

Roman Simić

Thus Spoke Mayakovsky

Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

There was no doubt: Zazu Mayakovsky was crazy. I met him in an insane asylum, watched him rage about the madhouse's corridors, saw three husky male nurses collapse him like a folding chair and pack him up into a straight jacket, and even if it were not for all that—there was his name: not even in the late self-managed socialism, not even at the end of the golden eighties, no one sane was called Zazu Mayakovsky.

Back then he introduced himself as a poet, and whatever he was doing outside, he kept on doing inside the asylum, except that here it was called therapy. He wrote gloomy poetry on pieces of toilet paper, poems called the cold shower, electroshocks, a solitary, and a lot of haikus with the names of sedatives in their titles. I'm not exaggerating if I say that because of this in certain circles he enjoyed somewhat of fame. The rumors said it was anything but insanity—an internal exile, an act of rebellion against the repressive regime—and almost every day someone would clatter down from the city to read those doodles, to sigh and bow in front of a flock of unruly madmen, which in the end turned to everyone's profit, even the guards': cigarettes, women, alcohol—all cheap, yet free—everything that the coked-up poet could not consume—now became the guards' loot. One of them even admitted that they encouraged him into all that writing mess by granting him tiny benefits: they would let him skip a daily dose of roughing up, they'd slide in a chocolate for him here or there—it sounds surreal, but those were the eighties, socialism, and even the asylum guards thought it made sense to invest in poetry.

I visited him on duty, as a delegate of an uncertain mandate, as his wife's new boyfriend.

Ana Mayakovska—this sounds like a beginning of a love letter—and perhaps that's what it was: either that or a beginning of some only slightly different madness. Of course, just like Zazu, that's not what Ana was called, but it was more exciting to call her that: the borrowed surname fitted her like another woman's dress; it stood out at all the wrong places, it gave her what nature deprived her of—frailty, and back in those days we said it like a love statement and a joke, while, sweaty and sticky, at the end of our love-wrestling tackles, we lay on the carpet filled with mites and breathed heavily into the ceiling.

And laughed: Ana Mayakovska—my mouth is still full of that name!

Ana worked at a school, she was a language instructor. By all standards, she was an attractive woman, but that thing between us was not love at first sight; simply, we spent too much time among the same people. We saw each other at the same places, both of us in our late thirties, both of us somewhat dented, roughed up at places, both of us in some kind of wanton-drunkenness brought by the excess of vigor you don't even know you have or you don't know what to do with. And so one evening we were sitting at the same table, side by side, and I caught sight of her feet, and after them, well, her toenails. If there ever was a romantic moment in our affair, then that was that. Summer was all around us, open terraces and open sandals, and Ana's toenails, painted in a shiny, transparent polish, silverfish, almost almond-like, on her pretty long toes, sparkly and gracious like constellation of stars full of promise, and both of us had a couple to drink, a couple too many, maybe that had something to do with it too.

But how do you get from toenails to visiting someone's husband in an insane asylum, the answer to that question only I know. (Although, Ana had her ways too; she had the ability to talk me into all kinds of things, to howl at the moon, for example, or to lick salt from her palm—and from many other things, from all kinds of places, it's better not to remember them all.)

In any case, it did not take long and we were living together, we were a husband and a wife in every

other way but by law, because by law she still belonged to Mayakovsky, and that tortured me, it made me miserable, that unconquered place, that unfilled hole, that something I was envied a madman on. For, let's say it once again, Zazu Mayakovsky was crazy, and she, although neither blind nor a Catholic, did not want to hear of a divorce.

Why didn't I accept that as a gift, it's hard to say: a beautiful woman you can enjoy in without any strings attached, I mostly considered that a dream-come-true scenario, but it was stronger than me—instead of at the rest of the paradise, like hypnotized I gazed into the apple tree, into a sorry calculatedness of a woman, into a desperation with which she held on to that worthless diploma, as if she still had some hope of Mayakovsky, yet not so much hope that she would dare and play everything on that card. I gazed and envied because how else to explain the need to think about the marriage, the marriage with Ana, even if only so to destroy the one in which she was already stuck.

I'd say: she never gave up on him completely, but when I say gave up, I don't know what exactly I'm thinking of—Mayakovsky as a man, a husband, or her child's father. I know only one thing: I was jealous of all three of them, and, who knows, maybe that's why I went to the asylum, to make sure they are behind bars.

Besides the toenails, then, Ana also had a child, a ten-year old kid called Noa. She did not hide this, and I soon fell in love with that story, I learned to wear it like a medal, I was proud of the fact that another man's child did not bother me, I strutted around as if I'd saved someone from drowning or brought food to the lepers. Little Mayakovsky—as he was called by those from our circle of friends who, each at their time, played and finished playing my game—was a quiet, shy boy, a spitting image of his father; delicate, skinny, red-haired like a match. We went along well, I'd say I knew how to handle him, or at least I was no worse at it than the others. When Ana was not at home, we would read comic books or watch TV, and it was not a problem for me to get out in the street and run after a ball; I was even more eager to do so than him, it almost seemed he went out only to please me. The cold pinched our ears and noses and he'd run out of breath, stop, bend down with his hands on his knees, and watch me as he tried to catch his breath, while I went on to score a goal and give him a fillip; only later I learned that he had some problem with his lungs, something incurable, something that could not go away, but could only be kept under control. He was that type of a kid: quiet but smart, and you could see he understood everything: both who you were, and what was on your mind, and how long you would stay around. In any case, this was much more than what I knew, although I pretended that everything was clear to me, that I had the situation under control. As usual, I had nothing under control.

When I now think of it, a lot of time was spent fighting, but I cannot say what Ana and I fought about. Then I remember what age we were and that at that time everything was important, extremely important, all those things I can't remember anymore, but I know that life was full of them, and that of all the things in it most important were we, our extremely important lives and our extremely important madness. True, some time was spent on Mayakovsky, on his life and madness, a tiny piece of our story was dedicated to him too.

And precisely that part is what I remember the most, that anxiety on the visiting days, combed up alley in front of a stilted Austro-Hungarian building, smelly halls I threaded through holding a sweaty hand of a child. Ana always walked a meter or so in front of us—it seemed something would get into her, extend her step, and then abandon her just before she saw him; the crazy Zazu Mayakovsky, that demented tropical bird that stared into emptiness and laughed into emptiness, and out of all three of us talked only to me, salivating toothlessly and smiling cunningly, probably seducing me, trying to make me his accomplice.

Why did I allow myself to be dragged down into that hell, I don't know, but I liked to think it was because of Ana. For, no matter how obnoxious I was before and after the visit, no matter how much I nagged about that senseless loyalty of hers, I couldn't but imagine a reverse situation: I'm salivating, gazing blankly in front of myself, and there she comes to pay me a visit, dragging behind some stranger and a child, a boy that was, in truth, Mayakovsky's son, but whom in those fantasies I imagined as mine. That's the point where I'd become sentimental, my jealousy would give way, and even if it wouldn't, it's not likely anything would be any different: Ana would give in with many things, but one thing there was no discussion about. And so: just like other men go on Sunday lunches to visit their parents-in-law, I once a week paid a courtesy visit to the insane asylum, finding justification in all kinds of thing, love being just one of the excuses.

But the real truth is that I was suspicious, that I was afraid.

I was afraid of all kinds of things: that Ana loves me and that she's luring me on; that Mayakovsky is crazy and is not crazy; that I could catch the madness myself (from just looking at him and from just breathing the air at that ward), but also that sooner or later he'd come up with some poetic trick, something good enough to let him out, good enough to take the place that belongs to him. Behind his wall, Mayakovsky was safe, life could not hurt him, but I? What, by God, did I want from life? A job, money, family, travels, an ordinary marriage or a marriage with a woman who's already married? Everything or none of that? Such thoughts running through my mind I stared at Mayakovsky, and he was everything crazy people can afford to be: sometimes he'd go wild, sometimes he'd run down the hall, sometimes he'd cry and laugh at the same time, and sometimes he was as calm as a mirror and he just stared in front of himself, stared at Ana and the boy, with a face that seemed to be deeply sorry, the only question was, sorry of whom, and that was when I was afraid of him the most. His madness took care of him, and I was supposed to take care of his wife and his child; a fake widow and the red cuckoo's egg, nature always finds a place for its orphans.

Was there a reason to think that way? Of course there was! Regardless of the fact that she gave herself around unsparingly, Ana believed in marriage and—even more—in survival. And the basic precondition for survival, at least as she saw it, was marriage, even if the one with me or Mayakovsky. I watched her sometimes secretly as she hugged Noa before putting him to sleep and I knew there was nothing she wouldn't do for that wheezy little fledgling, for that quiet little creature who's beak was always open and wanting, even if you could never see him want anything. She was ready to sacrifice herself, yes, but she needed to be sure. She was not allowed to make a mistake. Many times later, I wished I'd had enough brains to grab her by the hand and tell her that all that was stupid, that all that was a tragic mistake; that she should have better told us all to go to hell, but then again: perhaps she never even thought about all this, perhaps it was all boiling only in me.

Anyhow, those were crazy days, but also beautiful, and, as usual, nothing remained of them. Not even socialism. Actually, it perished first; in front of Zazu's room first the visitors disappeared and with them the guards' interest in poetry so Zazu stopped writing, and then there were parliamentary elections. I'm not saying there was any relation of cause and effect between all these things, but today it seems it was exactly that. We entered the nineties, and here some new rules were in place. Flags fluttered, people came out in the streets and suddenly no one had time for an insane asylum, at least not for the one in which Zazu was waiting. We were crazy in and of ourselves, we were drunk from the changes. Perhaps that's why we still have a headache.

But let's speak in singular. Although I loved being a part of the crowd, as a witness of historical events I was completely useless: commotion, yelling, several close-ups and lots of phrases that now do not mean

anything; that is more or less all that is left for me from the time that changed the world. Had someone asked me back then, I'd have told him that I'm living something that in thirty years' time will be the peak of the story of my life. Today I would ask him to ask me again. And in the new story I would most certainly mention Zazu.

The last meeting with the Mayakovsky family in their full glory happened in the spring of 1990. It was an outing: we went to the countryside, to Zagorje. Was that possible because Mayakovsky's condition improved drastically or because no one cared anymore, I no longer remember. I only know that it was a beautiful sunny day, that we signed some papers and got into Ana's Lada. I was driving, Ana was next to me, and Zazu and Noa were in the back each in his own corner. I can't say I was relaxed. At the very beginning of our relationship, Ana confided with me that Zazu ended up in the madhouse because he'd killed his lover and then later she tried to soften it a bit by offering some other, actually just as terrifying scenarios: strangling his aunt because of inheritance, shooting a BB gun at children playing in the street, burning the carpet at night. Supposedly all those stories were a test, a mocking of the fear her fingers felt in me, but Ana always told them in a serious voice, cracking her toes if she was barefoot, and with her you never knew what was what anyhow. But even without them, even without the threat that in the surge of frenzy Mayakovsky would throw himself at my neck and dump us all into some wall or a ditch, there was something odd in that ride, some unease which was—I know that now—in connection with all the possibilities, with all the scenarios that drove between the four of us that day in the car. What we were to each others, or what we could have become—it was astonishing! All it needed was just a little miracle, some good tactical maneuvering or a simple chance and all of us could have come out of that car changed—as husbands, lovers and foreigners, killers and stranglers, fathers and sons, abandoned and found, saved and betrayed... and who would get or lose what here was all but certain. And too much for me. That's why I probably stiffened in my seat and drove, just drove. I was a little jealous, a little furious, a little scared, a little of all this together. The landscape passed through the window, all that world in which we lived and wasted each other, but I did not notice it. From time to time I would change gears, glance at the rear-view mirror. I don't know, maybe I should have driven completely differently. Maybe that was exactly where I lost Ana.

But we were still in the city and we were still together. Zagreb from this memory is a thousand of cities, a thousand of ordinary, empty, spring, lost, sun washed weekend-cities pressed one over another into the cardboard of a démodé postcard. And every wave of a hand from there, every call is in vain. Nothing in that postcard no longer belongs to us, neither time nor place, and the most we can get from it are kind greetings. I opened the window and I know that I was overwhelmed by the smell that I cannot forget, but that I no matter how hard I try cannot call back, just as you can't do it with love. For, yes, it should be noted: love was in all of that, without it from that story there would be nothing left.

But let's go back to the car, to that morning with the Mayakovskys. We were driving each with our own thoughts until Zazu got involved. Until then he was mostly quiet, it seemed they'd stuffed him up with something back in the asylum, but at one moment he leaned forward, suddenly he sprang up in the rear-view mirror and with his cold, moist fingers plucked my hair, tapped my neck. I shrieked and tugged at the wheel so the car danced on the road and the magic was gone: Ana and Noa started laughing and I, still furious, confused, embarrassed, with some sick feeling of relief, could have sworn that in the rear-view mirror I saw the poet's well-known toothless smile.

And then Zazu once again leaned back in his seat and let us drive him and take him down narrow worn-down roads, over the hills and through the green, while spring clouds gathered in the sky, while it rained and cleared up, for it was such a day, nothing we hadn't seen before, but everything changed in

an instant. We talked, passed through the villages with churches and villages with church fairs, our goal was some castle, or a restaurant, which this story, however, never gets to. Somewhere along the way, Ana wanted us to stop, she needed to go, into the bush. She took paper tissues, waved shortly and started making her way into the bushes, stepping over the wet ground clumsily, in her brown heels, her worn down strapped shoes. Why did that scene get stuck with me, why doesn't it let go of me, I don't know. Today it seems that at that moment I pitied or loved her, both strongly. I imagine her lower her panties and squat down, carefully, while dewy leaves of grass make their way up her genitals, while everything, every last thing can throw her out of balance. She looks up into the sky in which the clouds crush each other and, holding her breath, finally, with a relief, releases a thick golden stream. Ana Mayakovska peeing peacefully, not knowing and not sensing and not thinking about and not understanding anything that is about to happen, that will begin to happen when the soil drinks her last drop. I waited in the car, as if within some God-given pause. The engine was still running, the window was still open, and then there was a blackbird, picking up a worm from the ground, devouring it while it jerked around, and nothing is clearer to me than that scene, the feathery heart of blackness rooting in the prickly green of the spring morning. In the backseat there were Ana's husband and Ana's son, each in his own expectation, silent and dull, but when I took a better look, they were holding their hands. As if he'd caught me looking at him, Mayakovsky leaned forward once again and stuck a sweaty piece of paper into my hand. When I went to open it, he placed his palm on my shoulder. Later, he said, pointing with his nose at Noa and throwing me the blackest of his smiles, when you're left alone. Why did I take that paper, why didn't I tell him to go to hell, that's yet another thing I don't know. Both Mayakovskys watched me put it in my pocket and say nothing when Ana came back from the bushes, smiling and placing her brown, dewy strapped shoes back in the car. We went on and stopped, and let the day come to its end in some castle, or a restaurant. On that paper, when I opened it later that evening, there were two words: NOT MINE.

Have I even once said that I loved Ana? Have I told you how I moved out of her place, how I said goodbye to Noa in front of the elevator, waved at him, and how the elevator door and the apartment door closed? And how I used to run into her in the town, but we never sat down together again, and it was neither summer nor spring, and her toenails were never bare. Have I told you that everything that happened to me afterwards was good, bad or inevitable, that it was incurable, that it couldn't go away, that it could only be kept under control? Have I told you about the madness of the nineties? And about the madness of the new millennium? And how I, years later, at some scorched Adriatic quay met a man with a sombrero who was selling souvenirs and plastic Chinese trinkets and who, lowering his sun glasses and flashing his artificial teeth, said that that was him, Zazu, that he lived there in summer and in winter wherever he could, and that we should get together for a drink that evening, that we needed to celebrate our reunion. While the river of tourists frothed more and more in front of his stand, he told me that from our acquaintances he heard news about me, and that he was happy that I was doing well, but that the only mistake in my life was not taking the greatest gift from him, an investment that would, in sports terms, pay off just by selling t-shirts—a son.

“The wife, that I understand, but you could have gotten a good, almost ten years old kid,” he said. “You could have skipped all that crap with diapers.”

Zazu was laughing, selling, tossing in comments and winking his eye, and he looked neither like a man who had killed his lover nor like a man fighting the rotten regime with poetry. This was a different man, and he had swollen cheeks, a lousy set of false teeth and an unhealthy complexion, even his sombrero was falling apart at the edges.

“He saw God in you, you fucking idiot, the only thing you should have done was see him. But no, you two had better things to do...”

Thus spoke Mayakovsky. He spoke about the past, about the future, about the stands and children, tirelessly and greedily, as if the very next moment he would run out of words. It was getting dark and the quay turned into a corridor of hungry shoulders, heads, stomachs and tits, into a sweet-smelling highway of lust on which everyone drove fast, changing gears like crazy, not opening their windows, not looking around, pausing only to buy some trinkets, even from Mayakovsky. At some moment I said goodbye to him, tossed in something about the drink we both knew we would never have, and allowed myself to be taken away. It took me some time before I managed to wiggle out of the crowd and into some of the quiet alleys. Behind me echoed sounds of celebration, I found my car and drove, just drove. Not mine—I thought about Mayakovsky’s words just like he wanted; when I was left alone.