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**Sweetlust**

Translated by Jennifer Zoble

**Gretel**

*A glitch is the loss of control*

Olga Goriunova

US

There were no more men. All that remained of them was Sweetlust. When the amusement park opened in Karlovac, over 15 years ago, the whole country crammed into it. Sweetlust became the main place for socializing and spending money, and all the women, including my best friends, hurried there to take part. The park paid no taxes to the state because it was registered as a rehabilitation center for women with scoliosis. Its director, curator Karla L, carefully programmed a series of activities for visitors to enjoy day and night. All of the activities were, of course, conventional. The media nonetheless deemed them “revolutionary.” In front of the entrance hall were stands selling sausages called “girl’s dreams,” sex gadgets (the most popular of which was a small chip that visitors placed under the skin of their groin for enhanced pleasure), and popcorn and cotton candy machines in everyone’s favorite shade of pink.

“Isn’t it sad to be surrounded by other women but still thinking only about men?” I asked one of my friends.

“We’re mourning them,” she said.

“But so many years have passed. Sweetlust keeps us stuck in the same place. Isn’t it time to move on?”

“It’s still too soon,” she said.

My friends planned a group outing to the amusement park for International Women's Day. I'd stubbornly refused to go with them the year before. Instead of the usual lecture about how the eighth of March had nothing to do with "girl's dreams," nail polish, and candy apples, my friends heard only my brusque "Yes" and were left stunned by the unexpected capitulation.

"You'll really go?" they asked.

"Yes," I repeated. "It's time."

Little was written online about the park in Karlovac and the fun that awaited women there. If someone wrote something about their experience, it was just general impressions: what the weather was like, how the people were. No one ever elaborated because visitors had to sign a nondisclosure agreement upon entering. The curator hoped to emulate the Eleusinian Mysteries: only those women who'd come in person knew exactly what happened and what the rites of the Karlovački initiation were like.

My friends had signed the NDA, but they nevertheless divulged every detail. They were somehow still devoted to me, though exactly why was no longer clear: after the park's opening they'd spent every free moment there. We'd begun to drift apart. While they went for rehabilitation, I devised my revenge: a computer virus I wrote in secret. I wanted to attack Karlovac with a big zero to nullify the damage caused by its message, but I knew this wasn't possible. I needed to cast the ones and zeroes slowly—bit by bit, as if flinging pubic hairs one at a time into sterile enemy territory. I programmed day and night in hopes of deprogramming my friends and every unfortunate woman who'd gone for a dose of mystery to that site southwest of Zagreb and naively left her hard-earned money there.

The thrills the park offered were very banal. Every room, according to my friends, had a story each woman could enter with abandon. The park cooperated closely with Google and social media, and visitors were thoroughly profiled using data from their online searches, purchases, and TV and film viewing habits. But the personalization was a lie. The women were alienated from themselves and from the algorithm.

At the same time, the false pleasure sold to visitors destroyed Karlovac's city plan, transforming it into a witch's house covered in chocolate and cake. Every woman who made a pilgrimage there was a Hansel to be fattened up, shoved into an oven, and devoured. I decided to call the virus I'd written "Gretel."

"Wear something nice," said my friends. "It's important that you really shine."

"I will," I said, even though it wasn't clear why I should get dressed up for artificial intelligence.

"L" wasn't the first letter of Karla's last name, but rather the Roman numeral 50. Before her, the men had tested out 49 other versions of Karla, but I suspected they'd then written a special program that wouldn't need to be translated into a low-level assembly language. Rumors spread that Karla L had in fact

programmed herself using a machine language that people couldn't understand at all. At first I'd been skeptical, but such gossip wasn't always unfounded.

The men had originally wanted to build the park in Duga Resa, but they'd ultimately given up the idea because they needed more space for the servers. The best option for cooling them was the River Mrežnica, so Karlovac—"the city on four rivers"—was the perfect location. Beneath the city unfurled a network of tunnels and basements that housed the cluster of servers. Karla L monitored everything, including the master server. My plan was to act like an arrogant and overexcited visitor and bulldoze my way into a more exclusive package for me and my friends. Then I'd separate from the group to perform my mission: uploading Gretel to some of the terminals and letting her pump through the virtual reality visitors paid outlandish prices for. Paradoxically, the VR package sold by Karla L included cultural material that belonged to all of us. Fairy tales, Jane Austin, adaptations of books and comics that previous generations had effortlessly enjoyed for free had suddenly become exclusive content costing an arm and a leg because it was "personalized."

Karla L ranked the offerings on her menu by popularity: the most famous programs instantly became the most expensive. Everyone knew in principle what *Beauty and the Beast* was about, so Karla L made it the most sought-after content. Every woman, the amusement park claimed, wanted a beast she could save and tame for her own sexual pleasure.

"That sounds awful," I told my friend.

"It's really fun," she said. "The look of the Beast is tailored to your desires. They know exactly what will cause maximum pleasure, and what kind of Beast will make you emotionally invested."

"And intellectually?" I asked.

"Don't be silly," she said. "No one goes to Karlovac to talk."

"But how can you build up excitement without conversation?"

"With a look, with flirty hints. Touch. Women aren't fools," she said.

At that moment it seemed to me they were.

"Sex can't rehabilitate anyone, not even those with a bent spine," I barked.

"The scoliosis thing is just a cover," she said.

I was glad the park hadn't completely brainwashed her.

"Tax exemptions," she added. "You know how these things go."

Of course I knew. The same multinational corporation controlled all parks like Sweetlust. The content it offered varied from country to country—the stories and situations that excited, that is,

“rehabilitated” Serbian women were allegedly different from those favored by, for instance, Croatian women, Uruguayan women, or American women. The wealthier the country, the better the product. Pleasure was mapped out in advance: everything was categorized, documented, and priced in different currencies.

“You’ll see,” my friend said. “Nothing compares with the excitement you’re about to experience. It’s impossible to describe.”

Early in the morning on March 8, we arrived in Karlovac. Snow was falling, but everyone was dressed lightly. Wrapped in their coats, my friends walked through the snow in open-toed sandals, in the kind of makeup you’d wear to an evening gala, and not a dark space whose visitors stuck VR goggles on their heads and crawled around fondling imaginary male genitalia with palms drenched in spit and sweat. The park recorded the highest numbers of visitors on weekends and holidays, which explained the crowd of women patiently waiting at the entrance. In front of the main gate a video played in which Karla L invited her guests to relax and enjoy the greatest park in the world. Her artificial face filled me with discomfort. It reminded me too much of a dealer, a hustler, someone who’d coax the last dinar from my pocket just to humiliate me.

As I sidled up to the admission kiosk, the video had a glitch. The screen froze with Karla L looking right at me. It lasted so briefly as to be barely detectable, but I didn’t believe in coincidences like that. Not anymore. I wasn’t paranoid, rather prepared for the worst, and my worst-case scenario was truly awful. I turned my gaze to the cashier as if I hadn’t noticed anything.

“Welcome!” repeated the voice of Karla L. “Welcome!”

Visitors didn’t know, of course, that Karla L was a computer program. I wasn’t sure if it had ever been discussed in public. The media held their silence. Her character was necessary to motivate women to be ambitious, successful, and carefree. She promised wonders and had to be natural, of flesh and blood, so that women would recognize themselves in her. The mission of Karla L to make all women happy needed to be natural in order to be effective. Compared to her story, Gretel sounded deviant, like something that had crawled up from the depths of hell. For every “sweetlustful” corporate image of the self-sacrificing woman who could enjoy life only after having healed a wounded, misunderstood man-beast, I could respond only with the “dirty,” unappealing truth that love never healed anyone. Women had become obsessed with the idea of a romantic love that would free them from all negative emotions. They’d forgotten that emotions like fear were essential to survival. The body feared with reason.

“Relax,” my friends said.

I was afraid for myself, but for them too. Their blindness saddened me.

Karla L wasn't your typical villain. Other women had made hacking attempts (I wasn't the first to despise her), but we'd quickly perceived that efforts to destroy her through programming from outside were in vain: we were throwing eggs at a stone fortress. After months of contemplating how to approach her, I realized that, instead of striking Karla L herself, I needed to subvert what she relied on: her lie. Once I became conscious of the fact that I was dealing with a story, everything became easier. I was less fearful. As with any ugly story, I could remake Sweetlust, rewrite it more beautifully. In my version, women would no longer cry for men when they came. Sweetlust advertised those tears as a catharsis, a sign of healing, but my Gretel would reveal what they really were: a symptom of a chronic depression from which the entire female gender suffered.

As soon as I paid the entry fee, a guide separated me and my friends from the mass of other women. We'd bought the full package, which included VIP treatment: we could go wherever we wanted. Of course, such freedom of movement was a lie because there was no way we could get to the server. I had the right to move only in virtual reality, not outside of it. All you could see was the set—never what was holding it up.

“Look,” my friend said. “Girl's dreams. Buy one, get one free.”

“Considering how much money we gave them, I wouldn't say anything at that stand is free.”

“Soon you'll be coming so hard you won't think about money for ten years.”

Her words sounded like a threat.

“I don't like crying in public,” I said.

“You should just let the tears flow.”

Before I could continue arguing, we arrived at the first of the 13 rooms we were supposed to visit that weekend. I wasn't excited—I didn't miss men in the slightest—but my friends were jumping for joy.

“We begin gently.” I heard the voice of Karla L coming from a small screen next to the door.

In the first room, a historical romance awaited us. I guessed that Karla L had adapted a bestseller by Julie Garwood or Judith McNaught, but I wasn't sure. My virus was supposed to turn every visitor to this story into a servant who spent hours hand-washing a nobleman's codpiece. I'd enjoyed coming up with that twist, but before I had the chance to chuckle at my own cleverness, my friends surrounded me: two of them took me by the hand, and the third produced a small chip from somewhere and placed it behind my ear. I looked at them, astonished.

“What did you do?” I asked nervously.

My friends were also programmers. Two worked for Google, and the other, for the Ministry of the Interior. All three, like me, had been hackers in their student days. I’d thought they were ashamed of their past, but obviously I’d been mistaken.

“Doesn’t that chip go near the genitals?” I asked.

“Not this one,” one of them whispered.

She winked at me, putting her finger to her lips. I needed to be quiet. It was pretty dark in the room, but I could still make out that they were adjusting their watches. They fastened one of them on my wrist.

“After this we go right to the thirteenth room, for *Beauty and the Beast*,” they said.

I was about to take Gretel from my pants pocket, but my friends shook their heads. They were planning something. I was thrilled. I touched the chip behind my ear. My friend smiled.

“Relax,” she said loudly. “When the sex is amazing, nothing else matters, right?”

“You’re right,” I said, even louder.

I came, it’s true, but I wasn’t happy about it. It was difficult to concentrate on the task at hand when the clitoris was in charge: my soul had plunged into it. The virtual reality was attending to my pulsating anus. Very actively. It didn’t distinguish one hole or nerve ending from another. Karla L was thorough, I had to give her that much.

When we were led to the room that was next chronologically, my friends stopped the guide and told her we should go directly to the last room.

“It’s our friend’s first time here and we want her to experience only the best. Today’s her birthday.”

Their lie was persuasive and the guide believed them.

“Let me just notify Karla L,” she said.

“Of course!”

My friends were brilliant. They’d come to Sweetlust often and I finally understood why. They’d wept so many times under the watchful eye of Karla L that they aroused no suspicion. They’d persisted in their performance for years.

“You’re our Trojan Horse,” they murmured while we waited for the guide to return with an answer. “Be patient.”

I trusted them, but the feeling of sadness was more palpable.

“Alright,” said the smiling guide when she came back. “Karla L approved the change. Come with me.”

We followed her to a plush door. The door alone was enough to make a woman come: it was soft, like a pin cushion. Karla’s greeting for us waited on a monitor to the left:

“Welcome!” she said.

This one hadn’t been recorded in advance.

“Your friend’s celebrating her birthday?”

“Yes,” they said.

“It appears there’s been a mistake. My records don’t show her birthday as International Women’s Day.”

“That’s our inside joke,” said my friend. “We celebrate the birthdays we choose for ourselves. I, for example, was born in February, but I celebrate my birthday in July.”

Our joke didn’t have a digital trail, which confused Karla L. Everything had a trail. Everything.

“Alright,” she said, sounding unconvinced.

She wished me a happy birthday and our eyes met again, but this time Karla L maintained complete control over her code.

“Enjoy!”

We entered one by one. As soon as the door had closed, my friends swapped the chip behind my ear for another.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” they said. “Keep her occupied. Good luck!”

## HER

“Wait!” I yelled to them, but they could no longer hear me.

What did “keep her occupied” mean? My throat clenched from rising tears. I’d never cried because of a man, but my friends were my weak spot. Nothing confirmed for me that I was a woman more powerfully than my complicated, often difficult, relationships with other women. This could perhaps explain my impulse to instantly, without any deliberation, accept my role in a plan I knew nothing about. I’d worked doggedly on Gretel, but now that I needed to choose between my own vision and friendship, it was as if Gretel had ceased to exist. Just two words from my friends had been enough to make me give up on myself.

I waited for the computer to generate the setting and my avatar, hoping that my haste wasn't going to cost me my head. Not only was I in the dark about my friends' intentions, I also had no idea what Karla L would try to do with me.

I assumed that my friends hadn't clued me in to their plan because I wasn't a good liar. My face was an open book; Karla L would read me easily. I was sometimes, truth be told, too direct for the political games that were a daily indulgence for employees of the Ministry and Google, but didn't I deserve even the slightest hint? I stood in the virtual reality anteroom, completely lost. It seemed Sweetlust brought out the worst in all of us. I waited to see from which direction danger would strike me first. Men were no longer with us, but their shadow hung over everything. That enormous shadow tended to blur the contours of women's faces. Sometimes it seemed that the women who'd come to power had begun to resemble men. I didn't want to think about my friends this way.

The world without men wasn't the utopia we'd longed for. After the entire male population had died of syphilis, women at first had felt a weight lifted from their hearts, but with Sweetlust they'd soon transferred that weight to their backs. The amusement park was the crown jewel in the final stage of men's lunacy, but women embraced it as the loveliest memory of the extinct gender. They walked bent beneath the banal epitaph.

There was no cure for syphilis because the bacteria *Treponema pallidum* mutated beyond recognition. Not one woman succumbed to the deadly infection, but its madness spread to us. A destructive idea can be more dangerous than bacteria. Karla L knew this all too well. On the outside, women were infected with her optimism, but inside they wrestled with a guilty conscience for identifying with *T. pallidum*: they were the spirochetes that had obliterated men with sex. The more often they went to Sweetlust, the more convinced they became of their guilt. Hadn't men written for centuries about long, feminine hair, prophetically describing women as an irresistible sickness? Had their misogyny not been justified? Women cried and came, came and cried, for nearly 20 years. I wanted to help them finish the business of wailing once and for all. It looked like my friends had preempted me in this.

When the virtual reality was finally loaded, I looked around. I was in a garden full of roses. Since I'd read the classic fairy tale, I wasn't surprised. You were supposed to pluck a rose to summon the Beast. It wasn't entirely clear in this case, frankly, whether I was the Beauty or the Beast. Before I dared to touch a rosebush and discover the truth, I went walking. Right away I noticed that the castle had been replaced with a modern one-story glass house. There was a pool in front of it. The sun was shining. I wore a bathing suit, and was wrapped in a beach towel. Nothing in this world was to my taste.

I grabbed a rose and cut myself on a thorn. From the bush emerged Karla L. I was expecting her, but I nonetheless recoiled at the sight of her: she looked like a woman dipped in a sugar glaze. She reminded me of a candied apple.

“Which of us is the Beast?” I asked her.

Karla L just smiled secretively and shrugged.

“Can you at least explain why neither of us is a man?”

“Maybe the chip your friends gave you has something to do with it.”

“What chip?” I asked. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She approached me and took the chip from behind my ear.

“This one.”

She shoved it under my nose.

“They gave me that to intensify my orgasms. I’ve never been here before, so I don’t know where it normally goes.”

Karla L smiled again. She slid the chip into her bra.

“Don’t defend them,” she said. “I’m intimately acquainted with all women. Deceit is encoded in your DNA.”

Her response immediately clarified which of us was the beast.

“I was born a man,” I said. “Your theory doesn’t hold water.”

“Why would anyone want to become a woman? That’s incredibly stupid.”

“But you’re a woman,” I replied.

“This is just an avatar,” she said with a dismissive wave.

“What do you look like when you have no audience?” I asked.

I expected Karla L to take on a different, masculine form then, but she didn’t relinquish her façade.

“That’s utterly irrelevant,” she said.

Now I shrugged. I feigned indifference. But I was afraid.

“It’s a shame your friends’ plan didn’t work,” she said.

“I don’t know what the plan was, but I doubt it had anything to do with you.”

“Nonsense,” said Karla L. “Everything at Sweetlust has to do with me.”

I had no idea what my friends had planned, but I didn’t want the artificial intelligence to know that. I didn’t want to reveal my greatest weakness.

“They wanted to use you,” she said.

“Possibly.”

Gretel was in my pocket, but since I was nearly naked in this world, I couldn't find the pocket. I regretted that this hadn't occurred to me sooner.

“What made you come to the park now?” Karla L asked.

Her curiosity surprised me.

“So you don't know everything after all.”

“I know,” she said angrily, “but I want to hear it from your lips.”

“It was time.”

“Time for what?” she asked.

“To kill you,” I replied.

Karla L laughed. She hadn't expected an honest answer.

“You see, not all women lie,” I said.

“You're not a woman,” Karla L said.

“If I weren't a woman, I'd be dead.”

That silenced her for a moment.

“Either way, if you were born a man, you can't be a real woman.”

I was seized by choking, nervous laughter.

“Why are you laughing like that? Stop!” said Karla L.

My fear slowly transformed into anger. I remembered the pubic hair. Bit by bit, I kept telling myself. Bit by bit. I needed to outwit her—that was all. I had to keep her talking.

“If I'm not a real woman, and I'm not a dead man, what am I then?” I asked her.

“An enigma,” she said.

“Weren't women always enigmas to men?”

“I'm not a man,” said the artificial intelligence.

“But your chauvinism is definitely male.”

I was trying to lead her to thin ice.

“Otherwise why would I be wearing a bathing suit?” I continued. “Why would I look like this?”

“That's what you yourself wanted,” Karla L replied.

“Nothing here is to my liking,” I said. “This is someone else's cheap fantasy.”

To her I was the beast. I saw that she couldn't fully understand my words. She froze, barely capable of continuing the conversation.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“What every woman wants.”

“You miss men? You want them back?”

“No,” I said.

“What do you want then? What do women want?” asked Karla L.

“We want to bury men once and for all,” I heard my friends say.

Karla L turned around in panic. Neither she nor I could see them.

“Impossible!” she shouted.

We were both in the same dark, but there was no time to be disappointed. I got up in her face. Karla L took a step back, then two more. She was getting close to the roses and their perilous thorns.

“Men died long ago—there’s no need for women to keep crying for them day after day. We’ve mourned enough.”

“But women adore Sweetlust!” said Karla L. “Women love me!”

“Women hate Sweetlust!” said my friends.

When she wasn’t looking, I grabbed her by the neck.

What my friends did then wasn’t entirely clear. I assumed that the chip Karla L had hidden in her cleavage really did have something to do with the whole intervention. I asked my friends afterwards, when it was all over, to explain everything in detail.

“How did I manage to strangle Karla L?” I asked.

“That’s a state secret,” said my friend who worked at the Ministry.

I had indeed served them like a virus. I’d written Gretel, but in the end I myself had played her role.

“Biology defeated technology. How is that even possible?” I asked.

“Information is information. There’s no substantive difference between biology and technology,” said my friend from Google.

Her tone was patronizing. I felt a bit stupid.

Now there were no more men, and no more Sweetlust. We could start anew, just like my friends said. No longer covered by a fake roof of candy. All around us were bare walls and exhausted women leaning against them. Some of the visitors lay on the floor and we had to step over them on our way to the exit. Our teeth chattered from the cold.

“They got their first dose of antibiotic,” said my friend. “Everything will be okay.”

“We won,” said another.

I didn’t share their optimism. I looked at the weeping women we were stepping over.

“It’s hard to turn off sadness like a computer,” I said as we arrived at the parking lot.

My friends pretended they hadn’t heard me. We drove home in complete silence.