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Mihovil from the North Sea

The channel he could watch from morning to evening, the one alongside the street underneath his rain spattered window pane, was not – the sea. Although it might look like the sea at first sight. Especially in the evening, when the lights from the nearby buildings scattered silver dust over the surface of the water.

And he wished that the water in the few meters wide channel — was the sea. Not just any sea; not the Baltic, Boston or Aegean Sea ...! He wished that it be the sea stretching towards the islet of Ošljak, or towards Kukljica on Ugljan, towards the lights some seven hundred meters away from Zadar. The sea whose shimmering blueness can be breathtaking, as if it conceals some ancient truth — useless, but necessary — which has settled below seaweed leaves that spring up from the sand and rock, swaying bewitchingly at the bottom, like long hair of sirens, long-time inhabitants of the undersea world, who have been waiting for a new misfortune to befall someone on the surface. But this channel was *definitely* not the sea.

It is interesting to watch the sea at the Dutch coast, so different from our Adriatic Sea: a greyish liquid brimming with sand spills with a roar, fascinatingly but somehow slowly, into long and wide waves. If you step into it, you will be surprised by the strength with which this mixture of sea water (very tasteless) and sand sweeps you off your feet. No wonder that swimming is forbidden. Try to wade deeper than, say, 1.5 meters, and you will in a split second be approached by a patrol

boat and kindly asked to return to the shore. So, what else can you do? Paddle and try to hold your balance in the unfriendly ooze. Well, if that is what is called sea bathing ...

Mihovil was reading an internet travelogue, written by a countryman of his, who somehow found himself at the beach in Scheveningen, a satellite settlement to the Hague. This part of the world seemed full of light, like a future promised to a young man; it was just a fragment of wide open spaces he was going to conquer, in one way or the other. In the beginning, the world had no limits and he was free to do as he liked, nothing stood in his way. However, time was slowly but surely seeping into the lower half of the hourglass, leaving just a few precious beads in its upper half. Still, although he stopped being a young man a long time ago, Mihovil was a "smooth operator", a type of man who moves through space and time unhindered and undisturbed; he overcame obstacles with ease or just ignored them. His business partners from other countries called him, half-jokingly, a Mediterranean with a Slavic soul, or a Slavic Mediterranean, knowing he would not resent their good-natured jokes. In fact, they themselves were not sure what they meant by putting such a label on him: either that he was temperamental and generous or kind and impulsive — there was no point in analysing or discussing it. Each of them would leave the label incomplete, unexplained; it gave them pleasure to let someone else solve this riddle about the man who was inscrutable and untouchable when they first met him, but would soon turn into a predictable creature with nothing special to hide. He would sometimes vanish into the night, miss parties and business dinners, following his own invisible signs, unknown to others.

Women would smile at him from the corners of cafes and posh restaurants in big and gleaming European cities (he knew Bruxelles, London and Paris like the back of his hand), and he would find them in his bed in the morning, lying asleep in sweet exhaustion between the sheets, looking like pumpkins on the cracked and dried out surface of a field. None of those women, white, black or yellow, stayed long with him. Having spent some time with one of them, in an effort to detect her special traits and talents, he would soon find her an open book, too approachable and therefore — useless. Anyway, he had such a woman at home, in the South, his wife, with whom he had children and shared the whole burden of problems inevitably created by such circumstances. Oh God ... So why would he need another one like this - exhausted, tired of his whims, getting moodier by the day, frowning, withered, repugnant.

The word had it that Mihovil changed them "like socks" (in his worried mother's words), mercilessly, with a few words, sometimes with a hint of gracious, but negligible pity, most of the times coldly and, sometimes, even viciously, as if exploiting to the full his potentials of wickedness and cruelty. Women were there to be beautiful, to smile, to accept challenges, to be his travel companions and accompany him wherever he went: to fairs on Thursdays, to fish markets on Fridays in search of high-quality exotic fish, to shopping malls on Saturdays, to dinners in fancy restaurants on Sundays; he needed them to buy him trendy and expensive men's perfumes (he had quite a collection of them in the bathroom!), to pamper and spoil him, when he wanted to be pampered and spoiled, to pet him, and be fun, as much as he wanted them to be ... He did not spare himself, neither was he tight with money: he bought them expensive gifts, spending a fortune in a blink of an eye (make no mistake, he could afford that, he was making good money,

although he had no savings, "nothing put aside for a rainy day", as he would occasionally remark) and he did not mind doing that. After all, he was deep down — a generous and sensitive man! Believe it or not.

At times, when he was in low spirits, humbly admitting to himself that he was nothing but a sinner and wrongdoer (if only to get rid of the man or woman who has accused him of being one), he would refer to himself as "a lover past his prime", seeking compassion, perhaps, but also probably expecting to be comforted and contradicted by his companion (*Oh, come on, you are not past your prime, no way, you are still vigorous; you are fit as a fiddle...*), and encouraged to go on, to dream, to be timeless.

Still, a cloud of anxiety hung over each street angle, following the freezing wind which cut into his skin under the collar, even though he was wearing a thick shawl around his neck; a smell of jam and halva was coming from Turkish pastry shops which had nothing in common with his usual Saturday evening setting down there in the far away South ...; pine tree crowns, dark green "down there", here turned into sad graphite-neutral shades of deciduous trees, while the sky these trees touched was at times clear and at times dark; also, short sunny spells would here in the Netherlands soon be followed by cold showers and hail — dangerously large chunks of ice falling from the sky. And that sky was seemingly nothing like the sky above the beaches and bays on islands in the Zadar archipelago, which he knew so well and where every nook and cranny was to him so close and familiar and yet again excitingly novel and inscrutable.

People in the street smelled of unlaundered underwear and crude Scottish wool of their jumpers, which in rainy days unpleasantly evaporate in trams so that you have to move away or get off.

He tried his best to be polite because that was a requirement of his job: he made contacts with strangers, cold and pragmatic, devoted to business, and had to leave the best possible impression at each new encounter. And this could be exhausting. He could barely wait for Saturdays and Sundays, vacant and free of obligations, when he could do as he pleased, or nothing at all. In the evening he would smoke a joint — easily accessible here, naturally — and prepare a "Dalmatian" dinner for a group of more or less unknown people: newcomers, his countrymen, and those who were not exactly his countrymen, but made such an impression in this foreign land, where the distances between Split and Skopje, Rome and Stockholm or Ljubljana and Belgrade meant nothing at all. They arrived after having fled from their obtrusive ex-wives, who adamantly required (as their husbands — current or former — said) a modest alimony payment for their children of kindergarten, primary school or secondary school age; also from the avengers they could not be protected from at home, as they could not be protected from the war in Sarajevo, from misery, or from unemployment and chaos in the aftermath of the war. ... Here they would find unassuming jobs, working at racquet rentals or picking up tennis balls, carrying containers with plastic bottles in warehouses of huge department stores, cleaning pools they would not even consider diving in ... (and would not never have dreamt that such jobs might earn them a living...). The ostensible security in the North, apparently, made them comfortable. Nobody knew them, they meant nothing to the locals; they were nonentities, inconspicuous and — unimportant. This was, under these circumstances, good.

The sky was invisible. It did not even exist! Do you believe me?

He — a tall, sinewy Dalmatian, with high cheek-bones (as in an Indian chief, ah ...), high forehead and large, clever eyes ("as in /this / story"!), he

had no one of his own here. Before every journey, before coming here, he would develop a fever and his temperature would increase: he was weighed down with melancholy which overwhelmed him even before his departure and he felt as if parts of his body were starting to rot. This gangrene of Mihovil's soul, which he had not recognised at first (since he had no idea what was happening to him, and then – after he left home several times ...), gradually led him to conclude that he had grown weak and unhealthy (although he was straight as an arrow, “*tipo sportivo*”, as his friends from the South would say); and in fact, every time he left home and the natural environment in which he grew and matured, he made an organic break, extracting himself from nature and vanishing in a most ludicrous and pointless way.

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At that moment, a woman walked in front of him. Not knowing her real name, he named her Lenny ... Her long hair was wet; she had obviously just come out of those muddy shallows since traces of sand still lingered on her back and on the wisps of her hair, glittering in the sunshine and dripping with mud, which slid down the blue cotton tea shirt that she had just put on, so that the drops on the surface turned into coal black, bluish black spots and touched the skin on her forearm, adorned with a myriad of moles. So bedewed, her dark – “Mediterranean” – skin, covered with fine dark hair, was very alluring to him.

She looked around. Mihovil caught his breath.

Her eyebrows were almost connected in the middle, as Frida Kahlo's, and below the bridge they made an elegant nose stretched down in a narrow line to the full lips the colour of marasca cherry. At that point, she tucked a wisp

of hair behind her left ear and wiped her forehead so that water would not drip down her face and breasts ...

It was, as I said, Lenny.

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The next day, on Sunday, he came to the beach again, at the same time as on the day before. She was not there. His strokes in the sea (and he swam only up to the permitted depth of the mentioned metre and a half!) were sluggish. His forearms slowly penetrated through the ooze, which resisted both inserting your hand into it and drawing it out. Indeed, our existence sometimes seems so completely unnecessary without the person indispensable to it!

He did not find any relief either in the joint bought in a cafe decorated in "Italian style", the one in that giant brick building, whose facade was painted light pink by the owners to add merriment to the neighbourhood (and he could not stand it)... or in baked potatoes with thick Brač olive oil poured over them ... or in the wine he had brought from Dalmatia. The glass somehow felt heavy in his hand.

That morning he snapped awake from an early morning dream in which he was walking in pink streets, surrounded by giant pink houses (and it also seemed to him that he could hear Pink Floyd's music), with a frighteningly pink joint in his mouth, which he was about to light with his right hand, but — ah! — he had a stump instead of a hand, smooth and surprisingly complete, as if he had been born with it, and there was nothing he could do. (Not even his "buddy" Miro had such an "original" stump, Miro from the Culture Defence Unit — a tragicomic, idealistic military outfit, makeshift and practically unarmed, which defended the Zadar hinterland,

courageously, devotedly and — as it was revealed afterwards — with many casualties, sometime in late 1991).

The scent of her black hair, which fell over her shoulders and shimmered in the Northern sun like a noble animal's hair ...had awoken in him the call of the depths beneath the rocks near Ošljak, where the sea is so invitingly dark: lured by its serenity and dignity you dive into it like an obedient child, who is not allowed to think, but must do as told, plunge into it and disappear.

He followed her, humbly and desperately, to the beach exit, and then to the town, sitting in the last row on the bus, which was —of course —pink, and watching her from the corner of his eye. Was it possible that the famous Jan, whose surname contains *the sea* (Vermeer), was doing the same a few centuries ago in the streets of the Hague, casting secret glances at a girl whose ear he would later adorn with a pearl earring and whose head he would wrap with an ultramarine scarf, a symbol of the sea.

The building she entered late that afternoon was obviously her home; she came out of it again in less than an hour having changed her clothes so that he could hardly recognise her; he was standing — as in an ambush, at a marble table behind the glass window of a snack bar across the road and he spotted her wearing a black leather coat. The only make up she wore was bright orange and red lipstick, of the kind that our mothers used to wear in early sixties, dressed in wide skirts and looking like the best and most beautiful mummies in the world to us children, true Hollywood stars. He quickly paid for a cup of linden tea and a glass of expensive cognac (which strongly counterbalanced the weak tea) and started to follow her, the woman, keeping a polite distance of about twenty metres. He was in fear of losing her, he almost mad with anxiety and worry lest this woman, a panther,

should not disappear in his dusty existence, as it used to be before he set eyes on her on the muddy Scheveningen beach.

When she appeared behind the glass under the low clouds of the Hague, looking like giant clusters of lava and ash, about seven o'clock in the evening (and it could have been midnight, four o'clock in the morning, four in the afternoon ... it did not matter), lit by a dim light coming from the background of a leaden room in which there was a bed, a washing basin with a mirror above it and a wall cupboard — this room with the dimmed thick glass under the fat sky seemed to him like a room designed for dying, like a death room, but with an occupant who was lively, beautiful and unforgettable. The woman seemed to him to be out of this world, detached from the people that meant nothing to him in this foreign land, in this neon-lit, big-city solitude, tasteless and odourless. Only with her hands clasped. Lenora — the one from Poe's stories and poems, from that dire semi-darkness, or perhaps ... Magdalen, Lenny was sitting on a high bar stool, behind the glass, in the shopping window, in the damp warmth of the room in which everything was probably velvety, sensual, a bit eerie, only as much as necessary, beautiful as the sunset, as the final rest after a long wait and hesitation.

She was looking straight into his eyes (Mihovil could only romantically hope that she had noticed him at the beach and that she remembered his face), unblinking, like a mannequin; she was looking at him through that glass, and fluorescent turquoise light, as if installed in a cooling showcase, exhibited — just a piece of meat, to be bought, now or never. He had woven a story about a woman like her who gave love for free, providing comfort to lonely sailors and desperate men in the street, delaying their end; Mihovil sincerely pitied her (although she fit into a worn out cliché) because there

was probably a man waiting for her at home, with whom she lived out of wedlock and had children, who needed her only for her money, and she was — so threatened by sickness and exhaustion — for him, a vagabond with a selfish, restless hearth, "the Lady of the North Sea". Oh, how he felt sorry for her in his imagined story! (As a stereotype from his own imagination.) Oh, how he loved her!

He slowly pulled his hand out of his jacket (even late summer evenings were chilly here) and raised it, to wave, clumsily, shyly and childishly. And then he entered the fluorescent-blue room, a shopping room, while the tall, long-legged Magda-Lenny (he increasingly grew fond of this silly stage name that he gave her), her breasts bursting like fresh, savoury bread, and her hair smelling of the Scheveningen beach, was drawing the curtain on her cooling showcase to hide reality, while giving out a smile in which he, Mihovil, once empty, and now filled with hope in the foreign land, feeling a *crescendo* beat in his temples, louder than his heartbeat — sought encouragement for his own compassion and salvation.