



Photo Credit: Alessandra Capodacqua

Gliding past his wife's pale shoulder, Pavel's gaze rested on Cora's smooth sunburnt skin, taking in every detail. Seated leg-crossed in front of them, she sifted the sand through her fingers telling them about the week she and her partner had spent in the Danube Delta before coming to Mamaia. Her restless eyes were roving around, captured by anything that moved: a foreigner inflating a rubber mattress with a foot pump, a little boy hopping after his father, a ball thrown up in the air. Whenever

she turned her head to follow those moving targets, the breeze blew her curls over her mouth, and she promptly brushed them away with a nervous motion of her wrist. From behind his sunglasses Pavel was trying to fix Cora's facial features, to dominate, just for an instant, this woman's provoking mobility, but he had to give up, as he had to recognize that, even though he found her story alarmingly trite, he was fascinated by her presence and her colorful way of describing things. It wasn't flattering for him, but he found himself an excuse: on the beach towel stretched next to theirs, Gelu, Cora's hairy man, lay on his stomach, arms folded under his chin, and listened to her without blinking, a mesmerized bear with a sun hat on top of his head.

Every now and then his wife Madeleine asked a question and Pavel thought it was just to keep Cora talking rather than out of pure interest. He knew they would never go to a place where you had to imbibe your skin with a sort of tobacco brew to keep mosquitoes away and fish soup was made with Danube water.

Suddenly Cora turned silent, reclined her head on the shoulder, then shook her hair energetically and said with a mysterious air: "I've got a surprise for you!"

With great agility she started fumbling in her straw bag, took out four apples, jumped to her feet, and headed for the showers. A few minutes later she offered each of them a freshly washed apple, the sweet-sour greenish sort that ripen first in the summer. After sitting down again, Cora started talking about one of their ex-professors at the university, who was shamelessly courting her, so she said. Pavel was trying to catch his wife's reaction. She and Cora had studied together at the university. Madeleine looked curious, she had no idea about this story, so she wanted more details, and Cora started pouring them, taking voluptuous bites at the apple flesh with her strong teeth. Madeleine was nibbling at her apple slowly, as if pondering Cora's story, without any expression or gesture that would betray more than bland amusement. Her attitude fit her thin, not yet tanned shoulders, her long graceful neck and her blonde hair, evoking to Pavel the enduring plants sprouting on the sandy shore.

Soon he ceased to follow Cora's words and Madeleine's reactions, absorbed by the picture he had in front of him: a woman with indefinite dark green eyes and wavy chestnut hair, tumbling wildly down her shoulders, was passionately speaking and laughing. When she laughed, wrinkles formed at the corner of her eyes and they fit perfectly with her entire being, just like the thin thread of perspiration

in the cavity between her breasts. Behind her, the pale sand stretched widely, monotonous and indifferent to the palpitating green sea in the background. After she finished her apple, Cora jumped to her feet and said joyfully, clapping her hands: "Come on, up we go into the water! Don't be lazy!"

As soon as she said this, she turned on her heels and headed for the sea, flaunting her hips. Her man stood up and followed her like an arrow shot from a bow. Pavel smiled ironically at Gelu's reaction, but then he himself felt a strong impulse to go for a swim. He gave a last bite to the apple, jumped to his feet and asked Madeleine: "Aren't you coming for a swim?"

She did not even bother to answer. Just waved her pointing finger in denial and moved on to the rubber mattress. He dropped his sunglasses in her beach bag and started for the water with long decided strides.

For a while he lingered on the shore watching Cora and her man: she dived into the water, he plunged after her. When they started splashing each other, Pavel could not perceive anything, apart from her excited screams. Then silence. Cora had disappeared underwater and Gelu was looking around dumbfounded. He dived and returned to the surface holding Cora tight in his arms. With strained muscles he lifted her above his shoulders and dropped her which made the water whirl for several meters around them. A few seconds later, Cora leaped out, shaking her hair. She looked towards the beach, noticed Pavel hesitant on the shore and blew him a kiss. He waved in response and threw himself into the water. When he reached Cora and her man, his first impulse was to enter their game, diving and resurfacing in a spectacular manner as he used to do in high school. But he feared the ridicule and swam away enjoying the light movements of his body in the warm welcoming sea. With the rhythm of his arms and legs, his thoughts started rotating around one theme: Cora. What a woman! He had met her only three days ago but couldn't help wondering how intensely she lived her life. Everything she did, no matter how small or ordinary, filled her with joy. Even laying the towel on the sand was a great pleasure: she shook it vigorously, let it pose itself on the sand and then smoothed it with her palm with undeserved tenderness. In the three mornings they had spent together she played handball with an improvised team on the beach, offered him and Madeleine ice-creams and apples, hired a paddle boat with Gelu to reach out beyond the buoys and swim where the water was fresher. Then with the same excitement she sat on the sand in front of them and recounted things she had seen or heard the previous evening in a shop, in a bar, on a terrace.

As she described them, all those little entertainments that filled the days at the seaside abounded in secret pleasures. Coming to the seaside, not to look for rest and comfort but just to taste the gifts of life. Cora and Gelu slept in a tent in a nudist camp, north of the beach. She was euphoric about it: "You feel free of any constriction. That is what Paradise must be like."

This appealed to Pavel. He would have preferred to go to the fisher village close to the Bulgarian frontier, where the intelligentsia gathered and practiced nudism in defiance of the political regime's prudishness, but that would be unthinkable for Madeleine's sense of decency. The more he thought about Cora, the more he admired her for everything, including the unattractive red sunburns on her shoulders he had seen the day before. He had joined her to buy Pepsi-Cola. With every step she used a new infantile stratagem to make him come out of his reserved manners, and he couldn't help but let go, as if he were no longer himself but had made his own that woman's senses, her energy, her way of being. He remembered the scene at the low hedge that separated the beach from the kiosks and smiled, turning on his back and swimming slowly, eyes wide open towards the sky. To take a shortcut, Cora had jumped over the hedge, then she had turned back towards him as he stayed undecided on the other side. She placed her hands on his shoulders and urged him: "You're really funny! What are you afraid of?"

Her words seemed to mean something else, and he tried to read that meaning in her slippery gaze that seemed to conceal a promise and a threat. He kept on swimming for another while, getting farther away, still thinking about Cora, then decided to get out of the water. When he stepped on the dry sand, his expression was of wistful longing and concern.

The beach was full now. He lost time trying to find the others. He noticed Cora standing with her hair bound in a ponytail. She looked much younger, a round-shaped, cheeky teenager. Gelu was smearing a solar cream on her back, careful and tender, as if he were taking care of a child. Stretched on the rubber mattress, Madeleine was absently perusing a magazine. She did not seem to notice his presence. Neither did he announce himself but simply moved towards the showers.

The cold shower turned his thoughts cuttngly clear. For the first time he was thinking over his marriage with a certain detachment. He remembered meeting Madeleine five years back at a party. She studied art history, he studied design, they had subjects in common, so they hit it off right away. He had no idea what she thought about him, but he was struck by her delicate lineaments, her amber

eyes, her blond hair, her contained gestures, symbols of gestures, so different from the other girls of her age. At the end of the party, he knew he desired intensely that reserved young woman, closed in the calm of her mystery. Their story ran smoothly, she accepted him as her boyfriend as if it had been the most natural thing in the world. After they graduated, he proposed, and she nodded lowering her lids with a thin smile. Now he was wondering whether she accepted out of love or because her father had died recently, and she and her mother wanted to fill that void with another masculine presence. Just the thought of it was so unbearable that he threw his head under the shower to wash away this suspicion.

After he moved in with Madeleine and her mother, he set in a peaceful routine: he went to the lamp factory early in the morning, where he acted as the assistant of the quality control inspector, came back in the late afternoon, and passed the evenings in his atelier, improvised in a box room, creating art objects he sold in the artists' shop. Then they dined, and on the weekends went to concerts, took walks, visited exhibitions. He had highly cultured conversations with Madeleine's mother, a retired French professor who

never missed the opportunity to praise her deceased husband, a law professor, whose study was a sort of sanctuary, with his writing desk, his books, and his favorite objects dusted reverently every day. He was lazy enough to leave everything else, apart from his work, for them to decide. In this arrangement there was barely any space for spontaneity or outbursts of passion.

When he returned, Madeleine was alone. He lay down next to her and she pulled herself away, to avoid contact with his cold, wet skin. Then he saw her stand up, with almost closed eyes, like a night walker, due to the strong sunlight, or just her usual drowsiness and heard her ask him with a vaguely interested air: "What is the sea like today?"

She waited for his answer with an apathetic expression, then she walked to the water, thin and straight, stepping carefully on the hot sand with her toes. He watched her step into the sea until the water reached her knees, she bathed hastily her shoulders and arms, and turned back to their place with a face heavy with fatigue and disgust. It dawned on him that her lack of stamina was due to being the child of an elderly couple, their tiredness of life had passed on to her.

After lunch, Madeleine and Pavel were seated at a table on the restaurant terrace of their hotel. He

had ordered a beer, Madeleine a lemonade. He observed her attentively, while she turned around the straw in the tall glass and sipped in, without thirst, without a shadow of pleasure.

Pavel used to like relaxing moments like this, but now he was getting bored.

Madeleine turned towards him: "Maman said she would go with her friend Cornelia to the mountains for a week. Then she comes to spend a week with us."

Pavel suddenly felt he had been confiscated by Madeleine, her mother and her father's ghost. He now felt guilty for growing apart from his parents, who were never invited, maybe because they were looked down on: his mother was a nurse, his father a technician at the phone company.

He gazed questioningly at Madeleine's fine profile and her thin wrists he liked so much: he would have wished to discover in them a spark, a nervous flicker.

Then he heard himself asking for Madeleine's opinion on Cora.

She replied: "Well, I wouldn't say she's strikingly deep... the adventuresome type. When we were students she had an abortion, then who knows how she managed to marry one of the French faculty lecturers. One year later, after she got her residence in Bucharest, she left him. It looks like she gets quickly bored" She sipped another drop of her lemonade, set her white lace hat better and went on: "... and for the rest she's too noisy and always needs the attention of the others, which I find in bad taste. Like sleeping in a tent and practicing nudism."

She had talked with a level voice, rancourless, aloof. He listened to her apparently untouched, but inside he was opposing her opinions with mounting irritation. "Venomous," he thought. "You know Cora outshines you in vitality."

He was wondering if he could change the subject. Ah, yeah, Gelu, Cora's man. He had scrutinized him on the beach: the classical profile and the grey hair gave him an air of distinction. But the hairy body, muscular strong arms and legs, the rough skin and the unkempt nails cancelled the first impression. He asked Madeleine with a voice he wanted to sound as indifferent as possible: "What do you think about Gelu?"

Madeleine answered with an indulgent smile: “Well, this bunch of simple instincts does a good job in a nudist camp.”

He wanted to ask her if there was a way to avoid seeing them as she disliked them so much. A useless question: they had never planned to spend their time with Cora and her man, just met them casually a few days ago. Madeleine had told them they used only the beach in front of their hotel, and since then the two came to keep them company uninvited.

As if she had guessed his thoughts, Madeleine continued, “It’s fine, I can cope with it. I’ve seen you find them entertaining, don’t you?” launching an inquisitive gaze to him, so intense that he felt like an insect trapped in an amber drop.

Pavel refrained from making any comment and tried to shift his attention to a boisterous family at the next table gathered around ice creams and coffee. All the things he had admired in Madeleine suddenly appeared in a different light: her refusal of vulgarity, her mania for hygiene, her fixed habits ceased to appear as marks of a classy woman; they now seemed an agile way of concealing her incapacity to vibrate to the many rhythms of life. Could spending his life with her hamper his creative energies?

Pavel fastened his furrowed gaze on Madeleine who lay on the deck chair with closed eyes. He had a vision of her 20 years later: a distinguished stodgy lady, with graceful thin arms, a white lace hat, and a fine handkerchief spread over her décolleté to protect her skin already reddish from sun exposure. With a mute rebellion, he thought that his future life would be a tedious treadmill without any stimulus.

An hour later, in the hotel room, he announced to her impatiently: “I’m going for a swim.”

“Fine, I’ll finish my book and maybe take a nap.”

She answered with her usual calm voice. They never went to the beach in the afternoon. They rested, read or simply idled on deckchairs on the balcony of their room. Each day the same schedule and the same mood: calm, deep calm, immobility, monotony. With some variations: Madeleine’s headaches or bad moods.

From Cora's chitchat he found out how entertaining their afternoons and evenings were. They went bowling, dancing, or played cards, they watched a film in the open-air cinema or made a fire in the camp and feasted with other nudists sharing food and drinks. All their dinners were improvised: fish soup in a beach pub, next day a "lords" menu in a restaurant, or just canned meat, popcorn and beer in front of their tent. All this culinary disorder caused Madeleine barely to withhold grimaces of disgust, used as she was to her mother's soufflés, soups, and vegetable pies.

The beach in front of their hotel was quite crowded at that hour. He started walking distractedly, trying to avoid the people standing in his way, and only stopped every now and then to fix the sea, as calm as a sleeping lake. Two steps away from the water, a little boy was digging a hole. He noticed it late, when he almost destroyed the child's work with the tip of his toes. Dirty with wet sand, the face red from effort, the boy reproached him: "Why don't you look where you step?"

Taken aback he pointed to the miserly turbid water in the hole: "Why are you digging for water here, when the sea is only two steps away?"

The boy pierced him with a mature look: "Yes, but that's not my water! I haven't discovered it!"

This brief encounter changed his mood. How interesting to desire that drop of yellowish water only because he had discovered it, when the sea, so inviting, offered itself to everybody? What will become of this child, who knew something he had never thought of: you own only what you discover. And suddenly he realized he had always taken the line of least resistance: he had kept a safe distance from Madeleine's moods and silences, accepting her rules. She may hide a different woman inside, and he would need patience to find her.

He slid into the water and swam far from the shore with decided, almost furious arm strokes. When he returned to the hotel, he felt clarified: it wasn't fair to rebel against his wife, since he had never tried to know her better. He found Madeleine reading with half-drawn curtains. He greeted her, his mouth dry from emotion. She stood up from bed and asked if he wanted an instant coffee. Without answering he came closer and took her by the shoulders, with burning eyes, ready for a mad embrace. She pulled herself out of his arms with a reproachful look: "Ouch! It hurts!"

He felt so disappointed that he let his arms fall. He blurted out: "You have never really desired me,

have you?"

"What do you mean?" she retorted in offence. "Is forcing me a way to trigger my desire?"

Her gaze stood up to his firmly. He felt guilty, tactless, a beast and took refuge on the balcony and started smoking. She joined him after a while, placing a tray with two cups with instant coffee mixed with sparkling water, and two tumblers with sour cherry liquor on the low table. She sat on her deck chair without a word and started drinking her coffee. He felt her distant, closed in her world, a world he couldn't access. But maybe this was life, after all. Each of us has a secret impenetrable world, and our worlds barely touch each other, but they never fuse. Why should it be different with the woman you have united with in marriage?

Pavel drank the liquor in one gulp and started drinking his coffee standing, his elbows leaning on the balcony balustrade. The quiet sea and the clear sky were joined by the horizon like the two sides of an open shell: a transparent blue-greenish side and a silvery one. A couple of sail boats were quivering in the afternoon sun. In a balcony nearby one could hear a woman's joyful voice.

This voice dissipating the immobility of the moment brought back to his mind Cora's laughter, like a water spray, in which the zest of life gurgled out, insatiable and fresh. He drew her features in his imagination, the fine wrinkles at the corner of her eyes, the full lips. And what if, like in a fantasy game, it would have been Cora waiting for him in the room instead of Madeleine...?

The next three mornings he waited anxiously to see them coming along the shore from the camp and welcomed them with increasing joy. Cora seemed to grasp what was going on in his mind and started responding in her own manner: she touched his arm as if by accident, she splashed about when he joined her and her man in the water, or she kissed Gelu, jumped into his arms, pulled his ears and played with him, only when she was sure Pavel was watching her. One day they arrived late, when he and Madeleine were ready to leave for lunch. Cora had rings under her eyes, dry lips and a husky voice. "We threw a crazy party last night on the beach with a group of funny guys."

Madeleine answered with a critical look, and Pavel knew exactly what she thought: Cora was having a bad day and should have stayed in her tent to recover. But he liked that soft lassitude that turned

Cora vulnerable. It was like a surrender and a call. He was eagerly taking in her tousled hair. The breeze was playing with it, and he would have been able in a moment of loss of control to grasp that hair and cover those dry lips, that kept on chatting about the night party, with brutal kisses.

Each day, the hours when Cora was not with them made him more nostalgic and silent. Cora had proposed a few times to go out together in the evening and dance on one of the open terraces. Every time Madeleine had declined in a kind but cold manner: "Thanks for the idea, but we do not dance!"

It was true, she loathed public places where people turned ridiculous in the dance frenzy. In the evenings they took long walks on the promenade, stopped at a cafeteria for an ice cream or stayed in their flat and made love with the lights off, as she preferred. She abandoned herself to his embrace, and he was blindly sculpting her shapes with his hands, but his sensations were slipping through his fingers, as he could not seal them with his sight. Their soft embrace was fleeting, which gave him a sense of insecurity, until it all ended up with her sigh; he never knew if it was of pleasure or relief.

One evening Pavel accompanied her listlessly on the promenade. It was late, there were ever fewer people around. Wrapped in her large shawl Madeleine was walking in silence. When they passed by a discotheque where they could hear applause, Madeleine stopped, grabbed his arm and squeezed it. He thought she wanted to tell him something important and was caught by a violent emotion.

He looked at her inquiringly, and she started to speak with brilliant eyes: "Well, you know..."

But she was interrupted by a shrill voice: "Look where they're hiding in the evenings! You're caught! Surrender!"

They turned around and saw Cora, her face shiny with sweat, wagging her pointing finger in reproach and shaking her head which made her heavy earrings sway. Gelu kept his arm around her waist so tightly that he had ruffled her dress. Pavel and Madeleine greeted them without enthusiasm. Cora went on undaunted: "We have danced for two hours non-stop. Then we had to go out, it was deadly hot."

She was blowing the fringe wet with sweat from her forehead and was uselessly trying to push her liquored up man aside as he was trying to kiss her on the neck, while ready to tell others about an

incident between a young woman from Prague and a tipsy local man.

This time Pavel paid no attention to Cora. Next to him, Madeleine wasn't listening either. Half turned towards the sea she was scrutinizing the darkness. A new thought dawned on Pavel: what if Madeleine was secretly longing for another man? Two steps away, Cora was cheerfully chattering. In the calm of the night, her laughter sounded vulgar. But that woman wished to communicate, she was alive. So alive, that her burning body was emitting its call around, and he apprehended that call.

In an unexpected moment of silence, they heard Madeleine's voice: "Tonight, the sea is sparkling blue!"

They went on the beach. In the moonlight, the refulgence of the moving waters was launching mysterious signals in brief flickers. The silence was oppressive, as if the air had been pervaded by an unknown presence that absorbed every sound and turned the dark strangely dense. At the beginning they commented on the phosphorescence. Cora exclaimed in a shrill voice, but then she too was silenced by the atmosphere. They were almost afraid, and stood there motionless and wordless, letting that indefinite powerful thing overwhelm them. The women took off their sandals and started walking in front of the men barefoot. The traces of their feet on the wet sand of the shore glimmered for an instant and vanished in the dark. Under the cover of that enormous immobility each of their lives appeared as a short, insignificant breath, and thus, Pavel found himself wondering if the intensity of living could really matter. Or, on the contrary, did that brevity mean that one had to experience, enjoy and taste as much as one could?

Madeleine turned back towards him. He could see her well in the moonlight. She was livid and thin, like an apparition suspended between this world and another one. What if she was really able to capture the deepest rhythms close to that immobility of the air, while he was catching only life's surface bustle?

Cora's voice cut the silence like a crude knife: "What about leaving our clothes on the sand and jumping naked into the water?"

Her nostrils were quivering, and her eyes hid a provoking glitter. Nobody answered. Not even Gelu who stood there as if hypnotized. Shortly afterwards the two couples separated. That night, after

taking a shower, Madeleine went to sleep exhausted. Pavel stood on the balcony watching the shimmering waters till late. His mind was imagining feverishly, teen-ager like, a night swim in the sea. The characters were Cora and himself.

In the morning he woke up very early after a heavy sleep troubled by chimeras. He found the room stifling. He had to go out in the sun, move, breathe. He asked Madeleine if she was ready to wake up for breakfast, but she answered without opening her eyes, that she would rather skip it and sleep the whole morning. He set out with stiff joints and a dry mouth. On his way to the restaurant, he decided he didn't want any breakfast either, so he headed for the beach.

There was nobody on the beach yet, only seagulls walking on the wet sand, white question marks between the sleepy yellow of the sand and the palpitating green of the sea. The breeze was stunningly fresh. He suddenly thought of the stories with sirens and smiled. In an intact seascape like that one any dreamlike creature could have a place. As if forged by his fantasy a character appeared unexpectedly on the shoreline. Judging by his dress, shorts and sweatshirt, rucksack and alpenstock, he seemed to have come to the wrong place, mistaking the sea for the mountains. A pointer dog was running by his side, now darting towards the water, now spinning in circles on the shore. The old man was walking with regular steps, indifferent to the dog's play. This made Pavel think that for that man there were no more doubts or quests, the sea could be equal to the mountains, nothing could deviate him from his path.

Intrigued by his allure, Pavel started following him. He wanted to see his face: he imagined it petrified in one expression and wondered if it was irony, sadness or disgust. What would Madeleine say about this apparition? And Cora? He himself had no idea how to judge him, but it seemed to him that the old man had appeared to guide him towards the north, pointing to one place: the nudist camp. He followed in his steps until he saw the first tents on the beach. Then he lost him and stopped disconcerted. The first dozy nudists were getting out of their tents. Where could he find Cora and her man? Was it appropriate to visit them without notice? He smiled at his own scruples. Etiquette was not for people like them. He wandered between tents and cars while trying to remember details from Cora's stories. Yet nothing relevant came to his mind. He was ready to leave when he caught sight of Cora next to a blue tent. Standing, nude, she was combing her hair with lazy arm motions. He did not know what to do. His legs were carrying him towards her, while his eyes were trying to look at her decently, winning over his curiosity. In an instant Cora noticed him and came forward naturally, as if she had been expecting him. Her body was showered with water beads.

"I've had a swim," she said for a greeting. "I needed to refresh myself after last night's dance."

For an instant Pavel thought of Madeleine, pale with shadows beneath her eyes, lying in bed, waiting for her headache to pass.

"Where's your wife?" Cora asked, as if she had read his mind.

"At the hotel. She doesn't feel very well and doesn't want to go out before lunch."

"I'm on my own, you know? Gelu went fishing very early. He said that after the shimmering we watched last night, fish come stunned towards the shore, or something like that. Want a coffee?"

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“At the hotel. She doesn’t feel very well and doesn’t want to go out before lunch.”

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open shell: a transparent blue-greenish side and a silvery one. A couple of sail boats were quivering in the afternoon sun. In a balcony nearby one could hear a woman’s joyful voice.

This voice dissipating the immobility of the moment brought back to his mind Cora’s laughter, like a water spray, in which the zest of life gurgled out, insatiable and fresh. He drew her features in his imagination, the fine wrinkles at the corner of her eyes, the full lips. And what if, like in a fantasy game, it would have been Cora waiting for him in the room instead of Madeleine...?

The next three mornings he waited anxiously to see them coming along the shore from the camp and welcomed them with increasing joy. Cora seemed to grasp what was going on in his mind and started responding in her own manner: she touched his arm as if by accident, she splashed about when he joined her and her man in the water, or she kissed Gelu, jumped into his arms, pulled his ears and played with him, only when she was sure Pavel was watching her. One day they arrived late, when he and Madeleine were ready to leave for lunch. Cora had rings under her eyes, dry lips and a husky voice. “We threw a crazy party last night on the beach with a group of funny guys.”

Madeleine answered with a critical look, and Pavel knew exactly what she thought: Cora was having a bad day and should have stayed in her tent to recover. But he liked that soft lassitude that turned Cora vulnerable. It was like a surrender and a call. He was eagerly taking in her tousled hair. The breeze was playing with it, and he would have been able in a moment of loss of control to grasp that hair and cover those dry lips, that kept on chatting about the night party, with brutal kisses.

Each day, the hours when Cora was not with them made him more nostalgic and silent. Cora had

proposed a few times to go out together in the evening and dance on one of the open terraces. Every time Madeleine had declined in a kind but cold manner: "Thanks for the idea, but we do not dance!"

It was true, she loathed public places where people turned ridiculous in the dance frenzy. In the evenings they took long walks on the promenade, stopped at a cafeteria for an ice cream or stayed in their flat and made love with the lights off, as she preferred. She abandoned herself to his embrace, and he was blindly sculpting her shapes with his hands, but his sensations were slipping through his fingers, as he could not seal them with his sight. Their soft embrace was fleeting, which gave him a sense of insecurity, until it all ended up with her sigh; he never knew if it was of pleasure or relief.

One evening Pavel accompanied her listlessly on the promenade. It was late, there were ever fewer people around. Wrapped in her large shawl Madeleine was walking in silence. When they passed by a discotheque where they could hear applause, Madeleine stopped, grabbed his arm and squeezed it. He thought she wanted to tell him something important and was caught by a violent emotion.

He looked at her inquiringly, and she started to speak with brilliant eyes: "Well, you know..."

But she was interrupted by a shrill voice: "Look where they're hiding in the evenings! You're caught! Surrender!"

They turned around and saw Cora, her face shiny with sweat, wagging her pointing finger in reproach and shaking her head which made her heavy earrings sway. Gelu kept his arm around her waist so tightly that he had rumbled her dress. Pavel and Madeleine greeted them without enthusiasm. Cora went on undaunted: "We have danced for two hours non-stop. Then we had to go out, it was deadly hot."

She was blowing the fringe wet with sweat from her forehead and was uselessly trying to push her liquored up man aside as he was trying to kiss her on the neck, while ready to tell others about an incident between a young woman from Prague and a tipsy local man.

This time Pavel paid no attention to Cora. Next to him, Madeleine wasn't listening either. Half turned towards the sea she was scrutinizing the darkness. A new thought dawned on Pavel: what if Madeleine was secretly longing for another man? Two steps away, Cora was cheerfully chattering. In

the calm of the night, her laughter sounded vulgar. But that woman wished to communicate, she was alive. So alive, that her burning body was emitting its call around, and he apprehended that call.

In an unexpected moment of silence, they heard Madeleine's voice: "Tonight, the sea is sparkling blue!"

They went on the beach. In the moonlight, the refulgence of the moving waters was launching mysterious signals in brief flickers. The silence was oppressive, as if the air had been pervaded by an unknown presence that absorbed every sound and turned the dark strangely dense. At the beginning they commented on the phosphorescence. Cora exclaimed in a shrill voice, but then she too was silenced by the atmosphere. They were almost afraid, and stood there motionless and wordless, letting that indefinite powerful thing overwhelm them. The women took off their sandals and started walking in front of the men barefoot. The traces of their feet on the wet sand of the shore glimmered for an instant and vanished in the dark. Under the cover of that enormous immobility each of their lives appeared as a short, insignificant breath, and thus, Pavel found himself wondering if the intensity of living could really matter. Or, on the contrary, did that brevity mean that one had to experience, enjoy and taste as much as one could?

Madeleine turned back towards him. He could see her well in the moonlight. She was livid and thin, like an apparition suspended between this world and another one. What if she was really able to capture the deepest rhythms close to that immobility of the air, while he was catching only life's surface bustle?

Cora's voice cut the silence like a crude knife: "What about leaving our clothes on the sand and jumping naked into the water?"

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With easy gestures she lit the camping stove and put a coffee pot on the flame. They drank the coffee in plastic cups: she closed her eyes after each sip to enjoy the aroma. He lit a cigarette, so embarrassed that he couldn’t utter a word, let alone an entire sentence. She peered at him, in silence, while scrawling spirals with her big toe on the sand. Then she suddenly stood up, took his cigarette from his mouth and asked, “Aren’t you curious to see our den?”

He followed her into the tent. It was stifling inside. A blanket lay crumpled on a rubber mattress, and clothes were hanging from a cord across the space. Cora did not give him much time to look around. She slipped her hands under his T-shirt and started caressing him. Her touch unleashed his repressed desire, and, on an impulse, he bit her lips and dug his fingers into her flesh as if ready to tear it. Theirs was not an encounter, but a strife in which each of them freed their wild drives. Her embrace soon turned domineering and he gave in to that pleasant force that made his body lose heaviness, as if he had unexpectedly fallen into the void, devoid of hearing, empty of thoughts.

Pavel did not realize how long he felt like this. When he started recovering, he felt as if he were rising from the sea bottom towards the surface. He could hear the voices of people outside the tent. He opened his eyes: Cora was lying next to him, with a triumphant smile on her swollen lips. She kissed him on the neck, then jumped to her feet and put out her arm: “Come on, let’s go for a swim!”

They walked into the sea hand in hand. The sun rays were crossing the limpid tranquil water, making the sand grains glint like crystal drops. When he realized that his body, completely naked, was revealed by that limpidity, he felt ashamed.

His shame grew into panic when they returned to the shore. The beach was full of nudists. He thought

everybody was looking at him and all knew what had happened between him and Cora. The thought that Gelu could come back any moment upset him completely. He left her behind and rushed into the tent where he put on his shorts and his T-shirt with trembling hands.

Cora followed him into the tent and asked in a rough voice: "Running away? Deserter!" Then she started laughing: "Oh, yeah, the gentleman needs his outfit!"

She put a towel around her body and waited for him outside. When he got out of the tent, she grabbed his arm and whispered into his face with a low, visceral voice: "I want you to be mine! Leave her! You are made for another type of life. From the first instant I saw you, I knew you desire something else. No wonder with a half-mummified woman like her!"

He was listening to her completely stunned. She went on: "I'll teach you how to live! You have to feel the blood burning in your veins!"

After these words, Cora dug her nails into his arm and brought her face close to his, fixing him with cold eyes. He lowered his lids and felt invaded by the smell of algae and salt water from her hair. This smell made him nauseous. He pushed her slowly aside and started trying nervously to find a cigarette in the shorts pocket. She was nailing him to the spot with her gaze, expecting an answer. He muttered: "You are catching me off guard."

"Yeah, and your dear wife may play the desperate part. Maybe it's better to go slowly. Let's just meet in secret for the moment. Tomorrow on the beach I'll let you know when and where we can be together again."

He tried a way to back off: "What about Gelu?"

She burst into laughter. "Come on, you know that if I want to, I can send him away today. He's just a pastime!"

Her impertinent tone struck him like an icy wave. His nausea got stronger. Cora was not in the least upset: "So?"

He tried to find a way out: "Please, don't spoil this magical moment! Give me time to recover and

think... I need to go now and be on my own..."

It wasn't true. He was simply afraid of her, of her man who could return any moment, of his own wild drives he felt rising inside, ready to blow up. Cora squeezed his hand with unexpected tenderness: "I've taken you too quickly, haven't I? Don't worry. You'll learn to let yourself go."

He stood up to go away. She took off the towel and hung it on a tent rope. Then she threatened him with a playful air: "You'll be mine!"

Pavel shuddered. After a few steps he looked back. She waved a good-bye and turned her back on him, going into the tent with an insolent gait. He took this as an insult and started walking quickly along the shoreline. Whenever he came across a nudist, he jumped back to avoid contact. He put on his sunglasses to attenuate the sight of their exposed nudity. The paradise! A painful monkey colony. And that's where Cora belonged. Where she was queen. The passion he thought was shining in her eyes, was just a desire to possess. Madeleine was right to despise her. This woman was not able to elevate herself, and then, in revenge, she troubled other people's lives, sinking, crushing and drowning everything in her womb.

He had been an idiot to interpret her desire to overpower others as the source of life, the miraculous source that could have ideally helped his creative energies flourish. Pavel was desperately angry with himself, and everything around annoyed him: the dazzling sun, the sand that was already burning and the little waves stubbornly clinging to his heels.

Out of the nudists' area, he was now crossing a portion of untended beach that separated the nudist camp from the first row of hotels. He took off his flip flops and started walking on the whitish burning surface, glad to be alone on that expanse and crush under his feet rough stones, dry thistles, sharp sea-shell splinters.

He found Madeleine on the balcony, a book in her hand and a glass of lemon juice on the table. He felt so grateful to find this familiar image again, that his greeting sounded like a deep sigh. Madeleine lifted her eyes from the book and smiled at him, a slight sense of wonder shining in her calm amber eyes. He shunned her gaze and went back to the room to pour a juice for himself.

In the afternoon, the sea suddenly changed aspect and started swaying dangerously. From the height of their seventh floor flat, he watched the sea in silence, discovering that its undulating fullness contained a latent threat. During the night the tempest started: the wind howled, the waves crashed. Next day they were advised to stay in the hotel because of the turbulence. They took the lift downstairs to have their meals and got immediately after back into their room accompanied by the continuous roar of the sea. He passed long minutes at the window, looking horrified at the dark waters, sinister and wrathful. "No wonder it's called the Black Sea," he thought. His heart was trembling; he wondered what had happened to the people in the nudist camp. Cora would have been able to take refuge at their place, she knew they had a two-room flat. He was hanging around, furtively searching for Madeleine's eyes, tense and embarrassed, with a corrosive sense of guilt. She was the same, silent, graceful, a little absent. She walked around lightly as usual, prepared instant coffees, ordered a soup when she didn't feel like going to the restaurant for dinner, then lay down on the bed to go on reading, or came close to him, without any sign of passion, just like a soft breeze, to fix his hair.

Two days passed. Cora did not materialize. The third day, the sea was wavy, but no longer threatening, and some brave tourists were already sitting on the wet sand, even if the sun was covered by clouds and the breeze was strong. Pavel and Madeleine decided to take a walk on the shore. She kept the scarf around her head with a hand and held his arm tight with the other. They went northwards, until they came to the place where the nudist camp was supposed to be. All tents had disappeared, as if swallowed by the sea. Pavel breathed a sigh of relief. He looked at the sea: it was still swaying and had a bilious color. During the tempest it had thrown out on the shore heaps of algae, shells, dead seahorses and fish. Repugnant and indecent waste coming out of the sea's womb.

As they were walking back to the hotel, Pavel set his eyes on his wife's fine profile. He felt so grateful that she was the same. With a shudder of disgust, he tried to shove away the image of the other woman, wishing the wind could wash off not only his face, but also the hurting memory of what he couldn't undo. With this strong desire inside, he was pacing the humble and patient sand, that covered with its mute body both human steps and the sea's mutinies as it knew its silence was cutting time's zigzag like a straight line.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gabriela Dragnea Horvath

Gabriela Dragnea Horvath, PhD, published essays, book reviews, translations of poetry and short stories in magazines and anthologies in Italy, Romania, USA, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Switzerland. She also authored a monograph in Italian, *Shakespeare ermetismo, mistica, magia* (Rome, 2003); has co-authored a book of fiction in Romanian (*Preludi epici Epic Preludes*, Bucharest, 1990), has co-translated with Stuart Frieber and Adriana Varga the volume *Hands Behind My Back*, by Marin Sorescu (Oberlin Translation Series, 1991) prefaced by Seamus Heaney. In 2017 her study *Theatre, Magic and Philosophy: William Shakespeare, John Dee and the Italian legacy* was published by Routledge. She taught for the Liberal Studies Program at NYU Florence.