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1200

Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union



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THE CHASM

TRANSLATED FROM THE SERBIAN BY

EMA PANDRC



KONTRAST
Beograd, 2019.

Contents

THE CHASM

Part One / 7

Part Two / 91

Expression of Gratitude / 177

About the translator / 178

Part One

Even after all those years, Bogdan was awakened by a bang. This time his pupils exploded and, when he came to his senses, he felt his eyelids with the tips of his fingers to make sure that there was still something lying underneath them. He was fairly satisfied with the conclusion: he was occupying all three dimensions, and the fourth was gradually coming back to him as he tossed and turned in an uncomfortable bed he'd never slept in before. An old man knows he's alive when every inch of him hurts, it occurred to him. And in the same way, he's able to separate the dream world from the waking one. In his dreams, however nightmarish, pain doesn't exist. It only comes later, on this side of the wall, it starts and ends here. Pain pervades the length, width, and height, and lasts for seconds and ages. That thought was supposed to be a consolation because it meant that all the horrors one dreams are harmless, but it didn't make Bogdan feel any better. With his palm he rubbed his nose, which was itchy from his snoring, then raised his eyelids and for a moment was blinded. Radica had already opened the jalousies and a glimpse of the blue sky threatened to actually dig out his eyeballs. He felt dried sweat on his skin, the swollen mosquito bites were burning. It was difficult to choose a dimension suitable for escaping.

"At least close the curtains," he mumbled.

The suite in which they had spent the tortuous night smelled of a lotion that dizzied them; they had been forced to buy it as soon as they unpacked the previous evening, because the services didn't include safety from the bloodsuckers. The island they were visiting was not sprayed, ostensibly to protect the olive orchards, but no one put screens on the doors and windows. That is why every shop they entered, spotty like typhus victims, had a special rack with anti-mosquito products, the cheapest of which cost fifteen euros. Greek faggots.

Radica was heating water on an old greasy hot plate. The smell of coffee mingled with the smell of the insecticide lotion, and Bogdan threw the sheet back and rushed straight from the bed onto the terrace.

Nothing about the suite was good, it was where physical and spiritual pain connected. Damir had recently explained to him how reality enhancement computer programs work and showed him what they can do, for example, with an old photograph from his army days; but when Radica and Bogdan were in the agency choosing their lodgings it never even crossed his mind that none of the luxuries in the fancy presentations would actually be there when they arrived. Squalid, that was the right word for it. Everything was squalid. The beds were creaky and slid too easily across the tiles laid even in the bedroom, as if it were a slaughterhouse and not a hotel suite. The kitchen was so cramped that you could hardly open the refrigerator, and there were no pots among the dishes. What were they thinking, how was one supposed to eat? There were no pots, but there was an egg cutter in the cabinet above the sink. (Bogdan didn't know exactly what the thingy was called, so he called it a cutter. That little piece of crap with wires that you push down over an egg to cut it into slices. Into wedges. Whatever... Who needs *that*?) And a teapot. They had supplied all sorts of special utensils, but they had forgotten the general-purpose stuff—like a pot in which you could make tea and boil an egg. As soon as they arrived, Radica had told him why it was so, but Bogdan was not satisfied with the explanation. How could she know? It also didn't seem real to him that all of Corfu, including Dassia where they were staying, was primarily visited by tourists from Western Europe, mostly from England and Holland. “So, where are all the Brits?” he asked, pointing at the surrounding suites which were occupied to the last by Serbs. The second they got off the bus, several passengers had jumped straight into the pool and their host, a middle-aged slouching Greek in whose eyes Bogdan saw only money, money, money, began shouting at them and made them get out of the water. The

confused travelers milled around the deserted restaurant waiting for their room keys, only to be marched to their rooms single file, like prisoners. “Where are all the Brits?” he’d said then as well, leaning on the built-in barbecue in the closed-up dining hall, while Radica was straightening up the pile of luggage. He ran his finger over the grill and showed her that it was perfectly clean. “Nobody has used this for months. Years even.” Radica shrugged. “That’s because the Brits don’t come here anymore. See, the kitchen’s not even open. They won’t light the fire for people like us.” She picked up the smaller suitcase and instructed him with a look to take the bigger one. “That’s probably why we’re also not allowed in the pool,” she added, heading off in front of him to the suite. English faggots, he thought.

On the terrace, he was swept by a warm wind that gained speed as it came down the mountainside towards the sea. It smelled of... chlorine from the pool. Bogdan shook his head and crossed his arms. Why did they decide to come in the first place? Why had he agreed to a summer vacation in the high season, in the period he had always avoided even while he was in the service—and it had been a lot harder back then to go on vacation exactly when you preferred to. His superiors, truth be told, had usually yielded to his choices. *Captain Bogdan*,¹ *a.k.a. the God-Given*, they would say and write the dates he had picked into the calendar. *Captain God-Given can go on vacation whenever he desires*. What he could not do was to be promoted to the rank of major, but Bogdan had stopped thinking about that long before he retired. He had never really been obsessed with ranks. Promotions in the workplace were Radica’s thing, but she was cursed and Bogdan knew that. Even now—coffee was threatening to ruin his day. The coffee, the mosquito lotion, the chlorine, the egg cutter, the teapot, the non-existent Brits, the greedy Greeks, the whole island way too close to Albania.

1) The English equivalent of the Slavic name Bogdan is Theodore, which means God-given, hence the nickname. Author’s note.

It was her idea. She told him that they should get out of Belgrade, at least for a week. And he believed the given solution would work, just like he believed Damir that Photoshop can change people's appearances. Only that's not true: people change themselves, they make freaks of themselves. They don't need a computer program for that. *If he could leave, so can we*, he thought at the time and let Radica choose the destination. She chose the seaside, of course. *Corfu*, she said, *where the yellow lemon blooms, as the old song goes*. With the passing of time, he had come to understand the peculiarity of the people who come from the karst regions. Nothing can be compared with the thinking of someone who spent their whole childhood surrounded by greyness. The stones from the bare mountains threaten to move into a man, filling him like the wolf in the fable of the seven little goats, and dragging him to the bottom. Bogdan didn't think that Radica had reached the bottom, because he didn't know where that bottom was supposed to be. He was even more frightened by the thought that there was no bottom at all. He began to wonder whether everything the two of them did, those long-since established patterns in which they moved closer to or further away from each other, was mere groping in a dream devoid of dimension and meaning.

The anti-mosquito lotion smelled like lemons. Now even the coffee smelled like that, too. So much for the famous Corfu. Everything is fake nowadays. People are fake, smells are fake, islands are fake, no matter how big the humps on their backs. Humps that block the sun. Pantokrator. Who gives a mountain a name like that? Sounds like farm machinery. *Radica, I'm gonna go plow the field with the pantokrator*.

Bogdan stared out at the sea, about half a kilometer away from the complex with its swimming pool. In the distance, towards Albania, it sparkled in the sunshine as if covered in cellophane, but the shallows of Dassia were in the shade. Bogdan didn't feel like swimming in the cove where the wind rippled the water; it seemed cold, and the sand shining white at the bottom

could have been quicksand, waiting to swallow a man whole. If Radica was to be trusted, here nobody would drag him out, because the locals would not understand him, despite their traditional Greek-Serbian friendship. He'd cry out: "Upomoć!" and not "Help!" or "Hilfe!". When it finally did peek out from behind Pantokrator, the sun would be broiling hot and Bogdan would suggest not to go down to the beach today. They were too tired from traveling anyway. In the evening, they could take a walk around town, but nothing more than that. He was not a man of stone. He was born in the fields, he came from the fertile land of Šumadija, which, in all honesty, most often made him neither smarter nor gentler. When they'd first met, they joked that the differences between them would improve their relationship, that those things would bring them even closer together in what they shared. Perhaps it was once true but, like with the boundaries of their common dreams, Bogdan was more often disturbed by the thought that there weren't so many similarities or agreements at all.

"We should be in the common room in half an hour," Radica called out from the room, sipping her coffee. "The tour operator is coming to tell us about the arrangements. There are some outings, I saw them on the bulletin board. Paxos, Antipaxos. There's one to Vido as well. Maybe..."

"Maybe we could just skip all that prattle," Bogdan said, turning his back to the sea. He was met by a view of the slopes and a wind which drove straight into his face. Again he felt pressure in his eyes, a sign that something within him was about to burst. He knew that he was being defiant in vain. He went into the room, holding his breath so that he could avoid the unpleasant smells. He shut himself up in the bathroom and changed into decent clothes. When Radica had finished her coffee, they went downstairs. There, several guests had already gathered around the grill and the unset dining tables, and Radica recognized a

couple who had been sitting across the aisle from them on the bus from Belgrade to Corfu. During the rest stop near Predejane, she had exchanged a few words with them, while Bogdan relieved his bladder at the motel. When the bus had left the parking lot, she told him their names were Tanja and Zoran Simović, and that they too were headed for Dassia. The gentleman was even retired from the military, like Bogdan. “How nice,” he said, closing his eyes to avoid getting nauseous. Now, as he was standing among the sleepy tourists, waiting for the tour operator, he realized that that had been the first sign: a warning that they should have stayed at home. But he hadn’t recognized it on time and now it was too late. Radica was already chatting with that Zoran fellow and his significantly younger spouse, waving Bogdan over with her purse, to which he gave a wave of his hand and sat at the table right in the middle of the room, at a safe distance from them. Radica soon joined him with a map of Corfu which her new acquaintances had given her.

“I mean, really...” she swung her purse as if she were about to box his ears with it. “They’re staying in the suite next to ours. We’ll be running into them all week. Why don’t you relax for a change? That’s why we’re here, right?”

“No, that’s not why we’re here,” Bogdan replied, knowing that would shut her up. Still, he was examining the inside of her purse, which always reminded him of an ugly and ill-trained dog, ever ready to start barking. It had a surly snout and, whenever Radica unsnapped its metal jaws, Bogdan was afraid that a deluge of bile which its owner had stored in the darkness of its leather bowels would come at him. Fortunately, now it seemed to him that there was no reason to dread such niceties. The secrets in that purse were kept safe, hidden behind that mocking facial expression.

The moment she showed up, the tour operator won the audience over with her olive-tan skin and serene smile, so they instantly forgave her for being half an hour late. They sat at the

tables, dividing into groups as if preparing for a quiz, and the beautiful tanned woman began delivering a speech about the island, its landmarks, about a famous English writer who lived nearby and wrote of Mediterranean attractions, the fortresses worth visiting, queen Sisi's summer residence, olive trees and rainy winters, the island's highest summit and its largest, powerful transmitter. She talked about the upcoming excursion to Vido island and the visit to the Blue Sea Tomb on St. Vitus's Day... Bogdan stopped listening after a few minutes. A group of young people sitting at the table next to him were chatting. He shook his head and sighed.

"You hear this rubbish they're saying?"

Radica was browsing the island map spread out over the table. "No. What are they saying?"

"That Saint Vitus's Day got its name after the island of Vido."²

She looked up and blinked.

"That's when that old constitution was adopted or something, right?"³

And there it is again: the feeling that his eyeballs are filling up with air, that they're about to explode. People just kept asking questions; how long does it take to get to Corfu Town, when's the bus leaving exactly, how much time would they have for shopping, where can one find good food in Dassia, or how much does it cost to rent a car for a day? So, Bogdan was trying to think of something which would make the operator focus on him for a little while, perhaps an awkward question, for example: "How much do you charge restaurants on the island for recommending them to tourists?"—but all along he could feel Radica's presence, who was bent over the map as if exploring a buried treasure record that's missing a key element, the X mark. Some mystery that

2) Saint Vitus's Day (called Vidovdan in Serbia) actually got its name after the celebration of Saint Vitus. Author's note.

3) The so-called Vidovdan Constitution was proclaimed on St. Vitus's Day in 1921. Author's note.

is: just a hill poking out of a sea, surrounded by a main road. You can't get lost. Whichever way you go, you'll end up in the same place. What exactly was the problem? Why did she take the map in the first place, it's not like the two of them wouldn't manage on their own among all the olive and cypress trees? Rule number one: use well-known toponyms for orientation. At least here that's easily done. The most obvious one is impossible to miss. It overshadows the entire bay.

"Can you reach Mount Pantokrator by car?"

Bogdan didn't realize right away that it was Radica who'd asked the question. She placed her index finger over the summit point.

"Who says we're going to rent a car?" he whispered. "And even if we did, I have no intention of climbing up there."

Radica placed her palm on his hand to silence him. Cars are an acceptable option, the operator advised them, but under no circumstances should you rent a scooter if you want to explore the higher areas of the island, because those machines are weak and tend to be a letdown when ridden uphill. "Besides, by the time you get to the beach from way up there, your feet will have fallen off, even though you're going downwards." Someone interjected by making a remark about jumping into the sea and everyone laughed.

Bogdan drew his hand from underneath Radica's and took the map of Corfu, then folded it carefully and put it in his shirt pocket. The corner of Radica's mouth stiffened. "Then we'll go to Vido," she said and got up so abruptly that her chair got knocked over. "I'll sign us up tomorrow."

Bogdan remained seated among the tourists who were all looking at him like he'd done something wrong, and at that instant his head exploded yet again.

When he came back to his senses, he was in a different place, on a field intersected by a concrete trench from which heads were sticking out like ants'. He looked around and saw scared but cu-

rious young faces, and among them one that stood out in particular. Something in that look was worrying Bogdan, but then he thought that his mind must have played tricks with him because of the piercing sunshine in his eyes and the intense smell of tumbled, dug out, plowed soil around them. It was early yet to draw final conclusions; after a month, all ants still resemble one another. “Over here,” he heard his own voice. “Behind the wall.” And the ants did as he’d told them, all except for the one that remained staring at him. Bogdan tilted his head toward his chest, hiding. When he raised it back up, he found Radica bent over him, while Zoran Simović, the officer from the bus, was feeling Bogdan’s forehead with his palm and spreading the man’s eyelids with his thumb and index finger, examining his pupils as if Bogdan were a lunatic.

“I don’t think it’s sunstroke. Perhaps he dehydrated or his blood pressure dropped. You wouldn’t happen to have some coffee, with sugar...”

Bogdan blinked so as to get rid of the stranger’s fingers. He sat up and realized he’d been lying in bed, in his suite. Beside the bed was his suitcase, opened and crammed with underwear, socks, razors, pills, tins of pâté, and bags of pasta that they’d brought to save on food. Did the next-door neighbor really have to see all that? Why did Radica let him come in?

“Weren’t you in the military?” he asked, hitting with the back of his hand the open suitcase lid, slamming it down. “Don’t tell me they taught you at the academy how to nurse people back to health?”

Radica approached them carrying a cup of warmed up coffee.

“If I’d wanted to, I would have drunk it this morning.” He pushed the saucer away. The cup in Radica’s hands started shaking. “I don’t understand what you’re doing here,” he addressed the intruder.

“I was indeed in the military service, and, yes, they did teach us how to treat sick people at the academy. That’s why it’s called

the Military *Medical* Academy. And I'm here because you fainted in the dining room, so the lady asked for my help."

Bogdan blinked.

"What did you specialize in?"

"Endocrinology."

Bogdan snorted, and then took the cup from Radica, which still smelled of insecticide.

"Even my grandma would have recommended sweetened coffee for this."

Radica was just about to say something, when before the open door of the suite the doctor's wife showed up, accompanied by the owner of the place.

"I've been trying to explain to him that the guest isn't well, but he's refusing so much as to even hear of an ambulance."

The doctor moved away from Bogdan.

"There's no need for an ambulance, but if the host's grandma's still around..."

Tanja kept spreading her arms in confusion while the Greek guy was babbling something in his own, incomprehensible language. Bogdan gestured him to walk away, and so the Greek disappeared down the porch, pleased that there were going to be no serious medical interventions.

Tanja shut the suite door behind her.

"I don't understand."

Bogdan felt the pressure in his head ease.

"Just a short while ago your husband applied mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on me and I can tell you, you could have done a lot worse than that. His kisses bring people back from the dead."

The four people in the suite remained silent for a moment, and then the endocrinologist laughed.

"I see this is going to be an interesting summer vacation."

He reached out his hand to Bogdan, who grasped it more loosely than military conduct would suggest.

"The only people who'd look forward to that are those who seek excitement in summer vacations," he replied and shot a look

at Radica. She glanced at Tanja, who then looked at her husband, who'd directed his eyes down toward the half-empty cup of coffee on the nightstand.

"Have you noticed this coffee smells kind of strange?" doctor Zoran asked.

That first day Bogdan and Radica did not go to the seashore, not even to see the bay from close by, and they didn't walk down to the promenade. They stayed on the wide terrace circling the building and observed the blue waters from above. Radica sighed several times, and this sound of self-pity disgusted Bogdan. The neighbors from the next-door suite had withdrawn into their chambers, inviting them beforehand for an evening walk, which he flatly refused, so another dimension was contained within her sighs—they were telling him that he was being a grouch, or even worse, a wuss, and that the retired medic, with his two-hundred-years-his-junior wife and an arrogant smile, was more considerate than he was. He's taking his little tart out this evening to one of those Corfu gardens meant for non-existent English people, while Radica's holding on to the railing separating the suites from the rest of the world, as if she were an animal trapped in a cage.

The dark had covered the coves filled with houses for rent, hotels, and rows of straw sunshades like buttons that connected the sea to the coast, when Bogdan approached her and put his hand on her shoulder. She sighed even more dismally and finally took her eyes off the cypress trees, stepping away from the observation deck's railing. For a moment it seemed to him that she did understand everything after all, that she'd grasped the situation they were in better than he had, since he was utterly confused and stiff, distracted by the wind swooping from the mountain all day and by the smells he wasn't used to; had that moment lasted a bit longer, perhaps he would have said something to her—not that he knew what, though there were expressions of gratitude running through his head, they just needed to be molded so they wouldn't sound childish and ba-

nal—however, Radica abandoned his embrace and silently walked to the edge of the pool. She crouched and disturbed with her fingers the surface of the water they were not allowed to use.

“The mosquito trap needs to be switched on,” she said and headed for the suite, leaving another sigh for him as a treat, which dispersed in a heartbeat among the crowns of the surrounding olive yards.