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Singer in the Night

(A ROMANCE)

Translated from Croatian by Vesna Marić

## PART ONE

### Letters to Loud Lovers

Here at last is a true lover – said the Nightingale. – Night after night  
have I sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night have I told  
his story...

*The Nightingale and the Rose, Oscar Wilde*

## A FAREWELL LETTER

Dear citizens, hosts, my best men and my neighbours, gentle and careful brothers clerks and waiters, brave and patient sisters, moguls' secretaries, female hairdressers with voluminous heads, eternal children in short pants, seasonal ice cream sellers, pushers of intoxicating substances, bandits, gondoliers of city pathways, captains aboard foreign ships, foreign women aboard a captain, neighbours – polite disco gladiators, pre-astronaut neighbours and the rest on Dinko Šimunović Street, not to go on listing you all any further, I am writing because before I go

I want you to know that we live on the most beautiful street, in an enchanting city, and in a country that has no match, or meaning!

The sun rises at five, warms us and crashes out at eight, sometimes even nine o'clock, and at night, without our knowing it meteors drizzle over our heads; down below, in the building where we live, households sparkle with golden lights, capers shut their flowerheads, brimming with a seductive scent, and the quiet air, cooled by the freshness of the night, is sliced only by moans of love. The summer in the city is wet and warm, and the plants from the ground-floor gardens crawl up and along the roots and trunk of our block of flats, all the way up to where the birds are, to the tenth floor, the fourteenth. Some might find this grotesque, but it is really a thing of beauty. Cats come alive at nighttime and leap amid the ivy branches, flying across the narrow spaces between flats, spaces that are filled with the skies, and sometimes a swearword might fly across with them, making the scene more down to earth, thus protecting us, at least a little bit, from utter madness.

All this might also happen in other cities along our meridian and farther, but do those cities have such tall and proud men, humble go-getters with powerful thighs and well-built women with pony tails and long nails, somewhat cutting in their manner, as cutting as a thorn might be on a rose or a blueberry bush by the roadside, do they have, every day of the year, such fragrant pine trees under their windows, such beautiful singing voices, this

healing sea or a street such as this one, a joyful cascade, our musical scale, a staircase that takes you into future memories, into an incorruptible childhood? And if they do, do they know they do?

For not being aware of your fortune is the greatest misfortune. So be joyful, even if you haven't a clue why!

I love you all, your neighbour Nightingale, 35 Dinko Šimunović Street

Two weeks have passed since that happened: that's when I headed out in search for the letter's author. After a short stay in Split, I decided to get off the highway and take a side road, ripping through the arid landscape where even a stone would starve, towards his village, the place of his birth.

I already felt that my concentration was fading and that my thoughts were all over the place. I couldn't remember the meaning of a road sign I passed. This is a consequence of my condition, but it might also be simple excitement. (Or both.) This is why I am going to record them - the thoughts and letters - so that there would be a copy of everything that happened or might still happen to do with this thing, and so that I will have access to it (yes, it's mainly for me), though perhaps others might be interested too, darling.

Mitrovići. Nightingale's village, up on the hill where the three borders meet, has a small, eared, nationalist U scrawled onto the road sign with the village's name on it, and a Hajduk logo sticker. Above the sign with the name is a STOP, and you have to stop (though there's no one ever there) and then carry on straight ahead.

His mother met me by the bell tower that stood impaled bang in the middle of Mitrovići. The clock on the tower, black hands on rock, ran fifteen minutes slow and showed noon. She was alone, she and several flies, and was not sitting, but swayed, big and round, from one foot to the other. On her head was a black shawl with bright pink roses; her face bloomed into a smile when she saw me. The beginning of September is hot, but not in that villainous July way. September is the post-coital summer, lazy, mesmerising, luxurious and glanced at just before everything that had just ripened would start to rot; everything has been brought to its rapture, all the tastes and colours, and then submerged into a sumptuous tenderness, a melancholy.

She said, fuckin' 'ell you look fab, better than on the telly. She said and kissed me on both cheeks, grabbed me by the arm and took me inside the house on the square.

I looked miserable, after a two-day drive in a car with a broken air conditioner (the fact that it's a convertible didn't help) and after I'd been pissed on by a dog, but I didn't tell

her that because I enjoyed the moment, and the compliment.

No news of Nightingale. I say and produce Nightingale's last letter.

This was given to me by the guy who takes care of his flat, he's a lodger. (I didn't mention the other letters.)

She got a carob stick from her apron and bit into it. She offered me one. She said, scribbles again, the shit-eater. I can't read that no more. And you say - there's no one knowin' where 'e is. What's to be done now? How's you gonna find 'im? And if 'e's not in that Bosnia?! Don't go looking for 'im, not worth it, 'e's not.

Her name is Josipa, Nightingale's mother.

She flapped her hands against her thighs several times - I shrugged. Darling, don't worry, I say. I'll find him. The world is limited, but time is eternal.

She looked at me, puzzled as if I'd just spoken gibberish. She waved her hand.

That's a quotation from a graffiti, darling, Nightingale wrote it, I say. I didn't want her to think I was making fun of her. I felt stupid and awkward and downed the grappa that she had served me.

She reached towards the letter. Give it, I's goin' to read it!

She read slowly, mouthing with her lower lip.

He put that in the letter boxes of all the neighbours before he left, instead of a goodbye, I suppose, I say.

What's all this about, 'e's always surprisin' me. But it gives no clues. Is 'e sick, d'you think?

I shook my head no.

I'm glad 'e's all right. Since when does 'e love Split?

Sorry?!

In the letter 'e loves it. 'e never used to, never went out except at night like a pillock.

She was squinting at me and shaking the roses on her head.

She said, 'e was never ever completely normal, ever since old Joze called 'im

Nightingale, I'd 'ave called 'im Zoran or Gordan. We got 'im late, old, maybe that's why 'e's like 'e is. It's a shame in the village, I 'ad 'im at fourtytwo, and my Joze was a big fat sixty. The neighbours 'ad great-grandchildren, and we 'ad a baby. But fuck the village and fuck what they think, the idiots of Mitrovici. But I won't say no more, I'll shut me gob now (and at this point she started to laugh), because the way 'is old dad used to coo over 'im, 't was as if 'e were a bird, 'e might as well 'ave turned into a peacock or a swan.

She wiped her nose on a tea towel and poured us another drink.

Well, my parents had my brother in their forties, and so what. Darling, he's much saner than many people, Nightingale. I say, Nightingale is a real artist, all this stuff with letters to the neighbours, it's actually a brilliant performance.

I wanted to say something soothing to her. Anyway, Nightingale and I are similar in that way, we don't make sense, in these parts we're almost seen as riff-raff. Each of us in our own way.

You're an ar'ist, 'e's not an ar'ist, my arse is 'e an ar'ist. Scratches on walls, ruffles up people. The police are after 'im. She bit into the carob pod, which must have been too tough, since she spat it out into the sink. If 'e's that clever, where's 'is money, eh?

She was cross, beetroot-faced.

Is 'e doin' a performance of let's not get in touch with mother for over a year? Or to knock someone up and then not know there's a child for two years, eh? she says.

That's quite radical. (Nightingale has a child?)

Radical, radical. She agreed.

So she changed the subject, went through the TV listings and politics and prepared dinner for us after which I took off my heels, washed with completely cold water because there was no hot water in the boiler, and fell asleep immediately in Nightingale's childhood bed in the white room.

Next to the bedside, on a chair, stood an accordion, shiny and red, in a good mood; by the bed were school slippers, size 44. I had never seen such gigantic school slippers, a

childhood object. Mother Josipa had left them there for me, but they were much too big. A handful of school books lay on the shelves, and resting in the drawers was carefully folded underwear, belonging to a boy who would never come back. The boat logbook, which is what I was looking for, most probably wasn't there, the old woman would have discovered it by now. They never got on, controversial Nightingale and his old mother.

Above the bed hung a Mona Lisa tapestry, woven once upon a time by a youthful Josipa. The women in the village think it's the Virgin, she told me and laughed, let 'em, let 'em, I couldn't give a fuck what they think.

Years later, the woven Mona Lisa became an important motif in Nightingale's stories, sonnets, sketches and comics. And here she is, sitting in stillness amid the white empty walls behind a glass pane in a decorative plaster frame, and at times she is friendly and soothing, then turning irritated and snappy, this Gioconda, stabbed by a needle 13,190 times.

This is what I don't understand, you see, what is the thing with tapestries, who ever came up with that, what a ridiculous waste of time. Is it lobotomy or zen? I'm talking shit, it's actually quite similar to my job. It's just that I - well, I work for money. That thought used to warm me like the bright summer sun, but with time - with time it cooled down. But anyway, let's go back to the story.

About seven a.m. we opened, then closed, the door of the house. I walked towards the car, with mother Josipa in tow. She had a new headscarf on, yellow with blue peonies, which do not exist in nature, but they are still peonies, beautiful peonies.

You've really got it into your 'ead to find 'im, eh? ... Well, keep an eye out for any of them terrorists!

I turned on the engine.

Why terrorists?

They was on the News of the telly, yesterday.

Don't trust the news, darling.

Perhaps it's not fair to tell an old person not to trust the news, it could drive her mad, I



thought. But still, I don't think I know much about old people, my parents aren't alive (my mother, my darling mother, died three years ago). I remember my parents as beautiful and strong, I didn't get a chance to get fed up with them. One of my friends used to say that old people have selective deafness and allow only what they want to hear or can cope with to reach them...

Mother Josipa shouted: I's just jokin', I's jokin'! and I was relieved, though I wouldn't bet on it that she really was joking. I didn't want to think of mother Josipa as a dense old hag, it's hard enough to love people as it is, people often fuck things up. It would be easier if lovely and kind people were not chauvinistic idiots, but they are. I came out of the car quickly and embraced her, tight. Speak soon!

I see her in my mind (her, right now, I see her clearly). A formidable granny, the largest of grannies, the mother of my ex seasonal groom and the man I never stopped loving, Nightingale Mitrovic, and she's waving to me with both arms. It's an Indian summer, and she, in that very moment, with her arms in the air, could be the emblem for it, for that summer. A cloud of gold finches puffed up above her floral head into the empty and pale early morning sky, and the clock on the old bell tower, the one I mentioned earlier, was still showing three p.m.

I headed towards the border, towards Bosnia. The gloomy road gulped me down.

OK, I'll say it now. My name is Orange Peović. I am a blonde orange, on the outside. I have a silicone lip, a Brazilian hairdo, I drive a gold two-seater Mazda MX-5 convertible, but I am a black orange, on the inside. Brimming with black juice.

The day before I met Nightingale's mother, i.e. the meeting with which I began this story, I arrived from Ljubljana to Split. I had decided on that trip after I had called

Nightingale the previous week, to no avail. I had called every day. When I tried to pay in money for the boat mooring, I found out that his account had been closed for months, and at the port they told me that all the expenses had been taken care of, but that no one had visited the boat for months. His mobile was dead and I was at first irritated at this, but then it got me worried (we weren't in regular contact, actually we had been in touch very rarely in the last few years, mainly to do with our boat, but still).

Then I started calling his family, common acquaintances, our old neighbours: an entire vanished life surfaced, so disconnected from my present that it could have been anybody's; it was as if an entire mini-Atlantida had come up. None of the people that Nightingale and I had known knew exactly in which direction that sexy bird had flown. They were not unsettled by this, not even his mother whom he had only told that he had some work in Bosnia, she wasn't unsettled either, she had just looked worried for a moment, or I had imagined it, because that silly Nightingale has the habit of coming and going, no one ever knows when or where. The stuff I found on the internet turned out to be the most helpful: the blog he'd been writing was long dead, he had withdrawn entirely from the virtual world, which for him had anyway been a thing of vulgarity, but Google still knows - he had done some work in Libya, then in Chernobyl, there was even a photograph of one of his murals on a foreign webpage, with a caption that had Bosnia and his name in it. And that was all.

Officially, he still lived on our old street, Dinko Šimunović, on the tenth floor of the same block and in the same flat where I had spent time with him, but as I said, I didn't know anything about the last few years of his life, even though he has always remained my beloved in the depths of my heart. It's not as if there haven't been others, darling, but when it comes to Nightingale, this has had no effect on my devotion to him.

My encounter with Dinko Šimunović Street two weeks ago (has it already been so long?) was not a pleasant one. I walked onto the street cautiously and quickly, not looking around much. It was a scorching afternoon and the street was empty, even though the

asterisks on the intercoms showed that tourists had conquered even these concrete oases. Nightingale is right, this is the most beautiful street in Split, a serious Street, not a streetlet, pretty streetlets are something else, there are a lot of those, but I love Streets. And I love tall blocks and skyscrapers. And I love the twentieth century more than the nineteenth or the seventh. I'm not sure about the twenty-first century yet. This is where I lived as a child, with my parents, and when my mother and brother, after my father's death, moved to a smaller town and sold our flat (every unreachable dirty corner of that place, every hidden crack was mine), I moved a mere hundred metres east, to Nightingale's place (my mother didn't forgive me easily for that, poor mother, I let her go so easily).

I don't know what made me feel worse in the encounter with Šimunović Street: that which had changed or that which had remained the same. I didn't have the time or the energy for these feelings, to stop and work through them. I didn't even expect it would hit me like that. It was like the moment when you go out to take the rubbish out in your slippers and you meet some shithead from your childhood who keeps you trapped by the bins for fifteen minutes, and while he's looking and looking at you you're visibly ageing and disintegrating, getting fatter and fatter by the minute. The street was looking at me, it was watching me patiently, from all angles. And I had to look at it, in the passing, to see where I was going: the skyscrapers, tall and slender buildings, the staircase, the sea. Man, it was a return to intimacy.

The things we know and have disintegrate and disappear, get covered over by new things like grass grows over a grave. The inanimate world is the closest to death. Whoever thinks I'm wrong should try imagining a city without birds, insects or people, a city of things.

Or a hill with no grasses.

Or an old dancehall brimming with dancing ghosts.

Or a house that had been ravaged by war, after the blood had dried up and the stench of soldiers' boots had evaporated, and warm and sweaty bombs had cooled down and now sit, waiting at the bottom of the wardrobe, cocooned under the folded linen.

Or a snow desert when the sun sets behind the mountain.

Or a road that has been cut off.

A factory hall, the machines and turbines without workers.

It's an emptiness that a real desert will never know, because, for centuries, it has not been inhabited by anything but eternity. It is not a coincidence that this is how people imagine heaven. At this moment, there is more death in an empty cup of coffee whose glaze has rubbed off, than in the Sahara desert.

Nightingale (I am always mid-discussion with him in my mind) believed in technological advances with a socialist spirit and said that one day soon when people, all people, start going on holidays to the Moon, he would set up an exhibition there, showing only objects that had no importance, object that were irrelevant to him and to everyone else. There is no atmosphere on the Moon, no oxidation, and thus there is no death of the inanimate and the objects that we care about will finally last an eternity or at least longer than humanity. He'd remake our entire street up there. Of course, when you're seventeen, it's easy to fall in love with someone who wants to make an exhibition on the moon in order to keep beautiful or important things from disintegrating, although, I already knew: if not many can go to Brijuni\* [\* Brijuni: in Marshall Tito's days, an exclusive island for the political elite], they won't make it to the Moon either.

And what remains available to death if you forget everything before you die? Is there anything left to die? When things get jumbled up, and oblivion precedes death instead of death preceding oblivion? I imagine that the fact that the body disintegrates so fast after it has been emptied by oblivion is a defence mechanism.

Where were we? Ah yes, Šimunović Street. It's living proof of how tall buildings and skyscrapers can be so attractive, this third Split, Split 3, Trstenik, my neighbourhood. It's living proof that socialism can be beautiful, as Nightingale would say.

I pressed the stop button in the lift, mid-floors, so that no one could get in, fixed my make up and my skirt. A woman without lipstick is a bare woman, my mother used to say,

and this habit of putting on make up, a habit that's dumb for some, has remained with me since high school.

Slap me. I must be dreamin'. These were the words of the 30-year-old man who opened the door for me, smiling wide, and said he was called Joke Pironi. He was wearing shorts; between his skinny hairy legs protruded the head of a Maltese dog (Falcon was his name, witty but real) who was yapping at me. The next thing I noticed on Pironi was an oversized head with a crew cut and a pair of heavy-lidded blue eyes.

Is somethin' bein' filmed, then? (He paused here, lit a cigarette.) I know, I know, it's a crap joke.

I stood at the door frightened by the dog's tiny snarling jaw and explained that I was looking for Nightingale. I said I hadn't seen him for years, perhaps a decade, and that I want to sell the boat, urgently, and I that I needed his approval. The boat's in his name, darling, but it's still my boat, my inheritance, although, it's true, he had been looking after it all this time. I get a bit confused when I'm lying, but whatever, Pironi wasn't listening anyway.

He said: Can't believe it, man! It's not real! So he wasn't talking shit when he said that he knew ya and that you'd be turnin' up to get the boat keys. Yeah, the motherfucker knew you'd come. You and Nightingale, husband and wife, fuckin' 'ell. But he's not here, love. He's done a runner, gone lookin' for some bird he knocked up two-three years ago. Might be over in Livno or Tuzla or at the end of the world. If you want my opinion, I wouldn't bother lookin' for 'im. You'd better wait for him to get in touch.

Pironi had picked up the Maltese dog but the thing was still yapping. He put it down on the table and took out some rolling papers from a drawer, tobacco and grass, the dog went around in circles trying to get down. I didn't have time to wait for him to get in touch (Nightingale). There were no books on the shelves, not a single one, which meant that he had no intention of coming back. Still, his bizarre writing suit hung on a coat hanger against the wardrobe door as if it had been put there yesterday.

Pironi said: Wanna light up? Now that you're 'ere, we could get a bit high?! It's not as

cool alone. This is home grown, completely *au naturel*, pure honey.

To hell with it all, I said, it has to be good for you, I'll have a toke. We threw ourselves on the sofa. Falcon settled down between our shoes.

Pironi said: I swear, man, I'd not be messin' wif ya, I ain't got the slightest where the git's got to, maybe he's in Travnik, might be in Bugojno. I'm just like lookin' after the place for 'im. You know, I'm a local, a Croat, the place is taken, you get me. Last summer, before he done the runner, he was up against it wif all the neighbours, the cops were after 'im, all sorts. That was a major downer for 'im, he wasn't expectin' the letters to stir up so much shit. He's unrealistic, inni'. I told him straight - big man, leave that shit alone and mind your own business.

I said that, if we are going to be honest, that's exactly what Nightingale's business was - he's an artist, darling, he has to interact with his surroundings, he has to make shifts in the world.

You're shittin' me?! I'm also an artist. You must have seen the graffiti: *I'm hungry, give it to me*, downstairs, outside the door, just above the intercom? Yeah, you seen it. It's just that I'm not up my own arse like some of these uppity types. I'm more interested in reality.

I asked him if he was a gay activist, since that seems to me like a gay graffiti even though it also has a socio-economic foundation. He asked, of course, if I wanted to find out for myself and laughed: How do I know that it is not meant as, for example, give me some salami in my sandwich? You's a dirty little piggy, he said and sneered.

He said, him, Pironi, that Nightingale nearly got him into shit too with those letters, and something about a case of explosives found in a Split bank, where they found the same sentences scribbled on the bank walls as those in Nightingale's letters. They questioned him, took him in again and again, said Pironi, but they couldn't stick anything to him because the letter was received by the entire street, they had been copied into several hundred samples. (Magnificent, magnificent...)

But no information on where I could find Nightingale.

Last summer, the July before last, more than a year ago, on Dinko Šimunović Street, a pair of anonymous lovers made love so vociferously that they woke up the entire sleeping neighbourhood, and it was a sweltering summer, the nights were breathless and many windows were wide open.

From everything Joke Pironi told me, and he talked a lot and not very coherently, I understood this much: the letters that Nightingale had diligently placed into the neighbours' letter boxes last summer, unsettled the street. The letters themselves unsettled the street more than the reason they came into being, although that unsettled them too. I was pleasantly surprised by this lack of apathy, even if it was expressed in a negative manner. I was used to local people reacting only to football, which is why Nightingale considered them to be backward and worthy of his contempt, but I was more tolerant and practical, since those were the people we'd grown up with; I'd have found it burdensome to have to think negatively of them, or think of them at all. Compromises, always compromises, yet I either had to either live with people or die alone.

In June last year on Dinko Šimunović Street, Nighthingale, or so said Pironi, worked nights; he had been commissioned to do a comic for a well known foreign magazine - an American one - and I imagine that must still be an important thing for him - so noise disturbed his workflow.

On the tenth night Nightingale, not Pironi, felt a strong and wilful need to ask these loud lovers to turn it down a bit (which I find difficult to believe). But since he, according to Pironi, didn't know who these love birdies were, he wrote to everyone, started from the bottom up, must have been having fun, and planted the letters into the letterboxes, but the moaning carried on for a full three weeks, perhaps longer, until the second week of July. The street has an unusual cascading structure, slender buildings with hundreds of windows, so if someone is making love on the south side, up under the clouds, it is not easy to work out

where exactly the sound is coming from. It went on for three entire weeks, perhaps longer, until the second week of July. And then it stopped.

And before Nightingale Mitrovic ended his letter game, which he had entered, it seems, with his entire silly, idiotic and beautiful soul, the local housing council of the buildings closest to the sounds of grunting and moaning on Dinko Šimunović had summoned up a meeting:

the letters were collected and handed over to the police:

the police didn't really know what to do with such manuscripts,

Nightingale was warned for disturbing public order, and threatened with a criminal record,

silly stuff, said Pironi.

In short, they forbade him to finish the 'project' of writing letters to his neighbours.

Forbade him? The maddest thing is, said Pironi, they accused 'im that it was 'im, Nightingale, who was the lunatic moaning at night. Pironi didn't believe this (nor did I), but he couldn't be sure, because he was living at a friend's at the time, in Sirobuja neighbourhood.

Pironi said: 'e don't need no project, love, it's an act of artistic fuckin' expression every time he goes for a piss. See, it's a question of ethics how much you as an ar'ist can stick your nose into other people's privacy. On the other 'and, you's always getting involved, it's just a question of how you package it, the *way* you do it, you get me? You's got to package it right, big man, I told him, but he didn't listen.

Didn't package it - that's the problem, I say.

And did they ever discover who was doing it? Who was emitting the sounds of love? No, they didn't, they calmed down. But it was crazy, Pironi's bike once broke down and he stayed the night at Nightingale's while it went on. It was unreal, he said. The street has a million open windows, it echoes - it could have been anyone. (It's not appropriate for people to go knocking on doors in the middle of the night to check if they are fucking.)



Nightingale's flat-room spread out around me - I was looking for windows - one oversized room without walls, different from the flat I remember and which looked nothing like the Nightingale I used to know, and this lack of familiarity put me in a bad mood (perhaps it even frightened me).

I asked Pironi what ethics he was talking about, I said don't give me that type of shit. Like the neighbours were that bothered by someone's letters. Yeah, right.

He said: There you go, man, you're gettin' pissed off for no reason now. I ain't got a clue what he wrote to them, but they was bothered. You can ask Robert De Niro to show you the letters. 'e lives on the first floor. 'e's not an actor, not an actor. 'e's the president of the housing council, just looks like De Niro. You want me to go? You think I's got more of a chance of gettin' me hands on the letters from De Niro than you? But you's a CELEBRITY. You's embarrassed? Come off it, you's not that famous. I get it though, but there's still no fuckin' chance of me gettin' those letters from De Niro. He takes it dead seriously. Like seriously, seriously. 'e's fifty and lives wif 'is mum, 'e's the kind of bloke who doesn't even wank off any more, 'e's got to take it seriously. The president of the housing council. You don't want another toke?! Ok man, fair enough, more for me.

That's kind of how it went. While he spoke, Pironi's verbal ping-pong balls bounced around and off the rubber walls of my mind. I felt pleasant warmth on my feet.

Pironi shouted: Falcon, you dog fucker! Man, don't get pissed off, man. Now you're his, 'e's marked you, now 'e like thinks you's, like, OK.

Like.

I didn't get pissed off. Joke Pironi went to the toilet to get a sponge and some paper to wipe off the dog urine, but since he took his time coming back I used some kitchen towels and water from the kitchen tap. While doing this I, cleverly, opened several drawers where some of Nightingale's things were meant to be, hoping to spot the boat logbook somewhere; but the drawers were empty. I stuffed the writing suit into my bag, I had decided it was my right to have it (as an ex wife, my love, I can always use that). Falcon followed me with a

dangling pink tongue. As opposed to big dogs, who inspired confidence in me, I have always feared small dogs and other hysterical creatures. I warned him with a wagging finger, shut the door, called the lift. To the ground floor, after all.

Perhaps I could have knocked on De Niro's door on the first floor, but I couldn't be bothered, and I was a bit stoned, pissed on, sweaty and hungry and not in the best of moods, and the chances of some jobsworth giving me the incriminating letters were already tiny. (It's incredible that someone would flee because of writing letters...)

At the main entrance door I walked past two skinny girls playing with a plastic dolls. I am not sure I love you, one of them said sternly to the doll, angry almost, and she hid the doll from my gaze. The street was deserted in the afternoon blaze, the city is full of tourists at this time of the year, down in the necropolis, in the centre, on the beaches, but Split 3 is beautifully empty, as if the entire summer had settled in it for a bit of a lie down.

My gaze snagged on a graffiti scrawled on the overpass, under which the sea glistened, and which read MEANING in large letters. I heard the horn of the ferryboat from the distance, the captain's hearty baritone bass. Oh, my dear Mitrovic, where are you? Where have you been my whole life.

Before it got dark, I went to the marina, to Bloody Mary, our boat.

It was bobbing in the dusky shallows of the harbour, as enchanting as always, at least to me.

And she stood in the same spot as before, but unlike the flat, Nightingale had evidently looked after the boat: he had painted it, a poetic white and blue, the brass and copper shiny and polished even though it had been a year, or more, since the captain's departure; the deck glowed with a blood flow, felt alive under the palm of my hand, and when I saw that there was no one around, I gave it a loud kiss.

I hugged the worthy, reliable, beloved Bloody Mary in the same way I had done when I had pranced on its boards, wet, carefree and content like a young bitch.

I sat at the rudder for a while, the wind clearing my head.

There was a light breeze and a glow in the west promising more good weather. If I took a picture of this or described it, it would be an act of common kitsch. Beauty has no place in art - art is home for things that are semi-ugly or entirely hideous.

A producer once flattered me - that's why people love your series, handsome lovers, emotions, falling in love, a happy ending, all that is unavailable to them in real life and that contemporary art cannot offer. That's how the producer flattered me (not Kalemengo, Kalemengo is an all right bloke), but one who wanted to get into my knickers, which he managed to do in the end, probably because, at the time, everything listed above was unavailable to me in real life, the handsome lovers, emotions and falling in love, and a few other things.

And what's worse, that sad pathetic producer who produces the production was right.

People needed tons of cheap and fast emotion, needed it in larger quantities than it was possible to produce, by the teams of typists banging on keyboards daily writing up absolute nonsense, without putting in a microbe of passion, giving it only their resentful typist's sweat-shop sweat, but that sweat was fertile ground for tons of glorious sensational, sentimental slime-covered plot lines that provoked laughter and tears, love, fears and passions in the viewers, shook them up like the most precious works of art.

Why deny it, these stories shook up the large majority of the population and became lodged in their minds more than any magnificent artwork ever would.

Oh, no? Oh yes. That's the way things are.

At the end of that day, my mobile showed twenty-four missed calls (ten from Kalemengo, two from my brother, and to my surprise - two from Bere), but I didn't feel like calling any of them back. When it rang again, I thought how nice it would be to throw the phone into the sea and watch it sink, deaf and dumb. It would be a small victory, almost. Still, that temporary relief would bring about more long term complications, and I had already decided to go back to Ljubljana in the morning. So I turned my phone off for the night (go to sleep, go to sleep, tiny master).

When I finally unlocked the door of the cabin, moved the hatch and slipped under the deck, into the cabin where I would spend the first night of the trip I am telling you about, things changed.

The boat logbook, although I searched every inch of the cabin, was nowhere to be found, but under the mast, on the desk, carefully stacked in a box, I was greeted by those (these) famous Nightingale letters (some I will read out here).

The difference between Nightingale and a madman is that Nightingale is a real worker, a proper skilled professional. If he had put in so much dedication to a more profitable vocation, who knows, darling, he might have been rich. So, I settled in the cabin and read until the torchlight went out - I had no idea where the electricity cables were.

## A LETTER FROM A DESOLATE DOG

Honourable humans, friends of dogs and the rest,

I believe that you are familiar with the small acoustic scandal that has been stirring up our neighbourhood as of late, and perhaps it is you, the very reader of this letter, who has been filling up the silent nights with decibels of passion - but it matters not.

Whether you make love as silently as dogs or as loudly as cats is irrelevant - having been inspired by the aforementioned recent events, I am writing to share with you some dog thoughts on love. I will ask of you just one thing as you read: despite being caught in the whirlwind of passion or feeling irritated or shocked by the horny yelps in the darkness, remember that aside from the shrieking feline act of love, there exists the yelping canine ardour. Remember it at least in the morning, in the small gap where reason and the innocence of a fresh beginning reign, and throw a bone to those who are truly ravenous for love and for flesh.

This letter is a glance at unrequited loyalty - it is well known that dog's love is all about loyalty. But loyalty, contrary to common and superficial belief, is not always monogamous, just like monogamy does not have to be loyal or faithful, and so it is both with humans and with dogs.

Do you remember, perhaps, the handsome mix of a schnauzer and a mutt from our street, whom you called Shakespeare in Love? That whiskered fellow (and we'll refer to him as Shakespeare from now on, to avoid confusion), in the period when the little bitch Gara from the Mertojak neighbourhood was on heat, would run away from his comfortable home on Dinko Šimunović Street and stand, entrenched, by her gate. For three consecutive years he put his life on the line by running across busy roads, homeless for weeks on end, famished, parched, living off handouts and charity; he sat outside her front yard resolutely, like some furry monument, and waited for Gara's little tail to emerge.

She would, passionately, barking and snarling, reject other dogs from her behind, which was not easy, since, as we all remember, after her mistress would take her out for a walk, she would be seen running back with Gara in her arms, trailed by the insatiable alsatians, labradors and sausage dogs who had torn off their masters' leads and wandered along streets following their desire, rabidly looking for a female partner.

But only one, outside of that hypnotised pack, was her mating match, and as soon as her mistress would get distracted, Gara would jump the fence, lift her tail, and Shakespeare in Love, ever ready, would plug himself in.

On one occasion, thus plugged in, stuck together like the amorous deity of Janus, these unfortunate fortunates spent hours outside the back entry into the block of flats, and your children pulled at them and threw rocks in their direction - but they could not separate. It happens to humans, too, that the fearful heart blocks the nether gates, let alone to us dogs, our minds as full of moonlight and adrenaline as they are.

When the young mistress was surprised by a lot of wet puppies in the laundry basket for the second time in two years, the romantic relationship between Gara and Shakespeare in Love had to come to an end.

Gara, after being snipped, was not the same; disinterested in mating, she surrendered to food and melancholy, and Shakespeare took his love several streets down to a cocker spaniel called Luna and became faithfully hers. After Luna there was the pug, Hani. The relationship with the pug gave some interesting dog results in terms of appearance of the puppies, and Shakespeare's owner decided to keep him on a tight leash from thereon, and you could no longer see him roaming free, enchanted and libidinous.

But even before and after those serial monogamies, the erotic romances of dogs, golden locks and spiteful furs, dug up bones and wounded testicles, Shakespeare always came home to his human. The dog didn't resent him even when he got him neutered. In fact, his loyalty was made all the more focused and the dog was even somewhat grateful that the man had liberated him from the sexual neurosis. Now he could adore his dear human friend

with all his being, with a love that is unconditional, unreserved, platonic, crazy and pure, a love only a dog can have. This unadulterated adoration did not end even when his human abandoned him and left him in the street, dumped him like a dog, yes, the expression is quite accurate.

Only a dog can have such a dumb heart. A dog like me, a religious fundamentalist.

You know me? Shakespeare in Love, a scruffy tramp, from a schnauzer mother and mutt terrier father. Perhaps you shouted at me while I rolled a beef bone down the street after snatching it from the butcher's, perhaps you kicked a stone at me, or threw a set of keys in my direction after I sniffed your groomed puppy's behind.

My best friend left me in the forest by the slaughterhouse last spring, over there by the motorway, and I walked for six days and seven nights, came home with a bloody nose and ripped paws, and in the morning, as he was going to work, I, mindless with joy, threw myself at his feet. He was surprised and paused, and then said: Get lost!

And that was all.

I still stand outside the door and wait for him every morning. I don't throw myself at his feet, I stand by the side and wait, and I wail only after he is gone.

Neither soot nor misery have obscured the brilliance of my humiliation. Is there anything more gracious than being humiliated in love? It is a spectacular fall and the lower you fall the more profound your sadness, the more glorious your pain. To those of you who avoid me in the street with fear and disgust I say - whenever you kick me you move me further into the heavens, and through your contempt my love-ow-ow-ow! so utterly unwanted, becomes more beautiful, so much so that this suffering could make me into a holy dog.

I saw this, too: a few days ago my human bought a new dog. I now neither despair, nor hope, but I do wait. After all, where could I go with this invisible chain I was born with.

I therefore ask you again, because I am a beggar, a pauper, a swindler at times - despite being caught in the whirlwind of passion or feeling irritated or shocked by the horny

yelps in the night, remember that aside from the shrieking feline act of love, there exists the yelping canine ardour. Remember it at least in the morning, in the small gap where reason and the innocence of a fresh beginning reign, throw a bone to those who are truly ravenous for the flesh of hope.

Loyally Yours,

A Desolate Dawg



If I had to describe Nightingale, I would call him a street poet.

Even though after he published a *samizdat* when he was twenty-something - a collection of ten poems - and never wrote in verse again, everything he did could be termed poetry. The collection was called *Poetry*, which was neither good nor bad, but simply accurate. They were interesting songs, authentic, but he thought he needed a new way to express himself, that paper was slow, boring and uncommunicative, and the internet chatty, polluted and cacophonous, those were places that did not offer space for development, that's what he thought. He wrote verses with markers on walls, scribbled them on flaking facades at night, in lifts, toilets, on skips, subways. He drew. Discovered spray paint. Spray paint, that's a great couple of words, always modern, he loved spray paint.

He said: it was when the poets left the streets, that the bad times for poetry began.

Because the first poets lived in the streets:

noble homeroid beggars

a random villon down by law,

byrons who elegantly flail at the margins of law,

and those beatniks,

their distant cendrars cousins,

entire brigades of bukowskis,

several bolaños,

some camuses, ujevićs, dalmatian reporters,

rappers...

gentle decadents, anonymous painters and writers of graffiti, Banksy

and the rest,

and too few women, poets,

(maybe if we widen the term, Tracy Emin? Nin, Anais?)

because their wanderings were always barricaded by skirts and kids and aprons,

for too long.

Barricaded by door steps

and men's shoes

and women's, pointy.

On the other side the boom of

rhapsodies, troubadours, songwriters, street buskers:

young backpackers with guitars.

All of them were the lost fathers and corrupted brothers

of the bard,

although, although,

he used to say,

you never know who's the real dad.

Nightingale said that poets ruined themselves when they started focusing on each other and on their tool, the language, and stopped thinking about the world that they were talking about. They perfected their tool, fine tuned it, but their song was an echo chamber, that spoke into the emptiness and the emptiness was returned to them.

But poets don't give a fuck, they'll always have poetry, those blessed fools.

Still, the first thing I heard about Nightingale Mitrovic was not that he was a poet or a graffiti artist, or an art student, all of which he was, but that he was the man that women went to, all kinds of women and girls, when they wanted sex, free of course, he was not a whore. Available and approachable, he would say: life-lusting.

This seemed odd, since at that time I only ever saw him with a girl we called Hell's Bells, herself a refugee from Bosnia, and known as the girl who was utterly hairless (which she proved in various ways). I didn't know then whether friendship between men and women could exist, because we were taught that it could not. And I didn't know that Nightingale, Hell's Bells and I would become inseparable during that short time in one's youth when your friends are more important than anyone and anything, a time that passes as if it never really happened, see you later, alligator, each to his own, hassle-free.

