

Every Time We Say Goodbye

Ivana Sajko

Translated by Mima Simić

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For Armando and for all the wild childhoods



I start writing on the train, on my journey from point A to point B, from that small coastal town to Berlin, I stare out the window at the remnants of the city, the unfinished houses in the suburbs, the warehouses in the industrial zone and the stunted trees along the river, torn plastic bags hanging from their branches like bats, it's hard for me to be in this compartment, hard to be in this skin, in the role of a traveller, I have forgotten how to travel, how to surrender myself to the mercy of the road, how to say good-bye, I have forgotten how long you actually stand there looking back at point A as it rapidly disappears, and then how long you just keep standing there, just standing and standing, staring into nothingness, about to cry, so I open my notebook but I have no answer, I write 'On the journey from point A to point B, from that small coastal town to Berlin, I stare out the window at the remnants of the city, the unfinished houses in the suburbs, the warehouses in the industrial zone and the stunted trees along the river...' and so on, I write the only way I know, meandering and circling around what hurts the most and yet cannot be changed as it shrinks into nothingness behind me, I root through last summer, I root through last winter, I root through the autumn before it, I lose myself in the similarities of those days, all of them the same, I return to the afternoons spent between clammy sheets on a deathbed of a hangover, my hangovers caused by depression; my depression caused by failure, boredom, provincial life and a

lack of talent to turn my misery into a masterpiece, I can hear the seasons passing through my silence as everything goes to fuck, as I die for the tenth, for the hundredth and the two-hundredth time, and from my bed I watch the shadows creep into the room through the slits in the blinds, darting over the ceiling and cascading down the empty white walls, I do nothing else, I just stare at the lights on the walls or the patterns on the parquet floor or my toes, too wooden to move, I waste years like this, with no purpose, I leave no trace except for an occasional piece of journalism depicting human misery and hence paid just as miserably, and all the while she smokes in the kitchen staring out the window, as I am now, staring into the nothingness we have been reduced to, waiting and waiting and waiting for my departure, which is taking me forever, because I take the liberty to delay it, to gaze at those walls, the floor and my toes, to wallow in self-pity, repeating that I don't belong there, as I don't belong anywhere, that I am asking for nothing and want nothing except to write, but that's the one thing I can't do, I can't, I can't, I can't, and so I remain silent, although my silence scars no one but her, just as no one but me misses the books I have not written, this is our life, this was our life, this was just a week ago, those were our days, that was my cadaver in the apartment that I called inhospitable yet I could not leave, she called it a dump although she never allowed for it to truly become one, she cleaned, she cooked and decorated the shelves with cacti, trying her best to brighten it up, whereas I never even tried, I let myself off with the thought that I was just passing through, that I asked nothing from her and expected nothing, and so I could not be responsible for her discontent, I looked for excuses and arrogantly took

the liberties a man takes with a woman, took the liberty from that woman whom I claimed needed no liberty, I played that man and tried to make her into that woman, one who would, upon my departure, lose the right to be tied down and the reason to be unhappy in that dump, in the company of a depressed drunk, a so-called writer, an occasional journalist, between my bottle and her ashtray, in conditions that might rightfully be called the abyss in which the majority lived, and the abyss in which the majority lived became our habit, our decade, her third cigarette in a row lit mechanically without a thought as she observed the silent scenes in the windows across the street that reminded her of what we'd failed abjectly to become, while she watched our neighbours' harmonious choreography revealing that they didn't need to avoid each other to survive, as she stared into their interiors decorated with books and pictures where they planned to live forever, as opposed to our neglected rooms that tacitly counted on our transience, as opposed to our silences that we feared to break lest we injured ourselves, as opposed to our fear of an ending that inevitably caught up with us in every gesture, sigh or cigarette, in that galloping defeat of a love that would surrender in deadly silence, without a fight, without negotiation, which is why every shared moment of ours was half-baked, which is why we stopped trying; I lay reading the news, lay staring at the photos of war reporters, and lying flat on my back I perished in those wars, wondering how much longer; in my notebook the pages were blank except for the one where I'd written 'S.O.S.' before collapsing into the bed in which I slept, drank, ate, jerked off, perished, but I never got up; she smoked and suffered, sometimes she cried, she translated other people's

books, she spent more and more time in other people's heads and languages, that's how we kept maximum distance, she couldn't get closer to me just as I couldn't get closer to her, we'd long been complete strangers when she said it, between two puffs on her cigarette, so I finally got out of bed and did what I'd made so many empty threats to do, I left, saving us both, because I couldn't unhear her grand 'I don't love you,' a beautifully phrased sentence I will never forget: 'I don't love you, what's inside me doesn't connect with you, I don't rely on your body even when I'm at my loneliest, I don't believe our photographs even when we're smiling in them,' making me understand at last that I no longer had any right to stay, which truly took me forever to realise, and finally I set out from point A to point B, ashamed of the calm with which she endured my presence while I was convinced I was the one enduring her presence, I said: 'Give me ten days,' and it truly took me only ten days to leave and find myself here: on this train heading northeast across the continent, still fantasising about embracing her at the station where she did not appear; my mind was in the shape of the apartment I had to leave, take out the trash, repaint the walls and leave the keys, I had to start over, start from scratch, start from yesterday, accept the fact that the inventory of all the last years would yield practically nothing: 'What is the tangible residue of our relationships, if not a pile of fleeting memories and scattered time?' a friend once said, 'We have entered a strange age where we value only what we can capitalise thoroughly, relationships included, and now this question flickers in neon above our heads: in all these years, what have we created for *us*?' nothing, thankfully not even a child; the only profit of our decade together is

the fourth page I write as the train carries me to Germany, the day is gloomy, the dawn already drenched in rain, I search for a way to describe it, to give it back its meaning, I search for a voice within myself which would fit the tone and rhythm of the wet grey landscape through which we are travelling, which would fit me, or at least the man I have become by lying there, a voice that can calmly narrate fires and ruins and departures, a voice that perhaps knows a little more than I do, for instance why things happen the way they do or why we failed to be happy or why they say a man has left when in fact he was driven away, why they put it that way; it's a voice I have been seeking for years, not hunched over my notebook but staring into the void, staring drunkenly into the void, staring hungover into the void, hoping for a turning point that might fill the first page, I thought it would happen when I clutched the medallion my father used to wear, which arrived by post in a yellow padded envelope, forwarded to me when he died in his shack which shared a wall with a pigsty and stood on a hill that he defended with his rifle; they found him two weeks after his liver failed, by which time the starving pigs had chewed his feet off, they removed the necklace and sent it to me along with a clipping from the local newspaper stating he was decently buried, I don't know how they tracked me down yet track me down they did, I expected it wouldn't hurt, but it hurt terribly, most of all the empty space where some unforgettable shared moment should have been; sure, I remembered the last time we saw each other, his bloodshot eyes and that medallion on his chest, he patted me on the back, repeating 'Son...son...son,' he didn't ask about my brother, he didn't ask about our mother, perhaps he'd forgotten they existed, perhaps he wouldn't

have remembered me either if I hadn't shouted my name at least ten times as I climbed the hill, despite the locals' warnings that he might shoot, my temples throbbing but he didn't shoot, and when I finally reached him he knew who I was, he even smiled toothlessly, after all those years I expected he would have something important to say, but he said nothing, we got drunk, and I did the same when the letter arrived, I kept the obituary, put the chain around my neck and got drunk, of course his death might force me to pull myself together and start writing – to make an effort, as she liked to say, 'At least try' – but it didn't, and I was already half-tanked that time she told me she didn't love me, between two puffs on a cigarette and the trembling motion with which she flicked ash into the ashtray: 'Since when?', 'A long time,' 'How long?', 'I don't know,' and I didn't probe any further, I didn't give a fuck, I should have hated her, for some reason I thought it would make it easier to get over the fact that apart from her I had no one else to love me, I had long since lost track of my brother and hadn't visited my mother for years, I used to call her occasionally and relate exciting details of the fiction I called my life, I had been afraid to ring her doorbell and find an old woman I'd failed to give anything back to, a woman I couldn't skilfully lie to in the flesh and whose frequent phrase – 'You can't blame me for any of it' – I didn't want to concede to, I was already old enough to see some of the things I used to reproach her for in myself, but I searched for that inner voice with which I could write, for instance, that I didn't care, that I forgave myself, I sought it incessantly, everywhere, and so I arrived here, in seat number thirty-two on the train that will take an entire night to reach Munich, where I will transfer to a train

bound for Berlin, where I am travelling with no particular reason except to finally say goodbye, to fill my notebook, to write without premeditation as I might write letters to trusted friends and to find the voice that will be my reflection in the mirror in which I now stand completely alone since my mother departed so unassumingly, having arranged all the details of her own burial in advance, even leaving money for a wreath and the name of an agency to take care of cleaning and selling her apartment, so in the end I never even went through her door, I never looked around the apartment, never stopped the clock that kept ticking even after her time was up, I didn't open her cupboards but I could imagine the neatly stacked linens and towels smelling of fabric warmed by her iron, I didn't inhale the scent she left behind, I only asked the agency to look out for photographs during the cleaning, and they gave me a flat box with a Christmas motif on the lid which I have not yet even tried to open, but yesterday I packed it in my suitcase and set out, no one saw me off, I didn't kiss anyone, I didn't wave to anyone, her imaginary body remained in the apartment, hunched in a chair, motionless like furniture, we truly were like a bed and a solid oak wardrobe, we occupied space, nothing more, but I left, didn't I? and now I will change cities, I will change languages, I will change the shape of my head, and once I've spent my savings I'll find something called a regular job and refrain from grand ambitions, I will make an effort, at least a little, I will open this notebook here, fill it with tiny script and thus say goodbye in writing, I will grind our oak into sawdust as I always tried, but the sentences crawled across the blank pages' expanse like ants, in more or less similar variations, mechanically and habitually, shaping

nothing and no one, saying goodbye to nothing, I couldn't write myself out of that nothingness to become a man who admits failure and leaves without anger, a man who from now on can work cash in hand at some bakery in Kreuzberg or stroll through the Grunewald forest, a man who is secretly writing a book but won't kill himself if he doesn't finish it, no, he couldn't care less, 'Does this even make sense?' is what I asked my friend, 'Did it make sense to just leave like that?' he answered that he envied me, he called to check if I had bought the ticket yet, and my phone rang while she and I sat at a café overlooking the town beach, both silent over two espressos as if we didn't care at all, she nodded for me to answer the call, I took it, still watching her profile, soon I wouldn't be able to, I told him I was leaving the next day, she showed no reaction at all, her gaze lost in the cove where no one swam anymore because of the pollution, all the tourists and the fish now gone, the sea nothing but an image from a postcard stripped of any content, then she drained her coffee and left, her back hunched over again as she lit a cigarette in front of the café door, 'We're no longer together,' I said to him again as soon as she stepped away, as if I couldn't believe it; I'd spent the morning leaving little notes among her things but I wouldn't admit that to him, I was embarrassed; 'We're no longer together, now this city is the only thing connecting us.'