

Cachexia
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01

From the windows of my flat through which I look out, watching the sunset, I can see the four blocks of flats next to mine. They're huge and resemble cupboards.

There are one hundred and seventy-five flats in each block. At least three people, on average, live in each flat.

One hundred and seventy-five multiplied by three, times four. Two thousand and one hundred people, and every single one of them will one day die.

Mathematics is inexorable.

Some of them, perhaps, will even die at moments that are not so far apart.

Every year there are approximately three hundred and eighty thousand deaths in this country.

If the blocks of flats visible from my windows were inhabited by the last remaining humans on the planet, one could assume that our species would die out in just two days.

The ultimate genocide. Incredible, isn't it?!

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It doesn't matter what my name is. I just want someone to hear my story.

It unfortunately ended up being you.

Eeny, meeny, miny moe...

You're it!

*

You already know something about me – I'm interested in two things: mathematics and death. But let's start at the beginning.

I was born several decades ago, on the eighteenth of October, in a small town whose name won't mean anything to anyone. So there's no point cluttering up your memory with it.

My mother died when I was three years old. At the time, the cause of death was written as "unknown" on the death certificate. It doesn't matter anymore, so let it stay that way.

One could say that I never knew my mother. I did know my father, but this is poor compensation. I never got to know him very well, anyway. Or at any rate, not as well as most people get to know their fathers. At least that's what I've heard.

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When my mother died, my father essentially abandoned me. I don't know why I say "essentially", because he simply disappeared from my world as soon as I appeared in it.

For a very long time, the only way he appeared in my world was in stories. Actually, "stories" is too grand a word. It would be more accurate to say he was "mentioned" from time to time, but though I want to be as honest as possible, I don't want to be discourteous. What good would that do anyone?

It was only quite recently that he fully entered my life. There clearly hadn't been an opportunity earlier. Maybe the alignment of the stars hadn't been right. Who knows.

I think I'm trying to make excuses for him. People do that sometimes. There's no harm in it.

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Supposedly every love story, regardless of what kind of love it describes, is a story about sorrow.

I'm not sure if this is true of every love story in the world, but certainly most of them. At least the ones I've heard myself. Let's not fool ourselves into thinking it'll be different in this one.

I'm sorry to say that this story, too, is about love.

It unfortunately ended up that way.

Eeny, meeny, miny moe...

You're it!

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Sorrow is a feeling that invariably transforms into pain.

People become intoxicated by pain because it arises from feelings, insofar as it's not itself a kind of feeling. And feelings are the first narcotic people ever experienced. And they're still the most popular kind of narcotic.

Among all the different feelings we experience, pain is unique. You'll probably say that every feeling is unique, and of course you'll be right. But being right isn't always what matters most. Even if you think otherwise, I'm sorry to say.

Or maybe not.

In some latitudes, at least, pain is an indicator of worth. The strength of the pain is an indication of the significance of what is causing us to suffer. It's often the first indication that reaches us, and sometimes the only one.

Suffering is an extremely precise criterion, and it manifests itself on a scale of loss. We suffer to the same degree that something was worth. This is pure mathematics.

Some people even think that if something doesn't make us suffer at all, it means it wasn't worth anything.

Assuming the above elucidation makes sense – they're right, of course.

I'll let you in on a secret.

Nobody really knows.

02

I was raised by my grandmother on my father's side. It's not an exaggeration to say that if it weren't for her, I would've ended up in an orphanage. So I owe a lot to her. I can't say that about many people. Especially members of my family.

My grandmother's husband, my grandfather, was officially declared missing during the Second World War. And he's still missing, to this day. It seems unlikely he'll ever be found.

As for my grandparents on my mother's side – my grandmother claimed to know nothing about them. And so I don't know anything about them, either. Maybe it's better that way.

When it comes to extended family, I have an aunt. I also have an uncle – her husband – as well as some other relatives whom I saw from time to time while growing up, on various occasions. I didn't know them very well, except for one cousin – the son of my grandmother's sister's daughter, with whom, until a certain age, I spent nearly every summer holiday and winter break.

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I've led a life that has been, one could say, ordinary. The kind of life that one should have, according to my grandmother. Namely: decent.

At least up to a certain point.

For a long time now, I've been living in a big city. A metropolis, actually. The capital city.

I work for a large firm – the national branch of an international investment bank. I found this job right after graduating from university. It was back in the days when people were still being trained for tasks they would later be given. Both time and money were invested. They were also paid decently, sometimes even quite well. As time passed, the pay became better, and eventually even great. And that's basically how things have been until now.

My life is peaceful now, in many respects. But I've achieved this peace, unfortunately, at the cost of long periods of anguish and anxiety that weren't caused solely by my professional life which began, at a certain point, to leave me feeling dissatisfied.

And this is precisely what I would like to tell you about.

*

I often had nightmares when I was a child. Nothing remarkable. I don't remember any of them. But I remember waking up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, crying for my mom or dad. But they couldn't hear me. My grandmother heard me. She stroked my hair for a long time, until I fell asleep again, repeating like a mantra: "Everything's okay, everything's okay, you're safe. Grandma loves you. Your mama loves you. Your papa loves you. Everyone loves you. Everything's okay. You're safe. Everyone loves you." And so on, endlessly.

It worked. She always lulled me back to sleep.

At no point later in my life did I hear anything so ridiculous.

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During summer holidays, my cousin took over the role of comforter. When we were just a few years old, we often slid our beds together and slept side by side. It was more comfortable that way – we could talk late into the night without waking up our grandma, who would get annoyed with us if we didn't go to sleep on command at the hour when she thought children our age should already be asleep.

My cousin was one year older than me. He impressed me the way only a six-year-old can impress a five-year-old.

I felt stupid around him. That's natural. But I also felt safe with him, which was ludicrous.

*

I did well in university, to put it modestly. Were I to describe my academic achievements with less modesty, more truthfully, I would say they were outstanding.

We so often convince ourselves of what we should do that we end up forgetting what it was we really wanted to do.

As time passes, sometimes these two things become the same. But at their core, they become identical only very rarely.

The years spent as a university student are said to be the happiest period of one's life. This is true. Especially if you consider that it's the only truly happy period in life. When you're a student, you don't really have to do much because nobody has serious expectations of you yet. You meet new, fascinating people and cut yourself off from the old ones who headed off in different directions after secondary school. The whole world seems to lie wide open in front of you because you've begun an adult life, but it's not really an adult life yet and won't be for some time.

Adult life is work. Endless work that's never interspersed with fun or new and exciting acquaintances, thoughts, theories or plans.

Drudgery that's impossible to avoid.

It's a slow, day-by-day process of sinking into oneself, becoming cut off from one friendship after another – including the real ones that require nurture, attention, care and interest. There's no time for any of these things because there are more important matters to focus on, or so we believe.

Over time, one doesn't emerge from one's pit, cave, hole, because this requires too much effort. It's also convenient; one doesn't have to exhaust oneself by keeping up appearances and concealing one's failures. Pretending that everything has turned out exactly as planned, although it's hard to call the vague ideas floating through one's mind during the years of one's youth a 'plan'.

All this made me unable for many years to bear the thought of another twenty-four hours.

But tomorrow always comes. It's as unstoppable as the day after tomorrow.

The days follow one after another, and each will be spent wondering how much longer.

But while at a university, a person isn't aware of this. A student doesn't know much about life yet. Things aren't much better after graduation, either.

A college or university – like any stage of education – has specific plans and obligations for the young people who enter it and the time they spend there. These don't usually line up with how young people spend their student years. They're young for a reason, after all.

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My first day on campus, I was firmly resolved not to be like the others. I was determined to take everything seriously that was awaiting me there.

Some adults laughed at me when I told them this.

I wanted this time to be put to good use. And those years of my life to be devoted to learning.

It's very common that when you're occupied with something other than work, when you do something that's not intended to bring you money, people equate it with wasting the most precious of resources – time. That's how it used to be, at least.

How it is now, I don't know. I've stopped caring about it.

But while I was a university student, I wanted learning to be my priority, not a hard-to-digest side dish to the main course of never-ending revelry – which is how many of my acquaintances, both new and old, treated it. Even then, however, I tried not to judge their choices as bad or worse than mine. Their choice was their choice, not mine. That was all there was to it, and for me it put the matter to rest, even though I couldn't help feeling a slight sense of superiority from time to time. Conflicts occasionally arose from this. Probably there were more of them than I remember. Perhaps I was much more difficult to deal with than I'd be willing – even now – to admit.

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All this didn't have a very positive impact on my social life, but I like to think of it as my own deliberate choice as well. Even if it was just a splinter from a decision in a completely different matter.

But have no doubt – every decision, even the misguided ones, brought me one step closer to what I couldn't yet foresee. And every time I felt rejected, even when it was just a trivial event not worth remembering, and every cutting remark I received from people I valued for some reason, every sting of envy caused by not being invited to someone's party – all of it was another step leading me towards a place I had no way of knowing existed at the time.

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The year I entered university, I was still a virgin. And although this was about to change rather quickly – looking back at the amount of time I'd already lived through – I had no way of knowing this then, either, although I was already carrying around a desperately suppressed premonition.

Just imagine my terror, mixed with excitement, when I entered the university on the first day of classes.

It was like a beehive in there, except I had the impression that instead of one queen and countless workers, there were hundreds of queens. The other men, who by all accounts must have been there in no small number, I didn't notice at all, since they were of no use to me.

Every imaginable colour, shape and fragrance passed before me in an endless flood of bodies, hair and fabrics. I remember being completely stupefied. How could I not be?

*

Studying economics was a fully conscious choice that I made on my own, although not without the clear approval of my grandmother – the only person whose approval I still needed in those days.

This state of affairs gradually changed over time, actually, though I didn't notice while it was happening. It was a completely unnecessary change.

In conversations with people who were close to me, of whom there weren't many, as well as with those who were almost strangers to me, of whom there were significantly more, I liked to joke that my choice of a major was the result of a terrible mistake. That I'd wanted to

study ecology, but when the admission lists were announced, I didn't see any point in trying to fix the mix-up.

People are always willing to go to great lengths to dazzle others. Including making an idiot of themselves.

To this day, I don't even know if a degree programme in ecology exists.

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03

What are the chances that a crash could occur involving two cars of the same brand?

Let's say, Suzuki?

It's quite easy to calculate.

First, we need to know how many Suzukis are being driven on our roads.

In a record sales year for the Japanese company, there were just over one thousand new cars sold.

This type of data for used cars imported from abroad isn't publicly available, so we'll have to rely solely on what we're able to verify, taking into account that the degree of error is unpredictable.

This is the approach taken not only by responsible mathematicians, but any responsible person.

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Contrary to what some people believe, we're not born to die. We're born to live. Even if only briefly.

Life, however, means making mistakes. Sometimes there are only a few of them, but, as the inexorable laws of statistics demonstrate, there are usually a lot.

Like many people before me, I've made them too. And what's worse, they were probably the same mistakes made by everyone else.

Humans aren't collective beings at all and are only capable of learning from their own mistakes. And even that is not always the case.

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So let's count only cars that are new, bought in this country and still being used. The average amount of time that a Pole uses a car is just over sixteen years. Let's round it up to seventeen.

The family-owned company from Hamamatsu in Shizuoka Prefecture on the Pacific Ocean opened its Polish branch in 1992. Sales began that same year.

Considering that last year, when over one thousand cars were sold, was a record year, it's reasonable to assume that never before had so many cars been sold. This is what logic demands of us. Due to a lack of data, for the purposes of our calculation we need to make some assumptions – perhaps over-reaching ones. This has been given the ugly name of speculation, and it's even prohibited in some moral and legal systems. Capitalism, as I understand it, isn't one of these systems.

*

We first met a long time ago.

When I got on the streetcar that day, nothing suggested something was about to happen that would determine the course of my life.

The random encounter on the streetcar with an acquaintance from university – though I wasn't sure where or how I'd met him, or why we were actually still saying hello and talking to each other as if we'd known each other for a long time and much better than we actually did – wasn't remarkable in itself. But it soon became very significant to me.

After the standard pleasantries had been drummed up, followed by a long, awkward pause, he introduced me to his friend who was standing next to him, clutching the strap above her head and trying hard not to lose her balance in the carriage that was tossing us all around.

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Assuming an optimistic growth forecast for most of the companies in the automotive industry, i.e. ten percent per year, we can easily calculate that in the first twelve months of its operations in Poland, Suzuki sold just over sixty cars. In the next year it sold about seventy, in the next about eighty, and so on... Based on this, we know (or can presume, at least) that over the course of twenty-seven years, Suzuki sold roughly thirteen thousand cars in Poland. Whether this seems like a lot of cars or very few is of little significance because that's merely a matter of perspective, which doesn't interest us.

According to available statistics, there are twenty-two million cars registered in Poland. But these are just statistics. Economics and mathematics differ in that the latter creates statistics while the former believes in them.

The number of registered cars is merely a number on paper. It's written in official documents because something needs to be reported, but it doesn't necessarily reflect reality.

A registered car remains so until it's deregistered. Everyone registers their cars because it's required by law, and there's a harsh punishment for failure to fulfill this obligation. Deregistration is also required by law, but it's not very easy to enforce. Fulfilling the obligation thus remains a matter of people's goodwill. And we all know how that usually turns out.

This is essential to our calculation because a registered car is not, after all, necessarily a car in good enough condition to be driven.

For the sake of simplicity, let's make another completely unjustified but necessary assumption. Let's assume that there are no fewer than fifteen million cars in working order currently being driven on Polish roads.

That's basically one car for every person who could, by reason of their age, be legally authorized to drive it. A huge number, but it will be easier this way.

*

Forgive the poetic tone of these words, but her hips were sumptuous and her breasts ample. She looked like a goddess. She must have truly been one, in fact, since throngs of men and women regularly flocked to her to confide their sorrows and joys in her, to offer all sorts of gifts and to try to win her favour. Many, while gazing at her image on a screen, prayed to her in their own way. The masses dreamed of gathering enough courage to take a first step that would begin their journey toward happiness. Still others dreamed of her, without knowing her name or anything about her. It was utter absurdity.

During important meetings in glass-walled rooms, solemn people in finely tailored suits would ask the one question they thought was most important, which was the culmination of that entire charade of listening to what others present at these meetings had to

say, feigning interest, and even asking irrelevant questions just to maintain the necessary impression. A world of conventions that's incomprehensible to many people. In the end, however, the sacramental question was always asked in such situations: "Does it scale?"

I know this because I've participated many times in this type of meeting. It's part of my job. Nothing distorts one's perspective as much as working in a corporation.

And some people think it teaches them about life.

That's very amusing.

[End of excerpt]