

**Zoran Ferić**

**THE MAYA CALENDAR**

- Excerpt -

Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

## The Names

1.

“January, February, March, April, May, June...” my mother recited, gently placing her index finger on the knuckles of my closed fists. “Now you!” She made fists like I had a second ago and shoved them under my nose.

“January, February, March, April...” I began, hesitantly tapping the knuckles and the hollows on my mother’s hands.

“How many days in January?” she asked.

“Thirty-one,” I replied.

“And March?”

“The same.”

“Do you get it now?”

The social studies notebook was lying on a box in the empty kitchen where we sat waiting for the moving truck to arrive and bring our furniture. In it were my first F and a note for my mother. It said I was a third grader yet I still didn’t know what I’d been supposed to learn in the first grade: how many days there are in each month?

“Do you see it now? The knuckle is thirty-one days, and this here in between is thirty. Except for February, which has twenty-eight days. And here where my fists are touching, see, stop gaping around and focus, here the two knuckles are next to one another, these higher parts. These are June and August, and they both have thirty-one days. You understand?”

I nodded, but actually I didn’t understand how could the knuckles become months. The year would then have fourteen of them.

“When does February get the extra day?” she asked.

I said nothing. The thing with February and the knuckles was just too much to process and it all had to happen now that we’d just moved into the new apartment and had to wait for my father and a man from his firm to come back with the truck and bring all of our belongings that we had so carefully wrapped in newspapers and packed in boxes. For the past couple of months, we’d been living among the boxes in my grandmother’s studio apartment in Medulićeva Street, right downtown, waiting for the paperwork that would make the apartment officially ours.

“February gets an extra day every leap year,” my mother said trying to hide her aggravation. “This is the leap year, 1951. What is the next leap year?”

“1955!” I guessed.

“That’s right. You’re going to be a seventh grader then,” she said.

“If I don’t get leukemia and die.”

Mother gawked at me as if instead of her child she was seeing a warthog. “Where did you hear about leukemia?”

“We learned about it at school. That’s when your blood turns to water.”

She stood up and nervously opened one of the boxes in order to take out the cleaning wire she used for floors. Why did this upset her so much?

“Go outside and meet the children!” she said.

Hesitating, I went down from the second floor and found only an empty courtyard overgrown with weeds and a couple of scrawny trees that grew next to the house. I climbed onto a fence that closed the yard towards the street and that was made of hefty horizontal pipes. It seemed as if made to be sat on. Like a bird stand. The street was empty too. It seemed as if cars never passed through here. At my grandmother’s, down in the city, traffic was busy, cars passed by, small trucks carried building material, sometimes even a horse-cart went by on its way to the market on Britanski Square, people hurried towards Ilica. Here, on the other hand, the only thing suggesting some kind of life was a pile of freshly sawed logs in front of the large house next door. This confirmed my conviction that we’d come to the edge of the world. I was sitting on the fence for while when a man with a large wicker basket appeared next to that pile of wood. I watched him put the logs into the basket. The way he did it was strange and somehow slow because he had no fists. Instead of his hands, round stumps were sticking out of the sleeves of his old-fashioned brown jacket. They resembled smaller pieces of wood. He was picking up the logs with those stumps like with some clumsy pliers and putting them into his basket. When he filled it, he hung the basket around his neck using a cord for raising the blinds, so it stood right across his chest. Then he went up the stone stairs that led to the house.

I stiffened and focused my gaze on one point in the sizeable garden that surrounded the villa across the way. However, at one moment our eyes met, and the man shouted, “Hey, kid, come here!” As he shouted, he raised the rim of his old hat showing his forehead covered in disheveled wet hair. I just kept sitting there like a stuffed bird glued onto the railing of the yard fence. “Hey, I’m talking to you!”

Our eyes met again. The man without fists, his hat tilted, his hair sweaty, was waiting for me on the other side of the street. I jumped off the fence and felt like running back into the yard that was about to belong to me too, but something kept me there. Politeness or something else. Maybe shame. The man stood on the other side of the street in expectation and so I slowly, my step unsure, walked over to him. I saw his jacket covered in sawdust, greasy stains on his hat, his unshaven face, his thick graying beard, the stumps that had stitching scars somewhere on the middle.

“Put your hand in here!” he said and pointed one of his wrists at his pocket. I paused, hesitating, thinking that something inside, something from that pocket would bite my hand off if I put it in there. The man watched me in surprise. “Don’t be scared!”

I pressed my lips tight and put my hand in his pocket, as if putting it into crocodile’s jaws and felt something square under my fingers. I took out a flat blue pack made of soft cardboard with white letters on it saying: OPATIJA. Above the name, there was a drawing of a small white sailboat.

“Well?” he said impatiently. “Take it out!”

I took out one cigarette and just stood there, in front of this man, holding the cigarette in my hand.

“The matches are in there too. Come on, light it!” he said.

I returned the pack into his pocket, then put the cigarette into my mouth, and lit it the way I saw my father do it. I held the match in front of the tip of the cigarette and took a few puffs. Tobacco crumbs got stuck on my lips. I took a couple more puffs and then the man signaled with his head to put the cigarette into his mouth.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” he said.

“We’ve just moved here today,” I said.

This was my first cigarette.

As I stood in front of that man and took those two or three puffs of smoke, I saw two boys come out of our house carrying a ball. One of them, the taller one, hurried across the street and approached us.

“Hey, old man, can I have one?” the taller boy said.

“Sure!” the man said and pointed his head at his pocket.

Carefully glancing at the windows, the boy took out a cigarette and the matches and lit it. He covered it with his hand and blew the smoke somewhere behind himself. He said nothing to me, not even a word. He went back to the street where the other boy had already placed the goals made of four pieces of brick that stood by the fence. They started passing the ball to each other. I hurried back to the fence, climbed back on it, and watched them play. Each of them was at the same time the goalie, the defender and the attacker. One would start at his goal and, somewhere around the middle of this makeshift pitch, try to dribble his opponent or shoot straight at the goal. The other boy was smaller, his hair was black, and he had a nicely elongated face. He was about my age, but he still wore shoes for children: sandals with white straps and holes on the upper part. They were called Opatija. I just couldn’t understand why would a boy as old as he still wear sandals and why would the sandals be called the same as the cigarettes. The taller boy was a better player and he often managed to dribble past the smaller

one. It was sad to watch just the two of them take part in something that usually took twenty-two people to play. They seemed more lonely than I who was sitting all alone on the fence. I tried to make some kind of contact with them, but they paid no attention to me. As if I was made of air. Then I decided to ignore them. I stared at my hands, clenched my fists, and began counting: “January, February, March...”

## 2.

By June we had become best friends. Besides the three of us there were no other children in the street. We still played football one against one, because you couldn't divide three into two teams. The third one sat on the fence and refereed. The only things interrupting us were the rare cars that happened to pass through here. Actually, there were only two. A blue Opel Olympia with a white roof driven by the neighbor who lived at number 50, and Peugeot 403, whose color we just couldn't determine because every type of lightning left its mark on it, which appeared here from time to time and brought a man in a dark suit who lived in our house and whom we greeted with utmost respect, “Good afternoon, Comrade Mrazović!”

Around three o'clock, when he came back from work, if we were playing in the street, the neighbor would drive his Olympia to a halt just before the first goal and patiently wait until one of us moved the bricks from the street. Then, passing by, he would wave at us and sometimes even tap his horn. After that the smaller boy, Roman was his name, would put the goals back to their place. He would put one brick on one side and then count ten feet to another. He was in charge of measuring the goals so that the space between the two posts was always the same. The other boy, Radovan, had a much bigger foot and he no longer wore shoes for children.

Now, in late spring afternoons when the air was still cold enough that the heat, which had accumulated during the day and emanated from the asphalt, offered warm comfort to our backs and behinds, we lay in the middle of the street listening to the rare cars that climbed up Domjanićeva Street on their way from Kvaternik Square. When the whirr of the engine echoed at the bend, but the vehicle itself was not yet visible, we would take a guess: “Opel Olympia!” Or: “Peugeot 403 bringing Comrade Mrazović home.”

Sometimes, as hours passed before the first car appeared in the street, laundry ladies would walk by balancing giant bundles of clothes on top of their heads, which they secured with a skillfully tangled rag shaped like a snake. And when down behind the bend, a loud, hoarse, unintelligible voice boomed, we knew it was a man with a giant wooden case on his back. “Pots and kettles!” he yelled. “Old pots and kettles! You break them, I mend them! Make your stew, don't let it spew.”

The old Gypsy slowly walked up the street. His load, his age and the steep hill slowed him down. Back then, in 1951, none of us ran away from him anymore, we were ten and we knew the Gypsies did not steal children, and Adil, the man who sometimes came to our street to mend pots, never stole anything. Many times we tried to pull a prank on him, we would put a wallet attached on a slim, barely visible fishing line in the middle of the street, but Adil only paused, looked around, even glanced in the direction of the fence behind which we were hiding, and spat on the worn out leather surface. Adil, his back bent from the weight of his kettle mending tools, spat on everything they taught us about the Gypsies.

By late April, another car started coming to our street: it was an English army Jeep, its color changed to yellow, and it brought my father back from work. At the time, my father, a building engineer, supervised the construction of silos all over Slavonia. My mother used to say it was a very dangerous job because the silos were tall, and when it rained, muddy scaffolding got terribly slippery so he was often in mortal danger. As I played football in the street with Roman and Radovan, every now and then, I would look up at the house and see my mother part the curtains slightly and look down at the bend, where the car that was bringing my father was supposed to appear. She would sometimes spend the whole afternoon coming up to the window and glancing out, and the intervals grew shorter and shorter until she started showing up at the window every couple of minutes to stare at the street under the house. I knew what would happen next. One long and drawn-out: “Tihooomirrrr!” It meant fear had become so great she could no longer take it on her own. I had to hurry up into the house that very instant, and my mother would give me dinner. She did it even when it wasn't time for dinner and when I wasn't hungry. This was the only way she could justify my presence in the apartment. And when I would tell her that I wasn't hungry, that I'd done my homework, and that we were having a nice time playing in the street, she would just say, “Don't you talk back at me!” My father's arrival would slow her gestures down and put more sense into the things she did with her hands. His arrival was most often announced by the distinct sound of the old Jeep's rickety engine.

June of 1951 was rainy and we didn't play in the street much. We mostly sat at the entrance into our building dying of boredom. On one such, extremely dull afternoon, Roman said, “We could do that thing with the names again!”

The house we lived in had been built on a flat part of this steep and narrow street in 1933 by the Marić & Koch Construction Company. At least that's what the marble plaque by the entrance said. At the doors of all eight apartments spread out over four floors there were no doorplates with first and last names of their tenants, as was the case in most buildings, instead there were small metal frames where narrow pieces of cardboard with names could be inserted. All of the cardboard plates were the same in shape and size, and the last names were typed on the building representative's

typewriter. Roman once said he'd heard that before the war the apartments had been rented and that that had been the easiest way to put new names on the door. The matter had been practical because the tenants had changed very fast. Supposedly, the well-off Jews had lived here first because the building's owner had also been a Jew. After April 1941, the large, nice apartments had been given to the members of the first Ustashe government. Some of them had left even before the war had finished, after Italy had capitulated, but the second big change of names had happened only after May 7, 1945 when the 23<sup>rd</sup> Partisan Division of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps had entered Zagreb from the direction of Zelina. The first empty apartments had been given to the surviving members of the underground movement who had managed to reach the free territory in 1944. The third mass change of names had happened in 1948: as much as five cardboard doorplates had been replaced by new ones.

Roman took me to the door of the first ground floor apartment that was vacant. Radovan covered the peephole on door of the apartment across the hall, while Roman took out the cardboard.

"It comes out easily. When it gets dark, we're going to switch the names. First you take it out, like so, and then you slide in a new one in the same way, you just press it against the door and push it with your finger," he said and then slid the cardboard back into the frame.

I said nothing.

"You don't like it?" Roman said.

"My old man's gonna kill me!" I said.

"They're not gonna catch us," Radovan said. "They didn't the first time we did it. And you know why? Because we'll change the names on our doors too."

"I don't know."

"Why not? You're not gonna rat us out, are you?" Roman said seeing I was hesitating.

It was dangerous, but I'd just made new friends so I said, "All right!"

And then there was no going back.

As soon as it got dark enough so that no one could look through the peephole and see what was going on in the hallway without the light on, we waited for the right moment. And just when it seemed safe, because no one had gone in or out for a while, and just as Roman went to take out the name from the first door, the green Peugeot pulled up in front of the house and Comrade Mrazović walked into the front yard. We hid behind a large cherry laurel bush. He walked slowly, measuring his steps as if he'd had too much to drink. He wore an elegant dark grey summer suit and a hat of the

matching color. His white shirt with pointy collar was open wide on his chest. In his right hand he carried a black bag, similar to a doctor's bag.

"There's no screwing around with this one," Radovan said when Comrade Mrazović disappeared in the hallway.

"No one knows where he works," Roman explained, "but my mother says he can lock up anyone he wants."

We waited until we heard the door on Comrade Mrazović's apartment close. Then the light in the hallway switched off automatically and we made our move. Roman took the lead. We walked into the hallway that was in complete darkness so we had to feel our way around. The only thing illuminating the staircase was a track of light from the streetlamp coming through the main door. I reached the railing by the stairs and listened carefully. My heart was pounding wildly. My father wasn't at home and he could've arrived at any moment. He'd been away for three days and this was the longest he'd been absent. He would come back tonight for sure.

"Let's go, I've got it!" Roman whispered and we went down the stairs towards the basement apartments. I stayed close to the railing and, when we finally arrived, Roman shoved two pieces of cardboard into my hand. "Hold this!"

It took him a couple of seconds to remove the doorplates from both basement apartments. "Give me one!"

We'd already headed up the stairs, when the door on one of the apartments on upper floors suddenly opened. We hid under the stairs, right next to the metal door that led to the storage area expecting someone would switch on the light. The light, however, did not turn on, and then someone slowly went down the stairs. Someone wearing slippers, because their steps could almost not be heard. Only eerie shuffling. And it took some time. The mysterious person reached the final flight of stairs and just stood at landing for a while, in complete darkness, some ten steps above us. And then the person went down. The track of light coming from the street through the main door illuminated him for a moment. It was Mrazović.

Someone shoved his fingers into my biceps. It was a signal to stay completely still. I stopped breathing. Roman and Radovan stopped breathing too. Mrazović went down to the lower landing and, as it seemed, stopped in front of one of the apartments. Right in front of the apartment whose doorplate we'd just changed. He was barely ten feet away, however, there was no way he could see what we'd done. It seemed he was just trying to hear something. So we listened too and heard a weak drawn-out sound coming from inside. It sounded like music or some talk on the radio. Mrazović went to the next door, stood there for a while and listened, and then he went back up the stairs and soon quietly closed the door to his apartment.

"I've crapped my pants!" Roman whispered.



“I think he can see in the dark,” Radovan said, convinced. “Have you heard him walk, he barely touched the stairs.”

“It’s better we put the doorplates back to their place!” I suggested.

“No way!” Roman responded. “It wasn’t us he was looking for.”

Soon we were replacing the names of the second floor apartments with the ones from the first one. We changed the names on our apartments too, and on Mrazović’s. The light came on a couple of times and some people went to one of the apartments on the first floor: it was where the Perkonjićs lived.

“They’re having guests!” Roman said.

After we’d switched all the names, the ones from the second floor with the ones from the basement or the ground floor, Radovan said, “Now let’s go home and let’s see what’s gonna happen when they find out.”

Surprisingly, my mother was in a good mood. She let me into the apartment with a satisfied smile on her face. “I’m making pancakes. Your father will be here any moment now...”

And this got to me. The instant I stepped into our apartment, as my nostrils filled with the smell of hot oil, I regretted having agreed to this prank. If my mother said father would be here any second, if she wasn’t worried or scared, then he should really appear at the door at any moment. He would be tired, but not so tired not to notice another family’s name on our door. Because, every time he arrived, every time he came back, he paused by the fence in the yard or at the entrance into the building and with an experienced eye of a building engineer observed the graying façade that peeled off in large pieces leaving behind a naked yellowish plaster from which bricks were sticking out. And when he came to our apartment, he sometimes just stood there for a while admiring the freshly varnished, giant double-sided oak door. Sometimes he would even bend down and adjust the doormat if it were crooked. But, why hadn’t I thought about this before, why did it occur to me now after fear had enlightened me? Why had I, like some fool, agreed to participate in it when I, actually, knew I would be caught immediately? We’d been waiting for this apartment for three years and now, when it was finally ours, when our name stood on this giant door, I was fooling around with it. My mother was happy and she hummed a tune as the pancakes sizzled in the frying pan. I was sitting, as always, at our kitchen table drawing houses. My mother liked it when I drew houses, she said I would become a building engineer, just like my father. She pronounced these words, “a building engineer” with respect and importance, completely different than when she addressed my father. As if the “engineer” and my father were two completely different persons. And so, as I was drawing immersed in my thoughts, my mother glanced at me trying to discover the cause of pensiveness in my face. Even though it was dark, I was afraid that someone

might have seen us, one of the neighbors perhaps, and they would show up at my door any second now with the wrong name in their hands and a stern expression on their face. Or, even before my father arrived, all of the tenants would gather at the house representative's apartment and discuss the punishment.

"What's wrong?" at one moment my mother asked.

"Nothing."

"It can't be nothing. You're being strange."

Her instinct of an experienced hunter of her son's mood made her sense something was wrong.

I kept listening and every muffled sound that came from the staircase made me start. I could hear doors closing and opening, people's voices and even the music from radio, mysterious blows against the railing as they went up the staircase. Those otherwise mundane sounds were now becoming terrifying. My mother sat across the table, put jam on the pancakes, and wrapped them.

"You want one?" she asked.

"I can't."

"But you like pancakes," she said, got to her feet, and placed her hand on my forehead. "You're not coming down with something, are you?"

I had to accept one sweet, yellow wrap.

"Don't let it drip, pull the other end up!"

And so, as I slowly chewed my pancake, I heard a sound of some other vehicle pulling up in front of the house. I thought it was my father's Jeep and shivers immediately went down my spine. The living room windows were open and the sound reached us directly, right in the kitchen. But this time it was somehow different.

I hurried into the living room, and my mother followed. We leaned out the window, both of us, each in their own expectation. However, it was just some man on a moped. He wore a leather cap and carried some small bag in his hands. I felt relieved. It wasn't my father. The terrifying moment when I would be exposed was postponed for later. It seemed that time had become my ally and that the longer it took for my father to return, the slimmer were the chances of my treachery being discovered. My mother, however, observed me carefully.

"You sense something?" she asked worriedly.

And so both of us stood by the window. I calmed down a bit and I ate my pancake letting the jam drip into the yard. As always, Mother kept glancing down at the bend. It was a fresh summer evening, it had just stopped raining and the sky

started clearing up in the west. Patches of dark starry sky could already be seen. Some strange peace settled down on the street, even the noise from the staircase went quiet.

And then the doorbell rang. My mother startled and hurried to open the door. I calmly watched her go. As long as it wasn't my father. I heard her talk to someone at the door and at the next moment I saw her walk into the living room and switch on the light. She had a piece of paper in her hand. She stared at it with a terrified expression on her face, and then she collapsed onto the sofa. She looked at me for a second, her face bent out of shape, and then started weeping. She cried hysterically clutching that paper in her hand. When I ran to her, she held me firmly, and I took the paper out her hand. It was a telegram. The letters typed in faded ink said: "We're sorry for your loss" and "Please accept our condolences." As she was pressing me against her chest in anguish, my mother uttered through tears, "Daddy's gone! Our daddy's gone!"

I, a ten-year-old boy, turned into a piece of wood. Like in some reversed Pinocchio story. I just stood there, completely calm, my hands against my body, letting my mother squeeze me, kiss my hair, and wet my cheeks with her tears. I couldn't move, although I maybe wanted to. The time when, in a situation such as this, I would throw myself into my mother's arms and cry with her had passed. We were no longer what we used to be, almost one and the same body, the connection between us was slowly breaking. I was separating from her and at this moment this was clearly visible. I was distancing myself from my mother, although, had someone watched us, we were one, four arms, two heads, two legs standing, two legs sitting, one torso moving about and one standing still. For someone who watched from a side, we were almost a monster. The paper slid to the floor and now I could read the note more clearly, although it was very crumpled. There was someone else's last name in the heading. At first I didn't understand, I blankly stared at the name just as I stared at those two words: "loss" and "condolences." And then I said, "Mom, this isn't us!"

First it seemed she didn't hear me, but when she looked at me with her eyes filled with tears, she quickly picked up the paper from the floor and read the name out loud. "Pekonjić."

She got to her feet, wiped her tears, and with a dumbfounded expression on her face walked into the bathroom. She came back washed, tidy, and avoiding my eyes. She straightened the telegram with her hands, searched for the envelope she'd dropped somewhere in the corridor, put the letter back in, walked out of our apartment, and rang the bell at the Pekonjićs' apartment. I went after her, but then I paused at the door. When the door in the apartment below ours opened, I heard a song. It was sad and drawn-out, but it was nevertheless a song. Its eeriness filled the staircase. Mother stayed shortly at the neighbors' and then came back with a happy expression on her face. She tried to suppress her joy, but it nevertheless came out and changed her features. She still hadn't noticed that the name on our door was supposed to be on the

door in the apartment below. That's how death rang our door for the first time, but no one had died on us yet.

### 3.

For my eleventh birthday I got an illustrated book about four musketeers. There was a picture on the thick, yellow framed cardboard covers: d'Artagnan, Aramis, Porthos, and Athos. The four of them crossed their swords in midair, under the feathers on their hats, while a gorgeous castle with countless pointy, white towers nestled on a hill behind them. On the first page, just under the title and a small image of a treasure chest, there was an inscription: Svjetlost, Sarajevo, 1950. For a while I thought that these words – Svjetlost, meaning light, and Sarajevo, the name of the city – had something to do with the story and that they were part of the title that I just didn't understand. And it was precisely this, this part that I didn't understand so it grew into some kind of a secret, what made it my favorite book. I always read it before sleep, in my bed, and I would fall asleep with the book open across my chest and with my night lamp turned on. In the morning, the book lay closed on the linens cabinet that also served as my nightstand, and the lamp was turned off. That's how the musketeers got directly into my subconscious.

Once, when we played football in the street, I told Roman, "Let's play musketeers!"

I even brought the book. Roman studied the covers for a while, he even opened the book to look at other illustrations, and then he said, "No!"

"Why not?" I asked.

"There's only three of us," he replied.

And we glanced at each other: Roman, Radovan and I. The three of us, alone in the whole street.

"How come?" I asked.

"What do you mean how come?" he said.

"That there's only three of us. That there aren't any more children here."

"That's the way it is," Roman said.

"They weren't born," Radovan tossed in, juggling the ball with his feet. "The Pekonjićs' son got killed in the war, Mrazović lives alone, the house representative's wife died, and the Mayers' son disappeared during the war. And that's it."

However, I didn't understand why there were no children in other houses, but I didn't ask anything because I saw the topic annoyed Roman.

In a couple of days, after he'd come back from one of his trips to Slavonia without greasy stains of my mother's forehead on the window overlooking the street, I asked my father to make wooden swords for us.

"What for?" he asked.

"So we can play musketeers."

And so, one Saturday afternoon, Radovan, Roman and I got wooden swords made in a makeshift workshop my father had built in our woodshed, the first shed next to the laundry where the women from the house brought giant metal pots filled with white clothes. The whole basement smelled of starch. And on its door there was a list scheduling the time when each apartment could use the laundry. The list was neatly signed and stamped. And so with our wooden swords, which smelled more like our underwear and shirts than the spruce from which they were made, began our service to France. Now that we had our swords, the argument against our number no longer seemed to matter.

When we started our fight against Cardinal Richelieu's men, against spies in black cloaks, against armored soldiers who carried sharp halberds and against Spanish mercenaries with their pointy beards, I could easily imagine them lunging at us while we pierced them with our swords and kicked them with our feet, some of them, their guts spilled all over and tears swelling up in their eyes, calling their mothers in French, Basque, Spanish. The thing I just couldn't imagine was the fourth musketeer. Sometimes, when we played, I tried to imagine that he'd died. That being nonexistent was the same as being dead. I didn't feel the person, but the emptiness that the person who hadn't even been born left behind. Death before death. We were d'Artagnan, Athos and Porthos. Aramis, who hadn't been born and who hadn't moved here was the one missing, that emptiness in the corners of our yard, the emptiness when each of us stood in one corner of something that should make an irregular rectangle, a wooden sword in our hand, fighting the invisible foes yet unable to imagine an invisible friend, filled me with unbearable sadness. It was most likely because it was so easy to imagine the vile men in the dishonest service of the cardinal, but never, never ever were we able to imagine our fourth friend who had died even before he was born.

The nonexistence of the fourth musketeer was my first encounter with painful absence, as if death took on a different shape, from a misaddressed telegram to the fact that someone, regrettably, had never been born. While we were playing, I somehow managed to hit myself in the face with my own sword. The blow wasn't hard, it didn't even hurt. However, the fact that I could imagine my enemies, yet I couldn't imagine my friend made me terribly sad. And this sadness was stronger than all kinds of different sadnesses, caused by all kinds of things, that had tormented me in my life. When I was saying goodbye to my friends, almost right in front of my own door, the tears just started running down my face.

“What happened?” my mother exclaimed, seeing me all in tears and with a bruise under my eye. “Have you gotten into a fight?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Don’t you lie to me!”

“I’m not, mom, I’m telling you, I didn’t fight!”

And then I wept even harder. I was no longer of the age when someone cried a lot so this was strange. However, I just couldn’t explain to her that I was crying after someone who hadn’t even been born and that I had just encountered something that wasn’t exactly death, but it was its worst outcome. I went to my room and to my bed without opening my book. Before I fell asleep, I heard my mother and father having a heated discussion.

The next morning my father woke me up very early. He was serious, as if something important was about to happen.

“Come on, get dressed!” he said.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“You’ll see.”

We arrived to a sports hall near downtown and walked into a dark space that smelled of sweat and floor wax. There were punching bags in the room, some much bigger than me. My father warmly shook hands with some man in a tracksuit. They talked as if they knew each other for a long time. They were war buddies and he was a boxing coach.

“Šime is going to show you a couple of things. So that you know how to defend yourself,” my father said.

Šime put a punching bag in front of me, took my hands and showed me how to make a fist, how to position my feet on the floor, and how to punch the stiff leather with all my strength. It made my fingers hurt.

“If someone touches you, just punch him on the nose. Jab. Directly into his nose, make it bleed. They all shit their pants when they see their own blood,” Šime said.

I didn’t understand. I was mourning a friend who hadn’t even been born and they were teaching me how to fight.

## **The Guest**

The thing with months has always been the same. The first part, the beginning, while the dates were still in the single digits, always passed twice faster than the end, when the dates had two digits. As if Tuesday, January 3, could pass faster than Tuesday, January 20, because twenty was somehow larger and longer than three. The higher the date, the longer the month seemed, as if time slowed down. A single month tired a person down because it, together with all of its sensations, the sun, the rain, the snow or the heat, seemed to wear itself out in the person's mind and become boring, and only later time ran out of it. The thing wearing it out most intensively was writing down the dates. Ever since I was a child, I'd been waiting for the month to pass, hoping that the next one, the one that came after it, was going to bring something nice. And why was I thinking about it now? Because as I watched us in the port, standing like plants, waiting for a ferry that was still not here, it seemed to me that in all this waiting for the month to run out and for something nice to happen in the next one, a large portion of our lives also ran out.

"Are we all here?" Ana asked, glancing at Jugana's list.

"Not exactly," Jugana replied.

Jugana was trying to make sense out of the list of crossed out names. I took a peek too, but I couldn't see what I was interested into. I thought I did it just for the sake of it. Curiosity. Just curiosity. The two of them had calmed down a bit after a man who looked like Roman had showed up, and this could have been connected to the fact that I hadn't seen him anywhere in the group. We stood and calmly chatted among our bags and suitcases, our grandchildren ran between us, seagulls cawed and, generally speaking, no one was particularly worried because the ferry hadn't yet arrived.

And then on the port's stone slabs where cars usually did not venture a taxi pulled up. This provoked general interest. All of us stared at that red Audi station wagon. Some commotion could be seen inside of the car, most likely the customer was paying for the fare, but no one got out of it for a long time, and the light was falling at such angle that we couldn't see what was going on inside.

"Who's that?" Alma said, appearing next to us all of sudden.

Marijan shouted, "Isn't that Boba!"

"You're such a pig!" Ana barked at him. Boba had died when we were in the third grade, she had been the first one to leave us. All of us went to her funeral, we all stood in a line and each of us held a red rose in their hands. When I think about it from today's perspective, it seems that it must have been a really bad luck to get run over by a car in a city that at that time had so few cars. But something else was interesting here. First, a man who looked like Roman appeared, and now this idiot shouted Boba's name in the middle of the town's quay. Our dear departed showed up in mysterious ways. As if they too wanted to join us on our senior excursion.

However, the commotion in the taxi continued and we were running out of patience. For a moment, I got my hopes up. Besides, Senka was always running late, and she had a well-developed feeling for theatricality.

“Jugana, who’s that, tell us!” Ana asked, all on pins and needles.

Jugana, however, remained silent and just kept smiling. “Hold your horses, you’ll see.”

The driver got out of the taxi first and went to the back of the car to take out a huge old-fashioned suitcase, the likes of which had not been used for at least thirty years. He also took out a small travel bag. Then he opened the car and we could see a woman, obviously very old, get out taking hold of his arm for support and first putting out one foot in a white shoe that resembled an orthopedic device and was most likely bought somewhere at the beginning of 1950s. Then her other foot appeared, and the old woman, her hair completely white and neatly done, stepped out on the stone slabs of the quay carefully, as if stepping on the surface of the Moon. It got completely quiet. Even the children stopped running sensing something was up.

“Jesus,” Alma whispered. “That’s her. Our homeroom teacher.”

“She’s still alive?” Toni said.

“Alive?! Just wait until you’re ninety-two, we’ll see if you’ll be able to travel...” It seemed the question somehow offended Jugana, and then she addressed her son. “Mislav, go help, what are you waiting for?!”

I followed Mislav and when we reached her, I didn’t even have time to say hello to our teacher, Mrs. Sruk, because Mislav had already taken her by the hand. Even though he was in mourning, he was more agile, a younger generation. I, of course, was left with the suitcase. And Marijan’s drunken quip that the whole quay must have heard, “He’s always been a nerd!”

Mislav and Mrs. Sruk went ahead and I followed them walking over the slippery stone slabs lugging the heavy suitcase. What was she carrying in it? Her dresses from the Cominform period, a bathing suit she’d bought when Kennedy was assassinated, sandals older than my daughter and myself together? I hauled that huge thing made of hard cardboard adorned with metal hinges with one hand, while in the other I carried the smallish travel bag. The weight just couldn’t balance out, so I more pulled that humongous suitcase along the slippery slabs, leaning to one side, than I carried it in my hand. Sweat dangerously poured down my neck, and I felt my heart, which decided to remind me of angina pectoris, in my throat.

“If it heavy, Tihomir?”

“No, Mrs. Sruk,” I replied, stumbling over the slippery slabs, shocked that she recognized me and remembered my name. Forty years after our graduation and



ninety-two years old, nice, while I, at sixty-five, was already senile. And even the waiters were convinced of the fact.

Josip suddenly appeared by my side. I don't know why, but everyone in the class always called him Krešo. "You take one end, I'll take the other," he said.

I put the bag on my shoulder and picked up the suitcase with both hands. Krešo took the other end. Even two people had trouble carrying it. Sara went behind and led Denis by his hand. She said nothing about my effort because most likely she thought it would make little sense to do so.

"Is there a dead man in the suitcase?" the kid asked. Obviously, the night before he'd watched a movie he wasn't supposed to.

"Denis, be quiet!" Sara snapped at him.

It seemed Mrs. Sruk didn't hear anything.

"They're gonna cut him to pieces and throw him into the sea, right, Mom?" the boy asked.

"Be quiet, or say goodbye to your Ninja Turtles!"

And so, in a column, slowly and ceremoniously, we walked towards the center of the quay where the rest of the group was waiting for the ferry that still wasn't there. When we finally arrived, my former classmates jumped to greet and kiss our teacher, while the two of us placed the suitcase down on the stone slabs. Abandoned and brown, it really did look like a coffin that all of us had gathered around as if this were a funeral and not the beginning of our second high school excursion. It's strange that, once the old age actually arrives, everything starts to look like a funeral, even when you're standing in a peeing line, during the break of Swan Lake, in front of the theatre restroom.

## **The Strange Messenger**

### **1.**

Ten days before the new 1955, two things happened at our school: the coal furnace broke down and Anica Videk's sister died. We sat in our modern equipped classrooms in our coats, while some girls covered themselves with blankets so that their childbearing organs wouldn't get cold. Our homeroom teacher encouraged the girls to cover themselves up and told us, the boys, that the cold was nothing and that we needed to harden up.

When she taught, our science teacher, Diana Politeo, had whitish air come out of her mouth. She wore wool gloves with their fingers cut off so she could handle the

large wooden compass and triangle more easily. The history teacher, Comrade Zlatić, wore a black astrakhan fur coat; the geography teacher, Doctor Res, taught wearing a giant felt hat and raising his coat collar. Only our homeroom teacher, Zlata Obrenović, who taught home economics, didn't wear any additional clothes and she acted as if the cold had no effect on her. One day, early in the morning, sometime in the period of those ten days, I got a fever and was sitting in the second row wrapped up in a blanket, shivering. Mrs. Obrenović looked at me and said, "Come on, Tihomir, man up a bit?" It made everyone laugh.

In the second week of this horrible cold, the rumors started spreading about the school. During recess, Roman whispered into my ear, "The heating's fine, they ran out of coal."

"How come?" I asked.

"It wasn't even dug. Production fell short."

The rumors started on Monday, and already on Wednesday there was a long meeting of the School Board. The three of us, together with some other boys from our neighborhood, waited in this hellish cold, hidden in front of the school building, hoping that, once the meeting was over and the teachers went home, we would hear what they talked about among themselves. There was a rumor that, due to the broken heating system, there wouldn't be any classes until the New Year, which would make our winter holidays almost ten days longer. It was such a tempting piece of news that it was worth waiting out in the cold. The meeting finished, the teachers passed by, but they said nothing about school being cancelled. Only Comrade Res commented, "They've built the school and have no money for the heating!"

For a long time, we didn't know that a new school was being built in our district. We who lived in the upper parts of Šalata, such as Horvatovac or Zelenjak, as well as our classmates from the central part of the district, went to Kaptol Elementary because it was closer than Ivan Filipović, which was in Zajčeva Street. Besides, they said that the teachers at Kaptol were better than the ones at Ivan Filipović. There was no word about the new building, as if it was being constructed in secrecy. I first heard about it in our kitchen when my mother had coffee with Roman's.

"They've built a new school in Mesićeva Street. It's for the functionaries' children," Roman's mother said, "but don't you worry, our children will go there too."

It was said later that it was an ultramodern building designed by Božidar Rašica, a renowned Yugoslav architect, and that it represented the newest accomplishment of our building genius. When the new school year began in September, we went to Kaptol Elementary, as we had done until then. But, in early October, some fuss could be noticed at school, people in suits started showing up, in official cars, the data was being updated. On several occasions, we had to fill out survey

forms about our grades, our parents' occupations, the place of living, extracurricular activities. Something big was about to happen, but no one knew what. On one occasion, I overheard our homeroom teacher who pronounced a sentence that was dangerously similar to the one Comrade Res said commenting on the broken heating, "They've built the school and don't have enough children to fill it!" It told me that the lack of children wasn't just my personal problem.

On October 12, 1955, we shuffled ourselves to our school at Kaptol and after the bell went to our classrooms. Our homeroom teacher met us with a list in her hand. She seemed dignified, as if about to announce someone had died. "Dear children, I am going to read some of your names. I ask those whose names are called out to take their things and form a line in front of the school."

"That's how the Ustashe called out the Jews," Roman whispered when the teacher read my name. Those couple of minutes, before she called Roman and Radovan, I feared we would get separated. After she called out our names, we stood in front of the blackboard with our schoolbags in our hands, and then the teacher said, "Our classmates are moving to their new school. We wish them to have good grades and all the best in their lives. Long live Comrade Tito! Long live our Communist Party!"

And the whole class responded in unison, "Long live Comrade Tito! Long live our Communist Party!" And that was it. In a silent column, as if we were really being taken to a concentration camp, we went down to Moša Pijade Street and from there up Vinkovićevea towards Šalata. Back then we didn't know that the wide street that had only recently been named after the renowned theorist of the revolution had been taken as an administrative border. All of us who lived to the east of it were taken to the newly built elementary school that was named after the street in which it was built: Mesićevea I. Later on it was named after Ivan Goran Kovačić, the poet who wrote about the Ustashe atrocities and who was slaughtered by the Chetniks at the Foča.

I first saw the school from its side, from the south: most of the classrooms faced this way and this was where the school's movie theatre was located. It seemed incredibly modern compared to the surrounding pre-war houses, and the large glass surfaces seemed somewhat surreal. "I have to be a different man here," it crossed my mind, I remember, and this was the beginning of my intention to become a better student. It didn't happen at once and it wasn't a conscious decision, but it did begin at that time when each meeting with the modernist building still had its charm. During those first few days, I saw a change in others too. It seemed completely normal back then that the space altered people. I noticed, for example, that some students walked differently than at Kaptol Elementary. Here, the school hallways were several times wider, there was incomparably more light, and all of this affected us. At Kaptol, all we saw through the elongated, narrow windows were portions of the city landscape, bits and pieces of palaces in the old town, the roofs in Tkalčičeva and Medvegradska streets.

And now, thanks to the fact that one whole wall of the classroom was made of glass, we could see more of the world. Besides this, the sunsets were different, just as were our faces. It seemed we'd gotten into some different, more modern era.

This initial fascination was the reason why we saw the heating problem as a catastrophe, and the cold radiators as a proof that the modern age had somehow betrayed us. The following day, after that long School Board meeting, the teachers started coming to the cold classrooms without their coats, fur caps and hats. None of them no longer showed they were cold. On the contrary. All of them acted like our homeroom teacher, as if all of this was something completely normal. By the end of that day—we were in the afternoon shift—Mrs. Obrenović walked into our classroom wearing only a light floral shirt and a simple grey skirt. She read an announcement: “On its meeting, that took place on December 22, 1955, the School Board of Mesićeva I Elementary School made a decision that until the end of the first semester all classes will take place outdoors. On December 23, that is, tomorrow, the students are to go on a school trip to Mt. Medvednica. The students will start on foot, in front of the school, tomorrow at 8 a.m.”

And so the day I remembered the most out of all the days of my elementary schooling began the night before, with a mental image: two hundred of us lining up in front of the school and, in silence, via Mirogoj Cemetery, we walk towards Medvednica. The teacher said something else. Off the record. “Anica will come back tomorrow. I ask of all of you to be nice to her!”

Anica had been absent for almost two weeks, ever since her father had come to take her out of the school and said her sister had died, so she was the only one out of the whole class who had avoided the cold classrooms. Her sister was younger than she and very sick, but they nevertheless expected she would pull through. However, the grave heart condition she had from her birth took her before her time. On that particular day, we met death in her father's face that seemed as if he was the one who had died and not his younger daughter. He looked as if someone had locked his eyes and now he only looked on the inside and backwards, somewhere behind his back. At that time, death for me had already included one mistakenly delivered telegram, the impossibility to imagine a non-existent friend, and this man's face. I knew that now, with Anica's return, something else would follow and that we would be seeing this death in Anica's eyes for months to come. The thing was even worse because, before her sister's death, ever since Radovan, Roman and I had joined this class, Anica had been in love with me. Three days after I'd come to school, her friend told me, “Anica likes you!” And it was enough I start avoiding her. We separated girls in our class into pretty, ugly and the rest. Anica was among the rest, which meant there were days when she could be counted as pretty, but at other times she also wasn't far from the ugly ones. With that shadow of ugly on her long, straight, honey-colored hair and her

longish pale face she presented a serious danger to my reputation. This is why her return was particularly delicate for me. I hoped that her sister's death was something big enough to extinguish that love in her. At the same time, I knew I wouldn't be able to be rude to her and that I shouldn't do anything to hurt her.

Nevertheless, in front of the school, things took a different turn. At the moment she appeared, as far as I was concerned, Anica had no face and almost no body. She simply walked among us and the girls were the first to surround her. They kissed and hugged her, their bodies covering everything but her legs. And so I watched Anica's legs and now they were quite nice legs in modern little boots and a checkered skirt that ended just above her knees. Anica was having, so it seemed, one of her prettier days. When I finally saw her whole body, I almost couldn't recognize her. As if some of the beauty of all those pretty girls who had been kissing her had rubbed off on her. Her hair was considerably shorter, she had a bowl cut now, she wore makeup and a brand new black coat her parents most likely had bought to wear at her sister's funeral. I kept thinking that her sister's death made her pretty and that it was possible that the end of someone's life may have such consequences on the ones who were left behind.

She didn't spoke to me, she didn't even look at me until we started climbing up Bikić Trail towards the Puntijarka Hiking Lodge. And then she showed up by my side and said, "I've been thinking about you!" It meant that death wasn't strong enough even to win over this frivolous, purely platonic love. I expressed my condolences and we climbed on. It was terribly cold, and she had no scarf or hat or gloves, and she hadn't even buttoned her coat because she wanted to show her new skirt and her dark sweater. My mother, on the other hand, armed me with a winter hat, two pairs of gloves, one for snowball fights, made of leather, and the wool pair to keep my hands warm. I also had a long woven scarf so that Roman, when I had rung his doorbell in the morning, asked me, "Where are you going? To Greenland?"

Anica, however, said, "I couldn't wait to come back to school."

"Why?" I asked.

"I was bored at home!"

"What were you doing?"

"I played *Sorry* with my mom," she said.

It crossed my mind that the children whose siblings had died should not be playing *Sorry* with their mothers. During our conversation, she never once mentioned her sister, or the funeral, or her parents. As if she was trying to rest from it all. Every now and then she blew into her hands to keep them warm. Her hands had already become quite red.

"Do you want my gloves?" I asked.

“All right,” she said.

I took my gloves off and gave them to her.

I was aware that now she was different and—the respect towards death that had touched her in my mind—we continued our conversation. She asked me what was new at school and I explained that the heating system had broken down, that the teachers had been teaching in their coats, and that, in the end, the School Board had banned it so that defeatism wouldn’t spread among the children.

When we reached the first rest area, the one with a small wooden hut at Njivice, a cold northerly rose. I saw her press her hands, still in my gloves, against her ears.

“Would you like a hat?” I asked.

She looked at me gently. And thankfully.

“But then you’re going to be cold,” she said.

“No, I’m not.”

And so my hat ended up on her head. Close to the end of our hike I gave her my scarf too. Armed with my hat, my scarf and my gloves, she must have looked dangerously like me, because Roman, when he finally appeared next to us, looked at Anica in amazement, as if soaking in the scene and trying to keep it in his mind as long as possible: I, frozen and bareheaded, and she who was beginning to take on some of my features. And she kept looking like me that whole day because she wouldn’t separate from my scarf and my hat. It was as if I somehow embraced her with my garments. On the other side, looking at her like that, somehow familiar, I started to like her more seriously than I had ever thought it would be possible. During the four-hour-long hike down, we held hands, and I was in love like never before. That love affair, however, was short-lived. It lasted until we got down from the mountain and until the heating became operational again. From then until the end of eighth grade I didn’t like her anymore. It is a fact, however, that I remember that day more clearly than all the other days when she was getting on my nerves.

## 2.

On that evening when my father took me to see a vampire movie for the first time, someone broke off dog Sam’s tail. Before we went to the movies, my parents sat down to talk.

“He’s too young,” my mother said. “He’ll be traumatized.”

“He’s not in your belly anymore. Soon he’ll be living his own life and he should know what vampires look like,” my father said.

The movie was scary, but the only thing I remembered from it were those two or three whores at some London brothel that could be entered through a secret door from a soup kitchen. There was a naked whore who danced with a snake. My father wanted to scare me so I would grow up, and I grew up by experiencing an unplanned erection. Such cardinal mistake in my upbringing had to have consequences and they made themselves visible very quickly.

When we got home, my mother was anxiously sitting in the kitchen and staring at the floor. Our English setter was lying there, cowering and squealing in pain. When our scent entered his air, he tried to wag his tail, but he couldn't because it was broken all the way at its root. It hurt him to be happy.

"We have to take him to the vet," my father said. "Someone has broken his tail."

I, on the other hand, knew that there was a connection between the movie in which that woman danced with the snake and Sam's broken tail. For the next twenty years, whenever I feel sad or disappointed, I will be looking for a relationship. Back then, luckily, I didn't know that. Evil appeared on two different sides, it came from two sources and it met in a single impression of our kitchen's floor, under the table where our dog had its cot. Sometimes I watched him masturbate on his blanket. He would push it under his belly, bite into one end, and thrust his red member that had gotten out of his white fur as if covered in blood, like a long, pointy wound, into the other end. Whenever I saw this, I would call my mother. "Mom, Sam is messing with the blanket again!"

"Let him be," my mother would say and that's how I learned that people forgave dogs what God never forgave people.

When I, before we got Sam, imagined I had a dog, one and the same image appeared before me: the image of a little boy called Rene from *Big Red*, a picture book my mother used to read to me in English in an unsuccessful attempt to teach me another language at a young age. The boy ran across the meadow together his reddish Irish setter and both of them were happy. The dog's tongue was sticking out and Rene was laughing with his mouth wide open so that his straight, white teeth were showing like in a commercial for toothpaste that would come later and that would be called Signal. The image of a happy boy and his dog kept haunting me. The meadow, the space, the run, and the permanent, romantic friendship between a man and a dog. This is the proof that picture books tailor our lives.

When we brought him home, Sam was almost as cute as Big Red, except that he wasn't red, but white. However, the problems came about as he grew up. We couldn't teach him anything. When he got a little bigger, I went to our garden with my father to train Sam. My father had a pocket full of sliced bacon wrapped in butcher's paper. We

would let Sam off the leash, my father would blow into some kind of a dog whistle, and when Sam came, I would give him a piece of bacon. This was supposed to teach him to come back every time he heard the whistle. This was the first lesson. We practiced for days on end, but Sam just wouldn't come back. He wasn't even able to learn this first and most basic lesson that would allow us to take him out for a walk without a leash. We tried for months. I'm not exaggerating. We weren't able to teach him other things either: to sit down, to lie down, he didn't know he was supposed to come back home, he ran in circles like mad in other people's yards, he licked unknown people's hands when they entered our yard. In short, there was nothing dog-like about him, none of the things picture books wrote about. Soon we saw that our dog was irreparably dumb. He was dumb even for a setter and they are known to be dumb anyhow. Moreover, my father was convinced the dog was retarded. I didn't know if dogs could be retarded, I didn't even know what the word meant. But I heard it when my father talked on the phone to a friend of a friend who was a veterinarian. He asked, "Listen, Slavko, can a dog be retarded, say, like a person?"

I don't know what was the answer, but my father made a serious face, nodded, and kept repeating, "I see! Yes, I see."

And that was it. From then on, I felt like I was having a retarded younger brother. Had he been of normal intelligence, he would've stayed a dog. But this way, when the retardation appeared, he somehow became a creature closer to me, someone who no longer was in the dog domain, but who also entered the human domain. I thought if I had a brother, we would've been equally intelligent, except that my brother, at least for a while, would have less hair on his body.

Having a retarded dog was difficult for both my parents and me. I felt they suffered. But, they loved him. We had to keep him chained in the yard. He turned that grassy patch of the yard into a dusty circle of dirt within the reach of his chain. He planted shit in the dirt and occasionally chased pigeons that came to eat out of his bowl. He was a bird-dog after all. Not even the drastic lack of intelligence could annul the genes.

Besides, nothing in our home was like in the picture books. Neither did my parents love each other, nor did we have a sensible dog. One evening when my mother and I came back from our walk, we heard two shots. We thought my father had killed Sam. Before this happened, we had noticed that the dog ran to his doghouse in a panic every time the small bathroom window that overlooked the yard opened. Something wasn't making sense. Then we realized that my father, when we weren't at home, shot blanks out of his hunting rifle through the window in order to get the dog used to the sound of the gun, so he could take him hunting. True, he removed buckshot from the shell, so there was no real danger, but he nevertheless shot his gun. The poor thing



that didn't know to come back when he heard the whistle was supposed to become a gundog. That's how my father expressed his sorrow: by shooting blanks.

We couldn't even teach him not to pull on his leash. So, on one occasion, when she took him for a hike to Mt. Medvednica, Sam unexpectedly pulled the leash and my mother lost her step on a mild slope and landed on her left arm. She didn't fell hard, she only leaned on her arm. We were surprised that her arm broke. We didn't know she had bone cancer. The retarded dog revealed it to us. God chose one strange messenger.