

Renato Baretić

Hotel Grand

Translated by Ivana Ostojećić

CONDOLEEZO wrote:

I barely recognised it. The dark grey stone slabs covering the ground floor façade have been sanded to a dazzling white, and the rest, all the four floors, were painted some weird colour, something between pink and ochre, an off-white glowing brighter than the sun itself on a spring morning. All the upstairs windows were framed with white beams and shrouded with green shutters, blazing as only plastic fake shutter by the sea can blaze. Everything glimmered, as though ashamed of its grey, sultry past. My eyes, I suspect, sparkled too. But that thing in them is just a reflection. A reflection of less than nine months that defined the course of my life.

The terrace was repaved and fenced as well, and the distressed metal tables and chairs were replaced by lightweight bamboo and rattan woven lounge sets. If it weren't for that too small parking lot and the very same manholes in the very same spots, if they had cut those twelve palm trees and plucked out the oleanders, if down below there wasn't the same beach as before, if there weren't for the semi-circular awning above the entrance to the café and the neon, albeit new, sign that said "GRAND Hotel", I would probably enter the place like any other hotel so far.

Room 311, as I suspected, was no longer there. Neither was room 312. There were no numbers after 307 on the third floor, the key shelf said. To get that fourth star, the new owners, among other things, had to tear down the thin, hollowish partitions the communists used to turn almost every room in the old Austrian-Hungarian building into two. A little bit of planks, nails and wallpapers, breaking out a door from the corridor – and voila a new accommodation capacity.

– In that case, anything on the third floor – words barely left my mouth. That was my biggest fear coming here, not to be able to utter a word.

With all the stars they have, there might as well be 44 of them, but putting such a girl, so short and with an ass the size of a steamer ship, to work at the reception desk, means that the management doesn't have a partisan clue. Back then ("my" olden days?), a woman with such complexion, so short, with such a huge butt and bitten nails couldn't have even come near the Grand... Old Martin, with a glass eye, the bruised and swollen nose and all the cracked capillaries on it, was seven times sexier than this girl.

Nothing free on the third. The fair, she says and shrugs, the sport and nautical fair. Only two empty rooms in the entire hotel, one on the second and one of the fourth floor. I jolted when I realised I was staring for ages now in that too broader white parting in the middle of her head. Second or fourth? Up or down? Above or below?

– I'll take the second floor room – I mumbled and took out the ID card I prepared from the inside pocket of my raincoat. Above is crap and if I stay below, I will at least be able to hear someone's steps above. Perhaps even the beds creaking around two in the morning, perhaps an echo. Fourteen years old. If they had torn down the chipboard and plywood partitions, the real walls, the firm and hundred-year-old ones, must have preserved something. Quietly, patiently waiting to be asked. And they need not be asked, maybe they will recognise me immediately?

JULIO wrote:

Sorry, old man, did you get the wrong blog or something? Double-check, please. NHF, but you seem to burst in out of nowhere. Your nick is great though, and the post is cool, too. What is it, a novel, a short story? Sounds a bit like King's *The Shining*.

CONDOLEEZO wrote:

I didn't get the wrong blog, no, and it doesn't sound like *The Shining*. At least it shouldn't. Thanks for the suggestion.

JULIO wrote:

OK, you didn't get the wrong blog and it doesn't sound like King. But I still can't figure out what is it that you're doing on my blog? Like, there's a bunch of people here and that's cool, that's what I wanted, but they came here to comment on my writing, and you're not. You have a thing of your own, so the best would be to start your own blog and do your thing there. If you don't know how to do it, I'll explain, huh?

TAMIA wrote:

Man, I first thought I was on the wrong blog too! Julio, you seem to have a cute tenant over here ;))

CONDOLEEZO wrote:

See how the chicks get everything! Julio, I don't want a blog of my own. Who knows how many months would pass before someone stumbled on it and then told a friend, if he liked it, and then the friend wouldn't have time, blah blah... That's why I moved in with you, there's plenty of room for both of us, plenty of readership, versed and critical, I won't bother you much and I'll definitely get answers to some issues bothering me about writing. Take this as a compliment: I've been surfing literary blogs for months and, there you go, you're the only one whose wagon I decided to jump on. I don't snore, I don't fart, I can make coffee if needed... I've never written anything like this my whole life and I'm really nervous. Could you please let me be for a few weeks, just to see people's reaction and how I respond to their criticism? What do you say?

I've been reading your stuff and comments and I think that a) you made a horrible mistake by blowing off Lana for Christmas, she is just a chaste girl with a real crush on you, she just wants you to be a tad more sophisticated in your writing (believe me, such girls are the best choice for intelligent men!) and b) your story *Seconds*, the sex in the last elevator coming down the first Twin Tower a minute before the whole horror, wow, that's the best thing ever read from a Croat in the past 20 years, I mean it! Without further delay, this might have been the crucial reason why I decided to move in with you, of all people. That and, I'd say, the most coherent guest commentators.

Fear not, I won't breathe down your neck every day.

TAMIA wrote:

Julio, not only is your tenant good-looking, but he is also hitting on you. Come on, let him be, he's really cute :)))

II

– You like it, huh? – asked Ivona, gently scratching her son on his head with the tips of her nails. She occasionally caught a thin wisp of hair between her fingers and pulled it softly all the way to the ends, letting it fall back on his head hair by hair. Filip briefly nods, with his eyes closed and his right cheek on his pillow, and his mother laughs:

– I'm not asking about the scratching, I know you like that, I know it even better than you. The room, do you like it? It's the first time you have your own room.

The boy silently sighs and draws the sheet over his shoulders without opening his eyes.

– You should have a room of your own, you'll be ten in a few weeks. We can't all sleep together anymore, you wake up every night when Dad comes to bed and then you kick us and throw off blankets and stuff for the rest of the night, and I...

– Dad snores – Filip finally speaks up, still with his eyes closed.

– He snores because he is tired. He works really hard down in the club, until late at night. Besides, all the men snore. You started to do it too, you know?

Filip loved to hear his Mom talk. She seemed to talk somehow nicer with him, more properly than with others. Except when she was angry, then she sounded like a real Bosnian woman, not a trace of these wholesome, rounded, completely uttered words. Like in school, only with soft Zagreb accents instead of the Dalmatian ones. Filip loved Zagreb. He loved it even though he was there only once and of all the things he saw he remembered only the skyscraper the grandparents he never met used to live in. Mom too with them, a long time ago. The skyscraper was the highest in the world, higher than the whole Zagreb, he remembered well. "On which storey did you live?" he asked her, with his nose pressed against the window, while the tram was storming across the bridge. "On the last one," she lied to him, "and it's floor, not storey." Of all the things she was showing him in her native city, Filip was interested only in trams and skyscrapers. That was why she decided to tell him the little white lie.

And now she is pregnant, in autumn she is having a little baby and Filip will sleep alone in his room, and everything will be weirder still.

– Besides – Ivona continued – we're right behind the wall, there's nothing to be afraid of.

– Can we at least make some kind of door? – asked Filip, opening an eye to the wall.

– No – mother smiled. – The wall is made of stone, it's very thick. And even if it weren't, you know this is not ours. You can't break door holes and connect rooms in a hotel the way you want to, right? One day we'll have our house again and when they'll be building it, you'll decide how many doors it'll have and where, Mommy promises. My boy Fipi...

He didn't like it when she called him that. That was how he used to pronounce his name when he was little and only began to talk. His father always called him his real full name, whether he was strict or kind, but for some reason mother liked the "Fipi" and she called him that all until he told her he didn't like to be called that, since he was no longer a baby. Since then he was Fipi only when Mom got very emotional and it just came out.

– I'm... - he started and then stopped.

– Come on, tell me.

– Imscaredtobealone! – he blurted out and closed both his eyes again.

– What are you scared of, sweetie? Tell Mom, really. Come on.

– I can't...

– Come on, don't be a girl now. Tell me, Mom's here. What are you scared of?

– Pussies – he said quietly and closed his eyes even more strongly. – Not the Pussies, but what they dream in the night. They dream and they scream. And then what they dream of comes to their dream and a male voice is heard too, different every time, and it just growls and moans and laughs... That's why I kick and hit you.

– Darling – said Ivona after a few seconds. Her eyes were closed too and her fingers petrified, tangled in her son's hair. – Look here... First, it's not nice to call them that and don't say this ever again. Don't ever call them... Pussies... Those are good but unhappy girls, far away from home, even farther than we. I've never heard them scream at night, but if you do, and I believe you, try... Did it ever occur to you that they might be dreaming something joyful, not scary? That they are actually having fun?

Filip kept quiet. He was ashamed to tell his mother all the things that came to his mind. He knew the Pussies are here because of something bad they did where they ran away from, Ukraine, Krajina, wherever, and that it haunts them, that their dreams are inhabited by spectres and conscience. They came here to forget all this, that's why they dance like crazy, naked as if they were down on the beach, every night, to chase this out of them, but nothing helps when they go to bed and try to sleep. That's why they're here only for a short while, and then they ran someplace else, because they are seeking salvation from what haunts them when they're trying to sleep like normal people, without ghosts laughing, groaning and moaning.

– They don't have scary dreams, they just... – mother continued, and then she was interrupted by an uproar from the corridor. Upstairs, from the last room or the one before, a woman's cry first came out, followed by commotion, door opening, door closing and then hurried feet stomping up the stairs.

Ivona was quiet, she briefly closed her eyes, then came up, and fastened the belt on the satin robe she was wearing over the nightgown.

– Stay here – she said, pointing her index finger at him. – Mommy is just going to the door.

Filip also hated it when she addressed herself in third person. Whenever she said “Mom is” instead of “I am”, or “Mom will” instead of “I will”, he knew she was hiding something from him, she was all of a sudden again perceiving him as a baby, too immature to comprehend what was going on. She opened the door, leaning with her left shoulder carefully on the door frame and holding the handle with the other, looking out, spinning her head. Filip silently gets out of the bed and sneaks on his mother, squatting by her feet and peeking down the corridor. He was dazzled by the photo camera flash, and another, and another... With his eyes closed, he shuddered to hear his father’s angry voice:

– You devious motherfucker, didn’t I tell you to control yourself, didn’t I? Half an hour ago I told you that, you cheap shit! When I was giving you condoms, I told you! Beating my pussies, you piece of shit you?!?

At the other end of the corridor father was holding a bent man with a trimmed beard by the hair. The light that came from the open room to the gloom revealed the face of the man Filip only saw a couple of times so far on TV. Crouching and frightened, in his underwear and socks, helpless before the father’s hand pulling his hair on the nape, to Filip the man seemed like a caught lizard with a white stomach, squeezed by the neck.

– You too, get over here! – father yelled to the open room. – Get over here, let’s take a picture of what he’s doing, you sadistic piece of shit!

Galja slowly stepped out of the room to the gloomy corridor, in tears, with her upper lip swollen and her nose bleeding, holding her palm over her right eye. Martin again flashed with his camera.

– I never want to see your ass around here again, do you hear me? – father continued. – If I see you once more around my bar, I’ll fuckin’ scalp you with your own fingernails, you hear me? Get out!

– Sadistic piece of shit – Ivona hissed, while stocky Martin was passing down the corridor before her, holding the man with the beard with one hand and his crinkled clothes in the other. Father was treading behind them, gave mother a kiss while he was passing and said:

– It’s okay, it’s under control. Go see the girl, calm her down, I’ll send you some ice from downstairs. And what are you doing here? – he asked, seeing Filip crouching between the doorframe and his mother’s legs.

– Would you look at that! Hurry back to bed, not a word! I’ll count to five and then I’m turning off the lights, you got it? You have your own room, your own bed and get to sleep! One, two...

The boy swiftly went back to bed and covered up to his ears. He couldn’t wait for mother to turn off the light and go out; through the half-open window, downstairs from the hotel parking lot, Martin’s threatening voice was rising up. As soon as mother closed the door behind her, Filip stood up and took a peek through the window: the guy with the beard was trying to put his trousers on, scared, in a shirt and a jacket, and Martin danced around him with big long steps, taking his picture.

– I fly like a butterfly and I sting like a bee! – he repeated his favourite catchphrase and then kicked the poor guy in the butt, leaving him to wiggle on the pavement.

In the morning, on their way to school, Filip asked him:

- Who was the guy last night?
- What guy last night? – Martin pretended.
- The one you kicked in the butt.
- Oh that guy! You don't know who he is?
- I don't know his name, I only know he's a politician.
- There you go. That's all you have to know about him.
- What was he doing at our place?
- He came to see the pu... the girls dancing in the club, like everyone else.
- Not that, what was he doing upstairs at our place?

Martin stopped and placed his bulky, rugged hand on his shoulder. He closed his right eye behind the sunglasses only for a short while, thinking what to say. Finally he spoke:

– He lost his way, so we kicked him out. He got drunk and thought he was home, so he went to bed, just imagine it, at our place!

The boy bends his head a little and moves on, and Martin smiles, happy that he managed to satisfy the nosy boy's curiosity with a clean and simple answer. He likes his employer's son, but these conversations with the kid on the way to school and back home, have become increasingly tiresome day by day. Not because of Filip, the boy was intelligent and at times quite an interesting interlocutor, but because his parents forbade him to mention in front of the boy, in any way possible, what was really going on in the hotel, especially on the third floor. "We'll tell him ourselves when the time comes," they said. And Filip was growing more and more curious and started asking more and more questions around which fifty-year-old Martin, a plump ex-heavyweight boxer with the left glass eye had to flutter like a butterfly, trying to sting like a bee with the right words. And words have never been his thing, at least not as much as his fists.

– But why did he then beat the new... girl? He did beat her, right?

If he could choose between such questions coming from Filip and a police raid that would arrest everything and everyone from the Grand Hotel at five o'clock in the morning, Martin would think briefly and then quite certainly go for the other option. He again had to stop and close his eyes a bit:

– I told you he thought he was home. And then the drunken idiot probably thought this was his wife. And you shouldn't beat women, mark my words. Enough with the asshole and the questions. You have your mother and father, ask them.

– Just one? Did he live in Krajina before?

– I beg your pardon?! What Krajina, kid? In fact... yes, fuck, wait, yes, he was born there and worked there, all until three years ago, until the election. How do you know this?

– I don't. It just seemed possible.

– Seemed? Oh well... but be careful what you're talking, it's not called Krajina, only *chetniks* call it that. It's all Croatia, has been and always will be. No Krajina, understood?

– But why then our girls don't speak Croatian, but Krajinian? If they're from Krajina, they must be from Croatia too, right?

Martin's sight clouded without even blinking.

– I told you everything, ask your mother and father. We are friends, you and me, but there are certain things only parents can explain. And what they say, that's how it is. "Honour thy father and thy mother", that's... which God's Commandment?

Filip shrugs:

– Can't remember now.

– Well, if you don't remember, you can ask your Ma and Pa that too. Now go to school, everybody else is already in. What's today, Thursday? Four classes then, I'll be here at eleven thirty to get you.

Filip runs across the school courtyard. Martin's gaze sees him in and he turns back only when the boy is already inside the building. He takes out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and throws one in his mouth with a well-trained movement. He lights it, inhales deep, then sets out to the hotel. He made a decision, this has to stop. Just has to.

On the crossroads with the first by-way, a familiar red Škoda stops in the middle of the crossing. The passenger window was down. Martin draws closer:

– Do tell.

– A big raid is coming to your place tonight at four, the biggest ever.

– Bullshit.

– Fine, wait and see.

Martin opens the door and swiftly, as though he was thirty years younger and sixty pounds lighter, jumps on the passenger seat and spins the window handle:

– Don't make it like the last time.

– I'm serious – the driver continues. – SATs, dogs, the whole thing...

– Is there a new report? Like really fresh, from last night or this morning? Did someone mention... - Martin makes a pause, then pronounces the name of the bearded politician.

– What's he got to do with it? No one reported, last night two guys came, one from Zagreb and the other from Čakovec, out of the blue. I was on call, there was no report, until seven.

Martin sighs, takes out a bundle of notes from his inside pocket, separates five hundred marks and gives them to the driver, low, between the hand brake and the gear shift:

– Listen, inspector, if you fuck up this time like last time, if nothing happens, tomorrow you give me back three times as much, you clear?

– And what if it does? Will you give me that much?

– Ask the boss – Martin responds and gets out of the car in a haste, looks around and, quietly, only by pressing it, closes the door. He lights another cigarette and sets off, while the Škoda turned around the corner behind his back. A raid, and a big one, he said to himself. Probably someone in Čakovec spilled the beans, or just shook them. Or Matošić again lost a nasty sum playing cards and he just needs cash...

And then he returned to the earlier thoughts about how this has to stop. It simply has to. The kid started asking questions way too tricky, now they put him in a separate room, who knows what he'll see and experience in the nights to come, and tomorrow it's him he is going to ask questions. The two little idiots on the door go to sleep in the morning as if they worked their asses off and you, my dear Martin, take the boy to school and stop every three steps to close your blind eye while figuring out the answers... No, it's over, this has got to stop.

He entered the hotel round the back, turned left by the elevator and came down to the basement. As always, dozens of times a day, he thought of the boss's words, spoken the day they were starting this business: "It's as though the Austrian emperor himself designed this place for a whorehouse!" Indeed, if someone instead of 'ground floor' pressed the 'basement' button, he would turn up downstairs in a narrow hallway, not bigger than a toilet booth, in front of locked metal door. He wouldn't have anywhere to go but to the elevator and back up. On the other side of the door was the nightclub's restroom and on them, on the toilet side, the sign said "Storage". Each of the girls had in her purse a key and opened the way to herself and the client to the elevator and some of the rooms on the third floor. Completely inconspicuously, both the dancers and the patrons could sneak out and, from the toilet, instead of the main entrance and past the reception, go and do the thing the Grand Hotel was actually famous for.

Martin unlocked the door, letting them close on their own behind him, urinated, washed his hands and dried them, then went on and squinted in the darkness of the nightclub. The cleaner was vacuuming the floor between the tables in the auditorium, and in the right-hand side, in a booth number four, Dominik was sitting and smoking pensively, copying something from one notebook to the other. His long white shirt was fully unbuttoned and on the table, by the two notebooks was a bowtie on an elastic strap. There were three coffee cups, a bottle of mineral water and a half-drunk big glass of orange juice, probably spiked, as usual, with half a decilitre of vodka.

– Boss, I’ve got two bad news – he said, sitting down in the booth without asking.

– Let me guess, one is that there’s an ugly raid coming tonight?

– I’ve been told just a second ago in the street by Matošić, that inspector friend of mine. Like three minutes ago. How come you know that already, for crying out loud?!

Although he was ten years older than the boss, Martin was not on a first name basis with him, it was a sign of respect for the employer who recognised his worth and paid him more than decently. After a few weeks, Dominik suggested they call each other by name, but Martin said no and thanked him with the statement “A boss is a boss!”

– Well, this Bosnian guy has some strings of his own, you know – said Dominik and winked across the raised glass.

– Well, there goes my 500 marks.

– Nah, don’t worry, he’ll pay you back, or I will, maybe as soon as tomorrow, depending on what happens. Besides, it’s a good thing to get the same information from different sides. And what’s the other bad news?

– You see...

Martin’s face suddenly dismayed, and the boss’s followed. Both remained silent for a few seconds.

– What is it? Speak up! – Dominik hissed, suddenly more worried than before over the raid.

– I can’t do this anymore, boss...

Dominik carefully alleviates his voice and facial expression:

– Martin, you poor devil, is there something you can’t do?

– Your boy Filip. He is such a wonderful fellow, so smart... Too smart, my friend, that’s what it is! He started to ask more and more questions I can’t and shouldn’t answer. He seems cool and he stings like a wasp! Less than a mile to school and every day I go back shattered as if I was chased by wolves.

The boss’s smile returns:

– You had me there, real bad, you know? I thought, Martin is quitting, and what happened? My big man Martin is scared shitless over a kid!

– I’m not scared shitless, it’s just...

– Come on, please, suck it up until the holidays, it’s – what? – a month, a month and a half, let’s not make a big deal out of it for us and the kid, what say you?

– But he’s been asking questions about all this, more and more, every day, and I don’t know what to tell him! – Martin cries.

- Just take it a bit longer until his school ends, I beg of you. Then he'll be home all the time and we'll have to tell him everything finally, my wife and me. Please.
- Okay, fine - said Martin after a short break, then he raised his index finger seriously - but only until the school ends. Afterwards nothing, I can accompany him and watch him and talk, but no skeletons in the closet?
- It's a deal, my friend.
- Great, now what about tonight? What do reckon? A false alarm or a real one?
- Remember how Comrade Tito always used to say: "Let's live like it's going to be peace forever, let's be prepared like the war is starting tomorrow."
- Meaning what, ready?
- You betcha.
- Okay, will we tell the girls?
- We have to tell them. Tonight they're off, they just dance. Tell Oksana as soon as she wakes up, to tell the others. I don't want to see a single condom in the rooms, or handcuffs, whips, Vaseline, pumps, anything, tell them to put it all together and give it to you, and then I'll put it somewhere safe. If they find any drugs on any of them, I'll kill her with my bare hands, you tell them that.

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Nothing, nothing at all in the room could evoke any memory, any remembrance. Maybe just the ceiling height, but such high ceilings I saw plenty in my lifetime, not just in the Grand. Even the window view was entirely unfamiliar: the south-east hotel wing overlooks only dense tree tops and a few pieces of someone's reddish grey roof between the branches. Only a narrow pavement is down, between new concrete slabs, grass hasn't even sprung yet.

The beds are placed in parallel, each against a wall, it's no longer that roommates, if they wish, can lie on their backs and face each other if they raise their heads, or touch feet.

Instead of a chandelier with three darkened arms and cone-shaped glass shades, there was a flat, slightly oblique ceiling light with a thin plywood edge in a cherry tree hue, the same as all the woodwork in this room.

Which means that it's quite certain that the boiler room is no longer the way it used to be, my room for my plays. When I discovered it, behind the unlocked door in the basement and below eight metal stairs which I used to come down more carefully and slower than the Little Mermaid, so that they don't rattle and have me found out, I invented a new game I was completely obsessed with for a while. In the middle of the room, three construction pipes lay on an equal distance, the ones used for scaffolding, and with thick pieces of planks on the top and the bottom, to keep the existing distance from the ceiling to the floor, making sure the hotel doesn't collapse. And around them a bunch of pipes, at least thirty of them, thick, medium and very thin ones, vertical and horizontal and slanted, as though they were hiding a mystery. I started to search familiar outlines in them and finally identified - letters. This is T, this and

this is L, this is H... One day I realised that, if I bent my head to the left, focus, squint and then blur my vision, the thing in the corner, composed with the joints between the tiles rising above the floor in a single line, can look like an E. T, L, H, E... Only O was missing, but it must be somewhere, probably in the round boiler. Hotel, this is H, O, T, E, L and that's why the pipes are set the way they are and ramified, down here, where the hotel draws life from, just like our body draws life from the heart, as we were just learning in our science class in school. For a few days I was simply sitting on the penultimate iron stair and imagining what a boiler room looks like in a skyscraper: S, K, Y, again S, C, R, A, P, E, R...

Then I started to identify the pipes, separate the warm ones, through which life flows out, from the cold ones, through which it returns dead unless it leaked out and vanished along the way. At first I tried to touch them, until I burnt my fingers on one which was as cold as a pebble from the sea the day before. Then I became more careful, having realised that some of them warm up and cool down at different points during the day. I came up with a good trick: spitting. I spat on each of them and knew straight away what kind they were – hot, warm or cold. If the pipe was hot, the spit would stick on the spot and in a second or two develop a distinctive smell, but if the bubbles, if you look carefully, started to swell and darken, it would stop; on the cold ones the spit would slide a few inches down, leaving a dark trace behind, and then it would stop as if it was asking you: "Well? Now what?"

I realised after a while that the temperature in the pipes changed in a regular rhythm, and in less than a month I was bored of it. I could have, without being asked, draw a very precise table of the lifting and dropping of temperature in each of the pipes throughout the day, with a five per cent tolerance due to unexpected situations.

Then I moved on.

Well then, people. Waiting for your comments on part one.

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TORCIDA wrote:

Julio, who's this guy? Is it you, are you just fucking with us, or is it really an intruder? If it's you, this is great, and if it's really a tenant – not half bad either. For a start.

JULIO wrote:

It's not me, can't you see my style is completely different. Condoleezo, do speak up, don't just wait. If you're only waiting for comments – here you are:

You're the boy Filip, right?

Is this autobiographic prose then?

If it is, why do you 'explode' yourself in an 'omniscient' narrator? Why don't you write it all in an 'ich-form', like memoirs? Or, on the other hand, why don't you write it all as the 'omniscient'?

And finally, the pipe thing is a nice 'poetic image', but I'm not sure it works that way in real life. The boiler room, the spit, all that. I'm no boiler man, but it doesn't quite ring true...

TAMIA wrote:

Julio, you're full of shit. The boy's doing a great job. And I don't give a damn if it's autobiographic or not, and what it looks like when you spit on a cold or hot pipe. It's good, it's finely woven for now, it floats his boat. In cold or warm waters. Go, Condy, go! ☺

NEMO wrote:

All this fine, but so much was already written and filmed about kids in whorehouses that I really don't know what's more to be said... But whatever, Condoleeza, keep up the good work, whatever will be will be. To be honest (Julio, NHF), it came as a refreshment on this blog. The guy neither plays a smartass in the text, nor he devotes in too long theoretical explanations what he's really trying to say. He just writes and that's OK.

ZOKY wrote:

Will there be any fucking?

TAMIA wrote:

Zoky, would you get off this blog until further notice, we'll inform you if something happens. OK? Condoleeza, how long does it take to get a new piece of the action?

CONDOLEEZO wrote:

I don't know, Tamia, I'll try to be quick. Thanks for your support, and thank you too, Julio, for free accommodation. Talk soon!

TAMIA wrote:

Talk so on!

Hey, did you really live in a brothel or did Julio actually get totally hooked on the story?

III

Never before was Filip as frightened as he was that night, perhaps not even when he, his mother and his father, before dawn, with knapsacks on their backs, watched from the forest as the mujahidin threw in hand grenades through every window of their family house and the Belvedere restaurant.

He was unable to fall asleep, the silence trembled around him, threatening with laughter or screams of some of the Pussies jumping out of the trembles, followed by the growls of their persecutors. Waiting for this to happen, he fell asleep a little before midnight, covering his head. He had a horrible dream: he is running across a field through tall grass reaching almost up to his armpits; he is running towards the forest at the edge of the meadow, the forest is salvation, and before him, with each new step, swarms of black butterflies fly out; he is running on, but the forest is always distant, he can't seem to reach it, and the butterflies grow in number and manage to take refuge in the forest, turn around and watch, fluttering their wings, if Filip will manage to get out; they are all lined in the shade of the nearest trees and now observe his torment; all of a sudden he too removed from the ground, swayed his arms and in a blink of an eye flew across the entire meadow all the way to the forest, facelong through a wall of gentle, dusty wings; then the butterflies flew back to the empty meadow and again hid in the grass and he remained alone; he had to rest so he lay on his back between the tree trunks; then four giant, vertical black butterflies with human faces appeared before him; the slow wing flutter kept them in that position, creating a flickering fence around him, and their unfamiliar faces only gave away an air of malevolence; Filip asked them something, tried to scream out an answer, but the butterflies only stretched their human lips into growingly broad smiles, all until one of them, the one on the right, opened wide and showed a long, moist tongue with dripping saliva; the tip of this wet tongue licked the boy across the beard, right cheek, forehead...

Filip woke up in horror, with gaping eyes, and was just about to cry "Mom!", but then he was left stunned and speechless, seeing before him, instead of a monstrous butterfly, the jaw of a huge German shepherd licking his face. At first he was transfixed, and the next second he jumped away onto the pillow and curled up in the corner, screaming and pulling his blanket to his mouth. He was shaking like the wing of the smallest black butterfly from his dream. The dog barked loudly in his direction and climbed his one leg on the bed, but the policeman dragged him back:

– Down boy, Bongo! Down!

Ivona, in a nightgown, suddenly barged in the room, clearing away the policemen:

– Get the hell out of here, you motherfuckers!!! – she screamed. – This is my child, you bastards, shame on you, don't you fear God?!

She sat on the bed, held her son tight in her arms and started to calm him down with kisses and whispering.

– It's alright, it's all fine, my baby, it's all good.

Three policemen left the room, and the one with the dog was closing the door behind him:

– Should I leave the light on?

– Get out!!!

The policeman angrily, disappointed with such a response to his kindness, hit the light switch and slammed the door.

As soon as it got dark, Filip silently plunged his left hand fingernails in his mother's back, real hard, as though he wanted to pluck her shoulder blades out. It took a good quarter of an hour before his grasp started to release itself. Ivona carefully came out of the embrace, lay on her back and let tears silently stream down her cheeks, towards her ears. Blackbirds were warming up to sing outside, soon a new day will rise, a new day, a new day, she thought, a new day, a mew day, there's no point in crying now, she'll cry tomorrow...

She roused, leaned against her elbow and wiped her face with her wrist when the doorknob clicked and creaked. On the dark wall a thin line of yellow light appeared and started slowly to expand. When the long, stretched sound of old creaking hinges finally stopped, Ivona recognised Dominik's outline in counterlight.

– Is everything OK? – he whispered.

– Yes – she replied even more quietly.

– Did they scare him a lot? – asked Dominik, tiptoeing to the bed.

– Yes – she answered in the same whisper, and pulled her hand out of the blanket and stretched it to her husband. He gently took it, bent down and kissed her on the hand. Then he sat on the edge of the bed.

– Are they gone? – asked Ivona.

– Yes, it's all good. I mocked them downstairs and even bought them a drink.

– Are the girls okay too?

– Yes, they only asked about Galya, the girl from last night, why she is swollen, where did she get the bruises and the cut on her lip. I said she fell down while she was practicing, she still new here, and she split herself in pieces. Man, how I wanted to tell them the truth!

They both shut their mouth when Filip first wiggled, and then turned to the other side, facing the wall.

– Listen, let me just take the shit from under the bed. You stay here with the kid... And how's my baby?

– asked Dominik, placing his palm on his wife's stomach.

– Good, not jumping. What shit?

– Nah – he whispered, knelt and pushed his hand deep under Filip's bed – the stuff that belongs to the girls, so Martin can give it back to them.

He pulled out two big briefcases, kissed his wife on the lips and stood up.

– You bastard, how can you put this under the child's bed...

– Where else should I put it? You tell me and I'll put it there! – he whispered and slowly left the room, put one briefcase down and quietly closed the door.

Ivona moved closer to Filip, kissed him on the back and gently hugged him over his waist.

*

I think I was the only boy in class who didn't spit during the break, when they let us out of the school. Spitting was, I guess, a proof of maturity; if you didn't at least spit a little in the side or in front after every statement, you weren't cool. I wanted to be cool too, but I knew I had to keep my spit for the Grand, the boiler room and the door.

“Look at the little Bosniac, he can't even spit right!” they said, but I didn't care. I knew what they didn't: when you spit in the hinges, the door stop screaming for a short while! I heard this from a drunken guy downstairs, in the bar by the reception, he was telling to another similar guy how he used to steal eggs from the henhouse as a kid. I couldn't wait for a chance to try this out on the door to my room, day and day out something came in my way and at night I was scared. And this door squeaked, opening and closing, like a trident dragged by the devil across the road paved with good intentions.

That afternoon my old man was, as per usual, downstairs in the club, and Mom took three girls to the hairdresser's and gynaecologist's. The others were either asleep or downstairs practicing pole dancing. The entire corridor was deserted and quiet, just like I needed. I prepared my science textbook and put it on the floor. I opened the squealing door halfway and moved the book closer. I put my back in it as much as I could, I lifted the door and then tried to place the book beneath it with my foot. But I turned it the wrong way – with the pages to the door instead of the spine, so it wouldn't slide in, it either opened or bubbled up under pressure. I put the door down, turned the book and gave it another try. On my third try I made it, and then the book turned out to be too thin and too soft: the door flattened it and the gaps in the hinges increased only by a millimetre. You can spit your heart out, but nothing will go in... I again lifted the door and removed the science book. Instead, I put down my Croatian textbook, twice as thick and, again lifting the door, slid it at an angle, so that the door lies on the hard spine. Now that was something, a good half a centimetre gap in the hinges, just what I needed. I moved the chair near, climbed up and spat in the upper hinge, twice, then the middle and then finally in the bottom. I quickly re-lifted the door and kicked the book and then tested the deed. Left – right, front – back, open – close; no creaking indeed! The only thing missing was the chicken and the eggs to pick up...

I'm lying on my bed dressed, with my palms below my head, and watching the new door. It doesn't squeal, I listened, unlocking it with a key card. And they call this a door! There's only one door, the one I just spat in, until Zele appeared.

*

– Did they scare you last night, huh? – Martin asked, confused, even somewhat worried by the fact the kid hasn't uttered a word in over twenty steps.

– Who, me? Why would a dog scare me?

Martin smiles contentedly and rubs his palm through the boy's hair, disheveling him:

– That’s a good boy!

– But Mom wouldn’t tell me why the police and the dog came – Filip continues. – And I won’t ask you, because I know you won’t tell me.

– Well fuck... - Martin quietly mumbles, turning his head away from the boy.

– I mean, if the girls, our girls, if they are Chetniks from Krajina, why didn’t they pick them up when they came? Right? Look at me, who am I trying to talk to...

Martin lost it. I dragged Filip by the shoulder and turned him face front, then kneeled to be on the same level with him:

– What’s your first class today?

– Science, why?

– What grade will you have in this science, the final grade?

– A, definitely.

– Positive?

– Absolutely.

– Double positive?

– Even more.

– Great, now let’s sit here and have some juice.

– Where?!

– Have some juice. Let’s go get some juice, in a café, you and me, but only if you promise you won’t tell your folks a word I say.

– Come on.

Filip was thrilled with the offer.

– You sure you won’t tell?

– I’m sure, let’s go!

– If you tell them I told you, I’ll lose my job and you and I will never see each other again, you got that?

– I got it, let’s go! – the boy cheerfully chirped.

They sat in the farthest corner on the empty café terrace, and Martin's shadow under the low morning sun fully obscured the boy's silhouette on the other end of the table. They were quiet for a second and then Martin mustered up courage:

– Look here – he said pensively and took a deep breath through the nose.

– Gooood morniiiiing! – the waiter shouts from the door and rushes towards them and Martin dejectedly exhales all the air over his saggy lips. As they were sitting, he realised he got himself into trouble and it won't be easy to dive out of it. All because of his damned nervousness, this nervousness will be the death of him. Filip laughs and covers his mouth with his hand.

– Good morning, one espresso and one yellow refreshment, as always? – the waiter asked and Martin only nodded. – Fine, and what about our young gentleman over there?

– What's yellow refreshment? I'd like that.

– No way! – Martin opposes. – You'll get juice, no ice. Is that okay?

Filip shrugs.

They kept quiet all until the waiter brought them drinks and retreated in the café.

– Do you know what sex is? – Martin asks all of a sudden, with no introduction. Filip freezes, suddenly he became terribly embarrassed.

– Wh... Why?

– Because I'm asking you. Yes or no?

– Yes... - Filip answered, looking at the closest tamaris tree.

– No, you don't! – Martin snaps and slams his palm on the table. – Sex is a devil and a bad luck and the curse of the male sex. Men will do all kinds of silly and stupid things for it, outrages and crimes and all. There are lucky men, who marry a good girl and stay with her all their lives and don't need anyone else. Like your father, for example, but such are very few. Most men want more women, they can't have enough of them. They are willing to do anything, even pay a woman they don't know to be kissed and hugged a bit. Pay serious cash.

Martin stops and takes a sip of his 'yellow refreshment', orange juice with a lot of vodka. Filip was looking at him pensively.

– And that's it for you. There are women who want to do it for the money and then they gather and make a, let's say, a company of sorts, where men come, pay and spend some time with them, they kiss and hug and go home. Well, you see, our hotel is one such company.

– What do we do then?

– Who is we?

– Well you, me, Mom, Dad...

– What would we do, for crying out loud? Nothing.

Martin puts one leg across the other with unease and moves his shoulders to warm the up. “You got into this yourself, now find your way out!”, he thought.

– We just make sure everything runs according to the plan, everyone’s satisfied and all that.

– Why do they scream and moan?

– Eh... Well... I didn’t hear them scream, you did?

– Yes, almost every night.

– It must be for the joy, or to entertain a customer, to make him laugh. Did you hear them laughing?

– Yes, both men and women.

– Well, there you go then.

Filip thinks deeply, and Martin follows: he sensed there was a hard question coming, perhaps even the hardest.

– Is this called a brothel?

– What is called?

– Our hotel, is it a brothel?

– Where did you get that, a brothel?

Filip remains silent for a second and then looks at him directly in the eyes:

– They’re teasing me in school that I, like, live in a brothel. Is that it?

– Who’s teasing you, show me the bastards, I’ll take them home to their parents who brought them up so well...

– Wait, let it go, it doesn’t matter the idiots tease me, I couldn’t care less. But is it true that it’s called that? A brothel?

The kid sounded way too serious for his age. Martin took out a pair of sunglasses from his pocket and quickly put them on his nose. All of a sudden, for a moment, he felt like he could shed a tear on one eye, without even knowing why.

– I don’t want to lie to you – he said when he pulled himself together and took another sip. – There are people who call it that. A brothel, there. But look, our hotel is not an actual bro...

– Stop right there – Filip interrupted him decisively. – This is too much as it is, now I first have to set this straight in my head.

For the next ten minutes they sat speechless. Filip sipped little sips of juice on his straw and gazed between the trees in the park, and Martin stared at him over the brim of his glasses and tried to imagine

what this head might look like on the inside and the setting straight of everything that came inside it now. Will every word find the right pocket, the right letterbox? What will he remember and what will he forget, which piece of information will get lost along the way and which will end up on the wrong address...

– Man, I need to go to school! – the kid suddenly jumped.

– It's okay, we have another minute. Listen, Filip, remember what I said: not a word to anyone about this?

Filip nods, putting his school bag on his back.

– Okay. If it turns out the way you promised me, in the future you can ask whatever you want. Only we won't be going bar-hopping like today.

– Fine. And what should I say at school, where was I?

– Say... I don't know... Say something like, on the way you met an old man without an eye and you asked him where's the other eye and you talked about what it's like to look at nature with only one eye. Was science your first class? There. You were doing field work.

Filip laughs, pulls his hand out of his pocket, clenches his fist and stretches his hand to Martin:

– Way to go, bro!

Martin stretches out his fist, four times bigger than the boy's, and they touch as if clinking glasses.

– Off you go now! And if someone teases you, you just tell me.

That afternoon for the first time Filip tried to use his science textbook as a leverage to lift the door whose hinges he would be spitting in. In the night, after dinner and bedtime, he bravely decided to leave his room and wander around the hotel at night, listen through doors and walls, find out more about things happening around him. But two hours have passed, even more, and the spit dried out, so the door screamed worse than ever. The sound scared him and he retreated to his room and snuggled in the bed. He tried to read *A Train in the Snow*, an item from his school reading list, but he couldn't focus.

On Saturday and Sunday his mother kept asking him what was wrong, why he was so pensive, is everything OK at school, and at night she came to his room, got in his bed and gently scratched his head until he fell asleep. Then she too would fall asleep. That Sunday, before mass, he first time deliberately lied in confession. In fact, he just refrained from saying the entire truth, because he didn't feel like praying a long penance. Only because of that.

*

Noon. And the bell. The bell was the only thing left unchanged. The Holy Trinity Church, made of stone, small, with a bell-cote, surrounded by houses and trees and cars, seemingly fearing that, as hidden and squeezed, it lost any other purpose so it desperately rings and rings and rings, every fifteen minutes,

first on the last full hour, than on every quarter of an hour. Meaning, the longest ring today will be at 12.45. That's really the only that has truly remained the same.

We settled the first communion back home in Bosnia. When the war started, it was like an explosion, things were skipped and turned a blind eye on, you didn't even have to go to Sunday school, all for the aim of having more Catholics... When we managed to escape and come here, religion was not obligatory in school as it is today, and my folks weren't very religious anyway, so we kind of let it slide. The only thing left was – Sunday mass at nine. That was a must. Confession and communion. My old man did it, my Mom did it, I had to do it too. Sometimes Martin joined us as well. I would have loved to know what they were whispering in confession. One day I started to omit things to the priest and soon I even started to lie. And I didn't feel guilty at all. As far as this is concerned, I slept peacefully at night.

In church we were always in the back, in the back benches, although there was always room in the front ones. Mom said this was fine and the way it's supposed to be and my old man agreed. Training inconspicuousness despite the circumstances, that was the discipline of his life. I seemed to have picked it up from him. I also picked up, back in the old Grand, his ability to power-nap whenever he could. At night, before dawn, he slept no more than three hours, and the rest he made up for during the day – if he managed to take a nap before lunch, then an hour or more afterwards and an hour in the evening before work.

And now, hence, before lunch, I'll take a nap in this unknown room, as an inconspicuous guest of a somewhat familiar hotel. The church bell will wake me up at quarter to one, or it will be Galja's song, if it still echoes.

*

– Your mother lives in a brothel!!! Yours too!!! All of you!!! – screamed Filip at Karlo and the other five in a narrow, dirty, pissed and spitted passage between the school building and the gym. He himself was amazed at the words that came out of his mouth.

He was only now clear that they got it all planned and that a seemingly casual walk during the break was meant to get him to this ugly passage, to insult him, provoke him and beat the crap out of him if they get the slightest chance.

– You Bosnian motherfucker – Karlo went for him, followed by the others. Mother, cock, pussy, cunt, whore, faggot, Bosnia... all this blended in a cacophonic overflow that engulfed him – and ended the moment he heard behind his back a deep:

– Stop it, motherfucking kids!!! Hands off the boy!

In counter light, at the top of the passage was Zele, an eight-grader. He couldn't see his face, but the outline was recognisable enough for the boys to back off and retreat to the walls. A short and bulky boy with glasses wouldn't scare people off easily, but these kids knew that Zele had a brown karate belt and was the champion of Dalmatia and the junior vice-champion of Croatia. He looked like a plump nerd, but he was the strongest and weirdest eight-grader in school. A straight-A student, he always went straight home after classes. We knew his mother was an ex-addict and his father, two years ago, when the war started, joined the Guard and soon got himself killed somewhere in Slavonia.

– I’ll hunt down each and every last one of you if you ever touch the kid again, you hear me? – Zele rumbled, putting his glasses in his shirt pocket and slowly walking towards them, like in some kind of movie. Filip was scared as well.

– He called us... - Karlo opened his mouth.

– I don’t want to know! – Zele interrupts him. – I had my say. Now get the hell out of here!

One by one, the boys started walking away through the passage under the bridge connecting the school and the gym, away from Zele.

– Thanks, you really shouldn’t have – says Filip when they were left alone.

– Ha ha, “shouldn’t have” – Zele mocks him, putting his glasses back on. – They would’ve crushed you like a worm and act stupid later. Then the guy who takes you to school would come and beat them shitless, then their folks would come to school, and then the next time you’d be dead. I know how it works... I’m Zele.

– I know. I’m Filip.

They shook hands and silently walked to the entrance.

– Just tell me one thing – Zele speaks up when they entered the building.

– What?

– The place, the Grand, where you live, is it a brothel or not?

Filip thinks for a moment and then answers:

– For some it is, for some it isn’t.

– Lucky you! – says Zele, pats him on the back and runs upstairs. Filip remains in the lobby, looking behind him, and then he jolts at the school bell, runs down the corridor to the door that said “4 D”.

*

“Oj ti Halju, Halju molodaja, pidmanuli Halju, zabrali soboju” ... Something like that. In fact, just like that. Sort of. And I remember the simple melody of this chorus even better than the lyrics.

Galya had bad luck. On the first morning she arrived together with two other new girls, Ala and Irina, with a night van from god knows where, she saw the sea and a beach from the hotel window, only thirty metres away. And instead of taking the elevator down to the club, to the basement, for my old man and Anton to judge how good a dancer she was, if at all, she fled down the stairs, across the terrace, jumped to the other side of the road in three steps and, tearing off her tight shirt and skirt, she ran across the sand to the sea, dressed only in her bra and panties covered in fluttery fake gold sequins.

The old man barged into our suite at the end of the hall and yelled to Mom:

“Give me a robe, quick!”

“What happened?” Mom asked, checking the textbooks I put in my bag.

“Nothing, the crazy new girl went for a swim... If this one catches a cold too, I’ll kill her!”

Mother brought her terry cloth robe from the bathroom and gave it to him and the old man immediately passed it to Martin, who was standing at the door.

“What are you staring at, run, go get her out of the sea!”

“How am I supposed to do it, boss, it’s late, I’m not taking Filip to school in my swimming trunks?”

My old man took Mom’s robe again and ran down the corridor:

“Oksanaaaa! Oksanaaa!!!”

Galya caught more than a cold. I contracted a nasty pneumonia, because in early April the sea was too cold for swimming, no matter how seductive it looked. However, Mom blamed my old man for the pneumonia, because he took the girl directly from the beach to the basement and yelled at her for good fifteen minutes and finally explained that if she falls ill now, for every night of not working she will owe him the full amount, the entire fee, until she pays off for this morning and stops with the funny business, otherwise he’ll take her back where she came from. Oksana told me this months later, she was their interpreter. In fact, only to the old man, Galya kept quiet all the time, laughing and shivering beneath my mother’s robe.

She was ill for nine days and the debt really grew, nine thousand marks! The standard fee for clients was 200 marks an hour and a thousand for the entire night, midnight to six in the morning, no matter when they start. You paid up front to the old man in the club, and split the earnings once a week with every girl fifty-fifty. He kept triple books on everything, signed by both parties and split the profit fair and square, no quarrel about it. At least that’s what Martin later told me.

Anyway, that morning Galya got herself in the sea, but also in a serious trouble: instead of earning four and a half thousand marks in nine nights, or even more, she got herself in twice as big a debt. And the moment she paid it out, that sadist Krpić came to her room, with that fancy goatee of his, and beat the crap out of her. This, these seven days it took her to recover from the beating, until the swellings, bruises and the cut on her lip healed, my old man couldn’t deduct from her profit. He let her recover in peace, called her downstairs on the seventh day and, with Oksana’s help, presented her the state of her debt. She nodded silently and the old man finally lit a cigarette, took a look at her and spoke only when he smoked about a half: he said he didn’t know what the hell was his problem, but he would now cut her debt in half, since Martin was begging him. As soon as Oksana translated, Galya cheerfully jumped and pecked first my old man on the cheek, followed by the perplexed Martin, who had never in his life asked anyone anything of the sort.

My old man was not crazy – when she could, Galya danced better than any other girl. Only because of her performances the club bar could earn more than three rooms on the third floor. But Galya had bad luck. First all this, then the mishap with Martin, and finally thin sheets...

“Oj ti Halju, Halju molodaja, pidmanuli Halju, zabrali soboju”...

*

Only a week was enough for Zele and Filip to become friends who have something to talk about even when they don't. During breaks they met separately from the other boys from their classes – the boys in Filip's class kept aside in fear of Zele, and the boys in Zele's class started secretly calling him a fool for hanging out with a baby, but no one dared to tell him that.

– Look at that cigarette butt! – said Filip in the school yard and pointed his finger.

– Yeah. So?

Filip stops, bends his head and throws it slightly back, then hits the butt by spitting from over two metres away. The butt jumps off to the bushes.

– You fuckin' rock, man! – Zele was astonished. – Like you trained for years!

– Well, I actually did. My old man usually says “Bosnians will be Bosnians”.

– Oh great, I always forget to ask, this accent of yours? You're not a real Bosnian, you're definitely not a Dalmatian, nor a Zagreb kid, and you speak like all of them put together!

In a few brief sentences Filip explains: Mom from Zagreb, Dad from Bosnia, him in Dalmatia since autumn, trying to speak as clean a Croatian as possible. Then he told him about the spitting. In the boiler room on the pipes. And in the room on the hinges.

– Come on, you need to oil them, with a lubricant – Zele waves his hand.

– Where do I find one?

– I'll bring you some tomorrow.

– OK, but still I can't do it all alone, lift the door, keep them lifted, and lubricate.

– True that... Is there any chance I get in the hotel and help you?

– No idea.

In math class after the break he got a minus: the teacher called his name three times and he didn't hear her one single time, he was so immersed in thinking about how to smuggle Zele in the hotel and his room tomorrow night.

They devised a detailed plan with all contingency versions, what if Zele is spotted by Mom, what if Martin sees him, or one of the two bald guys from the back door. Filip pretended to have left the English textbook and workbook at school, Zele found them and read the name on the cover, everyone at school knows Filip lives at the Grand and there, he brought them to him, but he won't give them to anyone but him in person... And finally it all turned out so simple – he arrived at half past seven, no one saw him, no one stopped him, let alone asked him questions. Filip welcomed him by the service elevator, left of the passage to the reception, and took him on foot to the third floor.

– Man, first you should lubricate this door handle – said Zele when they came to the room and closed the door behind them. Then he took out a plastic bottle of engine lubricant from his pocket, with a blue insulation cap on the top of a thin little pipe.

– Fine, but I forgot one thing – Filip whispered. – Dinner is at eight o’clock, I have to go downstairs to the restaurant.

– Fuck... OK, fine, lock the room and don’t worry. This here is the WC?

– Is what?

– WC, restroom... toilet?

– Yes, bathroom and toilet.

– Great, I really need to piss.

*

Cherry tree imitation dominates in the restaurant as well. They could have just as well rename the Grand to the Cherry, that’s how persistent they were in their efforts.

Five times six, that’s thirty tables. Not thirty-six, not black with chapped legs, not with white tablecloths. Thirty tables, pink tablecloths with even pinker over-cloths, diamond-shaped and with little vases with fresh flowers in the middle. The cutlery on the lower side has ‘Solingen’ engraved, instead of ‘Kordun rostfrei’. The chair doesn’t scratch the floor when you move it...

We had breakfast in our suite around eight every morning, but we had lunch every day at one o’clock sharp and dinner at eight. No discussion or possibility of change. My old man said so, my Mom agreed. We ate at the time the restaurant was open for the customers, always together: Dad and Mom facing each other, myself in the middle. Sometimes Martin joined us. We had to stay at least half an hour at the table, but not more than 45 minutes. “This has to remain our time,” said my old man, “so that we don’t lose sight of each other in this hotel and in our lives. We have to stay a family.”

The girls were entitled to three meals, but exclusively outside the official restaurant opening hours, half an hour before the opening and half an hour after the closing. They all overslept breakfast, but lunch was mandatory. Mom explained every new girl with Oksana’s help:

– Breakfast is the most important meal in a day. That’s why you need to have lunch. Because of the nature of your job your lunch is really your breakfast and you should eat it all, otherwise you won’t have strength.

Dinner was always light, especially for the girls. They shouldn’t have stomach ache, they should eat something, but they should also be able to dance and work. In case of sudden hunger, there was a sandwich ready for each of them in a little room behind the counter, only one. And a few bottles of non-alcoholic champagne, in case the customer treats by the glass.

– Grilled or fried? – the waitress replied, much better looking than the receptionist, when I ordered a steak and salad. Well well, they have grilled too!

– Fried – I said. I'll eat it quick and then I'll go check out if there is anything left in the basement except fake cherry wood.

*

Well, that's it for this round. Let's hear your thoughts!

Condoleezo

*

JULIO wrote:

You had it real bad, it seems. I still think it's OK, but the kid seems a bit 'nerdish', right? I mean, with the talking and all, seems a little too grown up for 'his age'.

Now seriously: is this autobiographic prose or not?

Anyway, watch that first-person narrator: you started giving him dialogues and he had none in the first episode. Be careful these two narrative lines don't start to 'overlap' too much stylistically and resemble each other. See what I mean? Generally speaking, there's too much dialogue for my taste. You have like a page, a page and a half, only dialogue. And as far as I can tell, this is not a radio play, this is prose.

ZOKY wrote:

A hotel full of whores, and no sex!?!?!? What are you writing about, man?! Give us some flesh, if you went down this road, you yourself praised Julio's story about elevator fuck!

TORCIDA wrote:

Oh Zoky, for fuck sake, can't you see this is a ten-year-old kid? What sex?

Well done, mate, this is all cool and especially that guy Zele, a perfect portrayal, I had a guy like that, the same type, a fatso, a geek, a karate fighter, actually a tae kwon do fighter, with glasses, he went to the Nazor high school in Split. Your thing is also set in Split or what? Is this Park Hotel? I heard it used to be a whorehouse for a while. Don't answer a thing, just carry on!

TAMIA wrote:

Don't just carry on, carry on faster! Man, it takes you three weeks to write ten pages! For a moment I thought too it was really Julio writing under a different nickname, but then the slowness gave you away. See for yourself, the time it took you to write ten pages is the same it took him to write three short stories, each of about twenty.

I don't mind the dialogues. I just fear you might treat women the same way your characters do. All but the holy mommy. Male pigs! :)))

DINAMONSTER wrote:

You Torcida think anything's great if it takes place in your shithole city. We are the champions!!!

NEMO wrote:

I sense a nasty twist in all this. Watch your timing! Julio, would you block these football fans as soon as you see them, what are they doing on blogs like yours? Finally, for now, Tamia, I wouldn't be sure it wasn't Julio himself, he is afraid of a long form so he's stringing us along. ;)

CONDOLEEZO wrote:

Thank you for your every word! Zoky, there's going to be some sex, but if that's all you're waiting, you might wait a long time.

Torcida, I won't say a thing to you, because you asked for it!

Tamia, and how do you treat prostitutes? When you see one in the street, do you invite her home and share your pay with her indefinitely, or you just turn your head away and go about your business? I feel sorry for them, but it wasn't me who threw their dice, it wasn't me who got them into trouble out of which they can (allegedly) get out of only like this... Besides, it's you who is equalling 'women' and 'prostitutes', not me...

Nemo, thank you for reminding me of the timing. Nasty and not so nasty twists coming up.

Julio, I approach you with special care, fearing you might put me to a halt and kick me out of your blog, now that I finally have things rolling. But the dialogue comment really wasn't necessary. Too much dialogue? Doesn't our life with other people consist only of dialogues, interspersed with silences? Aren't dialogues a legitimate segment of prose? Do you think I'd describe a situation better by narrating the protagonist's thoughts on a half of the page, as though I was squatting inside his head taking notes, together with all the meanders and flows of his stream of consciousness? Isn't it more evocative to let dialogue flow, to let the reader imagine what a scene really looked like?

Too much dialogue? Have you seen Forman's *Amadeus*, do you know the scene when Salieri bickers about something new Mozart composed (I think it's *Magic Flute*, not sure) and then says it's bad because it has "too many notes", and then the evaluation is accepted by the emperor? Well, think of me, Salieri, now, saying that your texts (not so much prose, as much as messages and comments) have too many quotation marks, like you're always quoting someone, "too many quotes"? If I was a literary critic, I'd compare you to a blonde driving and turning on the indicator on every bend on the highway, I'd write you're in fact afraid of words and their solid, unequivocal meaning, so in fear you hide behind these quotation marks. And quotation marks are a legitimate participant of grammar and style and there's nothing dangerous about them. Just like dialogues, these quotation marks will be read and interpreted by every reader for himself. Got it?

And hold this against me, I just assumed you were ready for dialogue, since you allowed me to stay here for a while. Now off I go smash the keyboard, I guess the third round will go faster. Thank you everyone once again!

JULIO wrote:

I'm saying this without quotation marks: I hope everyone's clear now that I'm not Condoleezo. Another proof, if you need one: you all saw Condoleezo writes his endless dialogues so that he puts a dash at the beginning of direct speech, after the colon, whereas I, after the colon, put – what? Quotation marks!

GUEST wrote:

Ah *uck it Julio, now you have too many colons all over the place... :))))))