

Boris Dežulović

Forget About the Fucking Grand

Translated from Croatian by Dado Čakalo

In the high summer of 1993, the Blagajevac command of the Croatian Defence Council received military intelligence about suspicious activity of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina between Gračanica and Koveljača. A special operations squad of the 119th CDC brigade was assigned to get behind the enemy lines, reach deep into the territory controlled by the Bosnian Army and gather intel about the enemy movements and the alleged engineering unit roadworks intended to get the enemy tanks across Mt Stara Gora to take the high ground overlooking the Croatian defence lines around Blagajevac.

At the dawn of the last Sunday of August, six members of the special operations squad, so-called Black Pumas, dressed in the uniforms of the 8th Motor Brigade of the Bosnian Army set out from Orahov Dol toward the old Krvopolje road at the feet of Mt Stara Gora. This was the last time five of them were ever seen.

The sixth member of the squad was found in the woods of Mt Majdan near Prijedor three years after the event. He was in a state of complete derangement and unable to speak. Not until 1998 was he identified and released from a mental hospital in Banja Luka.

This story is inspired by a feature article about the "six stone pumas" published in the Croatian Knight in October 1993 and is a creative reconstruction of the dramatic events that took place in the village of Muzaffer's Houses, based, however, on detailed reports of the CDC Headquarters Board of Investigation and reports of the Joint Workgroup of the Joint Bosnian Army and CDC Command. The investigation of the events filed as "the incident at Muzaffer's Houses" also relied on the available archive materials provided by the counter-intelligence service of the Army of the Republic of Srpska and on the accounts of

the witnesses, friends, and relatives of the missing soldiers.

The cowl does not make the monk.

(proverb)

It's the other way around.

(author)

PART ONE

SUNDAY, 29 August 1993

8:41 a.m.

"Did you hear it?"

"What?"

"Nothing, now zip it."

"..."

"Did I hear what?"

"Nothing, for fuck's sake, didn't I tell you to zip it?"

"Why the hell ask, if it's nothing?"

"If you did hear anything, you would've told me already. Since you ask, it means you didn't. Now, zip it."

"..."

"Why are you so strung up, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"Are you really asking me that!? Why the hell would I be strung up? Maybe because we are behind enemy lines, in the middle of a minefield, on no-man's land, two hundred yards between us and the Turks, or because we can't get across over this bloody Ruštica river, or because our Kenwood radio broke down, or because I'm sweating like a pig and this fucking grass keeps pricking my eyes – take a pick. And on top of it all, you're taking the piss with me. So there, this is why."

"Hold on, shhh!"

"..."

"What the fuck, there it goes again. Did you hear it now?"

"What, you heard it? The same as before?"

"Yea, like a rasp, here."

"Rasp? Where?"

"Here."

"You're bullshitting me, right?"

"No, honest, there it goes again. Wait... I know what it is, don't you?"

"No. What?"

"It's me not giving a rasping fart about you being so strung up, that's what it is. Fuck you and fuck all your ants crawling up your ass, d'you hear me? Fuck you, you strung up motherfucker!"

Then it came back to him. He often thought about it even before they ended up in this minefield bordering the village of Musemići, but now as he lay prostrate on the sun-scorched prickling grass of Suhodol, hot sweat trickling down his nose, and listened to Thor whispering "fuck you" as loudly as he dared, Pako could not shake the thought of the fateful event sixteen months before, when Blind Susan handed him a carton of Pall Mall, and he only had to give up the fucking change of one thousand measly Croatian dinars.

That precise moment – and he'd be remembering it for the rest of his days, which was not much considering that he had only three left – was the turning point of his life, and he took the wrong turn. If only he had said "it's alright, aunt Susan!", he wouldn't have been chewing yellow grass in the middle of the Suhodol minefield. Instead, he would have remembered them as a software developer in a quiet suburb of Philadelphia, earning three and a half real grand a month, wearing a lined leather jacket and driving his Land Rover with his huge black Labrador retriever on the passenger seat... If only he had said, it's alright, aunt Susan, forget about the fucking grand!

The problem, of course, was not that the Blind Susan who kept the kiosk was blind to the kids of George's Wreath who used to tip her with change as a matter of charity. That ripe, overripe voluptuous red hair had a keen sight. Why they called her blind comes later in the story. The problem was that for Blind Susan to return the change from a drawer below the counter she had to lean forward and flash you with her neckline as deep as Zufka's Hollow, a cavern at Wolf's Head where the Partisans used to dump dead Ustashas and Domobrans in WW2. Pako would have flung himself gladly into that dark and deep Susan's hollow that morning.

The other problem was that as she straightened up and adjusted the shoulder pads of her red V-necklined jumper, she looked at him over the rim of her Armani shades and purred: "I'm a hundred dinars short. Are you sure you've got nothing hidden in your trousers?"

Pako didn't get her innuendo at first. It took several leanings forward across the counter and deep insights into her mysterious neckline before it dawned on him as his gaze penetrated the hollow down the lace lining her bra and the rosy rims of her nipples. "Why don't you take a better look down

there", she purred once more into his ear.

Pako still remembered every detail of that moment. He was wearing his brother's dark green shirt. The sun had just shone brightly between the dark rainy clouds of May, and it was hot. He was sweating just as he was now. He remembered Susan's sensual voice mixed with that heavy Turkish perfume. "Pako", she said, "say something". Yet all he mustered, wriggling and fidgeting, his head buzzing, was a dumb and coarse "really, aunt Susan... there's nothing there". Which, from her point of view, leaning over the counter, was clearly and unmistakably not true. He was so hard that he thought his trousers would burst. He remembered Susan giving him an inquisitive squint, as if she were still waiting for him to make a move, to redeem himself. Then she straightened up, adjusted her jumper, gave him another look down the nose, and asked him with a hint of pity in her voice to keep an eye on the kiosk while she popped over to the Spring Inn across the street to exchange his one hundred Deutschmarks.

He also remembered that he wanted to say no, there's no need, forget about the fucking grand, give me a box of matches or whatever instead, but she had already left the kiosk. He opened his mouth to call after her, but she had already been out of the earshot, so he stayed at the kiosk studying the four magazines displayed on the counter. One was a nude with Antonella (20) showing her crevice between spread legs like the carved wooden gate of the parish church of St Cosmas and Damien.

Oh, he remembered – how wouldn't he! – when the Blind Susan stepped outside with her long leg in a black stocking, laughing loudly at a remark from inside the inn. The slit in her black skirt was deep, deeper than Zufka's Hollow, deeper than Kimberly from Wisconsin 's (23), and definitely way too deep for a wife of Mujan.

She waved at him and yelled "here I am!", but her voice blended with the Ry Cooder's roaring "... crazy 'bout an automobile", coming from that dirty black taxi with Brezovača plates. Pako remembered it well, because *Borderline* was his favourite LP and he knew it by heart. And as the car stormed toward her and the driver waved at someone, Susan's "here I am" and "an automobile" blended with the screech of the tyres. It was a scene right from cartoons: Blind Susan flying through the hot air of May like mother's red Christmas tablecloth on a clothes line, her big shades and one red shoe spinning in slow motion above the asphalt of Velja Papačić's Road, the unfortunate woman landing some twenty feet away in a park a few seconds later, her long black-stockinged legs protruding from a bush like the wooden barrels of a fake anti-aircraft gun like the ones that were scattered all over Blagajevac to scare off Yugoslav air forces.

It was a miracle Blind Susan got out of that mess with only a broken rib, mild concussion, several

scratches and a bruise or two. Bruises were her regular makeup at that time of the month anyway, when Mujan was squandering his aluminium factory salary in Chicago Inn, and she was taking revenge by wearing see-through blouses or deep necklines and having a fling with the kids of Blagajevac, "the young lambs" as she used to call them.

Everyone in Blagajevac knew about her appetite for young boys, but no one talked about it. Even her beardless lovers didn't brag around. Mujan was a nasty man, who'd break the bones of every git in the pub who'd dare to take the piss on his wife's account, let alone of Susan and the horny pathetic kid eyeing her with hungry eyes. People in every local pub still talk – when Mujan is not around, of course – about him setting on fire an entire village on the Krvopolje road because of Susan. The truth, though, is that the village was burnt down by Germans in WW2, and Mujan set only one house on fire, the old Muzaffer Bey's Tower, where, the legend has it, he caught Susan with a young stallion.

In court Mujan, whose real name was Mariofil Mujanović, was acquitted of the charge over the lack of evidence, much to the indignation of the local lawyer and heir of the Muzaffer Bey's property, who had raised it although he'd never been there in his life. Story has it that Mujan did not even need an alibi. He only needed to prove that his wife was on a union trip to a Partisan hospital in Priest's Saddle at the time. What other reason would he have had to set Muzaffer Bey's Tower on fire? Stories or not, no one dared to mess with a man who was crazy enough to be charged for setting an entire village on fire over a woman. In fact, no one even dared to comment on Susan's provocative blouses or black Armani shades.

Susan wore them all the time anyway, whether she took a beating or not, to lift suspicion off Mujan. In fact, she would occasionally trip over a kerb or a low fence, pretending she did not see it because of the shades. Either way, she wore those shades and black eyes all the time: sometimes she wore the shades because of the black eye, and sometimes she got the black eye because of the shades. This is why – and we have finally got there – the residents of Blagajevac called her Blind Susan.

The incident ended well for Susan, but pretty shitty for Pako. He managed to put Susan in that windshield-smashed taxi together with a 30-pound lamb, freshly slaughtered and skinned, which flew out of the car. What Pako didn't know when he was riding his bike to the outpatient clinic but learnt in the meantime was that Aljo was looking for him all over George's Wreath with a permit to leave the town, signed and sealed. Uncle Kula got it for them as soon as he'd found out that a 119th CDC brigade military police Campagnola was cruising around with conscription orders.

Aljoša Dimitrović, nicknamed Aljo, was Pako's good friend from the local IT Club. He had been looking for him, panicking that they wouldn't make it out of town in those few hours they had while Zujo was still at the checkpoint. He turned every stone, but who could blame him for not checking at the

outpatient surgery of Dr Rebac, as it never crossed his mind to look there.

Yet Pako didn't move from the place for hours. First he waited for the nurse to recover from the shock. As she took two gentle arms at the back seat of the taxi and pulled, she saw two protruding eyeballs of a skinned lamb staring blankly at her. For the next two hours Pako waited for aunt Susan to come to. He was bursting, not as much with the sense of guilt as with arousal from staring at her undone hospital gown, daydreaming the wildest dreams. Then he waited for another hour and a half for the drunkard of Susan's husband to arrive.

Only later did he learn that Aljo had been looking for him at Yuma, but no one could tell him why. His mother Ilka could have told him that Aljo was looking for him with the permits, so that they could grab their passports and leave town for Croatia and go to his uncle Rajko in Šibenik, because MPs were looking for them. She would have told him that if he had returned home three and a half hours after the incident. If he hadn't stayed to chat with Dr Rebac about his father. Instead, when he got home, two gorillas in camouflage uniforms were already waiting for him at the front yard gate.

What his mother didn't know back then and what she knew now was that all that while as she was on the edges waiting for Pako to come home and small talking with neighbour Merima about Mujan's wife Susan being hit by a car at the kiosk, her son was with Susan at the outpatient clinic. As it happened, though, Merima did not know at the time that Susan was hit by her nephew, who was bringing her a lamb her brother Jusuf sent from Brezovača.

For the sixteen months since, Pako had only been thinking about that fateful morning at George's Wreath. If only he had said, "it's okay", if only he had kept his wits about and spoke, if only he hadn't nosedived into that abyss between Susan's breasts, if only he had said, "don't worry aunt Susan!", she would have given him a flirting grin and said, "why, thanks Branko, and say hello to your neighbour Merima". She would also have added, "and tell her that I'll drop by for a coffee in the afternoon". And he would have returned to Yuma and meet with Aljo fifteen minutes after that.

Then they would have picked up their passports and taken off with the permits they got from Aljo's uncle Kuba. Pako would have asked Zujo at the checkpoint if the MPs had already arrived, and he would have said "not yet", and two to three hours after that Pako would have been at Buljat's in Split. Two to three days after that, he would have been in Šibenik at his uncle Rajko's, and two to three months after that at his uncle's ex's in the US. Fifteen to sixteen months after the incident, he would have been sitting in his big silver Land Rover with his big black Labrador retriever driving through his green Philly suburb alley to Aljo, who would have lived two blocks away, to take him to a basketball match between Philly 76ers and Michael Jordan's Chicago Bulls. He would have gotten the tickets from his girlfriend, a busty, good looking Canadian with a Lambo, a pool, a brother scouting for 76ers, and a Charles Barkley's original Barcelona Olympics jersey. She would have loved him chatting with his good

old friend Aljo in an incomprehensible tongue, laughing out loud, pinching her ass, and caring only for her – the astonishing red haired northerner with the face and tits of... aunt Susan.

At moments like that, he was imagining what would his life have been in a parallel universe, the one in which he told Blind Susan, "it's okay, aunt Susan, forget about the fucking grand!" and rushed back to Yuma. He was imagining a life in which he had completely forgotten about that insignificant episode. A life in which he had never realised that leaving that one thousand dinar change with Blind Susan had been a turning point of his life in the right direction, toward a suburb of Philadelphia, a match between 76ers and the Bulls, toward Ry Cooder playing *Borderline* in his Land Rover and all the neighbours turning and commenting: "There goes Pako with his music!"

A life in which he would have sung "Every woman I know..." at the top of his lungs, drawn a puff of American Marlboro, and continued: "...is crazy 'bout an automobile", then taken a quick swig from a Budweiser tin so the police wouldn't see him, because American police is badass, given a honk "to every woman" he spotted on the street, and waved at his reserved, fat neighbours with lawn mowers with his original Dream Team cap, while his big black Labrador Brett, its large head sticking out of the passenger window, would greet them with his deep bark.

And God knows for how long the two of them would have been honking, barking, singing, and cheering the residents of Philadelphia if a knock with a hard military boot on the head hadn't put a stop to it.

"I said, now what?"

"Didn't hear you... I was thinking about something."

"Now what? That side of Musemići is mined for sure."

For a second or two Pako stared blankly, hoping that this was just him daydreaming in that other life, sitting in his Land Rover with American plates and imagining the war he left behind in his native Blagajevac. But he could no longer hear the neighbour's lawn mower or Ry Cooder. "The Girls from Texas" should have already started, being the next on the list. There was no one honking from behind to warn him that the traffic light changed to green. And the pecking on the back of his neck definitely was not his Labrador Brett.

"Hey, are you deaf?" It was Thor pecking his head with a wake-up boot. "That side must be mined."

"Yeah, I know..."

"So, now what?"

"Wait a sec... nothing. We proceed according to the backup plan, toward the road, behind that wreck of a tank.

"Why there?"

"Because nobody in his right mind would do it."

"And that makes sense how?"

"Because no one, not even the Turks at Ruštica, will suspect six men in Bosnian Army uniforms. And if we are lucky, they'll be wondering what squad is that for two minutes, spy us with binoculars, and realise that we are their engineers. And we'll proceed down the road, past Muzaffer's Houses, and be in the clear until we reach the intersection at Krvopolje. Then we turn right, get past Vilaja, and there we are, at the foot of Stara Gora. A bit more to go, but we'll get there."

"By Odin's beard! Not bad at all. You may be a strung up sod, but you're not stupid."

"Oh, but it *is* bad, except there's no other way around it. Not since the Ruštica plan failed. Now we stick to plan B."

"It's not my fault it failed. How come our people didn't know about the Turkish lookout?"

"Doesn't matter now. Here's what we're going to do: we crawl to that big oak there, sneak past the thicket, and get on the road."

"And then we go straight to Krvopolje."

"No. We go straight to the tank in the direction of Musemići, of Ruštica."

"Oh, for fuck's sake! I knew something was off. You couldn't just stop being stupid. So, why are we moving away from Ruštica now?"

"Because they'll see us hiding behind the oak from the direction of Ruštica, you twerp. And if I were a Turk on the lookout and suddenly saw six Turkish soldiers on the road, I'd least suspect those coming toward me, you see? Far less suspicious than just sprouting from the grass near the tank."

"And then, what?"

"Nothing, we get to the tank by the road, pretend we're inspecting something there, take off a part, and go back toward Krvopolje. We stay in plain sight, pretending everything is as usual."

"By my hammer! That's completely crazy. Yeah, we'll do exactly that... But what if our boys see us? We are not expected on the stretch between Muzaffer's Houses and Musemići. In fact, we're not expected to be on the road at all."

"Nothing will happen if they see us. They have orders to cease fire for seven days, unless the targets are one hundred percent positively identified."

"Now that's a relief! There's no way they could positively identify us by these spinach green uniforms and stripes with Allah Akbar inscriptions, Eighth motor division coat of arms, 'Hazem Mahmoud' patches, and the lilies on our pockets... In all of Africa there are no more positively indent... infed... idenfit... hundred percent Turks than us!"

"Shut the fuck up, Thor, you twerp."

Having said that, Pako turned his back and fished out a handkerchief from a pocket to wipe off

the sweat. He raised his head and took a look around. Then he noticed Thor's idiotic ivy helmet camouflage that made him stand out in the sundried yellow grass more than he would have stood out camouflaged as a blooming rosebush in the pristine snow of Mt Vilaja. Papac was lying behind him, and further down Pako made out the huge Vili's head lurking in the tall yellow grass. Then there was Robi next to Vili, and finally Plug, the smallest of the lot.

Pako signalled the company to halt and pointed at a ditch by the road. A slow, salty drop of sweat trickled down his forehead, perched on his eyebrow for a while, and eventually dropped on his eyelashes. Instinctively, Pako closed his eyes. There in the dark behind his eyelids he found absolute silence. He couldn't hear the cheerful bark of his Labrador Brett or the merry honking of his Land Rover or the ululating sound of Ry Cooder's guitar. The only sensation he felt was the hot prickling of the salty drop trapped in his right eye.

9:11 a.m.

Sooner or later you and your itch will be the death of us – that's what Gypsy saw in Coal's glare, but he simply couldn't help it. The itch was unbearable and so was the idea that he could not reach the sole of his foot, trapped in the dark and smelly depths of his military boot. It was easier for Coal to save the entire shift of miners trapped in the Brezovača mine after the earthquake than one Gypsy from his insufferable itch at the bottom of the darkest pit of his right boot.

The scratch wire Gypsy designed and made for this specific purpose failed miserably. He took a thick copper wire at the barracks in Koveljača, removed two and a half inches of insulation at one end and bent it at right angle. Then he bent the tip again like a small hook. The idea was to reach the bottom of the boot, turn the bare bent bit carefully, reach the itching spot with the sharp tip, and try to scratch it through the sock.

Now, this revolutionary design showed two major limitations when put in practice. The first was the unfortunate nature of the itch. You know how it always itches out of reach: between the shoulders, or under the balls just when you are in a company of women, or, in this case, in the sole of the foot in a military boot. But the problem lies in its devilish nature and its tendency to move away from the scratching nails, fork, knife, twig or a wire like a cockroach from the light. It crawls like little black scarabs up and down, and there is little room for manoeuvring a wire at the bottom of the military boot.

The other limitation was the sharp point of the wire. Good for scratching, it had a nasty habit of tearing and snagging the sock, just like Eliza's ring, but that story comes later. It also tore and snagged Gypsy's nerves and the skin on his sole, forcing him to eventually take off the boot, which rendered the whole point of the scratch wire moot.

Sooner or later you and your itch will be the death of us – said that look in Coal's eyes, reminding him of the old football pitch at Biska before the war and the acute itching episodes in the middle of the training drills.

Of course, it wasn't their life but the match that was at stake back then, and the look of his coach and teammates didn't bother him that much as he was trying to reach past the football boot until that moment finally came when his team Mašinoimpex from Koveljača lost a match – not any match but the semi-finals of the Brezovača District Cup – to The Coal Miner. In the 57th minute at 1:1, the devilish itch hit him just as Hajro Šabanadžić charged on the right flank Gypsy was supposed to cover.

Yet the weathered defender Mirsad Ateragić Gypsy Esq. estimated that he had one or two seconds to spare and thrust his finger in the boot to give his sole a scratch, but he miscalculated, because Šaban – instead of raising his head to see where his teammates were – kicked the ball forward and stormed past Gypsy like the express train for Sarajevo through the dormant Koviljača station.

Every child in the district knows and spreads the word about that unforgettable moment when Gypsy hopped on one boot, his hand stuck in the other, while Šaban darted past, breaking onto the edge of the penalty area, and toe-shot a screamer just beneath the crossbar, past goalie Buza aka Coal. The coach, Mr Ilijašević, and all the teammates on the old Brezovača pitch stared in utter, mind-numbing shock, first at the football prancing in the net like a trout and then at Gypsy wriggling on his back at the touchline, trying to free his wedding ring from the sock.

Every local also knows how the story ended. Cursing his itching sole and the ring and Šaban and his shitty luck, Gypsy finally freed his hand, and – blinded by impotent fury – hurled the boot down the touchline and hit the linesman straight in the head. The linesman, Džemo Skenderćehajić, was the players' legendary bane back then, notorious for rigging the games. People say that in one match he flagged for offside forty-three times! He was also notorious for keeping his own cards for players who'd rubbed him the wrong way.

In vain did Gypsy seek to convince the enraged assistant referee that the boot hit him by accident, that he had lost his temper because of the itch, the ring, and Šaban's score. The main referee Rade Uršuš removed him from the game without a second thought, holding the red card high like a Lenin statuette, and by the end of the game The Coal Miner took the advantage of one extra man and scored two more goals to the great delight of the thirty-odd spectators from Brezovača.

Mirsad Ateragić Gypsy was later suspended by the Football Association for three months, partly because he rubbed notorious Džemo the wrong way, partly because he snatched the red card from referee Uršuš, tore it to pieces, and shouted at him to stop brandishing his red Party card at people. Did he know that his granddad had founded the Communist Party in Gračanica long before the red card was even invented? Then he flung the damned ring at him. Truth be told, the suspension was also partly owed to the incident that took place a year earlier, when Gypsy slide tackled Života Evremović of The Insurgent in the penalty area and then bashed him with the corner flag. Because of that penalty, his team lost the only chance in 19 years to win the title of the zone championship, and now they also lost the chance to get to the Cup finals.

After the suspension, Gypsy played one more match for Mašinoimpex. His coach, Antun Ilijašević, took pity and replaced him after the crowd ceaselessly shouted insults at him from the terrace for the first 35 minutes of the match. A group of anonymous pisstakers even hanged a banner over a railing reading something impossible to translate into English but which had to do with itching and Serbs. That banner was not only an early sign of ethnic divisions in Koviljača in 1989 but also a sudden end of his shining career as defender.

Shortly after that, Gypsy started a business trafficking in Hong-Kong dollars – "the strongest of all American dollars" – with his partner Afan Kodrić, aka Chinaman, a con artist and smuggler notorious for allegedly having conned a sheik to buy Uzeir Pasha's mosque in Prečanj. Word has it that Gypsy received a call from Hajduk of Split for a try-out, but that he had already been bound by a two-year contract with the Federal Prison in Sarajevo.

Željko Buza, aka Coal, who was the goalkeeper of Mašinoimpex and Gypsy's best friend, gave his best to convince the teammates that the fiasco wasn't Gypsy's fault but his wife's. Eliza Đogaš was the daughter of Mašionimpex's manager of the Car Parts Department, who seduced Gypsy at the prom, and eight and a half months later dragged him to the Register Office and put the gold wedding ring on his finger, the same ring that got stuck with the sock in his right football boot two years, five months, and 57 minutes later. But Gypsy didn't find any of this funny at all. With his football career gone down the drain, he had to resolve the marriage crisis caused by the loss of that wedding ring. Again he failed miserably and nearly ended it right there and then with his impossibly idiotic story about the ring getting stuck in his football boot, which was the reason why they lost the match and the Cup, which was the reason why he hurled the boot and hit linesman Skenderćehajić by accident, which was the reason why he – blinded with fury – took the ring off and flung it at the main referee Rade Uršuš, who showed him the red card, and which was the reason why the ring was gone from the finger on his left hand.

He also told her not to ask why he didn't look for it, because the entire Mašinoimpex team was combing the grass for half an hour to find it, but it just vanished off the face of Bosnia.