“Winter”

by

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Since I moved away to a bigger city, I seldom come back home. Only for holidays and the anniversaries of a few people’s deaths. Before every encounter I carefully prepare answers to all potential hostile questions. I take deep breaths and count to ten. I’m sure my dad does that, too, however much he tries to hide it.

While I wait for him to come back out of the kitchen and tell me why he had called me unexpectedly, I ask myself how he manages to keep the house so clean. I secretly ran my finger over the oval frame of a needlepoint picture in the living room. Not even on the bas-relief were there any grubby marks of neglect. That cheered me up. Jakob Viler’s *Winter* was the emblem of my childhood, the trade-mark in the upper corner of every family photograph, proof of normality that father, mother, and child could offer to everyone for inspection. Our house was full of my mother’s needlepoint, but it was precisely this pixelated scene of a house in the snow that returned me to safety whenever I found myself outside of the framework of familiar experiences. I began to develop a needlepoint philosophy on the afternoon I was trying, as hard as I could, because I was frightened and confused, to hide in the little blue house on the hill, with the chimney out of which smoke rose up towards the moon.

It was late spring, and I was in the fifth grade. I rode my bike with Bojan to the old brickyard. The air smelled like rust and earth, intensified by the rain, which had stopped about an

hour before. The wet grass was knee-high to me; Bojan was shorter than I was, so the grass came up almost to his shorts. Droplets of water rolled down his thighs, and my skin crawled as if they were *my* legs. I followed along behind him and I never wanted to stop walking. Nature was licking our skin with its long, fresh tongue. We were walking across the soft soil of a new world. Then I couldn't stand it anymore, and I turned and ran home.

Those were the innocent days of our family, when we all trusted one another fearlessly. I tore into the house, wet, red-faced, and impatient. I found Dad at the table in the living room, leafing through the newspaper and slurping coffee. I poured out my heart, trying to explain to him what I had just experienced: the brick factory, Bojan, grass, my balls wrinkled like dried figs, heat stretching from my stomach to my cheeks. Dad looked at me as if I had listed off the symptoms of malaria or some other unlikely disease. "There's nothing wrong with you. You waded through wet grass, and now you need to pee," he said, avoiding my eyes. A shudder came over me as if I had suddenly been thrown out of a warm room into the snow. That was the first time.

My father came back into the room with the slow stride of an elderly person. He set two little glasses of *šljivovica* on the table. They were half-full. That was how he always poured them, because he was not a great lover of alcohol. He would drink only so he could clink glasses when company was around, and he expected other people to do the same, although guests were not frequent in our home. I leaned on the table. It creaked beneath the weight of my elbows and my trembling. My father, seated across from me, clasped his hands together in front of him and said: "I have something to tell you."

The second time wasn't until middle school. Maybe I would have kept quiet this time, if if it hadn't been a love that seemed bigger and better than anything in the world, the way we thought everything in those years was the greatest; it was the love that calls to you once in your life and it would be an unforgivable mistake to turn your back on it. It was May Day. The picnic area above the city smelled like grilled meat and doughnuts. Battery-powered boom boxes, strung up on the tree branches, vibrated in place of real accordions, and beneath them lay our whole little town, barefoot, full, and drowsy from drinking spritzers. The young people were either kicking around a soccer ball on a grassy clearing between two patches of shade or nibbling on sunflower seeds while they sat on a low wall. We punk rocker wannabes were slamming back beers behind the parking lot, under the eaves of an abandoned vacation house from the interwar period. We were angry and vulnerable, and thirsty for freedom. After the first joint, my school crew fanned out over the nearby stand of trees, hunting for squirrels and sunbeams. Only Džoni and I remained on the stoop to share a beer and a cigarette. The grass increased my sensitivity, and even the banal act of sharing a bottle gave me a sensation that blew my mind. I enjoyed the safe silence of a secret. With excitement I waited for Džoni to pass me the bottle, fantasizing that in the wave of beer I could clearly taste his tongue. When I look at it from this distance, artificial paradises had a decisive influence on my sexual life at that time; they were fuel for the stimulation of my vicarious experiences, whenever I wasn't having any real ones. We were sitting on the sunlit concrete, leaning back against the wall. Two lizards in low-top sneakers and the depths of puberty. He put a crooked Filter 57 in the corner of his mouth and checked his pockets for a lighter. I was quicker. I brought the lighter up to his cigarette and with my other hand I shielded its flame from the window. My ring finger touched his beard. And I didn't

remove it even when he inhaled. He didn't move away, either. To my surprise and joy, he rubbed his beard on the tips of my fingers, until he brought them to his lips. Then he sucked on them for a second, pointing with his eyes at the door of the house that offered little protection. For two minutes we broke into the sticky maelstrom of bodies, fear, and excitement.

I left the holiday house first. No one would suspect us, I was convinced, but my dad did note that something important had happened. "Take a look at that little bugger of mine. He's walking on air. Have you gone and fallen in love on me?" He greeted me loudly by the grill. "I did, Dad. I fell in love and I'm happy as a clam!" I raised my voice and stuck my hands in the air. "Whoa! So who's the girl?" He asked casually, flipping over the *ćevapčići* on the grill. "Nikola's my girl, Dad. Ni-ko-la!" I cackled like a monkey and plucked a piece of meat off of the glowing grate. Dad brandished the tongs as if he were going to take a swing at me, but he was prevented in that by a peal of hysterical laughter that burst forth from his stomach and heart. While the laughter spread to the other party-goers, along with remarks like "what an idiot," "he's bullshitting," and "just to rattle your cage"—I was already running towards the little wall, where the rest of my crew was hanging out.

After an initial glass of *rakija*, I got my answer about why the house was in such good shape. My father had recently started dating Mirjana from accounting. She was a widow and the owner of what had been one of the most desirable rear-ends in the factory where they worked. He told me that she was a good woman, that she could prepare ten jars of *ajva*r in one day, and that she had both a driver's license and a car. I did believe him when he said that this was all he needed to make a decision like that, and somehow I felt bad for him about it.

The fourth time was after the breakup. Dad had sensed that something serious was out of whack when I suggested coming to visit for several days. He was unusually kind to me. He made me tea, plying me with chocolate cookies and avoiding prying. I spent the weekend with him, but he didn't even ask why I had come so suddenly. Disappointed and intimidated by previous attempts, I had been telling him a lie for years, that I was living with a roommate, that it was too soon for me to be thinking of a family, that there would be time for all of that later, and now I was just working a lot and couldn't make plans. Although he didn't ask me any questions, I told him that Djordje had moved out, and that we were on bad terms. Such bad terms that we were going to cancel the summer trip to Crete that we had already paid for back in February. We sat on the patio and gazed at the tree that had just leafed out. There was no other living thing around.

We didn't talk. Thoughts, memories, and fears buzzed in my head in several parallel lines. I was not aware of saying out loud: "Djole's arms…Those are the only arms on earth I would give my child to…" There was no doubt that my father was listening to me very carefully, but still he replied: "It'll be all right, son. It will be fine. Look, maybe you don't have to cancel the Crete thing? Maybe you can get in touch with that girl from the office who's always calling you up? Who knows…" I looked at him, like he was a patient rejecting his diagnosis.

In that instant I knew I was not going to answer: "But I can't. I'm a faggot." I still remembered my third try and my mother's second-to-last heart attack. If up till then I had wanted to play my cards openly, from this occurrence on I assumed a new burden. I turned into a big powerful son, the protector of his helpless parents. More capable and intelligent than they were,

the savior of the situation. Staying silent fed my ego and my feeling of superiority. The lie sustained us. From that, I know now, one cannot live, but at least no one had to die.

My mother recovered. That day stayed in our memories: the day of her cardiac arrest. And we forgot my announcement forever, by tacit agreement. After just a week of dad's compulsory military-style meals, which all three of us choked down sullenly, she got out of bed and went back to making strudel, paprikash, and *gibanica*, and in between she did needlepoint, putting the pictures into tawny frames and tiling the boring walls with them. She did that for the next five years, and then my father had to learn how to cook.

The fifth, six, seventh, and all the subsequent times weren't so dramatic. I talked about names, without explaining relationships. It was an advanced, skillful version of avoiding the truth. I knew that my dad knew everything but that he had no intention of accepting the situation. We lived at a distance, in a cool love for one another, and both of us were reconciled to the loss that this kind of love brings with it.

While we were waiting for the water for coffee to boil, he said that Mirjana was coming by the next day with her children so that we could all get to know each other. Then she'd be moving in, on the day after that. Although he never said anything to me about it, I knew that after mom's death, he sank into a quiet but enduring melancholy. I was glad that he had finally gotten up the courage to make a change; a different woman in my mother's bed did not cause me any discomfort; it was like this wasn't changing just the future, but also the past, and not just my father's but mine as well. I could feel the pulse thumping in my temples.

He said he'd been by himself for too long. He was scared that he was going to have a heart attack in the middle of the night, too, and there wouldn't be anyone around to help him. He

spent half the day preparing lunch, and the second half of the day washing the dishes, and then he'd eat again, alone. This place was dead, said my father, a man who had given up a long time ago, and who now seemed to have grown weary of withdrawal. Resistance uses up a person just like action does.

I envied him. I envied him for being able to deal, out loud, with his fears, and for having simple ways to assuage them. Maybe they weren't the best ways, but they solved the problem. And I envied his problem, too. And his freedom to confide in me, and his expectation of support, and having me as his listener. For the first time he was talking to me about his feelings. He admitted that he was in a real bind, and he sat there all meek and puny—more powerful than he'd ever been in his life. Above his head hung *Winter* with its white and blue thread in the oval frame colored with fake gold. Beneath that little house on the hill my father waited impatiently for a hug.

I said I was happy for him, and then I reached for the remote so I could turn up the volume. On the TV, which was always on, a quiz show was just starting. In unison we both let out a loud "Oh yeah!" and turned our heads towards the sound that brought us relief. We were equally good with numbers and words. Then we competed in geography (Dad was better) and history (me!). The first game of association was easy. We were clueless about the next one.

END OF STORY

Translated by John K. Cox

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