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***The Absence of Beauty***

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Lále sang in the car; something she had never done in front of Pável. She wasn't inhibited; it just didn't matter if he liked her. Pit could barely tear his eyes away from the dark-skinned woman singing in Hungarian at his side. Smiling self-consciously, he told Lále that when she looked at him he felt like disappearing into a black hole. He laughed because she was singing in German and he made the car swerve on the empty street. Even if he was not Pável - Lále was glad he liked her.

They tasted the food being served; not everything was first-rate and when they saw each other's reaction they couldn't help but grin. They told stories about their childhood in their respective countries, about the fall of the Wall, and discovered they had much in common. They laughed, even though their memories were often pitiful. He talked about the old ladies at the old age home where he had worked and how they weren't always so ladylike. He had a way of telling stories that was both charming and respectful; Lále listened to him talking about how he washed old people's behinds, while swallowing their insults with the patience of a saint.

She felt great and miserable. When those feelings came over her, the almost-happy moments vanished. Pit could do nothing to help or hinder it.

Lále noticed his helpless fidgeting. She swallowed the pangs of conscience about not having informed him about the depths of her spiritual

despair. It was impossible for her to talk to Pit about Pável. And it was even more impossible for her to stop thinking about Pável. In fact, she was incapable of being attracted to Pit in the same way she was immediately attracted to Pável. Even if she had wanted it more than anything else. When they laughed, when they sang, Pável momentarily faded away. Such moments weren't frequent. It would be good if there were more of them. Lále was shocked when she got pregnant. That her egg took hold of his semen seemed like a paradoxical chemical process to her. She looked at Pit's hands and his chin in disgust and broke into a sweat at the thought she could be carrying a miniature Pit inside of her. But she did not get an abortion. She wasn't convinced in the least about her decision. She was lying on the right edge of the French bed, dreading he might move an inch closer. She felt a sense of relief when he fell asleep. She listened to him breathing. Pável's name once lit up on her telephone display. She was amazed more than excited and this came as a surprise to her. For a few seconds she stared at the display on the ringer; it didn't arouse any feelings so she took the call. After his initial, "how are you?" came Láles "good." And that was that. Quiet breathing. Suddenly he let loose a barrage of details about his latest production. He used the same expressions as he had back then, made the same jokes. Lále didn't ask him if he was seeing

anybody, although that's all she really cared about. She briefly told him about the pregnancy and felt his relief at her friendly response. She hated him for it. Her pregnant body reminded her of the other pregnancy. But Pável was not a part of her life anymore. The only being, who ever had promised to bond with her and stay with her forever was the cell mass in her abdomen. Pável dared to make an obscene comment, saying he always liked sleeping with pregnant women. And if she happened to be traveling to Hungary in the near future. Lále answered with a frosty good-bye, which didn't prevent Pável from delighting in his own joke. Most likely he blamed the bad connection for Lále not laughing along with him.

It wasn't that Pável forbade her from loving Pit. Lále simply didn't have the capacity to do so. In staying together with him, she was betraying nature, Pit and the child.

She had filed her ex-matriculation certificate together with the rest of her university documents. She stroked the stamp, at times it looked inky blue with a circle of faded gaps, at others colorfully pasted on. Back then, when they gave it to her, she had thought the German documents were beautiful. She looked at the long foreign words, which at the time she could not understand. They had said something about her - it was like having somebody slip a key to her

innermost self inside the cherry-red file.

She had enrolled in Berlin to study history. She admired how the Germans moved words around their mouths and for their capacity to create beautiful and meaningful constructs. German is a rhetorical language, it probably structured the brain's entire activity; her fellow students were clear, direct and peerless in their talent for taking language to acrobatic heights. For months Lále could barely understand anything she had heard during lectures, she was terrified of being called on and unable to answer; she didn't want anybody to hear her accent for fear it would reflect badly on her. At some point, she attended only language courses. Together with the Russians, Chinese and New Zealanders she watched Fassbinder films, learned Rilke poems by heart and took part in a performance by the foreign students of laconic sketches in German.

Once after a movie, the person who was sitting next to her had lost his cap and blocked the row from exiting. Lále's eyes were glued to the screen. In the credits, there was some information about studying in the animation program.

On the first day of classes there was a performance, a joint project by the animation and drama students. By the time she'd finally located the theater, the performance had already started. She walked up to the closed door and listened inside. As she looked around helplessly, she saw somebody walking down the long corridor. A small

man with long wavy hair and green eyes. They both held their ears to the door. They looked at each other.

"I'm hungry," he said.

"Me too," said Lále.

His sweater got caught on the door handle and he muttered a couple of profanities. Lále smiled broadly. He was a Hungarian, too. He seemed foreign to her with his light skin and green eyes. And his name was not very Hungarian, Pável. At first glance, he had beautiful eyes. The second time around, he seemed strange. By the third glance, Lále wasn't able to tell whether he looked beautiful or strange. She liked everything about him. He ordered more food than they could eat and he pushed all of it towards her.

"You've got to eat." He was totally engaging, paternal, acted as if he had long known her eating habits, as if they hadn't just met by chance.

It wasn't fun eating at Tamama. They recycled all the leftovers and by the third day the salad was wilted and the meat tasted warmed over and rancid, the potatoes were pasty, fresh bread was rare. Tamama spread some gray liverwurst onto the hard bread and offered it to Lále. Lále chewed and chewed and could not forget that by eating something foreign was infiltrating her body. She never had asked for seconds, or complained she was hungry. Whenever she tried not to eat the food being served, she succumbed to Tamama's arguments. When she first came to Germany, not

being forced to eat had given her an intoxicating sense of freedom. Her rumbling stomach was an anthem of purity. By the second, third day, she had trouble seeing. When she moved her head, the world was made up of streaky spots. It always took a while before she caught an image, understood the situation. She felt numb, protected, as if she was drunk. In this phase of starving herself, she was happy and had a permanent smile on her face, her sense of beauty was based on nothingness, suddenly she loved everybody. And just as suddenly she grew sleepy and listless. Unable to sleep, she lay exhausted for hours in a motionless trance. It was as if her body had been trying to get used to the new circumstances, to readjust. Of course, she lost weight. The mass of cloth fluttering around her allowed only an approximation of her figure. She was always cold, no matter how much the sun had shone during the day. And at some point she got a headache. She was in a lot of pain and it reminded her of her mortality.

With Pável food turned into something else. A certain calm entered Lále's stomach; with a comforting shudder, she realized being satiated made her entire body feel blissful. She enjoyed every bite with him. She did not worry about what the food was doing to her body, she was concentrating on his words, her eyes hung on his lips, his nose, his eyes. Food was something they analyzed, it assured them of their national

character, and, above all, it was something they shared in common. One more thing.

Lále leafed through the documents and caressed the ex-matriculation certificate absent-mindedly. The abortion had knocked her off her feet, she wasn't able to open her mail, and that's how the inevitable occurred.

She was pregnant again. She felt sick. Having a career was the last thing on her mind.

When Dorothee told her she was able to hide her pregnancy up to the eighth month, Lále believed her right away. She was slender, hadn't breast fed because she did not want to ruin her breasts. Lále nodded approvingly—she really was impeccable—and with a little contempt because she had not demanded anything from the baby. Dorothee had long black hair, her small curls seemed unnatural; she wore boots and a lot of make-up. She looked as if a child had cut out a fairy face from a book of fairy tales and stuck it onto the body of a fashion model in a glossy magazine. She incessantly talked about wandering souls and told Lále she had to throw stones at negative energy to keep it away from her. For no apparent reason, Lále was immediately taken with her from the very first meeting. Since Dorothee was such a freak, Lále stopped being the brunt of everybody's jokes. She didn't have to be ashamed of anything. Dorothee - elfin, horribly thin, walked with a stoop— she was pale as a wax figure and Lále



often asked her if she was feeling well, as if she was the therapist and not the patient. Even Dorothee's black cat, which always hid from the other patients, jumped up on Lále's lap and rubbed her head on her belly and arm as if she was covered in fish paste. Dorothee had to lock the animal out of the room so she could continue talking without interruption.

In Zehlendorf, time passed quickly. Lále tried to slow down the clock with a look. If the clock were to tick that fast for the rest of her life, it would soon be over. Being there was the only pastime that came close to matching the intensity Lále had felt when she was together with Pável. This wasn't because the encounters with him were being mystified at Dorothee's, but because her own endlessly chewed-over misery seemed like a great adventure to her on the therapy couch, and Dorothee's dedication to investigating and naming the hidden causes made that journey together all the more exciting.

Influenced by Dorothee, Lále bought cleansing crystals, listened to meditation music, sniffed incense and purchased two books by Osho that she placed in plain sight on the bookshelf without reading them. She counted the hours until the next appointment and hostilely eyed Dorothee's other patients. The situation reminded her of a brothel. The chair was still warm; five minutes earlier a total stranger had been complaining to Dorothee about her life. The rapid

descent into the next valley of tears didn't seem to faze Dorothee.

When Lále got pregnant, the altered physical state endowed her with sovereignty. She was so vehemently involved with her body, she had no room for lovesickness. And anyway, she was nauseous. "When you're pregnant, the crap comes to the surface and just keeps on churning," she told Dorothee. "You can't gloss over that. You can't turn disgust into pity. You are heavy, exposed and stupid. Maybe you can smell and hear more, but control is lost for good. You cry and scream and can't stand anything. Especially your own condition: You don't want to be pregnant."

Lále tried to neutralize the rooms with cleaning rituals as Dorothee had advised. But it seemed she had done something incorrectly; her life continued to be a mess. Finally she gave up and placed the crystals among the few important items she took with her every time she moved. The treasures consisted of a small altar made of ivory, a charcoal drawing - a portrait of her father her mother had drawn—a small diary with spots on the cover, a few postcards and the largest item: an old Erika typewriter. She felt at home when she had these items close by.

She usually typed meaningless, incoherent letters on the Erika for the sounds it made and the typeface. Sometimes she wrote letters which she

rarely finished and never sent, awkward sentences with uneven line spacing, a little smudged, some letters had been typed over. Whenever she read the texts, it made Lále sick. She tore the paper out of the machine. A corner was missing. She turned the creaking cylinder, but the fugitive piece of paper had been swallowed by it. She shrugged her shoulders, put on her coat and stepped outdoors. She strolled down the street to kill time. If she came too early, her mother would be angry. She claimed it disturbed her concentration. "At least before you get here, I'd like to forget you exist," she had said, and everybody looked at Lále as if she had stuck her naked buttocks into her mother's face. She had not. She had merely stopped by. She lowered her eyes. Shame had more weight than gravity.

She preferred to stroll like a tourist in her own life. She saw the lights turn on in the windows. Sometimes they were just warm-yellow spots; sometimes it was like a scene being performed from inside a *Laterna Magica*. Slowly, the city took on a gray cast.

Sometimes she circled the cellar club entrance. Nobody was there, but the door was open; the second time around two bouncers were wrestling with each other, panting and laughing. Afterwards, she walked along the avenue; busses stopped and it didn't bother anybody. But when the bus driver drove off

without waiting for everybody to get inside, all hell broke loose. The people who were locked out kicked the door; the driver stoically looked straight through the window, while turning the giant steering wheel.

She only dared to go inside the club when a short queue had formed in front. The bouncer let her pass. Inside the club, Lále was swallowed by the windowless mass, thick smoke and a sharp sour odor. A woman sat at the bar. Her dark blue eyes shone slightly phosphorescent at Lále, like cats eyes. She held a cigarette in her hand that looked like an organic extension of her long fingers. Another woman stood behind the bar wiping the smooth surface. It was easy to see her reflection in the mirrored wall with the three light bulbs. A braid of fire-red hair danced on her head, actually her hair was too short for a ponytail and it kept slipping out of the rubber band. The rag reached the smoking cat woman's glass; she raised it and swished the wine in a circular motion.

The stage was filled with boxes. A technician was stooping in front of two cables and a microphone stand was lying on its side.

Lále sat on top of a giant amplifier next to the stage, leaned against the heavy black curtain and was barely visible.

The club filled with people. Her mother appeared on stage every so often and looked around busily, but did not look in Lále's direction. She checked

the microphones, "one, two, one, two", drank greedily from a bottle, straightened her black stockings with the rhinestone snake design, kissed some of the men who walked past with instruments and beer bottles in hand, and then fidgeted with her pantyhose again. She paused a moment, spread her arms wide, jumped from the stage, grabbed a cigarette from a stage worker standing next to Lále and sucked the smoke deep into her lungs. When a few people in the audience started shouting her name, she disappeared backstage. The bouncer came and shooed the heckling fans away. A minor scuffle broke out. Lále wondered whether her mother had seen the trouble she had caused.

The amplifier Lále was sitting on spewed loud music. She needed to get off of it, or she'd go deaf. The air was made of a thick cloud of smoke underscored by a dissonant wall of sound. At some point, the last technician vanished from the stage, leaving an eerie silence. Lále covered her ears. Even without looking, she perceived the weight of the mass. Then came the first eardrum-bursting chords as her mother strutted onto the stage. Delicate, ageless, childlike. Everybody said she was a girl-woman. For Lale she was her mother. .And goddess.

She sang with a velvety voice, deep, low; suddenly she screamed and moaned; it was terrifying. She was in a trance throughout the entire concert. Her small sinewy body arched

tensely with her voice. When she stopped, the reflectors panned across her face and made the beads of sweat sparkle under her dark, damp strands. Her eyelashes of lumpy black mascara caught a few specks of dust. Her skin shone yellowish. Her tense face looked pained and it grew paler with every word. A whole palette of pain: every word suddenly possessed an unsuspected beauty, even if she only uttered the word "and".

Lále drove back to Prenzlauer Berg from Zehlendorf. She had moved there a month earlier and hadn't unpacked her boxes. She lived with Pit as if she were an overnight guest. She needed half an hour. The cobblestones made every screw in the car and every bone in her body tremble. The red lights seemed to be getting longer. By the time she reached the front door, she was swimming in sweat. She passed through the stucco-decorated entrance and walked across the courtyard to the rear building, which was painted in the same dark green color, but without stucco. She climbed the stairs with her eyes closed. The heat abruptly vanished from her forehead and her steps grew light as a feather. A tingling sensation kept shooting down her legs; as though a piece of elastic from her panties was dancing in her pants. She put the key into the door and was full of happy anticipation, given the weightlessness that would soon wander through

her limbs once she lay on the sofa. Lále looked back at the window in the staircase. She uttered a strangled scream. The staircase was filled with blood. She looked down at herself. Her pants were soaked.

She hesitantly asked the person on the phone what she was supposed to do. She kept washing the black puddles away. Pit was working near Nuremberg, calibrating roller blades; he called a colleague in Berlin who Lále had never met. He was supposed to pick her up and take her to the hospital. She walked down the hallway and quickly tried to remove the traces of blood, at least the most obvious spots.

Pit's colleague came, took her arm and shamelessly inspected her stomach. She felt like an impostor who wasn't pregnant anymore, yet had continued to allow herself to be treated as if she was. He drove her to the emergency hospital. His hair was pulled tightly back into a pony tail; he looked like he was wearing a black bathing cap. His eyes were red. The nurse at the reception signaled them to sit in plastic chairs in the hallway. Lále didn't want to talk. The ponytail was staring straight ahead. There was a lot of activity on both sides of the corridor. Nobody came to Lále. Something was tugging in her abdomen. Warm blood was flowing in her pad. Doors opened and closed. Nobody looked at her. Slowly, she grew restless. Finally, somebody came up to her, but just before he reached her,

he raced past them. The nurse at the reception hurried in the other direction. Lále felt like she was sitting in a bowl of warm liquid. She didn't want to get up again. She was afraid the chair was bloody.

"You have to go and ask," she said softly. Her escort looked around awkwardly, slid back and forth in his chair and grew calm again. He acted as if he had done everything in his power, or as if the problem had disappeared into thin air.

"It's full of blood," she said quietly again. He looked at her in dismay.

"Could you go and ask?"

She pointed her head towards an open door at the end of the corridor where the nurses were fluttering in and out. It was obviously the head station. The man sitting next to her said nothing and didn't get up. "I'm losing my child," she said angrily and this finally made him get up. He took two steps and stopped again. She nodded encouragingly. He looked back after each step, until he reached the door. He got rammed into several times, until finally somebody asked him what he wanted. He said two words, pointed at her and shrugged his shoulders. A doctor rushed over to Lále, opened a door near her and shouted! "Come here we completely forgot about you!" Lále stood up and looked at the chair: no spot. While Lále was climbing onto the cot, the doctor switched on the ultrasound equipment. "The embryo has detached. He is still there, heartbeat



is okay, but it's doubtful whether he will be able to re-attach. He's going to come out in the next few days, that much is certain. Of course, you can try to lie down, move as little as possible, but I don't want to get your hopes up." A glossy black image slipped out of the machine; the doctor tore it off and held it in front of her eyes. "You can clearly see the detached area here." She pointed to a dark spot on the dark ultrasound image. Lále frowned. The doctor then circled the shadows with a pen and put the slip of paper in her hand. When she looked at the spot, Lále felt a kind of intimacy - that was her child, it lived, it had a heartbeat - and she felt a kind of melancholy, as if everything had been irrevocably decided.

Lále was lying at home, trying not to get bogged down in thought. She rested, read, and waited for the rush of blood. A person who had never had a real mother was probably in no position to become a mother.

Her mother came home in the morning with ashes in her hair; the all-nighter had painted her face in shadow. She had moved past them wordlessly. Irritated by the light and the children's looks, she disappeared into her room. Lále learned how to act as if she wasn't there. Being overlooked was the lesser evil. The worst thing was to feel her mother's listless gaze, she acknowledged Lále either with a look of fatigue, or she was too busy to notice her. She also knew a

gentle, devoted, attentive mother with shiny eyes. But that only happened when she had guests sitting at the table. By herself, Lále was incapable of eliciting this reaction.

If the mother went to sleep in the morning, Tamama and Lále spoke in whispers and tiptoed around her. The mother tossed and turned on the bed. She crushed the pillow over her head, kicked the covers off, only to grab them and pull them back on. She'd then get up and stagger toward the bathroom door. The two fell silent, as if they had awakened her with their whispers.

She hadn't bled. After two weeks, she went to the next examination. The ultrasound showed a developed embryo, appropriate for its age, agile, firmly connected to the uterus.

After her initial joy, she grew silent. She had been given a second chance, but now there was no turning back. She surrendered to what would happen and listened to her inner thoughts.

Sometimes acquiescence resembled happiness. As far as she knew how happiness might feel.

Sometimes, for example, the evenings were less bleak than usual; they felt exciting even if she hadn't been doing anything. Or maybe she had. She waited. Like at Christmas. Lále was sitting at the kitchen table. She leaned back and stretched out her legs. Nothing happened, but she felt good. The warmth of the dim light above the table, the darkness outside, the sporadic

movement she perceived and then there was Pit sitting at the table; occasionally he got up or his teaspoon clattered, all these things soothed her. They said nothing to each other and were thinking about the same thing.

On one such evening, a tiny stream dripped down her thighs. She had noticed it by chance, she had felt nothing. She took the litmus strip from the bathroom cabinet and caught a drop. It turned the strip blue. She searched for a sign of happy anticipation, but found only unease, as if the condition of being "pregnant" would remain without consequences. She didn't feel like having the uninvited.

They drove to the hospital. She didn't have contractions, or anything else for that matter. Lále watched the women moaning and felt like a visitor. She asked Pit if he could please take her home. From the puzzled look on his face, she noticed the future father's reproach at having been slighted. He should have the child, if he thinks he knows everything so much better. She turned to the eager bellies that were moaning and screaming. Well, girls, come on, show Pit how a good wife looks when she gives birth! Lále was walking through the station door when a nurse shouted to her.

They fumbled around and sent her walking. Numbers and Latin terms were flying around and after ten hours, her cervix had allegedly widened by six inches. She was up all

night. They put her on the ECG which displayed the contractions. The most she felt was, perhaps, a slight case of nausea. She would bring her child into the world painlessly, she thought. Suddenly, they dragged her onto a stretcher and wheeled her through the corridors; everybody was shouting chaotically. When she asked what was going on, she didn't get an answer. The never-ending white walls were like a ski slope in a driving simulator.