

An Extract from

“An Angel in Disguise”

by Patrick Adrian

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To the angels among us

1

It seemed as though spring was approaching unusually soon. February just made it past its first half and already it smelled of southern wind. Two days ago, on Thursday, a chilly rain fell. Still at home then, Marta wished for her contractions to be late.

"I'm not going to give birth to him while it's this cloudy outside, am I?" she thought, pensively looking out the window. She passed one hand over her swollen belly and the child she was carrying. A special child. Special for her, just as every child is special to its mother. Yet there was something else here as well. She had to make decisions which were not so usual. She stopped asking herself long ago if she had done the right thing. Now she wanted just one thing: to give birth on a sunny day!

It was an unusual wish which her family met with raised eyebrows, but sympathetically nodding their heads. Marta knew they didn't understand her. Even Davor let it go as if it were a whim. Oh, she admitted to herself that it really did seem like a whim. But somewhere deep down inside, in an unknown small part of her, she knew that it was important – to give birth to him when it was sunny! She made that decision back when she decided she would keep the baby. It was almost like a deal, like an understood agreement. She knew that it was completely wrong to set things up in that way but then, when she made the final decision, it was under that crazy condition. The one to whom she prayed all that time finally convinced her that it was important she bear the child. Yet, she did it somewhat spitefully, "giving in" to him and accepting her fate. It was as if she had told him to his face, "Alright, I'll do it, if..." She never completed the sentence. She never even thought it up. She simply continued to live with the awareness that an agreement had been reached. It was a one-sentence agreement which went: "...if it's a sunny day when I give birth."

In the early days of pregnancy there was little hope that He would hold up his end of the agreement. It will be February for God's

sake! Still, hope did not abandon her. Even February can bring surprises. There were years when almost the entire month was warm and sunny. It could be like that, it could.

When February finally arrived her hopes were soaring. There was no snow and the days were warm. Just let it be like that on the 16th as well, on Thursday, she prayed. On Thursday she was supposed to give birth, the due date given to her months in advance, but in the morning it began to rain. Of course, rain was not considered to be the cause for the lack of contractions, but Marta knew that they had to be related. It wasn't easy for her when the clouds persisted throughout the afternoon as well. But there were no contractions and in the evening the sky cleared up again. "Friday", she thought excitedly. "I will give birth to him on Friday."

But it seemed as though the one with whom she had come to an agreement, took the fixed condition even more seriously than she did. Friday served him as a means to drive away even the slightest hints of winter and cold with the healing rays of sunlight. He spared her of the contractions which arrived with the Saturday morning. And with the first rays of sun.

She almost lost consciousness a number of times. It was getting warmer and warmer outside. What does the word "sunny" mean? Is there a difference between a sunny morning and the heat of an early afternoon in February, when spring is arriving too soon? Did she include that condition in her agreement as well? Did she ask for the sun to be high up in the sky when her son first set his eyes on its light? She didn't remember that. She remembered almost nothing. The childbirth was difficult and lasted a long time.

Edo was born on Saturday at precisely 2:17 p.m. Petrova Hospital was bathed in glowing sunlight. Barely able to see through the damp veil of sweat and tears, she embraced her child, sobbing silently.

Edo had large and intelligent eyes with which he carefully observed his mother. The white swaddling-clothes hid what he was missing, but everyone who saw him, both then and later, couldn't shake the feeling that he had something unusually attractive about him. All children are beautiful, at least that's what many people say,

but Edo was simply beautiful.

Still, neither the nurses nor doctors nor family and friends, nor Davor nor even Marta herself could have known what secret was intertwined with his birth. Oh yes, later it would be clear to everyone, everyone would understand when the time came. But then, on that sunny Saturday afternoon in February and the premature spring, all that anyone saw was a frail and weak newborn baby. Those who saw that he didn't have any hands hid their discovery tactfully. Perhaps that was precisely the reason why everyone paid more attention to his eyes. And when Edo would return their looks, attracting them into their depths, they usually got flustered and resorted to sentences which fit the occasion: "What a beautiful child!" they would say, bewildered. "A true angel!"

They couldn't have known, they couldn't have had any idea, how close they were to the truth! Not even Marta herself, who just smiled and listened to them, could have known. She would only find out later, only when Edo would have completed his task.

Yes, Edo really was an angel. An angel in disguise who responded to a cry for help and came to tell the story of the real, true meaning of love through his life.

2

The first days of May that year were filled with a feeling of slight dissatisfaction. They were followed by periods of despondency. By sometime in the beginning of the second week, Marta had already developed a serious depression. That state was familiar to her from before. It wouldn't be the first time she would visit her doctor, tell him of her woes and leave his office half an hour later with a prescription for antidepressants in her hand. Actually, maybe she didn't even need to go visit him. Somewhere in her drawer, in her bedroom closet, she still had a half-empty bottle she saved from her last crisis. She laughed to herself at the thought of that word – *crisis*. Fall, demise, a continual spiral downwards, those words better described her state. Crisis signifies something temporary. Something which will pass and disappear. And she knew that her feelings were, under no circumstances, temporary. She had been living with them for years. All that was keeping her afloat was the fragile shell of social responsibility. I can't let *them* know how I feel; *they* have to be convinced that I am happy and satisfied; I can't show *them* my true face. She had already grown tired of that game but she simply had no other choice. She had to maintain the image *they* expected of her. Well actually, she was completely aware of the fact that she was only fooling herself. Even *she* expected it and wholeheartedly created it! When she observes other people and other families she expects of them precisely what she projects herself. What does she know how her colleagues feel? What does she know how her neighbors feel? She doesn't even know how her so-called friends feel. All she sees is carefully prepared social masks. It's all a façade for which we need years to build and then proudly wear in the name of our lost identity.

She almost dropped the fake Chinese porcelain vase. She had been wiping non-existent dust off of it the entire time. She began late in the afternoon, as soon as she got home from work. Now it's already been over two hours that she's been tending to it and cleaning it. Like Aladdin's lamp, she thought. Maybe it would summon a genie who would help her. Or maybe she could just take

some pills after all?

She had already started towards the neighboring room and the drawer where she kept her "medication", but she stopped in mid-step. No, I won't do it! For once I have to face myself. There's no point in just running away and turning a blind eye from the truth. Should she really go through a number of weeks of sick-leave again, in a hazy state of semi-consciousness caused by the pills, just to feel ready to keep up the lie again afterwards? No, no matter how painful, this time she has to pull through.

A sharp pain passed from one temple to the other. This time she really did drop the vase. Suddenly, with a loud crash, the parquet was scattered with hundreds of tiny bluish fragments. Pale and expressionless, she observed the sight before her feet. Some of the pieces were spinning around in circles like tops, thrilled with their new form of existence. She watched them almost hypnotized. They look happy, she thought. It must have been terribly difficult for them to stand fixed inside a vase – lost, impersonalized, undefined. She bent over and took into her hand one of the pieces which stopped next to her right foot. She observed the jagged shape of its sharp edges. "Now you are free", she said to it in a whisper. She pressed it a little harder so that a thin trace of blood appeared in her palm. Now you have the strength, she continued in her thoughts. You can hurt me. You are stronger than me.

Blood was slowly gathering in her palm. There was thunder in her head. I too will free myself one day, she continued with her train of thought directed towards the blue piece of porcelain which was now completely submerged in blood. Now I am just an undefined part of something, but I will free myself! The vase will break and I will breathe freely. I will finally be strong, powerful, safe. I will be me.

The blood was now slowly dripping onto the parquet, but Marta didn't care. Motionless, she stared at her palm. She held the solution to her unhappiness in her hand. It seemed to her that, if only she observed the blue fragment long enough and pressed it hard enough, a magical spirit would arise from it and save her. And that was what she needed. To be saved. That was why she was persistent. She continued to watch and continued to press.

"Marta!" someone shouted. "For God's sake, what are you doing!?"

"I'm saving myself" she whispered, barely audible.

Strong hands grabbed her by the shoulders and raised her to her feet. She was already kneeling by then. There was blood all around her and all over her. She was weak and felt herself disappearing and getting lost in the bluish distance. I'm going to the fragments of my vase, she thought. I am no more. I am disappearing. Thank God.

"I just don't get what's wrong with her," Davor repeated nervously. He was pacing up and down the kitchen. His best friend Ivan sat at the table and followed him with his eyes trying to soothe him with an occasional temperate sentence from time to time. But for now it wasn't working.

Ivan was a doctor and rushed over as soon as they called him. Marta was in shock when he arrived. She was delirious, saying something about the vase and how one day she will set herself free as well. A sad state for a woman in the prime of her life. He gave her sedatives and Marta soon fell asleep. He cleaned and bandaged her hand. The wound wasn't big but there was an excessive amount of blood. It actually looked worse than it was. Ivan was sure that Marta would calm down and recover if she just got some good rest. At least that's what he told Davor. On the inside he shared some of his friend's doubts.

"All the neighbors know," said Davor. "That's what's worst of all to me. I care about Marta but somehow...it would be easier for me if she really were sick."

"Davor", Ivan cut him off, "Marta is really sick."

"Oh I know, I know," continued Davor. "But you know what I mean. It's not the same thing. Sometimes I get the feeling she's just pretending." In a swift motion he pulled himself a chair and saddled it. He began to wave his hands excitedly. "Tell me, what's

missing in her life? Go ahead, tell me!" Ivan remained quiet, knowing that Davor wasn't even expecting an answer.

"She has everything she wants. She doesn't have to work. I mean, I earn enough for three families! But still she insists on keeping up with her cosmetics, massages or whatever else she does. But alright, I agreed to that as well, even though it's pointless."

Davor paused just to finish off the beer in his glass. That was already his third since Marta had fallen asleep and he was slowly beginning to feel the effects of the alcohol. Not too much though, because he had a good "tolerance" to alcohol.

"Look, a month ago we spent a week in Paris. This summer I'm taking her to Greece. She has her own car and a few days ago I made a payment for a new one. Now come on, tell me, what husband can provide all of these things for his wife!"

Not many, thought Ivan, but he didn't say anything. He, for example, could never give all of that to Zdenka. Not that he wouldn't want to (or that Zdenka wouldn't want him to), but he simply didn't have the means. Yes, he was a little jealous of his friend for that. But still, that's not the most important thing in the world. Davor apparently didn't understand that. But how could one explain that to him?

Davor began his stroll around the kitchen again and on his way made a stop at the refrigerator to take out another beer.

"I know she's unhappy we don't have children," continued Davor in his monologue. But what can you do? We've been trying the whole time, you know that. You sent us to get all possible tests done. Everything looks alright, but there's no child. But that shouldn't be an excuse for her outbursts either."

"Davor," Ivan tried to get in a word again. "Those aren't outbursts. This is a serious problem and if something isn't done about it, it could end tragically."

"Oh come on, don't take her side! It's not a disease! A disease would be if she had a tumor or cancer or diabetes or I don't know

what. This is all in her head!" Davor raised his tone almost to a scream and then took a generous swig from his bottle.

The "head" is also a part of a human being, thought Ivan. The "head" can also get sick. Still, he again said nothing, figuring that Davor wasn't ready to hear a differing opinion.

Really, on the outside Davor and Marta led a happy and fulfilled life. Many were envious of their wealth, their spacious home, all the people they knew and everything that goes with that. And they were aware of it. And wanted it. It was important to them to be "elevated". It was important to them that they be respected, and other people's envy was like nourishment for them. Davor and Marta got along well. Actually, they got along well until a few years ago when Marta's "outbursts", as Davor called them from the start, began. Alright, at first he thought it was because of the war (Marta had family in Sarajevo), so he let it go. But as the years went on he realized that it wasn't just that. There was also the matter of children. Both of them have entered well into their thirties, and the children haven't come. It was the one dark stain on their marriage, at least as far as Davor was concerned. Actually, it wasn't even that important to him, but every time they were in a company and somebody asked about children and they responded that they didn't have any, he noticed the trace of surprise on the faces of those who asked. It wasn't that important, but the times were like that. To have children, actually, to have a lot of children, was almost a matter of loyalty to the country. Every time he faced that weird and undefined look, especially in the eyes of the high-positioned people who they were in contact with (which was important to Davor business wise), Davor had the feeling that he lost a few points. And he couldn't afford that. That was why they did everything they possibly could to find out what the reason for the situation was. He whole-heartedly sent Marta to all possible tests and submitted himself to testings as well. They were told they were healthy and fertile and that from the medical standpoint there was no reason for infertility and they should just keep on trying. What stupidity! Just keep on trying! What does that even mean? How does one try to have a baby? Does that mean making love every day? They do that. Does that mean not using any contraception? They never did. So what does it mean to keep on trying?

Still, they accepted the phrase and even used it as a joke. "No, we

don't have children yet but you know – we're trying!" It was pure stupidity. It was usually met with smiles and approval, but Davor felt that it was just a pathetic excuse. Why can't he have something everyone else could? All of this tortured him, but not as much or in the same way as it did Marta.

"You know," he turned to Ivan again, "a year ago she suggested we adopt a child. Can you imagine that?"

Ivan again remained silent sensing that it wasn't the time for replies.

"I just don't understand how she comes up with such things. Me, having an adopted child! I mean really! If I have children, they will be children of my flesh and blood. And I already know how I'll guide them and school them."

He took another swig from his bottle, finishing it off. The fourth beer was now showing visible effects.

"My son will be smart and strong. He'll be an athlete. From the time he's small I'll take care of his diet, training, physical condition... And you know what? I think I'm not the one to blame. There aren't things like this in my family. And I'm beginning to think of Marta as well. The mother of my son also has to be healthy..."

"Davor, I have to go now," Ivan got up abruptly, sensing which direction things were going in. He didn't want to take part in it. Marta and Davor have to solve their problems on their own. And things obviously weren't rosy. He felt for Marta. "Marta will sleep soundly straight through the night until morning, maybe even longer. Just let her get a good rest and I'll stop by somewhere during the day. Alright?"

"Alright, Ivan," said Davor, showing him out. "Thank you for coming and please, not a word of this to anyone. Please."

Ivan nodded his head and patted his friend on the shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "No-one will know."

In the bedroom upstairs, Marta awoke briefly just as Ivan was leaving. She heard the doors closing and Davor going to the refrigerator for another bottle of beer.

Her thoughts were slow. Feeling separate from their content, she observed them. She pictured them dragging along like spring fog in the valleys at the approach to Varazdin, just next to the winding road in Paka. Then she laughed at that thought – why on earth did she think of Paka and its valleys? She hadn't been there since childhood, since the last visit to her family when her grandmother died. She hadn't thought of it in so many years, and now suddenly – fog in the valleys! Maybe it's because my mind has now turned into a dark and damp lowland with fog dragging itself across the ground. Maybe.

She felt herself slowly losing this bit of foggy consciousness as well. Still, before she drifted off into a deep and dark abyss of sleep a thought appeared surprisingly clear. We all pretend, she thought. We pretend to be better than we are. We look better than we are. What would happen if someone came along who pretended to be worse than they were? What would happen if he looked worse than he was? How would we recognize his mask? How would we know who he really was?

The fog brimmed over the edge of the valley and covered the road Marta was walking along. She couldn't think anymore. She couldn't exist. "Help," she screamed from the depths, and fell asleep.

3

Unusual. Very unusual," mumbled Josip Gora, watching the computer screen pensively. He gently passed back and forth over one of the messages in his e-mail inbox with the mouse. He was in a dilemma as to whether he should even open it or just delete it, unread.

The message was marked with a red flag, which meant the sender deemed it to be important and required an urgent reply. That made it stand out among the sixty or so others he received during the night. It was simply unbelievable how the exchange of information through the internet grew with each day. Josip got connected to the communication network two full years ago, when there were not many Internet users in Croatia. Now the Internet, especially e-mail, represented his window into the world. It was difficult for him to imagine life without it. He could be up to date on everything that interested him. He was subscribed to a number of mailing lists and he also regularly wrote to some ten people from all ends of the globe, not to mention the hundreds of people he was in contact with periodically. Besides, he himself compiled one of those mailing lists and sent out two periodic electronic newsletters to a few thousand addresses. The end result of his internet use was up to a hundred received mails daily and at least a few sent. Time consumed: at least 40 minutes a day spent receiving and sending electronic announcements.

In this case it was unusual that he was dragging the mouse over the message in the inbox marked "urgent" for over a minute now, not opening it but not sending it to the garbage bin either. The minute, almost two – or maybe even more – which he will apparently spend thinking about it, represented a lot of time in the world of modern communication. He couldn't afford himself that time. But still he remained indecisive, observing his own paralyzed state. His mumbling was a comment on the unusual reaction to just one among so many other messages.

Throughout the years Josip had gotten experience in reading e-mails. That is, it should be referred to as experience in not reading e-mails. You just have to decide which messages you will read and which you will not. Sometimes, the subject of a message would be a reason enough for it to end up in the virtual garbage bin. Sometimes, especially in the case of mass mailing lists, he would just delete messages from certain senders (naturally, after he would become convinced with time that he wasn't interested in what they had to say). That process of elimination was immediate. A few clicks of the mouse and – bam. Instead of sixty messages only twenty or thirty which he might read later would be in front of him. Then he would open them one by one. A quick glance at the content of the mail – not longer than three or four seconds – and he would already know what it was about. After that the message could again end up in the garbage bin, and if the content interested him it would remain on his monitor. This part of the sifting process would last a few minutes, and after that Josip would be left with five to six selected messages which he would dedicate more time to, reading them, taking notes, checking the information in them and possibly replying.

All in all, it was a daily routine. It's a skill you have to develop if you want to do something meaningful in your coexistence with the Internet. Once you take that crucial step and get connected to the Internet, the amount of information which becomes available to you is so abundant that you can easily lose yourself in it. Actually, you can easily lose your time in it. Also, clearly differentiating important from unimportant messages is of utmost importance for your mental health.

"What should I do with it?" Josip asked himself out loud, unable to believe that just one single message threw him off like that. Is it possible that it's enough to flag a message as urgent to completely paralyze him? That's what was going through Josip's mind in his usual rapid flow of thoughts. He just couldn't believe the slow-motion state he was thrown into by the little red flag.

It really was unusual. Not just Josip's reaction, but the message itself as well. Its title, that is, subject, was "Please reply," and the sender's name was "Dany." Josip didn't know any Dany, but the plea in the subject allured him nonetheless. Actually, this wasn't the first time he received a message with the same subject from

this same sender. But the last two, three times he was quicker and more decisive (perhaps busier as well) so the message ended up in the garbage bin without much of a fuss. One of the things that Josip was accustomed to, just as any other "internaut", was so-called spam. The Internet was the ideal medium for aggressive and invasive advertisements and other forms of mental tyranny. Once you make your email address public, you will undoubtedly be harassed by various salespeople, dealers, saviors and others with good or not so good intentions who send out unwanted information. Every day Josip got at least one such message which offered various services (and the majority of the offers had to do with the millions of email addresses the sender will give you for some sum of dollars so that you in turn can harass others with your offers!). He blocked a great deal of addresses but a lot of the e-mails still made it past his filter.

His first reaction to Dany's messages was that they were obviously more spam. That was why he deleted them the first time. But now he hesitated. What intrigued him most was the plea in the subject. "Please reply" stood there, calling out to him to read it after all and see why he had to reply and to whom. He clicked on the right spot. Since he had already spent so much time on the message, well, what's another minute or two!

"Dear Josip," read the message, "It's good that you decided to read my message this time. I know you're busy, but I'm asking you to please reply with a confirmation. An important job awaits you. Dany."

"What?" said Josip out loud, as if he were speaking to the person who sent the message. He had no idea what this was about. What confirmation? He didn't agree to any sort of job with some stranger named "Dany"!

He read the message again. Realizing the meaning of the first sentence he had to laugh at the cleverness the sender employed. "I'm glad you decided to read my message this time" – good trick! It looked as if Dany was aware of my dilemma and that the content of the message was written the moment I opened it! But most likely all the letters had the same content. It dawned on him that the first message did have to be different (because there were no messages preceding it), but he concluded that it was a risk the sender took

knowingly. Either way it was successfully baffling!

The rest of the message was successfully baffling as well. Reading the message a number of times Josip just couldn't crack its secret. He didn't know what was expected of him. Somewhere within, he felt a faint instinct to do something. It was as if he felt the message could be of extreme importance.

That was actually what confused him most. While extremely intellectual, Josip didn't disregard the other side of his nature. Intuitive reactions weren't foreign to him. Actually he spent a considerable amount of time developing a sensibility to messages which came from within and were often opposed to what seemed rational and practical. With time he learned to accept the value of intuition and to integrate it into the decisions he made on the basis of sense and logic. But he also learned that he couldn't rely on his intuitive ability like he could on his intellect. That is, rational decisions were always equally verifiable and reliable. Intuitive decisions were always accompanied by some feeling of ambiguity. If he were calm and "focused" enough and accepted that ambiguity, everything would work wonderfully. Intuitive decisions accompanied by inner peace resulted in unbelievably smooth and simple solutions and outcomes. But when there was no calm, intuition became nothing more than a shot in the dark. Actually, over time, Josip had come to the conclusion that his intuition was always at work, just as his intellect was. The difference between the successful and unsuccessful employment of intuition lay in the fact of how open he was to that part of himself. Or rather, how open and connected he kept it to the world outside.

Something in him was awakening now. He read the message in front of him and felt his entire being react to it. He was aware that something was happening. "Reply to the message," an inner voice told him, "reply that you accept." Josip could clearly hear it echo throughout his entire body. Led by those echoes he clicked the "respond" icon and a window for his reply opened up before him. A copy of Dany's entire message was at the top. He had already begun to write out his response when doubt crept into his mind again.

"Oh what am I doing?" he said out loud. Things like this don't happen, he continued in his thoughts. That Dany is either just plain

crazy or made a mistake. It would all be too mystical if that wasn't the case.

Led by such thoughts Josip changed his initial intent last minute and simply typed: "I don't know what sort of work this is about. It's true that I'm very busy and I'd like you to be clearer in your message, that is, that you don't disturb me if this is a joke or a mistake. Josip."

And that was that. He clicked "send" and immediately forgot the entire thing. He still had many things to do today. First of all, the remaining messages. He threw himself into the usual procedure of removing uninteresting mail.

But no more than twenty seconds had passed before he heard the sound of a new message arriving in his inbox. That normally does happen while he reads other messages, but this time the sound really made Josip uneasy. Usually he would ignore it and finish what he was doing and only afterwards open the newly received mail. But now he felt a strong need to find out what kind of message this was. He had the program accept the new message. There was only one. "Unknown recipient," read the message he just sent as a response to Dany's "Please reply." So, the message was returned, undelivered.

"Ha," shouted Josip. "Dany isn't just unknown to me but to all the Internet!" But alright, he continued to himself, the problem is solved with that. He deleted the returned message and picked up with his work where he had left off.