

To Those To Whom It Seems To Be

by

Goran Mimica

My fear that someone had denounced me and that, if I opened my eyes, I would see two men dressed from head to toe in black with expressionless faces next to the bed, and that I would have to endure an absurd trial, turned out to be groundless. I attributed it to the influence of the book upon whose pages I had fallen asleep last night, which somehow had sneaked into the uncharted territory of the just-before-awakening. There, under the cover of the morning haze, it had managed to tangle the fine threads between things and their meanings creating a frizz of confusion and plain untruths.

Indeed, nobody had denounced me, because, as every morning, I woke up exactly at seven o'clock, put the kettle on, dropped two teaspoons of sugar in a cup, and while waiting for water to boil, spent the next ten minutes, hands under head, dedicated to the task of finishing my dream, or, as I call it, the dreaming-out. What I managed to save and preserve from oblivion, and reality, in these ten minutes, stayed in my memory throughout the day and was written down every evening, in a ritual lacking any enthusiasm yet sodden with dogged persistence, in a notebook I kept in a shoebox under the bed. Long ago this ritual had turned into a habit in no way different from my neighbour's teeth-brushing and bowel-emptying, and its very repetitiveness gave me that first, morning energy which got me up out of the bed, dressed me, put my shoes on and led me over the threshold, further and further away from the room filled with the comforting coffee smell.

At first, this morning too, things were no different. My dream had finished with the words *It is a feeling of the end rather than of the beginning that Joseph senses at the end of February*. I was not sure whether I heard a voice speak these words or I saw them written. The dream continued in silent images of my dreaming-out:

an unknown woman waved to someone, and disappeared behind the dark red brick wall of the corner house. Joseph stands and stares into

that corner, as if her movements would suddenly unwind, as if she would reappear from behind the wall walking backwards. Joseph would then step back from the window, first lift one and then the second suitcase, and with his eyes fixed all the time on the window, would back to the door that would open on its own. He would step over the threshold, put the suitcases down, the door closing in his face, take the brass-egg of the doorknob and pull the door to himself, lift the suitcases and go, backwards, to the stairway, down which he would descend, stepping heels first to the bottom of the stairs, cross the hall and stop in front of the director's office.

The director offered him tea, some biscuits and a short speech in which he explained the nature of the institution: to provide the inhabitants of the Sanatorium with the necessary peace and wrap them in balanced, undisturbed dailyness. But a dailyness which does not contain "all the tiresome details of a struggle to keep your head, which is an integral part of the outside life". Joseph is asked to respect the routine, like meals and group excursions to surrounding beauty spots.

In the huge spot of greyness which his breath now widens now shrinks on the window surface, Joseph cannot make out anything.

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I spent the whole day at work enveloped in the same mist into which my dream had strayed that morning. There was nothing about that dream that should have disturbed me in the slightest way. Nevertheless, I kept thinking about it, finding it odd, feeling somehow under strain, as if trying hard to see through the wet spot on the window from my dream-out. This chipped away at my concentration but the day passed and that evening I routinely wrote down everything I'd dreamt-out that morning. I went to bed. The book in whose pages I tried to find some repose brought no rest and disquiet stubbornly continued to colour the background of my thoughts, not allowing me to fall asleep for a long time. Only when I remembered that tomorrow was Saturday, the beginning of the weekend, and that, if I wished, I could take as long as I wanted to dream-out, did my breathing finally even and sleep come.

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A horrible sensation that, transformed into a giant insect, I lay on the floor next to the bed kicking the air helplessly with my many-jointed legs, turned out to be another unwanted side effect of the reading I had done last night. The touch of my feet on the cold floor shook off the nasty feeling. I put the kettle on and returned to bed.

It is a feeling of the end rather than of the beginning that Joseph senses at the end of February. An unknown woman waved to someone, and then disappeared behind the dark red brick wall of the corner house. From the window of his room Joseph can see the part of the street she vanished in. The rest of the window frame looks onto the sea-sand line. He searches his memory for the feeling of loneliness, sadness, and when he fails to find it, he tries to impose it on himself, only to end up in a numbing confusion out of which he has to name all the reasons that have put him in this situation.

The room is small, with a separate bathroom and wide windows. A bed, desk, two chairs and a cupboard, insides decorated with metal hangers, is all the furniture.

The sand is cold and wet, it sticks and runs in small crumbs between his fingers. His footprints, sharp and deep edged, cut into the grey surface. The wind clears the sky and whitens the wave tops, shaves the surface of the water. He pulls his head deeper between his shoulders, at the same time trying to release the spasm that calcifies his whole torso.

At dusk he returned to his room with blocked sinuses and watery eyes.

The day, its darkness advancing from the open ocean and the motionless staleness of the silence in the Sanatorium, seemed like three surveyor's stakes marking out the territory of his thoughts: a building site on which nothing visible would grow.

He neared the window and in his breath on the glass looked for the brick wall and the ocean. In the spot of moist, Joseph could not make out anything.

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Although there was no doubt that this time the dreaming-out had managed to move the dream and Joseph in some kind of sequential order, I still went to the bathroom with weak knees. The empty cup in my hand had turned into a piece of cold ceramic, and the granulated sediment of coffee at the bottom had thickened into an indistinguishable pattern. Sitting on the toilet lid I stared into the black substance as if it hid the answers.

“Something stinks here,” I said. “This dream still hasn’t been dreamed-out.” What does this new situation mean? Two mornings in a row the dream remains undreamed-out. Who is this Joseph? What does he want from me? Where does this fear that cuts my knees and rages with a storm of questions come from?

Certainly, the fault, if I can talk about fault, was not mine. I just followed an old ritual, an act that had not been subject to change. I could only slow it down, postpone it for a short while, just enough to prepare some coffee and climb back into the bed. Thus, if the fault is not mine, I have no choice but to look for the answer in my dream. Bitterness, rising from my failure to find any comprehensible explanation for my feelings, overwhelmed me and I directed its jet towards Joseph, a being of indistinct forms who, so it seemed, had a short past and an uncertain future.

“The fault lies”, that same evening I mumbled into my chin, “in the direction the dreaming-out went”. I could count on one hand the cases when it went unwinding, rewinding towards the starting point. “Anyway, starting and ending points do not exist. There are no clearly defined things or certainties in dreams. True enough, many dream-outs used to finish with an apparently clear ending, but the feeling of episodicality and temporariness would remain after the completed dream-out. There are numerous examples”. And to confirm it I read some passages from the notebook. “However, even this temporariness is better than the abyss of the backwards dream-out.”

In my notebook I entered very little that made sense. “I am desperate”, “it won’t finish like this”, “we’ll see”, “what’s happening?”, and a whole series of phrases with similar, almost arguing tones and dubious meaning filled the pages. Even my handwriting changed. The usual one, even and calm, was replaced with a nervous, jagged and for some reason left-slanting hand.

When, long after midnight, I finally stopped and glanced at the written lines the letters began to dance in front of my eyes and I was engulfed by the feeling of the floor giving way underneath me. Exhausted, I went to bed but could not fall asleep for a long time. Finally, sometime before dawn my mind refused to process or reason the barren thoughts, and sleep overcame me.

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A huge crowd gathered around a cage to see me, the last hunger artist. The growling and rumbling of my stomach were so powerful that the screams of horror and disbelief among the first rows of spectators were almost muffled by them: their mouths, it seemed, opened and closed in silence.

I was awakened, in the early afternoon, by the rumbling in my gut. Against all routine I greedily bit into a piece of a dry crust left on the table from yesterday's breakfast. That's when I had had my last meal. "Sunday starts with an act of eating. That's not good," I thought, and felt the first signs of headache. I put the water on and returned to bed, unsettled. But a sigh of relief escaped from my throat.

It is a feeling of the end rather than of the beginning that Joseph senses at the end of February.

Like Pavlov's dog, I oozed excitement thinking of the possibility of the dreaming-out finally bearing fruit. But instead of stepping into the no man's land between dream and reality and sinking into the state of mind haziness, nothing happened. With every moment I became more awake, until I finally opened my eyes wide and found myself far from any sleep and fully aware of my own disbelief. Not only had the dream of Joseph not happened, but it had been replaced by an utter emptiness, the absence of any dream at all.

What I had already suspected was now confirmed: a tiresome wait, mixed with useless hope, won't accomplish anything, nothing will happen. Unless I do something, it will all continue in new torments.

I had countless wishes but no will. Long ago I had found a similar phrase in a book and I taken it right away as something directed at me. That's why the sudden decision to go to the bottom of the case came as a surprise and meant only one thing.

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I woke up early on Monday. Standing next to the cooker I waited for the water to boil and drunk my morning coffee at the table: dreaming-out was out of the question.

I called work and to the supervisor's amazement (in 18 years I haven't missed a single day of work), I told him I was not coming in today, I wasn't feeling well. No, nothing serious, just general weakness. It could be the onset of exceptionally strong flu, so it is better to take a day or two off, just in case.

Finding the phone numbers of all sanatoriums along the coast was not a problem. There were three patients with the name Joseph. Two were old men.

Among the things I put into my two suitcases was my notebook.

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The landscape rushed evenly on the smeared train window and for the first time in a week I felt at peace: there was no going back. As if every responsibility was unloaded off my back. At the moment, it lay in the hands of the locomotive driver. When a road, like a ball of wool, starts to unwind, one cannot do anything but let the thread lead him towards the end.

Finally I knew what I was looking for, or rather, who I was looking for. The nearer the encounter, the calmer I got. There were only two possibilities, I kept repeating to myself, weren't there? Either Joseph is the man from my dreams or he is, so to speak, a simple Joseph, a mental case, a victim of his own utopia, a man who lives in a sanatorium. There are two outcomes. Isn't that great? What if there were hundreds? I'd never stop worrying.

If Joseph is the one from my dreams then the solution will come on its own, during the meeting. If Joseph is the patient, then... For that too the solution will somehow come. I did not want to think further than this point. I let myself be lulled by the toothless sun into sleepiness and the perspective of the horizon line that was taking me towards the meeting.

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Although I wasn't a member of Joseph's family, and my reasons for this 'private visit' rather vague, the Director authorised the visit. I felt relieved and gladly accepted the offered tea and biscuits. The Director also offered a short speech in which he explained the nature of the institution: to provide, above all, the inhabitants of the Sanatorium with the necessary peace and wrap them in balanced, undisturbed dailyness. But dailyness which does not contain all the tiresome details of a struggle to keep your head, which is an integral part of the outside life. Visitors are expected to respect the daily routine of the sanatorium and patients' privacy.

I closed the office door behind me, crossed the hall and stopped at the bottom of the stairs leading to the first floor. I took a deep breath.

I climbed the stairs, walked to the nearest door, put the suitcases on the soft carpet next to me and knocked. No answer. I reached for the oval brass-egg knob and opened the door. There was no one inside.

A bed, desk, two chairs and a cupboard, was all the furniture. The room was small and wide windows allowed the light to reach every corner.

I closed the door and went to the window. I first put one, then the other suitcase on the floor and stepped closer to the window. An unknown woman waved to someone, and disappeared behind the dark red brick wall of the corner house.

A misty spot of my breath was spreading fast on the glass and in it, I thought, I managed to distinguish the following words: *It is a feeling of the end rather than of the beginning that I sense at the end of February.*

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He was born in Novi Sad, ex-Yugoslavia. Since 1985 he has lived and worked in Poland, the USA, UK and Italy. He has published numerous short stories, articles and literary reviews. He is the author of a book of short stories Kratka Motka za Neposlusne (Serkl, Novi Sad, 2000), and two novels, Korografija (Stylos, Novi Sad, 2002) and Svinado (Futura Publikacije, Novi Sad, 2005). He writes in Serbo-Croatian and English. He lives in Italy.