiting long, I wrote you three messages, and you didn't even skim them. Let's go for a coffee, or tea, or whatever you want. I promise to be on my best behavior."

They drank coffee. Matthew behaved himself, he promised to write again. He asked for his telephone number, "just in case" and left.

The next time they saw each other was two and a half years later. Matthew was again waiting for him in front of the TV station, he was smoking again, he held the cigarette more expertly, he'd grown in height to be manly and handsome. He shot the cigarette from his fingers in the same assured way and spoke as though their last meeting

had only been a few hours earlier and the afternoon was smoothly turning into evening.

“I didn’t get on with applied mathematics, its calculation, methods and modeling. I dropped out. Take me to dinner, I’ll tell you everything.”

In the restaurant Matthew moved his chair quite close to his and let his head fall on Dobromir’s shoulder. Dobromir’s body tensed up.

“I could be your father.”

“You could be, but you’re not.”

Matthew straightened up, looked him in the eyes and said, “I’m stuffed, let’s go for a walk.”

The few customers paid them no attention, the waitress gave them an evil look, because she’d cleaned the table because of them, and they’d left even before ordering.

They walked through the town aimlessly, they stayed silent a long time. Dobromir coughed, but Matthew got in first, “I don’t know why I didn’t forget you in these two years. Maybe because you were the first man who’d ignored my messages. Or then again because when we drank coffee, you didn’t try to grope me “I...”

Another interruption, “You are on my side of the river, I don’t need to be a detective, to see that.”

Then he suddenly stopped, “It’s struck me, right now it’s struck me. I fancy you because you’re a decent guy.”

Dobromir laughed, “I didn’t know that decency is sexy.”

“And I didn’t know, but I do now. Hold me.

Dobromir held him. They spent the night together. Matthew woke up late, he saw the serious expression on Dobromir’s face and he giggled.

“Now it will turn out that the morning is wiser than the evening, it’ll bring out the morality in you. I don’t want to hear such a lecture. If you want me to go, just tell me.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

That’s how it began.

What began lasted almost three years. It could have been called anything, but not a normal, calm relationship. In those three years they separated at least five times, if we don’t count the occasions when Matthew slammed the door and returned after a couple of days.

Before one of his short disappearances, Dobromir asked him. "What are we?"

"People!"

"I mean what are we one to the other, what are we for each other?"

"I can't answer on your behalf, Dobri, I can speak for myself. I feel good with you, I don't like men of my age. I like grownups." When he wanted to tease him, he'd call him elderly.

"Is that it? You just like?"

"What do you want from me?"

"To allow me to make you happy."

"There are no happy homosexuals. There are just successes."

Matthew stepped towards the door. For him the conversation was over. Dobromir shouted after him.

"And me, who's not a success, what am I?"

"Nothing."

He left hastily, suddenly, not accepting a word from Dobromir that might be some kind of criticism.

Once they were in the pizza parlor. Matthew ate a little pizza, drank a lot of Coca-Cola, he burped and laughed loudly.

"Don't behave like a pig."

"Don't tell me off. I'm not your child. Just because you're old enough to be my father doesn't make it so. I have a father, I don't see him very often. If you want, get married, make yourself a baby and don't allow him to burp."

Dobromir sighed, "Matthew..."

But Matthew crushed the coke tin, threw it on the table and left.

This is how they didn't live together. Through most of the time. Matthew lived with him but refused a key from his home.

"I'm not really into this kind of thing, Dobri. I'm not going to come and water your flowers if you go to the seaside without me. I want to be free. What do you want?"

Dobromir stayed silent.

"You want us to become lovebirds and destroy our lives? No thanks."

And he left again. He knew however how to return with dignity and knew on his return how to preserve Dobromir's dignity as well.

“Please let me be forgiven, I’m a fantastic idiot. Can I come in?”

At the time of their first big row, Dobromir said to him, “I know that every relationship contains all the seasons within itself, but with ours it’s always winter.”

“We’re not in a relationship. It’s good in bed and I manage to put up with you.”

“You put up with me? You me? You don’t know what the words mean.”

“On the contrary I know exactly. I put up with all your attempts to train me out of using English words when I talk. I like it that way, that’s how all my friends talk. I know we’re from different generations, but that’s the situation. I put up with your faces every time I pay attention to one of my friends on chat, and you want me just to yourself. I am not your property. “

“Really? Well don’t pay me any attention then, Zombify yourself with your telephone. It’s clearly more important than me.”

“Don’t be pathetic, don’t compete with my telephone. Be a man.”

“I am a man.”

“OK, OK. You’re not more important than my phone, because...”

“Because what?”

“Because you kiss me like no-one has ever kissed me.

Matthew came close, grabbed Dobromir’s face in his hands and began to kiss him. He pulled back, then he yielded, the kiss became passionate, aggressive. They had sex. In the morning Matthew had disappeared.

In those four months and seventeen days, in which Matthew did not answer his messages, didn’t answer the telephone, and then turned it off, Dobromir realized that he’d fallen in love with this boy, almost twenty years younger than him, with all the force of a solitary man on the brink of middle age. And this force was devastating, because of it he spent the first days in expecting Matthew to turn up. He even knew exactly what he was going to say, then he wrote some really long messages, he didn’t send them. After two days he wrote another, longer than the previous three, sent it, every minute he’d look at his telephone to see if Matthew had seen it. Then he got angry with himself, he told himself that he should immediately forget him. One

Friday evening, he could not hold out, he got up, got dressed, he went through all the bars in the centre of the town, he peered into the discotheque, he went to the station, the bus station, he went to Accident and Emergency, they told him that since he wasn't a relative, he couldn't receive any information, even if the guy had been with them. At two in the morning, dying with shame, he rang at the door of his home. No-one answered. He began to feel sorry for himself, to blame Matthew, to blame himself. He began to drink, and when he was drunk, he'd swear. He saw him on the street on a foggy November evening. His heart stopped, when they came face to face. They were silent. Calm ruled

"Why can't we stand like this, opposite each other more often and let things between us get sorted out?"

"I don't know. I came back."

Matthew entered his home. In his home the five months of his absence left, as though they'd never been there.

At the beginning of December, Matthew had just put up the Christmas lights on the tree, he'd turned them on and was drinking vodka from his cup when Dobromir came in. His whole face shone.

"I won, I won the competition. I'll be the host of the Sunday afternoon programme on Bulgarian National Television, I really didn't believe it, when they called me.. We'll move to Sofia, you'll come with me, we'll live..."

"I don't want to go to Sofia. I won't go to Sofia."

"The smile on Dobromir's face fell. "Why?"

Matthew said nothing.

"I asked something."

"Because if I come with you to Sofia, I'll let myself down, I'll drink, get high, I'll cheat on you, it'll end bad."

"What are you on about, why are you saying this, there's no way of knowing?"

"There is a way Dobri. I've already done it."

"What have you already done?"

"I'd reached the edge, the very edge, I even looked over it."

"I don't understand. Tell me."

“You don’t need to know.”

Dobromir stepped forward. Matthew stopped him with a gesture.

“I didn’t simply leave university, I ran. I...had a man of my age... I don’t want to go into details. He broke my heart. And I bust his arse,” Matthew laughed nervously. “I don’t want to go back to Sofia, I won’t go back there. I wouldn’t last out being in that town with him and not go looking for him. That’s it. I’m telling you the truth, if you want to leave, leave, without me.”

Dobromir stayed. They didn’t raise the subject any more, but the shadow of the invisible third person was hanging over their world and was slowly stifling it. Dobromir became short tempered, began to be jealous. One day Matthew came out of the bathroom and discovered him trying to unlock his phone. He pulled it out of his hands, put in the code and handed it back with the words. ‘Go on, look.’

The only messages on Mathew’s messenger were from Dobromir. There were also dozens of photographs of Dobromir – how he slept, ate, drank water, read a book, watched a film. He left the phone, he went out. He disappeared for the whole day. He came back, said nothing. Now they weren’t having sex. His mother didn’t understand why her child “was letting his golden chance go”, he explained to her that it was just an idea. She didn’t give up, she went to the TV station to talk to the owner. Nedyalkov told her to talk to her son and her son-in-law. She froze, put her hands in her lap, gathered her strength and said, “My son isn’t, he isn’t... he isn’t.”

“You tell him then.”

“My son isn’t...”

“Your son is queer, I keep him on because the Deputy Mayor likes him.”

His mother went pale, left the office, dialed his number, began to speak with no lead up. “I didn’t give birth to you, so you could become...”

“I didn’t become, Mum. It’s not a job. You become a doctor, teacher, tractor driver. I was born like that. I was born that kind, I like and I love men.

“You’re not like that, it’s because of him.”

“Him’s got a name. He’s called Matthew.”

“It’s because of him, you’re not going to Sofia.”

“Yes.”

“What will your father say?”

“I’m forty-two years old. I’m not interested in what my father will say.”

Dobromir put down the phone and looked at Matthew, and he said, “I’m leaving. Now.”

He went out. Dobromir wept. This was about two months before he became ill.

At the outset he paid no attention to his bad breath, he was more concerned at the coating on the back part of his tongue. His GP sent him to a lung specialist because this coating was often an almost sure sign of chronic bronchitis. And he had that, so he was reassured and didn’t go. The dentist suggested a water-alcohol mouth wash and said that it would go in a week. After three days his tongue began to hurt, and after another two he began to babble. He immediately went to his GP and he sent him to Sofia. They examined him, they took a biopsy and tested the tissue. The doctors were categorical: “Advanced stage of tongue-cancer.” He could ask for a second opinion, of course. He asked for it – “Advanced stage of tongue cancer.” There followed a short and unsuccessful course of radiation therapy. Before chemotherapy they told him there was no point and they had to operate. In the days before the operation, he wasn’t able to talk any more. In spite of this, he tried several times to call Matthew. He invariably heard “You have dialed an incorrect number. Please check and dial again.” He’d deleted his Facebook and Messenger profile.

Two days after his nighttime search for a mirror, his mother and father came. His mother began weeping from the door, howling, lamenting, she threw herself to the floor in despair. His father swore and she fell silent. She stood up, cleaned her smeared green eyeliner, sniffed and said, “That guy wanted to see you. I don’t know how he found out, that you’re in the hospital. I told him he’d only come over my dead body.” Then his father, a former soldier opened his mouth, “I told him.”

His mother simply didn't take a breath, but groaned. His father didn't let her talk," I told him. My son is dying, he's at least got the right to be happy."

He approached the bed, he caressed Dobromir's head, like you caress a child. He turned his back and left the room. His mother followed him. On the day before his release, the doctor told him that "Seventy percent of patients like you have a life expectancy of between five and seven years" He wanted to ask about what happened to the remaining thirty percent.

On the next day Matthew was waiting for him outside the hospital. He helped him get in the car. On the road from Sofia to the town by Okolchitsa, they were silent. One because he didn't want to talk, the other, because he couldn't.

Later in the evening Dobromir refused Matthew's help with a categorical gesture, but he quietly insisted. They went into the bathroom. Matthew sat on the toilet lid. Dobromir slowly undressed, stood utterly naked in front of the mirror, didn't immediately recognize this gaunt, bearded man, who looked back at him. He passed his hands over his unfamiliar skin, it was yellowy and hot, it touched his fingers, it was as if his blue veins wanted to hide, from fear of becoming yellow. His legs were slightly twisted from weakness. They looked like the legs of a scarecrow. He touched his loins. He felt nothing. Then he pressed one hand to the heart of the unknown naked man and the other feeling the pulse in his neck. He stayed like this a long time, he took the pulse as like Morse code, he measured it, he decoded it. And he very slowly caught on to the fact that the unknown man and he were the same person. He just about managed with his hair and beard.

He just turned on the shower hot tap. He stayed a long time, immobile, leaving the water to wash away the smell of the hospital and death. He saw nothing through the steam. All the time Matthew spoke not a word. He just stood up, took off his wet clothes, embraced Dobromir and led him to their bed. They lay in the dark, they didn't sleep. Matthew left an arm over his body, Dobromir wanted to remove it, instead he grabbed it, took it to his lips to begin to kiss it, he bit it, then

let it go, squeezing into the naked body next to him. His groin awoke. Afterwards they slept in each other's arms.

Dobromir refused to write messages, he lost his temper and threw out all notebooks and notepads, which he found left by the bed, he ignored the sticky notes with short messages on the table or over the fridge. He was a man of words, his whole life, his whole career was dedicated to words. He wanted to continue to work on television, he wanted to talk, talk, talk, raise a ruckus, argue, sing, tell jokes, read books out loud, mutter under his nose, while he prepared to tell Matthew how much he loved him, he wanted to talk, talk, not till he got tired of talking, but until he just died from talking. Instead of this he was forced to be silent. That's why when on the next appointment the doctor told him that a tongue could be made from the muscles of his hand, he did not hesitate.

His new tongue flapped in his mouth like a fish out of water. He couldn't control it, he swallowed with difficulty, and three months after the operation his attempts to talk still resembled mooing to the unpracticed ear. Matthew understood him, because he loved him and wanted to understand him. Dobromir only pronounced vowels clearly. "I-a-a-a-o-a" for example meant "I want a glass of water."

And when he tried to swallow real food, a little soup. Instead of feeding from the nasal tube, he threw up into Matthew's lap.

"O-o-l-i-a o-oi-u," meant sorry I am horrible.

One day they talked.

"I-u-o-a?" (Why you come back?)

"Because I love you."

"I-u-e-e-e" (Why you leave me?)

"Because I was scared of loving you."

They fell silent.

"A-a-u-i-i-o?" (And what are you missing now?)

"You kissing me. You kiss me like no-one else has ever kissed me."

"O-i-o-a-e-e-o-o-i-l" (So I do have a reason for living).

Matthew hugged him. They stayed cuddling the whole night.

Translated from Bulgarian by Christopher Buxton

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