

The Place Where All Your Wishes Come True

a novel by Miha Mazzini

Sample translation from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

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Marko

Until she started psychoanalysing me, I thought that the most unpleasant part of my relationship with Elizabeth Jane was her smelly cunt. The less sex we had, the more she talked. The less I was in her, the more she was into me.

I hate Brisbane, especially the Gold Coast, this BrisVegas of rich women with their tanned skin the colour and texture of dried dates.

“Oh,” she says with those thin lips of hers. On her bloated face they resemble a slash in a deflated ball. “Mark-O, Mark-O!”

Ages ago I said to that she could just call me Mark. She didn’t need to add that O, the sound of my own land. But she’s a worldly person, broad minded and of politically correct convictions, she wants to be authentic and adaptable, understanding, and I hate her – fucking someone who repulses you is hard work.

She is drinking matcha tea on the terrace and offers me a cup. Everything is authentically foreign, like the -O in my name. The Japanese bamboo whisk – the *chasen*, and the kimono, the French perfume, the Italian jewellery, the Irish silicone breast implants and the American botox in her face. Among all this, her genuinely Australian skin, gathered into a garland in her cleavage. I can’t stop staring at it.

‘Fuck-yoO, Fuck-yoO,’ a voice inside my head responds and I know that I’ve wasted my last dollars – the Viagra won’t work. They promise a miraculous drug but if the body doesn’t want to fuck, the miracle won’t happen. Or is it just me? I can’t talk about this with anyone. At my age it would be embarrassing, and anyway, I’ve learnt to keep quiet about anything that might harm my career. Elizabeth Jane knows nothing at all about my folks back home. I even have a fake surname ready for her, in case she ever happened to ask me for one.

Matcha tastes of grass clippings. I twirl the bamboo whisk as if I were getting ready for a shave, and smile at Elizabeth Jane. She returns my smile.

She’s about to begin.

As an excuse, she will initially have a dig at herself, then she'll start on me. I focus on the wrinkles on her neck. The surgeon will soon have to stretch them out again. Her eyes, their blueness dissolved by age, observe me without a blink. A lizard. Photographers could not stop praising her shade of blue, she told me. *Used* not to. Everything is *used to* this and *used to* that. She doesn't have Instagram and shows me photo albums. Full of dead people.

Together we have time and money. The former is mine, the latter is hers.

I stare at the age spot above her middle finger.

"...they all married me for the money..."

I look at my fingers, holding the cup. "One needs to show one's better side, the Japanese take great care with appearances," she told me when she taught me the tea ceremony. It lasted about ten minutes, so it must have been a tourist version. She also said I had beautiful fingers. No woman has ever forgotten to mention this to me. They wanted these fingers to touch them the instant they noticed them.

When does a relationship begin? First there is an inkling, merely a possibility. Guessing whether anything might come from this, eating away at me, hollowing and singling me out. So I check. In the middle of our chat, interwoven with the occasional passing compliment, drinks and glances, smiles and faked embarrassments, I can no longer hold back. I will touch her. I never plan where. Her back above the waist, perhaps the shoulder, the wrist. Nothing that might hint at anything sexual, I limit myself to the safe parts.

I move, walk, turn round, pass her. I look away, entirely absorbed in thought, trying to remember something important, absent with the soul, the body follows its own gestures, I have nothing to do with it.

At the same time I exist only at the tips of my middle and index fingers. All I am crams into those finger-pads, and it feels as if they are glowing, the fire of temptation travels towards the female body. If at all possible, I brush against her skin, in extreme necessity her thin summer dress.

The skin connects. Less than a second, and already I am moving away. Mid-gesture, I can't do anything else.

If her skin responds, follows me, if it lingers on my fingers, sticks, wants to fuse, unite, mix with mine, then, whatever we say and however long we waver, sooner or later we will end up together.

When, however, her skin ignores me, as if it has just brushed against a stranger and it was all indeed just by chance, I quickly find an excuse, say goodbye, and leave. My heart aches where hope had filled me, and the time I had invested into an empty evening makes my stomach acids boil.

Then there are women whose skin shrinks, as if wanting to hide and drag the flesh along with it. These have been ill-treated and abused, and I am no therapist. They will have to sort themselves out alone.

“...and the mistakes I made were out of a sense of duty, thinking I had to be good to them because then they would love me. As if goodness ever delivers love...”

Older skin loses its susceptibility and elasticity. Marriages and divorces, hopes and bitterness layer it with so many dead cells that these women only feel me with a delay and flinch with surprise, and these Snow Whites, visited at last, greedily leap upon me. For a second their skin becomes soft and supple, the skin of a young girl. At that point I always look at their face and behold the brightest part of business: they really *are* young. We look at each other and I know that the moment is fading, the face will oxidise, the years will return and the partnership will begin.

“...contempt, more likely.”

Some of them don't realise that it is all decided with the first touch. They dither and pretend to be unattainable, but I simply wait calmly with a smile. The skin has already surrendered and once I have conquered their largest organ, the others don't stand a chance. They are wrapped inside it anyway.

“...and then I said to myself: What if I just bought them, like I buy everything else?”

I've heard this already, heard it all before. I don't understand people who cannot be alone. If I had money, I wouldn't need anyone.

“You're clever, quick thinking, sometimes you have truly brilliant ideas...”

Aha, it's my turn already. I study her wrinkles, precisely because I know she knows what I am looking at.

“...on the other hand, so superficial in your restlessness, shallow and trivial, without depth or an anchor within. Is this a generational thing? Has the world changed? I like to think about this because it makes me less sorry that I'm leaving.”

She has never allowed me to escort her to parties or meet anyone. She didn't open any doors in my career. Bitch. She just keeps me as a pet.

"You panic at the thought of monotony, ordinariness, there must always be some kind of drama in which you are the protagonist..."

It went so well at the beginning. She was silent during sex.

"...you have no desire for hard work, none for finishing anything, to persist, everything has to be instant. You remind me of a child on their birthday. Wanting the attention, the applause, the approval. Wanting to blow out the candles. Only that you have your birthday every day... and you never run out of breath..."

If I strangled her to shut her up, would her psychoanalysis on me be classed as a mitigating factor? I won't, of course – I know how to control myself and I'm all but what she thinks I am. To her I show the mask she wants. I'm a dog that doesn't bite, a cat that has lost its independence. When I no longer had an erection, I licked the organ that is the source of life; judging by the odour in the case of Elizabeth Jane, also of death.

"...and so I think that it is best you go home. To consider what you will do with your life. You'll soon be thirty and, as I said... no need to repeat myself. I won't."

She holds something out towards me. It's an envelope.

"The travel agent can sort out the details of your trip," she says. "I've included some pocket money for a new beginning. Bon voyage!"

Maria

Us non-smokers also didn't want to stay in the sewing hall, we preferred to stand outside, shivering in the cold. Our breaths and their cigarette smoke mingled in the winter air. I don't know which one started it, but soon they were comparing their husbands to animals. Imagining them as this or that beast, they all fell about laughing, roughly and loudly. They waved their hands in front of their faces as if trying to cast away the wrong images they came up with and jumped when they thought of a more appropriate one.

I gazed at the snow-capped mountains. It dawned on me that I would rather be there than here, overcome by a desire to start walking and never look back. I imagined John as a rock, recently broken off the side of a mountain, yet to be smoothed by water, so one might inadvertently be hurt on its rough edges if not careful. I suppose I too should have found some animal to compare him to.

I was twenty and he was a few years older when he walked up to me at Mass, blocking out the sun, and said, "I will marry you."

I can't remember feeling anything special. I didn't find him attractive or ugly, he was the factory boss so I had never before thought of him as a man, that is how naive I was.

"You won't have to work on the production line any more," he added.

"Alright," I nodded.

He took me to the seaside for our honeymoon because I had never seen the sea before. When I apprehensively stepped into the water, I was surprised how warm it was, how caressing, then how it slowly relinquished me as I walked back out onto the beach. Drop by drop it trickled off me, that gigantic sea, from my hair to my shoulders and from my top onto my belly, from the bikini briefs onto my thighs, sliding off me. It was the gentlest sensation my husband has ever given me.

The foreman pushed his sour face through the door and we knew that we had another five minutes until the end of our break. "Hey, Snoutface is here!" one of the girls at the back faked a whisper and they all started laughing. The foreman paid no attention to them. He looked at his watch and after a while began tapping it with his index and middle fingers. "Back to work! End of break! Get on with it!"

It hurts John, I know. After twenty-five years as a housewife and later also his accountant, I am back where I began. I told him I didn't see it as a breach of his promise and that I don't blame him for anything.

I couldn't, however, bring myself to lie that it was not his fault.

They say we get used to everything, which probably just means that we have a bad memory and a vivid imagination.

I can sew with my eyes closed and I can close my eyes without actually shutting them. I watch the throbbing needle and see the actual thing I happen to be thinking about. I was worried about how I would get used to the factory floor again, but after a few days it seemed as if the interim quarter of a century had not happened at all. The sewing machine hasn't changed. Leather still smells the same. It both resists and panders to spoiled fingers, harder to bend and easier to loosen. The work bench is the same, as is the noise. Were it not for my glasses, which I have to keep pushing back up my nose, I could well be the twenty-year-old worker,

sewing away without realising she was being eyed up by the factory owner who never tells her when and why he had chosen her.

Perhaps the comparison of my husband to a rock is not exactly accurate, a train might be a better one? It steadily drives along the tracks until some points in front of it switch and take it in another direction. One fine day he said, "I have an idea," and I found myself clenching my fingers, as if moving them out of the way to safety. There was no point in trying to argue with him, discuss it, or try to convince him otherwise. The engine was already rolling along on its new tracks, the previous ones no longer existed for it. When he handed over the company to his brother, they posed for a handshake in front of the photographer, and he never mentioned the factory again. It was seen as scandalous in the village when the former director of the factory opened a car mechanic's workshop. I consoled myself that he was doing something he enjoyed. With *The Place* I had had my doubts from the very beginning, but then I was engulfed by his enthusiasm.

It hurts whenever I think of Tanya. His own daughter is one of those abandoned tracks that are never mentioned and of which he seems to have deleted the memory.

Once again I am thinking about why he picked me. Sometimes, especially when I was younger, I worried that he would suddenly bring along some new woman and that I would have to gather what little I had that was mine and go back to my parents in the neighbouring village. I would die of shame. Or that he would no longer be able to put up with what I called my *seasons* – hunger that made me bloat and forgetting all about food that dried me up.

There was never anything in his behaviour that would confirm my fear, so it slowly subsided and eventually disappeared when, during my illness, I tried to explain that I was now less of a woman and could see from his face that he was incapable of comprehending what I was telling him. He never touched me until I wanted him to. When I told him that I was officially once again healthy, he just nodded and on Sunday evening came to lie with me in exactly the same way he had done before my illness.

I tell myself that marriage was something he simply had to get over and done with, and now just no longer thinks about.

The last hour of the shift is agonising. Instead of my spine, I can feel a burning spindle reaching down to the loins. My eyes sting and water. I am among the oldest in the production hall.

Sometimes you can be as determined as you like but temptation gets the better of you because it's quicker than sense. After work I went to get some bread from the shop and noticed some tomatoes. I craved them. I kept telling myself, they're from Holland, it's winter, they're artificial, tasteless, and I managed to walk away from the counter with just the loaf I'd come for. The shopkeeper's contempt burned my back as I left and I ran all the way home. Just before closing

time I returned, head low, briefly, as if wanting to convince myself that I wasn't me. All that was left in the plastic basket was a bunch of orange tomatoes.

"Are they the same as the red ones?" I asked.

The shopkeeper could not be bothered to answer.

"Yes, just the skin is orange," he muttered.

All the way home I thought about how much John would enjoy them.

I put a bowl of goulash in front of him and a tomato salad. I even put four rings of onion on top to make it look like that car brand. It took me ages to align them so that they touched but did not overlap.

John moved his head by a millimetre, little more than a brief twitch.

"It's a tomato salad, eat it, you need some vitamins!" I told him.

"Tomatoes are red," he said with that definitive voice of his and I knew that the matter was over, the salad didn't exist. I will eat it later.

He leans over the bowl of goulash so the steam rises into his face. His nostrils don't flare, he doesn't close his eyes, no expression of appreciation whatsoever. He takes a piece of bread, slowly breaks it up, and places it on the surface of the stew. When he finishes he rubs the tips of his fingers above his mouth to get rid of the crumbs. Then he takes the spoon, presses the top of each piece of bread so it sinks, and then watches motionlessly as the pieces take up the sauce and swell.

He eats beef soup in the same way, in pieces, and I've even seen him dip bread into wine. When Marko finished primary school with top marks, I insisted that we should reward him, so we went on a trip to an amusement park on the other side of the country. We had dinner in one of those restaurants with dimly lit chrome fittings combined with dark wood, where the loos smell of perfume and disinfectant, they use real towels, and the waiters wear bow ties that make them think they are gentlemen. They saw us as country yokels. I imagined ourselves though their eyes and wished the whole thing would be over as soon as possible. John couldn't finish all the sauce and to my horror he intends to ask the haughty waiter to wrap him the soggy pieces of bread to go. I leaned across to his ear and asked him to leave them on his plate. He stared at me with those dark eyes of his and nodded. But when the waiter went into the kitchen, John collected all the paper napkins, wrapped his leftovers in them and carried them out of the restaurant in his huge paws. I would never and for anything else say that John was a miser, but when it came to food, not a crumb should be wasted.

When Tanya finished school I just made a cake.

I mentioned his hands – is it his fingers that are too short or his palms that are too square? Broad and muscly shoulders, not from the gym but from birth and from work. One of the attractions at the amusement park was a machine I had previously seen in films: a vertical rail with a metal weight that moves along it. It is propelled by a spring that you whack with a hammer. The harder the hit, the higher the weight goes. If it reaches the top, it hits a bell. There was a group of youths gathered around the machine. The lads had taken off their T-shirts, showing off their bodies that could have belonged in an advert. John walked up to the machine and hit it with great ease, almost as if in passing. The bell rang long and loud. I won't forget the contemptuous fury in the eyes of those lads, spurred on by the mocking giggles of the girls. What probably infuriated them most was that John didn't even look at them.

I'd like to see inside my husband's head. I'd look at how the fresh mechanical engineering graduate felt and what he thought when he had just got a job in the capital and then the state collapsed. The system changed and our local factory was returned to his parents whose family had owned it before the war, before nationalisation. Did they visit him or did they just tell him over the phone that he was now in charge? Did he object? Or did he just lower his head and get on with it? His mother and father moved to warmer climes and sent the occasional postcard at Christmas and other holidays. Did it hurt? Or was the advice he and his brother were given enough: You're grown up, arrange it between yourselves and make the best of things. "I didn't expect anything else," John told me when I asked. When the parents died in a traffic accident, he and his brother flew out to the funeral but he didn't want me to go with them. What I'd most like to know is whether now, after the catastrophe, he feels trapped, cemented into a prison, the walls of which will never come down? If you have money, you can switch careers, it's the fashionable thing to do, but when you crash into poverty and contempt, there's no way to start anew. Novelty is for the wealthy.

John is alone in his jail. I don't know how to enter and he doesn't expect me to. He was alone when I got him, and he will be alone when I bury him, if I live long enough.

I am well aware of regret, thicker than cough syrup.

Every evening he stands up at 19:30, nods at me, and closes the front door behind him as he leaves. Before *The Place* we never had to lock it. He is back by 21:00.

On one occasion last month I followed him. It was snowing, the grey flakes falling slowly and reluctantly as if winter would last forever. It didn't stick, just clotted into a crust that was hard to tell apart from dust.

I peeked round the corner as he turned into the main street, then I lowered my head and ran after him. I saw him walk through the village. He stopped in the square in front of the church. Snowflakes gathered on his shoulders and whitened his hair.

He was gazing at the village pub across the road. Two small windows with wrought iron grilles and a light over the door, next to it remnants of some old New Year decorations, the word "Happy" formed out of a thin neon tube, so old that all the bends have darkened and the other half of the sign that used to show the year is no longer illuminated at all.

He stood there and stared. Like he does at the goulash. Like he does at me when he is on top of me on a Sunday evening.

Slowly he crossed the road and stood outside the door for a while before entering.

The snowflakes fell onto his footprints. I ran up to the window and took a careful peek inside.

John was sitting at his regular table, right in the corner. The villagers at the other tables sat tight-lipped, staring straight ahead. I could only see part of the waitress, but she was leaning on the counter, staring at her nails.

John's regular table and regular time, where and when everyone knew they could find him and talk to him, the director of the factory, later the owner of the car mechanics workshop and also the village mayor.

It was the time he was available, there for them.

And after *The Place* the time of solitude.

Yet he still goes there, even though everyone ignores him, even though he is unneeded and redundant. Not even the waitress serves him.

He once showed me an engine that he had removed from some car, the bodywork of which was so rotten that the owner welded it together and finally nailed some wood to hold it in place. "But the engine still runs," said John and we watched it hum and vibrate in front of us, supported on some logs, running emptily and to no purpose.

My John. I think I love him. If love is the soft sense of sorrow for someone who is alone in the world. Or is it perhaps the fact that I have watched him for years, dipping bread into his sauce, and still find it fascinating, new and strange, rather than annoying and aggravating?