

**AN EXCERPT FROM NIHAD HASANOVIĆ'S COLLECTION OF
SHORT STORIES "WHEN PEOPLE DISAPPEAR" [KAD SU
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WHERE ARE THE DRAGONS?

I finally realized that I was ill, that I was insane, incurably so, that help had been denied to me, that no one would fix me a miraculous potion; they won't because here, where I am counting my 39th year, there is no one close to me. I grow old in loneliness. There exists no healer who could fix me a healing potion.

I am driven into restlessness by difficult questions which sound ludicrous out of the mouth of a wretch a mere few feet tall... What does it mean to be ill? To be healthy somewhere else? There where the putrid is ordinary, and insanity and incoherent mumbling the rule?

I surely know, say what you will! I know that I have gone out of my mind, yet it is only recently that I have come to believe, both appreciating and pitying myself, that I am the only thinking creature left in this swampy nature—whose beauty, by the way, springs from monotony.

Before I lead the way to the story, wouldn't you like to know what this landscape, in whose solitude I have lived for more than three decades, looks like? Imagine an archipelago with thousands of small islands: turn them into deep swamps with greenish film on them, and turn the sea into a grassy scattered land. There are also some shallow, lukewarm, turquoise-blue puddles through which I, in times of inexplicable delight, wade. There!

that is where I live, out of God's sight, and I don't go far, I dare not, I'm afraid.

I tamed, that picturesque kingdom of swamps, I cultivated it, even if only a negligible part of it. Conscientious and imaginative, and most importantly, patient as eternity, I made a beautiful garden drawing on the best conceptions of unsurpassed gardeners and architects. Unsurpassed they are not any longer; I made them predecessors, and pronounce myself, not without justification, a fountain gushing with originality. They, my forerunners from the past and from distant countries, are tributary streams and I am the river, I am the ocean! Destiny inimically grinned at me: there is no one to see the magnitude and luxuriance of my genius, for there is nothing here but desolate land. Believe me when I say: I am small in stature, but great in mind.

I planted gladioli to give the land the poignancy of the sword and staff, so that the visitors could shout at each other: Be careful, you'll get pricked!; I planted tulips to somehow make that perfectly flat field rounder; I also planted dandelions to restore old fame and honour to the open, relaxed yellowness (at present contemptuously considered a sign of idiotic bliss), and to keep, for all eternity, the memory of jaundice by which I was miserably afflicted (I drank some muddy water), and am still suffering from when it comes to my nutrition... I barely pulled through, but I did; I am a strong spirit!

Between one not so large swamp that I'll talk about later, and a tower, encircled by miraculous gardens, which I often climb so as to enjoy the sweep of the region, I planted large corn, for I love the golden-coloured seed, the golden- coloured fruit of a peeled cob. I'll also explain where this unusual, childish love for extravagant colour comes from.

From childhood, every morning, my mother told her dreams to me and my younger but— as it turned out— more mature sister. Everything she would dream of she would tell us in the form of an instructive lesson: the invasion of grass-hoppers who have kidnapped me and my sister, my smiling sister; a cherry which has driven away the moon and taken over command of the night sky; a father, whom I have never seen, sailing a ship with four legs, cows' legs... That woman dreamt of everything and forgot none of it.

During one of these matinees, which I wrongly considered only a form of amusement and a way to greet a new day, my mother offered us, the children, rose juice which was not common (our morning beverage is, of course, chicory), hugged us both in an overly holiday mood, and told us a dream that became deeply engraved in my memory (even at this moment, as I remember it thirty—some years later, I still feel the fibers of the rose petals crawling along my tongue). The dream went like this: she was sitting, my mother that is, next to a blue-green river and saw the blazing yellow crest of some mysterious animal diving into the green, then surging out. At first she was morally scared, she said; after that the water was calm for a long time. Mother anticipated that the unknown being would appear again and she waited in fear of what would happen. In front of her, like a submarine, emerged the dragon, enormous, yet mother—curiously enough— was not afraid. The dragon was amiable, with fairy tale golden scales. She mounted it, and it carried her to the other shore. Right after she woke up, she was happy. My sister announced that she would like to see the dragon and to ride it, at which my mother delighted, stroking her hair,

while looking at me questioningly and with growing contempt—because, I supposed, of my silence: the dream was good and well, but a dragon is a dragon, and they eat small children.

Later, when my sister no longer partook in our morning meetings, playing in the court-yard, my mother always told me the same story, always stressing, syllable by syllable, as if addressing an idiot, the words: “to the other shore.” Every time I would express my admiration, but obviously not in the right way, for my mother responded with piercing dissatisfied glances. What was clear to others never even crossed my mind.

My development was stunted. Food was of no use; I didn’t grow, but remained ridiculously short, somewhat like a dwarf from the circus - I thought that was the reason my mother loved me less than my sister and why it was her eyes were so reserved and accusing.

I never had the opportunity to see my father; he had disappeared inexplicably before my birth. Later, when I grew up, my sister also disappeared and around the time when I realized that my manhood would be left untested, my mother mysteriously disappeared, without a trace, without a goodbye. I was left to the company of my misconceptions. God knows why, but during the first few months of my solitude, I continuously heard the quiet ringing of my sister’s sweet laugh. I cried, but soon got bored with crying. I wrung out all the sadness, until it became a dry, hard stone on my heart.

Corn... I planted stalks of corn so they would, by the colour of their fruit, remind me of that wonderful dream of a parent.

It took me, being faint-hearted by nature, a long time to collect enough courage to climb to the top of the tower, the belvedere, from which I could observe my homeland in its entirety; and it was beautiful, in all honesty, beautiful in its simplicity and uniformity. At first, I didn't pay particular attention to the swamps, my gaze was concentrated on the whole of the landscape, which would, during the afternoon and in blinding brightness, shine like an emperor's crown. Standing on the last floor of the belvedere, a man could say that slavery was a dead concept, and that obstacles in life did not exist. You are on top of the world, and everything is visible and accessible, all flat all the way to the sea.

However, as time passed and my soul was getting used to that simple grandiosity, I started, to the extent that my shortsightedness permitted, to notice the details: a few oak trees, a string of poplar trees, stranded, decayed ships, seagulls, storks... My favorite thing to do was to observe the nuances of colour which, depending on the time of day and weather, alternated at the surface of countless swamps: at night, under the moonlight, you would see melted silver or mercury; at dawn strawberry pudding, still warm; in the afternoon, if it was cloudy, billowing lead; in the evening, linden honey; at night, in the pitch dark, you could see white, silvery folds.

It is odd that I missed what was most important; probably because of my consciousness, its imperfection, a wish not to see what I wouldn't want to.

How is it that I didn't notice the golden colour in the swamps, how constant and striking it was? Does the blame for all that fall on my sight? How? How is it that after years and years I finally perceived that those scattered swamps were full of dragons, the dragons my mother talked of in

her dreams? Full and content, bathing in that damn muddy-green water, they would come out onto the shore and move on all fours in the mud. From the tower I wasn't able to see clearly what it was that they were doing, for they were the size of a foal. They were smaller than I had imagined, but there were a few of them in every pond, and I didn't like them at all.

I believed that their perfidiousness and charm were what enabled them to devour my family, and I would not go near them. Yet I had nowhere to go, they were cruising and crawling everywhere. I decided to engage in gardening, bearing, like ancient sages, the pain for my family, irreplaceably lost. I was afraid that they would eat me too, that some force pushing me from behind would drive me straight into their claws, and gaping jaws.

While I developed spiritually under that impression, I was unaware that as each day passed I regressed, becoming increasingly naive, stunted.

I remember well the day when the full dark was elucidated and when I, astonished, realized how bogged down I really was, when I realized that there was no getting back up. I was lightly digging and weeding in one small light-blue rose garden immediately in front of the tower; the tower which I intended to surround first by a belt of roses, the flower of inaccessibility and secrecy. I found there an emerald-green vase, sprinkled with white, foamy colour. It had belonged to my sister. The vase was small; you could hold it in the palm of your hand. What surprised me most was its content: a few scales shaped like leaves. I could not understand this pairing of toy vase and scales, childish and horrific. I did not want to know.

It was sunny, I stretched out on the grass and closed my eyes. I began rubbing the vase as I would a magic lamp.

It was upon so doing that I was startled by some shadow that was cast over me.

In front of me stood a Gypsy, short but taller than me. Above her left breast, amateurishly tattooed, was some name (“Keran”, “Kenan”, “Kean,” I can’t remember). Her face was clean, she was beautiful, even too beautiful for a beggar, and innocent, even too innocent for a beggar. She might have looked so beautiful because I hadn’t seen a woman for a thousand years. As for her innocence, I was mistaken: she only looked so at first glance.

- Do you have money? she said with a smile.

- No. Where from? Where did you come from?

- Me? From there, Barska. You don’t have any money? You do, you do... Give me the vase.

- No, that no.

- Give - she repeated purringly.

- Why should I?

- I have to have something to eat, and I also have three dozen children.

- I don’t care. Get yourself some corn, right there, bake it, or cook it, that’s what I eat.

- You are lying.

- What is it you would like, madam? Roast duck perhaps? I am not a fairy! Get away from me! You smell unbearably! Take a bath! — I was surprised at the courage in my voice. Decades of accumulated anger pored out from my mouth. Not even blinking, she stroked my hair and murmured maliciously.

- You are my little dwarf Gigi...

- My name is not Gigi!

- Every dwarf is named Gigi - she almost shoved her steel nails through the top of my head.

- Gigi, what you have just let fall from your lips, I'll forgive. You should thank me that I didn't rape you, kill you and throw you into the water. Your life is spared.

- So be it - I frowned with threatening eyes, but didn't utter another word. My heart dropped to my pants.

- I'm going to pick that corn of yours, and you, go get the fire ready!

- May the flesh fall off your hands and you drop dead! I thought to myself, but said instead:

- They are bigger and tastier closer to the swamp; just go straight ahead, don't turn.

- You are such a nice man.

I intended to send her into the jaws of the dragons. I won't let her tell me what to do. She'll come to her senses; if at least they tear off one of her arms, she'll see that it is not easy to live here, alone, in constant fear of these beasts. That is why I myself am so strange and withdrawn - surrounded by monsters! Everyone would think I am a miser, and I am not, cut off my arm if I am lying! She listened to my instructions and went towards the key to the secret which would shake me to my roots.

I had already collected and chopped wood into splinters, listening for a scream or a cracking of bones, when my guest emerged from the cornfield carrying an armful of corncobs, each peeled, each pinned onto the long,

pliable willow branch, ready for fire. And I don't know where from, through my nostrils streamed the scent of fall, the scent of kindled beech-timber, the scent of fog and first frosts.

- You are very diligent.

I wanted to ask her about dragons, but realized how wrong I was, how hasty, that I should not have sent her, that she might have been hurt. That anger combined with malice ignited me. Luckily, she was alright, and I was glad she was alright.

- Well, not especially. Your parents prepared this, so you wouldn't be hungry. They say hello!

- My parents?

- And your sister, she sends a kiss! - she kissed my forehead with her fleshy lips.

- Child, do not talk of my family! My close ones - they have all disappeared. Long ago!

- Then those are frauds.

- Who?

- Those dragons there, dummy. Why are you surprised? - she knocked on my head. - There is that kind of thing in Barska too, people dressed up as dragons.

I rushed, as if scalded, through the cornfield, a wall that I had built myself; lances of assumptions and presentiments were snapping in my head; I was panting like a dying dog. All scratched from ravaging corn leaves, I came flying out, on the verge of tears, to the edge of the swamp and shuddered: when I sowed seeds here they had not been there. They hadn't, they hadn't, I was sure.

Three of my closest relatives were there, swimming—slow, aloof, like crocodiles gazing from the water. I recognized my mother and sister immediately, though some minute mass made their faces ugly, and the third creature I assumed to be my father; only his eyes peered from the swamp, watery and somehow cruel, devilish. They were all glowing, golden—yellow costumes looking like a mix of crocodile, hippopotamus, clown and toad. These are they, the dragons.

Observing them from the tower, near-sighted from birth, I had added many details thanks to my imagination. From the tower I wanted to admire the gorgeous, frightful dream dragons, and to enjoy my helplessness. Now, in front of my mendacious eyes swam my animalized family.

My sister seemed to be smiling under a monstrous skin. My father, the only inseminator in the family, who most likely didn't even consider me a male descendent, was indifferent to me. They sniffed (legs in water, trunk on land), grazed on some reniform algae, crawled along in the mucous grass. Only my mother swam over to me. Before crawling out completely, she watched me for a long time, mumbling something under the water, letting the bubbles out. On the sandbank she stood up onto two legs: her back was covered with the costume, the front of her body, save for a couple of diagonal belts, was naked. Naked and dirty with mud.

- Mom...

- No mom! - her teeth were green from the pond-scum, her voice almost masculine so hoarse and deep was it.

- I didn't know...

- How could you, you degenerate waste. You are a deranged freak, the only exception in hundreds of generations which preceded us. Everyone could see the meaning of the Dream; don't grimace, you know perfectly well

which dream, even the snotty one got it, only you have been deaf! In every family there is a revelation, a ritual which everyone understands. Everyone's instinct awakens... You are... - she growled something. - Now disappear, if you come back again you will be food for pikes! And know this: all around you are ponds, and in them your uncles, nieces, nephews, and other family! They got instructions too! Leave, and God forgive your soul; your sin is deadly, there is no repentance, no purging. God Almighty, save me from progeny of this kind!

I opened my mouth, but she interrupted, pointing her finger over my shoulder:

- Di-ne! - she pushed out her chest while using her nails to straighten out the skin on her stomach. Her eyes had a reddish glow. That was not my mother. She scared me like no one before. I ran away, horrified, not believing that something like that could happen in this world. When I removed myself far enough and came upon safe ground, I tried to combat the excess fear, feeling the strange, tense resignation of a prisoner in solitary. Beneath that resignation a deep, destructive fear smoulders. Yet the more gray I become, the less I believe that it will flare up into wild fire.

Allow me to return to where I left off. The hungry guest of mine had not yet grilled the corn by the time I returned. I squatted patiently, and stared into the smouldering twigs, saying nothing. She was talking to me, but I was deaf to it and did not understand. When all the corn had been roasted, I suggested not waiting for it to cool but dipping the cooked cobs into the pond, climbing the tower and eating there in peace. On the way there, pretending she was genuinely concerned, she asked me about my family. I was silent, looking away into the horizon, into the sinking sun.

Amidst the roasted cobs, I surveyed the calming colour of the sky from the top of the world. Then she spoke:

- You will give this to me.

She was holding the vase in her hand. I had dropped it earlier, can't remember the exact moment. She took the golden leaflets out of the vase:

- Each has a word on it.

- Do you know how to read?

- "Shore," "the," "other," "to."

We remained silent until I asked:

- You, Gypsies, you don't turn into dragons?

- Everyone does but us; no nation is like the Gypsies.

Translated from Bosnian by Maja Đikić