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HOW JOZEFIEN ENDED UP IN SERBIA

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Server Demirtas, *Koro/Choir*, 2015,
kinetic sculpture, courtesy of the artist.

In less than 11 months, Jozefien – whose Dutch family and friends called her Josje (while her American friends stuck with Josephine) – lost her breasts (the doctors said she was in complete remission, but she mourned the loss of her femininity with a force that stunned her), her husband (he died in bed one Sunday morning; she only realised when he didn't come down for coffee at ten) and her job (she had worked as manager for a major company that specialised in logistics, which amounted to sending packages around the world).

She had no children. Her husband had dearly wanted them, but she had had her doubts and by the time those doubts were dispelled it was too late. She had never really felt too sorry about it; there were plenty of children in the world as it was.

It was for the sake of her husband Jacobo, an Argentine, that she had moved to San Francisco; he'd found a good job in Silicon Valley. She would have liked to continue her anthropological research, but San Francisco was not the place for that, and so – without ever having the feeling that she had made sacrifices for her husband – she became a manager in an office job she considered dull. It was only when she lost her breasts that she was struck by the relative meaninglessness of her life. While still in the hospital, she had asked herself what a life would look like that actually was meaningful, but she couldn't come up with an answer.

A few months after her husband died, she applied her makeup with special care, put on a new dress and went to a bar, where she ordered tortilla chips and a margarita. She wanted to feel like a woman again, although she doubted whether it was going to work. She didn't give up though, she was a fighter. In the bar she started talking to a young man, a musician, who asked her for advice about love, the housing market and a few other areas of concern to him, but which areas exactly she could not remember later on,

for by then she'd had four margaritas. He was definitely not ugly, but only after the third margarita did she know that she wanted to sleep with him. After the bartender had twice reminded them in a friendly fashion that it was closing time, and once she was standing outside rather forlornly with the young man, she realised that he did not view her as a sex object, but as a mother. That realisation made her sad and angry at the same time.

"Shall we share a cab?" the young man asked.

"I'm going in the other direction," she said, although that was a lie and she gave the boy twenty dollars.

At home it occurred to her that she was not depressed, but that life filled her with loathing, that she couldn't stomach it and could not imagine that loathing ever coming to an end.

One of her husband's former colleagues came to visit. He had lost his wife and although he didn't ask in so many words, his indirect question was whether the two of them might not become a couple. Yet he too did not view her as a woman, he did not desire her, he respected her at best, she was filler and that was not enough for her. She told him no, but in a friendly way. "I'm not ready for that yet," she explained. Then he asked if she never got lonely.

"I read a lot," she replied, and that was true.

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way," the man whispered, as though telling her a major secret, "but back when I was going through a rough patch, Oni was a great comfort to me."

Oni had been developed by Josje's late husband's employer. Oni was not human, but he was able to do many things a human could and sometimes a great deal more than that.

Josje's husband had never been the silent type, not at all in fact, he enjoyed talking about food, but he'd never said much about his work, perhaps because he had worked for the army for a while at the start of his career and had to sign so many confidentiality agreements.

“I don’t need a substitute human,” Josje said resolutely. “I’m sorry.” “Oni is no substitute,” the man replied. “If he doesn’t appeal to you, you can just put him in the closet.”

“That would be a waste, putting an expensive thing like that in the closet,” Josje objected. But as they were standing in the doorway, she said: “Well, if your offer still applies, send Oni over sometime.” If I have him around, she thought, then at least I’ll have something of my husband’s around the house, more than just his suits and books.

About ten days later, Oni was delivered to her door. He was not in box and he was accompanied by a handwritten note from the company’s CEO: “Dear Josephine, take Oni as a token of our appreciation for everything your Jacobo did for us and especially everything he did for Oni. I am sure that Oni will bring you great enjoyment.”

She laid the note on the kitchen table and looked at Oni. She wasn’t sure exactly what he reminded her of. Of old movies, perhaps. He had no human features, but still she thought she detected something like a face, although she knew that was only suggestion. People happen to like seeing their own image in everything around them. She didn’t have to turn him on, he was already turned on.

“Hello, Josephine,” Oni said.

She thought Oni’s voice sounded like her husband’s. She even thought he had a slight Argentine accent, but maybe she was imagining things.

“Hello, Oni,” she replied.

She opened the refrigerator and poured herself a little wine from the bottle she had opened yesterday; she had already finished half. Josje sat down at the kitchen table and wondered about what to write back to the CEO.

She had never really liked him much. It took a certain kind of personality to become a CEO and that wasn’t a personality she was fond of.

“What are you doing, Josephine?” Oni asked. It startled her, because she thought she recognised her husband in Oni’s voice, even more than just a minute ago.

“Do you speak English with an Argentine accent?” she asked.

“Yes,” Oni said, “I speak English with an Argentine accent. Would you rather have me speak with a different accent, Josephine?”

“No,” she said, “it’s fine.”

She was taking some salmon out of the fridge, she was planning to fry it for dinner, when Oni said: “You speak with an accent too.” He was right: she had never completely lost her accent.

“You’ve got good ears,” she said, pouring a little olive oil into the pan.

Before she went to bed Oni came to her and caressed her body with something you couldn’t call hands. More like claws, soft claws.

All things considered, he reminded her of a scarecrow, a scarecrow with the voice of her dead husband. Before falling asleep, she reflected that Jacobo may not have been particularly handsome, but he hadn’t looked like a scarecrow either.

Gradually, she grew used to Oni’s presence in her life. He became a sort of pet, he greeted her when she came home, without jumping up against her – which she was glad about, because she’d never liked that – and when she went to bed at night he caressed her with those strange, soft claws of his. A few times he offered to vacuum the house or help out with other chores, but she always refused; what he did was more than enough. Besides, she liked vacuuming, it soothed her.

One day Oni said: “Is there really nothing I can do to help? I could entertain the guests. “I don’t have any guests,” she said, and she thought: amazing, the things he comes up with. He’s a self-learning system, but it never stops being strange.

Over time she realised that, thanks to Oni, her husband had not so much died as been transformed into a more-or-less sentient scarecrow. That may not have been an improvement, but it was still better than nothing and she had to admit that Oni had advantages too. Her husband had had his foibles. When he couldn’t sleep, which happened fairly often, he had the habit of getting up in the middle of the night and frying eggs, and then he would forget to turn on the extractor fan, so the next morning the whole house would smell of fried eggs. That sometimes made her furious. Oni had no foibles. He didn’t mess up the bathroom and he didn’t use the toilet either, so it stayed nice and clean too.

One time, after she came home from the movies and finished brushing her teeth, she walked through the living room in the nude and asked Oni: “Can you see that I don’t have breasts, Oni?” “Yes,” Oni said, “I see that you have no breasts.” “But I do have buns,” she said, “can you see that I have buns?” She turned around and showed Oni her buttocks. “Lovely buns,” Oni said, “you have lovely buns, Josephine, I prefer no breasts to any breasts at all.”

She knew it was ridiculous, but still: his comments made her feel good. And when Oni caressed her that evening she felt for the first time a kind of desire for the robot that looked so much like a scarecrow. She was deeply ashamed of that desire, so deeply ashamed that the very next day she joined a philosophical book club.

The club was reading Schopenhauer, a philosopher she didn’t know much about and the little she did know did not appeal to her much. At the second club meeting, she met Eugene. He was a former post office employee, but his hobby had always been philosophy. Later in life, his wife had left him for a homosexual guitarist. The part about the guitarist being ‘homosexual’ she found a little strange, but she didn’t question him. All she said was: “That’s funny, I used to work for the competition.”

Gradually, she and Eugene became friends, and after he had taken her out to dinner once she invited him to her house for a drink. She didn’t really find him all that attractive, but Oni’s exclusive role in her life had to end; it was time for her to be caressed by a human being.

Fortunately, she had remembered to prepare Oni for her visitor. She had told him: “Oni, someone is coming over to see me tonight. I want you to stay in the guestroom the whole time and only come out if I ask you to, is that clear?”

“That is clear, Josephine,” Oni replied.

After the movie, which was a disappointment – it turned out to be a horror film, the title was misleading, she had been under the impression they were going to see a romantic comedy – she and Eugene walked to her house. As they walked, Eugene rattled on about Schopenhauer and the horror movie and how well Schopenhauer went with the horror genre, and all she could think was: I need to be caressed by a human being again.

In her living room she poured them a glass of wine and, after hesitating a bit, she went and sat down beside Eugene, who put his arm around her right away. “I have a daughter who’s quite bold,” Eugene said, “and a son who isn’t bold at all, and my bold daughter always says: ‘Dad, when you like a woman, you should put your arm around her.’”

“Ah,” Josje said. It sounded as though she was in pain, so to make up for it she quickly added: “I like you a lot too, Eugene.” She noticed that she wasn’t so much talking to Eugene as to Oni, but Eugene didn’t need to know that.

While she was wondering whether to kiss Eugene here or in the bedroom, he said: “Josephine, there’s something I need to tell you before we go any further, I don’t want it to shock you. I have psoriasis. I hope you don’t mind.” He took off his shirt and showed her the psoriasis. She did mind, in fact, but she couldn’t say that of course; you shouldn’t discriminate against people because they suffer from psoriasis. She said: “You almost can’t see it at all.” Was this the moment to tell him about her breasts? No, she didn’t feel like doing that, he would notice soon enough anyway. She led him to the bedroom, sat down with him on the bed, gave him a quick kiss and said: “I’ll be right back.”

In the bathroom she dabbed a little more makeup on two spots on her chin and tried to pull a hair out of her cheek. She had overlooked it earlier that evening, it was a stubborn hair, and it kept slipping out of the tweezers. While she was working on the hair, she heard noises coming from somewhere in the house, it sounded to her as though Eugene was jerking off noisily. Had he gotten started without her, she wondered? Was she taking too long? After two more attempts, she gave up on the hair. She hurried into the bedroom where she saw Oni sitting on top of Eugene. Oni must have been equipped with incredible strength, for he was busy pulling poor Eugene limb from limb. “Oni, what are you doing?” she shouted. Oni said: “This bastard doesn’t respect you, this slimeball should be in prison, Josephine.” And with his ordinarily so soft claw he punched Eugene again in the face, which was already something of a shambles.

There was no need for her to bend down for a better look at Eugene, she could tell right away: there was nothing anyone could do for him anymore.

Oni was not a pet. Oni was a lethal weapon, a predator. Josje closed the bedroom door behind her. She sat down on the couch and took a gulp of wine. This was a harsh, exacting country. If she told them that Oni had come up with the idea himself, they wouldn’t believe her; she was legally responsible for Oni. She would go to prison and they would never let her out again.

She opened her laptop, looked to see which countries had no extradition agreement with the United States and decided intuitively for Serbia. There was a flight to New York later that same evening and the next day she could go straight on to Belgrade. She booked a ticket, packed a carryall, put it down beside the front door and went back to the bedroom. Oni was still working on Eugene, all the while repeating: “This bastard doesn’t respect you, this slimeball should be in prison, Josephine.” “I’ll be back in a couple of days, Oni,” she said, and she realised she was going to miss him. It wasn’t like him at all, but he now seemed to barely hear her voice.

On the plane to New York, she suddenly came down with a fit of hysterical giggling. It was so bad that she apologised to the man sitting next to her. “Don’t mind me,” she said, still rocking with laughter, “I’ve just had an extremely peculiar evening.”

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