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CONCENTRIC CIRCLES
*Instruction for decoding America
and destroying your life*

At the End

The California sky was tearing over Alcatraz.

An enormous, stifling terror; the steel beast started staggering.

It was burning, from sea to sky, like a blazing path of a comet.

Under the gaze of the frightened inhabitants of the Bay, the

Serbian soul was spilling over the Golden Gate Bridge.

Still another attraction.

Maybe through a re-enactment, Hollywood will arrive at a new commercial script. Only it's not known who the hero will be. As it is, nobody loves a loser.

The tedious rain was falling, as usually was the case at the end.

It smelled.

Like a story.

The Meeting

Dunja

"Am I missing out on History?" I repeated, a little angrily, that washed out question, while reading the Chicago Tribune at O'Hare international airport. Her plane had already arrived, but I've still to see her, after a long flight and tedious bureaucratic bending. These things, however, are less painful here.

For two weeks already we have been on the pages of the world press--sufficiently exotic to figure sometimes onto the front pages, but not enough for the analyses and explanations of the op-ed pages. I know now more about everything, but I admit, unfortunately, I feel less. Space did its share, and time supported this distance. I quite rationally view the images from Belgrade streets, fully aware that the decision will be made by people here, not by those over there.

For almost two months I have been thinking about the convergence of two souls lost in searching for and in finding mistakes. Two heads that, however miraculously, the distance has brought closer forever and irrevocably. The big blue has linked them; probably it exists only for that.

Somewhat simply, we downplayed hurdles such as visas, a month's absence. ... We skilfully explained to those particularly interested that this would be a friendly journey for someone who is in love with the World. We tried to not let anyone know how hard we had fought for this. Within. Each for herself.

She appeared in front of that door, entirely at home, absolutely belonging to this space. That makes one a citizen of the world, that fluidity, that mindset, the ability to merge with the landscape.

The witches met, much earlier than any reasonable plan had predicted, even here, where it should have been almost completely impossible. As if alone in the entire world, they turned O'Hare around in their hands, ready for the last time to be crazy without guilt, not fearing strange, misunderstanding glances.

" From here America starts. It's time for you to finally meet her. Don't forget, you fell in love with her long before this meeting."

We started to explore this new, happy, curious world, which will last only as long as necessary. A precious 40 days, in an attempt to make up for some of the lost days, thoughts, emotions ... or perhaps to create an illusion of that missed time, time over which we had often wept, or had been furious over, or had unconsciously let slip by.

Maybe this will be an attempt not to miss out this time. Or at least not to suffer because of it.

The Meeting

Ana

Amsterdam was still asleep when the distances diminished and a tender flickering of the big city lights filled the air. Though I am here for the first time, I am filled with a feeling of belonging, however indefinite. To the throng? Freedom? Or just enthusiasm?

Is it natural to feel such freedom beyond your own borders, or am I the exception? Whatever... I'll be the exception. To hell with patriotism.

The airport was shining. Obviously unaccustomed to spaces thus arranged, I'm melting in the images of the West. Simplicity or excellence?

I'm thinking about my childhood friend. He has been here, in Holland, for a long time. He lives and lasts. Where is the liberty for him? We are scattered all over the world, like dandelions in the wind. The winds are still blowing. Maybe that is the way to our salvation. Maybe all we need is to grow roots, and we could exist again.

The strangely beautiful Dutch shared their smiles with us. Their friendliness increased our feeling of security. I'm leaving behind thoughts of salvation for some more realistic moment. We will soon be leaving this sky. I'm a bit nostalgic, but still more excitement awaits me. She is probably still sleeping while I slink around world metropolises. I intend to fly over the Big Blue to persuade her that stubbornness is not always a virtue; it usually creates some other faults. It's unbelievable at which trifles she failed, but what big obstacles she surmounted, those from which even I would have been scared and fled.

"Orange juice, please." How pleasing sounds the taste of the morally decadent West. "You don't say, the oranges are from California! Are you kidding me?"

The last phase of the journey. A few hours on 11,000 meters. Man truly belongs to the heights. The clouds have covered even a thought of the ocean.

I could only have dreamed of those powerful, busied waters, which undulate in between two unconnectable worlds.

The sound in the headphones is the link between these waves and the vastness. Rachmaninoff, DeBussy, Gershwin ... There are unreal moments which we wish are eternal. In the sun everything takes on a new dimension.

It's as if I'm not waking from the dream that started two months ago, sometime after midnight, in the shower, naturally, while rinsing off the daily dose of poison. I have to help her. It's my mission. Together we will find a small ray of light.

My thoughts are interrupted by a charming flight attendant with blue eyes. Again he offers something.

"What is it?"

"It's food."

"Yes, I know, but what kind of food?"

"You'll see. Be patient."

His smile was truly sincere. He put before me a hot piece of something luxuriously wrapped. He did that with dedication and theatrics, like that was exactly what I was missing. The smells were overwhelming.

"No, please, no. I'm not hungry."

He was prepared to be persuasive. Throughout the entire flight he softly interrupted my thoughts, and we often exchanged a few words. That helped, because I was getting more and more nervous over the meeting. I tried to fast-forward that film ahead a few days. Somehow everything was understood and unravelled easily. I saw her right away, as she was nervously cracking her knuckles searching me out with her gaze.

"Hey Witch, here I am!"

A smile was missing from her face. It's here now, and it warms us both. Embracing, we allowed our joy--hers and mine--to take us into America. As the plastic Chicago wind encircled us.

The Frame

Nine Months Ago

I

We separated on a rainy first of April. Strangely, nothing that day seemed like a joke. Due to my grandfather's death, my family didn't see me off. Thus my mom said good-bye to her father and daughter in one day. Even then Ana was persuading me that fate had avoided any type of pathetic, teary good-byes that I had always despised. Perhaps.

Again my entire life fit into two suitcases. Several times already the contents of my existence had been placed in the same number of varied suitcases, mocking me, ghastly, stifling my attempts to increase at least the number of bags.

The lead in my legs did not allow my last steps on my street to be light.

Even now I don't know whether I will see it again. In it I had been myself, such as I am, imperfect. And it, after all my painful separations, was again waiting for me, forgiving. My street.

That Sunday the city was typically dead, additionally tortured by a mist, which for years made it a strange dwelling

place, the face of which we no longer recognized. The mist was not anyone's tears. They will be shed much later.

I felt as if I was dying. I lived the last seconds of my life. I tried to survive, remaining normal. Everybody thought that I was leaving. In fact I was running away. Without looking back, full of fears, doubts, accusations, and without much hope. Getting away was possible, probable, and the need was intolerable.

In that bus began my journey over the big blue. We waved to each other, crazily resolved not to cry. As if compressing tears into our guts is not much worse! That day somebody did cry. So imperfectly male. And so authentically. Male. Like a coward.

My two worlds separated in that Belgrade night. From the first I was running (having destroyed all reason for its existence) into the other--in which I will be a "foreign body"--certainly alien, but not necessarily rejected. That night my life tumbled into stories and smoke, creating new traps to persuade me of the wisdom of my choice.

"A sun in Virgo and a moon in Virgo", Olja was spilling an astrological vision of my future, rubbing my nose into the truth that I am hard on others, but hardest on myself. As if I didn't know it, always trying to tear that skin off and run far from myself, looking for the culprit. Incompetent to find it inside of me. Olja became my Courage. Me, an obvious example of her powers, dominance and impotence, to make of life, with the help of the stars, a game with an anticipated ending.

At the end of the night the tail of the Boeing was shining. The tears were painfully hidden. I flew. I got lost in Business Class. Next to a folk singer. A folk star. The queen of folk. Me? What ironies! We are having a typical girl talk.

She was afraid only of flying.

But me, nothing could frighten any more.

The seasons changed in the mornings. Someone naive would think that the time reacts to our feelings, that autumn and spring replace each other in my heart. And me, somewhat less naive, will have to somehow refresh the thought stuck sentimentally to the stupid scene of our separation.

To hell with rationale! It hurts me and I am selfish. How to reconcile a happy moment, almost a salvation for my friend, and a loss nearing an amputation for me? The physical presence or the absence draws us from the essence of love, from giving and receiving.

We drank Nescafe together. To be close with someone, to merge thoughts, confidences, dilemmas and some happy moments into a cup of coffee, makes that ritual irreplaceable.

That is why I am dreaming of some pub and the two of us sipping the drink of prolonged closeness.

I drove along the wet streets to meet her. To see her off. Admiring her decision, courage and her hope. I knew already; she had made that first step for all of us who must escape. From this madness, powerlessness. From being futureless.

The rain had just stopped and the air smelled clean. She stood with her suitcases wherein, I believe, she was carrying the rest of her heart, since there was no place for it in her chest. Over her face spilled a spasm. I had the impression that my sorrow was merely a joke.

We have to meet somewhere in that big world, since we have already started to look like the shit here. Reality was pictured on our faces. And I, paranoidly, was afraid of those new, ugly wrinkles. We will correspond about the known and still undiscovered. Can Dunja uncover all the mysteries? I am afraid that in becoming perfect, she was becoming alien and haughty. Did she kill in herself every childish need for play, imagination, hiding? Alone in the whole world.

We drove for a short time and in silence. The radio played "Simple Man." God, for how long have I been listening to the same music!

The city suddenly changed. It warmed up from the heights. We put on sunglasses, a powerful means of masking the insecure, weary and tearful.

She climbed up the steps of her boat, caressed me with her eyes and disappeared. Someone naive would think that trains and bus terminals exist only for separating, so that there would be those abandoned and those who abandon, but I, somewhat less naive, believe that something awaits all of them somewhere.

As Uranus entered, at the beginning of 1996, the constellation of Aquarius, Dunja was unaware of the tumultuous social and political changes it would stir. Too much chaos left with her.

We wrote letters continuously--me letting out that wail from my cage, which was not like the scream of Charles Bukowski. She, clinging to that old European habit to correspond, since she had learned from Danilo Kiš* that a monologue is a deeply dishonest matter.

We threw away the letters, but the messages scattered throughout space; from them formed concentric circles. Inspired by many important people, events, emotions, defeats, pains, loves and smiles. Both ours and others'.

The emotions framed themselves into a net of circles out of which one can escape, but from which there is no escaping.

II

I have not yet managed to recover from the first blow given me by America, so do not hold it against me if this letter becomes a story of a little, old provincial girl. All my preconceptions of Chicago fell into the water by the time I exited the airport, and the American dream burst like a soap bubble within its first contact with their plastic. I am still amazed. For now, my greatest dilemma is: are natural flowers plastic, or are the plastic ones natural? I have the same problem with fruits, vegetables and, honest to God, with people too. Everything is plastic. To the point of perversion.

They are OK. Like I imagined them. More or less plastic. And me? I am now a nanny, baby-sitter, a housekeeper. My name is Quince, and I live in a basement. This is the American name for a cellar, so that the life down below may sound American. Thus am I now really underground, in my selected tomb, from which, however, I can leave, but to which I have to certainly return. But that is not the only symptom of my slow dying. Perhaps I came here dead. Dying in a basement is only proof that a true, real death is not the worst thing that can happen to you.

The basement. In the house which is a status symbol. Of the American life or dream. It took me a long time to persuade myself that the houses were not cardboard. Even if they are, they don't leak, I realize. They exist to be a separate, removed world. Wherein neither water, air, sound nor colours can enter. None of them links its owners with those heavy lead legs; nor obligates them to an eternal stay. And when they go, they carry it neither in their hearts nor in their souls. Usually they go to a better one.

I ask myself how would Americans understand our proverb that one house for a lifetime is too little, and two too much? To them one life is short for all of its challenges. And a "sweet home" is one of the easier ones.

About me? What? That I am lost? Or am discovering myself? It doesn't matter, at least I'm full of American fascinations that I have to share with you. Anything else would be selfish.

I want you to believe me. We know absolutely nothing about America. She left movies and rock-and-roll behind a long time ago, tore herself away from all our preconceptions of her. Curious, I wish to get to know her. I know it will be painful.

You remember that there I yearned for some plastic illusion, for when you don't have something, you wish it! And now I regret that I can't send you a bag with 20 apples, weighing half a pound. That is that plastic air. For you to bite. Chew up. Swallow. And digest.

Translated into English by
Seka Palikuca

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Mila Filipovic - Born by chance in Uzice, Yug., in 1962. Since then, she turned down a path, and delved into the magic of the magical radio box, naively forgetting that only a moment is magical and that magic is easily rejected.

She outgrew all her naiveté with the desire to fly and fly away over the big waters, without fear of leaving traces, ready to be an emotional immigrant. She preserved her language and writing inclination, staying faithful to only that love.

And to one great friendship.



Zana Boskovic - Born with purpose in the same year in the same town, this Aquarian managed to avoid any kind of inclinations, remaining a free spirit, hiding from set patterns and expected realizations. Her heart she shaped into a word, ready to renounce that word with a big swim across and back into an emotional prison.

As luck would have it, her word responded with friendship.