

Lucie Vaňková

The Wanderings of a Dead Fish

Summary

Just as Venus was born from the foam of the sea, Ishtvan Mackerel was born from the vices of the 21st century. Made up of liquid postmodernity and created because of global warming, he suddenly finds himself on Earth – without a past or any qualities, let alone a plan for what to do with his suddenly acquired life.

In many ways, he resembles a stereotypical millennial: he feels thoroughly unskilled, he can't financially sustain himself, and he is experiencing choice overload. On top of that, Ishtvan knows he is not a real person. His personality is strangely *liquid* – his opinions change depending on the surrounding environment and the people around him. His emotions always seem to align themselves to match the emotions or expectations of others.

This, of course, affects Ishtvan's relationships: Methodius, who is indirectly responsible for Ishtvan's emergence by reading a badly edited report about him, accepts Ishtvan as his own out of convenience: he likes that Ishtvan always agrees with him and that he lets him go on about his favorite subject – himself. Similarly, Julie, Ishtvan's new girlfriend, is neither in love with him nor sure that she cares about him at all. She simply likes the company and the fact that she can split the bills with him. One person who isn't particularly fond of Ishtvan is Radovan, Methodius' (soon-to-be former) boyfriend, who thinks that the story of how Ishtvan came to be is grade-A bullshit and a cover-up for a particularly vile case of infidelity on Methodius' part.

In the first half of the book, Ishtvan experiences various hardships associated with his efforts to navigate and settle into the modern world: he works for an environmental non-profit, meets women, farms thrushes (since rapid climate change is preventing the birds from prospering in the wild and people now have to keep them in their homes), finds a job at an advertising agency from which he is subsequently fired for being too truthful... and attempts to get to Milan Kundera after reading a sentence in his novel *Immortality* that convinces him he has just learned his own fate – he believes that the character of Agnes, who was born from a single gesture of an elderly lady by the pool, is a member of his species and that he must meet her and ask her all the burning questions on his mind.

This begins Ishtvan's journey, which takes him to Paris, Geneva and Strasbourg, only to bring him back to Prague without ever meeting Kundera or Agnes. He does, however, gain another important ally: Czech writer Patrik Ouředník, who is generally dubbed a less famous but more accessible alternative to Kundera. Ouředník himself accepts the role and successfully imitates Kundera at a reading for the blind to make a little extra money. It is Ouředník who reveals to Ishtvan that there is an institute dedicated to the study of effusions,

that is, Ishtvan's species. Filled with excitement upon finding out he is not the only one of his kind in the world, Ishtvan agrees to undergo a three-month treatment that is supposed to make him 15% more human.

Things get complicated when effusions are labeled environmental pests and they are declared wanted by officials, who have decided that removing them is a convenient way to reduce humanity's carbon footprint without harming a single real person (or road traffic). A chance to escape the witch hunt presents itself when he is offered an experimental surgery that will make him human. To get it, he only needs one thing – a human organ. For a long time, it seems that no one cares enough about Ishtvan or those closest to him to make such a sacrifice for him... Fortunately, Methodius has unfinished business with his ex-boyfriend Radovan – he unceremoniously deprives him of one of his testicles and “donates” it to Ishtvan without Radovan's consent. After a successful surgery, Ishtvan slowly begins to grow human tissue, gradually becoming fully human. Ironically, just as this happens, scientists announce that though it has yet to become apparent to the naked eye, it is too late to reverse climate change and save humanity. Ishtvan, who finally experiences emotions of his own, feels strong regret right then. He doesn't regret the fate of humanity as such; he regrets trying so hard to be part of it only for all his effort to end up being in vain.

– Lucie Vaňková