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Captain, Sir, we have plenty of coffee!

by Dubravka Ugrešić

translated from the Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursac

Opulencia...

The lips pursed in the shape of the letter “O.” “Pu”—a throat bulging from within, a mouth crammed with mouthfuls. “Ll-en-ce”—rings like a brass bell. O-pu-lence.... The word swells, then pops like a fountain gushing with sprays of gold coins. Rivers flowing with milk and honey, roast chickens tumbling from the sky.

“What image does the word *opulence* evoke for you?” I ask a friend and fellow countryman who is a little younger than I am.

“An American refrigerator!” he shoots back.

It is an accurate representation for many Eastern Europeans—especially those Yugoslavs who watched American movies from their earliest childhood—of the mythical “horn of plenty.” The image of that immense American refrigerator so close to overflowing that food cascades out of it; the picture of the fridge (what a warm, soothing word!) out of which a sleepy American pulls a plastic half-gallon jug of milk or orange juice and chugalugs it down; or removes a tub of ice cream, brandishes a soup spoon, and sitting cross-legged on a comfortable sofa, flips on the TV and slurps the ice cream from the tub as if it were soup. This has been etched on the imagination of Easterners for generations as the most direct and appealing image of wealth and comfort.

In an episode of *Dynasty*, Joan Collins’s Alexis and her lover Dexter are soaking in a jacuzzi, sipping champagne. Dexter scoops something up with a spoon from a serving dish and tastes it.

“Hey, go easy,” says chronically vulgar Alexis, “that is caviar!”

The director probably thought it *gauche* to zoom in on the pickled salty roe, yet the audience still needed to register the couple’s indulgence, hence Alexis gets her incompatible sentence. The champagne, the caviar, the jacuzzi: the simple symbols of opulence the media have thrust into the brains of poor people in America and all over the world. Yet many Russians during the starvation period of the Red Revolution had so much caviar that they were sick of it; there was absolutely nothing else to eat. Those who were short of a spoon scooped it with their bare fingers.

Opulence resides where the poor and the rich meet. All of us intersect in a place much like an old abandoned railway station where trains never arrive or depart. Apparently we arrived at the station when God expelled us from paradise. After the Fall, it makes no difference whether a silk pearl is natural or artificial.

Poverty knows affluence best. Peer into the small apartment where the largest wall in the living room is wallpapered with a glowing sunset over a vivid seascape. Or into little city gardens done in plastic grass with a flock of plastic flamingos and plastic frogs

swimming in a plastic fountain. Peek into the stores selling gilded nylon brocade, synthetic lace and silk, polyester satin. Check out Eastern European hot springs dating from the communist period, where weary Western retirees purchase accessible pleasures: a swim in the shabby pools, a massage and a pedicure.

Perhaps it is only in this context that we can make sense of why the Vanderbilt family imported, brick by brick, lavish Italian rooms from the 16th century and built them into their “cottages” in Newport; and why today’s rich Russians blast great slices into the Montenegrin cliffs to build villas reminiscent of the Guggenheim, with swimming pools from which the swimmer gets an eagle’s eye view of the majesty of the Adriatic.

There was a popular ad for Franck coffee on Yugoslav television back in the late eighties. A spaceship with its crew. Sudden turbulence. Grim expressions on the astronauts’ faces signal that the spaceship will never return to earth. A stewardess wearing a Gagarin costume steps into the captain’s cabin and smiles brightly: “Captain, Sir, we have plenty of coffee!” That was a time of chaos on the Yugoslav market, a time of shortages. Three things symbolized opulence back then: coffee, detergent, and cooking oil. The women of Yugoslavia went off over the border by bus on day trips to Trieste or Graz to buy supplies. For no apparent reason one of the items on the *must have* list was raisins. My mother’s cupboard at one point was nearly bursting with little packets of them, and I nearly burst with pity for my mother.

Opulence is dangerous because death usually lurks just beyond its achievement. (Moths will get to it! Mice will nibble it! Fire will reduce it to ashes! Stains will make it ugly! People will snatch it! Banks

will go bust! The money will be eaten by inflation!) Nothing lurks beyond poverty but the necessity of survival.

When I was a child, we lived in a small town near Zagreb, about three kilometers from the motorway to Belgrade. In summer the traffic of Turkish and Greek guest workers on their way home from Western Europe inched along the road. One day the local police knocked at our door and asked my mother to help as an interpreter. That very day the Bulgarian ambassador to Mali was on his way home for a hard-earned summer vacation, and just where the road splits off the highway toward our town, the ambassador had collided with another car. His wife was killed instantly; he and his two little girls were unharmed. There were formalities to attend to, but also the poor man and his children needed to be cared for. They were our guests for several days. When the ambassador departed, he left behind two large sacks of peanuts which had been in the trunk of his car. He probably felt it no longer appropriate to return and deliver them home along with the news of the death of his wife. Perhaps this was his expression of gratitude; he had nothing else to give us. None of us had ever seen or tasted a peanut before. Our whole neighborhood roasted peanuts in the oven, shelled the unsightly husks, and nibbled at the unusual oval seeds for months. From the horn of plenty peanuts showered down upon us. I have disliked peanuts ever since.

Opulence should be left where it can do the least harm—in the realm of the imagination. I make an effort, as much as I can, to steel myself to its siren call. Plenty of coffee is entirely sufficient for my daily dose of happiness.

Dubravka Ugrešić’s latest essay collection, *Nobody’s Home*, is forthcoming from Open Letter, University of Rochester.