

story of the man who didn't want to die

Catherine Lovey

Novel

French



A story of two neighbours, which begins with a breakup and ends with a death, shot through with joy, incomprehension, recognition; these ways in which we share in our otherness. Travelling towards death without ever looking it in the eye, the narrator's mysterious Hungarian neighbour confronts her with the remarkable vitality of our encounters: the discovery of another vision of the world, and the paradoxical affection that can emerge.

"He confided in me then that, as far as he was concerned, he didn't first separate the inhabitants of the earth according to the classic criteria of wealth and poverty, hot or cold climate, life expectancy of a hundred or thirty years. He took into account above all the implacable demarcation line which has, on one side, the immense majority of human beings who have every good reason not to trust authorities, and on the other, a handful of Martians like me enjoying the luxury of acting, in the face of power, as if the word wasn't actually embodied by flesh and blood individuals, obsessed with control and their own might."

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Photo: Giulia Ferla

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1.

Once upon a time there was a man, a brave, audacious man, who didn't want to die. This man knew that death existed. He knew it showed up every day. Only, he couldn't quite believe it was a threat to him, personally. As if, somehow, the sun shining down on him wasn't the same sun that shines down on other people, not the same sun, not the same rain getting him wet. I knew this man. He was my neighbour. Every day, when he wasn't travelling, and he was often travelling, we would meet at some point in the day or in the evening. Sometimes, we would just exchange greetings, sometimes a few words, and occasionally we'd carry on talking over a drink.

I lived a solitary life. So did the man who didn't want to die. However, neither of us was alone. You can't claim to be alone when you live in a small city with well-populated surroundings. Isolation would mean, to my mind, living in a Siberian forest, unreachable by road, and even then. From time to time, I find myself thinking that such an existence could be possible. Desirable. Assuming the forest isn't frozen solid ten months out of twelve, and that a sizeable river, maybe even a lake, is close by to the site where I'd have done my best to put together something like four walls and a roof, even if I didn't quite achieve it.

Three or four years ago, before the man who didn't want to die got sick, or rather, before the man who thought that his sunlight wasn't the same as my sunlight learned that he was sick, we spoke about these dreams of cabins deep in the woods. About these projections, which were completely ridiculous coming from two people like us, both of us incapable of imagining a life other than the way things are, with faucets and flushing toilets, light switches, underfloor heating, high-speed internet connections; full of senseless injunctions to spare our natural resources while compelling us, by our mere presence in this comfortable world, to exhaust them, every second of the day and night. We laughed as we spoke of these fantasies of shelters far from civilisation, the man who didn't want to die and I. But we weren't

laughing for the same reason. He claimed that the stupidity of this dream, more specifically the fact that it seems stupid to everybody, provided a good measure of human intelligence, of everything it had accomplished until now and would produce in the future, which would no doubt be astonishing. As for me, this dream deep in the woods made me sad, more than anything else. I would watch him, sprawled out on his cushion like a house cat. Sometimes, without warning, this kind of animal demonstrates an attack or defence reflex, perfectly coordinated between the brain and every muscle in the body. The laziest of cats can do this. For a moment in time so short it might as well have never existed, the creature gives us a glimpse of the fact that a wild life would still be possible for him. This is what happens for me, with my Siberian forest. Nature's reign, freely chosen solitude, a life and a landscape both forbidding and enviable, all in a single image. And then it all vanishes. Only this remains: the cushion, the screens, daily life within reach of a single finger clicking on a mouse.

2.

The man who didn't want to die spoke easily enough. However, he spoke very little about his life. About the part of his life that made up his own existence. You might have said it didn't seem to interest him. And that it interested me more than him. But I'm cut from the same cloth as everybody else. My own life interests me first and foremost. And only then the lives of others, close friends or strangers.

The man who knew that death exists, and thought it didn't concern him, was born in Hungary. He didn't have anything particular to say about the country. I had to ask him questions for him to say anything about it. Hungary is a country that has always intrigued me, because they speak a unique language there, which doesn't have siblings anywhere in the world, except, apparently, in Finland. A distant common root exists, apparently, between Finnish and Hungarian, which doesn't mean very much since no one who lives in that northern country has ever been able to understand an inhabitant of central Europe, and vice versa. I thought my neighbour would know all about this. I was mistaken. When I told him about it, he didn't seem that interested. His world as a Hungarian

exile didn't suddenly expand, as sometimes happens for those who emigrate or don't emigrate, when they learn something about themselves.

There was nothing in my neighbour's French pronunciation that could have served as an indication that he was born elsewhere than in our little multilingual country. I found this bizarre. I wondered if he had mentioned Hungary somewhat randomly. He could have said anything. Armenia. Transylvania. Lithuania. He could have made up the fact that he was born elsewhere to stimulate my curiosity, and his own, tired as he must have been of his own life, as we all are, drawn to trying out other hypotheses. Often, it only takes a sentence like I wasn't born in this country, and everything changes.

The illness which came upon my neighbour all at once, or rather, the illness which was discovered after a series of examinations, didn't change his way of being in the world. It must be said that my own naivety is substantial, enough in any case to make me believe that important events change a human being. Open up his ribs, in essence, so that his breathing becomes more ample, and the words he speaks more free, along with the meaning these words carry. But I saw nothing like this in my neighbour. He was the same man, albeit ill now, and who handled his illness like everything up to now, good and bad news, serious problems and less complicated ones, by working things out. He never asked himself if the solution he'd found was the right one. He just needed to find it himself, and think it was good enough.

As the months went by, his chest tightened from the treatments. And since his state of illness hadn't brought about an expansion of his personality as an emigrant Hungarian, or indeed an Armenian or Lithuanian one, he seemed to have nothing more to say about his country of origin, beyond what he had already given up to me in bits and pieces.

3.

The first time I met the man who didn't want to die, it wasn't him I saw, but the woman who lived with him in those days. Actually, I never knew them when they lived together, the two of them, since I met his partner on the landing of our floor, the day she was leaving him. It was

one of the most disconcerting moments of my life. I'd just moved into the building and, that morning, I'd been sorting out various things that required me to go constantly back and forth to the basement and the attic. All at once, on the landing where I hadn't seen anyone until now, there was a woman. Immobile, tall, very calm, shoulder-length brown hair tied back. There was a beige leather suitcase at her feet, the sort of size that's allowed into an aeroplane cabin. I remember thinking there could have been a dog inside. This impression came from something, I'm not sure what, in the way the woman had arranged the bag next to her legs and was looking at it. What was even more striking for me, as I went back and forth, unkempt and sweaty on that July day, was realising, simultaneously, that this stranger was wearing an elegant gabardine in a coppery chestnut colour, completely inappropriate for the heat, and that it was impossible to tell if she was coming or going. What was obvious was that, standing on this particular landing, this woman could only be connected to the apartment with the front door facing mine. There were no keys in her hands. Nothing suggested that she was getting ready to search for them or that she had just put them away. For reasons I can't quite explain, I ruled out the possibility that she didn't have keys and was just a visitor about to ring the doorbell or on her way out. I'm sure I greeted her first. She responded in kind, without adding anything. I was holding a reading lamp, one I'd decided to get rid of more than once and yet had gone to retrieve from the basement. The stranger had given the lamp careful consideration. Dented but unique, she said, you're right to hold on to it. Are you my neighbour? I asked. She responded that she had been, more or less, and wasn't anymore. I'm going, she added. Ah, you're moving? Not exactly, she said. You see, I'm leaving the man who lives in this apartment. We've lived together for a long time. Today, I'm leaving.

Thinking back, I worry it might have been inappropriate to stare at this woman the way I did. Only, the tranquillity of her gaze and her features so clearly didn't match the few words she'd just spoken. She was evoking a situation of total upheaval, without experiencing it. And of course, I was the one who ended up feeling moved, on the landing, by circumstances which didn't concern me in the least.

I asked her if she needed help carrying boxes, making a bit of a joke of it, implying that I was already dressed and ready for this sort of task. She answered that this was kind of me but that she only had this little suitcase and that her taxi was probably outside. She wished me a pleasant move, noting without a trace of nostalgia that the neighbourhood was a nice one. Then she went down the stairs, ignoring the lift, and I stayed there with my lamp in my hands, listening the whole time to her footsteps as she went down the three floors, until the building's front door emitted its closing click. In that precise moment, I had the feeling of being caught in the clockwork of one of those mechanical toys that contains a little animated scene, and having become the character whose sudden arrival sets off the motion and disappearance of another.

That day, and during the week that followed, the man who lived in the apartment across from mine and whom I didn't yet think of as my neighbour occupied my mind. I hadn't yet managed to rid myself of the idea that he had been watching us, his partner and I, through the peephole. The uneasiness I'd experienced had managed to spoil all the good first impressions I'd had of my new place of residence and its surroundings. I'd got to the stage where I would have chosen, without hesitation, a violent scene in which a couple fell apart under my eyes. Anything but this frighteningly sanitised separation, the single tiny suitcase, the silence, the perfectly peaceful expression of a face. It was only later that I managed to consider the possibility that the man was perhaps not there on the day the woman left.