

YOU'RE AN ANIMAL, VISKOVITZ!

because I'm an elk, but to me those sharp peaks look like invincible antlers. I bugled. Because I felt like it. I would have liked it if, from the other mountains, some herd bosses had answered. Because we elks are here on all these peaks. The little brats were grazing happily. The herd was peaceful. I had a bite of grass and then I called the girls over. How nicely the little fillies trotted! We had some unfinished business to take care of. There was no reason to wait for evening—from now until then I would take my pleasure. There was really no need for modesty in my own home. There was Ljuba, then there was Lara, then there was Elke, then there was Olga . . . Great Elk, I felt as excited as a young buck!

"Girls, today we're all going to work together to make sure our herd has an abundant and vigorous offspring," I neighed. "Step right up, Ljuba."

"I'm afraid that's not possible, my lord."

"Don't say that, not even as a joke . . ."

"The mating season is over, my lord, and we'll have to wait until next year for these things, if we'll still have the honor of having you with us. In the meantime, you remain our only master. If you would be so kind as to pull down that branch, we . . ."

Jana was lying in a pond, half submerged in the slime that covered her scabs.

"Your Elkness," she brayed, "you smell awful."



## ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD, VISKOVITZ

As soon as I was born, I got compliments.

"How beautiful he is," Mama crowed. "He's already a perfect beetle. He has more color than the others, he's more attractive!"

She was completely happy with what she saw. Brand-new, I must have been a pretty sight.

I congratulated myself on coming into the world and took a look around to make sure there were no predators. I would have been annoyed if the party ended so soon. Around me there was a bunch of snot-noses who had barely completed their larval stage. They were trying to

get out of their "pears," making an effort to move around. I liked the idea that I was starting life with an advantage over them, even if it was as ephemeral as beauty. But Papa managed to dampen my enthusiasm.

"Don't listen to your mother, Visko. Beauty is no advantage at all for creatures like us."

"Is that right?"

"I'm sure of it, son. And it would be good for you to know right off how things stand. We're dung beetles, kid, and the only thing that matters in our life is . . . well, look . . . it's shit."

I was stunned. I wasn't able to take in what he meant, but the way he said it, hunching up in his shell with a mortified expression, weighed on me uneasily.

"But we should have a party now," he continued. "This is a delicacy, you'll like it." With a certain apprehension he held out a little dark ball with his appendages. I warily tasted it, just a little lick. It was disgusting. My God, I thought, do our lives really depend on this filth?

"You are our first son, Visko. It wasn't easy to bring you into the world. To grow a larva it takes a ball of material two inches thick. We call them 'pears,' and they don't grow on trees."

"There's a lot of competition?"

"You said it, kid. There's a drought and there aren't big herds, so the vital matter is scarce, and there are a lot of us. When a two-pound load drops, in the span of ten minutes you'll find something like five thousand dung beetles—as well as endocopridi, scavatori and rotoletori . . ."

"Endocopridi?"

"Yes, they're scarabs, too, tiny little bastards who sneak into the balls you're rolling, and they eat them from the inside out. They can even do it in the larva if you're not paying attention. Then there are heliocopris—they're diggers, real bulldozers, great big beasts who weigh almost an ounce.

"If you run into one of them, I'm telling you, son, you'd better do what he says."

"I'll remember, Papa."

"But most of all, you've got to keep an eye out for your own kind. Because digging up, rolling and pushing a pear is backbreaking work. It takes thirty minutes, twenty if you're in really good shape. Dung isn't all the same. When you make your pear test the moisture content and the consistency. Then you have to find any knobs, pull them off, make it round. Then you have to roll it—you have to prop it up with your head and shove it with your hind legs, and at the same time you have to use your claws like rakes, smearing all the feces you find onto it. These are operations that cost energy. And energy costs shit. So the most efficient strategy for getting a ball is to steal it. When you're all tired out and the pear is ready, you have to defend it as you would your life, or they'll carry it off by force. Even your best friends, the ones you grew up with. The material is more powerful than we are, Visko. It eats up your soul."

"Papa, what are these appendages under the elytra?" I threw it out to change the subject.

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"They're membranous wings. They allow us to fly."

"Fly! Wow! That's great news!"

"Pay attention now—flying takes a heap of energy. First you've got to speed up your metabolism, increase your body temperature. To do that you have to shiver."

"Shiver?"

"Yes, shivering charges you with energy, gets you ready for action. But you have to have ingested enough material to be able to do it. These days your energy is barely enough for gathering your material, and the material is barely enough to give you energy. You can allow yourself to fly only to get to the manure in a hurry. In the end it always comes back to that, Visko."

"To the material?"

"Right. But don't think that what we do is contemptible or worthless. Just the other way around. We dung beetles are fundamental to the ecosystem. Not only do we remove the manure that otherwise would pile up on the ground and suffocate the plants, but we also aerate and fertilize the soil, as well as hold back the proliferation of parasites and pathogenic agents, not to mention reducing the number of flies that proliferate in the excretions." My father proclaimed this with as big a sense of pride as his metabolism would allow.

The next day we were up in the air early to make up for the time lost with my birth. I was beginning to feel guilty

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until at last we caught sight of a herd of elephants at a watering hole. Papa advised me to choose a specialization, and coprophagy of elephant products seemed the most promising. Even though it had been emphasized to me that these animals rarely stepped on their products, it was still hard to imagine that anyone would have the courage to go into the midst of them and carry away that stuff. And yet the first load was barely released when thousands of beetles materialized as if by magic and hurled themselves onto it. My father was among the first. I was to learn, to study his moves, to familiarize myself with the unexpected, but pretty soon the scene had turned into a dark hell of bodies and shit, an unintelligible chaos of hitting, yelling and swearing. I stood there, petrified, overcome by the stench, by the trumpeting of the elephants, by terror. I prayed to God to have pity on us.

It seemed to me a miracle when I saw the antennae of my father emerge from the melee. He was dragging himself along, clutching a good-sized piece of a ball—bigger than him—not so large as to give me a brother but enough calories to allow him to make it to his next battle. He signaled to me with his elytra. He was shaken up and bruised, but his buccal appendages were grinning with happy anticipation. His joy was short-lived, however, because two bad guys came out from under a leaf and began to pound on him. They turned him upside down and took the pear. My father got up and charged. They beat him up again. I ran to help him, but I still hadn't quite

gotten the hang of shivering to accelerate my metabolism. So I ended up with my belly in the air, beaten. When I came to, I saw that all that was left of my father were a few scattered fragments. In the distance I could see his persecutors making off with the loot. With them was my mother, who hadn't taken long to jump on their bandwagon.

From that day on, shivering wasn't a problem. I was one against all. In that godless world, only one value survived: the Substance. In it I put my faith. I began to measure the meaning of life in grams.

I gathered a band of young toughs who raided and beat up the young and the old. I took part in all kinds of crime. I told myself that I wasn't the one who invented the law of the strongest. But two pears stolen from a family bug couldn't begin to satisfy my unlimited desire to own. So I decided to look for wealth at the very point of origin. I fastened myself onto the coat of the producing animals and let them carry me. That way I saved energy, and when they dumped a load I was always the first one there. If the wind carried the scent over a dead zone—a pond, for example—it could take as much as a half hour for the crowd to show up. It was hard work but well paid, and soon I had enough capital to set myself up on my own. I hired a staff and surrounded myself with a private militia. In a little while I found myself at the head of an organization that controlled acres of the savanna and had exclusive contracts with many herds. Moreover, we controlled the

currency exchange, the futures markets and the fluctuation of savings rates. In the course of one season I had amassed a patrimony that was calculated in tons of substance, a good part of it in liquid assets.

I became the preeminent insect, the one to be admired and envied, the one who received a respect and adulation equal to that paid only to the thing itself. I thought that was all the happiness a beetle could hope for. But I was forced to change my mind.

I saw her on the corolla of an orchid. Her exoskeleton was red as the dawn, her corslet a whirlwind of golden reflections, a little sun caught among the petals. How to describe her? Her beauty was simultaneously adelphagous and polyphagous. Every part of her body, emimeron or episternum, prothorax, mesothorax or metathorax, ureters, stigma or scutellum was for my ocelli both joy and torment. She was the queen of scarabaeids, and I couldn't live without her. At last love had a face and a name: Ljuba.

I thought of delivering a bouquet of the precious currency, but it dawned on me that it was contraindicated. It wasn't with riches that I wished to storm the castle of her heart. She had just arrived with the monsoons and knew nothing about me. She liked talking about flowers, trees, resins, fruits, an unusual tendency in a beetle. She could chatter for hours without ever mentioning the brown substance. Ah, how refreshing it was to be with her! She was fascinated by everything that was sweet, perfumed,

colored, and this passion of hers was so contagious that for the first time my life seemed an adventure full of wonder and mystery and the world a perfect place in which to celebrate the harmony between insects and creation.

I told her I loved her.

"And I like you, Visko. I'd like to be your mate."

"Do you mean you like me as I am, as an insect? That you have no interest in knowing how much I own?"

"Of course, what importance does that have?"

I felt myself melt. Was this real or a dream? Even beetles had hearts? We made the preparations for our nuptial flight and never—I say never—did she ask me for a present or even simply to be fed. At last, fully convinced of her sincerity, I decided to bestow on her the prize she deserved, and I took her to one of my properties, a bath of manure ten yards square, surrounded by my militia.

"It's all mine," I announced. "And this is only one of my holdings—an empire that reaches from here to Lake Victoria."

"You're joking."

"Not in the least. Look." I plunged in headfirst. "Come on! It's yours now, too!"

Ljuba couldn't believe her ocelli. "You're asking me to go in . . . to go into that?" she stammered.

"Absolutely. I understand your modesty, dear, but after all, we're dung beetles."

"If this is a joke, it's in truly bad taste, Visko. I am a

purebred malolontha, a May beetle! No one has ever called me a dung beetle."

"May beetle? I don't understand the difference."

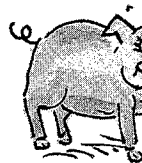
"I see that you don't. Dung beetles are crude creatures with dark carapaces who eat unmentionable filth. We May beetles, on the other hand, have dazzling colors and feed on pollen, aromatic resins and other sweet things. We can fly for hours, and we love poetry, the dance, good company and, above all, cleanliness, Visko. I can assure you that until today I have never seen a great big May beetle like you soaking in shit. Now I have to go away because this place stinks and you disgust me."

She had shivered enough to fly across the ocean. I would probably never see her again.

There I was with my palps open, trying to make sense of it. Me, a May beetle? And Papa and Mama? So that was why they didn't look like me. My real parents must have forgotten where they left my egg. Maybe Papa and Mama were tired of being alone. My God! Was it possible that . . . I was completely confused. Who was I? What was I doing soaking in this stuff? I should pull myself out of it, go after Ljuba, explain my situation and build a clean life with her. I said to myself, "Come on, Visko, do it!" But I wasn't able to feel enough disgust to shudder, and without shuddering I couldn't charge my metabolism enough to fly. There was too much pleasure in that odiferous bath, the fragrance of that bog, in the satisfaction of seeing the rabble—not only Coleoptera but also Trichoptera,

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Thysanoptera and Aphaniptera—pressing up against the barricade to look at me and dream. For an instant I thought I caught a glimpse of the integument of my old father and saw him tremble. Trembling with pride that his son had made it, that he was in it, in it up to his neck.



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