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Like in That Film

Translated from Croatian by Celia Hawkesworth

It had not rained for a week. The roads were dry and brimming with the filth the rains had washed up. But before this it had rained for days. The river had burst its banks and created a murky lake down below the town. Now it had gone. Instead of water, cascades of dirt, mud and rubbish of all kinds was strewn there. The weather had cleared. There was not the trace of a cloud in the sky, just uniform blue. I was sitting at the bus stop. I was waiting for Ivana. It was late autumn. Cranes were flying over the town. They flew high up, they looked like tiny drops of ink and the sky like endless light-blue paper. They came from the north and flew over the town for a long time in separate, orderly formations. There were hundreds of them, thousands. The air was full of their cries. A flock in the shape of the letter V followed one in the shape of an upside-down figure 1, then there was a long formation in the shape of a straight line, then another V, this time uneven, with one line longer than the other. Then a vertical V ... You could not see the end of them. The first flock had appeared in the sky an hour before, and they were still flying. And they would go on flying, for a long time: an interminable black broken ribbon drawn across the sky. My grandfather, my mother's father, called the cranes badyears, presumably because they were infallibly followed by cold days, the bad part of the year. I imagined that in the following way: the last cranes fly over, their cries are ever weaker. After them floats a cold current of air carrying snow with it. That was, in fact, what they were fleeing from.

Ivana was the wife of my best friend, Braco. She was supposed to be arriving from Zagreb by bus. She had left Braco a month before, abandoned him. They had quarrelled about a waitress Braco had been dancing round. I knew about it. Although dancing was perhaps a bit too strong a word. It was nothing serious, there were others, I knew of five or six, who danced round her in a similar way to Braco, but who knows what gossip had reached Ivana. They didn't have any children. She had said, then, that she would never come back, and that, for all she cared, Braco could go off with that waitress wherever he liked. Recently, Braco had got drunk, I was with him on that occasion, we sat drinking for three hours. First we drank a few beers, and then we switched to brandy. We drank almost a litre. After that he got into his car and crashed it into a streetlight, a hundred yards or so away. I had tried to persuade him not to drive, as though I had known. He wouldn't listen, and now he had been in hospital for ten days, unconscious and hooked up to machines.

There was a capricious wind blowing. It kept changing direction, as though it had got lost in the town and was vainly looking for a way out. It came in bursts: when it blew, it drowned out the cries of the cranes. It whipped up the dust, tossed it into my face and swept on down the streets. I was left with its acrid taste in my mouth. The columns of dust kept changing direction. It looked as though the wind was keeping on tossing the same dust cloud into my eyes. It also carried plastic bags, a whole flock of plastic bags was roaming through the town. The river had drawn back into its bed, leaving behind hundreds and hundreds of plastic bags with heaps of other debris all along its banks and in the places where it had overflowed. From a distance, it looked as though snow had gathered in those places. Now that they had dried out, the wind was lifting them up and shifting them round the town. They were everywhere: on fences, steps, trees, inside ruined buildings, they slipped and rolled along the streets ... The ones that were hanging in the branches of trees looked like birds caught in a trap, desperately flapping their wings. The wind swelled them like sails. And it sent a two-litre plastic coca-cola bottle rolling over the platforms. It was playing with it: tossing it from left to right, up and down, spinning it round in one

place... It reminded me of a crazed animal chasing its own tail, a maddened fox. As in some wonderland, plastic birds were flying around me, high above them interminable flocks of cranes, while mad plastic foxes wound round my legs.

The bus was already half an hour late. I went to the Information point. There was a sour, bad-tempered type sitting there. He could not tell me anything. He was running the fingers of his right hand through his hair and reading a newspaper. He did not even look at me properly.

"The Zagreb bus," I asked, "it's already half an hour late?"

He raised his eyes from the paper and glanced at the wall clock.

"Yes, half an hour," he said.

"So, when will it get here?"

"I've no idea."

He went on reading his paper. It was Sports News.

Braco's hospital was in the next town. We'd get there in Braco's car, the same one that he crashed into the streetlight. I had fixed it and given it a facelift. I had paid a hundred and fifty marks just for parts, not counting my own, the ones I had in the workshop. If I had included them, the bill would certainly have come to three hundred marks. It was a good car, the latest Golf, turbo-diesel, servo wheel. German import. Now it looked better than the day Braco brought it from Germany. I had put new headlights in front, a chrome bumper, I had replaced the mudguards and bonnet, taking them off another Golf that had not been crushed. At the back, along the whole width, over the rear lights I had built stop lights and on the rear side windows I had stuck dark, opaque foil. And finally I had polished it, you couldn't tell where the new paint had been applied, it shone so beautifully.

Ivana was wearing a headscarf. The wind had rolled the plastic bottle up to my feet. I got up and threw it into a rubbish bin. The bus pulled back from the platform and continued on its way. Ivana was waiting. She had only a small dark-blue sports bag. It was lying at her feet. She did not look great. Over there, in Zagreb, they had discovered some illness. Ivana thought it was cancer, but no one wanted to say so openly. And her hair was falling out. That was why she wore a scarf, she told me. She told me that everyone was kind in the hospitals there.

"Here too," I said.

"Yes, but it's not like there. Here, if you don't give the doctors or nurses something, they won't even look at you."

"They will," I said. "It depends. You get all sorts. Here and there."

"Don't kid yourself."

"Do you really think that?" I said.

"Totally."

We were crossing a bridge. I was driving. Now that the water had subsided, the bridge seemed higher and longer. When it had been raining so hard, at one time the water had almost reached the bridge. It looked as though someone had cut it and shortened it at the ends. Tons of rubbish were lying along the banks. A cloud of plastic birds was resting on the trees beside the river. As though at any moment, at the least sound, they would rise up into the air. There were some on the the wire supporting cables of the bridge as well. Those ones looked like washing hung out to dry.

"I saw a film at my brother's in Zagreb," Ivana said.

"What was it called?" I asked.

"I don't know. It was about a woman " she went on, "she's been in a coma, for ages, years maybe. And a man comes to her ..."

“Her husband?”

“No, but it's not important. He comes every day and talks to her.”

“What about?”

“Anything, everything.”

“She can't hear him, or ...” I said.

“No, she can't. Or perhaps she can. That's the point. Nobody knows,” she said and stopped. “I was thinking the same thing... Thinking of Braco. How I would like him to hear...” she said a bit later. “There are always things we haven't said to each other, and should have. Both of us, me and him.”

“Oh, he can definitely hear!” I said. “And that woman in the film, does it help her, that talking?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there you are! Then she can hear.”

“They had time. Lots.”

“It'll be all right,” I said.

“I suppose so,” she said vaguely. “But it would be so good to know whether he can hear.”

We had crossed the bridge, the river was a long way behind us, the road was as straight as an arrow, and I put my foot down. The engine was as good as new, it purred like a cat. If I pressed the pedal a little more, I thought, the car would detach itself from the ground and fly, like a plane. The last cranes were dragging themselves across the sky. These ones were stragglers, they weren't flying in regular formation, like the ones before them. Their cries could no longer be heard.

“Those are the ones that won't make it,” said Ivana. “Most of them.”

“Who? The cranes?”

“Yes.”

Although I could see only scattered dots at the end of the ribbon that was slowly winding its way over the sky, I imagined the birds, I could see them, desperately flapping their wings, trying to maintain the rhythm of the flock.

“No, they won't,” I said.

I imagined them beating their wings ever harder, but still the flock was steadily moving away.

“You can't be sure,” said Ivana.

We reached the town. We could see the hospital. It was on a slope above the town.

The machine ticked monotonously. Ivana was sitting beside Braco's bed, talking to him. I couldn't hear what about. I was standing a little distance away, just by the door. Occasionally a word would reach me. I listened to the ticking of the machine. It seemed to me that at a certain moment the rhythm altered. The machine ticked more rapidly. Ten rapid ticks, and then it reverted to the old rhythm. Then again. Or was I just hearing it in my head? No matter. I went up to Ivana.

“He can hear you,” I told her. “When you talk to him the ticking of the machine becomes irregular, it speeds up. That must be why.”

“Do you think so?” she said.

“Definitely. It couldn't be anything else. Talk to him. I'll wait for you outside. There's no hurry.”

I was sitting on a bench from where you could see the hospital entrance. Ivana had been talking to Braco for an hour now. To my left the town stretched away. Dust was blowing about the streets here as well. But there were no plastic bags, as in our town. There was no river flowing through this town so they hadn't had any floods, or bags. The wind rustled the treetops. There were trees all around me: pines, planes and chestnuts. If I closed my eyes, I could distinguish precisely the sound the wind made in the pines from that of the planes or chestnuts. I couldn't distinguish those two: the planes and

chestnuts made almost the same sound. There's a doctor in our town who has twenty or so photographs on the wall of his clinic, one next to the other. The photographs are of the same scene. The first shows bare rock and the sky above it. There's a line of hills as well: they rise at a slant towards the other end of the photograph. There are saplings planted in straight rows. The upper row follows the line of the hills. In the next picture, the saplings are a little higher. The same on the third. The forest is growing from left to right. He calls this trees growing. The last photograph on the right shows a dense pine forest. All those photographs were taken from the same spot. Who knows how many were taken, over ten, fifteen, twenty years ... Maybe the doctor also sometimes closes his eyes and imagines the sound the pine trees on the photographs make. It must be a sad, wistful sound. Because that's the noise pine trees make. Once I asked him how many years he had spent taking the pictures. He did not reply. Or at least he did, but as though he hadn't, I couldn't understand him at all. I doubt that anyone would have understood him. He was a strange man, that doctor. He had an ugly, lifeless look in his eyes. Braco maintained it was because of the war. He called it the look of a thousand footsteps, after some film, presumably. "Ten, twenty years, it doesn't matter," he said. "Or thirty, fifty ... The essence is in the tree, in the fact that it grows. Do you understand? That's the only thing that matters. Trees that grow."

I couldn't grasp why that was important. But never mind.

Ivana was coming out of the hospital.

"You were right," she said. "He can hear, he definitely can."

We went over to the car. She believed it. You could see it in her face. That was the most important thing. I had begun to doubt it, as soon as I came out of the hospital. Sometimes, quite simply, we hear what we want to hear. Or see. Perhaps it was only in my head that I was speeding up or slowing down the beating of Braco's heart.

"I told him about everything: Zagreb, you, the great way you've fixed up the car, about their hospitals, the ones in Zagreb, plastic bags all over the town, everything... Only I didn't tell him about myself, about my illness.

"Like in that film?"

"Sort of."

We drove across the bridge. Birds could still be heard in the branches of the trees along the bank. Like in a different film. There was some water there as well, it seems to me. I imagine: I'm standing on a river bank, and then at a given moment I clap my hands with all my strength. The birds rise up into the sky. Everything is white with their wings. A white ribbon forms across the sky. I imagine their cry: it reminds me of the cry of the cranes. Or, I imagine them attacking me. Like in that film.