

"Welcome, Nathan! — an Act of Literary Genesis"

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Translated from Bulgarian by Elitza Kotzeva

The procedure for cleaning my cervix from the last traces of the placenta was scheduled for Thursday. Chris came with me. But when they took me to the waiting room and inserted the IV, I found myself alone. I broke down in tears. It was a lot to take—this very hospital, the terror of the needle inside my arm, all that I have gone through, the removal of the last traces.

"Do you have children?" asked the nurse trying to distract me while the other one was inserting the IV into my arm. The wrong question again.

Two days earlier, when they took blood before the surgery, the nurse—a kind woman at about sixty—had asked, "Is this your first child?"

"I lost my child," I told her, "and yes, it was my first."

"I'm sorry."

"That's okay."

Afterwards when I was already at home I felt peaceful. I laid down in the bedroom while the afternoon sun was resting at the end of the bed. It was that light which brings along a promise for peace.

And now again I'm resting completely relaxed in the sun in the garden of the Abbey where we scattered Nathan's ashes. From a lower level I can hear the kids laughing, playing, singing. But the fact that they are alive, and Nathan isn't, does not hurt me anymore. Now I'm able to look at a pregnant woman, at a mother or father holding a newborn in their hands, at children who saturate the world with their existence, without the dire need to turn away my eyes. The resounding echo of his departure deep inside me does not reach the surface in the same way. It is in there, all that happened, and at the same time I can feel joy, be cheerful, peaceful, and even happy. I can. If I climb down the ladder to that place deep down inside me, I'm seriously bewildered. But at the same time I know it. I know that I was pregnant, I know that I felt his kicks, I know that we lived together, I know that his heart stopped inside me, I know that I gave birth to him, I know that I saw him, as I also know that I bid farewell to him while he was resting in the small white coffin and that I was nesting his ashes in my hands before I scattered them over the gardens where I'm sitting now, and over the sea—the very sea where my life always takes me. And this is the most unfathomable part of it all. That knowledge and the calmness together. Their possible coexistence.

I forgot about the third month. My dear baby, I think about you every day and, imagine, I forgot about the third month. I always make a special note of two dates, just for myself. The day you died. The day you were born. Three months after the first date I was swimming in the ocean and let the waves break against my bare chest as I imagined how they were washing away all the darkness, the pain. And then your dad and I flew back home. On the plane we saw a funny movie about a wedding. Before we went to bed, your father thanked me for the lovely holiday and told me he loved me. I thanked him too. We had sorted out our contentions and smoothed over our disagreements more efficiently than we used to do before. It was not the kind of happy and lighthearted holiday that I had imagined before, with cocktails on an exotic beach, somewhere far away, but it was a holiday after all, we were together, we

felt bonded... most of the time. The walks along the ocean shore were the best part of our days spent in Gran Canaria. And the dunes. And there was also one pigeon who perched on my arm and ate peanuts from my hands. Three months after the second date I flew to Prague, I had dinner with girlfriends, drank some wine, it was nice, that night I dreamed of snakes, poisonous snakes, one of them green, they were cropping up everywhere, following me. Three months. Is it a long time? Is it too short? An entire lifetime. A whole cycle starting with death traveling toward life, a trip from the hollow to the replete again.

Today I was to give birth to Nathan. Instead I lit two candles—one in the little white candleholder with his name, and another one, a big red candle. I was calm, so profoundly calm, in the way only one who has lost everything can be. I did some yoga, meditated, tidied up the office, wrote. It was easy, pleasant, so, what's the big deal? He could have been born yesterday, or in a week. But he did not get born, he will not get born, he will only be born in my thoughts and in my pain, in my joy, and in the knowing of a woman who was pregnant, who was once a mother of a dead baby yet a mother of a living soul, a soul that plays in the eternity on its own star, like the Little Prince, yes, like him, my little Nathan. And then when I stopped writing, the food and cooking reminded me of the materiality of my life, of my sad little life, of the self-pity, the memory, the pain, the tears, the gasping, the choking, the impossibility of my life and the funniest, silly, immature question: why? Because. God. Faith. Humility. Peace. But how? How can I get there when I am alone, completely alone, that is, without Chris? Although he keeps calling and leaving voice messages, I've chosen to be without him, I do not want to talk to him today, I'd rather shield myself from his potentially harsh cold words that name things as they stand in his conveniently made-up world where his wishes and comfort are the rule of law. We could have stayed together. We could have if he had not made it impossible using exactly those frigid words.

For the ceremony, we both were dressed in white as if for a wedding. He wore pants and a shirt, I was in a lace dress with tulle sleeves, the same clothes I wore on that last day of my normal pregnancy in Amsterdam.

Earlier we had lunch at home, his parents came, my mother was here too, he had bought pre-cooked food, we went together to get flowers, white flowers. We ate, I don't even know how I was swallowing the food, how I put it into my mouth, I just don't know, I was not in this world, I was not taking medications, I was a shadow of myself, reincarnation of pain, of nothingness, of the darkness that engulfs everything. Right before we left, my dad and I spent some time on the phone in silence, choked up. We picked up my French teacher and headed to the graveyard in Uccle.

We were walking toward the hall, Chris and I in the front, I was holding his arm, crying, crying out loud, walking toward that hall, it was not a ceremony hall, or maybe it was, but for other ceremonies, for an ending, and not for a beginning, although the ending and the beginning inevitably meet, they are betrothed to each other. We were walking, the sun was scorching hot, I did not wear a hat, it was a short yet difficult walk, our *via dolorosa*, preceding the real one two months later in Jerusalem, an unforeseen and fateful journey, choir music was playing, Chris had selected it, we were walking, and every step was taking us closer to the unconceivable terror embodied in a miniature white coffin, to consign my little baby to the flames of eternity. The coffin was like a child's toy, closed, the flowers, all white, my hand was caressing its surface, and those sounds, animal sounds, howling, sobbing, sounds that don't have names, erupting from my body, my body that kept shivering bent over the coffin, my forehead leaning against it, just a wooden board away from my sweet little baby. I forgot to put the flowers on it, I sat in the first row between Chris and my mom, and then I saw them—the flowers. I got up, approached the coffin again, and placed them there. The priest said a few words in French and

then started the liturgy in Russian. Slowly my tears dried up, the sounds of my body faded away, I began listening to the chants, they were carrying me away to this other world where my little child had been prematurely transported.

At the end came the song, an old lullaby, they say, people sing to their babies in Indonesia. Parting with the coffin, my hand, my forehead, the wooden board, my little baby, before he would turn into ashes, ashes that would be scattered on the earth in these two spaces—Belgium and Bulgaria—where my life would continue without and also with him until the end.

In the evening of that day at home we prepared the memento box for Nathan. On the lid we wrote in crayon: Натан Nathan. In the two alphabets in our lives. We placed in there all our memories of him, the cards that were arriving every day, beautiful cards with sincere condolences, the images of his fetus, and the last one, twelve days before he died. The stone that they gave us in the ceremony hall and the prints of his little feet and hands. This was the first and the last time I saw them. Months later we had to choose a gift for a colleague who was returning from her maternity leave. Someone suggested a kit for baby hand and footprints. When I saw the item on the laptop screen, my eyes got foggy and I immediately closed the window. Then we also read the speech that the officiant of the ceremony had prepared. When we reached the part about the Little Prince, I was amazed and for the first time something like happiness sprang up inside me, as if I had received a letter from my child, from the other world. Later that night I scattered his ashes over the gardens of the Abbey.

“I will come by to pick up Nathan’s box,” I wrote to Chris a few months later, a week after I had moved out. He wanted to keep the little bracelet from the hospital. I did not remember he had a bracelet.

My tears left behind dry traces. I feel like sleeping. But instead I will go out and do things that endorse life on earth.

I am dumbfounded by the paradox between my intention at that time to do things that endorse life on earth and what actually happened.

A friend of mine was helping to sell the belongings of a relative, someone I knew too, and she invited me to join them. The apartment had been transformed into a knick-knack shop. There was kitchenware, china sets, decorative items, jewelry, clothes, shoes spread all over. Two-three other women were there too. I approached the hostess, she was talking to another woman. I asked her if she would be going back to Madrid. Not exactly, she answered, but it would be a place close-by. She had chosen her path, it was a calling.

“Are you maybe going to a monastery?” I asked her.

“Yes indeed, I’m going to a monastery, how did you know?”

“I don’t know. It was a guess.”

She was going to a monastery that required complete abstinence, that’s why she was selling everything she had. The proceeds would go to cancer patients. It was riveting that exactly on the day when I was supposed to give birth I found myself in the home of a nun-to-be. I was moved to tears.

I bought a china teapot and a cup printed with red and yellow lemons and leaves. I also purchased one small hand-made coffee cup of blue and grayish green color, which came with its history. One summer the nun-to-be went with a girlfriend to France where they met up with her sister. Every year the two sisters would organize such meet-ups and gift each other something, a memento. That time the sister had made a little cup for her present. My friend liked it so much that the sister made one more cup for

her too. I enjoyed the story and bought the cup with the intention to give it to my sister. But then later I learned that she takes her coffee in a big mug. I gave the cup to Chris upon his return.

On the morning of the day when Nathan was supposed to be born I stood in front of the mirror repeating to myself, “there is love in your life, you have the love you need and deserve, there is love in your life...”

On my way back home, in the dim electric light of Chaussée de Waterloo I saw lying on the asphalt a small children’s ring with a yellow heart. I picked it up and put it on my pinky finger.

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