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We Did It Because We Had To

It rained. The road was meandering and wet and he had to drive slowly so that they wouldn't skid, so that they wouldn't slide away.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

She did not reply, she was pretending to be asleep.

He turned the heat up. It was getting dark. There were no houses, no sheep, not a thing by the road. He craved a cigarette. They were on the back seat, in his jacket, with her, he thought for a second or two. "Pass me the cigarettes."

She was silent. Without taking his eyes off the road, he felt for the jacket with his hand.

"Don't smoke."

He looked for her eyes in the rearview mirror. They were closed. "Why?"

She did not reply.

He watched the chipped white lines emerge and disappear on the road in front of them.

"What?" he asked.

The only thing he heard was the scratching of the wipers on the windshield.

"We did it because we had to," he said.

"I just asked you not to smoke."

He turned on the radio. The car echoed....

"Please..."

"Go f..."

Sharp red lights sparkled before them. The road slowed down. Then became faster.

While they were silent, he thought about them. About the silence, about Vanja. She was always the one talking, he had met her on the street, in front of a phone booth, she had talked so much that he had thought...

“Do you remember...” but he gave up.

Now, between them, there was the wall, the ice mass, that he felt all over, that lurked from the rearview mirror, in her closed eyes, where he dared not look. He thought they were in a film and that they were driving in a limo, separated by a thick, dark glass which neither of them was able to lower. “Maybe we should’ve slept in Zagreb; I could’ve phoned Joško...”

“Have I told you what I dreamt about last night?” she broke the silence. “I dreamt that we were at the seaside and that we were collecting sea shells...”

“You’ve told me.”

“We collected many sea shells, and sea snails, and everything, and everything was great like it...”

He drove slowly now. They were passing through some village. There was no one on the street.

“You said that there was a pearl in one of the shells and we tried to open it, but we couldn’t, so you put it in the shallow water so that it would think it was free and that...”

Candles burned in the window frames of the houses by the road. Tricolor flags, all wet with rain, hung down from some of the houses. Some of them were almost touching the ground.

“And when it opened, you slid in a pocket knife, opened it and showed me the pearl, in it, inside, it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life...”

“Vanja...”

“Then we went down to the beach and met somebody and he asked us what had happened, and you told him, but when you wanted to show him the pearl, you couldn’t find it anymore, it wasn’t there, it wasn’t in your pocket either, we’d lost it somewhere along the way...”

“What the fuck, stop already!!” He pulled over and turned toward her. “Haven’t I asked you nicely...”

“You have.”

Behind her closed eyes the...

He reached toward her. He couldn’t hug her. The seats were in his way. “My love...”

She sobbed, lay down, and covered her face with her hands. He could not hear anything. He touched her knee. And left his hand there.

“Vanja...” He did not know what to say. He looked outside, through the window covered with mist lit by the wet orange light.

“We did it...” He felt stupid. He stopped. Finally he covered her with his jacket, took the cigarettes from it and tucked them into his pocket.

“Sleep. I’ll wake you up when we get there.” The words sounded hollow, impotent.

He thought he should get out of the car, sit next to her on the back seat and do something.

“Please, drive,” she said.

A passing car honked at them and he realized they were parked at the curb with their lights off. He turned the engine on. He felt relieved. He moved on. For a moment his hands were shaking on the steering wheel. He tried to think only about the road, to drive carefully, but faster. He managed to do it and he felt calmer. He felt he needed air. He rolled the window down and then rolled it up again. He could only hear her deep breaths in the back seat. He was not sure if she was asleep. He thought of them, he thought of the last couple of days. It happened... All kinds of things happened, he did not want to think about it.

“Now it’s all over.”

As they were coming out of the village, they sped past a shop in whose lit window there was a large photo of the president with the black crepe over it. He thought of Franjo Tuđman and felt a knot in his stomach. He was dead, definitely, now. They had kept him on life support for over a month, and then... who knew why, for some reason, on Saturday... it happened. He had had no time to think about this, about Tuđman, only when... If he hadn’t died, he thought, they would’ve been in Zagreb yesterday, and by now they would’ve been sitting at home, him, Vanja... But he died. He was dead, laid out, people were coming to see him, the town was a nuthouse, the preparations, everything stopped, nothing worked, they couldn’t have come, made arrangements...

“What happened with other people who died that day?” he asked himself. “How did they...”

He heard a sigh coming from behind of his back and he stopped breathing. He felt the bitterness.

“And the two of us...”

They had neither parents nor an apartment...

“They thought we were going to the funeral.” He thought this was funny, disgusting.

The rain stopped and he turned off the wipers. For a while he had been driving through a thick pine woods. He drove faster and faster and with more and more confidence, as if some invisible force had power over his body, and he did not resist it because he knew that everything was in vain, that everything was the way it meant to be. He thought that there was no way out of this life and he got scared.

“Out!”

Everything was black! He needed a cigarette.

After a couple of kilometers, he saw a rest stop on his side of the road and he pulled over. All kinds of thoughts ran through his head. He stopped the car, opened the door quietly, and got out, without a jacket. Vanja was sleeping. It was cold, the air was sharp, and the sky was clear. The stars, like tiny pinheads, flickered above him. He took a deep breath, so deep that his lungs began to hurt. He took out a cigarette, but he did not light it. His body shivered. He approached the car and looked at her. She lay on the back seat all shriveled, tiny, with her hands crossed over her chest. Her face was pale and her lips were tightly closed, as if she did not want to say a word even in her sleep.

“We did it. Because we had to.”

He thought...

As they entered, they saw a short-haired pregnant woman sitting in the waiting room with a piercing in her nose, flipping through the newspapers. She smiled at them. The doctor smiled as well, the speakers released some relaxing music, they wanted to make it easier. But it didn't work. He wanted to kiss her, to hug her. That silence of hers. He could not remember when and why they...

He looked up into the sky. He waited for a star to fall, but it didn't. There were millions of stars, but as if out of spite, none of them moved. The only thing he saw was the fast, airy light of a satellite. He lit a cigarette. He remembered once, in winter, they were going home from Zagreb, it was night, it snowed, she was lying in the back seat, and he drove slowly, so that they wouldn't skid, so that they wouldn't slide away, and then at one moment, from somewhere in the woods, a deer ran out in front of him, a deer on the road covered with snow, he remembered, a deer, he asked himself which one of the two of them was going the wrong way, the woods glimmered, the moon, he cut the engine, watched the deer and it watched him back, it didn't move, and he, without taking his eyes off the road, quietly called Vanja to see it, to see how beautiful it was,

how alive it was, but Vanja was asleep and he remembered that he had never loved anyone so much in his whole life, like then, like her while she was asleep, he remembered he loved her so much that he didn't want to wake her up, that he loved her so much that he let the deer run away, to escape her eyes, to preserve it for some other time, for now, for this kiss, for everything that was yet to happen.

Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović

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