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Blazing Love

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It grew dark, it grew light, then I died. A push—that's all it would take to kill me. I was torn from sleep, I was thrown from my seat, I saw the onboard monitor burst before I crashed into the center aisle, and saw the man on the other side of the window expire in a shower of sparks, yes, he, too, paid with his life, I saw the metal spike flying towards me for a brief, hideous moment, then darkness enveloped me, and lying between the seats, seconds before my death, I heard a scream; closed my eyes. And I remembered: When a person puts on rouge for the dark dream, the glow pales.

And I remembered: When you die - right before the thread tears -, the nerves transmit millions of impulses, and perhaps this impulse-explosion is purgatory, the small hell before entry to the grand paradise. I wasn't prepared for that, I was afraid.

A cold breath of wind swept over my face, and I turned to my side to die more easily— when did I open my eyes? A young man hung across a splintered arm rest, a razor burn, or fear, reddened his cheeks, he ground his teeth, no, he was speaking to me, our heads were touching, I should have understood him, he shook me awake with his free hand, and suddenly noise broke into my world, the noise of the men and women in the night express bus; I saw the rear seats burning, the fire made the glass, metal, and wood crackle. I must have gotten up, the young man had lost consciousness, I wanted to pull him out of the seat, but a blast threw me to the ground, a shadow climbed over me, and I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder. How can I die here? I thought that cannot happen, so I got up again, I lost my balance as I straightened, I closed my eyes in fear, I forced myself to open them and shards of glass rained over my face, the shadow kept hitting upward again and again with a small hammer. That couldn't be possible, how could the ceiling be made of glass? What was tearing me to the side? When I looked down, I discovered a bloody hand, the young man was pulling at me, I grabbed him by the hips, he wound out of his seat. Don't look up, I yelled, and wiped the sweat from my eyes, we were close to the thundering hammer blows, and the light from the fire in the rear of the bus transformed the shadow into an old man squeezing himself through the hole in the glass ceiling, the jagged glass tore his pants, the right sandal fell from his foot. I yelled, now it's your turn, and got onto all fours; the young man climbed onto my back, and a few seconds later he was looking down to me, now it's your turn! He screamed and stretched his hands towards me, I grabbed them, he pulled me up, I cut myself, I started crying.

We stepped cautiously over the roof of the burning bus, but some men yelled we should jump, they would catch us. Where could these strangers have possibly come from? I

was dragged from the wreckage, somebody shoved a balled up shirt under my neck, and then I was lying under the sky, in no man's land, it was a place where blind dogs retreated to die, that's what the natives said, they gathered together on the barren strip of land next to the guard rail, in the distance leafless trees. I was freezing, I was in pain, I was afraid of the dark, I cried quietly.

Su! Su! Someone called from nearby, I opened my eyes again and looked into a face, into the face of a woman, into the face of a foreigner, she pronounced the Turkish word for water with a strong German accent. What do you want from me? I said quietly, and then somewhat louder: I didn't do anything to you, leave me alone, please. I thought she was a plunderer, someone who prowled around accident scenes to steal wallets and watches from the injured victims, I couldn't defend myself, she must have realized the error of her ways. But she didn't go through my trouser pockets, she carefully placed the plastic bottle to my lower lip, at first the water ran down to my neck from the corner of my mouth, then I took a few sips, and as I drank, the silver ring on the long index finger of her right hand caught my eye: a light blue lacquer medallion set in multicolored jagged rhinestones.

I must have nodded off, she jarred me awake, legs in soldier's boots marched past, then legs in street shoes, blue lights flashed on and off, I saw white coattails flapping, and a doctor asked me if I could hear and understand him, I wanted to nod, I couldn't. Yes, I said, where is the woman who gave me water? Here she said, the doctor can't understand you, he doesn't speak German. There's a hanky in my jacket pocket, I said, can you wipe the sweat off my face?

It isn't sweat, it's blood, she said and hit herself in the mouth, the ring clanged against her teeth, she shouted in pain, she had lipstick on her tooth. She soaked the hanky in water and gently wiped the blood from my forehead, from my eyebrows, from my cheeks, and while she was taking care of me, I checked her out. She wore a conservative suit, the hair clip hung loose on a blond strand of hair, it didn't bother her, nor was she bothered by the onlookers standing in the fire's thick smoke, I lifted my chin to see better, traffic was jammed on the three-lane highway, the drivers on the other side of the street also stopped, got out of their cars, and ran with portable fire extinguishers.

You're on your way to a party, I said, you're dressed up. And you're delirious with fever, she said annoyed, I could see by the rotating blue light that she was fighting her growing rage, she looked towards the impatient crowd, a shrill scream made me cringe, a daughter wept for her mother, the lifeless body was being taken away on a stretcher, and the young woman was immediately surrounded by women who stroked her hair and spoke words

of comfort, an onlooker gave her some strange advice, she should pinch herself in the butt, that would sober her up right away.

Your shirt is torn to pieces, said the German, you've got a few small wounds, but don't worry, you survived.

Why are you here? I said, are you on your way somewhere?

You could call it that, she said, and got up again, I have to get going, and without another word she left me, I raised myself up on my elbow, reached for the hair clip that had fallen out after all, I gazed after her, she had performed first-aid, I had drunk from her water bottle, and what was left for her to do at the scene of the accident? the dead were dead and had been taken care of, the doctors were dealing with the injured, I gazed after her until she stopped next to a station wagon she had parked at the side of the road, without further ado she stepped inside, and before she disappeared from my field of vision, I managed to read the first numbers on her license plate-NI, I said the letters out loud, over and over, maybe I hoped they would act like a magical formula and the roar in my ears faded away.

I was lying alone on the ground now, I got up slowly, the reporters were at the site for the first story, and they shot one photo after another, my legs gave way, but before I fell to the ground, a policeman held me tight, he put my left arm around his shoulders, his helmet nearly fell off his head.

Relax, brother, he said, I'm taking you to the doctor and he'll make you well, I remained silent, he thought he had to keep me awake, so he told me about his good-for-nothing sister, who despite the warnings of their three siblings, their parents, and just about all their relatives, moved to the big city, he had a serious talk with her, the wolves wander around there in broad daylight, he had told her, and young girls from small towns, whether they wanted it or not, would end up as fodder, he didn't doubt his sister's moral strength.. I limped beside the policeman and wondered what could have made him forget proper decorum; there he was telling me, a strange man, about his own sister, whom he seemed to have given up on. I must be in really bad shape, I thought, he must have figured I was going to die soon, probably he thought it wasn't a problem if I took his little secret to my grave. I tripped over some debris from the wreckage, smoke rippled upwards from it, the policeman seated me on the footboard of an ambulance, a doctor climbed out, she told me to stretch my arms out and took a large scissors to cut the torn shirt off my body. While she was taking care of my wounds, I stared at the hairclip in my hand, the tortoise shell had fallen off, specks of soil stuck to the crusted glue. I rubbed the shell clean, stared at my hands which obeyed another's will, and as my gaze swept over the accident site, I saw people in the morning haze,

men and women with little or dwindling hope, they were lying on the cold ground, and the blood seeped or poured out of them, they stood motionless next to the doctors and police, and were resistant to every question and every consolation.

An officer barked an order and a little later five bodies were covered with jackets and body bags. A disgrace, screamed an old man, who pressed a piece of cloth to the open wound on his temple, where's the goddamned driver? I'll kill him, I'll tear his skin off...A few of the survivors joined him and screamed until they went hoarse, give us the blood sucking bastard, they called, we've got a mind to stab him to death. Then the young man whom I had saved showed up, who had saved me, a shape in the darkness, and the men started moving, but before they were able to form a circle around the driver, the gendarmes came between them, the survivors' rage was beyond measure, they ran across the human barrier, they yelled obscenities, they threw themselves onto the driver, he couldn't flee into the darkness. Orders were shouted again, and the gendarmes fired warning shots, and it felt as if somebody had driven a thorn in my ear, I withdrew my head and simply fell from the footboard, I didn't understand why two men ran out of the bus wreck. They were plunderers, they believed the shots were aimed at them, their escape was thwarted, a man was given a hard blow with a rifle butt in the hip, the officer grabbed the other one and slammed the edge of his notebook in his face, handcuffed him, and had him driven away. These two are the bloodsuckers! The gendarme shouted at the furious survivors, who were frozen in terror and began to complain about the failures of the system because the bus driver had been torn from their clutches. The doctor helped me up and put a blanket around my shoulders. You survived the terrible accident, it would really be a shame if you caught bronchitis.

What happened here?

She seemed to be contemplating my question for a while, she looked me in the eyes and made a half-hearted attempt to act as if she didn't know, then she took a breath and told me that the driver had fallen asleep at the wheel and that he crashed into the back of a cross-country truck, imagine, the guy was only allowed to drive 100 km on the highway, but he was going at least 130, and then after the collision he tore the wheel to the left and then to the right, the bus crashed into the middle and side guard rails, and by the way, the driver is doing very well.

He jumped out at the decisive moment, she said, the abandoned bus tipped over, and the people inside were damned to hell.

My suitcase, I said.

Be glad it was your suitcase that burned and not you, she said, there are awful rumors about corpses burned to a crisp, your name isn't on the list of people who died.

So a lot of us got caught, I realized.

A good dozen, that's what the officer revealed to me, she said, but don't you dare say you heard it from me. If you say something, nobody will believe you anyway, you're in shock and later you won't be able to remember me, you have to reckon with that. I didn't deal with her threat, my flesh pained, my bones hurt me, it wouldn't have made any difference if I were to reveal that I never forget a face I've stared into, sometimes it was a curse, because in my nightmares I look into bloodless faces and eyes with huge pupils. The doctor told me to get into the ambulance, I tucked my head and slinked inside, folded down a narrow seat, and once I was seated securely and the sliding door was pulled shut, I noticed the two women and the man who were staring straight ahead, like me they had sustained minor injuries, a few small wounds that would heal. A sudden impulse made me wish them a pleasant journey, and they looked at me angrily—did they really think I would be making jokes so quickly after the accident? I didn't care that I could see my reflection in the side window, I stared at the passing landscape, barren fallow land interspersed with factories, black-grey smoke was oozing from the chimneys, I saw two farmers squatting by the road, they had the front of their caps pushed into their necks as was the custom, their waistcoats buttoned to the top, they were hired hands before a day of bone crushing work. In the distance I could see the outskirts of a big city where the mayor supposedly behaved like a naughty child, pulling the guests' toes under the dinner table, he punished the citizens for having elected him by an overwhelming majority. I thought about the adventure book in my suitcase, I thought about my passport and the credit cards in my wallet, I thought about how odd it was that nobody had asked me whether they should inform my relatives. I didn't have a wife or children—could they tell?

From the corner of my eye, I could see the eldest of the two women scrutinizing me, the left side of her face was swollen from a shove or a hit, her healthy right eye sparkled at me.

Where were you sitting? She asked, and looked into the group to see if they were paying attention.

In the middle, I said, the aisle seat across from the entrance.

The window seat was free after all, the woman called out triumphantly, I knew it!

What did you know?

You're the kind of person who books two seats, she said, that way you can make sure nobody steals any of your breathing room.

Even if I were rich, I'd only reserve one seat, I said.

So says the first-class-man of all people, shouted the woman, and even though her daughter begged her to keep quiet and leave me in peace, the woman was not to be appeased, she accused me of blocking the seat she might have had, and surely it wasn't too late to reproach me for my bad character, I couldn't possibly admit in front of all the people there that I had acted badly. Only when the doctor intervened, saying she had a huge syringe filled with a sedative that would bring everything and everybody to their senses, did the woman grow silent and allow her daughter, who was riven with shame, to massage her upper arm. If there were to be a second accident now, everything would be settled, I thought, and pulled the blanket more tightly around my torso, I had experienced and seen enough, I was familiar with the procedure, as my friend would have put it, but he was far away in Germany...I gripped my pants pocket and felt the bulge, thank God, my mobile phone had not been lost. I played with the thought of calling my friend for a while, but no, I would have spoken to him in German, I didn't have the least desire for more complications, as long as I stayed in the company of the indignant lady, I was unprotected. Our drive to the state hospital was already taking way too long, we drove through deserted streets, the street lights had been turned off at most of the intersections, light was shining in one or the other apartments, and some hawker's pulled their heavy loads behind them. It had caught us almost half way there; that was my last thought before I nodded off.

The ambulance jolted to a halt and woke me. The doctor pulled the sliding door open, we exited one after the other, and then stood still, I had gotten used to the shouts and orders and didn't dare take a step without being commanded to do so. Unshaven men in pajamas and dressing gowns were walking around the courtyard of the emergency station; they formed a small line in front of the kiosk, sat on park benches, or conversed with their healthy relatives. I saw two security guards checking us out, the doctor had a word with them and they called the orderlies over. They led us into the emergency room, I tried to shake off the orderly assigned to me because it made me feel stupid, but he clasped me more tightly and told me to be patient. How am I supposed to be patient? I thought, I've got minor wounds bleeding all over, my face looks like I had been attacked by wild dogs, and all of them are thinking the accident made an idiot out of me. The nurse brought me into a small room, barely had I stepped inside, when the policeman looked up from his files and roughly brushed them aside; they had seated him at a dwarf-sized desk, perhaps he was so furious because he was ordered to the emergency station in the middle of the night and had to take statements from the slightly injured victims.

Can you stand, or do you need to sit? He said.

Am I arrested?

Don't talk nonsense, he said, but when he discovered the orderly was holding me with both hands, he sternly ordered him to release me on the spot and to bring two glasses of tea, he watched the orderly as he stormed off, he looked disapprovingly around the room, he looked me in the eye.

What happened exactly? he said, every detail is important.

I was asleep, I said, I believe I'm a useless witness.

That's not the issue, he said unexpectedly, just tell me how a brand-new bus could turn into a giant, charred accordion.

Don't you first have to examine me? or am I mistaken?

You were treated on the spot by the emergency doctors, said the policeman, we don't have to worry about you dying off in my office...the passengers in the front seats testified that the driver collapsed at the steering wheel and they swear he suffered from cardiac arrest. But the driver is still alive, I said, he couldn't have recovered from a heart attack that easily... Cardiac arrest, he corrected me, and, in fact, I'm excluding that as a possibility. So what happened inside the bus?

All hell broke loose, I said, I found myself in the center aisle, and a few seconds later I slipped through a hole in the window...then a foreign woman gave me some water.

A foreign passenger? shouted the policeman.

No, she hurried to help me. Then she quickly got into her car and drove away. I don't consider her a terrorist.

Don't take that word so carelessly in your mouth, he said, otherwise there will be unpleasant consequences for you. You know that misleading authorities constitutes a statutory offence?

I didn't realize this is an investigation, I admitted, I apologized to the policeman for my careless use of the Turkish language, I explained to him that I had spent nearly my entire life abroad, and the more I spoke the more broken my speech became, the words lurched out of my mouth like tottering fools and fell to my feet, the policeman didn't take offense to my laxness towards his language, he let the orderly give me the tea glass, sent him away, I took a sip, and a second, and a third, the heavy wool blanket scarcely cloaked my torso—I looked like a victim and I was ashamed of it. Finally the policeman dismissed me, but not before taking my personal information, I shuffled behind the orderly, a cleaning lady was mopping the linoleum floor in the corridor, she froze when I reached her, I sidestepped the wet mop,

and turned the corner into the main corridor, I didn't interrupt the orderly's wordy account as he handed "survivor number two" over to the on-duty physician. Then he continued on his way.

You have to excuse the man, said the physician, he's a bit strange, but he does his job, and he's paid badly for it...like all of us doing our damned work here.

Without waiting for an answer, he took the blanket from me, examined my wounds and the cuts on my face, I groaned when he gripped me on my right side. Three to four fractured or broken ribs, he said, we're going to X-Ray you, the flesh wounds on your back don't look too bad, it's best if I stitch them up. I sat on the cot, and despite the local anesthetic, I felt every prick of the needle in my flesh, god bless what makes you tougher, the doctor laughingly exclaimed, what use would it have been to show me pity, he was there to repair the damage, I was slowly losing my strength.

The orderly took me back to the reception, I let him lead me, I let them X-Ray me, I let them give me a tetanus shot, and as I was walking next to him in the corridor I said to him: I need a shirt and a jacket, you look like the kind of person who would know how to find abundance where there's a shortage. I pulled some cash out of my pants pocket and slipped it to the orderly, who made no attempt to pretend he couldn't be bribed. He eyed me quickly from head to toe, he was probably calculating my size.

In an hour, he said, and here are the rules: I fulfill every wish, but I won't break the law, and I won't do anything immoral.

Don't worry, I said, and besides we're not in prison.

He had to laugh long and loudly, I wanted to slam him against the wall, but I probably had three or four broken ribs, and it was hard to breathe, I was on my own here, and I needed this subservient soul. He opened a door onto a large hall filled with men and women lying in beds, my gaze fell upon a disgraceful woman, she had her hands crossed behind her head and her armpits were covered with wine-red paper napkins. The orderly assigned me the empty bed to the left of the door and told me to lie down and wait: for him, for food, for a visit from the chief doctor, for my guardian angel, who needed to clean and straighten his plucked wings, and only then would he settle down on my right uninjured shoulder. What's with the left shoulder? shouted the disgraceful woman after him, is that position also vacant, or does the devil himself, the one responsible for all the damage in life, get rewarded with a day-off? Some of the men in the hall laughed, the women kept silent, they were busy checking if their bodies were improperly exposed under the blanket. I paid the men a greeting, the men greeted back, and I quickly slipped under the bedcover and pulled it up to my nose, I was cold, my

whole body was freezing. A man crouched in the bed next to me with his legs folded under him, he didn't bother to take off his slippers, he was frozen in this posture so he could face me more easily, peace to the unborn, joy to the surviving, and a blessing for the departed, he said, do you want a free tour of the hospital, do you want some quiet, or, now that you have been saved, do you want to commune with the good Lord under your blanket?

The second one, I said.

An economical answer, he determined, I am Mr. Liver.

Excuse me?

That's how we do it around here, who can remember all the names around here?

I'm a drunkard, I've got a liver problem, so I'm called Mr. Liver.

Then there's a guy who was admitted with a multiple fracture in his ankle, his name is Mr. ankle...what's your problem?

A deep wound in my back, a few broken ribs, I said.

You'll stay here for a few days. You should select your own name, then they'll be good to you.

Rib, I said.

Rib fits, he said, now get some sleep.