

Translated excerpt

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Daldossi oder Das Leben des Augenblicks

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I

The birds, stirred by the din of battle, had fled the trees and flown away.

Bruno Daldossi sat in the back of a minibus, looking out the window. They drove toward the village. He tried to understand what was happening at this very moment, or what could happen, but was at the same time distracted. In two days he would be back with Marlis; even here, in the countryside, he could still smell her skin, recall running his hands through her hair, remember kissing her between the legs.

To the side of the road, on the left, there were red wooden posts in the ground. Someone had written *Danger* on a sign.

Once, back in Bosnia, Daldossi had stepped off the road to take a piss. As he tucked his dick back in his pants and zipped his fly, two men ran a few steps toward him, shouting. He had been so lost in thought that he didn't immediately understand what they wanted, why they weren't coming any closer. For the next two hours he'd had to stand motionless, in the middle of the field, until the minesweepers came and led him to safety.

The report of a rapid-firing machine gun rang out once again. He turned his head, but didn't notice a thing. The reverberation came from afar. Live ammunition produces a second bang after firing, sometimes a third on impact.

Daldossi suspected the snipers hid behind the wooded hill, toward where the sun had just set. An autumnal cold spread.

What's that, Henrik Schultheiss asked from the seat next to him.

Daldossi stared silently into the landscape, and saw a section of sky, trees, and field in diffuse light. He had always taken photographs, since before he even owned a camera. From an early age he'd made a rectangle using his thumbs and index fingers, and through this makeshift frame he'd observed objects, cars, forests, and faces. When he stood frozen for long enough, he'd even managed to see the finished picture before him.

When he was ten, his mother gave him a camera for Christmas. His father scolded him constantly for spending too much money, shooting too much film.

Schultheiss tapped Daldossi's upper arm with his finger.

This time Daldossi had to react.

C'mon, what's happening?

I don't know.

The minibus continued down the road. To the right side was a field still thick with verdant grass.

Schultheiss liked to talk, and talked a lot. It wasn't the first time they were on the road together, but it was better to keep an eye out now. There were still warning signs along the roadside, and there wasn't a soul in sight.

That's a bad sign, thought Daldossi. Locals usually realize when a bomb lurks somewhere below ground, and disappear before it explodes.

I don't know why I'm still doing this shit, said Schultheiss. I don't really want to anymore.

No one's forcing you. Just get out.

Now? Schultheiss shook his head. I'm not one to commit suicide. Did you notice that stiff patch of grass back there? The chief sergeant said it was a detonator. And that yellow toy car in front of that boulder?

I did. And you—did you see that thin green thread?

Where?

It ran along the roadside, hidden amid the tufts of grass. I happened to have my glasses off because Marlis had just texted me. She's so excited, she's about to get a new bear for her animal preserve in Zwettlburg, a cub seized by the town council.

How come? Schultheiss fidgeted, jiggling his knees.

It was kept in a tiny concrete pen. Now they're moving it to the forests of Lower Austria. Marlis will see to its recovery.

That makes sense, said Schultheiss. This guy's driving a bit fast, don't you think? Schultheiss leaned forward to take a look at the speedometer or say something to the driver. Just then, the driver turned back toward Schultheiss and yanked the steering wheel round, veering off into the field.

Shit. Are you blind?

The vehicle came to a stop three meters from the road.

Schultheiss grabbed the driver's arm and shook him.

You distracted me, he said.

I didn't do a thing! You were driving too fast. I saw it coming. Now we're fucked.

Daldossi opened the door.

Schultheiss pulled him back. Didn't you see the red posts?

I did.

Well then?

I'm looking for the tire tracks.

Why?

They're probably the only way we'll get back to the road in one piece.

And what if you step outside the lines? That's playing with fire, said Schultheiss, and began to laugh.

This is no time for fooling around. Daldossi pulled the door shut and climbed to the rear. We're in luck.

You call this luck? Schultheiss ran his hand through his hair and zipped up his padded jacket.

We could've been in a smaller van without a rear door, said Daldossi.

Then I would've been driving, and we wouldn't have landed in this minefield.

Nothing's happened yet.

But some mines only explode the second time they're touched.

Take off your belt, said Daldossi.

What do you want with it?

Or do you have a hat, or wool gloves?

Just a scarf, said Schultheiss.

Good. Take it off.

Are you nuts? Johanna knitted it for me.

We don't have much time to lose. The grass will straighten out again, said Daldossi. He knelt on the rear bumper and tried to etch the exact course of the tire tracks into his memory. Then he sat down, keeping his feet off the ground.

Schultheiss handed him the scarf.

It would've been easier to mark the path with spray-paint, but they didn't have any.

It was so typical of Schultheiss to just sit there and let him do all the work.

Let's give this a try, said Daldossi, stepping into the track with his right foot.

I don't know if staying in back is the best idea, he said to Schultheiss.

He carefully laid the scarf out, marking the right edge of the tire track and its trajectory, then put his other foot down on the ground. As Daldossi reached the road, the chief sergeant whistled, marking the end of the exercise.

Schultheiss got out of the van and joined the other journalists and photographers. Your colleague was right, said the chief sergeant, you should've taken cover up front, by the driver.

...

As a child, Daldossi had owned several model airplanes and a miniature airport, but no gangways to connect the planes to the terminal, which had made him sad. Airplanes had always fascinated him, but they disturbed him, too. The first real planes he'd ever seen had come out of nowhere, wrenching him from his quiet childhood as they thundered over the valley unannounced.

He'd barely had a chance to lift his eyes before they'd already reached the other side of the valley, crossing the blue strip of sky between the mountains with incomprehensible speed, soon shrinking to just a few spots flashing in the sunlight, then vanishing into thin air over the horizon.

But the nightmare wasn't over. Daldossi remembered the thundering and booming that had filled the valley just seconds later, frightening everyone. The explosive, echoing, double bang and rattling of the windows could still be heard even when the bombers had already left the valley's airspace. Everything was tossed into turmoil. The neighbor's dog had yelped as if he'd been beaten, the chickens fluttered into one another in the coop, and the younger children ducked their heads down, running to the adults. The grocer, who'd

gone to his shop to see what was going on, had raised his arm and shook his fist. Come back, you cowards, he had called out.

No one was aware that these supersonic bombers were a marvel of aviation; the boom resounding through the valley was immediately seen as an assault perpetrated by the occupiers—as the Italians' belligerent demonstration of power.

Even then, Daldossi couldn't tell exactly what had overcome him: fear or curiosity. The latter was so great, at any rate, that he'd clambered up the rain gutter to the terrace, hoping to get high enough to spot something he'd missed from the courtyard. The fact that his grandmother had forbidden him to climb the rotten gutter mattered not one bit. He'd always wanted to convince himself with his own eyes, even if they seemed to be no good, neither fast enough nor sharp enough.

The gutter, he remembered, had torn from the wall; he'd lost his grip and fallen backward onto the cobblestones outside the garage.

You could've broken your neck, his grandmother said, shaking him and then giving him a slap.

Too bad you're not coming along, Johanna said as the taxi stopped outside the terminal.

Maybe I will, said Daldossi. He jumped out of the car, took her luggage and his travel bag from the trunk, and paid.

Johanna stood by his side, pointing at his bag.

She seemed happy. Daldossi looked into her eyes, but she turned to her luggage, pulling at the handle.

I'm coming along, he heard himself say.

He wanted to know how she'd react.

I don't believe it.

Well, you should.

She walked in front of him, shaking her head. The hem of her trenchcoat waved in the wind.

I hate revolving doors, she said, after her luggage had nearly been pinched between the door and its frame. She turned around toward him: Then you can take the photos.

He let her believe he was still going with her.

In the middle of the hall she stopped. How nice, she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

He held her arm, but didn't know what to say. He was afraid to disappoint her. Before he had a chance to fix the situation, she had reached the Alitalia counter. Since he was still standing there, she took a few steps and stopped again.

So—you're not coming after all?

I'm catching another flight, said Daldossi. To Frankfurt. I have something to take care of.

In Frankfurt?

He'd have liked to capture her curiosity in a photo, the slight tilt of her head, the furrows of her brow obscured by her hair. It would've been a good picture, he was convinced of it—not an exciting shot, but a memorable one. In order to really work, it would need a touch of mystery to spark the viewer's imagination, a shadow cast on the bright fabric of her trenchcoat, the outline of a man's head, a dark silhouette, unrecognized yet threatening, thereby transforming the picture into a coveted object of interpretation.

Since Daldossi didn't answer, Johanna got in line at the counter. Hardly anyone was there.

He was still thinking about the missed photo, and how his pictures were now increasingly created without a camera.

Maybe he was that shadow on her coat.

He needed a glass of wine, the sooner the better. His mouth was dry. He felt a tingling in his fingers. A cigarette would have calmed him down, but the next smokers' lounge wasn't until after the security check.

Johanna put her luggage on the belt.

Standing about fifteen meters from check-in, he watched her.

The interest she'd brought to his work pleased him, as did her mention of the curator, who still seemed to have an appreciation for him despite their falling out.

We'd make a good team, thought Daldossi, the two of us could work independently. I'd provide the images for her texts. And at my age it'd be better to

photograph a few refugees on Lampedusa or Malta than get into situations where everything goes out of control and a bomb could go off at any moment.

Marlis had long since felt disdain for his *snapshots*. She no longer said *photographs* or even *pictures*. Her use of the word *snapshots* expressed her total lack of regard. The word had come up during a disagreement.

As long as he'd put himself in danger, she'd had her fear, and that fear was an affirmation of sorts. Marlis liked it when he told her his stories after returning from one of those hellholes. At particularly tense moments she'd even shout *stop!*, but that was just an invitation to relay in even greater detail everything that wasn't visible in the pictures. In the first year of their relationship, they'd tumbled atop one another just inside the apartment door, tearing the clothes from each other's bodies, eagerly groping every crag and crevice. Sometimes Daldossi took her right on the entryway floor, and afterward they'd just lie there, utterly spent and satiated. She'd yank a jacket out of the closet and lay her head on it. So, how was it? Tell me everything. And he'd talk on and on, as if it were a way of giving her back the time he'd taken from them both during his travels.

He couldn't remember the last time she'd encouraged him to tell those stories, it was so long ago.

But the stories didn't stop, thought Daldossi.

They were just smaller, more inconspicuous. But also larger, more monstrous. Some came back, like those pitch-black nights, the kind of nights that didn't exist in Vienna. Daldossi sometimes sank into such nights, waiting for them to vanish, but they didn't simply pass like others. That's when he'd again find himself sitting with young Chechen soldiers in a duplicitous darkness, where he could only rely on his ears. For Daldossi, who'd had a series of major ear infections as a child and consequently had limited hearing, deep darkness was the worst of all disorientations.

Sometimes it struck him in the subway, or in an elevator: What if the electricity went out? Then he was at pains to distract himself, as the images rushed back again: the long hours he'd waited alongside Khamid, Ruslan, and Tamerlan, expecting the Russians to attack, without being able to see a thing.

Daldossi's own breath had sounded like a loud rasp, and his body was so tense from sitting and listening that every inch of it was in pain. With every pore he'd tried to

suss out what was happening around him. When an animal howled or made even the slightest move in the woods, he was so frightened he'd begun to tremble. The Chechens had immediately grabbed their machine-guns. The mere suggestion of a sound—a rustle of clothes, a stifled cough—was enough to make them all turn their heads. But nothing had happened for a long, long time. The enemy had waited, too, in darkness and silence.

Sightlessness—for Daldossi, that was the epitome of meaninglessness. The absence of light made him uncomfortable.

Back in Chechnya, he'd come to understand in a profoundly physical way why the color black stood for evil and death in so many cultures. The absence of visible light could only mean danger and disaster.

The blackest black, Marlis had told him at the time, was the color of soot. For Daldossi it had always been those cold, wet nights spent beside the people of the Chechen civil defense, even though he already knew that wasn't true.

Later, Marlis had told him about a butterfly whose blackness set a record. The *Papilio ulysses* has nanochannels arranged like a dense forest on its wings, so that light gets caught in the gaps and can't escape, falling into thousands of tiny traps.

Daldossi had also found himself in a trap. There, out in the open field, everything had become immeasurable. Even his thoughts suddenly seemed loud and rumbling. He'd started talking to himself; he became inured to everything. Ruslan had tried to hold Daldossi's mouth shut in the dark, but his wet, filthy fingers poked his eye instead. The rain had washed away the men's vigilance. Their senses had dulled, they became careless, and had even lit cigarettes.

When Daldossi later saw someone light another's cigarette at night, as a face suddenly appeared over the lighter, the blurry features struck him as those of Ruslan or Tamerlan. Memories lit up with the flame, Daldossi recognized a few details that disappeared in the dark as the light faltered. But the next night, as more cigarettes were lit, they were back: Ruslan's weary head, his snotty nose, his passive gaze set on his Kalashnikov, his lifeless eyes. Ruslan had given up, no longer capable of any reaction. The long days waiting in the rain and countless dark nights had sapped his strength from within. The machine gun leaned against him, but had become a useless tool. Time had taken its toll, beaten him down; he hadn't been able to wake back up, although his body

bore not a single scratch.

Maybe Marlis felt compassion for Daldossi, or for every person, every creature forced to just sit and wait, right where they were; those who, like Ruslan, had long forgotten what everyday life used to be like, what the simplest components of civilian existence were.

Maybe she could only love him out of pity. It didn't help, he must have known, and had to talk to her about it.

He had never surrendered, not even on those Chechen nights when almost everyone had grown indifferent to everything, but only *almost*; Daldossi wouldn't give up now, either. He would fight for Marlis, he'd do anything to win her back.

Johanna stood before him, fanning herself with her boarding pass. It's so hot, she said, the heat's on too high. But maybe it's something else. She laughed. May I ask what you're doing in Frankfurt?

Just changing planes, he said. I'm not going to Palermo, but to Venice.

When he saw her disappointment, he added, I'd like to go with you, but—he hesitated for a moment—I can't. I've got things to do.

Is there another war against the Ottomans? Or against the Austrian aggressors? Has the Serenissima recaptured Crimea? She glanced at her boarding pass.

No, said Daldossi. It's a private peacekeeping mission.

He raised his shoulders and pursed his lips. I'll just photograph some pigeons.

Some of you photograph young vets, some become animal photographers—is that all that's left for you old warhorses?

Warhorses? We've always left the fighting to others—how much time do you have before takeoff?

Johanna had hands that pleased his aesthetic, unadorned, with strong, long fingers and not-too-short nails. His mother had had similar hands when she was young. They'd since become wrinkled, the nails brittle. Her hands were no longer as confident as they used to be, but they were still adroit when it came to threading a needle or preparing finely sliced onions. And, unlike father's hands, they'd never hit him. His mother's hands had been helpful hands, and had never gotten carried away with affected gestures. The next time Daldossi visited her, he'd photograph her hands, and nothing else.

An hour and a half, Johanna said, glancing at her watch.

She went with him to the Lufthansa counter, then they went through security.

And what, exactly, does *private peacekeeping mission* mean? She put her passport and ticket into the side pocket of her handbag.

Marlis left me. Things got ugly before she went. I want to speak with her.

In Venice, the city of love? How romantic!

Was she making fun of him? Did she find him laughable? Or was there a tinge of disappointment in her tone?

She ran off with a Venetian.

Oh, I'm sorry.

Was she actually sorry?

Johanna had taken her trenchcoat off and stuffed half of it into her bag. Her dress looked good.

What were her sexual predilections? Back when they were at the airport in Tripoli, Schultheiss had told him he'd never had anal sex. Was that Johanna's choice, or Schultheiss's?

He had pretended to be open, but then didn't tell Daldossi the real reason Johanna had abandoned him. They'd been destined for each other, Schultheiss had said. He felt they were soulmates. They both had similar backgrounds.

Schultheiss's talking got on his nerves. Maybe that's why Daldossi had stayed with Marlis for so long: he didn't have to bluff, didn't have to justify their relationship with romantic explanations. Or was that one of his mistakes—that he'd failed to do so? Johanna entered a duty-free shop and Daldossi followed, although he didn't like such stores.

Christmas eve is just a few weeks away, she said. I've always celebrated with my mother. You?

Daldossi reached for an aftershave, sprayed the back of his hand. What do you think?

Too harsh.

I don't know what I'm doing this year. He put the bottle back on the shelf. As a child, I always dreamt of a big Christmas tree with tinsel and sparkling lights, of beautiful

shortbread cookies and fragrant vanilla kipferl, but such storybook pictures were never a reality.

Why not?

Maybe it just lacked the kind of glow only joy can bring, said Daldossi. Of course we had a tree. We also had cookies, but we were a sad family, and Christmas was a sad affair.

Too little money?

That, too, but that wasn't the issue. It's hard to celebrate with a sullen, drunken father.

It wasn't actually about the Christmas tree, Daldossi thought, it was about my father. All their hopes and expectations revolved around him. He never came home in time for Christmas eve, never as Daldossi and his mother had wished he would, and they always felt they were somehow at fault for his drinking.

Marlis and I always cooked, Daldossi continued, but oftentimes I just wasn't there, and she resented me for it.

I would've, too, said Johanna.

She hadn't witnessed the humiliations and injuries that two lovers, or ex-lovers, could inflict on one another. Bruno couldn't say much about the end of his relationship with Marlis. He'd spoken her name twice; once, he'd casually mentioned that Marlis also drank espresso—no sugar, just a splash of cold milk—at all hours of the day and night; another time he'd praised her patience and courtesy with restaurant servers. He considered women who acted superior around waiters an abomination.