

The virgin Marino

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The door opens, and it's no surprise to Marino that the man who appears is wearing nothing but a pair of briefs. That was the agreement. More surprising is the expression on the man's face. The heavy eyelids indicate a rather doped-up condition. His gait is just a bit unsteady. But the clenched jaw muscles attest to an intense determination. The chin is slightly raised, the lips pout forward defiantly. He looks like a cross between a zombie and a martyr, or a sleepwalker glinting with lethal aggro. That's most probably the effect of the drugs he's taken.

The living room curtains have been carefully drawn. There's not even a glimpse of outside any more. In a corner of the room a floor lamp's faded coarse green shade gives a rather dim light. You could almost call it cozy in here, if the space weren't almost completely empty except for a dining table and two chairs, plus a sofa.

Marino sits down on one of the chairs. The thing that's been worrying him suddenly strikes him as a certainty: this isn't the right time. Not because it's too early, not because it's already too late, not because any other time would have been preferable for this, but just because it's wrong to have chosen a specific time for it.

Well, he can't get out of it now. He gets up and goes after the man, who has silently taken up position with his back against a wall. To the right and left of him, at arm's length, hang two metal rings that were installed up there a few days ago. Picking up the two lengths of rope on the table, Marino ties the man's wrists to the rings.

The rest of what he has to do was also agreed on beforehand.

The man's face wears a rather dreamy expression, there's even a trace of mockery around his lips, as if he finds Marino's discomfiture amusing. Marino takes a length of fabric he's cut from an old dress out of his trouser pocket and blindfolds the man, who submits without resisting.

Marino runs a hand down the man's chest. The other hand brushes the thighs and genitals. He knows this body. He has touched it before. That time they had sex. This time they'll take it a step farther.

Marino is supposed to act not as the lover-boy, but as the executioner. Or rather as something even less human, even more impersonal: a fatal disease, a purely accidental physical occurrence. But how plausible is it, really, for a fatal disease to strike by prearrangement?

Marino tugs down the briefs and lets them fall down to the man's ankles. He takes a few steps back and then the unexpected happens: even more than the outstretched arms or the tied wrists, it's these underpants around the ankles that strike him as the very emblem of total submission.

The man's mouth still wears the vague, mysterious smile. Maybe it's because he's stoned. Who knows, maybe it's partly an expression of fear as well. But it isn't Marino's job to figure out what the man is thinking. He has to concentrate, first of all, on the role he himself is supposed to play.

He steps forward again. The man's forty-two year old body is in excellent shape. If Marino weren't here right now, it might have taken years and years for death to come for him. Only inside the chest the pounding is faster and more furious than normal. It's making Marino's own heart start to race as well.

"Is that all?" he suddenly hears, spoken in an astoundingly lucid tone, which Marino would never have expected to come out of this sleepwalker's mouth.

"Come on, Marino. *Do something*," says the man. It seems as if he's about to start laughing. His provocative words reverberate through the near-empty space, violating the agreement completely. The agreement was that during the performance the man and Marino would just forget each other's names, or at least not say them out loud. The spirit of anonymity, even if artificial, was seen as being absolutely critical to the success of the production.

Now the man is even starting to chuckle, as if he can see, right through the blindfold, the flush on Marino's forehead, the bewildered and indignant expression on his face.

"Who're you talking to?" Marino snarls at him, upon which the man's grin fades. But there's still a vague curl around the lips.

Without another word Marino turns his back on the man and walks into the kitchen. He pulls a knife from a knife rack that has an important part to play tonight. The right-angled triangle of the blade is about twenty centimeters long by five at the base. He has never handled it before, as far as he can remember. He opens a drawer, takes out a roll of adhesive tape, and cuts off a piece. Now that the agreement has been broken, he is suddenly determined to follow it to the letter.

Returning to the room, he puts the knife down on the table and walks up to the man. Who seems to be sunk in a dazed reverie.

"No names, understand?" Marino whispers in his ear, and he presses the piece of adhesive tape firmly over the mouth. The man looks rather surprised, but makes no sound that can be taken as protest.

Marino picks up the knife. It's as if the luster and smoothness of the metal in his hand had transferred itself to him. Now he is just as anonymous as this knife. Suddenly even the staged character of the proceedings no longer matters. The knife is quite sufficient, all by itself. It feels more real than he'd been expecting.

He presses the cold steel blade against the man's stomach, who in a reflex pulls in his stomach, then relaxes it again. Yet he doesn't really seem all that relaxed. Now that both the eyes and mouth are covered, it has become even harder to tell what is really going on with him.

The room is deafeningly quiet. The blood hisses in Marino's ears. He asks himself if it wouldn't have been better if there'd been a little music playing in the background. While he's still musing that neither the man nor he are particularly fond of music and so hadn't the foggiest what sort of music they should put on, his hands have already done the work. The knife was heavy and sharp, the flesh was weak, it was easy. He barely had to glance down at his hands as they did their business; hands that were now getting drenched in a warm, sticky stream.

Later this deed will be explained, even by Marino himself, as an act of extreme self-mutilation, except that it was carried out by another's hands. But right now it's something else. This is how the man wants to end his own life: as an emasculated being. That's a gesture of pride and contempt for the world beyond anything anyone else would ever think of.

Marino takes a few steps back and stares at the spurting stump, the bespattered floor, the furrowed dribbles running down the thighs, the underpants around the ankles, already soaked through. A peculiar cloying smell is starting to fill the room. That's another unpleasant surprise.

The man still hasn't made a sound. It's as if he actually doesn't feel any pain. His penis, he claimed, was the last fleshy link that still connected him to the world. It was up to Marino to sever that link. At this point the man is no longer alive, but he isn't dead yet, either. He seems to be completely immured inside himself. Perhaps his lifeline is now winding itself up into a spiral, spooling a fantastically instantaneous snapshot of the moments of his life. Or — who knows what other visions are giving him the strength to ignore the pain. The man remains so immobile that Marino is even starting to feel a bit left out. It occurs to him that he'd like to hurt the man even more.

But then the man's face begins to convulse, and he tugs at the rings he's shackled to. His knees buckle under him and the muscles of his blood-smeared thighs tense like those of a weightlifter in action. All of a sudden he seems barely able to keep himself upright.

Marino puts both the knife and the penis down on the table. What is he supposed to do now? The man's squirming is making him nervous. When he starts snorting furiously and, groaning, tries blowing the tape off his mouth, it throws Marino into a mild state of panic.

Maybe the man is trying to tell him something. Although Marino is curious to know what that could be, he's worried that all the man will do is scream bloody murder.

"If it hurts, we'll stop," he says loudly, articulating emphatically, but his voice is shaking. He rips off the piece of tape. The man is panting heavily. His face is now flushed and bathed in sweat. A fork of blood vessels Marino has never seen before runs across his forehead. He's giving off a wild and sour kind of smell.

"Untie me... Marino... Untie me," he mumbles. Marino is on the point of slapping the tape back on, but then he decides to do what the man is asking him to do. Who knows, maybe the whole thing is about to end much sooner than they anticipated.

He unties the wrists.

"A chair... Bring me a chair..." the man whispers, leaning against the wall. Quite a large puddle has already gathered around his feet.

It was *your* idea, Marino thinks to himself as he goes to fetch the chair. His hands are shaking. Just as he's about to turn back with the chair in his hand, he hears a crash — the man has keeled over sideways. The blindfold has slipped down around his neck. The eyes are squeezed shut. With his pants still down around his ankles, he's started to wriggle and squirm in his own blood. He's moaning and sobbing. He has his hands crossed over his crotch. There can be no doubt about it: all that's left now, is pain. Whatever mental fortitude the man once had, and whatever extra fortitude he'd hoped the drugs would bring him — this body is no longer capable of expressing anything but the overwhelming dominance of the pain, the inescapable grip of its blistering fetters.

Marino puts the chair down. He walks back to the table and picks up the knife. Then he kneels beside the man and, battling revulsion and shock, tries to think how to do this. He wasn't prepared for this much spastic agony. He'd thought that the man's death throes would be a bit more dignified.

Then he stops dithering, and, taking advantage of a fortuitous jerk to pull the man's head back, slits his throat in one clean stroke. The knife is sharp, the flesh is weak. The forceful momentum of Marino's thrust is promptly answered by the force of the blood spurting from the artery. The man has already stopped moving. A wave of blood spreads halfway across the living room floor.

Hours later, Marino still sits slumped on the chair he'd gone to fetch for the man. A wake for the dead: the one thing he will never forget about it, is how he just couldn't get over how great an impact the blood made. A similar amount of water wouldn't have made anything like as catastrophic an impression. It is the man's ultimate self-portrait, in which he both depicts and suffers his own irrevocable demise, painted in every possible gradation of red and brown. Compared to that, how pathetically inconsequential does the scrap of penis on the table seem. The trail of blood that has leaked from it appears, in Marino's dream state, to be slithering off all by itself, to get away from the chaos it has unleashed.

The crazy rumor going around that Marino is supposed to have cooked the penis and eaten it must here be emphatically denied. Whatever sick brain may have come up with such a fantasy, it certainly wasn't Marino's. He just put the thing in the grave, next to the rest of the body, a fact that was, by the way, confirmed by the forensic experts.

A few days ago, Marino and the man dug a narrow, rather shallow trench in Marino's garden. Marino recalls that the man, although trying hard to be cheerful, had suddenly started feeling bad — certainly not just because the wiry jumble of roots was making the digging so difficult. At a certain point he'd had to let Marino finish up. The sight of his own grave had given him a sick feeling of panic that was only allayed by a lengthy shower, with lots of self-pampering and hydro massage.

So Marino knows where he's supposed take the body, anyway. Besides, it's high time to get a move on, if he's to erase all evidence of what's happened here by morning.

As per the arrangement, one last thing needs to be done before he can bury the corpse. It was Marino's idea originally, but now that he is about to plunge the knife into the corpse's butt, he doesn't actually see why it was necessary. Alas, this isn't the right time — just the time that was prearranged. But maybe he'll be able to figure it out again later, why he wanted to do this.

Fortunately it's not too hard to accomplish. He's become quite accustomed by now to the heft and sharpness of the knife, and to the weak, yielding texture of the flesh. He doesn't have to give it much thought. The operation rouses no particular aversion that needs to be quelled.

There! It's a good thing that Marino has finally written it all down. It wasn't exactly a picnic, of course. A little detail here or there, too filthy to put into words, may have been omitted. It was necessary to keep a certain distance, after all. But even with the unavoidable need for a bit of abstraction and sanitization, this is still the most accurate account of what happened that night. In a number of instances it does of course differ somewhat from the version concocted for Marino's trial. But no one knows that, except Marino and me.

It has taken months to get Marino to write down this story. For months on end he continued to cling to a different version; he was sincerely doing his best to believe in the story that was supposed to mollify his judges. During that time I could do nothing but keep up an angry but impotent hammering of protest, soundlessly, from death's void. But the words written down here are as fresh air to me. They give me the feeling that I can breathe again.

Of course I'll admit it's nothing more than a feeling. It would be an exaggeration to say I'm alive. After all, I no longer have a body. But I do have a voice once more. I wouldn't say that I was entirely dead. I have a great longing to speak. And in Marino's body I have found a listener again. More than a listener, actually. An accomplice, just as he was when I still had a body of my own.

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When Bruno Klaus awoke one morning from restless dreams, he discovered that he had been transformed in his bed into – well, a monstrous insect is perhaps putting it a little strongly, but like the victim in Kafka's celebrated story, I too had the feeling of having woken up in a different body from the one I'd gone to bed in. And though in my case it wasn't a beetle's body, it was still one that felt alien and uncomfortable. I might have spent the night in a fairly cramped position, which would account for the stiff neck, the painful right shoulder. In addition, I'd spent many hours at the computer over the past few weeks. Three guesses as to what I was doing. Everyone already knows anyway. The posthumous investigation into my computer use brought to light my extensive surfing expeditions through Pornomania.

I'm bound to add that I no longer derived much pleasure from them. Once, I had been able to create tangible shapes from an area of pixels that I could feel move with well-nigh total realism across my longing lips, against my horny crotch, among my many limbs – a sensation, an imaginative feat that formed the teeming core of my pleasure and brought a long afterglow of satisfaction. But I had almost completely lost that ability. The image was just an image. For me the porn channel had become a barrage of icy looks, which no one could escape, in which everyone climaxed, which no one enjoyed and yet to which everyone returned time after time. These days I never saw a body whose tangibility I tried to imagine. In practice I hadn't touched one for some time, and now I no longer did so even in my mind. Seated at my computer, I was master of a million or more naked images, so what did I care about the paltry reality of domination over a few real bodies?

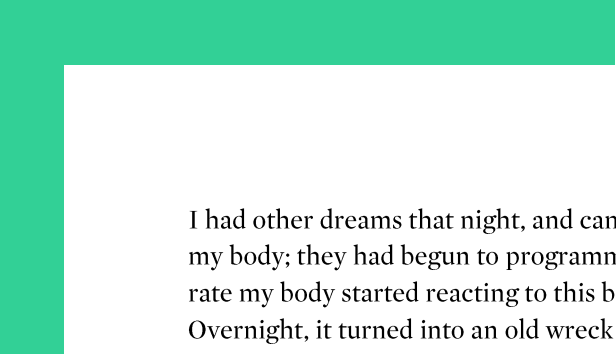
At the same time I was well aware of the joyless side to this supremacy. Electronics were not just an aid to achieving gratification. Rather, I had become completely dependent on them to help me conjure up something resembling desire, or at least the memory of it. I was afraid of losing all sense of what desire was. That's why I was constantly driven back to the screen, to those prefabricated, pinkish-red, endlessly varied yet always identical goings-on with rammers and orifices. Orgasms lasted half a second and three seconds later had dissolved again without trace amid a smell of cooling sperm. Ejaculations without an erection are not something you'd kill for, but it often took me hours to reach one.

One might see in this monotonous pastime an explanation for my sudden spinal and joint pains. I myself prefer a different interpretation.

I had handed in my resignation about six weeks before. Since then my resolve to die had hovered to and fro somewhere in my mind, between rejection and disbelief. However convinced I may have been at the moment I made this decision, it had not immediately succeeded in etching itself on my flesh as a totally inexorable prospect. The flesh just didn't want to know. In its blind, robust vitality it hadn't for a second taken that insane idea of mine seriously. I was still eating well, I was still sleeping well, I had no physical ailments. I jerked off until I fell into a stupor, or else the reverse: I sat there in a stupor jerking off.

But one night something changed. It really was a rough night, full of turbulent dreams, one of which I was able to remember quite clearly afterwards.

Floating somewhere in the roaring universe of sleep was a globe, a kind of planet so it seemed, disseminating a rosy glow. Reluctantly, I headed towards this odd phenomenon in my dream probe. The glow, I saw, emanated from a flesh-coloured layer of gunk covering the surface of the globe. And when I got even closer, this gel turned out to be not as static and even as I had first thought. I noted with some abhorrence that polyp-like bodies were bubbling up from the base layer, continuously and slowly as paraffin in a lava lamp, and then collapsing, after which their constituent material formed new shapes. I didn't understand why I had been given the distasteful task of landing in this field of mobile malignant growths. But gradually it was as if they were trying to tell me that they themselves were leaning towards me and straining desperately to develop mouths or faces in order to explain to me what I was doing there. The fact that they failed utterly in this simply made them more repulsive. I can't say how much dream time I spent among these protuberances and slow-motion spasms. But suddenly one of the polyps reared up, higher and faster than the rest, and provoked not only a deeper fear in me than I had known hitherto, but also a dramatic sense of identification. I was here not only as a spectator; according to the logic of my dream I was also present in the form of this monster. And this dual role was definite cause for panic. Because the head of the monster that was me was becoming ever more globular and ever larger, while the cord linking it to the rest of my flaccid, waxen body was becoming thinner and thinner and threatening to snap. That must be prevented at all costs – I realised as a spectator – that was certainly not the answer I was looking for. But I could only watch helplessly as the head end severed its final connection. The huge balloon, in the shape of an inverted droplet, trembled and wobbled in its suddenly untrammelled state, then shot upwards with a jolt and as it did so seemed to produce something akin to a silent laugh. I started awake with the oppressive feeling of having escaped suffocation by a whisker. And it was mainly the memory of that coy twitch, that comfortable rocking motion, the horrifying silent jollity with which the head had separated from the rest, which provoked a few more violent shivers before I was able to get back to sleep.



I had other dreams that night, and came to the conclusion that they were intended as a briefing for my body; they had begun to programme my mental resolve to die along more physical lines. At any rate my body started reacting to this briefing as if it were actually afflicted by a physical illness. Overnight, it turned into an old wreck full of ailments. And in the mirror it showed me a face that was obviously at odds with me: pale, drained and angry. Somewhere inside me silent laughter and carefree indifference must now be circulating, but there was no visible trace of this at all.