

**Marina Vujčić**

*The Anatomy Issue*

**Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić**

It was the back that brought together Ms Veronika Vinter and Mr Florijan Bauer.

No, they did not lean together against the same thing at the same time or anything like that. It was far more delicate and had nothing to do with anything we may think or have heard.

Namely, Mr Bauer placed a rather peculiar advertisement in a newspaper. If, for instance, Ms Vinter had not been a passionate reader of classified ads in the very same newspaper in which Mr Bauer had run his, and if she had not been eager for new experiences and adventures, Mr Bauer's strange advertisement would have probably remained unanswered. It would have also been unanswered if Ms Vinter had not been looking for a side job because she had run into financial problems due to her tendency to make irrational decisions. But everything seemed to have aligned in the lives of Ms Veronika Vinter and Mr Florijan Bauer for this story about the back to unfold.

Mr Bauer was a well-off man in his fifties. A widower. Mrs Bauer was carried off by a stroke of apoplexy ten years earlier, when she was under forty years of age. Mr Bauer missed his Amalija. He missed her soft, loving voice, her gentle disposition, her serenity and her cooking, but what he missed the most were her hands on his back. Of that Florijan Bauer became painfully aware in the first weeks of her sudden, premature death. For one can do pretty much anything by oneself, but stroke one's own back – it simply can't be done. That thought never occurred to him when Amalija was alive.

Why would it? Amalija would put herself into stroking his back as if her life depended on it. And it would have lasted for hours had they had that much time, but Mr Bauer was perfectly happy with whatever time they did have. For instance, when they would read on the couch in the evening, Amalija would slide her free hand under his shirt and run her warm palm over his back. That is why Mr Bauer preferred not to use the back of the couch for what it was designed. When they would settle down to sleep – he on the left side of the bed, she on the right – he would turn on his left flank, and she would immediately find his back with her fingers and stroke it until she fell asleep. And in the morning she would wake him up by gently scratching his back. If Mr Bauer had been a cat, he would have spent half of his time with Amalija purring. And then suddenly Amalija and her hands were gone.

For years Mr Bauer knew what he missed the most, and then one morning, out of the blue, he simply concluded that back stroking could probably be bought like so many other things. Money was not a problem. The only problem was that his longing had not faded away with time and

that after Amalija's death he had never become close with a woman to get himself a new pair of hands. And then it suddenly occurred to him that for someone's hands on his back closeness was not required.

He was surprised it had taken him so long to realize he could hire someone to do it. That person would be behind him, which meant that he could simply tune out and imagine those were Amalija's hands. In time, he could teach the hired hand to do it the way Amalija used to, or as close as it gets. In fact, to expect anything more would be irrational.

He started to compose his advertisement right after he made his first morning coffee. Mr Bauer was very thorough in everything he did, and composing an ad was no exception.

At first he thought it would be wise not to be fully honest. Maybe he could write he was looking for a housekeeper, and then explain to the applicants what it was really about. But then he concluded it would be a waste of time. He didn't need a procession of aspiring housekeepers who would run away as soon as they realized he was expecting something else. He had to deal with it head-on, come what may. A woman who wouldn't understand was not the right person for his back anyway.

*I am looking for a lady to stroke my back. Only my back. Safety, discretion and a decent fee are warranted.*

That was what he came up with in the fourth draft, in which he added *my, only my back*, and a *decent fee* to the original version. He crossed out *discretion* several times but in the end decided to leave it. He hesitated over the *lady* as well. He could write *a woman*, for instance, but he didn't want to risk dealing with young, unreliable, inexperienced women. The stroker of his back had to be mature and serious like him.

When he was absolutely certain that the advertisement was properly worded, he delivered it in person to the *Evening News* classifieds office, where he was given the ad number for replies.

He counted on the popularity of classified ads in that newspaper, the only one that still published classifieds in print and stuck to the old way of gathering responses. Letters with the ad number had to be delivered directly at the counter of the newspaper's classifieds office or left in its letterbox. Everyone who shrank from the Internet placed their ads in the *Evening News* when they wanted to buy, sell, rent, find, or donate something. And so did he.

Ms Veronika Vinter read the *Evening News* classifieds on a daily basis. Not only because she badly needed a side job, but also because she always cherished the secret belief that classified ads were an inexhaustible source of new opportunities. You never knew. Classified ads, she reasoned, were much like lottery – if you don't buy a ticket, you can't hope to hit the jackpot. Who knew what unexpected turn her life could take thanks to the ads in which people searched for something she might have or offered something she needed, without even knowing that she did. Classified ads had helped her more than once already. For example, when she bought for a bargain a set of oil paints, canvasses and brushes, and an easel from a painter who decided his painting career was over. Or when she answered to the ad looking for a house sitter for three months, which made it possible for her to leave her husband. If you asked Ms Vinter, the price of the newspaper was an insignificant investment for the wealth of opportunities hidden in it.

As she read the *Evening News* classifieds she was not looking for an opportunity for a huge life change but just for a side job she could do in late afternoon or evening hours, after her shift in the bank.

When she saw Mr Bauer's advertisement, though she didn't know his name at the time, the first thing she thought was that the world was full of crackpots. She knew that people placed ads to find love or lovers, or sex services disguised as massage service, but to look for someone who would stroke only one specific part of the body, that was unheard-of. *Only my back*. That's what the ad said. Plus, to *stroke*. If it said *to scratch my back*, that she would understand. Everybody's back itches from time to time, and we all know how difficult it is to reach it. On second thought, however, she realized there were all kinds of back-scratching tools, such as the small hand on a handle she had seen in the shops. Back stroking, on the other hand, was something completely different. There were no tools or alternatives for that.

It didn't take long for Ms Vinter to admit to herself that she was intrigued by that advertisement. Thirty minutes had barely passed from her first impression that the placer of that ad was someone deranged when curiosity and wondering about that person took over. When she came to terms with her curiosity, she decided that the placer of that ad might be someone really interesting, because only an exceptional person would place such an exceptional ad.

And when it finally occurred to her that it was a good thing she was not in the habit of asking advice, because if she were, she would most certainly be counselled against answering to that advertisement, she knew she had capitulated. She had no choice but to write a letter of

application and wait for the morning to pop the envelope into the *Evening News* letterbox before she went to work.

There is no telling what would have happened if her letter were not the only one Mr Bauer received in response to his advertisement. Maybe there would have been an audition, a trial back-stroking session, which would have ended unfavourably for Ms Vinter. But that wasn't the case, because Ms Vinter's envelope was the only one Mr Bauer received when he came to the *Evening News* classifieds office several days later.

Mr Bauer was disappointed at first. True, his advertisement consisted of only three sentences, one of them elliptical, but he had put a lot of effort into its wording. Yet he received only *one* application. One.

But when he read Ms Vinter's letter, he concluded that fortune may have favoured him after all. Ms Vinter had written a level-headed, promising letter without a single spelling or grammar mistake. Besides, she seemed to be a person of wit. When he read her fourth sentence, *If I didn't trust my intuition, I would have never answered to your bizarre advertisement*, he even smiled. His intuition may not have been as advanced as Ms Vinter's, but it looked like he found his back stroker at the first try without having to go to the trouble of dealing with other potential applicants.

All he had to do was give her a call, and he did not hesitate. He waited for the late afternoon, because Ms Vinter's letter said she was available after five p.m. on workdays. He decided to call her landline, although the letter contained her cell phone number as well. He had always considered cell phone calls a bit aggressive, as they can get you just about anywhere, especially when the caller is someone you don't know. He dialled the number and two rings later heard the voice of the woman whose hands were supposed to assuage his years-long yearning.

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The following day, Ms Vinter paid a visit to Mr Bauer. She boldly headed to his apartment. They could have arranged to meet at a café, but it would have been difficult to check Ms Vinter's qualifications as a back stroker in a public place.

*Have I lost my mind?* she asked herself when she got off the tram at the station near Mr Bauer's apartment. *I am going to the apartment of a complete stranger offering to stroke his back as if*

*that were something normal.* But she didn't hesitate. It was but a passing thought, a formality of sorts, expected to occur to everyone in their right mind in her place, so why not to her? As she moved past it, she realized that her peace with the notion was almost as bizarre as Mr Bauer's advertisement. Her next thought, the thought that she was fully entitled to every foolish experiment she wanted and didn't have to justify her little whims to anyone, filled her with exultation. People in general had no idea how far more interesting their lives would be if they took more risks.

She rang the doorbell at exactly six p.m., the time of their appointment. Mr Bauer considered it a good sign. Lateness annoyed him. Pleased with her punctuality, he answered the door in a terrific mood.

Ms Vinter considered it a good sign that her sixth sense didn't prickle at the sight of Florijan Bauer. She couldn't be sure what she was in for with him, but she clearly felt he was harmless.

When Mr Bauer let her into his apartment, they were both secretly proud of themselves. Mr Bauer because he had the guts to place an advertisement unprecedented in the history of classified ads, and Ms Vinter because she answered to an advertisement which an average woman would definitely dismiss with prejudice.

If Mr Bauer had been interested in women the way men usually are, and if he hadn't given up on them when fate took his beloved Amalija from him, he would have certainly concluded that Ms Vinter was far more attractive than one would expect of a woman in her forties, let alone of a woman who answered to an ad such as his. But being what he was, he didn't conclude that. The only thing he was interested in were female hands for his back, and that was something Ms Vinter undoubtedly had.

Mr Bauer ushered Ms Vinter into his living room and invited her to sit on the sofa. He politely offered her a drink. She asked for a glass of water. While he was gone, she inspected the room. A sofa, a big armchair, a coffee table, a shelf full of books across a whole wall. She noticed there was no TV set, which was rather unusual for a living room. Who knew, maybe Mr Bauer liked watching TV in bed. She also noticed that the other three walls were bare, with no paintings or photographs, just a wall clock on one of them.

Everything was clean and tidy, so she concluded that Mr Bauer must have a cleaning lady and wondered why he didn't ask that woman to stroke his back from time to time. It would have been easier with someone he knew. She also wondered why Mr Bauer was single. He was good-

looking, civil, and apparently not poor. Why did he have to resort to classified ads in the newspapers to find a back stoker? She just hoped he was not hiding psoriasis or some other skin disease under his shirt. But she had no time to further elaborate her suspicion, because he returned with a glass of water.

When he settled in the armchair across her, she seemed a little tense to him. A huge responsibility lay on him now. He had to break the ice and win her confidence. Or rather, prove worthy of it, because Ms Vinter would not be sitting opposite him if he hadn't had her trust.

- Let me explain, Ms Vinter. I mean, the advertisement I've placed - he started, trying to sound as someone who has a perfectly logical explanation for a completely illogical situation.

- I have to admit it's rather peculiar - she said, trying to sound as someone who expects a perfectly logical explanation for a completely illogical situation. Or at least as someone who doesn't expect anything awkward.

- As you may have already assumed, it is only the issue of anatomy.

- My thoughts exactly - said Ms Vinter, although the word *anatomy* never crossed her mind before he mentioned it. But she said it because Mr Bauer paused, and silence was not desirable under the circumstances.

- I'm glad you've come to that conclusion. Some people, I mean, some women would undoubtedly think... they would have come to all kinds of conclusions.

- Those women haven't answered to your ad.

- But you have, because you haven't.

- I haven't. That's why I'm here.

Two thoughts crossed Ms Vinter's mind at once, if that is even possible. First, that Mr Bauer had a way with words, and second, that she had never had such an odd conversation before.

- In short, - continued Mr Bauer - my wife died ten years ago.

- I'm so sorry - said Ms Vinter with sympathy.

- Thank you. She died and, as you know, one's back is hard to reach on one's own.

- True.

- You can scratch certain parts of it, but there is no way you can stroke it by yourself..
- I agree, that's simply impossible – agreed Ms Vinter.
- I've tried with massage. I thought it would be similar. But massage is kneading. It's not stroking.
- You are right – agreed Ms Vinter. – And it can hurt.
- And those oils they rub into your skin, they turn my stomach.
- Well, there's no accounting for tastes – agreed Ms Vinter, although she loved the scent of massage oils.

Then Mr Bauer fell silent for a moment. He was actually angry at himself for behaving as if he were trying to justify himself. As if he were trying to persuade her to do something improper – and that was by no means the case. His advertisement was fully transparent, and she applied for the job he was going to pay for fair and square. Short reckonings make long friends. Well, not exactly *friends*, but definitely associates.

The silence lasted long enough for Ms Vinter to start feeling uneasy. She wanted to ask him about the fee. She wanted to know more about what one may call *technicalities* – how many times a week she was expected to come over, how long a stroking session should last, would she be doing it sitting or standing – but she thought it was up to Mr Bauer to bring up the terms of their agreement. After all, he was the employer. And to remind him of his role she decided to say something with the word *job* in it.

- I really need a job.

Mr Bauer found that statement absolutely unnecessary.

- It goes without saying. If you didn't need it, you wouldn't be here.

He was worried she would start talking about herself, about everything that led her to answer to his advertisement, and that was something he wanted to avoid at all costs. Nothing about her interested him, not because he was a rude man, but because he believed it would make her too real, and her every stroke would remind him of this extra information.

- Ms Vinter, the less I know about you, the better. Don't get me wrong, I'm not belittling you. But the only thing this job requires from you are your hands.



- I understand – said Ms Vinter, although it was very questionable if she really did.
- We'd best be practical and agree upon technical details.
- Yes, that's a good idea – agreed Ms Vinter, although she almost blurted *It was about damn time.*
- Can you come twice a week? For an hour.
- Yes, in the afternoon and evening hours.
- Is two hundred kunas per hour a satisfactory fee?
- Certainly.

Then they both fell silent again. They both knew it was the time to test her back stroking skills. Unlike Ms Vinter, Mr Bauer had already solved all his dilemmas about how strange it would be to have an unknown woman stroke his back. For him it was a clever solution to his long-time crisis of withdrawal, and he was too proud of himself for having come up with that solution to let any doubt eat at him now. But he was observant enough to notice her unease.

- Don't worry. It's perfectly simple. I'll sit down and take off my shirt, and you'll sit behind me and run your hands over my back. After an hour, I'll pay you and you'll leave.
- I understand.
- If you are ready, we can give it a try.
- Well, we have to start from somewhere – she said decisively, realizing that the inevitable moment had come.

When Mr Bauer stood up to take off his shirt, she thought of the dire financial straits she was in and of the quick money she could make with him. She thought of all other jobs in classified ads – cleaning jobs which were paid thirty kunas per hour, babysitting jobs, which would also bring only thirty kunas per hour, door-to-door sales jobs, which would require miles and miles of walking. When he sat next to her on the sofa and turned his naked back to her, she decided to consider herself lucky, because just one hour on this job would bring her the same amount of money as more than six hours of toiling at other jobs. And she would earn it by doing something that didn't require any particular physical or intellectual effort – and at the same time was an extraordinary experience which could bear unexpected fruits.

Ms Vinter was surprised that her thoughts could be so obedient. When she first touched Mr Bauer's back, she ordered them to see Mr Bauer as a patient in need of care and herself as a nurse or a caregiver. And that was exactly what her thoughts did, although they could have easily gone astray, given the circumstances. How many times before had she asked them not to dwell on everyday worries, but they wouldn't listen. They would spite her and return with her huge monthly loan instalment, with the pile of unpaid utility bills, with the apprehension that she would find a warrant of seizure in her letterbox or power cut off in her apartment when she came home from work. They would return with everything that implied defeat. But this time they obeyed. After all, this was only about her hands and his back.

Mr Bauer, on the other hand, did not think about thoughts. He had no thoughts, because he existed only in body. Just a brush of Ms Vinter's palms against his skin almost made him squeal with delight. Not until that moment had he fully realized how much he missed a touch on his back. He didn't think about his Amalija or Ms Vinter. He just felt the touch – a nameless touch, a touch without a signature, without a person behind it. For him, it was only anonymous, sexless palms on his back. The whole world shrank into his back, which finally got what it had been missing for ten long years. The touch slowly descended from the shoulders to the end of the spine as the person sitting behind him made synchronised outward moves with both hands. Not for a moment did he wonder if that was the right rhythm, if the touch was too soft or too rough, if the palms lacked warmth. If any weak thought found its way into his head, it was only the thought that his experiment was proving successful and that he should have long placed his advertisement.

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Ten minutes into the stroking, Ms Vinter realized it was no longer a trial. She obviously passed the test, because Mr Bauer showed no intention to stop her. At first, she expected him to say something along the lines of *Thank you, that's enough* to let her know she could stop. She counted on some sort of directions from him, on him guiding her touch. *A little lower, please or Stay there or Could you pace it up a little?* But Mr Bauer gave none. He was silent as the grave, and she thought she could even feel him suppress sighs of pleasure out of decency. To be honest, that suited her. True, a sigh or two would reassure her that she was doing a good job,

but on the other hand, she would definitely feel uncomfortable if Mr Bauer started sighing or, God forbid, moaning.

After fifteen minutes, she knew that the trial had turned into the whole session. She couldn't help thinking what it meant – she would go home with two hundred kunas in her purse. When did she last see two hundred kunas in her purse? On her way home she could spend, say, twenty kunas, and tomorrow she would still have one hundred and eighty. To start a day with a hundred and eighty kunas was no little feat at that moment in her life. If she spent twenty kunas on beans, she could soak them overnight, make a bean soup before she went to work, and still have a hundred and eighty kunas by the time she returned home. That meant two days of a frugal well-being. And two days of a frugal well-being meant she could easily pretend everything was fine.

While Veronika Vinter made these calculations in her head, Mr Bauer shut out every thought. All his thoughts were on hold. He shared no Ms Vinter's worries, and people without such worries can easily afford to empty their heads of all thoughts and abandon themselves to the moment. After twenty minutes of stroking, the only thought that passed through his head was that it was a good thing he was facing the wall clock, although he hadn't planned it. If he faced the opposite wall, there was no telling how long would Ms Vinter go on beyond the agreed one hour of stroking, and it really wouldn't be nice of him to put her in such an awkward position that she would need to warn him the session was over at the very first appointment.

Thanks to his fortunate position in regards to the wall clock, he could afford to simply close his eyes and let his unjustly neglected back revel again in what had been just a decade long memory. From time to time, he'd crack his eyes open for just long enough to discern through the curtain of lashes how far the hands of the clock had moved since he last looked at them.

In the meanwhile, Ms Vinter had cooked the beans in her head and distributed the remaining one hundred and eighty kunas on the urgent purchases she had to make in the following few days. A hair shampoo was one of the first things on her list. She had already watered down the remaining shampoo several times over, and the last time she washed her hair there was barely any foam. She was going to divide the newly bought shampoo into two bottles and water it down just a little, instead of waiting to almost run out of it before starting to use it sparingly, as it had been her habit.

There was no doubt in her mind that she had got the job. If that hadn't been the case, Mr Bauer wouldn't have endured her caresses for forty five minutes without a single protest. This realization meant there were another two hundred kunas heading her way before the end of the week, and a steady inflow of two hundred kuna bills in the weeks to come, provided Mr Bauer didn't get tired of stroking for some reason. That would have been a pity. Truth be told, her arms were aching a little for the last fifteen minutes, but she felt as if she had hit the jackpot. And what made things even better was that Mr Bauer's back was not hairy at all. That was one of the things she had feared. True, in that kind of situation in which she was a caregiver, it would have made no difference if the employer, that is, the person in need of care had a hairy back. Even if she had had to deal with a hairy back, she would have run her palms over it with the same indifference with which she was running them over Mr Bauer's smooth skin now, but still. When it came to the male bodies in her life, Ms Vinter had no special requirements or affinities, but she felt a certain disinclination, not to say revulsion, towards hairy backs. With Mr Bauer she was fate's darling in that respect, not to mention psoriasis and similar skin diseases.

At precisely seven fifteen p.m., one hour after Ms Vinter first touched Mr Bauer's back, Mr Bauer stirred and said *Thank you*. Only then did Ms Vinter realize that he hadn't even stirred all that while, that in those sixty minutes she hadn't felt his chest heave under her fingertips, as if he had laid low, hardly breathing, hiding the life of his body from her, so that she would not be disturbed in her sublime task.

Ms Vinter was deeply grateful for that *thank you*, uttered at the right moment. For she too was facing the clock and spent the last five minutes wondering if Mr Bauer would notice that the time was running out or she would be forced to warn him about it. Once or twice she even thought that he had fallen asleep and that she would have to wake him up. And that would have been especially embarrassing – to wake up a stranger who had fallen asleep right in front of her eyes, or to be more precise, right under her arms. To wake up her employer. One way or another, it would have been an awkward situation. But luck had it that Mr Bauer was collected enough to pay attention to time, although he had seemed unconscious under her fingertips.

– I hope this was all right for you – he said with his back still turned to her as he put on his shirt.

– Of course – said Ms Vinter, slightly afraid of meeting his eyes once he turned to face her.

*This is what women feel like when they have to face a total stranger they just spent a night with,* Ms Vinter thought, for her romantic biography was not devoid of such experiences. Okay, she didn't really end up in bed with total strangers, but she had to admit that some of her lovers had been a little less than strangers before they became intimate. If she wanted to be totally honest, her now ex-husband was a similar case.

She was annoyed by these irrational comparisons, because whatever she had been up to for the last hour in Mr Bauer's living room had nothing to do with those capricious thoughts.

- Give me a moment, please - said Mr Bauer and disappeared in the adjoining room.

When he returned, she was already standing with her raincoat on.

- Is Wednesday 6 p.m. all right with you? - he asked, handing her a two hundred kuna bill.

- Sure - Ms Vinter replied. - Thank you - she added, putting the bill in her grotesquely big wallet, considering the amount of money it usually accommodated.

- Thank you - Mr Bauer answered politely, with his gaze fixed at something behind her right shoulder, over which she had hung her handbag.