

THE REAL BEINGS

I have not enough patience for life
Søren Kierkegaard

He was last here fifteen years ago. Almost nothing has changed; the hotel, eucalyptuses and lakeside are all the same as they were back then. Time has stopped here, and it almost seems as if it's still that summer, that carefree summer of fifteen years ago.

Maybe it's because everything seems so boring and monotonous to him now. Before he got here he thought differently. Back in the city he had made the deep blue lake, its shoreline, and the summer he'd once spent there sound as attractive as possible for his wife and children, and they had agreed to go, albeit grudgingly. After all, when all is said and done he who pays the piper calls the tune. And so he made his choice—the best room in the hotel. He packed their bags and started up the car and now, suddenly, here he is. He looks at the view from his hotel room and feels a sense of regret. He realizes that spending his time off here will not be pleasant at all—in fact, it will be torture. He felt like this when he first saw the lake and the light green painted façade of the hotel, and when they were unpacking their bags and Lana was throwing a fit about some toiletries she'd left at home, and again when he realized how it actually hurts to revisit the past with a tired heart and an empty future. He tries to rid himself of this oppressive feeling. He leaves his room and walks slowly along the shore. In the distance he sees holidaymakers and hears their voices mixed with happy laughter. He doesn't want to see all those unfamiliar happy faces and sits down where he is. He throws pebbles glumly into the lake. He feels just how tired he is... Maybe it's the contrast between the carefreeness he left behind here fifteen years ago and the oppressive weight of the present day. Or maybe it's Lana's neuroses, which tighten around his neck and stop him breathing like a choke chain on a dog, or this landscape, completely unchanged and uncomplaining, with which he's somehow fallen out of step, and which unlike him has not aged or deteriorated at all, and which confirms to him once again that you can never go back and can never go into the same lake twice.

Even recalling the days he spent here in the past doesn't bring him much pleasure. Somehow it feels like flicking through an old album, looking at photos that faded long ago and with which you no longer have any emotional connection, where nothing transports you anymore—not the surroundings, not the people—and the only thing you find in there to like is yourself, just as you were back then, and nothing more.

It would be good if there was some kind of romantic history attached to this place. One of those stories that you later embellish in your mind and repeatedly furnish with new details. In such stories there's always a girl—her face forgotten, but suddenly accessible again. A girl he loved, a girl this place brings to mind. It made his heart beat a bit harder, brought about a

slight yearning, yes—a bitter-sweet yearning, the pleasing thought that one day the girl might come here too and sit on the lake shore, and that his face would suddenly come back to her too.

But that is not how it is, and he ruthlessly casts those days gone by into the water like a handful of pebbles. The pebbles quickly disappear from sight, circles ripple across the surface of the water and he gets to his feet again, straightens himself up, regains his calm and serenity. Mika thinks a person's life is but a slight ripple on the surface of existence. A few faint circles and then—glup!—eternal invisibility...

He hears footsteps behind him. He doesn't want to look, wants to pretend he isn't even there. He wants solitude. And silence... But someone always ruins it. Lana, of course. She has calmed down; her face is like the sky after the clouds have passed. In her fingers she is holding a cigarette. She stands silently by his side. She sniffs, takes her lighter from her jacket pocket. Still saying nothing, she lights her cigarette. She is so sweet, so meek, as if she has offloaded the uncontrolled rage of a few minutes before onto that snail there, crawling towards the lake, hauling its load on its back. Mika finds his wife's sudden metamorphosis irritating. Even more than her senseless anger, it is her radical change in mood that infuriates him. And even more than that, the fact that her good mood is so arbitrary and incomprehensible... If one moment Lana was a real tempest—destructive, eyes blazing, screaming at the top of her lungs—then the next moment she could make the whirlwind dissolve into its own turmoil and start dancing around in the middle of the room on shards of crockery she had smashed a few seconds before. And even now, it seems, she is planning to talk about something cheerful. She stubs her cigarette out on the grass and opens her mouth to speak...

She has just spotted an old friend, Keta, from the balcony, she says. Apparently she comes here on vacation too. Keta, the one who lived in Germany for a few years, the one she used to talk to on Skype. How can he not remember? Ketato, Keta! Blonde, big boobs? Mika doesn't normally forget women like that, but then he never takes any interest in his wife's friends. Lana's face darkens again. She doesn't think Mika is interested in any part of her life. Actually, it is Lana herself he is not interested in, not this way, not that way, not during the day, not at night, not in the long grass, not in bed... She could always she could dye her hair blonde and get implants. Maybe then she'd attract his attention. Mika feels a sense of dread. He realizes this is the start of round two. The mountain air has clearly filled Lana with new strength and energy.

Thankfully it is dinner time and their fellow holidaymakers are hurrying back up towards the hotel restaurant. Mika throws his lit cigarette towards the lake and stands up. Lana's attention shifts to the other holidaymakers. When it comes to judging others one look is enough for Lana. Generally speaking her judgments are unchanging and unshakeable, a final verdict against which there can be no appeal...

Mika and his family sit on the terrace. From here he can see just how varied this group of holidaymakers is—teenagers with sunburn from the lake shore, married couples, pensioners

convinced of the benefits of mountain air. The view from the terrace is not bad at all, but Mika is the only one who notices. Lana is still busy looking at everyone else, Nia is in her own little world, and Datuna is playing a new game he's discovered on the Blackberry. He is so engrossed that he only occasionally breaks away from his game to chew mindlessly on a mouthful of food.

Datuna really can't stand family dinners, feasts, all the rituals of communal eating and drinking. At times like this his mouth fills with food, his stomach with junk and his heart with sorrow. He fantasizes about it all being over as soon as possible. Datuna hates this place, and by this place he means reality. He hates all living people, but most of all his parents, because they are the closest to him, the most real. He sees their humanity every day—their hideous, weak, imperfect humanity. Datuna raises his head for a moment and looks with thinly-veiled disgust at the array of animated faces all around him. They think they're all different, but they're all made from the same old shit—locked into their petty routines, narrow-minded, mortal. Insatiable pigs who shove down huge portions of food, then noisily void their bowels with relief behind closed doors before lying on the shore satiated, or licking each other clean like dogs.

Datuna feels sick. No, he's not like them. He's an extra-terrestrial, sent here on a special mission. He realized this when he was a little boy, and set to work planning his escape from this place. He started planning how to carry out his mission. It was in that other world that he grew up, developed and multiplied, and now he is thirteen, and his real name is David and soon he will replace these pitiful degenerates with new, beautiful, perfect people. People who don't shriek like his mother, who aren't lazy and uninterested like his father, who don't have ugly screwed-up faces like his grandmother and who don't shuffle back and forth from bedroom to bathroom carrying stinking bed pans full of their own urine like his grandfather. Datuna will replace them all with virtual beings. All he needs to do is work out how to get them here. How to get them here? Surely that's just a utopian fantasy? Not at all. If we can enter their virtual world then they can enter our world too. Datuna is sure the process is reversible and spends many hours shut away in his room, glued to the computer screen, surrounded by his perfect virtual creations, working to complete the mission entrusted to him...

“The food's fantastic tonight,” says Mika.

“Yes. And you always have such a good appetite in this air. Do you actually want to be fatter?” Lana curls her lip and lights another cigarette.

“Is there any dessert?” Nia asks and covers her mouth with her hand. She's yawning. It's boring here, although probably quite not as boring as she first thought. There was the lake, after all. That meant swimming, sunbathing and boys...

“Oh look, there's Keta,” says Lana. She stands up and smiles at the woman coming towards her. The woman, wearing a light pink, plunge-neck dress, comes swaying between the tables and waves at Lana. 'She really has got huge boobs,' thinks Mika, and his mind starts making multiple connections: Madame Tussaud's wax women, bowling balls, a juicy peach, Tinto Brass, a hearty evening meal, a female pheasant, belly dancing...

The women meet in the middle of the terrace and kiss each other affectedly. Mika watches them and observes how this meeting of erstwhile friends somehow resembles a meeting between boxers in the ring. They look each other up and down, exchange a greeting and—ding ding!—from that point on it all comes down to evasion techniques and the strength of their punches.

The first round goes to Lana. Lana introduces her friend to Mika and her teenage children. Keta finds Lana's family quite delightful. Especially Nia—already fifteen years old, quite stunning to look at, with fair honey-colored hair and a gorgeous young body. Keta married later than Lana and she only has one child, five-year-old Barbara. There they were, over there in the hall, Barbara and Keta's husband.

“Bebe!” calls Keta, and Mika sees a small, fair-haired girl. She runs over to her mother. A man follows behind her, striding towards them miserably, unsteadily, like some rum-soaked old sailor. His face is beetroot-red. He is holding a beer. Lana compares her friend's “sailor” to her own husband and feels satisfied. Extremely satisfied...

After dinner Datuna shuts himself away in his room. Nia pulls out a series of colorful items of clothing from her bag like a magician and scatters them around on the bed and floor until the room looks as if a band of gypsies has set up camp in it. Eventually she chooses a white pinafore dress. She picks up her book from the bed, walks across the multi-colored carpet of clothes and goes outside. First she walks along the tree-lined path that leads to the lake. She walks slowly. She chews her gum determinedly and eyes her surroundings with an inattentiveness typical of a teenage girl. Down by the lake there are bamboo pergolas along the shoreline, a few beach bungalows, and some blue hammocks a short distance from them. Nia sits in an empty hammock, crosses her legs on top of each other like the Buddha and opens her book. After a few minutes she looks over to the bungalows and catches someone staring at her. Good. The trap is set, the countdown has begun, and in a few minutes the first victim will be well and truly ensnared...

Nia blows a bubble with her gum and pops it. As she does so she leafs through her book, giving it a cursory glance. After a while she looks back over to her victim. He must be around forty. Maybe a bit less. A rather ruddy, mature man on the edge of a mid-life crisis. Nia looks at him and then goes back to her book. Her victim comes out of the bungalow and sits in a nearby hammock with a can of beer in his hand. Nia chuckles inside. Oh, what a lustful world this is! She may only be fifteen but she already knows a lot. People think she's just like other girls her age: a stupid little girl with her head crammed full of romantic stories. Ha! How ridiculous. She might not know exactly what she wants from life yet, but she knows just what she doesn't want. At least, she knows how she needs to live if she doesn't want to turn out like her mother or those thousands of other desperate housewives...

Nia swings her hammock with one foot. The shoulder strap of her dress falls off one shoulder. Engrossed in her reading, she doesn't notice the thin fabric drift downwards... Nia's flawless young chest is half exposed. The oaf in the hammock salivates. He washes huge mouthfuls of spit down with his beer. Oh, how he stares, and doesn't even seem ashamed—a man of his age!

“Where's Nia gone?” Only now does Mika notice that the number of people wanting to go for a swim has dropped by one again.

“She went off with her book. She's probably gone to sit somewhere. Or maybe she'll meet us down by the lake,” replies Lana, standing in front of the mirror. She's finished applying some light make-up and now she's trying to objectively evaluate how she looks in a swimming costume. She can't see the cellulite piling up at the top of her thighs just under her buttocks and thinks that if she covers her flabby stomach with a sarong and sucks everything in a bit—yes, like that—then she looks pretty good. Great, even.

“Look over here a minute. Does this look all right?” she calls to her husband.

“Does what look all right?” asks Mika.

“What do you think? What I'm wearing.”

“Yeah.”

That answer isn't good enough for Lana. What does “yeah” mean? He's supposed to say she looks really nice. Perfect. That she is the most beautiful woman in the world, that she has the ideal body and that no matter what she wears it always suits her.

“And how does it look on?”

“I've already told you, it looks fine.”

For Lana that's grounds for a fight, but that would just be a waste of time. While they're arguing the sun will go down and she'll miss the chance for an evening swim. So she locks her anger away inside for now and throws her things into a straw bag with considerable irritation—sun creams for various skin types, a comb, her phone...

Down by the lake they're putting up parasols and setting out sun loungers. There are boats for hire, the barmen are busy mixing cocktails—in other words, everyone and everything they could possibly want is there waiting for them. Including Keta, it would seem. She is lying face-down on a sun lounger, resting her chin on her hands and watching from behind her dark round sunglasses as people come down from the hotel to the lake. And whom should she see but her long-lost friend, whom fate has decreed is now sharing her hotel and getting a tan under the same sun.

As soon as Keta sees Lana and Mika she gets up from her sunbed. But no—it's not that straightforward. In reality it's a whole sequence of actions, a performance, a blend of movements, mannerisms and mimicry perfected over many years. Even the timings are work out, precisely configured to her audience...

First of all, like an aerobics instructor demonstrating a move, Keta supports her weight on her hands and raises her body. Slowly. Deliberately. She stretches her body upwards, gracefully, like a cheetah. Gradually she comes up onto her knees, pushes her bottom up and back. In this position her breasts are displayed in all their splendid, captivating glory. Heads begin to turn... Keta slowly straightens up from the waist, brings her hands to her chest, sits back on her heels on the sun lounger and adopts the guileless, smiling expression of someone who is ignorant of their own sins, like a rather bemused church-goer. An unparalleled performance! And now, of course, the eyes of every man at the lakeside are on her. Mika feels rather excited too, but out of fear of his wife keeps it hidden.

Keta gets up off the sun lounger. She slowly brings one leg over, and then the second. Even the soles of her feet are attractive, so she stands on tiptoe on the sand. She knows, too, that this makes her seem taller, more slender. She can't help it if she looks so good: tanned, curvaceous, her figure-hugging black swimsuit highlighting every well-rounded contour...

Keta's caused such a stir and now, like a true professional, she fires her warning shot—as a final detail she removes her sunglasses and shakes her hair coquettishly, like Pamela Anderson in Baywatch. Many people are in need of rescue, but Lana's first in line. She's been knocked out, brutally, with one clean punch. Second round to Keta.

Mika takes a sideways look at his wife's face. He realizes that later tonight a violent storm will be passing through this sheltered, tranquil spot. That much is clear. Despite this, he feels a strange sense of calm. Over the course of the years he's got used to such sudden changes in the weather and they no longer upset him as much, but in any case right now there are other things helping him to maintain a good mood. On the sun lounger next to him lies Keta, and now she's face up...

Whether to hide her feelings or show off her swimming skills, Lana goes into the lake. Mika watches his wife in the water and tries to remember when it was that Lana's endless series of hysterical outbursts first started. He comes to the conclusion that she's been like that since day one, and blames himself only for not ending their marriage sooner, before she had a chance to give birth to their two children, raise them and put down such deep roots in his life. He knows deep down, though, that even if Lana were the devil incarnate he still wouldn't be able to replace her. Living with her for so long has made her his reality, and one which has no counterbalance. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't, as he sees it. He just hasn't got the kind of patience, energy or, most importantly, strength that would be needed for changes like that. For new dramas. For a new life.

Lana goes far out into the lake. She is swimming fast. “What if she drowned now?” Mika thinks. “If, say, she pulled a muscle, couldn't call out, and just sank to the bottom. So fast that nobody could save her in time and when they finally got her out onto the shore she just wasn't breathing...” Mika keeps thinking about this and as he imagines the scene he is filled with an indescribable bliss. It's not the first time he's had thoughts like this. He's imagined a terrible car crash, for example, in which only Lana is killed and everyone else escapes with superficial injuries. He's thought about a fire when Lana is home on her own, or Lana getting food poisoning from something she bought in the supermarket that morning and which only she has eaten. At first his conscience was haunted by these thoughts and he chased them from his head. Eventually, though, he had trouble resisting the pleasure they brought and gradually they became his sweet, forbidden, hellish bliss and supplanted all the thoughts and fantasies that had existed until then, starting with an adolescent's sexual fantasies and ending with a youth's most daring desires or unrealizable selfish goals.

“I don't suppose you've got a light?” Mika hears and sees Keta leaning over towards him from her sun lounger.

“A light? Sure,” laughs Mika. He gets his lighter from his shorts pocket, lights Keta's cigarette and takes another look at her lovely t—torso. Keta holds the cigarette in one hand and with

her other hand sifts sand through her fingers. She smiles an enigmatic smile. Mika's associations become more concrete now, and among them are a hotel room, some enticing Playboy bunnies, the rapid ebb and flow of water, loud moaning...

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The waiter brings cold beer in bottles dripping with condensation and a couple of decorated tankards. Tengo upends a bottle into his tankard and firmly grips the outside like a woman's waist. This is already his fourth. He only really needs one tankard to get drunk, but then getting drunk is not what drinking's all about. It is a ritual. An event. Something best done with another person. That's why he has a companion, somebody he met right here, sitting here with him quietly. A pleasant breeze cools their grateful brows and cold beer cools their throats. On the table in front of them is some fish, a few other dishes and some glasses which moments before had contained delicious, neat wheat vodka, and which had already been emptied.

"We should have got a whole bottle to begin with. When I order shot by shot like this I'm sure those bastards are counting how many I've had," Tengo says.

"You're right, and we should order some more," his companion agrees, catches the waiter's eye and gestures towards the vodka glasses. "Two more doubles, please." They laugh inanely. The bungalow rocks from side to side and it seems to Tengo that he has been sitting here a very long time. So long, in fact, that time has actually slowed and is no longer counted in seconds and minutes but in shots of vodka poured by the barman. The sun goes down, the sky turns a beautiful red and then slowly darkens. The people on the shore start coming together. Lights go on in the hotel rooms. People start getting ready for a new part of the day, new situations, new rituals. Tengo's family are probably among them but by now Tengo can no longer remember what they are called or what they might have been doing—and he doesn't care...

They drink some more, smoke a cigarette and order another glass each. The bungalow rocks from side to side like a boat set loose on a lake and Tengo starts to think that the bungalow is the ark and that only those sitting in it will survive. It is a pleasurable feeling, but suddenly he is troubled by a vague recollection. It's as if the thing he can't quite remember is a splinter that's just lodged itself in his finger and is causing him some pain. He racks his brain. It feels almost as if someone else should be here in this ark with him, someone else should survive, someone important to him, dear to him... But he really can't remember who. Uncomprehending, he shakes his head. He's just not in the mood right now for thinking and remembering. He'd need to sober up for that, for a start. He'd need to leave his ark and go back to the pain and the flood...

"Did you want to say something?" his fellow ark-dweller asks him. "Well, I wanted to—Here's to our health!" he stammers and clings on to his vodka glass hanging surrealy in the troubling void...

Meanwhile that other person, the one he's supposed to rescue, is sitting right there on the shore playing. Five-year-old Barbara. Bebe, who really doesn't want to go to Daddy's ark right now. She's holding a little stick in her hand and tracing strange creatures in the sand. Strange, non-existent creatures, almost like the ones the clouds make in the sky. The sun's going down. The sky is red and the water in the lake is still blue with some red on the surface. Everything is very beautiful and Bebe feels how big and round the world is. And she is inside it. Just like an embryo in its mother's belly. She is inside it and with her are the birds, butterflies, and clouds in the sky, the ants and tiny worms on the ground and the jellyfish and fish in the sea.

Bebe is happy to discover this and to realize she is not alone. Even though she can't see her mother anywhere, nor her father, she is not alone. It is getting dark and the lake shore is emptying of people. In the yellow-lit bungalow Tengo is still drinking. He thinks he must have been here a very long time. So long, in fact, that time has actually slowed and is no longer counted in seconds and minutes but in shots of vodka, yes . . . And then that thought again, the thought that he's been left in charge of someone. That he was supposed to be looking after someone. But who, who? He can't remember and feebly casts his eyes around...

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Nia comes back up from the lake and lies down on the sand. She likes swimming at twilight like this, when there is hardly anyone around. That oaf on the sun lounge doesn't count. Pitiful creature... He looks completely dumbstruck. He is still just sitting there, staring fixedly at her. His family are probably right there in the hotel, waiting for him. Or maybe he's not even married, maybe he's come on holiday with friends who are single and disappointed just like him. After all, men like that don't even dare approach a woman, let alone ask for her hand.

Nia lies on her stomach and swings her long lower legs back and forth. Her book and dress have been cast aside. Her lustrous hair spreads over her wet back and still childlike shoulders. Her curvaceous, womanly buttocks are covered with droplets of water. She lifts her head and turns over slowly. Her stomach and chest are coated in golden sand. There's a bit of sand inside her bikini, too. Nia sits up and tries to get it out, tries to pour it out of her bikini. She does this so guilelessly, and yet so brazenly, that as that poor wretch watches his mouth goes dry, his breathing quickens and large beads of sweat form on his brow. Nia is a cruel, cruel girl. She likes playing with people's feelings. She never did like playing with dolls. She has a lot of fun with these newly-acquired skills of hers. These are dangerous games, the games of a naughty, immature child who has now developed the passions of a grown woman. Games like this: whilst emptying the sand out of her bikini she pulls the material to one side and fingers her own pussy. Her victim stares. He is all eyes, two enormous eyes. Nia is the only character in a play, and he the only spectator. She chooses her role beautifully, plays it to perfection. Her time in the school drama club was clearly not wasted. Although she is acting she tries to enjoy herself all the same. She slowly wets her

fingers and finds the sand stuck between those small, pink lips, feels it mixing with her juices...

The spectator cannot move. He is completely paralyzed. He's on the verge of having a heart attack. Of course he doesn't yet know who he is dealing with, or that this little Lolita who has so completely captivated and bewitched him will make him empty out his pockets and his wallet, that for her he will withdraw an entire year's savings from the cash dispenser in the hotel lobby, and that he won't get anything in return. But for now this scene really is worth any price, even life itself. And it seems to him, on this astonishing evening, that this near-naked young siren lying enveloped in twilight on the shore is the most wonderful vision and dream he has ever laid eyes on.