



Blue-green

A STORY BY ANDREA PISAC

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If Paul hadn't asked about my earliest memory, I would have never thought about it. Pictures from childhood are unfolding like strokes of watercolours on a painting surface. It is difficult to know what makes the colour blue-green: where the dark pine forest leaves off and the raging stone sea begins. What is the beginning, and what is the end?

As we lie cosily in our matrimonial bed the invisible feelers with which we had been touching each other disappear and we suddenly become separate again. In the tranquil aftermath of lovemaking, I sometimes think of my past lovers. Not so much for the sake of comparison or because I am not enjoying it with Paul. My past lovers are the only thing we don't share. And, of course, his past lovers. We believe that nobody can take away from us the things we have experienced. That's why, remembering things past means holding on to our autonomy.

My first memory, I say to Paul, is connected to the soles of my feet. Some four inches long, they want to carry the strong body of a three-year-old girl to the other side of a metal grid. I remember pine tree needles that stick lightly into the tender, still spotless skin, leaving behind traces of sap and sticky Mediterranean dust. I try to detect the most painless possible way of getting the feet across the obstacle. Because once before, the feet reached out across, but were stopped by sharp metal edges which cut deep into the child's skin. Unaccustomed to pain, the feet pulled back. It would be clever to step on the grid where the soil has filled up the gaps – that would make the child's body less heavy on the metal edges. But the feet care little about rational calculations. When they hear their mother's voice calling them, they dash across their hurdle, forgetting the pain which remains thumping in the arches of their soles for a long time.

'What do you call this metal grid in English?' I ask Paul, because it is important that he understands my earliest memory. 'The grid people have in front of the door to brush mud from their shoes?'

Paul takes a pull on his freshly lit cigarette with a deep sigh and looks blankly into the ceiling.

'We don't have such a thing', he finally disappoints me. 'Hang on, yes, on farms... There are these grids which people have to prevent cattle from leaving their enclosed space. A cattle grid. But they are much wider. You see. If a cow wanted to stroll off, its hoof would get caught in the grid', Paul says peeping at my face.

'Human grid', I say quietly.

'Sorry?'

'Our grid is for people, not for cattle. So we can call it a human grid', I stutter.

'That sounds a bit apocalyptic, don't you think?' Paul blows away the smoke and moves the ceramic ashtray from his naked stomach on to the floor. 'In translation, you always have to be careful with overstatements. English can't take overstatements.'

'Of course it can't', I mutter to myself and reach out for my part of the bedding, 'In English, the word sea is an overstatement,' I strike back with vengeance.

For Paul, words which describe the watercolours of my soul have a meaning, but they lack sense. He couldn't understand why I wanted to see the Irish Sea in the north-west of England. Our house is only ten miles away from the coast, where the river and sea meet in a gentle plain. Still, it took months before I finally talked him into showing me the sand banks of Arnside Knot.

In Arnside, it is difficult to squat down by the sea and touch the supple surface with the palms of your hands. I was surprised at the teacher who was trying to get the children away from the sea in panic. She was pointing to the danger signs - Beware! Fast Rising Tide! The children reluctantly left the sandy surface, cleaning a thick layer of mud from their little shoes.

The sea in Arnside tore me between a sense of bliss and desperation. I would either grab at Paul's arm in excitement and shout like a madwoman: 'There's a rabbit, Paul, look at a rabbit!' The next minute I would scorn the uninspiring and dull mustard colour of the Irish Sea. How could that sea ever stand for the Divine? The thought of, not drowning in it, but getting sucked into the quicksand was driving me insane.

'Shouldn't there be a global arbiter that would ban this swamp from being called a sea?' I asked Paul.

He lost his temper then. He was never a big patriot, but my limited world views drove him mad. He told me I was a stick-in-the-mud. I had no idea what that meant, so I took out my moleskin notepad and jotted down while walking 's-t-i-c-k - i-n - t-h-e - m-u-d, check at home, Paul is pissed off'.

A few days later, with his English pride still hurt, Paul gave me a reproduction of the Turner painting *Crossing the Sands*. It showed a caravan of people, horses and cargo, crossing the sand banks of Arnside Knot. At misty dawn, during the low tide, the courageous ones would walk across the bay, shortening the trip by several miles. They didn't look scared. On the contrary, they looked as if they did it every day. In front, stood a guide with a long stick to check new formations of quicksand. Once, to be a guide across the sands was a very prestigious occupation. It paid extremely well because there was always a slight chance that the entire caravan would end up lost in quicksand.

'See, it is possible to survive the dangerous Irish Sea', Paul said sulking.

'Yes, and it is not quite that dull', I added, trying to make up for my backward attitudes.

Turner's canvas and its ethereal light, in which dream-like travellers quivered, filled me with respect for a landscape different from the one I was used to. Then again, I thought to myself, the sea can't be anything else but blue-green. I held the thought silent.

It takes two weeks for the dull grey to become blue-green. If I look closely at the surface of my skin, where its texture and colour resemble shiny fish scales, I see that grey still covers some parts. The blue-green bleeds into it like flickering darts and it looks like it will finally surrender. The bruises stay on the skin a long time,

sometimes for months. Of course, it depends on the object with which they were caused and how strong the blow was. Some which don't go deep skip the grey phase and turn green at once – a sure sign of the skin healing. I don't believe that wounds heal quicker if they are kissed. But I do know that the perpetrator's guilty conscience literally disappears with warm kisses which he lavishes on my bruised legs.

'Let me kiss it better', he says and I know I have to lie on my belly while he licks my wounds with his remorseful mouth. Even if that childish trick worked, what would I kiss of his? The broken frames of his glasses that I knocked off from his perplexed face in our last clash? There is a fine line between a duel and a duet. Passion baffles the mind in both cases. In one minute lovers drink from the sweet cup of the exotic and unknown, while in the next they turn into deadly enemies who despise their mutual difference.

Our Adriatic duel in the sun had only one casualty. The mysterious strangeness that attracted us to each other passed away. All over my body, I could feel gushes of Paul's hatred. Defeated, we were pushing our bikes along the road which passed through scorched Dalmatian undergrowth. We had no strength left to carry on fighting. The climax had subsided and the feathers from our flamingo fell off forever. We followed a narrow village road leading towards the coastline of the island of Brac. Our desperate caravan was interrupted by an old man with his donkey who was approaching us from the opposite direction. He couldn't begin to imagine the blows we had given each other only a few miles up the road. His own donkey had probably never experienced such violence.

Paul suddenly felt awkward because of the old man's presence and went on to smooth things over between us.

'There is a very logical explanation for what just happened', he said, carefully choosing his words. 'We should have eaten after the swim in Postire. Even only a pizza.'

In most cases I never doubted Paul's way of dealing with conflicts. He would usually think of a sound explanation for why things happened, then we would both nod approvingly and agree that we would not remember negative things. It was as if they were erased. But now, moments after he uttered the word pizza, I knew it would not end. He hated me even for being different in the choice of the food I ate. And it wasn't actually a choice at all, but rather a peculiar metabolism which would push my body into hypoglycaemic shock if I didn't follow my strict diet. I was problematic, for ever. So, I accepted my so-called limitation as much as I could. Where normal people had chocolate cakes and pasta dishes, I knew I had to bring a bag of nuts and some dark yeast-free bread in my handbag. They were my proteins and my carbohydrates.

'Nobody eats as healthily as my squirrel and me', Paul would cheerfully chat at parties, losing count of how many glasses of red wine he needed to boost his social nature.

'Come on, Paul', I would smile and gently warn him with a squeeze on his arm, 'people might not be interested in that.'

'Of course they are', Paul would protest, 'especially in today's world where we

don't know what we're eating and how much of our food has been genetically modified.'

A growing group of people would join the loud advocate of healthy living. Paul would normally have his arm around my shoulders.

'My squirrel', he would give me a look of worship, 'which nuts have you been munching on today?'

He would make me talk about the three killer whites and how we try to avoid them as much as we can.

'Not even cane sugar?' the questions would crowd in.

I would smile absent-mindedly, almost as if I was apologising for our strange eating habits: 'no, not even white flour, and only a tiny bit of salt.'

Paul was besotted with me being different from others. Even when I was cracking pieces of hazelnuts in my mouth, he found himself sexually aroused by my strangeness. Unfortunately, his mating fuse was quite short and it could burn down easily. I wasn't a squirrel then. I was a dirty urban rat which stopped him from quenching his hunger during an exhausting bike ride, even with a horrible piece of junk food.

The circumstances of our bike ride that day were not favourable at all. We were both unfit for a twenty-five-mile strenuous ride, and we got carried away by the beauty of the blue-green colour of the Adriatic Sea which kept drawing us further away from civilization. We even went skinny dipping on a deserted rocky beach, surrounded by a thick pine tree forest.

'This sea', Paul was gasping, 'how can you ever put it into words!'

'This is just sea', I shrugged my shoulders. 'When you say sea in Croatian, this is what comes to mind, tame blue-green water where people go swimming.'

'Don't be facetious', Paul scolded me and returned his romantic gaze across the open sea.

'I am not being facetious at all', I replied flatly, 'I am just explaining the state of affairs. It doesn't mean that this sea is more beautiful than the one you have back home.'

'The one I have?' Paul raised his voice.

'Well, you know what I mean', I eased off. 'It's only a matter of cognitive linguistics at the end of the day.'

This is where the conversation ended. And I knew it would. Freshened up by our swim, we set off on our bikes again, looking for an inviting tavern where we could get home-made Dalmatian food. There was a sign-post along the road leading inland – home-made food, 1.5 miles. On both sides of the narrow route we could see vineyards hazy with buzzing insects. Paul was speeding up. It's the food, I thought. I moaned and begged him to slow down just a little bit, but my voice echoed across the island fields in vain, failing to reach the burning ears of a determined Englishman.

One minute I was cycling standing up, the next I was resting against my saddle. I nervously changed position to avoid the pain. My mouth felt parched. I could hear the donkeys braying with all their might somewhere in front of us. They were protesting against their owners and the heavy cargo that was digging

into their skinny ribs. I got off my bike and screamed:

'I can't do it any more. I just can't!'

'What do you mean you can't? What's wrong with you? You can't just give up now!' Paul was hollering at the end of his tether.

He carelessly threw his bike down on the side of the road. Well, it wasn't actually his bike. We had hired them for the day. There was a power cut inside his head. 'I've had enough, you know. I am fed up of being with somebody who always has to be different. You always give up at the last minute. You are a bloody loser who is dragging me down as well.'

Stunned, I was looking at Paul's face where his mouth was opening and closing of its own free will. The sound died out after the first few deadly sentences. Then suddenly, his glasses fell and broke against the asphalt. My hand felt numb. I was observing his frantic endeavour to screw the glasses back together. They had stayed in one piece after all. Through them, his eyes grew smaller, looking at me with piercing anger. They were dull grey. With my back to him, I searched for our bikes: they looked broken, thrown like that on the ground. There were no words, no language to rationalize this. I waited for Paul to offer some sort of reconciliation, knowing he would not be able to apologize. Because last time, he said, he would not stop, he would lash out. The first blows reached my legs. I felt a sharp burning on the skin from the hard sole of his trainer. Gradually, the pain turned dull, seeping deep into my warmed-up muscles. The following kicks came and went faster, even following a rhythm which by then had stopped registering as pain. I could only follow his foot – a wound-up toy that kept thrusting at my calves.

The tavern we found in the next village had no fresh fish available. The owner was not expecting accidental tourists, so he defrosted Patagonian squid and made two mixed salads. We said nothing – trying to be especially careful when it came to food. Going back was much easier. No climbs, so the bikes just rolled their way along the coastline, lit with the purple sunset. If only we could have had another swim on a lonely beach, Paul cried, stopping by the side of the road to wait for me. But, the bikes had to be back that evening. And it doesn't really matter, I reassured him, people go on remembering only nice things from their holiday.

My husband does not speak my mother tongue. Yet I am both my mother's daughter and my husband's wife. As we lie in our matrimonial bed, he names parts of my body in his language. He teaches me who I am and how to ask for what I want in English. The accent which reveals my origin is very attractive for Paul. It excites him. Especially when my sentences are grammatically correct, but stylistically inappropriate in a given context.

In English, Paul says, desire is never expressed in a direct way. But what do I know? Instead of saying *I want to go on top today* I should say *would you mind me going on top today*? When we are on good terms, my stylistic mistakes are a real turn-on.

If you miss what somebody told you, you must say *sorry*? They will then repeat what they said before. I know that, grammatically. But I can't make myself be so polite, so I keep using the literal translation from my mother tongue. I say *what* instead of *sorry*. In the first few months of our relationship, Paul would drag me to the bedroom every time I said *what*? Now, it is assumed that I am getting better at English, so when our English friends come and visit, I say *sorry*. I avoid expressing desire in a direct way and keep away from overstatements. I always ask nicely for what I want, and so I get it. *Could you please do this, or would it be a huge problem if you did that, could I do it this way, or would you mind if I did it in that way*. Neurolinguistic programming, originally from the Anglophone world, pays great attention to affirmative statements. So, instead of saying *don't do this*, I say to Paul *please, do that*. When I am having a great time in bed I scream *oh, my God!* But this was not too difficult to learn, as you can see it on TV all the time. It is easiest to learn exclamations in a foreign language because they contain no verbs. The hardest are the words which stand for things that don't exist in another language. Like the metal grid across which my little feet dashed.

The other day, I thought of them again. The memory lulled me into a child-like serenity. Then suddenly it dawned on me, *oh, my God*, what does that little girl think of me when she sees me all nice and polite like this? Who is this woman? Has she gone mad? – frowns the chubby face. It does look like me, but it's not me. Soon enough, after the momentary scare, the little girl goes back to playing on the sticky Mediterranean dust, embraced by the blue-green sea. She is immersed in the safety of the world she knows, remaining quite ignorant of the strangeness that will soon start eating up the shiny scales of her soft skin.

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