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The Imposition

Novel

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There, where the guest departed from, he is no more. There, where he once was, is now just an empty space. There, where the guest no longer is, is nothing but a void, perhaps a pulsating void. Someone is confronted with the guest's absence. Someone may be astonished, perhaps sad, perhaps happy about this.

Whatever the guest might be too much of here, he might be too little of somewhere else. Nothing was missing here. Nobody had been waiting for a guest here. Everything is already available in abundance here.

Only the Rondell Bar is slowly falling apart. The golden fabric pinned to the walls is slowly peeling off, and the people sat drinking around the bar are also developing wrinkles, first only around the eyes, then around the mouth. At some point, the excess skin on their necks will hang in the froth of their beer. The Rondell Bar is gradually becoming a museum, a home to a collection of fossils. Sometimes I imagine labels, imagine display cases, cabinets in which the fossils are stored: the moustached artist; a woman with very long hair, whose face looks vigorous and who prefers to wear a garment like the scales of a fish; another woman with shorter hair, her drinks sometimes falling spectacularly from her hands. Yes, even these fossils need a home.

I've been longing to leave my whole life, but never do. In fact, I've been thinking and talking about leaving my whole life, but I'm still here. I'm the oldest of all the old fossils and I hate this small town so much that I'm going to take revenge on it by never leaving at all, even if I keep pretending to. I'm the oldest of all the old fossils and even if they were to go on bended knees asking me to leave, I'd stay.

Perhaps the guest is the only one who has grasped the difference between possibilities and

actualities. Maybe he never wanted to go anywhere at all, maybe he just wanted to stay in one place all his life, but still managed to prefer the inevitable to the undesirable.

I thought about telling the guest that he can be proud of himself for having grasped something that a small town full of fossils is unable to grasp for a second – not even when the interior is slowly raining down on their heads. I thought I could tell the guest about my plans to leave so that he'd predict its feasibility. Or rather, I hoped that – if I approached the guest – a little of his wandering spirit would rub off on me, washing me out of town like a wave. In short: I needed an expert.

Sometimes I think I should stop talking about leaving since I've already talked about it too much. In fact, I talk about leaving every day and never get tired of it. I wonder if you can only stay somewhere if you constantly talk about leaving it. After all, anyone who only talks about staying has long since left on the inside, haven't they?

You could also stay with someone by going away with them.

Everyone could leave and never stay anywhere.

Everyone could stay, right where they are.

I slid off the bar stool, walked halfway around the bar and then stopped on the other side next to the guest, but can't for the life of me say how my way there, equal to half the circumference of a circle, could have been calculated exactly. It might have been two steps, but also a hundred. I thought I'd die on arrival, or the guest would then perform a dance that would make me laugh. There I stood before him, the guest, who raised his spectacled gaze, staring at me with his eyes, promptly causing me to fall into the glow of his pupils. The strands of hair, which were still short at the time, stood up on end, making him look like a hedgehog. If only I'd known how long this stubble was capable of growing. The guest did not dance when I reached him, but only asked: Do you want children?, or maybe he said something else that he'd come across on the back pages of a small, completely outdated dictionary. Whatever it was, it didn't make me laugh. The waiter turned to us, extended his arms each holding a beer and placed them on the bar in front of us, where their heads of froth splashed in our direction.

The guest was wearing a rain jacket without a zip, a poncho, the kind I'd only ever seen on children before. I remembered that when you try to put on this type of jacket, you'd stagger around for a short moment, unable to find the exit or the openings for your head and arms, and so you'd stumble around disoriented until you eventually found your way back to the light. In any case, the guest's extremities protruded helplessly from the holes in the rain cape, while he seemed to be waiting for me to answer something. So, I said my siblings wouldn't like him at all. He nodded.

In the bar, the shadow of our limited time together was already looming over us. It's a shame that you always seem to miss the beginning of things, while each ending becomes manifested in your body. The last thing I thought before I fell into his clutches was to be careful not to fall into his clutches.

I led him through the streets, without a lead, yet he still trotted good-naturedly behind me, in his fluttering rain cape. And he suddenly transformed the paths I'd walked up and down a thousand times into different ones. His gaze made things shrink or grow, spatial perspectives and colours change like chameleons, which, by the way, are my favourite animals. Their feet are like soft pincers with which they hold on to branches, literally clawing them tightly. When they move, then only in slow motion, while their eyes dance around wildly. I imagine that if I owned a chameleon, it could sit on my shoulder and scare off passers-by by flicking its tongue out every now and then.

I pointed to the signs whose various directions could've been followed, something I'd definitely do one day I let the guest know. Hong Kong, Paris, Budapest. It seemed to me that a cloud was descending on the guest while his eyes wandered to the signs, but he only nodded kindly. What I liked about the guest was that I never knew whether he was really able to understand me.

I pointed to the mountain he was looking up at, shielding his gaze from the bright light, his brush-like fingers casting a fine pattern of shadows upon his face. I looked him up and down and wondered why he was wearing such flimsy shoes, almost sandals, under his rain jacket, which, come to think of it, resembled a tent, when the winter was lurking around every corner.

I suddenly remembered how I'd once gone outside with my father in the intense cold, the ground was covered with ice, and how my father had unceremoniously put spikes on his shoes and run off while I slithered across the ice without suitable footwear. We jogged through the forest, he with a sure step, I close behind him with arms flailing, unable to keep my balance. My father didn't turn around once, didn't seem to take any notice of my predicament.

I said to the guest: Do you know the feeling when you go somewhere you've never been before, but actually feel as though you have? At least – no matter where I go – I always find myself reminded of something I already know. And so, I'm sometimes disappointed to say the least that our minds only ever search for the known in the unknown, instead of surrendering completely to the unknown.

The guest smiled and formed a triangle with his fingers, but I wasn't sure whether it was supposed to represent a roof or a pyramid or if he was just stretching his limbs a little out of boredom. We entered the shadow of the mountain, stopped in front of my house, the biggest one in the small town. I sometimes thought about erecting a fence around the house. Is it an exaggeration to say I was thinking of installing a cat-repellent alarm?

I never intended to take him in in the first place. It had never been my intention to turn my singleness into togetherness. But I was taught that taking guests in is the decent thing to do.

Especially when they hang around and don't know what to do with themselves. I know very well what to do with myself. I'm bursting with imagination and for once I can share it with someone, or so I thought.

My house is guarded by two lion statues, both with their mouths wide open and each with one paw resting on an orb, that failed to deter the guest. I said to him: You're welcome to come back to my place, but you'll have to bring your own mattress, unless you want to sleep on an air bed, which loses air gradually, so that you're actually sleeping on the hard floor, although not directly on the floor, since I have a Persian rug that someone once left there, but which you can use for all I care, so go ahead and lie down if you're looking for a stiff neck.

So, the guest carried a mattress with a salmon-coloured cover through the small town. I suspect the woman in the light grey coat lent it to him. Sometimes he set the mattress down on a park bench, rested for a moment, then stared at the mountain again, which still looked back lifelessly, just like the passers-by.

I'd not had the courtesy to help carry his luggage. He just about managed on his own, breathing heavily and in a slightly stooped over position, body tilting from side to side. The guest therefore dragged it up the stairs, step by step, scraping it along the walls of the corridor, before finally reaching the square-shaped room, which was full of broken vacuum cleaners. The guest placed the mattress between the clattering vacuum cleaner trunks that would secretly sniff him at night, something that he didn't suspect at the time.

I took in the guest because I live in a house with ten rooms, of which I only use nine, meaning one room was empty. I kept receiving calls from people interested in renting the room, even though I'd never advertised it publicly. At some point I just stopped answering the phone. The room was becoming dusty, it needed a new lease of life, I thought. Pets or nomads could live in it. At one time I even thought, a servant. The room used to belong to someone who was always travelling, which was convenient for me. At first, she still sent photos and postcards on a regular basis. And then she stopped writing. The person's name is still on the letterbox, but has since been faded by the sun, washed off by the rain and thus become illegible. My name, on the other hand, can be read quite clearly.

I never knew what kind of name it was that I'd inherited. I've never bothered to look this name up, the name I'm condemned to use. From time to time, I've come across people with the same name in books, for example a misogynist judge at the turn of the century, a crazy parasite researcher or a company that earns its money by manufacturing weapons and shipping them worldwide.

Of course, the guest also has a name. Quite a long one, in fact. But it's so long that it's impossible to memorise even with the best will in the world.

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