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This Past Tuesday

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It is a dream that has come to me quite often these past few weeks. I envision myself lying in bed, waking to the sound of my telephone ringing. In the dark, my hand fishes around for the receiver, accidentally knocking a number of things off of the small, rickety night table. Dirty dishes, an undershirt, socks, unfinished letters, a jar of coins — even in dreams, the apartment needs a great deal of reorganizing. Amidst the sound of more objects crashing against the unclean floor, I luckily navigate my hand to the ringing box.

"Hello," I say, still somewhat asleep.

No response.

"Hello," I say again, increasingly curious and a bit irritated. There is the sound of someone breathing slightly on the other end of the line. "Well?" I say, preparing to hang up.

"Come over. Please." I recognize Ana's voice immediately, though I have not heard it in many months. It has been even longer, I must admit, since I've heard that voice speak in such an inviting tone.

"Okay," I respond a little too quickly.

At this point, the dream progresses in a standard fashion. I jump out of bed, hurriedly pull on my trousers, wet my hair down in the bathroom mirror, and sprint clear across the capital without even considering a stop for rest. On the other side of the river, out front of her building—our old building—I pause to catch my breath and gain some composure, before traversing the three flights of stairs that lead up to the familiar dark brown door.
Once I arrive, sweating profusely, I knock lightly, trying not to wake Ana's sister or her sister's husband. The apartment is small, the walls are rather thin and, although it has never happened in my dream before, I know for certain that any undue commotion will lead to me being turned around and sent back to my dank, empty room on the other side of town.

If the dream reaches that stage, Ana will answer the door and, before I can say a word, will quickly move a finger to her mouth as a gesture for silence. At the same moment, she'll gently tug at my sleeve with her other hand, pulling me into the dark apartment. From there, the action will progress in either one of two directions. Possibly Ana will lead me to that small bedroom she has been sharing all these months with her infant niece—a room in the back decorated by small stars and pale moons intended to resemble the summer sky at night. After quietly undressing, Ana and I will proceed to the squeaky bed and make love in a way that is so unobtrusive that it is barely personal and hardly sexual. Instead, it is merely a reminder that we are still married—technically, at least.

When we're finished, I usually find myself relaxing and staring at the star-covered walls, trying to picture the previous tenants as they painted, preparing their perfect nursery. When Ana and I had originally moved in, we'd agreed not to change it, though at the time, I remember thinking such a setup held the potential for problems in the future.

"What are you thinking about?" she says.

"Nothing," I answer.

"Me, too," she says.

I suppose it is not strange, then, that it is the alternate resolution to the dream which I prefer. Instead of grabbing my shoulders and yanking me into the bedroom, Ana motions a stop gesture with
an outstretched arm, the open palm of her hand indicating that I should wait in the hallway. As I step back, she disappears into the darkness of the apartment only to return a few moments later, dressed in her old, plaid coat and carrying those two suitcases that we received many years before as a wedding present from my old boss, Hansa Splite. From there, we slowly return down the boulevard to my small apartment—I, carrying the suitcases heavy with Ana’s many possessions, she, smiling in a way that I have not seen in many years.

Yet on this particular night, my recurring dream did not reach either of its appropriately dreamlike endings. Instead, the earlier segment where I am awakened by the sound of a telephone ringing was, surprisingly enough, interrupted by the sound of the telephone ringing.

“Hello,” I said, not nearly as sleepy as I always dreamt I might be.

“Come over. Please.” Ana’s voice said, without hesitation.

“But ...” I said, not following the usual script. It didn’t seem to matter though; Ana had already hung up. I considered calling her back, but then remembered that she did not have a phone, and probably had been talking from the neighbor, Privdi’s apartment. I pulled on my trousers and, like always, moved to the bathroom to wet my hair down before realizing that the water was off and that I had forgotten to fill my tank. I doled out a cup’s worth of seltzer water from the bottle I kept with the medicines, thinking it would suffice, but then noticed through the kitchen window that it was raining. My hair would be flattened immediately.

Outside, I ran at a speed paralleled only in my dreams, watching the road for muddy potholes and concentrating hard to maintain my balance. Soon however, I tired from this quick pace and slowed to a
brisk walk. Upon reaching the square, I realized that it was not nearly as late as I had thought. The coming winter and the early onset of darkness had again fooled me. Many people were still about, scampering around, looking for shelter from the downpour. I recognized my friend Leni sitting beneath the outstretched arms of the old Hoxha monument. He was with his co-worker, Kiti Lexhe, and from the tentative nature of his wave, I could tell that he did not want to be bothered.

Across the river, just past the unfinished pyramid, it finally occurred to me that Ana may have called for some other reason than those that I had previously imagined. Perhaps, I thought, she had come to miss having those long involved fights that we’d once performed on a nightly basis. We had devoted the final six months of our days together to perfecting a wonderful, cyclical, unsatisfactory argument that usually required no less than four or five hours to complete.

Or maybe, I thought, she was calling for some lesser reason, like a leaky pipe or a blown fuse. Of course, this was completely nonsensical in light of the fact that she, more than anyone else, knew of my inability to comprehend even the simplest of mechanical principles, but still I considered it.

Upon reaching her street, I attempted to clear my mind of all the negative possibilities. In their place, I tried only picturing my dream—Ana alone in the dark apartment, smiling, inviting me in—and the feeling that it gave me. It was an unusually peaceful feeling that I had not known in reality since those first days after our wedding. Still, even in the imagination, it left me strangely satisfied.

For some reason though, I was having trouble visualizing the familiar scenario. I could not see any part of the dream now, or feel anything like it. Instead, there was only the rain coming down on my
head. Small drops from the sky and larger, colder ones from the trees above. Most of them hit me directly, some even managing to find that small opening at the back of my shirt.

I did not pause out front of her building like the blueprint of my dream required. My anxiety and tension would not allow it. Instead, I quickly climbed the stairs, taking them two and sometimes three at a time. The entire way up, I tried to think positive things, blocking from my mind the fact that our many fights had indeed been my fault, all made worse, on top of it, by my stubbornness.

Right before reaching the top floor, I simply assured myself that it would end happily, if for no other reason than that was how it had been ending night after night. Even if Ana was feeling only a small portion of the dread that I always felt when considering the alternative, continued separation, she would certainly still come to the same conclusion.

The hallway light on the third floor was out, and it would have been completely dark if not for the small bulb leaking through the staircase from the flight below. I quickly moved toward Ana's apartment, hardly attempting to conceal the noise coming from my soggy shoes, and, when I got to the landing, reached my hand out in the darkness, feeling for the heavy oak of her front door. I had made a fist, knuckles forward, in an attempt to knock, but instead, found only air at the other end. I imagined myself standing there, rapping on an invisible wall like the mimes I'd seen in the park as a child. If a crowd of people had gathered around me to watch, there in the dark, they certainly would have been amused. I inched forward, thinking it was only a small distance away, my hand held out in front of me.

When at last I did bump into the door, my arm folding up, I almost fell—entirely surprised by the very thing I'd been expecting. Quickly, I regained
my footing, knocked lightly, and waited. Perhaps a minute went by, I wasn’t sure. I remembered something my Uncle Alqi had once told me. In the old days, he had said, when they wanted to see if someone had gone mad, they used to put the person in a room with a small group of people, all facing each other. Then, the doctor would have the first of the crowd yawn and soon the others would follow suit. If the subject did not yawn along with the rest, they put him through a second test. This involved a completely dark room, pitch black and a seated subject. The testers would explain that they would be back in a minute’s time, then disappear, leaving the subject alone in the dark. They would wait half an hour before returning, acting as if nothing had happened, that only a minute, maybe a couple seconds more, had gone by.

“We apologize for the short delay,” they might say, looking at their watches, “but a few extra seconds surely didn’t harm you.” If the subject didn’t play along, acting as if he really had been in there only one minute, or a minute and ten seconds, then the doctors recommended detainment for further experimentation.

“Fortunately, things are no longer like that around here,” Uncle Alqi used to say, ending the subject.

After knocking a second time, I reached into my jacket, searching for a packet of matches. I thought perhaps I still had that book from the Trefoil, but instead I could only find three or four of the large kitchen sticks I used to light my stove. I leaned over and struck one on the wood frame and saw immediately the explanation as to why no one had answered. At the foot of the door, next to the hinges, rested a large, oblong box, and above it was a note which had been tacked to the door frame itself.

“I have finally found the energy to collect all of
the remaining things you left behind,” it said, in the familiar handwriting. “Please understand that this was not as easy for me as you may think. In fact, I have been putting it off for quite some time. So when, at last, I was able to take the initiative, I wanted to be done with it at once. And the task will not be complete until you have removed these items for good. I wish you the very best.”

Ana had not signed the note, and I thought for a second that it was because doing so would have finalized the act. Granted, she was generally a forgetful person, but still it seemed more intentional than that. Perhaps she could not go through with it, after all, and this was why she had telephoned.

Underneath the entryway, I checked to see if a light had gone on behind the door, but it was still dark. I lifted the lid off of the box and lit another kitchen match against the wall. Inside, I found a number of random items that I had mostly forgotten about: an awl with a wooden handle, two pairs of suspenders, an old, tarnished money clip, the textbook *Principles of Engineering*, a small ledger with a cardboard case, a rusty straight razor, a tin of brown shoe polish, and, at the bottom, two small, handsewn pillows. Of course, I could find uses for all of these items, or, at the very least, trade them, and I was certain Ana would have done the same, so it was generous of her to return them. But I couldn’t help feeling that it was meant as some kind of message, especially the inclusion of the pillows that had comprised half of our original set. Clearly, it could be interpreted as Ana dividing up all of the remaining possessions, closing the books on us. But if that were the case, where was my half of the silverware, my share of the china, my portion of the dining room set?

I tried to remain optimistic, believing that perhaps, as in the dream, it would end as I hoped. Yes,
it would end all right. Before I proceeded to knock once more—this time a heavy pounding—I turned to set down the last of the box’s contents, and in an anxious state, lost my footing. My shoes, still soaked from the trek through town, gave way and I fell on top of the box with a loud crash. Immediately, a door opened behind me, and as I lifted myself up, I was soon face to face with Privdi, our old neighbor, and his wife, Kascha, both standing in their nightclothes. The light from the entryway seemed unnecessarily bright, my eyes having grown accustomed to the darkness.

“Isn’t it a bit late for this type of thing?” Privdi said, staring down at me. A large man with a short, practical haircut, he’d been in retirement for nearly a decade, but was still in excellent shape. It would’ve been unwise of me to do anything foolish.

In my many years of living next door to him, Privdi and I had spoken but a few times, and always regarding the most general of topics. He prided himself on being a very plain-speaking man, and accordingly, made only the most obvious of statements. Not once was I able to draw him into any sort of conjecture or even the most incidental of rumor-mongering. “I am a man of few opinions,” he would say, without even the faintest hint of sarcasm. Looking over at Privdi’s wife, I was also certain that the animosity my wife had held for me in recent times could only have transmitted across the hall, especially considering the confidence that she and Ana held.

“What are you doing lurking about at this time of night, anyway?” Privdi said, moving onto the landing.

I motioned weakly to the box, the contents of which were now somewhat scattered across the floor, and held up Ana’s note. At the moment, Kascha stepped out in front of him and, appearing to understand what was happening, calmly helped me gather
the objects. When we were finished, she took the note from Privdi's large, beaten hands and slid it on top of the items, then replaced the lid to the box.

"I suppose you should be going," Kascha said, trying to force a polite smile.

"Yes," I said, looking back over at Privdi. "I suppose I should."

I was about to make some excuse involving the unlit stairs and hallway, but realized it would be to my advantage to remain silent and leave quietly. As I headed down the stairs, guiding myself along the banister with my right hand, the box resting in my left, I recognized the old Persian carpet lining the floor below. In my haste to reach Ana's earlier, I hadn't even noticed it lying there. Certainly, it had always been my favorite part of the building, going back to the first day we moved in, and it reminded me of a better time, even though it was something I only saw in passing. Every year, I had been careful to renew my application with the building manager to relocate to an apartment on that floor, and every year I'd been told that there were still no vacancies, but that, if I liked, I was welcome to try again the following year.

As I continued downward, I could still hear Privdi and Kascha talking, and I looked back to find them staring at me from the top of the staircase. I suppose they thought I might try one last thing, like a thief who'd been caught prowling and mercifully sent on his way, looking to filch any small item while leaving the store as a means of getting in the last word. I found myself creating vague scenarios where I exacted my revenge on Privdi, sometimes as his wife watched, and other times, the two of them together. Ultimately, though, I wound up unsatisfied. Ana would arrive at the end of each scenario, and her stoic indifference would undercut any pleasure I had gained prior to that moment.
By the time I reached the lobby, I could see that most of the streetlamps outside had been dimmed or shut off entirely. It being December, electricity was especially scarce, and every night after a certain hour, a portion of the power across the city was shut off to keep expenses down and resources up.

I was in no hurry to return to my small apartment on the other side of the river, so I headed toward the Kafe Quristi, the only place usually open late in the evening. If I was lucky, I might arrive in time for the final round. Of course then, there was the possibility that I might recognize someone and have to explain the box, so perhaps it wasn’t the best idea. But maybe, I thought, I could steer the conversation away from it, ignore the box altogether. Certainly, if Leni were there, he would recognize the pillows and know better than to bring up the subject, unless I did so first. I could count on him that way. Just like he could count on me to decipher a look, a facial expression, a small hand signal, as I had done earlier that evening.

Eventually getting tired, I switched the box to the other hand, and finally, up over my shoulder, balanced against my head. I was so preoccupied, it did not even occur to me how silly I must have looked. At a distance, the box probably resembled that old woven laundry basket my grandmother had carried when we were children. Each day, she would take the most direct route to the Drini, which in our case, unfortunately, led straight through the center of town. It was there that she washed our clothes in the river’s icy water. Once, when I asked her why she needed to walk that specific route—why she couldn’t take the path along the base of the mountain—she looked so perplexed that I did not have the heart to explain how it embarrassed my brother and me.

Still, I walked on, now oblivious to the box on
top of my head, and oblivious to the rain that continued falling. There were at least another ten or twelve blocks to go before I reached the center of town, and so as I approached the main road, I listened for the sound of someone I might know approaching in a cart or on a bicycle. Unfortunately though, the increasing darkness and the relentless rain had, of course, driven everyone off of the streets. All of this dawned on me rather slowly however, causing me to walk several blocks in a drenching downpour imagining that it wouldn't be long before someone ultimately appeared. Later, across the square, just past the Kafe Quristi, I allowed myself to give up hope. Strolling along quite slowly—surely I was already as wet as I could possibly get—my ears gave up listening for a sound that did not exist and my mind slipped off into another in a long series of daydreams.

*Translated from the Albanian by Kevin Phelan and Bill U'Ren*