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The Sweet Life

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Extract from pages 9-25

TOLYAN ANDREYEVICH

2011. ABRUZZO, ITALY.

It is Friday the 22nd of July, 2011. The funeral is set to take place on Sunday the 24th of July.

The first letter: a 'C'. A 'C', followed by a short sequence of characters that resembles a code. In front of that, an eagle with its head turned awkwardly to the right, as if it had been caught in an undignified position by a stranger during its morning exercises and wanted to look away. The bird holds a sword in its left talon, while its right foot awkwardly clutches a scarcely identifiable agricultural product - either a cereal crop or an ear of corn. Meanwhile its beak bites down on an Orthodox-style crucifix. The eagle also has a shield on its breast, on which the head of an aurochs can be made out; to its left there is a moon, while to the right of the rampant ruminant a shining sun is depicted, with a meadow flower underneath. Below the shield and the bird of prey two letters are unmistakably engraved: MD. This number plate is mounted on Tolyan Andreyevich's Ford Transit Minibus, which arrives in Abruzzo at precisely 10.45pm.

A few immigrant Albanian crickets are gently but insistently singing in praise of the Italian summer. The Minibus - with Mini-Putin swinging in an easy rhythm from the rear-view mirror - emits relaxing sounds that put the driver into a semi-conscious state halfway between reverie and meditation. Mini-Putin's cardboard eyes look watchfully into the driver's face. Said driver is wearing plush slippers and a shirt made from a soft material that hangs casually over his hips. The driver has a likable face - with little dimples around the corners of his mouth of the kind mostly seen on the faces of people who laugh a lot - while a white cap pulled back jauntily towards his neck covers his close-cropped flaxen hair. He looks like a boy grown old, on whom the passing years have unmistakably laid down their tracks and carved merciless furrows like club-blows into Russia leather, but whose zest for life could not be completely effaced. Tolyan Andreyevich does not laugh; rather he stretches his countenance into a strained grin, through which a gold tooth emerges from time to time and glints a little. As if he has something unfinished to accomplish, or some valuable object to find that he has carelessly managed to lose.

Tolyan Andreyevich pushes down on the accelerator. The sky is a deep mocha colour and speckled with stars that twinkle as they rush past Tolyan Andreyevich's Ford Transit Minibus. And then: it happens. Just as Tolyan Andreyevich is wondering if it is Ursa Major or another constellation that he has spotted in the firmament as he swings into a sharp left turn, two shapes

appear on the road. Tolyan Andreyevich is almost certain that these are two people lying on the asphalt in front of him. For a fraction of a second Tolyan Andreyevich hesitates, wondering if he hasn't merely imagined the whole thing and if he simply ought to keep driving. However he decides against this hypothesis. The Moldovan wrenches the steering wheel to the right, takes his plush slipper off the accelerator, and pulls on the handbrake. The Ford Transit's tyres screech, Tolyan Andreyevich swears, and the Minibus roars as it spins twice round its own axis, like a figure skater performing pirouettes on the ice. Mini-Putin shamelessly mimics the Ford Transit's movements, and continues to do so even after the Ford Transit has come to a stop in the verge, surrounded by a swirling cloud of dust. Tolyan Andreyevich's skull meanwhile comes into violent contact with the steering wheel and meets the hard plastic cover with a crack. The Moldovan's white hat flies off as the lights fade. He can still hear the meditative music playing in his car as if from the other end of a tunnel; however he is no longer able to see anything beyond the darkness that enfolds him utterly like a fleecy blanket. The music too grows gradually quieter and more muffled, until it becomes nothing more than a revolving acoustic buzz. Some time elapses, during which Tolyan Andreyevich unsuccessfully attempts to escape this noise. At the end of the noise - a glittering light. The Moldovan realises that he is in fact inside something like a tunnel. Maybe even a gargantuan funnel or a wormhole. Like a moth Tolyan Andreyevich begins to move involuntarily towards the light, when suddenly he finds himself next to a transparent alcohol tank of a size normally only found in breweries or industrial facilities. Inside the vat sits Director Hlebnik, ossified in the pose of Rodin's Thinker. Director Hlebnik is completely immersed in some kind of fluid, but nonetheless appears to remain dry and unharmed. Tolyan Andreyevich lifts his arm in greeting. Hlebnik does not return the gesture, instead motioning for the Moldovan to approach the tank. At this Tolyan Andreyevich starts to paddle determinedly with his arms and legs towards Hlebnik's tank. When the Moldovan is close enough to Hlebnik to touch the Director's tank with his outstretched foot the Director suddenly begins waving his limbs around like a madman, screaming twice in a Ukrainian accent, 'Get lost! Your time hasn't come yet!' before vanishing into nothing together with his tank.

HLEBNIK

1991. DONDUŞENI, MOLDAVIAN SSR

On Gaddafi and poor harvests

In the district sugar refinery in the Moldavian 15,000-person urban-type settlement of Donduşeni (to give it its official name), Refinery Director Hlebnik watches from his vantage point propped up between two centrifuges as two small children - a boy and a girl both aged about five - wander absently across the refinery floor. The boy is wearing a Lenin badge and a cherry-red armband, while the girl carries a net bag with half of a foreign teddy bear inside. In the background can be heard Paganini's Caprice No. 24 as performed by Jascha Heifetz, who is floating like a Sandinistic molecule just under the roof of Bagging Hall 2 by means of a system of ropes. After a while the boy with the Lenin badge begins to speak: 'On the way to Colombo Gaddafi made a stop in Tashkent. He wanted to speak with me. I informed him that you were staying with us and that I would therefore be unable to meet him.' At the same time he removes a box of filterless White Sea Canal papirosi cigarettes from his breast pocket and holds them out towards the girl.

'We have good relations with Gaddafi. However he often sits in the desert praying,' says the girl, taking a White Sea Canal from the pack and putting it in her mouth.

The boy with the cherry-red armband laughs.

'Gaddafi needs more experience and still has a few things to learn. He should come to us on an official visit, when the time is right.'

The boy also puts a White Sea Canal in his mouth with a nimble movement, produces a crumpled piece of paper from the sleeve of his jacket, lights the papirosa and continues talking around his cigarette:

'But now to business. The difficulties in Poland continue as before. They've introduced sugar rationing, and meat rationing will be next. Gierek begged me to help them, with tears in his eyes.'

'What did you say?'

'I couldn't make him any promises.'

An uncomfortable pause follows.

'And what about...us?' asks the child with the teddy bear, concern in her voice.

The boy with the Lenin badge looks sharply at the girl and brandishes the piece of paper.

‘These are the figures for our current deliveries on each side. We’ve given you 2000 extra tractors, 50 of them Kirovets K700 models. You now receive 16 million tonnes of petroleum from us. But it’s still not enough. I don’t understand what you’re doing with it all!’

The girl’s face grows sad, almost tearful.

‘We haven’t had any rain since May.’

‘And?’

‘We’re going to harvest fifty percent fewer potatoes - not 195 decitonnes, as predicted, not even last year’s average of 173, but under 100 decitonnes. The same applies to sugar beet and grain. We estimate that we’re going to lose 8.4 million tonnes of grain this year.’

‘That’s bad.’

‘It’s worse than bad. We will now be forced to buy at least 1.5 billion dollars’ worth of grain.’

The boy’s eyes light up briefly, like those of a predator scenting its prey.

‘Where?’

Refinery Director Hlebnik is all ears between the centrifuges.

Just as the girl with the teddy bear is about to reply, the left-hand centrifuge’s anchoring rips away with a loud crash. Hlebnik expels a juicy Ukrainian oath. Both children look up and for a fraction of a second their gaze meets the curious eyes of the Director, his pupils grown a little rheumy thanks to intensive alcohol consumption during Gorbachev’s prohibition. The children vanish in the blink of an eye, like startled meerkats. Hlebnik looks around. Jascha Heifetz is gone as well. The apparatchik exhales noisily.

Hlebnik is annoyed. The head of the Donduşeni sugar refinery is normally able to orient himself better during his dreams - especially from the spot between the centrifuges, as he discovered a while ago. Yet this time he lost control over the dream. Director Hlebnik knows enough about the subject to realise that what he has just seen can only bode ill. Possibly he should even be worried about his 40 tonnes of sugar. Director Hlebnik decides to consult the medium Lydia Ivanovna without delay.

The Medium’s Prognosis

The retired Commissar for Food Production of the Northern Regional Soviet of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) and recipient of the Order of the Red Banner Lydia Ivanovna Cernei does not give anything away. She calmly places her cards on the table, arranging and

revealing them in various sequences. She murmurs some sort of mantra, covers certain cards up again, uncovers them once more, stacks them in a different order, stands up, fetches a 5-litre preserve jar half-filled with an unidentifiable cloudy fluid from a shelf, and places it on the table. Next she disappears briefly and returns with three hen's eggs, cracks them and deposits the yolks into the jar, all the while muttering something incomprehensible.

'Are you quite sure? I mean, it wasn't just some kind of neurotic episode, or a ghost from the other side?' asks Director Hlebnik across the table, noting with amazement that the egg yolks are undergoing a unique symbiosis with the cloudy fluid and making sizzling circular movements around the jar. Once the contents of the container have calmed down Lydia Ivanovna turns over a concealed card in the centre of the table.

'The signs are perfectly clear, Hlebnik. And if you don't believe me you can push off right now. I have a lot of clients today', answers the medium as she points towards the veranda window, through which can be seen a long line of people, all of whom require Lydia Ivanovna's services. Each of them has brought a gift for Lydia Ivanovna: tapestries, goats, televisions, Czech crystal chandeliers, French perfumes, thousands of White Sea Canal and papirosi packs, entry passes for health resorts in Yalta and Stavropol, preserves, ermines, Yugoslavian massage devices, cement, Russian winter shapkas, beluga caviar, prosthetic teeth hand-made from Russian red gold, 20-litre jars filled with Ukrainian pickled tomatoes, Lada cylinder head gaskets, gas, Belarusian circular saws, icons, imported antibiotics, coal, alcohol of every kind and in every quantity imaginable, sausages - and only recently two 9mm Makarovs from the Transnistrian arsenal of the 14th Army in Tiraspol were presented to her by her faithful clients. And when occasionally citizens come to her who are unable to part with any of their possessions, Lydia Ivanovna attends to them with the same dedication that she brings to her usual clients, since times are hard and Moldovans' problems numerous.

Sugar Refinery Director Hlebnik places the packet containing his offering on the table, next to the medium's three red telephones and in particular next to the one labelled 'Express Line'. The apparatchik knows that the medium likes the Chinese herb ginseng and that she will be pleased with his gift.

'When?' he whispers, almost inaudibly.

'Tomorrow at noon. Yeltsin is on his way. Kuchma too,' answers Lydia Ivanovna with a touch of discomfort at how easy it is for her to predict the future.

'So the time has come.' Director Hlebnik wrinkles his brow. 'Where?'

'It doesn't matter. The result will be the same.'

'Tell me anyway, please.'

‘If you absolutely must know: the meeting will take place in Belarus, in the misty Białowieża swamp - not far from the village of Viskuli.’

‘Ah. And what will happen then?’

‘Chaos will break out, and those who were once united will be torn asunder and will wage war on one another. Blood will be spilt. And many will lose their worldly possessions and be afflicted with hunger. Still others will obtain power and wealth, and will help themselves ruthlessly and without pity. And these will be the ones who are able to correctly interpret the signs of the times.’

Director Hlebnik takes a moment to digest this information. Then his features shift; something flashes in his eyes before the Sugar Refinery Director narrows them to slits.

‘And am I one of...those people?’

The retired Commissar for Food Production of the Northern Regional Soviet of the Moldavian SSR and recipient of the Order of the Red Banner Lydia Ivanovna looks sympathetically at the Director of the Donduşeni Sugar Refinery and gently shakes her head.

‘You are not one of them, Hlebnik.’

A few beads of sweat appear on the diabetic’s forehead, but Lydia Ivanova pays no heed to them, nor to the Sugar Refinery Director’s tormented expression, and signals that he should leave her reception room with its hand-made Moldavian tapestries so that she can attend to the problems of the people waiting outside. The Sugar Refinery Director summons all of his strength, gathers himself up from the table, bids the medium farewell with a kiss on the hand and a poklon, and leaves the house. And it is precisely at that point that Director Hlebnik takes the momentous decision to consign the 40 tonnes of sugar to their fate and to transport them out of the country without delay. Director Hlebnik cannot foresee that this action will prompt the population of Donduşeni to launch a hunt for his 40 tonnes of sugar.

DOLCE DELLA LUNA

2011. ABRUZZO, ITALY

Cristina and Angelo

It is Friday the 22nd of July, 2011. The funeral is set to take place on Sunday the 24th of July.

22:46

Silence. The two teenagers lying in the road - Cristina and Angelo - do not move. The Ford Transit is resting in the verge, ominous and inert like a shot-down big game animal. Angelo listens in the night. He can only hear Cristina's laboured breathing. Angelo opens his eyes. The dust cloud is still hanging in the air around Cristina and Angelo - who moments earlier narrowly avoided being run over by a car - as if in a sadistic attempt to slowly smother them both. Angelo coughs. Still in a daze from what just happened, he stands up and approaches the vehicle; leans with his shoulder against the driver's door. On turning his head to the left he notices Cristina touching his arm. She looks pale. Her hands are trembling slightly. Angelo opens the driver's door. A roughly forty-five year old man is lying with his head on the steering wheel. Blood is dripping from a wound somewhere not immediately visible at first glance. Angelo takes the driver's pulse, but cannot feel anything. Angelo looks mutely at his hand - at the blood sticking to his fingers.

'I can't feel a pulse,' he says softly, as if afraid to disturb somebody's sleep.

'Huh? What's wrong with him?'

Cristina stares at Angelo with her large hazel eyes. For the first time Angelo is able to recognise something in those eyes that he has never seen before: fear. Pure fear.

'He's dead,' says Angelo.

Cristina staggers backwards a step, buries her face in her hands and sobs gently. Her jet-black hair covers both hands and face.

'I had no right to drag somebody else into this.'

Angelo slams the driver's door shut, makes a circuit round the Ford Transit Minibus, opens one of the rear doors and climbs in; emerges with a plastic bag; removes a sandwich and takes a greedy bite.

'A man is dead because of us, just because he didn't want to run us over. And...and you're eating? How can you even think about food Angelo?'

Angelo chews deliberately and hungrily, like someone who has endured an involuntary two-day fast. Then he holds out the plastic bag to Cristina.

At first she declines, with a slightly offended air; yet before Angelo has the chance to reach inside the bag himself and devour the second cheese, salami and gherkin roll, the girl takes the sandwich and bites in defeatedly. She closes her eyes. Angelo watches as she turns her face away with a mixture of shame and primitive satisfaction at having finally sated her hunger a little. The fear and guilt soon return, however. Then Cristina notices the number plate.

‘What are those strange numbers?’ she asks.

‘Moldova.’

‘What?’

‘MD means Moldova.’

‘How do you know that?’

Angelo turns round. Cristina looks at him quizzically as he notices through the corner of his eye the hum and the headlights of an approaching car. The young Italian frantically signals to Cristina to get into the Ford Transit and pushes the body - Tolyan Andreyevich - into the passenger seat. He climbs into the driver’s seat, pulls Cristina up close to him and begins to kiss her on the mouth. Cristina attempts fiercely to push Angelo away, but when she sees the approaching car she stops resisting.

A blue Alfa Romeo with a white CARABINIERI label slows to a stop alongside the Ford Transit, rocking slightly on its suspension.

‘Car trouble, *ragazzi?*’ asks a smiling and visibly good-humoured law-enforcement official around his chewing gum, his mushroom-shaped Carabinieri peaked cap tipped back casually.

Angelo pretends to be surprised by the appearance of the police car and smiles self-consciously. Cristina wipes her lips and shoves Angelo away.

‘*Tutto okay! Grazie, Ispettore!*’

‘And what’s the matter with him?’ asks the policeman’s bald colleague from the passenger side, pointing his finger at Tolyan Andreyevich.

‘Dad’s taking a nap,’ says Angelo.

‘And we wanted to stop for a toilet break,’ Cristina lies.

‘Doesn’t look much like a toilet break, what you were up to.’

The Carabiniere with the chewing gum laughs. Looks Angelo sharply in the eye.

‘You aren’t brother and sister, are you?’

‘We’re cousins.’

Cristina shoots Angelo a venomous look; the Carabinieri with the chewing gum grins, winks at Angelo conspiratorially and nudges his grumpy colleague with his elbow.

‘Look at that, Leoluca - there’s a crisis on, and these two here have their heads full of nonsense. What do you say to that?’

The bald Carabinieri’s stern expression brightens unexpectedly.

‘What should I say about it? I was exactly the same when I was their age.’

‘I expect you still had some hair back then, huh?’

The policeman with the chewing gum breaks into uproarious laughter while his grumpy colleague eloquently abuses him. Once he calms down, he turns to Angelo and says:

‘Anyway, there’s a nice quiet hotel near here, about 15 miles away on the way to the Lago di Barrea. Your dad can have a rest there. And next time turn on your hazard lights when you stop for a toilet break, as nobody can see you otherwise.’

‘Thanks, *Ispettore*. We’ll make our way there.’

‘Well we’re heading that way anyway. Just follow us and we’ll take you to the hotel. Then when you go back to school you can brag about how you got to fool around under a police escort.’

‘That’s really not necessary, *Ispettore*, we can get there on our own.’

‘No excuses now. Or should we wake your dad up? Well then. *Allora*, let’s go, you shameless pair of chancers. *Andiamo!*’

The blue Alfa Romeo with the CARABINIERI label sets off once more. The bald, bad-tempered Carabinieri switches on the siren.

23:02

The owner of the Hotel Dolce Della Luna - the thirty-eight year old Monica Elisabetta di Garozzo from Milan - moans with pleasure. It is a muffled sound, an almost animal growl, that the redhead is making. Her left nipple, with a kitsch and colourful butterfly tattooed above it, is in the mouth of her sixteen-year-younger girlfriend and colleague Francesca Lombardo. Francesca’s tongue is diligently circling her manager’s nipple. From the side it looks as though Monica is nursing her naked colleague. Meanwhile with her left hand she strokes Francesca gently on the cheek, like a mother giving a little solace to her frightened child. However this idyllic scene is soon distorted when Monica abruptly digs the carefully polished nails of her right hand into her employee’s back above the collarbone and drags them all the way down to Francesca’s hip like a cat sharpening its claws, leaving red welts on Francesca’s back. The twenty-two year old colleague moans - more with pain than with pleasure. Francesca bites down

hard on Monica's nipple in response and slaps her manager hard across the face with her open left hand. Monica grabs Francesca gently by the throat and whispers something indecent in her ear - something that fills the twenty-two year old with pleasure to judge by the blissful look on her face. The room is alive with the intense odour of joss sticks.

In the background the TV news is running on RAI 1. The sound is muted. A smiling Silvio Berlusconi is on the screen, having just delivered a speech to the Italian Parliament. He waves a magnanimous farewell to his audience, as if all the assembled Italian MPs were his fans, and allows himself to be escorted out of the Palazzo di Montecitorio by his bodyguards and by a large mob of reporters and journalists, who act like hysterical groupies on the appearance of their idol and all simultaneously attempt to shove a microphone or sound recorder in his face. Berlusconi accepts these proceedings with a professional serenity indicative of the fact that he is rarely required to enter or leave the parliament building alone.

The next image is of rampaging citizens in distant Reykjavík, who are enthusiastically hurling lumps of plaster at both the Icelandic parliament and the security personnel in high-visibility jackets stationed in front of it. Now and then a particularly dedicated Icelandic citizen throws an expensive organic egg at the parliament building, with a ruefully strained expression on his face that seems to say, 'I can't actually afford it, but for this no price is too high.' The Scandinavian demonstrators manage to break most of the windows in the Icelandic General Assembly before enthusiastically setting it alight, while freezing representatives of the Icelandic police half-heartedly pelt their countrymen with tear gas grenades. Unobserved by these, another group of demonstrators set light to the flag of the Icelandic Kaupthing Bank - weeping tears of euphoric exuberance all the while - and trample on the portrait of the smiling and good-humoured Prime Minister Geir Haarde. In the background a wary Icelandic politician can be seen fleeing secretly from the rear entrance of the burning parliament building with a thick lever arch file under his arm, looking cautiously to his left and right.

Underneath these images a brightly displayed text reads: 'Iceland today experiences its worst unrest since the island state's entry into NATO in 1949.'

An alarm clock rings persistently.

'I'll just do my rounds,' whispers Francesca, before climbing out of bed under protests from her manager Signora di Garozzo, hastily pulling on a robe, picking up a fruit bowl with a sharp knife inside from the bedside table, and going out through the door. The corridors offer nothing suspicious save some quiet whispering in Serbian, followed by muffled laughter, as if someone is telling witty jokes behind the door of room number 7.

‘Only Vladyka Borimirović is awake,’ the young woman whispers into the night, taking a few steps forward. She pauses for a moment, before turning round and heading towards the kitchen to put back the fruit bowl. Suddenly she finds herself in front of room number 12. Francesca remembers uneasily that she hasn’t yet cleaned this room. Strange, thinks Francesca - she can’t recall the guest checking out but she knows for a fact that the reservation wasn’t extended. She decides on the spot to clean the room up quickly, so that she can have more time in bed with Monica in the morning, and longer to make breakfast. Francesca opens the door with a master key and turns on the light. She sees a man in his mid-fifties wearing an A.S. Roma shirt with the number of Francesco Totti - number 10 - and dangling from the ceiling on a rope. His head leans slightly to one side, as if he were resting on his own shoulder. Francesca puts the fruit bowl down on the floor, climbs on a chair and cuts down the departed A.S. Roma fan. She is unable to hold up the heavy body, and it crashes to the floor. Next to it she notices a note scribbled in an energetic hand:

Better a decent end than scratching round in the dustbin for food. 30 years of graft for fuck all. You can all kiss my arse. Pippo.

‘The crisis...’ says Francesca almost inaudibly. She picks up the note and leaves Pippo’s room.