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# Animal

TRANSLATED BY BRIGITTE GOLDSTEIN

# Triste

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ANIMAL TRISTE

**W**HEN I WAS YOUNG, I was certain, as most young people are, that I would die young. I was filled with youthfulness, such promise, the end could only be imagined as violent and beautiful. No, I certainly wasn't destined for gradual decay. Now I'm a hundred years old and I'm still alive. Maybe I'm only ninety, I don't know for sure, but most likely a hundred after all. Except for the bank where I keep an account, nobody knows I'm still among the living. Once a month I go to the bank to withdraw a small sum of money. I live very modestly. And yet each time I am afraid the teller will tell me my money has run out. I had a few savings, but it is hard to believe that they have lasted all these years I have been living on them. Maybe I'm getting a small pension from somewhere. Or maybe I'm only ninety or even younger. I no longer pay much attention to what goes on in the world, and I don't know what time period we are living in right now. When I run out of food, I go to the weekly farmers' market, where I prefer to shop since I stand out less in the crowd. I never meet anybody I know; I'm not sure I would recognize them anyway. They're probably all long dead, and only I am still alive. I'm surprised that I'm still able to walk quite well at my age. It is not much of a burden for me to carry my groceries, even though I always buy for two or three weeks in advance, and the load is quite heavy. That's why I sometimes wonder how old I really am. I may quite possibly have miscalculated the time I have been living in seclusion.

My apartment has no mirrors in which I might count the wrinkles in my face to determine my age. In another time, long ago, fifty or forty or sixty years ago – it was an autumn day, this I remember clearly – I made up my mind not to add any more episodes to my life and I smashed them all to pieces. I could, if I

were so inclined, examine the condition of my skin while changing my clothes in the evening or morning, had I not deliberately ruined my eyesight decades ago.

My last lover, the one for whose sake I withdrew from the world, forgot to take his eyeglasses when he walked out on me. For years I wore those glasses and fused my healthy eyes with his weak eyesight into a symbiotic blur in a last desperate attempt to be close to him. One day – I was heating noodle soup with bits of chicken – the glasses dropped to the stone floor in the kitchen and shattered, but my eyes had already lost their natural sharpness so I didn't miss the glasses very much. Since then I have kept them on the little table next to my bed, and sometimes, though less and less frequently now, I put them on just to feel what my lover must have felt when he wore them.

I remember my lover very clearly. I know what he looked like when he entered my apartment, reticent, with the measured steps of a high jumper taking aim for a precise jumping-off spot. I can still sense his smell as if he had just left this room; when I'm lying in the dark, tired and weary, I can feel his arms around me. I have forgotten only his name and why he left me.

One day – it was autumn, this I remember clearly – he left and didn't come back. It is possible that he died then. Sometimes I seem to remember my telephone ringing thirty or fifty or forty years ago and a voice, probably his wife's, telling me that my lover was dead. She introduced herself by name, which was the same as his; since then I have forgotten it. It is, however, quite possible that I am imagining all this. I have been sitting here much too long making up stories to explain why he walked out of my apartment that autumn night. It didn't rain that night – he left in a hurry because he was a bit late, and he never came back.

I waited for him. For weeks I didn't dare go out for fear he would come back just then and go away for good because I wasn't home. At night I kept the telephone close to my pillow. While I was waiting for him, I thought only of him. Every encounter,

every word he ever spoke to me, our nocturnal embraces, I rehearsed it all in my mind over and over again. I managed to draw my lover so close to me in my imagination that I was able to be happy for hours, as if he were with me in body. In time I reconciled myself to the fact that I was waiting in vain. If it is possible to wait without hope of fulfillment, that's what I did, and truth to tell, I'm still waiting to this day. Waiting has become part of my nature, and the hopelessness no longer pains me. I don't know how long I actually knew my lover, a long time or not such a long time, long enough to fill forty or fifty years of memories, a very long time.

I was no longer young when I decided to turn my life into a never-ending, unbroken love story. My body was already in that precarious state that shows signs of the onset of old age in particularly endangered parts. Sagging folds around the posterior; soft, undulating flesh on the belly and inner thighs; under the skin, tissue separating into small clumps. Nevertheless, a certain youthfulness still adhered to its contours and with favorable lighting and a posture that tightened skin and flesh, the illusion could be created that I was no farther away from the days of my youth than from old age.

Fortunately, I'm not aware of the miserable picture my body presents now. I've become rather emaciated. In bed I have to stuff the covers between my knees because my bones are so hard they hurt me. Actually I don't care much what appearance I present during my rare forays into the world. At my age, one can be regarded as beautiful if one doesn't evoke disgust in other people. I still take regular showers and I take care that my nose doesn't drip.

After my lover had left me, I stripped the linen from the bed in which we had lain close together one last time and stored it, unwashed, in the closet. Sometimes I take it out and put it on the bed, taking care not to lose a single strand of my lover's hair or a skin flake. The flowery print of intense red, green, and lilac

young girlfriend had been carried off to distant shores by the new time, he wouldn't have told Karin, and certainly not me. Instead they were probably greeting the downfall of the gang of liberationists as a blessing for the sole reason that it brought them, Karin and Klaus, back where they belonged, back to their house, which they had built together, stone by stone, and the garden where they would want to be buried next to each other if it weren't against the law. After all, even I sometimes think the only reason the wall in Berlin was torn down was so Franz could meet me that morning under the brachiosaurus.

As far as I know, Karin and Klaus lived happily ever after. The time, this new, unpeculiar time, a time that was obsessed with certainty, had given their way of life the stamp of approval. I never called her again. So I don't know what kind of message Karin was sending out from then on with her "Lüderitz." She had a high-pitched voice. It probably sounded like a fanfare.

Everybody saw a secretly awaited sign in the unexpected change of the time. Some may give themselves over to ultimate resignation, and others may accept this second chance for life even at the risk of total failure. It all depends primarily on the individual's personality and the condition of his secret longings, whether they existed in a desiccated, neglected twilight state or were lurking well-nourished in their hiding place, bursting with life and ready to be liberated.

I met Franz.



Franz and I are sitting among the carnivorous plants. Franz strums on the strings of a guitar. Either it belonged to him or my daughter may have forgotten it when she moved out long ago.

Everything is so long ago, says Franz.

Yes, say I, everything is very long ago.

We weren't old yet when we met. At least Franz didn't look

old to me nor I to him. But neither were we young. This gave us the advantage of having a lot to talk about.

What was it called, the material shoes were made of after the war, asks Franz.

Igelit.

Igelit, that's what it was, says Franz, Igelit.

And I repeat one more time: Igelit, Igelit. Did you also eat dried potatoes?

Naturally, says Franz, but I preferred the red ones, they were sweeter than the white ones.

No, Franz doesn't say naturally, he says of course. What I call naturally, Franz calls of course, because I am from Berlin and Franz is from Ulm. That's why Franz got chocolate and chewing gum from soldiers of the occupation forces after the war and I got nothing, because Franz's soldiers were Americans, mine were Russians, and they didn't have anything for themselves.

Then I ask Franz the question that provokes overly hearty laughter in every man of my generation, if he has to answer in the affirmative, and most do. The question is about the *leibchen*, the little bodice that must be described in every detail as soon as the word is pronounced. This shirtlike garment buttoned down the front or back, with long garters attached. It was imposed on boys and girls alike, but it was particularly humiliating for boys. I remember very clearly the garters pulled taut over Hansi's thighs between his short pant legs and his dark-brown, ribbed cotton stockings with white buttons attached to them for the garters. Later Hansi was allowed to wear long pants, while I was put in a stupid satin feminine undergarment imbued with a certain embarrassment, a so-called garter belt or hip girdle. It was unclear if the girdle was meant to hold the hips as well as the stockings or the hips and stockings were supposed to hold the girdle. When I looked at my legs, prostituted by pink rubber garters, I often thought of Hansi's innocent boyish thighs and the hated bodice, which I was now no longer allowed to wear

her, I explained, because of Ali and Parsifal and Dr. Hans-Kurt Weiher and the whole crazy or not so crazy time in those days, but especially since I recalled the line: “. . . to win your heart or to die.”

Ata sat up straight, lifted her chin and her left arm into the air and called out:

Otrere was a great mother to me  
And the people greet me: Penthesilea.

Then she fell back into the chair.

And you are serious about that life and death thing? she asked.  
Dead serious.

But didn't you live without him until now?  
Bad enough.

I mean, after all you didn't want to die then.  
I wonder why not.

What?

I wonder why I didn't want to die. It certainly couldn't have been much of a life.

Yes, yes, said Ata, I know: “I suffer greatly for I have lost that which was my life's only solace, the sacred, invigorated force with which I created worlds around me; it is gone.” *Werther*, Goethe.

Well, there you have it, I said, that's the way it is, he is right. I am unable to even find any interest in the brachiosaurus anymore. Nor did I go to South Hadley, Massachusetts. It's true, my life's only solace is gone.

Ata said it was comforting to hear that I still remembered earlier solaces of my life, even if they now seem lost.

She fished a little fly from the wine and flipped it onto the carpet. I had the feeling I had returned to a moment in the distant past of my life in which I got caught up without asking and without my own doing, so that now, decades later, at the same crossroads, I could decide once more and take a different direction.

And Franz, does he love you in return, asked Ata.

On Friday I still would have said yes, yes Franz loves me too. But meanwhile it was Saturday, and I had certain images in my head: Franz in the narrow passageway of the passport control, behind him his wife, who pushes the two passports past Franz's left arm; Franz, smiling at his wife because he had inadvertently pressed against her with his elbow. Yes, this most of all, this smile. While I felt my racing heart galloping straightway into death, he managed this casual, tender smile. Not the least thought of me pulled the corners of his mouth or twitched about his eyes. He had forgotten about me. This smile had become lodged in my memory like a gaping wound that would not heal. Since then Franz's wife had become a sexual being for me.

It must be a different kind of love, I said to Ata, a love with which one can live.

That kind doesn't exist. There is only one kind, the kind that kills you, said Ata. After Ali, I was as good as dead. I put up a sign over my bed that read: “And if somebody kicks, it's me / and if somebody gets kicked, it's you.” I kept this as my motto, at least in life. Onstage I experienced every conceivable kind of happiness and catastrophe. I died every kind of love death from Monday to Friday and on some weekends even twice a day. There is not much about love I don't know. The end is either tragic or banal, and you seem intent on the tragic ending.

And you?

I am against it, said Ata, neither tragic nor banal, just simply against it.

The sun's warm rays streamed through the open window, over the carpet, the furniture, and us. It occurred to me that Ata and I were encased in the yellow light like two insects in amber, back to back, the little legs stretched out in opposite directions and surprised by the same death.

A numbing sadness paralyzed my senses like the effect of sleeping pills that were staved off, and yet I felt good. There was nothing false about the way I sat next to Ata, willingly yielding

will. Before we left the apartment, he put his guitar into the empty room. And still he didn't come back.

We have not yet reached the end of the street. We have walked only a few steps under the shedding trees. Franz searches his pockets for small change for the bus fare. At the end of the street and thirty feet to the right is the bus stop. Maybe I asked Franz as we walked along whether he would like to go to South Hadley, Massachusetts, with me, to Pliny Moody's garden after all. Or maybe Franz was still singing that song or just humming it, or he neither sang nor hummed but was silent because he thought of his wife, not knowing how to tell her he would move out of the apartment at the park tomorrow to move in with me. I don't remember. Only that I was sitting until morning in the empty room next to the guitar waiting for Franz, that I know.

Now we have reached the end of the street. Only thirty feet to the right is the bus stop. Two headlights from the left, still far away. The bus, says Franz. He starts to run, I'll be back tomorrow. In the gleam of the streetlight Franz's face for one second, his eyes without promise, his faint smile already asking for forgiveness. He won't come back. I'll have to rearrange the room again. My arms are around Franz's neck, don't go. The bus is approaching, I am holding on to Franz's sleeve with a clenched fist. Stay. Franz tries to free himself. I throw my arms and his around him. I'll be back tomorrow. I know he's lying. Then go, just go. Do I hold him, do I push him, does he tear himself away? A noise like none I have ever heard, like a wet piece of cardboard clashing with iron. Howling as from a pack of dogs. Who is yelling like that? Somebody under the bus is bleeding to death. A pool forms in the gutter. The crushed arm of a man under the front wheels.



I killed Franz. Or wasn't it me? Didn't I push him? Did he fall, lose his footing, by himself, because I didn't want to let go of

him? No matter, I killed Franz. Now I am compelled to know it again. Maybe I just waited for him all these years so I wouldn't have to know it. It's all over. Nothing keeps me awake any longer. I can still manage the few steps from where I am sitting to get to the carnivorous plants. A strange wind grazes my face and plays with the leaves of the plants; eyes are blinking from among them. From everywhere eyes are gazing at me. These are animal eyes. They sit among the carnivorous plants and watch over me so no harm will come to me. More and more animals gather, big and small; they settle among the others. I am stretched out in their midst, and I am not afraid. I am one of them, a brown-haired ape with a stubby nose and long arms that I wrap around my animal body. That's how I remain lying here.