

Relapse

Short Stories

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Date: November 25, 2010

He agreed to drive me to the station, so I took the right front seat. I watched his reddened hands, old and cracked, wrapped around the wheel. His fingers were stained with lathe industrial oil, he even tried removing the stains with lye but didn't succeed. He said he had enough petrol for another 77 km. I smiled pitifully.

He wore the same leather jacket he had worn ten years ago, when I had left home. I looked at his lower teeth, which he would push with his tongue at every word he said. I couldn't see more than four and asking him how many there actually were seemed embarrassing. He was looking straight ahead through the soiled windshield at the road, which was so uncrowded that you could bet it was Sunday. Apparently, he was my father, the first man in my life, the man who had ceased to say "Son, you and me are alike" a long time ago.

His belly kept growing since he had quit smoking but I felt better knowing him well away from tobacco. He must have had a haircut a month and a half ago. He was tall. He would wear a suit or at least suit trousers. He used to arrange parties, telling jokes and dancing with all women in the room. Nothing to celebrate now though.

The wedding ring squeezed his finger. He was able to remove it with water and soap only. He used to cry when watching romantic movies, yelling at the TV, where the good were bleeding, left to despair. He himself looked defeated from aside, from behind, or beneath his blankets.



When I had called him two nights ago to let him know I was coming, he said: "I'm on a business trip. I'll be back on Sunday. I'm not even sure whether I'll get some sleep on Saturday night. I have to perform an inventory. When will you leave?"

"At four o'clock in the afternoon", I replied. "I thought I'd catch up with you. You'd better take a good sleep, though. Forget it, we'll get to see each other some time".

"I'll try to be there."

"I'll try" was not good enough for me. I expected an "Absolutely. I'll be there". But both of us knew we would shake our hands firmly, like he taught me, and we would have no idea what to do then.

We had that handshake in the hall. I looked at him right between the eyes, like he also taught me, so I could make a difference between defiance, indifference and love. Mom had just laid the table and we sat around waiting for the meal. Then all three of us chewed silently. When I was there, they used to move the table from its place near the wall into the middle of the room. Each one of us had one side. The cupboard side was always left empty, mom sat across, near the gas stove, me and dad sat facing each other, and now we were bent over our plates filled with fish bones.

I had waited there until mom finished washing the slimy dishes. She poured a glass of crude milk, from Nucșoara, and put it in front of me, then she caressed my hair as she would when I was 17 and it used to annoy me a lot. That day, though, it seemed only a bit useless, considering the man with perpetual existential crises I had become. I was watching her weary breasts in the same way a general practitioner would probably watch. I tried to figure out whether how I chose women had some connection to her. I could picture her breastfeeding or kissing me, but she seemed incapable of tenderness, just like me, and the thought that I could be haunted by images which never really existed made me sick. I recognized a hindrance in the feel of her touch and I had always been afraid of her because she looked as if she always had an affectionate gesture prepared for me. Dad was different. I never



had that sort of incidents with dad. It was much simpler. He would say briefly and quietly, once in a few months: "Bravo!", meaning "I'm proud of you", "You're great", that sometimes stood for "I love you", which I later learned it was far easier to say in English.

I put the glass on the edge of the sink and headed to my room. I sat down on the bed couch I couldn't remember how to sleep on. I felt I've always been 34 and six feet tall, I've always been outspoken, I've always been considerate, I've always been wise and lucid. And the reason I sometimes did use the wardrobe next to the window as a hideout was that I liked them to miss me from time to time, asking loudly where I was, well, with false desperation in their voices, but who cared? Sitting there holding the wardrobe keys in my hand I realized why I couldn't flirt. I was too old to find the patience I needed for coping with a few weeks of teasing and babbling, so that I could start caring and talking about who I really am.

When we had arrived, dad took my knapsack in one hand, as he used to do when he sent me in youth camps. I let him pass ahead of me, to ask about the train, about which platform it would arrive on, to act as a father. We split up near one of the poles.

"I must go. You take the train from here."

"It makes no sense for you to stay. Anyway, it's cold, you're tired. Go get some sleep."

"Call us when you arrive."

"I'll call."

He went across the wet rails with long steps. His shoulders were drawn forward. I thought of him while in train. The world appeared simpler from above.



My name is Paul, I am a writer and I fix things on paper.

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EDITURA PENTRU LITERATURĂ CONTEMPORANĂ

CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE PRESS