

Bekim Sejranović

Your Son, Huckleberry Finn

translated by Sandra Milanko

*The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner;
he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong;
but he is perfect to whom the entire world is
as a foreign land.*

Hugh of St. Victor, 12th century*

Prologue

FOR STARTERS I WILL TELL YOU a story, one of many sketches from our voyage, that peculiar sailing trip down the Sava and the Danube to the Black Sea, as we set off into the world, which soon turned into an adventure.

That was in 2006, if my memory serves me right... in the summer of 2006 when Moku, Petter and I set sail from Brčko and...

Breakdown

A morning on the river comes up from the water in the form of vapor and rises up to the sky as gently as a soul starting a new life cycle. At first you hear tiny songbirds: nightingales, blackbirds, tits, goldfinches, robins, and then the bigger ones wake up too, which also belong to this group (although they should be called screech birds) such as magpies, carrion crows, and perhaps ravens. Along with the screeching, the Sava's gulls begin with their aggressive calls, flying low over the water surface. Storks and grey herons don't make such loud calls, but you can hear them clattering with their big beaks and flapping their wings in the air. Predatory fish can also be heard, most probably pikes, catching their breakfast in shallow water. You can often hear fishermen churning the water surface with a wooden stick, trying to provoke an old, greasy catfish and finally make it rise from the mud and take the hook. Then, if you are near a house or a village, you hear roosters, they always sound somewhat hoarsely, as if lacking sleep or having a hangover, as if they had partied like crazy all night instead of sleeping inside a warm hen-house.

The river carries the echo of life diversity like a highly resonant sound tunnel. Often, while others were

* Cited from Georg Johansen, *Eksil*, translated from Latin by Jerome Taylor.

sleeping, I would listen to anglers talk all night, even when they were several kilometers upstream or downstream from our small boat, and then I would think how everything you see or hear is actually already irreversible past. As you become aware of your own life, you are already gone.

When the river starts to rise to the sky in the form of vapor and when the birds resembling a philharmonic orchestra readily start their morning concert, the sky in the east reddens. Then, little by little, as if it were a true stage, the music becomes louder and more intense, the stage lights are on, and what appears is the first beam of the true master of our lives, the oldest human deity, His Majesty the Sun. After a while the entire east bursts into an orange flame, the vapor instantly disappears from the water surface, the birds after their final screech finally fall silent, everything clears up somehow and a new day begins.

At that point I begin with my morning ritual on the boat. First I jump naked into the river to make myself wide awake. The jump needs to be done from the bow because if we are anchored, the river swiftly sweeps you away and if the current is strong and you are unwary, you won't be able to reach the boat. The only remaining thing for you to do is to turn on your back and float or, if you have any strength left, swim towards the nearest bank.

After the morning swim I relieve myself, I do number one and number two, it depends, holding myself by the stern so that the current carries it all away. Then I climb into the boat, dry in the sun, retrieve the anchor, let the river carry us for a while because I don't want to start the engine and wake up Moku, Petter, the girls and the little dog.

I'm always the first one to wake up, wherever I go and whoever I'm with.

After a while, however, I start the engine anyway, but still they don't wake up. That is, at least they seem not to. Only after a while, when I find a spot on the bank where we can go ashore and when they smell coffee, tea and fried eggs, do they get up one by one and rub their eyes. Then they go to the bank to relieve themselves, come back, stay silent and look a bit grumpy. At that point I usually start the engine again, take us to the middle of the river, turn off the engine and let the current carry us.

Moku practices yoga, Petter makes lunch, and I steer the boat with an oar so that the current doesn't carry us towards the banks.

And that's all.

That's exactly how life is. The current carries you and you wriggle a bit to the left, a bit to the right, but it, the current, be it life or river current, it's all the same, always pushes you forward. There's no turning back.

But still, everything is the same somehow.

The same muddy river, the same wood as a tall green wall on both banks, the same blue sky with

burning Sun on it's daily trip over the same swampy endless Pannonian plains, and there is the very same, deranged and – all messed-up: you.

On that day everything was the same too except for the fact that the engine persistently wouldn't start. We had been anchored since the previous day and I believed, don't even know why, that the engine would repair itself and that after it slept well over night it would function again in the morning. I have had such experiences as well. Sometimes the engines, especially the old ones, are like living beings, like children: you have to be patient with them and believe in them. But now there was really nothing to be done. I was trying to start the engine by pulling the starter rope for at least a half an hour, but not once did it give any sign of life. When the other “crew members” got up, I laid out my plan to them. We can either retrieve the anchor and slowly go downstream, hoping that we will pass by a village or call a friend of ours whom we had met a few days before in Sremska Mitrovica, around ten kilometers upstream, to come and fix the engine. Essentially, the only real problem was that we didn't have enough water. Just few liters left and on a hot, summer day, for the six of us, including the little dog, that was too little.

We decided to call our friend, a young doctor who had sewn a wound under my eye a couple of days before, and he said not to worry about a thing and not to move as he would send a mechanic right away. We were relieved, now all we had to do was wait. We could relax, take a bath, soak up the sun... However, every once in a while we looked upstream. And indeed, after a while, something was approaching us. It was a small, yellow “Elan”, inflatable boat and a young man inside it, with long, black hair tied in a tail. On the boat there was another boat engine, the so-called penta, a four horsepower Tomos engine, in case our engine couldn't be fixed. The young mechanic Jovan explained that to us.

The mechanic tried all sorts of things, but the engine kept silent. He changed the spark plugs, cleaned the carburetor, cleaned the sucking-pipe, and I myself can't think what else, but still nothing. We also chatted with the mechanic, had drinks, smoked cigarettes, smoked weed, laughed. The day dragged on, the sun was already beginning to set, but none of us was too worried.

Then the mechanic started to fiddle with the fuel tank. There is a small air valve on it. If it is closed, the engine won't start. The valve was, of course, closed. Last time we filled the tank with the fuel from a canister, someone closed the valve inadvertently and after a few minutes the engine stopped working. The mechanic opened the valve, pulled the starter rope three or four times and the engine started to roar releasing dense smoke. We shouted all at once:

– Yaaaaay...!!! – and started to laugh and hug and applaud out of joy. Only the little dog Jarane had no idea what the fuss was about, but in any case he barked squeakily in our direction and wagged his crooked tail.

We had another sip of brandy, smoked another cigarette, finished with one big, fat joint. The mechanic stared

at us and couldn't believe what a clumsy suckers we were and that we were sailing to the Black Sea without even knowing how to change a spark plug, let alone open the valve on the fuel tank.

I asked him how much we owed him and he said we owed him nothing. Just for the gas he had spent. I gave him almost the double, but under the condition of not telling anyone over there in Mitrovica, what actually happened to us. We had spent ten days in that tow and made a lot of friends. He laughed:

- Well, that will cost you a bit more.

Then he probably thought we had money so he tried to sell us the Tomos engine, but I told him we didn't need it. For, you see, if that nonsense with the valve hadn't happened, we would have never met him and spent a day with him. So, that's why we will stick to that. If the breakdown happens once again, we will meet someone else who will help us and fix it. But no other breakdown happened, if you can even call this a breakdown.

- If you need anything else, you have my number, feel free to call. I know everyone from here to Belgrade! - shouted the mechanic Jovan as he started the engine on his inflatable boat. We sat on the upper deck, for a while, waving at him.

Then he disappeared behind a curve and we never saw or heard from him again.

But I haven't forgotten him and I think neither has he.

I started the engine and the Sava Beetle sat sail downstream leading us towards new adventures and misadventures which impatiently waited for their turn.

I

1.

THAT'S HOW IT WENT then, and now it's the end of the summer 2014, and I'm still on the Sava River...

As every morning, the light coming through the little window of my boat wakes me up. But, since September was almost over and the Sava had started to carry reddened poplar leaves, every day the sun was a bit late, and so I would open my eyes a bit later. When I would wake up, I would always fidget a little, trying to sink into sleep again, but it never worked, so eventually I would get out of the bed abruptly and suddenly, envying people with the talent of lying around in bed until noon. For me it worked only on rainy mornings, when I would blast my brain with some stuff, and that has recently started to happen more and more often.

Some time ago, perhaps not even that long ago, when I was younger, I used to love mornings. I would wake up

full of energy, with a thirst for life, with a smile on my face and an erection in my pants, yearning for love and caresses, whereas now my mornings are ballads played with sighs, aching groans and by rubbing my painful back. The space around me filled with anxiety, self-pity, and not infrequently with dissatisfaction of having awakened alive at all.

I go to the stern deck, take off my clothes, I slowly pass onto the bow stepping on the narrow, lateral bulge made on the meeting point between the hull and the cabin, I scratch my back, my ass, my balls, of course, I blink in the morning red light. It's humid and chilly, a mist wriggles all around us, me and my little boat. The fall has already arrived, I think.

I always try to press that moment into my soul, sometimes I manage and sometimes I don't. In the air you can hear, just like the murmur of the waves, the buzz of tiny songbirds. Sometimes I see a gull, a heron, in recent times, since the fall has settled in, the first, mostly small flocks of ducks flying south. I jump into the river which releases vapor in the morning, as if it breathes. The Sava has already become cooler due to heavy rains, it has risen, become a bit muddy and started to carry branches and old logs pulled out from the mud. Even so, I find this version of the Sava better than any shower. I swim a bit upstream and towards the middle, where the current is faster, and the water, which is usually turbid, is still slightly greener here. I dive, breathe in, yell "ohoooooho", I let the current carry me and then I swim again towards the boat, crawl, backstroke, even butterfly as much as I can. In the end I grab the stern boarding ladder and I do what is usually done in the morning, and then I climb back into the boat, let the wintry sun dry me a bit, wipe myself with a towel, put on a pair of bermuda shorts and a T-shirt, turn on the gas ring and boil some water. Tea for me, coffee for "Sengor El Negro", as for a jerking I sometimes used to call him, this Negro-dude, my best and, to be honest, the only friend. (I know that somebody would say that it is an "offensive" nickname, and, sure, it is on the edge. But it's not the words that are offensive, it's meaning that we give them. We are offensive, not the words. It was simply his nickname: Negro, pronounced as in Italian "Monte Negro" - Crna Gora or Black Mountains, the smallest country on The Balkans.)

After the water has been brought to a boil, I pour two thirds into an earthenware teapot, while the rest goes into a copper oriental coffee can called dzezve, I prepare our morning drinks, I shout in a half-loud and amused way: – Come on, little Negro... have a sip of coffee! – although I know that there's no point of me yelling and that this one won't get up even if you throw a grenade underneath his hammock, where he slept like an Indian in the Amazon. The guy gets up only at the smell of coffee and the sound of police sirens. That's why I, like an auntie, bring him the dzezve, a cup and three sugar cubes on a platter and slowly get on his raft. Here you have to be careful, the boards are bumpy, rundown and unsteady, some of them, truth be told, are missing, and the monstrous boat itself swings and lists heavily at the slightest move.

The raft's door creaks and the morning light bursts into Negro's den, I hear him murmur and cough like a badger, and when he realizes that it's me who's entering, he often farts on purpose and the smell goes as far as to the Slavonian side of the Sava. You can't talk to him in the morning until he has three cups, smokes two “Drina” cigarettes from Sarajevo and one huge joint. That's why I don't even try, I just imitate the voice of a radio host from the naive days of socialism, yelling all of a sudden, in a deep and seemingly spirited way: – Gooood morning, working people of Bosnia and Herzegovina! – or: – Riiiise and shine, soldiers! – or a similar nonsense, depending on what pops into my head.

Sometimes, out of pure spite, I even sing a nice little melody which I believed to be a morning program's old jingle of some radio station, don't know which one. Then I leave the platter on a cable drum that served him as a coffee table and go back once again to my boat.

And this is how the two of us have been waking up for a very long time now, each on his own, with his own warm drink and a smoke. He drinks coffee, smokes “Drina” cigarettes and weed, I drink marigold, chamomile and nettle tea, whatever I have, I don't smoke cigarettes, weed on rare occasions because it makes me paranoid, but I do smoke a joint if I have hashish. And this is how it has been for the two of us, as I said, almost every morning for the last several summers.

In Bosnia they would say: to each his own.

In the winter we sought shelter, each man for himself. I used to go to Bosnian town Tuzla while my dearest and Lundo, our dog, lived there and while I still had some money, but after I had lost them all, him, then her, and running out of money more and more often, I had to undertake forced labor in Norway. I will tell you something about that too, perhaps not every little detail, just enough for you to understand what I'm talking about. And Negro, as everyone called him, the policemen, his wife and child, even he himself when he talked about his adventures you could write an entire novel on, he would either go back to his wife and child who lived in a house on the outskirts of this small town or spend the winter in jail. He claimed that the best combination for the winter was a few months at home, a few in the can, so he always tried to arrange something like that. Usually he would succeed, and even if he didn't, this fellow gets by everywhere somehow.

That is why I call him Badger sometimes and he doesn't mind. What's there to mind?

This is how it's been for years between us and the Sava, dividing our lives in just two seasons: summer and winter, freedom and dungeon. However, at the beginning of this summer a third character sailed into our lives, my father, whom both Negro and I called Old Man. Last night he went night fishing and he should be back any second with breakfast. Lately he has also been late, just like the sun. After spending a lot of time on the river, you don't need a watch anymore. The river, the sun, the moon, the wind and storms, even fish and birds, cut time into bearable and less illusive little pieces.

Sometimes I would even get a bit worried after Negro and I had been drinking, smoking and getting high, each with his own stuff, and my Old Man still wasn't back with freshly caught fish. Then I would think: today is the day. But it happened only on rare occasions like, for instance, this morning. Me worrying. For I've been expecting what's about to happen today for a long time, perhaps even hoping for it to happen. I have already relived this morning and this day countless times. And each time, just like today, I knew that that day was the day. Today everything will turn upside down, today destiny will throw its dices once again for all of us, today the fish you have been lurking for your entire life will take the hook, pull the fishing line, bend the rods and the only remaining thing for you to do will be to pull it out. In my opinion, a true angler never releases or throws away its fish, no matter how small and plain it is. For why else would you go fishing then, why would you torture the creature if not for putting it inside you, together with your flesh, blood and soul? Fine, if it's really a young catfish, tiny and without whiskers, there's no use of it. You release it and wait cynically for it to grow. If it's a bullhead, which takes the hook, as anglers say, up to its butthole, you slam it against the boat's shell plating and return it to the river beaten to death. That's an angling rule, it's not subject to ethical rethinking.

Today is the day.

I knew it from the moment I woke up. But, truth be told, I also knew it yesterday and the day before yesterday and many days before today, but it wasn't though. Or perhaps it actually was, but I couldn't "process" it, as a hacker would say. It's hard to distinguish days on the river.

Today is the day.

2.

Perhaps Negro is right when he says that this fatalistic mantra is just an excuse for my addiction, just a way of escaping my weakness, a reason to become stupefied with something more tangible than real life. This might be the reason why sometimes I couldn't wait for the summer to end, my Old Man to die, Negro to go to prison, and I, at last, to go to rehab. I didn't even believe anymore that the big old boat, which my father had bought

and which the two of us had grinded, welded, painted for the entire summer, would be launched the following summer, which for us started already around Easter, so that we could sail again to the Black Sea, perhaps even all the way to Istanbul, and use it, as Negro dreamed, to smuggle into Europe merchandise, people, animals, everything that could be smuggled. Sail the Danube to Budapest, Vienna, and then continue along the rivers and canals across Germany and the Netherlands all the way to Amsterdam. As for me, I dreamed sailing across France, all the way to Paris, who knows, you can go anywhere on rivers and canals, you don't need a compass like on the sea or the ocean, sometimes you don't even need the engine, you can let the current carry you. The only thing you have to do is avoid shallows, rapids and sandbanks, and you can stop whenever and wherever you like, pick up people, sail with them for a while and put them ashore when the right time comes.

I read somewhere that life is just like sailing downstream on a river. Though we would sail both upstream and downstream with our big boat, which I wanted to name, of course, Huckleberry Finn, and Negro – Old Lady, “because it's your Old Man's boat after all and it's awful to name her after a male”. My Old Man, on the other hand, stuck to tradition, so he wanted to name her the Sava's Beetle II, which wasn't actually such a bad suggestion, because ten years ago or so I had given the exact same name to my present boat, the one I sleep on. Besides that, my Old Man bought that big boat with his own money, so he was free to name it as he pleased. What bugged me was that ordinal number, why not call it simply the Sava's Beetle, without the second, the name on my seven and a half meter iron boat had faded a long time ago anyhow. That's why my Old Man wrote again “the Sava's Beetle” in thick, black letters on my boat, then on the big boat too, adding “II”. I, however, took the brush and wrote on the other side “Huckleberry Finn”. And that's how it remained to this very day. The big boat was lying on the levee a bit upstream from Orašje and we hadn't even started to paint it, but it already had two names.

My Old Man always plays tricks on us. And he likes to have the final word even on his death bed.

Today is the day, I think once again, as I enter the cabin and lift one of the boards on the floor below the bed. I find my toiletry bag, take a red capsule, open it carefully, and sprinkle a few white, large pellets on the upper side of my hand, between the thumb and the index. I lick them, hold them inside my mouth, under the tongue, then I nibble them and swallow, as the bitterness makes me shiver. I hide everything again, go up to the stern, mouthwash with tea, put away the dishes and wait for it to kick in. Although you need to wait for a while, I already feel the anxiety, the fear of future, of my father's death, of getting off drugs, disappearing.

Today isn't that day after all, it echoes inside me as I turn on the radio, search for a station and sing softly, relaxed: *Che sera, sera...*

A middle-aged junkie sang softly this song every morning after his dose of methadone in a clinic in Oslo. I met him when I was in a short, “acute” rehab a few years ago. At night, however, he would shout and cry like a little child. He would tell me that people are the happiest in their homeland, implying, I suppose, that I should go back to where I came from. But five minutes after he had been given his dose of legal drug, that same guy

would tell me that he was going to Thailand and that he was going to spend the rest of this life there. He talked enthusiastically about it, as if he had another half a century to live. But then again who knows, I thought, people like him actually get to live a hundred years, if they make it to fifty. At the same time I envied him, felt sorry for him, and he also got on my nerves. However, the thing that scared me the most was that there was a huge probability I would end up just like him.

Perhaps this is why I returned here. However, the homeland I was born in and whose bright future I was trained for wasn't there anymore, it had been destroyed and nothing decent had been left to replace it. But to hell with the land when you've got water. I don't even live on land anymore, I live on the water. Once my Old Man told me he thought I had been conceived on a ship that he was captain of, on the Sava, in Belgrade, when my mother came to visit him. And that he wasn't sure, but he supposed he had also been conceived by his parents on the Sava, in town Šabac. Hence our yearning and love for this river.

- Everyone yearns to go back to where they came from - my Old Man agreed with the old junkie from Oslo. He would often retell this story in the evening while we ate some catfish, zander or fish stew, and Negro would add jokingly: - Oh that's why I love pussy the most...

But my Old Man was sly as a fox, too cunning even for a badger like Negro: - Yes, you do, but when a river flows from the inside, when it's wet.

Then I would start to chuckle and repeat what he said to him, because someone had finally outwitted an idler and a tough smuggler such as Negro. But then my Old Man would look at me and say in a sharp tone, as if I was still five:

- Well, aren't you vulgar or what... tsk-tsk... such a pig... And what's with that grin, when will you finally fix those teeth of yours?

And then I would shut up. That wasn't my Old Man anymore, the one I was getting to know starting from this summer. That was my father again, my childhood father, my first and my last source of anxiety. But lately he had been accepting my laughter more often and had become softer on me. Perhaps because I would put, without him knowing it, a few "medicinal" pellets into his tea, coffee, so that the man could relax a bit, soften up and finally show some emotions, that fatherly love he has been hiding for forty years now, always keeping a stiff upper lip. My Old Man couldn't drink anymore, but sometimes he would have a glass of wine with fish or a cold bottle of beer when the heat made him thirsty. He often smoked weed with Negro and he even had some papers that his doctor from Melbourne had given to him. It was legal for him to buy it and smoke it, and the cops couldn't do a thing about it. This was how he saved Negro and me from jail once. I will tell you about that too if I don't forget.

At first I put these little cocktails into his thermos he carried with him when he went night fishing because I couldn't watch him play the tough guy and put up with the pain, but later on I did it because he was becoming friendlier, nicer, even he had finally loosened up. And I wanted us to be, as they say, on the same

wavelength, at least once in a lifetime. Negro was on to me right away, perhaps at first he was somewhat pissed, but “what's he gonna do about it?”, as they say in Mostar. He is surely not a saint either.

There he is... Negro gets out of his hut on the raft, puts on a T-shirt that slides down his muscular chest, covered in tattoos and scars made by bottles, knives and bullets from the last war.

- He still hasn't returned? - he asks a bit grumpily - I need the boat.

- Now?

- Aye, now.

- What do you need the boat for now?

- There's something I need to do.

- Why now?

- I need it now, I'll do it later on.

- He'll be here any minute.

- You already got smashed once again... you're crazy...

This is how he always spoils my mornings.

- Nope. Not yet.

- To hell with you and your Old Man, I need my boat - he says putting on his flip-flops and walks across the board that connected his raft with the bank.

- He'll be here any minute. - I yell after him.

Negro climbs up the levee towards the tent. We made a small camp there, with a table, chairs, hearth. Then his dog came from nowhere, he calls him Pujdo. A big, seemingly aggressive stray dog that everyone feared although he wasn't dangerous. A mixed-breed between a Rottweiler, a German shepherd, and a mixed-breed, I suppose.

3.

I stayed, like many such mornings, on the boat, listening to the music from the radio, reading. Today it is *When Pumpkins Blossomed*, for the nth time. The last sentence in the novel says that the only way for the main hero Ljuba to come back from Sweden to his Dušanovac in Belgrade is the outbreak of war in the country. He might as well have returned at the beginning of the 1990s, but many others were forced to leave. Some went to the west, some to the north, and some, sure enough, didn't manage to leave the country and ended up underneath its soil.

Fate assigned me to the north. And to be honest, in the beginning it wasn't at all that bad there, in that Norway. At least not in comparison to what I had left behind: a state in ruins and its mud from which war criminals popped up like poisonous mushrooms. A country which bled and discharged pus like a dying man in terrible, unearthly agony. In those first couple of years in Norway I actually had experiences similar to those of

the main hero of “Pumpkins” in Sweden. I had a girlfriend, she had a son and we loved each other. She was pretty, red-haired and freckled and she didn't have one leg shorter than the other like his Swede. However, later on our experiences weren't that similar anymore. I came back even without a war, but, as I said, not to the land, but to the water, meaning river. The only things I was interested in were those having to do with the Sava, the Danube, the Tisza and some other rivers I rarely sailed on because the water level or the current didn't allow it. True, I read newspapers, magazines, listened to the radio, sometimes I even watched TV news in a café or in some of those taverns on the huge floating rafts, but I did it for no special reason, out of hobby, curiosity, sometimes even out of that petty, human malice, as if saying: “what did I tell you, and you thought they wouldn't screw you again, you fools...tsk-tsk-tsk”.

A lot of people on the river knew me, fishermen, anglers, rafters, tavern-keepers, recreational fishermen, smugglers, border policemen, and thought I was... it depends on whom you asked. Someone thought I was a true lover of life on the river, someone else thought I was a weirdo, some thought I was a bum and a junkie, a fool, and for a while, that first year on the river, having spent the winter in Oslo and having moved my boat little by little next to Negro's raft, some kind of shaman, almost a prophet. Negro had been in jail for a couple of months at that time and I was pretending to guard his raft for him. It was then when rumors about me spread, that I was clairvoyant, that I could remove spells, give advice, solve love problems and that kind of nonsense. The thing was that all kinds of weirdoes, both men and women, both the young and the old, wretches and junkies every last one of them, started to gather on the raft and around me, on my boat. We ate LSD and magic mushrooms, smoked DMT, drank ayahuasca, sometimes got totally smashed on ketamine, licked crystal MDMA, stuffed ourselves with 2C-L, 2C-B, methyone, carefully drank up caps of GHB, inhaled Poppers and 3-MMC for a while, which was a novelty on the drug market at the time. Nothing special, truth be told, I could have mixed up a cocktail which would have been better than that. But I had to try that too since I was already stuffing myself with everything else. And this is how in that winter people started to talk about me as if I were... again I myself don't know how to call it... a medicine-man, perhaps. I didn't even know anything about it until Negro came back from jail and at first started to fuck me with me, but later on to get mad at me because the police also started to come, search the raft and the boat, once even with a dog, but they never managed to find anything.

Only later did I realize that those people weren't coming to Negro's raft to hang out with me, but to seek help, that is, something to get them high or down on, to get over the nasty winter. Oh well, I wasn't that better either. They would bring me wood, food, beans, sausages, a carp, a catfish, a crate of beer, a few trifles stolen from the market and I would always give them those “medicinal substances” which most of them had never heard of. They had heard of plum-brandy, beer, weed, speed and benzodiazepine, heroine, but none of them had ever tried the Norwegian “fleinsopp” mushrooms. I tried to convince them that they grew here as well, on the meadows where caws graze and leave their dung. Sometimes I would throw a sort of a séance. I

would light candles, give them some DMT to smoke or ayahuasca to drink and when they would come out of it, I would add a tiny bit of ketamine rolled into cigarette papers, so that they could get, as they say, completely “wrecked”. Sometimes I would also organize themed evenings just to fuck around, like: discussions on world politics while being high on methylone and hashish or saving love couples by giving them a bit of MDMA for days, each day more and more of it, until they fell in love with each other once again. To those suffering from pain I would give a bit of morphine sulfate; can't get an erection? – I'll fix you up with a mixture of amphetamine, Viagra and MDMA, then you'll see. Your husband mistreats you or another family member sexually harasses you? Here, give him a bit of buprenorphine, little by little, every day, he'll leave you in peace and love you like a puppy. Just no sex, it's a double-edged sword like everything else, fuck it. If you want to see the future, here, take a bit of liquid LSD or 2C-B, 2C-L or GHB is also fine, it depends on what kind of person you are. Perhaps ketamine would cure your depression? And perhaps you'll even see the future, and perhaps you won't because, if you see it, you will be able to change it. It's all about believing in it or not, just like with religion. Do you suffer from anxiety? I'll give you a mix of Prozac, buprenorphine and a type of benzodiazepine; for more serious cases perhaps I would even add a few drops of heptanone. Opium. Morphine sulfate. I had them all, literally all, and not thanks to Negro, to be clear, I got them all by myself, something would arrive from Norway, something from Belgium, and something even from Slovenia, that first spring on Negro's raft, while he wasn't even there.

This went on until I ran out of everything and they started to suffer from withdrawal symptoms, and they continued to come back with the same problems they had before, only ten times worse because of the withdrawal. I couldn't get rid of them anymore and if Negro, who's not afraid of the devil himself, hadn't sent them all to hell, I don't know what would have happened. However, I really did help some of them, not too many though, but that's the truth. But then people realized who I really was, they started to call me a con man, though I had never said that I was or wasn't one, not a con man, not a medicine man, not a fucking thing. An old junkie, with no possessions, depressed about love. Just that and nothing more.

But it seems that you are never what you really are, but what other people see in you. And they see what they can see, as long as you have something to get them high on and delude them.

Yes, I had lost everything, I thought back then, I was left only with rivers and “medicinal” substances. But they divided even the rivers. Almost the entire Sava was a well controlled border, most of the Danube too, the Drava, then the Tisza, although counties Banat and Bačka are in the same country. I guess it was always like that, the rivers united things, but also separated them. Today's youth finds it strange when I tell them that in my time, the time of Yugoslavia which is dead now but still refuses to rot out from our memories, we took a swim on the other, Slavonian side. And how I, as a ten-year-old in my hometown Brčko, swam up to four times a day across the Sava. They say that the river is over four hundred meters wide here, although this has always seemed a bit overestimated to me, but even my Old Man says so and you have to trust him.

A bit upstream from my hometown Brčko the river meanders, it becomes shallow, widens and slows down. Here where Negro is, about thirty kilometers upstream, in Orašje, the Sava is longer, deeper and a lot faster. My Old Man says that life is like that, like a river. Either wide and slow or narrow and fast.

– It's possible – he says so wisely – for a man's life to be wide and deep and fast, but then the man is like a torrent.

It's true, I agree, torrents come and drag everything with them, destroy, change the landscapes and then people talk about them for years or even decades. But torrents come and go, while quiet, tranquil rivers continue doing things their own way, slowly, but with certainty and under control. It seems that the world need both of them. Both the torrents and the quiet waters, the destroyers and the builders, the poets and the officials. The latter keep the world as it is, and the former ruin it so that a new one can be made which will again have to be maintained by someone.

– Everything in the world is dualistic – my Old Man says again. – You are both alive and dead. First you need to realize this, then everything else.

He must have got this from the time he was into Zen Buddhism. He has had all kinds of phases. From yoga to alcohol addiction, fucking around, inn-keeping, soccer, taekwondo, Zen Buddhism, reading, and even writing. However, he was always near a river, mostly the Sava and the Danube. Until he got stuck in a Serbian concentration camp during the last war, and this was on the Sava, in small town, Stara Gradiška. He barely managed to save himself, somehow got to Germany and ended up in Australia. But even there, where every soul goes swimming or fishing in the Pacific, he goes to a river.

– I'm a river child. When I go offshore with our countrymen, in those plastic, little boats of theirs, everything is rocking, even when there are no waves. I get immediately sick and feel like throwing up. Besides, all that blue annoys me. Blue above me, blue beneath me. I like being on the water but in clear sight of land. I like green, I like brown. It relaxes me. There's a reason why blue is the color of depression. Did you know that?

– Yes, Old Man, I know that – I reply.

– And do you know what violet stands for?

– What do you mean by that?

– Well blue stands for depression, red for passion, green relaxes, and violet stands for...

– You mix blue and red... depression and passion... it can't be good... – I reason.

– It's the color of suicide – he says dead serious.

– Really...? But it's a nice color. I like it when the sky is a bit reddish-violet, when the sun sets above the Sava, or the dark blue before the storm.

This is how the two of us nicely talk in recent times. About the river, the colors, sometimes about literature.

Negro provokes me and tells me that it's because I got my Old Man addicted to my "substances", but it's not that. At least not entirely. And even if it was, who cares? My Old Man will soon die anyway, so why shouldn't he leave this world happy and high?

4.

Yes, it is strange how the rivers both connect and separate. I guess this is that dualism my Old Man talks about. I, for example, like when they connect, whereas Negro likes when they separate. Yes, he really likes the fact that the rivers, especially the Sava, have become borders, even more so since Croatia too has entered that EU, so the river is once again not just a border, but a defensive wall, nay a "bulwark". And this is why I love Negro and what he does. He jumps over and crawls through that defensive wall, ferries over everything that can be ferried over: people, animals, plants, "chemicals". Everything except horse. And this too, his attitude towards horse, I respect that as well. Negro makes more actual, good deeds in a year of smuggling than some commission, be it European, international, regional or who knows which community, or some bureaucratic-lobbyistic "NGO" organization which gets the dough, seats on its ass and sends emails. Fine, it's not entirely like that, there are good organizations too, but there you go, a sort of a metaphor.

When one talks, one needs to overstate a bit in order to indicate, as some say, "the point of the story". As opposed to Norwegians. When you tell them a story, for example: – I was at a party and there were million of people... They look at you and say in a completely serious, even sympathetic manner, because they "have caught you in a lie": – Were there really million of people? There couldn't have been one million of them.

There, I'm overstating once again, I don't actually mention million of people to them nor do they instantly react like that, but I think you got "the point" once again.

– That man has principles – my Old Man would often say that about Negro, thus criticizing me at the same time.

Yes, he did have principles and he stood by them and knew how to defend them, both with physical strength, and, I must admit, a skillful, rascally-minimalistic rhetoric. You couldn't say, though, that Negro was one of the brightest kids in elementary school. In short, at least in that respect, he was the exact opposite of me – a straight-A pupil, no strong viewpoints on anything, with countless theories on all sorts of things which I couldn't explain plainly though and which I would overload with unnecessary complications or would develop another ten new, fairly shallow theses out of that one. Both of us knew this, which must be the reason why we started to hang out in the first place. We were different, but we also complemented each other like two matching puzzle pieces, put together even more firmly, as if it were a superglue, by our love for rivers and for the same woman. My ex dearest. It was she who introduced me to Negro then, six or seven years ago, when the Sava's Beetle was still freshly painted, and the two of us were in love.

And when our love succumbed to the weight of reality and my insecurity, and then feebly drew its last

breath, and when depression, jealousy and infinite remorse got a firm grip on me like a pitbull's eyeteeth, somehow I had the urge to look for Negro and stay on his raft. Perhaps I will tell you something about that too.

5.

When Negro was really strict about some of his principles, for example, not drinking alcohol during Ramadan, but still smoking pot or even snorting a considerable amount of speed, I would often mock him and say: – There he is, Gavriilo Princip, a young Bosnian who doesn't drink alcohol out of principle. But he snorts like the entire Franz Ferdinand before a concert. Including the backing vocalists.

Hearing the joke, my Old Man would start to snigger although he didn't entirely get it whereas Negro got it, but didn't laugh. He would just say: – That's just fine, man, professor... or should I say “mister writer...” – but he would pronounce the word “writer” with such sarcasm that each time my Old Man would laugh until he would start to cough. More than to my joke. He would even start to spit blood. So I had to drop some more pellets from the red capsule.

Negro never said what he meant exactly by that phrase of his, but I guess it implied that I had wasted all of my opportunities, that writing was a sort of a trap I got into and which didn't let me live as I should have, nor did it let me go. Bukowski was right, everything is a trap. Love is also a trap and writing too and bourgeois life is a trap. The only thing that makes us happy at least for a while is being successful at what we do. And I have never been skillful or successful enough at something so that it could make me happy. But also not so unsuccessful that I should stop doing it and find something else. Somehow I knew a bit of everything, but still casually and poorly, nothing good enough that would make me an expert. I wasn't even a good junkie. Perhaps the only thing I was on my way of becoming really good at was sailing the rivers. I was able to sit at the helm of the Sava's Beetle and sail for hours and days and weeks. Somehow watch at the same time what's in front of me, at the sides, throw a glance sometimes at what is behind me, see grey, extremely white herons wading through the mud on the bank, catch a glimpse of a grass snake's small head, cut through the smooth, greenish water surface, cross the curves by taking the shortest way, catch strong downstream currents and avoid upstream ones, feel almost instinctively where a sandbank could get us stranded, where a whirlpool could pull us down, where to find the bottom for good anchoring and where there are pebbles which will make us scratch like a cat against the glass and won't let us anchor. I have sailed the Sava from Sisak to Belgrade, the Danube from Budapest to Đerdap, the Tisza and its canals, more or less the whole river, all the way to Hungary. I also went to the mouths of the Kupa, the Una, the Vrbas, the Bosna River, the Bosut, the Morava, the Tamiš River when the water level and the river's speed allowed it. I sailed the Drava from its mouth to Osijek. If I overstated, which is something storytellers typically do, I could say that I knew every curve on the Sava and the Danube, that at least I went ashore, if not even stayed overnight, on each island from Sisak to

Đerdap, that I knew every backwater from Đerdap to Budapest and that perhaps not all (fine, I'll let you have this one) anglers, fishermen, recreational fishermen, tavern-keepers on rafts and fish restaurant owners, the river people, knew me, but still, a lot of them did.

Negro sometimes tells me that I'm the only angler who doesn't know how to catch fish nor cook it.

- You can't be sent to get some fish not even to the fish market - he would say. And it is the complete and utter truth. Once I went and brought a carp from a fish market in Brčko and it began to stink. Negro wasn't there with me at the time, but some guys I knew from Ficibajer, which is a swimming beach and a popular resort on the Sava in Brčko. Somehow we decided to make some fish stew and we didn't have enough fish. Actually, truth be told, no one caught a thing, so off I went to buy some fish, still alive. The man got the fish out of the aquarium, but by the time I got back to Ficibajer, one of them had long since been dead. Gills turned brown, eyes white, nasty smell. So I really have no right to call myself an angler. I don't have patience to squat by the rod and wait, let alone cast a lure for a thousand times and still end up empty-handed. I'd rather read a book or swim across the river, from bank to bank. Several times if I feel like it. Negro says that's because I'm impatient and nervous and "I can't even drink coffee in peace, like every normal man".

Time ago, when I was younger and went to visit my father on the ship, which was his working place, a dredging ship which sucked sand and gravel from the bottom of the Sava, I used to love putting fish traps or "the drums-net", as my Old Man called them; or go fishing with him for the entire night using a gillnet, or sometimes a cast net. However, the cast net would often stuck on the bottom, so not just once did my father have to jump into the Sava and pull the net out of the river's jaws. Oh, we left so many nets around Gradiška one summer. It was so funny how my father was disgusted when we would catch a turtle with the net. He was willing to leave the fish trap and everything, just so he didn't have to touch or pull it out of it. I wasn't disgusted by the turtles, so I pulled them out. My Old Man would often take me fishing with him only because of that.

And one time, during that terrible and windy winter in Lyngdal, in the far south of Norway, I went to haul the nets with my former, I don't know what he was to me, the husband of my unmarried Norwegian wife Sara's sister. I had never truly seen, nor would I ever see again, such waves, such wind, or such color of the sea. And it was so cold that the sea foam on top of the waves would freeze in the wind and fall upon us like hailstorm. True, he cast his nets inside the fjords, where it was calm, but we had to pass from one fjord to another, and right here, around Lyngdal, Farsund, Flekkefjord and especially around Lindesnes, the southernmost point of Norway, are the strongest winds in the whole of Europe. Neither did I know this at the time, nor did I have choice. I had come to meet my future Norwegian relatives and this guy wanted to see right away what I was made of. And so I endured those three-meter icy waves inside a wooden, little boat without a cabin, I bore all

that wind and rowed and hauled and piled the nets as fast as I could so as not to let them freeze. I was strong back then, it's not that I wasn't, and I was also eager to do it, I loved that woman who left everything because of me, a refugee from some war in the Balkans, having no one and nothing. And everything was fine until we pulled out an arctic loon. I don't know the exact name of this bird, the great cormorant, a grebe, but it was white, big and beautiful, with light grey wingtips and dark blue feathers on its head. It must have seen the flashing of the cods trapped inside our net, dived to eat for free and the poor guy got entangled in the net and drowned. This must have been the worst way to die for this bird, it had seen it a lot of times in its nightmares.

Anyway, we hauled back the net with the fish, a few crabs which also got entangled while catching fish, together with that poor bird. I felt both sorry and awkward about it, as if we had pulled out a drowned man's body. It didn't feel like catching a fish, a huge one too, that you could be happy about. At least I didn't feel like that. But that brother-in-law of mine, I guess, I can't even remember his name now, so small, flushed cheeks, plump, blonde, downy mustaches, so happy, said to me in a South Norwegian dialect whose "r" sounds like an old man's death-bed rattle: – Ahh, that will make a delicious soup. It will be a real pre-Christmas lunch.

And he told me how his father makes the best soup in the world from those birds. It was then that I realized somehow that we, human beings, are not carnivores, but scavengers.

Anyway, when we got back to his folks' home, we first cooked the crabs, which are really good, big and meaty, and his father started to pluck the bird, then cut it open and showed us the fish it had swallowed avidly: – Well, you won't be eating our fish anymore, it's us who will be eating you now – ha said jokingly. And we all laughed and really ate it in the evening. To be honest, the soup wasn't that bad, but I thought about that bird and its stupid death all day long. That was its monkey trap. There are lots of fish everywhere, but the bird thought of feasting upon fish already caught and ended up in a soup. It must have done so a hundred of times before and got away with it, but not this time. After that I didn't eat poultry for about half a year. I was so sorry for that bird.

6.

And as to the monkey trap, if anyone wants to know how it works, I can tell you. I like to talk about such things. My Old Man likes to listen to me, he says I'm not actually as stupid as he thought I was. Yes, I think to myself, neither are you, but it's taken us a long time to realize that. A lifetime, more or less. That's why Negro had every right to consider the two of us idiots. The man knew his onions, having grown up without a father, he doesn't even know where he is, whether he is alive, and he barely saw his mother. She married and left him at his grandma's in Orašje. And he grew up among mahalas' hooligans and the 'jalija' in Orašje. For those who don't know, the 'jalija' or 'jalijaši' are people who live by a river, that is, on land brought on by a river. So men without land who were given land as a gift by a river. And land meant life for people.

However, one year the river gives, and the other it takes away. Both land and life.

There are various types of traps, but in general they can be divided into those which kill animals on the spot, those which wound them or those, the cleverest ones, which catch animals still alive and unharmed. A mouse trap belongs to the first type, leg-hold traps once used to catch bears, wolves and foxes to the second type, and a monkey trap to the third one. A monkey trap is simple and perfect because it was designed to catch a healthy monkey and it takes advantage of what is in my opinion the best and the worst characteristic of both human beings and animals: curiosity and greed.

What you need is a trunk and then cut a hole into it, large enough for a monkey's slim, but strong, hairy paw to fit in, a paw very similar to the human hand so that's why we call it like that. Then you put a fruit inside the trunk, preferably an orange, I'll explain later why. Then you fasten it onto a surface, the ground, a stump, a fallen tree somewhere where there are a lot of monkeys. If the trap has been set up well, with a little bit of luck (which is necessary for every type of hunting), sooner or later a monkey will notice it. It will look a bit around that square trunk and it will soon discover that there's a hole on it. It is then when the monkey's curiosity takes the stage. It will peep through the hole. Its curiosity grows bigger. It will put its paw, or hand, as you wish, through the hole and realize there's something edible there, peel-covered, like a banana, but it's not a banana. Its curiosity will grow bigger. It will try, of course, to pull it out, but, alas, the radius of the hole is shorter than that of the orange and there's no law of physics, skillful trick or black magic that will make the orange leave the trunk. This is where it becomes evident why an orange is better for this trap rather than a banana. A monkey, perhaps not every monkey, but at least one which is a bit more clever, luckier or stronger, would pull it out somehow, break it in half or crush it. And perhaps its curiosity would ease up, "fuck the banana", it would release it, jump swiftly onto the nearest branch and disappear among the tree tops where precisely bananas often grew. But an orange, that still barely known treat in the monkey world, it cannot resist. And then, when the monkey gets hooked on the orange like a catfish on the hook, it doesn't let go, its greed takes the stage. The monkey stops for a second, scratches itself on the belly and head, the poor guy thinks: if it got inside through the hole, then it has to come out somehow through it. At this point the hunters, who had been hiding in the nearby bushes, appear. They start to run, but not because they fear that the monkey will release the orange and run away, no, that has never happened, at least according to Afam, my ex roommate in Oslo who comes from Africa, Nigeria, the Biafra region, near the city of Abuja, of the Ibo tribe, Catholic. That's how he would introduce himself when someone asked him who he was and where he came from. Here's all information, just so you don't ask any further questions.

The hunters run because when the monkey notices them, it becomes nervous, starts to squeal and tries to pull out both the hand and the orange with all its might, but as I told you, it just doesn't work. This is clear even to the poor monkey, but greed, injected into this world by the Creator for reasons known only to Him, has

already taken control of him. Only then can it become even aggressive, bite or scratch them, that's why they come running towards him, throw a net or just grab it without it even realizing it. But even if they don't manage to surprise it and even if the poor guy starts to defend itself with teeth and nails, it doesn't let go of the orange. Afam says that even after the hunters had taken hold of him, the monkey doesn't let go of the fruit, so they have to either inject it with sedatives in order to stupefy it or, if they don't have any, use force. Finger by finger, sometimes two men can fight with the monkey for a half an hour. Fine, perhaps Afam exaggerates a bit, so do I, I have already admitted this to you, I always add a bit, I can't help myself. My black friend, not Afam from Oslo, but Almir from Orašje, says: - You lie like a rug, but in a sincere way somehow, from the heart.

He can't hold it against me, he says. That's why he digs me, I think, because, as he once told me in narco-poetic rapture, I'm: an angler who doesn't go fishing, a liar who retells true stories, a workaholic who has never had a real job, a captain without a ship, a professor without a professorship, a nobleman without noble ancestry. Perhaps Negro didn't use these exact words, actually he didn't say any of this, but I know he sort of feels this way, he just doesn't know how to put it into words. Seemingly, he thought the worst of me and not rarely did he tell me that, sometimes he was joking and sometimes he was really mean and wanted to hurt my feelings, but still we were best pals. I'd like to believe I have something similar with my Old Man. The fact that he loves me, but doesn't know how to show it, except when I give him a little "push" with one of my "medicinal substances".

Sometimes it seems to me that all of us are like monkeys and that life is a trap. Life is full of monkey traps, full of trunks with holes on them, hiding oranges inside on which we get hooked and which will cost us nerves and strength and freedom, and our life itself in the end, but we don't want, or perhaps even can't let go of them. And that's all. I will tell you about some of my own traps, as soon as I peel this orange. That's what I like the most for breakfast. I peel it, throw the pieces of the peel into the Sava, take a bite and enjoy the sweet and sour juice. The sugar lifts me up a bit so that my head doesn't drop, I slowly watch the pieces of the peel sailing towards the Black Sea like a regatta. I envy them a bit, so after that I often start the engine and sail behind them.

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VI

1.

AFTER I HAD TOLD them about our adventures on Ada Huja, Saw and Muerto laughed like two fools while Marky was still rubbing his eyebrows nervously as if all of that had happened to him five minutes ago, so he

said to me several times:

– Fuck, you could have left your heads there, fuck.

I also laughed although I actually shared Marky's opinion. At least I did so in those days when all this was happening. Now it is just a story, a travel sketch that can make them laugh.

The sun was already high in the sky when they were starting to pack. Besides my story, they didn't catch a thing, but still they were satisfied.

I asked them how come they came all the way from Brčko although it actually takes you no more than forty-five minutes to get here by car, and Saw answered:

– It's just that you have nowhere to go to anymore, wherever we go, we run into some jerks so that's why we made this den for us. No one has discovered it... yet... – and he started to laugh again.

I told them, actually asked them not to tell anyone that they met me.

– But you gotta go there and talk to them... about your father, fuck...

– Oh, don't you worry about that. I'll talk to them, I just need a day or two... to get my act together.

They agreed, no problem, and off they went in their car, back to Brčko, and I started the boat engine and sailed downstream towards “Hawaii” where I planned to spend this day, alone, by myself. To think a bit about everything, as they say.

So there you go, that day was that day after all. That is, *those days*. Everything was exactly as I saw it in my dreams-hallucinations. Perhaps I'm truly clairvoyant? – I thought foolishly. Or my brain on “substances” simply processed the thing I couldn't accept, that is the thing I couldn't even dare to think. That thing we call reality. My worst enemy.

I sailed along the Bosnian bank of the Sava at full speed in order to get there as soon as possible and slip into the backwater between “Hawaii” and the bank so that The Sava's Beetle couldn't be noticed by anyone on the river nor from the bank because it was impossible to access it due to dense vegetation. I think not even a tank could access it, but perhaps I'm wrong about the tank. Perhaps it could actually access it. But, be that as it may, I've never seen anyone fishing here without a boat, and even those on boats were a rarity. Those who wanted to come here, would come to “Hawaii”, but most of the time there weren't many people there. Only three or four times did I run into someone.

When I arrived, I pulled out my cell phone from the rucksack, turned it on and called my ex stepmother Danka who was still a sort of a second mum to me. She lived in Melbourne so I wanted to let her know about everything, but she already knew, so I was relieved in a way.

I also told her that I didn't know what to do, that I didn't feel like going to Orašje nor Brčko (actually I didn't know where my father's corpse was) and she told me not to worry, everything was already taken care of. My father's half-brother, who also lives in Australia, was spending summer holidays in Brčko. My uncle had

taken care of everything. My father was already in the sky. He was flying over the Indian Ocean inside a tin coffin, on a plane to Melbourne. Like some special piece of luggage, I thought, and in that moment my eyes started to fill with tears once again.

– Son, do you need money...I will send you some, me and your sisters will gather some money so you can come too... over here. What will you do there now, all by yourself? Come and stay, son, as long as you wish. Do you need money? – she asked again.

I needed some, it's not that I didn't, but I was ashamed of admitting it.

All that time I wanted to ask her if they knew what the Old Man died from. Did they perform an autopsy? God forbid! I was tormented by the thought that it was me who killed him. Unintentionally. I recounted once again all the stuff I put into his drink: a bit of morphine sulfate every morning, plus a bit of amphetamine into his coffee inside the thermos he carried with him when he went fishing or casting nets. The former for the pain and all the worries in the world, the latter to prevent him from collapsing somewhere in the middle of the Sava, in the dark or in the midst of fog, or, God forbid, from overdosing. From having a heart attack. And sometimes I also gave him some MDMA, to soften him up a bit and make him show his emotions; a bit of buprenorphine so that he doesn't get hooked on morphine; then there was also 3-MMC so that he doesn't feel bad after all of the aforementioned. Who knows? Fuck, perhaps I really let my Old Man “overdose”, I thought again. Only then did I think about that sincerely although I had been entertaining that thought for the entire time.

That was the cause of my paranoia, that's why I have been destroying myself with drugs so fiercely these last few days. I didn't want to face *it*. A junkie denying reality, no doubt about it.

As if she had heard my voice inside my head, but to be honest, I wasn't quite sure if I had said it out loud, Danka said then:

– Don't you worry about a thing, we'll send you some money, you think about it. And as for your father... That too. Don't worry about father... there was nothing to be done. He had bone marrow cancer, it had probably spread onto the lungs as well. And he didn't want to be medicated... The doctor says he is amazed by how he was able to endure that much because the pain can be terrible. Uncle said they found him on the boat. As if he was asleep.

He fell asleep on his river and never woke up. He sailed away. Tears were still pouring down my face, but my lips were curling in a smile. Only then did I realize somehow that I had lost my father and that I would have given everything in the world for just one day of being his son. Of being anybody's son. Only then did I truly feel alone in the world.

– Uncle says that he looked as if he was sleeping when they found him. He had a smile on his face – she kept repeating. Or were these my thoughts? Perhaps I even said them out loud.

– How has he been? Has he been in pain? – she asks.

– How should I know... didn't seem so, but you know him...

- Never mind, son, your father doesn't suffer anymore and now you should take care of yourself. Where will you go, dear? You can't go on like this, father told me everything. We will send you the money for the ticket to Melbourne; you think about it and decide.

She was calm and composed and gave me the strength I needed to calm down a bit. She told me once again to come, she would let me stay at her apartment and she would stay with one of my half-sisters.

I decide to wait until the evening and then go down the Sava to Orašje, Brčko, Mitrovica, perhaps even to Belgrade, go ashore there and then perhaps really go to Australia. Or perhaps to Norway once again. I had no desire whatsoever to go there, but I knew it was likely to happen, sooner or later. I just couldn't imagine myself spending the rest of my life in Australia. Let alone languishing in Norway, the most boring country in the world, but you can't say it out loud not even that. Especially if you're a foreigner. They instantly bombard you with all sorts of statistical data indicating that Norway is the best, the richest, the happiest, the most ideal country in the world. But there are lies, damned lies, and statistics, Mark Twain said.

Or I could... I myself didn't know what. I just couldn't stay there. That much I knew. I thought of the big boat, my father in the sky, inside a coffin, on a plane, Negro in jail, always caught with a small quantity of something, I thought of my mum too, and that naive dream of mine of taking tourists on boat excursions just like Mister No does with his Piper. I escaped from Oslo to Brčko, he from New York to Manaus, I have the Sava and the Danube, he has the Amazon and the Orinoco, I'm a junkie, he's a drunkard, he had a German friend, a former German soldier from the Second World War, I had a Japanese whose father had survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. And there was Negro who fought in the wars in the Balkans. Somehow I always end up alone and without money and something like that always happens to Mister No too.

All my life I've wanted to live like Mister No, it came to me then. I just wanted to be a hero from a cheap comic. My whole life was built upon this naive, boyish fantasy. Some turn their life into a book whereas I, it seems, do the opposite. I read and then I relive. I give myself the instructions, notifications, like a crazy "prophet" and here I am.

On "Hawaii" near Orašje, having no idea what to do and where to go next.

I berthed the boat in the inner side of the island, that is the one overlooking the Bosnian bank about thirty meters away and now I'm lying in the cabin, in the shade, smoking a joint and wondering: where to now, buddy?

I thought of the red toiletry bag: a monkey trap. I took the bag from beneath the raised floor, opened it, a lot of stuff was still in there. I wanted to throw everything in the Sava, I really wanted to do that, this was my last chance to quit drugs. Even if you quit drugs, what then? Years of depression, relapses, and bullshit, and insomnia, and sweat, and nightmares.

I thought: come on, throw away at least this shit you don't need, save a bit of morphine, buprenorphine and speed. And a couple of Valiums. Throw away all the rest. I took the plastic bag from the tin box, but my hand didn't let me. It didn't let me.

It took the plastic bag and made two small 3-MMC “bombs”. Yes, my hand took the powder, put it onto a paper wrap and wrapped it into a small “bomb” which would fry my brain and untie my tongue.

Why, why, why? – I wondered. Why do I need to get high on something when I become restless? Why do I destroy myself? I don't know. Because I like it? Because the real life is boring? Maybe. Because I can? Because I'm fucked up? What should I do? There, you tell me. What?

As we approach the end, perhaps I could also tell you why we didn't sail all the way to the Black Sea. I wrote a story about that too, but I don't feel like searching for it now. Perhaps I could make a short summary, while I sit and wait for the drugs to kick in. It's entitled “The Return”. I know, I know, fucking original.

The Return - Abbreviated Version

We sailed downstream the Danube, passed towns Grocka, Vinča, Smederevo, brethed everywhere and stayed for a few days, met all kinds of people, hung out with them, listened to their stories and then sailed again, and again, and again. We also passed the Morava's mouth and, in the end, right at the Iron Gates, I decided to turn the Sava's Beetle and begin our return journey using the same waterway, only upstream, towards Brčko.

There were several reasons why I made this decision, but the main one was that in almost three months of sailing we hadn't made even five hundred kilometers. Summer was coming to an end and we still had almost a thousand kilometers ahead of us. Not to mention the Iron Gates and the dangerous currents we had been warned about by everyone. Even if we reached the Black Sea, how would we return later with the Sava's Beetle? I'm the captain, I can't just leave her like that, I thought. Petter also wanted to go back. Only Moku was disappointed because he didn't get a story for his film, but he had all the material in the world, he just needed to make the best use of it, if you ask me. But I wasn't interested in his film, I can't explain why. I wanted to sail, he wanted to shoot, to each his own.

As for me, I got my dose of adventure for that summer and now I couldn't wait to get back to Brčko where my dearest was waiting for me.

And so I turned the boat and headed back. We stopped only when we needed to, that is to fill the canisters with gas and buy the necessary amount of food. Nevertheless, we did stop a few times here and there to say hi to our friends we got to know better sailing downstream.

When we started to recognize the silhouette of Ada Huja-island in the distance, I thought of how it would be if we went ashore once again. The very thought of spending even one more night there gave me the chills. The atmosphere on the Sava's Beetle was gloomy and dispirited. We were all low-spirited, tired and

down in the dumps. True, it was a cloudy day with a bit of light rain, so it would drizzle for a while, until the sun came out. Behind us, in the distance, there was a double rainbow.

- How about we pay a visit to those pirates once again? - I say to my tired friends trying to snap them out of lethargy.

They smiled, believing I was joking. They shook their heads just in case. No way. I was joking, of course. At least at that moment. But there is some kind of a devil in me who sometimes, it seems, throws down challenges to me and tells me: - What's the matter, pussy, come on, come on, do it if you dare - especially when I'm all alone, when, that is, I shouldn't be playing a tough guy with anyone.

Now we were already near Ada Huja-island and were sailing right next to it, about hundred meters from its shore. We passed by the little "Little Ravna Gora" and soon we could see the white-painted structure of the big "Little Ravna Gora". It was exactly then, in that moment, that the devil in me woke up and ordered me to go right there:

- Fuck them, no one will tell me where I can or cannot go ashore - I said out loud. Then I turned the boat and went aground in front of the terrace and the hearth of the big "Little Ravna Gora". Moku and Petter rolled their eyes.

There weren't many people in front of the café, just Čeka-the Duke, his right hand Mongoose and a few more guys. They were sitting under a big parasol, hiding from the rain. Smoke was coming from the place where the hearth was, but there was no fire.

When they recognized us, you could see surprise in their eyes, they were completely astonished. I jumped out of the boat, went straight towards The Duke and shook his hand as if we were two old buddies. He kept staring at me as if he had seen a ghost, his jaw dropped. Perhaps the fellow was simply drunk already in the early morning because he stood there like a statue. Mongoose was sniggering in the back and saying something to the three guys who were sitting with them. They were also half-drunk, nasty fellows I wouldn't like sitting next to at the table: giant, protruding beer bellies, golden chains around their swollen necks, bold heads and shoulders covered with tattoos. I ask where Pavel and his friends were.

- They went back home, to Belgrade.

- And Mladen, Mlado, where is he? - I asked hoping that at least he was there.

- He's here somewhere, he's here... - replied the duke thoughtfully. - Tell me, would you like to eat or drink something? - he asked.

- Oh, I don't know - I reply feebly. It seemed as if that devil had abandoned me as soon as I saw them. And somehow everything looked deserted and sad on that island now. Heavy rains had already started, the tourist season was over, there was no one around, just the five of them, and they looked at us as if they were a pack of wild, soaking wet, starving wolves.

- I just came to say hi. We are also on our way back.

- So you aren't going to the Black Sea? - Duke asked smiling acidly.

- No, we aren't.

And just when I was about to say that we would continue with our journey, Mladen came out of the café, dead drunk, staggering towards us.

- Whoaa... - he yelled drunkenly. - That's my Bosnian. He'll play for me now and sing our songs... Bosnian songs...

Somehow the look in his eyes was different from the last time I saw him. He hugged me and yelled and pulled me towards the café, the rain was getting heavier and the wind stronger, so we all got inside the café, that is, that space underneath the columns, covered by a tarpaulin from one side and surrounded by walls from the other three.

We couldn't sail anyhow with such strong headwind and going upstream too, I thought. But I was even less eager to spend the evening in such company. The worst thing of all was that the Duke seemed the most normal among them. That scared me. Mladen, as it would become evident during the evening, had completely gone nuts. Since the last time we were there, said the Duke, he hadn't been sober. To be sure, he was a heavy drinker even before that, he added.

The Duke started a roaring barbecue fire. Mongoose served us, ran to and fro and chuckled idiotically like a court jester, the other three mostly ate, drank and talked, and I, as always, played the guitar, Moku the mandolin and Petter the Jew's harp.

Several times the Duke started to talk about how the Jew's harp was an old Serbian instrument. Actually, as far as I could remember, he had mentioned it even before, when we came to the island for the first time, but this time he started to persuade us to sell it to him because, as he said, you can't get it anywhere. I told him that this tiny, primitive instrument can be found in every better-equipped music store in Belgrade, but the Duke insisted like crazy. I realized already then that the guy wouldn't give up until he got what he wanted. I said that to Petter in Norwegian so that no one understands, but Petter wouldn't have it. He told me to tell the duke that this Jew's harp reminded him of his grandpa and that, if he really wanted it that much, he would buy him a Jew's harp the first chance he got and send it to him by mail. The other guy laughed harshly.

- Mail, what mail, man... I'd rather buy this one, I'll pay it fair and square.

Petter then told us the story behind his Jew's harp which I had to translate.

So, at the very beginning of the Second World War, somewhere around Kristiansand, in the far south of Norway, a German "Stuka" crashed and all the folk from the village where Petter's grandpa lived went to see this great wonder. And folk being folk no matter where in the world, they started to pluck the metal bird. Petter's grandpa also took a piece of metal, perhaps an alloy of steel and aluminum, I have no clue, and made a knife and a shredder, that is a grater, and some other things too, including this Jew's harp.

Hearing that, the Duke was even more determined to get this fucking piece of metal made by the German military industry more than a half-century ago.

- Then this makes it a sort of a war booty - he said laughing.

And so the night went on and we got drunk. In the end, after we had paid through the nose for the partying once again and when we were about to go to sleep onto our lovely boat, it turned out that the Jew's harp was gone. With all the confusion, someone had snatched it. My guess was that it was Mongoose who did it, as he would always remain the most sober one, as if there was some kind of natural speed in him. A pure case of ADHD mixed with innate malice, if you ask me.

And then all hell broke loose. The Duke just kept laughing drunkenly repeating how it is an old Serbian instrument. And then he started to yell at us, only then could we see for the first time his almost bestial resolve, practically broken by years of drinking.

- Are you accusing me of being a thief? - he got all serious and a silence fell. He was looking straight at me.

- Oh no... it's not like that, no... - I said - but it's not right to let the guy lose something that belonged to his grandpa, even more so after everything. We were all sitting here and drinking and eating and everything was on us, and now this happens.

- What? - asked the Duke, all serious, drunk and ill-tempered.

Mongoose was chuckling in the back like a hyena from Disney animated movies. The other three were looking daggers at us. Moku had already packed up and left, gone back to the boat. The guy could smell trouble and was always the first one to turn tail when things got messy. I dragged Petter out of the café telling him to forget about that Jew's harp, to hell with it, you'll buy a new one, can't you see they're just waiting for us to make the wrong move and screw us over. If this is all, we got off lightly. But he wouldn't have it and, thin as he was, like a toothpick, as some would say, he was ready to die for his grandpa's Jew's harp.

- This is not right... You stole it, you stole my Jew's harp - he spoke in the Serbian language and they laughed even more when they heard his pronunciation and use of grammar, and so they started to imitate him and make fun of him.

I glanced a few times at Mladen trying to see if he could come and help us, but he was already so drunk that he couldn't get up out of his chair anymore and his head kept falling drunkenly on the table. In that moment my biggest problem weren't those disgusting characters, but this young Norwegian and how to make him and his Protestant, naive faith in justice and honesty calm down. Perhaps in that moment he didn't really care that much about the Jew's harp, but was just pissed off and couldn't fathom how anybody could play dirty so openly. As if he didn't understand where we were and who we were dealing with. Anyway, I barely managed to drag him to our boat, his eyes were filled with tears from anger and he tried to break free several times and run towards that fucking café. When we got onto the boat, Moku had already lied down and was pretending to be asleep. I already said that, he was always like that. He saves his ass when things get rough, I often resented him for that. But, on the other hand, I understood him and I felt bad for getting us into unpleasant situations. I forgave Moku and consoled Petter:

- We sail away at first daylight, fuck Chetniks and the Jew's harp and this entire island. It's my fault, I should have left sleeping dogs lie, we shouldn't have made a stop here, I don't know what came over me - I said to myself in Bosnian.

Then someone gave a knock against the boat's tin and we felt someone getting onto it.

- Yo, where are you, Bosnians, yo, Norwegians... Japanese...

I opened the door cabin and went astern, but Mongoose had already climbed onto the bow and then came towards me, to the stern.

- Everything is all right - I said - we're going to bed.

- Here, the Duke sends his finest brandy - and he started to chuckle once again.

- Where is the Norwegian guy, has he stopped crying?

I took the bottle and said once again that everything is all right. We are going to bed.

- Come on, man, don't be angry, that's not nice of you, after everything - he said and kept smiling, but the threat in his voice didn't pass unnoticed.

- Oh, we aren't angry - I said wearily - everything is fine.

Mongoose leaned towards me to see inside the boat's cabin.

- Hey, man, Norwegian guy, here's some brandy. Let's have a drink, to make peace, fuck the Jew's harp, you'll buy a new one.

Petter didn't want to, he cursed in Norwegian.

- What did he say?

- Nothing, it's all right... he said it's all right.

I took the bottle of brandy, opened it, took a pull and gave it to Mongoose to do the same.

I said to him once again that everything was all right, but he wouldn't leave. He took a cigarette and lit it. Now I expected the others to come and climb aboard. But luckily, after a few cigarettes and a strained conversation he finally left. Perhaps that was their plan, perhaps this one was waiting for them, but who knows what prevented them from coming? Perhaps Mladen, perhaps the fact that they were drunk, perhaps the Duke Čeka was satisfied with his booty. With the Jew's harp made of a German "stuka" which crushed somewhere in the mountain ranges of the southern Norway. Perhaps even today he shows off with it, showing them to his pals, one of which being, as he had told us a hundred times old Serbian rock star, Bora Čorba, but to his disappointment I didn't know how to play any of his songs. He must have thought that Boras band, "Riblja Čorba", was the embodiment itself of the Yugoslavian "rock". I didn't like Čorba nor Bora ever since I was a child, because of the Old Man; not only did he listen to them, but he also made me do it. In that time, as a little boy, I liked Denis and Denis, Plavi orkestar and Duran Duran.

I thought about starting the engine right away and sailing upstream towards Belgrade. It stopped raining, but it was still cloudy and dark. And it wasn't that long till the dawn, a few hours. I locked us from the inside, put a hatchet by the door and tried to get some sleep.

At dawn thirst woke me up. I found a bottle of mineral water and drank at least a half liter in one draft. I went outside, the sky was clear and the sun hadn't come out yet. I watched the vapor rising from the Danube as if it were a huge pot of simmering fish soup. Then I had to do number two. I could have done it in the water, but somehow I didn't feel like taking a bath in the Danube after all that raining in the last few days.

I had a hangover and looked awful, I had a headache, a stomachache, back pain, I felt pain almost everywhere. I also didn't feel like going to the Duke's café because I didn't want to wake up those thieves and muggers.

A chetnik Duke reduced to stealing Jew's harps, that's life for you, I thought acidly.

I went ashore, not to the terrace itself, but a few meters from it, onto a path that led to big "Little Ravna Gora". And there I dropped my drowsy, large, compact turd. I used my leg to cover it a bit with sand, as if it were a landmine. Some of them will step on it for sure, I thought maliciously imagining the scene and regretting that Moku couldn't shoot it.

There, this was everything I could do in order to have my revenge. It's not a lot, I know. In that moment the sun came out as if approving with its shiny applaud that silly and a bit disgusting act and I was filled with happiness. I felt like a lonely avenger who had settled a huge grievance and was lifted by a bunch of people as a sign of approval.

I was so high that I jumped into the Danube, took a bath, washed my ass. Then I retrieved the anchor, loosed the boat, jumped a bow, went astern, started the engine and sailed upstream looking over my shoulder a few times and watching Ada Huja-island vanishing in the distance.

When we finally arrived in Oslo, one month after all this happened, I bought Petter a new Jew's harp. It wasn't the same, I know, but there was nothing else I could do in order to ease my guilty conscience.

The Duke probably had its own version of this entire story. If you ever go ashore on the beautiful sandy beach of Ada Huja-island, 15 kilometers downstream the Danube coming from Belgrade, ask him to play something on Petter's Jew's harp. If he's still alive, that is.

2.

There, that would be it as to our unsuccessful sailing trip towards the Black Sea. Actually, that sailing trip wasn't unsuccessful, true, we didn't reach the Black Sea, but I went to that trip to find myself once again. I made it actually, I found myself in sailing the rivers and in love. But, as it usually turns out, this wasn't the end of the story. It was something else. And now I should tell you something about that too, but I don't know how.