

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

MIHA MAZZINI
WAITING IN
WINNEMUCKA

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Miha Mazzini: Waiting in Winnemucka

Short story, version 2.20

Entering a human body means losing contact with reality. There are ten billion bytes of information around me one moment, but when I go through the eye, set off down the optic nerve and settle in the brain, there are only a hundred bytes left. I receive only the merest hints about the world. Being human is limited.

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The man I had entered had only recently come of age. He had his driving license in his shirt pocket and from time to time patted it with his right hand. His frontal lobe was still not fully developed, neither was his ability for long-term planning. He had not bought drink for the journey; out of the sheer excitement of being able to drive he preferred to suffer from thirst. I directed him to the parking lot and bought him a can of his favorite drink from the machine. I let him drink in long swallows, the icy bubbles filling his nose and rasping his throat. For a moment, I melded with him. The sensuality of their bodies works like an eraser.

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He choked and I let the reflexes do their thing. The relief after the first deep intake of breath fogged my thinking once more. They are not aware how their breathing unites them – in every breath, there is at least one molecule which has passed through the lungs of every person that has ever lived. Including the man I had been in before him, nearly three thousand Earth years ago. At the other end of the planet, with a similar landscape, with tufts of semi-dry vegetation on sandy ground.

On a building nearby a sign consisting of multiple light bulbs was flashing away, even though the sun was still up. I directed the young man to the entrance. The doorman demanded ID from my borrowed body. When he examined the driving license, he smiled broadly:

“Welcome,” he said, pointing at the darkened room. The body around me was surprised by the joy upon the realization that this was the first time it was able to enter.

I watched him push a bill into a slot. The lights twinkled and the machine rattled. He pressed a button. The concept filled me with interest: you wait for a coincidence, three equal images must position themselves side by side. A billion consecutive goes would keep showing the same ratio. In their transience they are only able to see a small fragment of the sequence and therefore call it luck; for us who are immortal in comparison, it is all just statistics.

Two gray haired ladies doused in perfume were sitting at the other end of the row of slot machines. When the one on the right reached for her drink, the one on the left pressed the button for retrieving money. Coins fell into the slot and the old woman clapped her hands, shouting: "I've won! I've won!" Her friend's face tensed for a moment so that her lips nearly made contact with her nose.

A status lie, how impressive! My body corrected me and turned its head. In this society you are only allowed to watch if you remain hidden.

*

When the slot machine stopped responding, I halted the hand that was going to reach for another bill. I turned the head toward an older man sitting on a stool at the bar. He was passing an empty glass from one hand to another – the right hand pushed it along the varnished surface and then the left hand sent it back again. Long, slow moves. The man had a broad, bent back, above it there was only a crescent of hair surrounding a bald patch. In his brain my protégé was waiting.

I let him sense me. He rapidly took control over the body, the glass turned over, the shoulder blades nearly clapped together and the head jerked back. The hands slammed on the counter as if wanting to drill through it with the fingers.

The man slowly turned. A bushy yellowed moustache protruded into his mouth and he kept automatically pushing it out with short bursts of air. His bald patch shone with grease in spite of the dimmed lights and on the back of his hands age spots combined into large brown patches.

I set my young man in motion and led him to the stool next to the old man's. The waitress picked up his glass, wiped the spilt drops and looked at me questioningly.

"The same again, for both of us," said the body next to mine.

“They have more drinks than when you were last on Earth,” he said, allowing his head to follow the waitress to the shelf with bottles, “I took the liberty of ordering you a drink, too. I think your young man will like it.”

The waitress came back and stood before us with two glasses containing reddish liquid.

I let my body act automatically. I felt pride and looked at its roots: until now, he had had to drink secretly, this was followed by hesitation, worry, he was driving, his mother’s face. I took control over his hand just for a moment, enough to push it toward me only by an inch, then it continued on its own.

Their brains can make do with so little information because they are supported by the nervous system, full of stored procedures about which they do not need to think or be aware. In this way some of the burden is removed from the tiny fragment of consciousness they possess. Out of all the beings I have entered as part of my job and on the basis of a court warrant, humans are easiest to control: the procedures run automatically, but if I need one of them, all I have to do is give a little push.

The drink brought an unpleasant sharp taste which after a few seconds turned into sweetness. I have been visiting various planets for a long enough time to know that you can tell what the essence of a civilization is from their bad habits. I took another sip: Earthlings think that it is only through suffering you can achieve pleasure.

“I’d like to ...” my protégé lifted his man’s shoulders. “I must give you an introductory warning,” I interrupted,

“it’s the procedure. Everything you say, think or do, will be recorded and can be used against you. We also record the physical state of the body in which you reside, as we know that it’s not possible to separate thoughts from matter when residing in one of them. The moment you start your speech, this hearing becomes official and lasts until we stop it upon your request. As you know, I’m only responsible for your case, not a member of the court. I will add my opinion to your request, but the court will treat it only informatively. I must warn you that you have already asked for a parole dismissal three times before, completely needlessly in the opinion of the judges.”

“Sir,” he said, “it’s different this time. I’ve been thinking for a long time ...”

The body in front of me began sucking its bottom lip and blowing away its moustache, there was a bubbling noise at the bottom of its lungs and a wheeze turned into a long bout of coughing and moaning until my protégé took control again and stilled it.

“I apologize,” he said, “he was a miner until all the mines in this country were closed, then a stoker in a heating plant. He thinks there must be a lot of coal dust in his lungs and when he manages to cough it all up, he’ll be well again.”

“Are you ready?” “Yes.”

“The recording has started,” I told him.

With a single move, he poured the rest of his drink down his throat.

My young man’s hand was waving to the waitress. A clumsy, still fresh mechanism, a gloating feeling – he was new to publicly ordering alcohol.

We waited for our glasses to be refilled.

My protégé’s body rubbed its eyes and supported its head on its hand.

“I apologize for bothering the court ... I was new ... I was different.”

His face turned fully toward me.

“Can we go out? My body ... You have probably noticed that humans are a set of automatic processes that vie for attention and want to be put into operation. The consciousness of the man I occupy is now dealing with one of them and that’s taking up most of my short-term memory.”

The waitress took the bills and thanked us. We led our men among the empty rows of slot machines, past the dining room in which the waitresses were chatting, through a double glass door onto a tarred surface. My protégé let his body greedily reach for a pack of cigarettes, get one out and light it. A new habit, a new characteristic of this civilization: they are constantly reminded of hell after death, so they choose to inhale smoke and fire while still alive, little by little.

Above us a huge neon sign was flashing, even though the sun had not yet begun to set. Across the completely empty junction, on the traffic light pole, there was a sign saying Winnemucka Blvd. We filled our available bytes with the image of a woman who stepped out of the house opposite, got in a car and drove a few yards down the road, to the parking lot belonging to a large store, behind which there was only a cemetery and then bleak flatland.

“Can we go for a ride,” he asked after his body had deposited the charred cigarette filter into a tall ashtray,

“I’d find it easier ... His car is over there.”

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I sat the young man in the driver's seat and sensed his fear, it swayed me a little, this was followed by the image of his mother's face, so I allowed him to get out again and leave the driving to the older body. Driving was one of man's well established automatic processes. A straight road stretching into eternity, the same speed all the way, trucks that occasionally let out a cloud of smoke. A sour smell of old cigarette butts.

"It's clear to me now," he began, "that at first I was acting like a ..." He could not find the right word. "Like a" he said again, an echo. "Maybe because I thought ... Why did you put me here? On Earth? I know, a punishment, but you didn't tell me what you expected from me. You took most of my power, but even what you left me with, was for them ... I thought that you'd sent me to create some order here, as soon as possible. A deluge and a completely new beginning was obviously not what the court wanted as it rejected my first request.

But I already talked about this at my second appeal. What I'd like to talk about now is a man called Jesus.

First, let me say something about their biology. You've noticed what a small fraction of the world they're able to control. I've often asked myself if you'd found this world on purpose, as a way of letting me know how limited I had been when I ... did that for which you punished me."

Visual stimuli came to me from the point where the asphalt met the sky. He wanted an answer and the body in which he resided was unable to resist him. It was nibbling the corners of its lips, looking sideways at my carrier. The anticipation transferred to the young man and he started shifting on his seat until I stopped him. I had no right to talk about the court's decisions.

"May I smoke?" he asked.

My body smoked sometimes when drunk, so I nodded.

The man lowered his window and bent low down in order to light his cigarette. The car swerved toward the other lane and the truck behind us blew its horn.

The wind ricocheted from the back window and twirled the young man's hair. Each hair a separate blow against the skin, its own impulse, transferred to the brain. A single feeling. Bodies made for simplification, therefore needing to constantly swing between two extremes.

He went on: "I didn't notice it for a long time and wasn't interested anyway. I demanded from them that they leave their countries, kill their sons, and they did it all. I found out that the source was their biology. If you're able to only process 0.00000003 percent of the

information available, there is only one way in which you can make up for all that you lose every second: religion. You're biologically incapable of thinking, so you must believe. Faith is a shortcut, it uses the fewest bytes for the greatest effect."

The man opened the ashtray in front of us and added the cigarette butt to the many already in there. He pressed the button and only when the window was lifted did my protégé speak again:

"You gave me power over beings that are built on faith. I abused it mercilessly without even noticing it.

I'd like to talk about Jesus. After the third rejection, I didn't know what I was doing wrong. Should I leave them alone altogether? Should I only observe them? But surely that wouldn't be enough for the court?"

He lit another cigarette, bending low again, lowering the window. A short burst of coughing, which turned into wheezing.

"This body won't last much longer," he said, slapping the chest of his carrier flatly with his hand, and returning to his tale:

"My punishment is not temporal, but intellectual. I have to learn something, but what? From such a low organic form? From small bits of trash placed into a fragment of the eternity of space and time, the only two out of all the possible dimensions."

The man stole a look in my direction and shook his head. I noticed how much better my protégé was utilizing the body in which he resided than I did mine. No wonder, after so many returns, but what did surprise me was the merger, which appeared to be seamless – the body not only participated in the talking, but also became a physiological symbol, a language of expression consisting of flesh and bone.

"I really didn't know what I was doing wrong. I moved from one body to another, without them knowing, I was nothing but a witness. I don't know if you've noticed, but evolution supplied them with a strange tool for more efficient action – before they move, they fill with chemicals and the feelings this produces they call emotions. And that ... erases us ... for a moment. Have you noticed?"

"Yes."

The recording also caught my thought that I would probably say goodbye forever to those short moments of the loss of oneself, if the court granted my protégé's plea.

"They multiply sexually," he continued, "and through evolution they too gained a moment of loss they call an orgasm. In men, the danger warning system is switched off during this time,

whilst in women the whole brain shuts down, so I preferred to choose women. And so I once stood in a

young body in the middle of a desert, by a river, in which a man who called himself a prophet was baptizing some humans. He kept repeating that for centuries there had been no true prophets, but that an incomparably stronger one would follow him. I thought: was it power they needed? What if a single

one of them was given just a fraction of my capabilities? For the first time in centuries I took control of the body I was in and moved her neck. The group was small and shabby. Among them was a stocky laborer, a carpenter, who was scratching a burst blister from his right hand. He had left his wife and kids, brothers and sisters back in Nazareth and set off to find work. He sensed that my body was looking at him and smiled at me. I moved into him and directed him toward the river. John baptized him and as he was shaking the water out of his hair, I stopped time and told him that I was giving him the power.

They really are primitive beings, a message never truly reaches them, their bodies and culture always intervene. He understood me in the only way possible to him: I was God and had made him my son.

I took him with me and spent a long time in the desert explaining the hows and whys. He oscillated between faith and suspicion, accusing me of being the Devil and then falling down in front of me, calling me God. I told him: "You have the power, use it. Take a rock and smash it!"

He looked at me in disbelief and then finally laid his hand on a rock.

He pressed and nothing happened.

"Wish it," I told him.

The rock exploded.

After that, things went as expected. He floated, turned circles in the air, brought on a storm, drilled a hole in the ground until lava sprang out. He cried with happiness. He looked at his blisters and healed them.

"I can do anything I like?" he asked. "Yes."

"You gave me the power for ever?"

I admit, I felt like playing with him, just as I had done so many times before.

"No, I'll take it away when I feel like it. But I promise you'll have it for a month."

I lied to him. The power was now intertwined with the very fiber of his cells, it would stay with him for ever.

“Only a month?” He scratched his beard with the tips of his fingers as if trying to rip it out. “What can I do in a month?”

“Drown the world, burn it down, start a new one?”

He looked at me in horror: “Why would I do that?” “Because you have the power!”

He stopped talking and spent a long time gazing at the landscape in front of us. The wind carried dead tufts of grass and wove them into the bent shrubs.

With the power I had given him, I had sealed him off from me and I could no longer see inside him. But he was undoubtedly troubled by something. Finally he asked:

“Do you remember Elisha?” “Who?”

“The bald prophet. When the town boys teased him by shouting ‘Baldy, baldy!, he called upon your help and you sent two she bears who mauled 42 of them.”

“Yes.”

“You did that?”

It was strange. I was no longer used to facing a being who was closed off from me.

“Yes,” I said. “I did what I did. I have drowned the world, destroyed cities, ordered Abraham to kill his son. All that and more. So why are you asking me only about these two bears?”

He shook his head, looking at his fingers, the color of which barely differed from that of the dust. If I could have taken the power back, I would have done. Only so that I would know what he was thinking.

“Look,” I said, “you now have the power, too. Didn’t you crush the rock, drill into the earth? And now you’ll go and burn down the Roman Empire which is oppressing you, and that will be just the beginning. There is much you can accomplish in a month.”

He lifted his head and looked at me with his mouth open.

“I don’t want to...” he began, but I responded with a peremptory: “Go and act!”

Slowly he got up and went. He turned around a few times and looked at me as if wanting to come running back.

By the Sea of Galilee he tested his power for the first time without me – a stone turned to dust. He leapt away as if afraid of himself. He squatted over the water and looked at himself for a long time. Was he looking for traces of a change in his appearance?

They're sociable beings and can't be alone. So he invited along everyone he met on his way. He naively thought that the loneliness inside him would diminish in the presence of others.

In Kafarnaum, after three days, he was still not using his power. I possessed a young man and began shouting at Jesus, saying that I knew him, knew what he would do, that he was there to finish us off. I expected him to incinerate my borrowed body with one gesture. He did raise his hand and unleashed his power. But only enough to drive me away. If until then his wandering was aimless, it now had a purpose. He walked around the city, healing the sick and the insane.

Late at night, exhausted, he fell into some straw and slept a mere half an hour. Then he ran into the night in terror, knelt down and prayed.

I hid inside a rabbit and listened. He was scared, oh, so scared. As they can only process so little information at once, their attention is narrowly focused. While healing, it had never occurred to him that he was attracting the attention of the authorities and he was aware what the punishment was: a long and terrible death on a cross. But when he was sinking into sleep, this information rose to the surface for processing and he fled the city, trembling. However, his reputation went ahead of him – so he healed humans, asking them to keep quiet about it. Of course they didn't listen. He stayed in isolated places, but was found everywhere.

I admit that sometimes I helped them. I entered their bodies and directed their feet at crossroads. I wanted to know how long he could last before he began spreading thunderbolts and destruction.

The masses followed him, but his apostles were a confused bunch. Day after day they witnessed the power he was using, but they still doubted him. They rubbed their eyes, thought they were dreaming. He wanted to be with them, but they knew that he was different. And humans are unable to unite in such a case: the one who is different either becomes their leader or is pushed to the margins.

His loneliness grew. He walked home, but his fame overtook him. His family withdrew from him in public, afraid of punishment, but sought his company in secret and within the shelter of his embrace, demanded immortality, wealth, kingdoms. I was certain he would succumb. But all he did was heal the sick and run away.

At one of the gatherings, he looked defiantly at the body from which I was observing him and said: "There is nothing outside man which could sully him if it should enter him; what sullies him is that which comes from within."

I have thought about those words a lot. Nothing in his past indicated that he would use the power in the way he did. There was irritability, impatience, a propensity for arguing, great skillfulness in the use of words, even audacity, but nothing unusual for a human. I couldn't believe it, how could I have chosen a man so wrong for the job.

His reputation spread around the country and in Caesarea he told the crowd that he would end on a cross. Having the power to destroy worlds, would he calmly await his slaughter?

The month was nearly up and Jesus set off toward Jerusalem. I accompanied him, hoping he would demolish the city while he still had the power.

Now he was no longer just afraid, he was raging in horror. He cursed the fig tree for not bearing fruit outside its time, he drove merchants from the temple, predicting its devastation, and warned his listeners of the apocalypse coming within a generation.

He stood amidst all those apostles of his, what a bunch of losers, traitors and snobs. They looked at him faithfully, their mouths opening in fish-like fashion, their eyes staring like those of pigeons. Suddenly, he began promising them that they would not die, together with their bodies they would be elevated to paradise and I expected he would not be able to hold out any longer and would do for them what he had been denying himself..

He didn't use the power, then or later.

In the Garden of Gethsemane he cried on the ground, calling to me: "Father, everything is possible for you! Let this chalice pass me by, not because it is my will, but because it is yours!"

I took on the form of a young man who had been asleep in the house nearby and stepped into the garden:

"I have not taken your power away and I shall not. Use it!"

His body shook and his robe dragged on the ground. Slowly he straightened up, the tears on his cheeks combining with the dust into mud.

He shook his head.

"Lord, you are the Creator, you're like a fruit grower in his orchard. Does a fruit grower inspect his trees in the morning, spot a withered leaf, a dried up shoot, a broken branch and because of this destroy the whole orchard? Does he not try to help every weakened part of his trees?"

I waved my arm, saying:

“These parables of yours! I’ve had enough of them. I gave you the power. I admit, I thought you’d burn the orchard. But OK, don’t, you have the power, go and continue healing those gnats that surround you.”

“Lord, as I have already said, not I, you!”

I did not understand him.

He looked at me with large eyes that seemed round in the light of the oil lamp.

“Your power is mighty, Lord. Turn this earth into paradise!”

I shook my head.

He looked down, silent for a long time. Then he whispered:

“Lord, please, take the power back.”

“No. You have it for ever. You can save yourself!”

“I know what I must do,” he said. He stood there before me, an enigma. After a long silence, he added: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. I’m afraid I won’t be able to endure it.”

“What? The torture?” “That too.”

“What else?”

He did not reply.

He shook the dust off his robe and left.

They arrested him, charged him, began to torture him. He kept stumbling beneath the cross, bleeding beneath the crown of thorns. I stood among the crowd, raging inside: “Come on! Send lightning! A hurricane! Begin the apocalypse! Toy with them! Repay them for everything they’re doing to you!”

He just went on dying in agony.

It would have been easier for me to accept it if he had stayed firm to the last, rather than what actually happened. He could not make it, he used the power, but in such a futile way: at six, he made the sky go dark in order to conceal his suffering from the onlookers. That was all.

At nine, he shouted to me, asking why I had abandoned him. I could not take it any longer and ended his torment.

I waited for him to be buried and for everyone to leave and then I unwrapped him from the shroud and took him in my arms. I carried him away and buried him in a secret place.”

We were driving past shopping malls with skyscrapers towering above them, my companion lit one cigarette after another, coughing each time. The road turned toward the mountains, the sun was setting.

“And the end?”

The body sighed and barely managed to suppress another bout of coughing.

“I’ve thought about him a lot. How many humans I have seen who were given human power and used it in my image. And then this man was given a part of my power and I expected the ‘horror of devastation’, to use his own words, but instead he used it for trivialities, healing and bringing individuals to life. So that they would again become sick and die, as this

is how they are made. I have spent centuries wondering how someone could throw away the power. The court knows I no longer acted, only moved from one of them to another, repeating our conversations, especially the one about the two bears and the children.

He had wanted to change me. To show me that power does not have to be pompous and arrogant, irresponsible and selfish, bloody and destructive. That it can be calm and dignified instead. That you can build anew by transforming the old rather than bringing on a deluge. That it’s not necessary to abuse the faith you receive, but you can pay for it with goodness. He died in order to be an example to me. To teach me a lesson. And relieve me from all of this.”

We said nothing until we crossed the mountain and the driver stopped. The body had to fulfill its needs.

I let the young man wait by the car until my protégé’s carrier stepped out of the restroom, drying his hands on his pants.

“That is all. End of the appeal,” he said.

I made my chin nod.

“End of recording.”

The head in front of me turned to the other side of the road and sections of parked cars could be seen between the trees.

“Someone is going back to Winnemucka,” he said.

He reached with his right hand toward my body, at first I did not know what he wanted, but the automatic pilot engaged. We shook hands.

A rough, warm, slightly damp hand. A firm handshake, his thumb over my index finger. A light shake. For a moment I merged with the body I controlled. They are like cocoons to each

other, opaque in their isolation, they walk past each other and can only assume and guess what is concealed in the cocoon in front of them. But in their aloneness they never miss an opportunity for contact between two surfaces.

Our hands separated. The wind carried away the warmth. He looked for the nearest bench.

“If they’re under my control for a long time, they get dizzy. I don’t want him to fall,” he said and sat his man down on the bench.

My protégé closed the old man’s eyes and when the man opened them for a moment, he looked around in confusion and began to sway. He gripped the bench firmly with both hands and took a deep breath.

He noticed that the young man was staring at him and said: “I’m alright, you know,” even though I had not said a word. He got up gingerly, swayed some more, took a few steps and steadied himself by holding onto the vehicle. Then he stretched, got behind the wheel and drove off.

The noise of the highway, the sound of leaves in the trees. I examined the recording and instead of my opinion added only a fragment of the conversation from earlier about the body he had released onto the bench.

“I don’t want him to fall.”

THE END