

1

I died in my sleep.

There wasn't anything special about my death. I hardly even noticed it. I dreamed I was walking down a long hallway closely lined with doors on both sides. The end of the corridor was invisible in the distance, and I was alone. On the wall next to each door hung a framed portrait, slightly larger than life, and lit from above by a lamp.

I looked at the paintings as I passed by them. What else could I do? Only the portraits disturbed the endless monotony of the corridor. There seemed to be male and female portraits in approximately equal numbers, but randomly distributed. The people were mostly of advanced age, and some were very old indeed, but here and there was a younger face, or even a child, though these were quite rare. The images were formal studio portraits, and the people were all elaborately, even ceremonially

dressed. They looked conscious of their own importance, and that of the occasion. Most of them were smiling, but some faces were simply not suited to smiling. They looked grimly serious.

I was not overly surprised when I finally saw my own portrait next to one of the doors. I hadn't actually expected it, but it didn't seem out of place. After all, if so many others had their portraits hanging there, why shouldn't I? Where else can one hope for a privileged position if not in one's own dream? The only thing that momentarily confused me was that I could not remember when the portrait had been painted. I must have posed for it, I supposed. But maybe that hadn't been necessary. It's hard to say. I don't pretend to understand much about portrait painting.

Regardless of its origin, I liked the portrait. It did me full justice—more, it showed me in exceptionally good form. Although I was depicted at my current age, the painter had skillfully diminished some of the more unpleasant aspects of aging: he had slightly smoothed the wrinkles on my forehead and around my eyes, tightened my double chin, removed the yellowness and blotches from my cheeks, darkened some of the gray streaks in my hair. This was not to make me look younger. The years were still on the painting, but I bore them with greater elan. And most important of all, there was no sign of the debilitating disease that had taken such a heavy toll on my looks. No effort on the part of a photographer could ever have produced the same effect, however great his skill.

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I stood in front of my portrait for a long time, gazing in satisfaction. But all things have their measure, even vanity. I couldn't stand there forever. Someone might pass by sooner or later and find me in this unbecoming position, which would certainly be embarrassing. But where could I go? Continue down the corridor? That did not seem promising; it appeared to extend endlessly before me, with no destination in sight.

Should I go back? That possibility hadn't crossed my mind before. I turned around and immediately understood I could not count on going back. Just a few steps behind me the hallway disappeared, turning into deep darkness, as though all the lamps above the paintings had turned off as soon as I passed them. Maybe the lights would go on again if I headed in that direction, but I had no desire to find out.

I turned to face forward again—and suffered a new surprise. The same thing had happened to the corridor in front of me. It had turned into a dark tunnel that began at the edge of the small, conical beam of light illuminating my portrait from above. This sole remaining source of light covered the painting, the door beside it and myself in front of it—a tiny island of existence bounded by an opaque, black sea of nothingness.

I had lost the right to choose; there was only one path before me. The moment I touched the doorknob, I was overcome by the feeling that something important was about to happen, but I had no immediate inkling what it could be. It was only after I opened the door and entered the room that I realized I had

died. It happened in the middle of raising and lowering my foot as I crossed the threshold. I was still alive when I started the step outside, and already dead when I finished it inside. I barely felt the transition itself. Something streamed through me, a wave resembling a light trembling or momentary shiver. It lasted a split second, then passed, leaving behind no other trace than the certainty of death.

I was not afraid. Fear of death has meaning before one dies, and not afterward. The only thing I felt was confusion. I naturally knew nothing about this state. How could I, after all? I had not even tried to picture it in my mind. That had always seemed a pointless exercise to me, and as the disease got the upper hand, such thoughts had come to fill me with revulsion—to be avoided as much as possible.

First of all, I wondered if I was still asleep. It is said that the deceased rest in eternal peace, but that is probably a metaphor, not meant to be taken literally. In any case, the sight before me did not resemble in the least any that I had seen in my dreams. There was nothing unreal or strange. On the contrary. The room I entered was some sort of study, elegantly furnished to be sure, but otherwise not the least bit unusual. There was no one inside. Feeling a bit uncomfortable, I started to inspect it, without stepping away from the door, which I had closed behind me.

To my right stood a large, black, wooden desk. A lamp with an arching neck and green shade illuminated numerous objects, arranged in orderly fashion upon it: a wide, leather-bound desk-

Зоран Зивковић
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pad; a decorative brass inkwell with a heavy maple wood blotter; a rosewood cube, drilled with holes to make a pen and pencil holder; a shallow lacquer paper tray; an ivory-handled magnifying glass; a double silver candlestick (without any candles); three identical little boxes covered in dark velour whose purpose I could not make out; a white flowerpot containing a flowerless plant with long, thin leaves; an engraved pipe stand with three pipes of different shapes.

Across from the desk, on the lefthand side, were two large brown leather armchairs with a small round coffee table between them. On the table was a lamp with a tasseled yellow shade, a book and an oval tray containing a lidded jug of water and two glasses placed upside down on round paper coasters. Behind the armchairs rose a bookshelf that covered the entire wall. The books in it were of uniform height and thickness, and their spines were bound in a limited range of somber tones. A vertical ladder rose along the edge of the bookshelf, its ends firmly anchored to guide rails on the floor and ceiling.

The middle of the wall facing the door was covered by a large painting in a simple rectangular frame, positioned longside up, and brightly illuminated from below. It depicted an area of clear blue sky seen through a double window. The deep blue was portrayed so convincingly that for a moment I even took it for a real window.

The window was closed, but there was a certain tension in the otherwise tranquil scene that indicated it might open at any

moment—through a draft, perhaps, or by someone going up to open it, someone who was still not visible, but whose presence was hinted at by a shadow that flickered just inside the frame. The only thing that disturbed the harmony of the straight lines and uniform shades was a colorful butterfly that had already tired of its efforts to fly outside, clearly unable to understand the existence of a completely invisible but still impenetrable obstacle such as glass.

To the right of the picture, in the semidarkness, stood a grandfather clock in a tall mahogany case. The glass door was decorated with geometric designs in the corners, and a disproportionately small key protruded from the keyhole. At first I thought I saw only one hand pointing straight up, but when I took a better look I discerned the small hand hidden under the big one. I stared at them for some time, but when they failed to change position I lowered my eyes suspiciously; only then did I notice that the pendulum was resting in the middle, motionless.

To the left of the painting, hard by the bookshelf, was another door. It was the same color as the wall around it and could only be distinguished by its edges, which appeared somewhat darker. It had an unusual characteristic that I did not notice at first glance. There was a lock, but no doorknob. If the door could be opened, then it was only possible from the other side.

Just as I was looking at it, that happened, quite soundlessly. Part of the wall seemed simply to arch forward, and a figure appeared in the emptiness left behind. I stared at it fixedly. Had I

Здравіє Тітківі
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not been dead, I am sure that my heart would have jumped, and pins and needles would have run up and down my spine.

The man who appeared in front of me seemed unassuming, almost like a clerk: in late middle age, not very tall, balding, with a thick, narrow mustache that covered only the line under his nose, small, round, wire-rimmed glasses, and a dark suit of classic cut that did not quite succeed in hiding his extra pounds. The smile that appeared on his round, ruddy face seemed guileless and unaffected.

He hastened brightly to greet me, his hand stretched out. I had no recourse but to accept it.

“Welcome! Welcome!”

I didn’t know what to say in return, so I smiled too, although mine was somewhat forced. We stood there like that for some time, gripping each other’s hands, eyeing each other curiously, like friends meeting after a long separation.

He was the first to break the silence. “Please, make yourself comfortable.” He indicated one of the armchairs in front of the bookshelf, waited for me to sit down, and then sat down in the other, hitching up his trouser legs a bit. He was still smiling.

“I was expecting you earlier. You stayed a bit longer than planned.”

His voice seemed to contain a touch of reproach, but that might have been my imagination. He looked at me in silence for several moments, perhaps expecting me to say something. As I remained silent, he waved his hand at last, dismissively.

“Well, it’s all the same. Some are late, some are early. There are very few who arrive on time. They all come, however, sooner or later. How do you feel?”

I cleared my throat before answering uncertainly. “Fine, I think.”

He nodded his head in satisfaction. “Nothing is bothering you, there is no discomfort?”

I paused briefly. “No, everything’s all right.”

The man’s smile broadened. “I’m glad to hear that. You’re just a bit confused, yes?”

“Yes,” I admitted after a moment’s hesitation, “a little.”

“You mustn’t reproach yourself for that. You’re no exception in this regard. They’re all confused when they arrive. It’s quite normal. Would you like a glass of water?” He indicated the jug on the table between us.

“No, thank you,” I replied. I had the ghostly impression that my throat was dry, but somehow it didn’t seem appropriate to drink water in this new position. Maybe later, when I was used to it.

“People are really quite full of questions,” continued the man. “They are dying of curiosity. I’m sure that you are, too.”

There was no reason to pretend. “I hope that’s normal, too.”

“Of course, of course. You are certainly interested in where you have arrived, what awaits you here, and who I am, as well.”

“Certainly,” I agreed in a faltering voice.

Здравіє
Здоров'я

“There is a little difficulty in this connection. I, naturally, can answer all these questions. And many others that you might like to ask. But if I do that, I will deprive you of the possibility of going back.”

“Going back?”

“Yes. You can return. To life.”

I stared fixedly at the stranger in the other armchair. His tiny eyes returned my glance good-naturedly through his round glasses.

“But I’m dead,” I said finally, in a half-questioning voice.

“Yes, that’s clear. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

“Well, then, how...”

“I can’t explain it to you. Unless you decide to stay.”

Now my throat felt not only dry, but tight. I tried to swallow, without success. As I poured water from the jug into one of the glasses, my hand trembled a bit. I hoped this clumsiness had not been too conspicuous. The water was cold, but it tasted a little stale.

“Do you mean to say I’m the one who decides—whether I go back or stay?”

“You, of course. Who else?”

“I mean, it doesn’t depend on my behavior in...my previous life? I might be someone really bad, for example.”

The man gave a short laugh. “Yes, you might. But it makes no difference. There is no punishment or reward here. This is not the Last Judgment.”

“So, it’s enough for me to decide to go back. Do I understand that correctly?”

“You understand correctly. You can even choose the shape in which you will return.”

I put the glass back on the coaster. Small puddles of water that had spilled from the jug sparkled in the yellow light on the silver surface of the tray. Several drops had even fallen on the book nearby. Had it not been for that, I probably would not have paid attention to the illustration on the front cover. It was a reproduction of the painting of the window on the wall next to us, and above it was the title written in slender, yellow letters—*Impossible Encounters*. I was not familiar with the author’s name.

“I wouldn’t change my shape,” I said. “I’m used to this one.”

The smile disappeared from the man’s lips. “I’m afraid that’s the only thing that’s impossible. Your old shape has been used up, it is no longer serviceable. You can’t go back to it. And it would not be wise. Disease has completely destroyed you, isn’t that so? But you can choose something completely new. The choice is almost unlimited.”

“Be someone else?”

“You would not be someone else, because you would have no memory of your earlier life. It would be a new beginning for you.”

“I would be born again?”

“Most assuredly. You would return to the world as a newborn child, as is fitting. To live a new life. With the characteris-

Зоран Зинковић
Zoran Zinkovic

tics that you want.”

“You mean, I can choose what I’ll look like, or how tall I’ll be?”

“And much more than that. You could change the color of your skin, your sex...”

“Sex?”

The look of amazement that appeared on my face caused the stranger to smile once again. “That is one of the most frequent changes. In both directions. I think it’s not so much dissatisfaction with one’s original sex as much as curiosity about trying the opposite sex.”

I shook my head. “Well, I’m not curious.”

“I understand. Would you perhaps be interested in going back as something other than a human being? That is also possible.”

I squinted my eyes in disbelief. “What do you mean?”

“There are other forms of life on earth besides humans. There are countless numbers, in fact. They are all at your disposal.”

“What, for example?”

“Oh, anything. Of course, it all depends on the inclinations of the one going back. People usually choose an animal.”

I paused slightly before answering. “Why would someone want to be an animal, and not a human, in his new life?”

“Well, it doesn’t have to be at all as bad as you might think. The life of a pure-bred cat or thoroughbred horse, for example,

could be much more comfortable and carefree than many human lives. And if you prefer excitement, there are few human experiences that can compare to what a lion, an eagle or a shark experiences every day.”

I thought it over briefly. “I still don’t think I want to be an animal.”

“Whatever you want. There are other possibilities as well. You could be a plant.”

“A plant?”

“Yes, that is not such a rare choice.”

“But plants don’t have any...any consciousness.”

“That’s true, but this drawback is compensated by other advantages. A long life, for example. Almost every type of tree lives considerably longer than a man. Sequoias are highly valued in this regard. They are protected, which makes them additionally attractive. But even short-lived flowers have their admirers. People sometimes decide to go back as an orchid or a rose-blossom, even though they know they will only live one short season.”

“But that’s absurd. Getting the chance for a new life and wasting it on some flower...”

“They don’t look at it like that. Beauty means everything to them. That is something we must accept. But there are some decisions that are truly hard to understand. Even for me. What would you say to going back as a salamander, a worm, as a sagebrush, a stinging-nettle or a spider?”

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Завтра Зинаида

“A spider?” I repeated. My face twisted into a disgusted grimace.

“Yes, quite unpleasant, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would not change at all,” I rushed to say, shaking my head. “I would like to stay as similar as I could to myself in my previous life. If that’s possible.”

“Of course it is. The great majority choose just that. So this means you have decided to go back?”

I did not answer at once. A multitude of confusing questions swarmed inside me. Finally, one outweighed all the others. “If I returned, I would live out another lifetime, right?”

“Yes.”

“And in the end I would die again?”

“That is inevitable, unfortunately.”

“After that, would I...come back here again?”

“No, you only come here once. After your second life all that remains is death. You are given no further choice.”

He said this in an even voice, as though it were quite banal. I looked at him for a few moments without speaking.

“But what is this choice all about, anyway? On one side there is a new life. I understand that. But what’s on the other side? What am I supposed to choose between?”

The stranger removed his glasses, took a large white handkerchief from the inside pocket of his jacket and started to wipe them. He did so patiently and with extreme care, and in the end lifted them against the table lamp to check them. Without them

his face seemed somehow bare. He put them back on slowly, pressing them onto the bridge of his nose.

“They rarely get around to that question,” he said at last. “Almost all of them immediately grab the chance to return. They’re not interested in anything else.”

“What do you say to the others?”

“Nothing specific. The most I can do is give them a hint. Anything more than that would endanger their return, if they decided to go back after all.”

“A hint?”

“Yes,” replied the man. “Please come with me.”

He got up, waited for me to do the same, and then took me cordially by the arm and led me. At first I thought we were heading for the door through which he had entered, but we stopped in front of the large picture in the middle of the wall.

His voice dropped almost to a whisper. “Look at it carefully.”

My eyes were filled with the sight of the blue heavens seen through the closed window. The moments passed by slowly. Nothing happened. When the change finally occurred, it first affected my sense of hearing and not my sight. Suddenly, as though from a great distance, I started to hear an even, steady drumming. I didn’t recognize it at first. It was only when it grew louder in the surrounding silence that I realized it was the dull ticking of the clock. I did not need to turn my eyes toward the large mahogany case in the right-hand corner to know that the

Зоран Зинковић
Зоран Зинковић

pendulum was no longer motionless.

As though in answer to this awakening sound, the picture came to life. The butterfly fluttered once, sluggishly, without hope of finally breaking out, and slid down a bit lower. The shadow moved because the hand outside the frame moved. The hand entered the frame and made for the middle of the window. It tried to beat its own shadow, but they reached the handle at the same time and turned it.

The moment the window opened, I was almost stunned by a rush of dizziness. The man’s firm clasp on my arm was a welcome support without which I would have lost my balance and fallen. But the butterfly had no one to help it. The gust of wind easily whisked it off the smooth glass surface and sent it rushing into the blue infinity.

That very instant everything disappeared: the picture frame, the wall, the stranger, the entire study. I was in the middle of nothing and started to fall. I knew that I had to move my wings, that I was supposed to fly and not descend headlong, but I suddenly no longer knew how. Many flashes of an eternity filled with icy horror passed before I once again mastered this simple, instinctive skill. First my descent slowed down, then stopped, and when I finally started to climb on an ascending stream of air, I didn’t have to move my wings at all. I just kept them spread out like two enormous, colorful twin sails in the middle of the vast open sea of air that surrounded me.

Fear turned into the rapture that always accompanies fly-

ing. I could have stayed there forever, surrendering to this tide of joy. Then, at an unspecified distance ahead of me, I caught sight of something wrinkled on the uniform fabric of blue. Something had started to thin the air, to dissolve it, something that appeared from underneath. It was bright, radiant, inviting. I flapped my wings energetically, wrenching myself away from the main airstream. The call that drew me, the radiance coming from the other side of the firmament, was irresistible: the flame of a candle attracting a moth in the dark.

But I was not allowed to reach the light. The airstream suddenly changed direction. I tried to resist it feverishly, realizing in despair that I was being borne away from where I longed to go. The strength of my wings, however, was nothing compared to that powerful pull. I rushed backwards faster and faster, filled with a painful feeling of futility and helplessness. The window slammed shut after me when I flew back in, and the same moment I was swallowed up in darkness.

The darkness was not completely empty; it was filled with the beating of a colossal heart. It was a regular, uniform sound, but somehow I knew it would soon stop. That happened all at once, without any premonitory slowing. Dropping to the lowest point, the pendulum did not continue on the other side; it stopped there, having nothing else to measure. In the silence it left behind, my sight slowly returned.

I was still standing in front of the picture, staring at it, although there was no longer anything moving in it. The butterfly

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was drooping in one of the corners again, and the shadow was patiently waiting for the unseen hand to move. Another hand slightly increased its pressure around my arm.

“This way. You’ll feel more comfortable if you sit down again.”

I wanted to tell him that everything was all right with me, but I staggered at the very first step and was grateful for the support he offered. When we were settled in the armchairs, he poured some more water from the jug into my glass. I wasn’t thirsty, but I still took a long drink.

The man did not speak right away, just watched me with his customary grin. He was clearly giving me the chance to collect my wits. And I was grateful for that, too.

“An exceptional painting, wouldn’t you agree?” he said at last.

“Yes,” I agreed after a brief hesitation, a little hoarsely. “Exceptional.”

We stopped talking once again. Just then a thought crossed my mind, one completely inappropriate to the decisive moment at hand. The other glass was still turned upside-down on the tray, unused. I wondered if it was there incidentally, just like the multitude of other objects in the room, or if the stranger sometimes drank a little water from it.

“So? Have you chosen?” There was no impatience in his voice, and I felt under no pressure. He could have asked me something quite trivial in the same tone.

“A butterfly,” I replied softly. “I would like to be a butterfly, of course.”

He looked at me wordlessly for several moments, and then gave a brief nod. “Of course.” His smile grew broader. He motioned toward the door next to the painting. “After you.”

I got up, a little unsteadily, and headed in that direction, but after a few steps I stopped, confused. The door had no handle on this side. How could I open it? I thought about turning around to ask the man. But that very instant I realized there was no need, for there was no longer any door in front of me.

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