

The Beggar

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She slept in the hot sun on the deck's wooden boards and dreamed that algae was growing all over her face, that she was sinking endlessly into green water to gaze upon a half-demolished castle amidst the misty movement of the waves. A green suitcase full of old photos swayed in the water under the castle; she brought the photos to her eyes and saw her own face, overgrown with algae, in one of them. Her friend came along the winding, gray path behind her, put his hand on her shoulder, and said: "You were a wonderful person." Under the green growth, images branched out, becoming intertwined in a long wreath of memories, a necklace on which each bead stood for one day she had lived. Her red blouse with the big buttons was in the red ring; it was bright and beautiful, just as it had been when she'd worn it the first time she saw him across the table. The Indian summer's chocolate day gawked at her from the brown ball—the day they laughed in the labyrinth of little white birch pillars and smoked cigarettes near the edge of a big, brown puddle full of fallen leaves, where frogs were splashing. She saw and smelled all the days, all the drives, over roads in disrepair; she saw herself, how she'd woken him at three in the morning to offer up her body in the white nightgown her mother had worn many years ago when, in a sleepy stupor, she'd given hay to the donkey; it now brayed in the courtyard, gray and bored. In a dream, she was again reminded of her dream where he would nervously shove a large crowd of people through a door—people who had been milling about under chandeliers with glasses in hand—so they could be alone, so he could stare at her longingly, so he could straighten her body beneath his, close her mouth, and pull her open from the inside, so that she could feel shivers down her spine, all the way into her bones, leaving her very being sobbing in mournful expectation.

In a heat-induced drowsiness, she ran her hands through her dark hair and blinked. She stretched her legs and staggered toward the rail, gazing into the water. A wide, white line trailed behind the ship. Her memory was moving like waves under rays of yellow sun, and she saw herself sailing on a similar ship with him and sleeping, curled up in a blanket. There, she wore a straw hat with a wide brim which the wind blew away so that it sailed, lonely, over the surface of the sea. They waited for the mist, and it rose out of the water in the morning like sea fairies. They sipped juice and broke off pieces of cookies, while in the water, big, brown piles of land lingered. Beside the ship, the cities and white churches on lonely dark rocks disappeared, even now. The day was as if it were made of gingerbread, her insides as if made of a dark forest which flooded her limbs

so that she only wished for sleep. In her weakness, in rare moments, she comprehended that the piles of land in the sea were in fact Greek, and so were the coffees she drank on torn leather chairs in the café, and so was the music the waiters moved in time with. She spent hours and hours in the bathroom listening to the rattling and coughing of the ship's engines. Sometimes it seemed that the blue color was passing into her, that she was drifting away into the air, that she was about to lose consciousness. "It's just nerves," she calmed herself, because she always had these kinds of feelings when her life was slowing down. The sensation of drifting. The sensation that she had no body, that she was falling to pieces, that the pieces were nervously trying to reconnect with their tentacles, that she didn't have a father, or a mother, or a home, that she didn't even have herself anymore. The sensation that she felt cold even in the midst of a crowd, that the cold was creeping through her teeth with a sudden force. She picked herself up and went to take a shower. She watched as water rushed over her beautiful, naked body, and it was to her redundant.

And so were her legs because she didn't want to go anywhere, and her hands which brushed the hair away from her face under the hum of dripping water. She stepped out of the shower and pulled on a short dress, and then she went to the rail, leaned over it, and gazed upon herself. The passengers around her chatted in English, Hebrew, and French. Jewish students were going back home, and they sat on benches smoking cigarettes. She saw a Polish family making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land; they slept on a large pile of blankets. She studied a young Jew with a shaved head. He had slept for three days without interruption, only waking up to give water to the long-eared dog that was tied to his suitcase full of books. Lebanese people were chatting in French and sipping coffee, gathering coins and selling tokens for the colorful arcade games around which children were running and screaming. "Lebanon was rich once," repeated an old man with small, lively eyes who was sitting at a small table. "On New Year's Day, we danced on tables." The wind was blowing gently. In the furthest corner of her line of vision there sat a Jewish family. "They're probably from a Kibbutz," she thought. The young wife had an unkempt appearance and was relaxed, holding a lively child in her arms as the child kicked his little legs and muttered something. "How ancient they seem," she thought. When it came to Jews, it seemed to her sometimes that they bore an ancientness on their faces, as if their field of view had a broader spectrum. The father smiled at her; she hadn't been watching them discreetly, and she smiled back at him. It seemed to her that she didn't exist. That instead of her, some other body sat in the chair, and she was contained within an opaque cloud of thoughts which hung over that body, obstructing its view. The pictures of the ship, the sea, and the people were just the background to her sharp contemplation. In the evening, the sailors dragged a long string of lamps on deck and hung it between the bow and the stern.

Now the ship was an illuminated ball rolling across the water. From time to time, the ship gave a melancholy blast of its horn and the passengers turned their heads, disturbed. She sat down in a corner between a rail and a large, red trunk over which a lifeboat was tied down. It was thus that she sat on warm wood and swung her legs restlessly. She smoked a cigarette. She was like a lonely, beautiful animal, like an animal taking refuge in a solitary clearing and cradling her own paralysis. The young Jew with the shaved head woke up once again, pulled himself up slightly, and scratched his dog. He remained crouched down. "Do you have a light?" With a quick flick of her wrist, she lit his cigarette and couldn't help but smile at him as he crouched, so downtrodden, by his dog, stroking his shaved skull. "Those exams were crazy, really crazy." He knocked on his suitcase. "I had to know the names of all the viruses by heart. It was like memorizing a phonebook. Crazy." He shifted near his suitcase and scratched his dog, who was on all fours. "I'm going home now. Thank God. It was a three day drive from Romania. The car was so packed that I couldn't even sit comfortably. Ugh." She felt like laughing but she didn't say a thing. She imagined him behind the wheel, how he sat awkwardly among his books like a sailor with a strong body, driving along the roads from Serbia and Macedonia, the adjacent yellow fields eating into the hillsides, the sun shining on the windshield as he watched, exhausted, the villages pass by on the Pannonian Plain; how he took it all in, the villages and broken-down tractors and geese in the yards and green heads of cabbage. He shifted once again and began stroking his naked skull. "We'll stop tomorrow, won't we? I need to buy gifts for my sisters." The waves crashed against the ship. Once a sailor with wide teeth who reeked of alcohol told her that the waves right next to the ship were called 'captain's daughters.' "Captain's daughters," she thought. The mist rose into the sky. She fell asleep again.

The sounds of singing and the clinking of glasses drifted from the lounge on the ship, while she lay curled up on a blanket as the wind rustled her hair. When she woke up in the morning, the sun was already high in the sky, but it wasn't so unbearably hot as to make the air tremble. The ship was slowly coming to a halt like a large awkward animal; she leaned over the rail and saw the port with its large docks and new passengers, who crowded the entrance. Cars were honking, sailors were running back and forth in the hallways, and a monotonous voice kept repeating: "We've come to a stop! Passengers who plan to continue their voyage must please turn in their passports at Reception." The young Jew managed to get up and ask her, yawning: "Would you teach me English?" "Of course." She squeezed between the passengers, between large suitcases and black-haired people who were rushing toward the exit. The harbor was hot and dirty, and heat rose from the black asphalt. They took a small road to town. Bartenders were pouring water on the floor in front of the entrances before sweeping, smiling kindly as they passed by. Rays of sunlight rolled over flat concrete

walls and wire fences. They drank up their coffee and observed the things around them: the sea in the distance, and people who were rushing by on loud motorcycles. Then the young Jew awkwardly bought bracelets for his sisters while she stood in the background and gazed into herself. She felt as if it were all a dream, as if the stones weren't real, as if she were only imagining bathing in the waters of the bay beside the port. A man with a monkey on his shoulder came by. "Would you like to buy her?" The monkey was making faces. They laughed and went back to the ship, squeezed by the passengers and their luggage, and smoked cigarettes on the deck. The wait under the sun dragged on.

When she opened her eyes at night, she thought for a moment that she saw large flames on the shore's edge, spreading into the darkness, licking its insides with large red tongues, as if burning and stripping the world in an ancient myth. She wished the flames would lick her insides, too, so they could burn the darkness within her, so that she would stop traveling through dark reflections of life, so the sobbing of her consciousness would stop. When the ship spat her out onto the pier, her legs dirty with tar pitch, the young Jew held out his hand three times through his car window, and she hitchhiked to Jerusalem. Premature happiness gnawed at her soul when she fell out of the car in front of the Damascus Gate, where the air was thick with summer and where there were Arab merchants, angry words, and olive green uniforms—where the tomatoes rolled down the stairs. And she thought, how great is the loneliness in the most beautiful city in the world, how incredibly beautiful are the little Jewish children with long sideburns under their black caps, who, in the evening, yell at the edge of sidewalks in all the languages of the world. How peacefully the flag on the white David's Tower waves in the evening's gentle breeze, when, on the smoothed rocks of the bazaar, an old man rode by on a horse with side baskets, and a line of wet cats meowed near the walls of the nearby stone houses. When she was going back to the hotel in the evening wearing white pants, with a cigarette between her fingers, she looked through an open door in one of the houses and saw three bakers who were rolling dough with a bare bulb flickering above their heads. For three days she looked only at images. She was too occupied with pictures of the most beautiful city in the world that barked at her. Her blood ran thicker; the pictures were giving but also taking. She saw an old man with a bird on his shoulder, and under the weight of her gaze, the bird slowly spread its wings. She saw a dark-haired beggar in a white linen shirt who slept on the roof of the same hotel and in the morning smoked cigarettes on the steps and sipped tea; in the mornings, he thumped on the metal doors and curled his dirty legs under a torn blanket. She saw him on the street when he laid his olive beggar eyes on her hands, thinking: "She's not beautiful, but there's something about her that makes her beautiful." It was her lonely lost-ness, it was her animalistic hermit-ism, her glassy stare at images; her sharp hunger, and her unbearable

thirst. She ran into him amidst the merchants' wearied screams when his face hanged amidst white head coverings. He reminded her of the jack of spades and of the hopelessness of the gypsy wagons that sink in brown mud when colorfully dressed people on them moved their limbs in a yellow manner and jingled their jewelry. She pressed her lips together, passing an apple from one hand to another; he had wolf-like eyes and dirty legs and scraped hands. On his face were traces of a blue indigo color. For three years he'd been drifting around the world, sleeping on the streets of Spain and even loved a girl in Milan, he had lived for a year with Yugoslavian gypsies with their many dogs and screaming children who crowded amidst the trailers. In Egypt he loved the Nile and a dirty hotel where cats sat on the tables and where the proprietor continuously smoked a big pipe, winking to guests, who rolled in beds in countless rooms, when behind the windows the day was thick with heat, rising from giant run-down houses on the jagged terraces of which people lived; for three days he had been watching one of them; a woman with a dark face and a man, who, covered with a white jacket, smoked cigarettes while children threw a ball around the rubble and yellow rocks high above the city. Among them walked a turkey, wandering between the children's feet, that fell into the dust as they adorably hopped on the terrace. There was a sense of social-ness and of being lost in his nature; the traces of needle marks on his arms were disappearing slowly; he had a great warmth. He socialized with everyone and everybody, even though at moments he had a lonely nature; as he walked through the red desert, hunched over and dressed in black with a small barrel in his hand and a knapsack which contained a carved chess set. He thought about death, the face of which, to him, appeared to have changing features, the features of a lonely, well-trodden path and Bedouin tents and the outlines of salt pillars planted in low water from which salty smoke rose. He didn't wish for death but he didn't fear it, he laughed in its face when at the end of the end of the pilgrimage in the bars of Jerusalem he got drunk alone so that his limbs went numb. She sat beside him and he told her about the unrestrainable search and deciphering of images; he had also seen the bird with the outstretched wings. He laughed at him and she was fond of him from the start. She leaned on the table, holding her head in her hands, in a wine-red dress that fell over her sandal-clad feet. To her, he seemed the most splendid of all images and his exhausted warmth, which rolled across the table against her, was starting to eat away at her train of thought. It was completely different or her; she didn't socialize with anyone, she was hermit-like in nature, and only rarely, and only for short moments, did people's faces break into her atmosphere. She was not afraid of him. He was too experienced and he was not yet run ragged from drinking, and the colors of his body radiated brown. The soldiers danced with shotguns on their shoulders, and the women wore long, colorful skirts. It was summer. He told her of the roads behind which he had slept, curled up in a thin blanket; he avoided big words. He spoke slowly and in good

English, but with a thick accent. And then I woke up beside my best friend, and I saw that we were lying in the middle of the village road dusted with pebbles. She had also been waking up on the sides of roads; one morning, she was woken up by an old man who kept repeatedly calling his goats which rang around her when she got up from the yellow grass and saw the cloudless sky and the sea beyond the rocks. “And then I left my homeland to be able to live without the needles, my family, and the city, my mom, who only on rare occasions awoke from her alcoholic stupor...” and the moldy way of life amidst the parties full of colorfully dressed people and giant ecstatic images of drugs; of grimacing faces and ringing ears and swiftly beating hearts, when before him awakening pictures rose up, and clowns on the walls grew ears. She watched him and saw how he traded one downfall for another, which in truth was really no different. She was fond of him because there was a sense of being lost in his nature and because he was fighting it so desperately. He walked along a million roads, sat on stones, read books, tasted food, and loved people, fighting his own inadequacy. To her, the downfall was also making itself known. She awaited him in the evenings when he came back up the stone steps and lay beside her. They laughed all night. They laughed until the sun appeared behind the hill covered with olive trees, splashing onto them. In the houses, forks started to clang and the sounds of music arose. Their bodies ached with insomnia, and they found it hard to breathe because of all the cigarettes they smoked. The smiles remained on their faces; they dragged themselves to a tea house, and there they were served by a young boy with a bit of peach fuzz on his upper lip. He asked them with a cracking voice where they were from. So that they wouldn’t become similar to each other, they separated immediately after with a sad light in their eyes, drenched in sweat.

After long days of the journey, this seemed to her like begging for life, like the worst form of loneliness, and that being trapped between images was worse than being trapped between constant existence and everyday life. She couldn’t sleep at night; she felt hot and cold at the same time. Insomnia cleared up her thoughts, and she became somewhat numb. She wanted to go home; she succumbed to exhaustion, fed up with the images, as all travelers eventually are. In her consciousness, days at home were already being planted in her mind, blue, green, incredibly boring, and at the same time, the only authentic days. She didn’t even see the island where she stopped. She didn’t see the endless growth of olive trees and the autumn rain over stony hills, in which goats grazed. Her traveling companions were burning themselves out with their joy for travel; at night they danced in clubs and clapped for the dancers on tables, they were spinning in a wild rhythm of days. She looked through the window, at stony slopes and at the old man who was hacking downstairs, on the floor beneath her. She changed her clothes and looked at herself in the mirror. The sun

was drawing large shadows on the walls. She drove her car into the wind and watched the church bell towers. They were like Chinese pagodas. She only read a little bit, and in the morning she couldn't wake up from the drunken chirping of dreamlike thoughts. She thought about how the beggar had given her stay in Jerusalem meaning, how he lent color to all the pictures, to which she was so trying to cling. She ate pistachios and spat out the shells. Her thoughts knew no bounds. The Mediterranean days fell into autumn. Her insides were also autumn-like. No flames had licked away her sorrow, and she regretted everything. In that state, she again fell into the endlessness of reminiscing. One day she waited for traveling companions to go swimming; she feigned sleep. Then she got up and got dressed. She prepared her luggage and left her money on the kitchen table where a knife lay flat. She looked at it for a long time; she looked all around the kitchen and through the window, under which the world lay.

The warmth of the day was rising and falling mildly. The clothes were hung over the chairs. She closed the door behind her and didn't waver even for a moment. She went to the harbor to wait for the first ship. She sat on a tar-stained bench and fingered her tickets. On the other side of the street sat three beggars. They were eating bread and drinking water. She looked at them. Not one of them was the right one.