

Brokeback Suicides

Mladen Grgić. Montenegro

Petar passed by the beaten footpath and got tangled in the undergrowth. He fought branches and their cruel barbs with one hand, while clutching a bottle of rakia with the other, as if it were some precious medicine or elixir of youth. He remembered the car keys in his pocket. Should he have left them? Should he have destroyed the car, or maybe driven it off a cliff? It made no difference whether he took the keys with him or not, he thought. The car is in the company's name in any case, and the banks will take it all the same. They'll take it all! Why does someone who's killing himself even think about these trivialities? What does a normal person who wants to kill himself even think about? Do normal people kill themselves, he wondered.

Damn thoughts. Blessed are the animals.

He reached a cliff where waves were splashing against the red rocks, red as blood. The moonlight was almost perfect, but the sea was still rough from the storm the night before, as if nobody had told this marvelous blue to calm down, as if it refused to surrender to the moon, which shone brighter than the sun that night.

This was where he used to bring girls, where he had his first kiss, made love for the first time, cried for love, and said I love you for the first time. The end would come where everything began. Anything more natural than that? He thought of her again, remembering those nights they fell asleep here and then had to think up excuses for their parents. First laughter and then tears. A feeling of sadness that seemed to have no end.

Why hadn't he realized then that it was the high point of his life, the moment he'd

been happiest? Why don't we realize this? Why are we so greedy that we always think we can do better, we can do more? Why has our thinking been undermined since childhood, since school and sports teams, to believe everything can be improved? Well, it can't, my dears, it can't. Happiness has its own high point, although we aren't aware of it when it comes. But we do know when it's gone, and that's the day we take a look at our life, and in the archive of our memories we search out the one moment when we were carefree. For some that moment lasts longer, for others less, but for everyone it comes to an end. No enjoying retirement for you, man. That's only torture before the very end. A bogus life and illusory happiness. Happiness is light-hearted, it's when you're alone, when everything's quiet, and when you smile, and yes, when you have a future, when you don't know it will end soon. Everything else is a moment of satisfying some physiological need, which can resemble happiness, but is not the thing itself.

He wondered if she was happy with that damnably perfect man. How can one person's luck be the cause of someone else's sorrow? Is this the way it works? When someone becomes unhappy somewhere, someone else becomes happy somewhere else? Who gets to decide this? God? He doesn't believe that, so now, by killing himself, he's going to prove His nonexistence. No God gets to decide on his life, much less his death. He thought: I am the god of my life, I get to decide, and now I'm going to put an end to this exciting but tragic story. His thoughts wandered again. He again lost sight of what he

was here for. Death. His own. His head started to hurt. Maybe you should've taken a pill, he thought. A pill? He reproached himself. You're killing yourself, you idiot, does this damn migraine matter now that you've found the definitive cure for it?

Earlier, having put his affairs in order but wanting to leave his possessions to his daughter Asia, he'd walked the city for hours to find the only woman he had ever really loved.

He visited all their old places, all the bars, stood in front of the kindergarten, walked the promenade, sat on benches where they used to hang out. It was all in vain. He didn't see her. He wanted to tell her everything, try one last time. In her he'd seen salvation, but that's something you can only find on your own. Will she suffer, is she going to mourn him, he wondered. Where will she be when she hears the news, and who will she hear it from? What will she be wearing, will she be alone? Is this more news she'll find out about on the damn Internet? Will the comments be like those that led him to his doom? Will this barrage of hate from people who know nothing about him continue even after his death? He can see it already, the news and the barrage of damning comments from idle people who can express their pathetic opinions publicly thanks to Internet. He likes to think she'll be alone at that moment, and already he can picture her hugging a pillow and crying. But it will no longer be his problem. The end is now.

How does a person end up standing before an abyss? Is it always there and just one slip takes you to the point of no return? In this country, he believed, everyone lived on the edge of one. Only now and then did they seize anything resembling happiness, but everyone, or a vast majority at least, died an unhappy and pathetic death. It's the doom of these damned people, in this damnably beautiful country.

Drinking the rakia, and finding it harder and harder to control the chaos in his head, Petar heard rustling, somebody thrashing through the undergrowth. Is this possible, he thought, can a person never be left alone?

The last person he expected to see emerged from the bushes. How is it possible, he wondered.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm ... It's nothing. And you, you bastard?"

"Is that a gun there in your hand?"

"Is that rakia there in your hand?"

"Yes."

"Pass it and cut the crap."

His face was frozen, but he watched his long-lost friend's every move as he took too long a swallow of rakia. They hadn't seen each other for years. They'd heard about each other every so often, sent greetings through various mutual friends, but for ten years they'd never laid eyes on each other, not even in passing. Now they looked at each other, at a loss. They'd been inseparable at school, both having been successful and never jealous of each other. A true and strong friendship, at least they thought so. Then different scholarships took them to different regions, jobs increased the distance, and responsibilities did the rest. Even later, when they both returned home – one a young, unscrupulous businessman, and the other a promising young politician – they still hadn't crossed paths. Not until now. On a cliff. At the end.

Edin wiped his mouth on his sleeve, shuddered as the rakia reached all the capillaries of his body. For a moment he closed his eyes, and let out a wordless cry.

Edin had had great promise, had been perceived as a fresh face in a system imbued with corruption. After returning from the US, he took a low-ranking position in the Ministry of Finance, then in the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs. Success came quickly. Even though nobody in the system liked him, foreigners loved him. He was a star among foreign diplomats, an object of admiration. “A gentleman among the savages,” the French ambassador used to say in private conversation. They mentioned him in every report and always requested his promotion informally, “because,” as one of them said, “it would contribute to changing the government’s image as well as accelerating the process of integration, which is a priority, not only of the state but of society as a whole.” To no avail however, as no one had yet outwitted the system, the system having devoured far greater people than he. The system here was designed to wrap like a python around its prey until it was strangled. First Edin had asked for a favor, then he’d returned it, and in that damn world, one favor led to another, and so on indefinitely. He became one of them. Success came even faster, but it was bitter and pathetic. When he tucked all his ideals away in the back of his government car, he knew it was the end – there was no turning back. A barrage of online posts ordered up by people he’d only been good to brought on an investigation. This arose out of comments on social networks, or some article on a news website, not with the police or the public prosecutor’s office. Then there were the hits with likes and shares, all peppered with hateful comments.

Now here Edin was too, in the place where he’d smoked his first joint, kissed his first girl, opened the letter saying he’d received a scholarship, cried when his father died, read novels, gazed at the sea, talked, fought, and made up with his best friend, Petar. The very same Petar who’d also come to kill himself. Fate. Bitter. Sad.

“What are you doing here, tell me,” uttered Edin, returning the rakia to the friend he hadn’t expected to find.

“I’m here to, how should I put it, kill myself!”

Edin’s face took on a soft smile, like when one kid meets another and hears that they are fans of the same club, this time a club of suicides. He barely kept himself from shouting, me too. He shrugged, and looked toward the sea.

“And you, Edo?”

“What about me?”

“So why are you here, and with a pistol?”

“To kill myself!”

“Fuck it!”

They both start laughing hysterically, rolling on the ground.

“No, I’m serious, fuck suicide.”

“What else can I do? What’s left of my life?”

Edin recounted the past ten years. His rise. His sins. His mistakes and successes. The disillusionment of an incurable optimist who’d just fallen to the earth. Such a clash with reality was fatal for a young populist.

“I can save my name. I handed over evidence to the prosecutor’s office, all the conversations, all the documents. I submitted copies to each embassy and NGO. I made amends, I guess. But I can’t save my family. Only my death can save them. They’d kill them all, and leave me alive. They’re vicious, so bloodthirsty that they’d kill my whole family, one at a time. By killing myself, I save them. There will be no one else to retaliate against, so they’ll have nothing. My death means an end to it, and life for my family. That’s it, one person’s death for someone else’s life.”

Edin spoke with the same energy that had thrilled everyone at university, with the same zeal that enchanted everyone around him. Petar always said he’d get such a shock the day he realized that not everyone would love or admire him.

“Hunger’s Got No Eyes, no, no, no, how stupid of me!” Suddenly Petar started shouting hysterically.

“What are you ranting about, hunger having no eyes?”

“The drawing, the last Medijala, it’s the latest one. No, no, no.”

“What Medijala? What drawing? What are you talking about, man?”

“The last Tošković painting – Hunger’s Got No Eyes – then I’ll have a painting by every single painter in the Medijala movement!”

“You’ve got at least ten Tošković paintings. You had them back at university, when you used to go through Belgrade’s trash looking for paintings his wife reportedly threw out after a fight.”

“I do. But this one, this one epitomizes the entire avant-garde movement. It’s the essence, the best example of the whole idea. It’s also the last one. I’ve been looking for them all my life, collecting them all my life. They’re the key to making Asia understand everything, so she’ll change her opinion of me, even if it’s just a little. Maybe not now, but some time, some day, when she grows up. No, no, no. That damn art dealer will keep it to himself. As soon as he hears I’m dead. Maybe he won’t. I think he will. No, no, no!”

“You’re mad. You’ve been collecting them all this time? I thought it was just a student fad, and that when the money came pouring in, you’d started collecting crucifixes in gold frames or something. You’re king of the hill.”

“First Glavurčić then Đurić – it was that pig of his, remember the one on exhibit in Milan? Remember? I bought it! It cost me a Picasso drawing! Imagine, a Picasso drawing for a Đurić! What a deal. Everyone laughed at me. But it didn’t bother me. The pig was important. The diabolical pig, that surreal, hideous, disgusting pig. The one that defied life!”

“Why Medijala? Why that obscure movement, artists no one knows?”

“I don’t know. I thought it was something big. A rebellion against everything. I imagined it as a revolution, even if it was just in my head. Maybe the whole movement was a lie, a tall tale, but for me, it was my only truth. My only passion, my only aspiration was to collect the paintings that best represented the Medijala movement for me!”

“You mean you gave back the letter Švejk wrote to Kiš? The one that’d been stolen from the museum? Anonymous donor? Was that you? I thought then, for a fraction of a second, it could’ve been you. The old you, the one without a penny. But then I thought you were a businessman, the kind who walks over people, the kind who would’ve kept that drawing.”

“Yes, I was. I paid a lot for it. They didn’t know what they’d stolen. They knew it was valuable, but didn’t know what it was.”

“So you’ve stayed at least a little bit human.”

“You tell me, you rich politician. You who sold us out to everything – NATO, EU, whatever. I wanted to throw up when I heard you. ‘We have to make unpopular decisions, in order to...’ What was that shit? What kind of crap were you hocking to the masses? Then you asked us so-called tycoons to give money to your programs for workers.”

“You never cared about workers.”

“Me? I don’t care about the little people who elect officials for me and think they’ve found happiness with their shitty fucking jobs and their leased cars. I despise the little man, I despise the peasant, I despise everyone who can’t appreciate art. I despise their music and I despise their culture even more – their social networks. I despise them because they created you, and the likes of you.”

“My education created me. You were there, I guess you should know. I guess you

should be clear about that anyway. I guess you know all about the kind of dirt I fell into.”

“You know what? There’s nothing left for you to do but kill yourself!”

They both laughed. Hard. Truly.

“Easy, you’ll die laughing,” Petar said.

They laughed even harder. After a few minutes, they both grew quiet. They gazed at the sea, listened to the waves splashing against the red rocks.

Some blamed what happened next on the sirocco. When the south wind blows, as the local saying has it, people act oddly, their minds grow dim. The newspapers reported it as a murder-suicide caused by a deal gone sour. On-line editions placed the articles under local community news sections, and used words like corruption, business, murder. The comments added under the articles were merciless.

Social networks chose their own versions. Being more imaginative than the daily press, and more liberal than any television station, they offered the version of two lovers and a suicide pact. The bodies never turned up, although there were rumors that they were found in an embrace on the beach. Queers who killed themselves. Time will wash away all the other versions, with only the social network story left. Maybe one day it will become a symbol of the fight for gay rights. Maybe they’ll become objects of admiration, who knows? Today, they’re only “the Brokeback suicides,” which was the joke making the rounds of the cafés. No one will ever know the truth. No one even wants to know. It’s something to run away from. Like from demons.