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The Eight Commissioner

Translated by Ivana Ostojcic

The biggest settlement on the island of Drugić was barely discernible through a thick veil of rain, and a bony character was standing on the pier in a worn-out fisherman's raincoat and too short trousers. Siniša's bags sat drenched by his feet and his hands were broadly and joyfully waving. His left hand was holding the prime minister's open umbrella and his right the sign that said "COMMISSIONER" in block letters, and "Tonino → boat → Trečić!" in smaller print.

Without conscious intention, completely instinctively, before starting to descend the stairs, Siniša firmly gripped to that beer and rosary in his pockets.

The rain was pouring even harder and the commissioner immediately withdrew into the small cabin. It was as tiny as it was uncomfortable, but then again, on the other hand, at first sight it oozed ascetic sturdiness, just like an inexperienced mainlander might imagine the cabin on a boat of his own.

– Your boat is lovely – shouts Siniša to Tonino and the other man, from the stern, replied with a loud "Thank you!" and a broad smile, gesturing something that was supposed to mean "Just a moment, I'll be right with you". His thumb and index finger gently held the rudder and, looking across the cabin and the prow, he slowly left the little harbour of Drugić. The boat swayed with the first open sea wave and Tonino caught the rope and wrapped it around two wooden poles to secure the rudder. He took off his raincoat and hung it by the door to the cabin and then he sat down opposite Siniša:

– Autopilot, hahaha... Well then, now we have a chance to get to know each other and converse as decent people do. You like the boat, right?

– Yes, it's somehow... It's a pasara, right?

– Well, not exactly. It's more like a leut of sorts, but don't rack your brains over it. Trečić calls stuff their own names anyway. Gajeta, gajeton, gajetona, gajetin... The Adelina is, for instance, a gajetona.

– Who?

– The Adelina, this boat. A gajetona.

– Oh!

They spent a few moments in silence, and then Siniša took the first diplomatic step:

– Can I ask you something more of a personal nature... You know, out of the blue?

– Sure, go ahead, be my guest! – answered Tonino readily and happily.

– I don't know how to put this without insulting you...

– What's all this, for the love of God? You just go on ahead! You're the government, aren't you?

Siniša grows serious. The wretched Dalmatian, the likes of him only know how to provoke.

– Never mind, I'm sorry, it's too soon... Tell me, how much more to Trečić?

Tonino glances at his clock on the wall of the cabin. It was a bit after one in the afternoon, but the clock said ten past seven. It didn't stop, it simply kept ticking the seconds of his own personal time zone.

- Well, if the sea and the weather don't change significantly... I'd say not more than four hours.
- How mu... Fo... Four!?! - Siniša gagged.
- Unfortunately, Trečić isn't just across the street, and neither is the Adelina in her prime. But she is unsinkable. Fear not, it'll pass before you know it.
- Four hours... And four hours from where, from Drugić! Did you people ever wonder why Zagreb thought it important to establish any kind of authority in this God forsaken place, pardon my French?
- I fear, sir, that this is the question you will most frequently encounter in the period to come...
- Tonino, listen... Can I call you Tonino? Great. Well, I'll ask you now, I'll ask what I wanted to ask a second ago. May I?
- Of course.
- OK, here it goes... Right between the eyes: what with this speech of yours? I did spend some time around the islands, I heard hundreds of dialects, I understood two or three. And I heard a bit those on the ferry...
- Nah, those are from Prvić and Drugić...
- Doesn't matter, whoever they are, but they speak a dialect, a language of their own, I don't know. And you, you talk like a fuckin' state official! Is that everyone of Trečić, or...?
- I make an effort. One needs to make an effort to endeavour all their life - said Tonino, proud of his correct and distinguished grammar.
- And others, well...
- How should I put this... Well, I deem a translator will be necessary, Moreover, indispensable.

An unexpected offer remained hanging in the air, suspended on the ceiling of the cabin, and swayed in the irregular rhythm of the big waves. Siniša imagined the prime minister's face for a second, souring over a telegram: "Translator needed urgently for Trečić dialect-stop-Wont do it without fee-stop-commissioner Siniša". Now that would be really something! I'll make them talk, no screwing around with me, concludes Siniša, they'll all recite the election act by heart!

- Don't worry about the fee - Tonino breaks his stream of consciousness. - This was already arranged at the time of the third commissioner. Every month a certain sum lands on my account, nothing special, but still. And now, we haven't had a commissioner in a long time, but the government nevertheless sends me regular money here on Drugić. Even if you turn me down, the fee will continue to arrive for some time certainly.
- And this Trečić dialect, you understand it perfectly?

– Whaddaya thaenk, I is meeself a Trećić maen! Mee fadher is a Trećić maen, and mee laete modher was too. I waes bowrn here, I aeve spent mee liefie here! – said Tonino in a single breath, ending the statement with that broad smile of his instead of an exclamation point. Then he suddenly leaps up, throws his raincoat on and gets out on the stern. He glances across the prow, releases the knot on the rope, sets the rudder a bit more to the right and ties it again. In the cabin, Siniša begins to ponder. All of a sudden, this job, this terrible punishment for recklessness and sin of omission, unveiled itself in a pretty bearable light. And this terrible sirocco and this strange island and Tonino “making an effort to endeavour” and this whole story suddenly took on vague outlines of an adventure offered only to the few select ones. This could be marvellous! He remembers the beer in his pocket and pulls it out on the table. Tonino was just getting back to the cabin.

– They gave you this on the ferry, didn’t they?

– Yes – Siniša replied, looking at Tonino and smiling mysteriously. – Care to share?

– My sincere thanks, but I’d rather not. Furthermore, I wouldn’t recommend it to you either.

– Good grief! What are you, a temperance man? A beer hater?

– No, quite the contrary! But this thing they gave you, it’s not beer, it’s a curse.

– I beg your pardon?!?

– And poor Tonkica must have silently given you a rosary, right?

Siniša was speechless.

– They do this to everyone, to every commissioner. And then each and every one of them goes bust on Trećić, either as a person, or as a politician. Do you know any of your predecessors who continued a public life? In politics, art, sport, anywhere? Of course not, because all of them were cursed! Even this one...

Tonino suddenly goes quiet, as though he said a word too many. Siniša kept staring at him, with his jaw mildly dropping.

– With your permission, trust me, for your sake and mine, I would throw this into the sea, both the beer and the rosary. May I?

Siniša was trying to think quickly and soberly. Engrossing himself in the situation, he was trying to grasp it logically and became even more surprised when his hand took out the rosary by itself, put it on the table and slowly pushed it to Tonino.

– Thank you for your trust! – Tonino was thrilled. – Thank you indeed! – he repeated while grabbing and putting on his raincoat again. He then took the beer and the rosary and swiftly climbed the stern. Because of the sound of rain, wind and waves, united with the buzz of the boat engine, Siniša heard only “Daevwoul... heall... and naevawr... daemned... amen!” he saw Tonino wrap the rosary around the beer bottle and throwing it far away from the boat, and then making a big sign of the cross with his right hand in the air above the sea.

– Now you are cleansed – said Tonino excitedly, returning to the cabin. – And besides, now you are ready for a real Trećićan beer!

He lifted the lid off the bench he was sitting on a while ago. Inside, in the case, there was a firmly fastened thick bunch of weekly newspapers, and beside it a dozen neatly lined half-litre Australian *Foster's* beer. Tonino took out two cans and, standing by the open bench, gave Siniša one. Confused, Siniša accepted and opened it, fixing on that bunch of newspapers. The last week's issues of *Global* was on the top, with a headline strutting across the entire cover: "Former Intelligence – Real Kings of Zagreb?" Siniša knew all too well what this headline meant. He read the article at least a dozen times over the past week and everything in it was like he dictated it himself. His case, how he was framed the waitress, the activist, the drugs and the photographer, was told almost subjectively, to the tiniest detail. And hence more painful was the concluding sentence in the article: "Thanks to intelligence underground, his up-and-coming career was put to a halt until further notice and it is questionable whether Mesnjak, the victim of this quasi spy set up, will ever again return to the job for which he was undoubtedly quite talented but, unfortunately, lacking instinct."

Touching his lower lip with the edge of the cold beer can, Siniša wakes up.

– Thank you, I'm sorry... And what is this? Collecting old paper around the islands?

– No, it's... To be honest, others collect it for me. Newspapers don't arrive to Trećić, and there is a couple living on Drugić, I lived with them a short while when I was in high school... Well, they read all the newspapers and save me the weeklies. Whenever I come, they greet me with a little bunch. This is from today, with over three months of issues, I can't wait to untie it.

Siniša finally managed to put together at least one tiny puzzle: here's where Tonino got his incredible Croatian, from the newspapers! From this fantastic one-pot in which, as the former minister of culture said, "the rare literate authors serve only as an additive and preservative to the genetically modified concentrate of ignorance and superficiality"! God, imagine how Tonino would sound if these people from Drugić saved him the daily papers as well!?

Siniša, pleased, takes a sip of beer, looks into the can and remembers the café in the Old Town where he last had it. Željka had just received her MA, she was wearing something cheekily plunging, without a bra, and later she smelled somehow like a poppy cake... In a matter of seconds Siniša was again enraptured by romance. In a blink he decided to organise the election on this wretched Trećić in a half a year's time at most, one way or the other. That amount of time will be enough to recover physically and mentally and perhaps even for the public to forget his entire case. Maybe in the meantime something comes up that would rehabilitate him completely. And he will spend six months meditating in the middle of the Adriatic, outsmarting with local illiterate wise asses, perhaps even learn to eat fish. Željka will come by two or three times for the weekend and in the meantime an island girl maybe even comes handy. He only needs to be cautious... For the umpteenth time in these ten days he remembered *Mediterraneo*, adapting the film plot to suit his situation (autumn and winter, loneliness and inhospitality), and, leaning his head against the corner of the cabin, slowly dozed off. He was startled by Tonino's voice:

– Hey there, commosso! Siniša!

- Huh?!
- Sorry to wake you, but in case you plan to call anyone, I recommend you do it in the next ten minutes. I suppose you own a phone...
- Yes, I do.
- Well, we're leaving the availability area.
- What availability? Cell phone?
- Precisely. More accurately, of all mobile networks.
- Are you crazy? There's got to be a signal!
- Yes, there has to, for at least... Well, seven to eight minutes - explains Tonino, looking at his clock from the Irkutsk time zone.
- What, nothing on Trećić? OK, what about a normal phone, you know, post office, local office...

Tonino compassionately closes his eyes and spins his head in denial. Siniša grabs his phone from his belt and looks into it. Željka? The prime minister? Whom?

- Wait, this means that this shit is worthless?
- It is worth something, but only for a short while.
- It was three fucking days ago that I paid four thousand kuna for it, with a discount! You could have fuckin' told me this earlier, so I could throw it into the sea with the other shit... How come there's no cell reception?

Tonino shrugs.

- We are far off, I don't know what else.
- Wait a second, what about Italy? An Italian network, roaming, you know?

Tonino makes a 'never heard' face and again spins his head. Siniša looks at the screen: the signal strength is down to the last bar. He starts to type quickly. "Save me from here! Anywa"... Just as he was about to press the next letter, he noticed the last bar was fading away.

- Make a turn! - he yells. - Take us back a bit!

Tonino rushes out on the stern, looks around and comes back.

- I can't, the storm is growing stronger. There is danger that the wave might tip us over in the manoeuvre.
- Bullshit! Turn around! Motherfuckin' reverse!
- Siniša, I am now responsible for you. I can't. Throw me overboard and navigate the way you like, but until you do so, the Adelina is under my command.

Siniša dejectedly looks back several times, not knowing what to look at. Then he jumps and presses 'Send' on his cell phone five times, and five times gets the reply 'Address?'. Fumbling in a hurry he finds 'Zeljka' in his contacts, presses 'OK' and then 'Send' again, peering at the device. After a few second the text 'Message sent' appears. Siniša exhales with relief, once, twice, three times. His head happily dozes off for a second and then he is aroused again by a jolt:

– Wait, so this means, no internet, e-mail...

Although he was pretty experienced, Tonino always felt terribly embarrassed anew in this situation. With sincere discomfort he looked Siniša straight in the eyes and said:

– Nothing.

Siniša lowered his tired gaze onto one of his bags, the one containing the laptop he barely managed to get from the ministry of agriculture.

– How much more to this island of yours?

– Oh well... Two hours, two and a quarter.

– Do you have a blanket?

– Sure I do.

Siniša takes off his jacket, takes both blankets Tonino offered him, covers himself and nestles on the bench facing the cabin wall.

– You will, naturally, wake me up at the occasion of our arrival to Arcadia – he mumbles as cynically as possible.

– Of course, of course – replied Tonino obligingly.

A huge shark was furiously swimming around, flashing his bulging eyes at everything. He was hungrier and more dangerous than ever before. The sea corrugated emptily a dozen metres before it and then the surface was suddenly broken by something like a black chain with a pendant. The shark retreated a bit back and to the side, waiting for the strange object to finally sink to its level. The moment it recognised the rosary, its mouth went from a motionless hungry spasm to a pleased smile. First it stretched, and then gaped as though it was going to swallow a tanker, not tiny prayer beads. The Saviour's face on the minuscule crucifix was Siniša's, with eyes aghast from unspeakable horror...

Siniša jumps, takes off the blankets and sits up so suddenly that Tonino petrified in fear for a moment.

– Wow! Wow... Aha... – the commissioner panted. – Man, what a dream... What a fucking dream, this is crazy...

– It's OK, it's OK... It's all good now. We have just made a turn into the cove of Trećić.

Siniša drowsily looks through the round window frame, blurred with drops. He didn't manage to notice anything except that the sea was significantly calmer than before.

– Are we there yet?

– Soon, another ten minutes.

– Do you have a mirror or something? A bathroom?

– A mirror is in the bench beneath you and the toilet... How should I put it, I do it from the stern.

– No toilet?

– Not on the Adelina. No need. I wouldn't recommend doing it now. It would be much more advisable to be patient for another half hour.

Siniša sloppily gathers the blankets and puts them on the table and then he lifts the bench seat. There was no mirror inside, it was on the lower side of the lid. He dejectedly looked at the smiling Tonino, kneeled, placed his shins below the fixed table and began to embellish his reflection in this insane mirror as much as he could. Tonino came out on the stern and lowered the engine power until it comfortably rumbled.

Siniša lowered the lid with the mirror, went around the table and took out a new can of *Foster's* from the bench across, joining Tonino on the stern.

– The niew won! The niew commosso of Trećić! The baest so fawr! – shouts Tonino and jumps from the stern to the prow in three steps.

On a small promenade, in front of a short row of derelict stone one-storey houses, some twenty people gathered holding umbrellas. One separated from the group. Tonino threw the rope and he deftly caught it and wrapped it around a crumbling stone pillar. Siniša, not knowing what else to do, lifted the can a bit, as though raising a toast. As though standing before a conductor, all the black umbrellas on the shore rose up for a moment. Siniša, pleasantly surprised, lifted the can once again, maybe even higher, but no one replied.

– Tonino, you all live in these few houses? – Siniša quietly asked.

– Good grief, no, this is the harbour and the village is up in the back.

– In the back?

– Easy now, you'll see everything. Now get off the Adelina, careful not to slip.

Siniša approaches the tip of the prow, steps on his left foot to swiftly jump onto the wet coast, just beside the man who stepped out of the group to help him. He superiorly patted the guy on his shoulder and smiled at him, and then shot the same smile at the rest of the crowd:

– Good afternoon, good folks!

– Waelcome, sir commosso – one of them readily replied and the others nodded. – Waelcome to Trećić, thies stone tear, thies rwock lacrima!

Although he didn't understand too much, from the tone he deduced that this must be a courtesy welcome.

– Thank you very much – he said and cast a smooth glance over the crowd. – As it seems, we'll understand each other great... I will, of course, need some time to get to know your dialect and customs, but I promise I will be diligent and swift. Naturally, I will not manage without your help, but I think the most important for both of us is to resolve this situation as soon as possible. If you don't mind, I'd like to start immediately... Say, what do you call me “commosso”? Both Tonino on the boat and now you here. As far as I know, “commosso” in Italian means restless, disturbed, something like that. Why do you think I'm like that?

The islanders begin to glance at each other seriously and Tonino, with his bunch of newspapers, jumps down from the boat:

– Easy now, sir commissioner, it is most evidently a matter of a misunderstanding. Commosso is not disturbed, quite the contrary. We shortened the word ‘commissioner’ a bit, it was a novelty to us, so it turned out ‘commosso’. Commosso is commissioner, in Trećićan, no evil thoughts.

Siniša looked deep into his eyes, which radiated nothing but innocence and honesty. Still, he was taken by surprise by the official tone Tonino chose to address him with. He evidently wants a pinch of authority himself. Well, he can have it, as he will definitely be much more than a mere translator here. Silence was way too long and Siniša felt the gaze fixed at him. He was supposed to say something, he knew it, just like he knew that whatever he said will make a direct impact on the future behaviour of these drenched hypocrites.

– I feel much better now – he said finally, trying to keep the smile on his face. – So, are we done with the protocol? Where did you say the village was?

He addressed Tonino on a first name basis, to make sure that pinch of authority doesn't transform into something bigger.

– Here, above... How should I put it, well, above this hill...

– Great, let's go get there before it's dark.

– Waent an aess? – a man from the group immediately asked, dragging a donkey with his left hand and pointing to it with his right hand. The mime helped Siniša understand the meaning of the question.

– Thank you, I can walk. It can't be that far.

No one said a word.

The road took him by the sea, shortly paved and then just dirt and wide enough for two men to walk shoulder by shoulder. Siniša, preceded only by that donkey burdened with his luggage, after the first look back thought that this welcome wagon, walking behind him two by two, looked like a class on a

field trip. But who would be the headmaster? Him or the donkey? Or him, the donkey? Or this peasant walking by the donkey and holding an umbrella over the load and his bags?

– Pay attention to the flora and the shrubbery on our right hand side – Tonino’s whisper startled him. – You will find it logically allocated and carefully nurtured. It impedes a stranger’s gaze to the other side.

Two or three steps later Siniša stops for the first time and looks back thoroughly. Indeed, the low shrubs by the pathway, interspersed every now and then with a scrawny little tree, must have kept the trail hidden from a view from the sea. But what intrigued him even more was the cove itself. He didn’t even notice it from the boat, but from here, now almost ten metres above the sea, the bay of Trečić looked like a lake, completely surrounded by land. Where land was at its lowest point, in the North-West, if it was North-West at all, under low clouds, balanced light red reflections of a faraway lighthouse could be discerned.

– Well, well, well! Fine job at hiding you did there, ay? – Siniša asks Tonino, who just shrugged and fashioned a silly smile.

– Is that lighthouse light? – Siniša points his finger. Tonino gazes towards the reflections on the low sky and shakes his head back a bit. The same second his face looked like a child observing a fascinating phenomenon for the first time in his life.

– Can you see it? The reddish thing behind the hill – Siniša asked. – Hello, Earth to Tonino... Hey!

– Eaesy, commosso, that’s Tonino fawr ya... It’ll paess, it aelways does – says the one who welcomed him in the harbour.

Siniša takes a deep breath and exhales before speaking:

– Sir, I cannot understand a single word. And my translator seems to have turned into a pillar of stone. I’ve been travelling over ten hours and I’m too tired for the silly island folklore. What the hell’s going on?

The peasant’s face spasms into a grimace of hard labour, necessary to utter something that this commosso might understand:

– Tonino... eveyary day... like thees. It’ll paess in five miniss. Notheng!

– He petrifies for five minutes?! Stiffens and turns off?!

– Si.

– And then what, he comes around and back to the old drawing board?

– Pasitive.

The other peasants nodded to everything their spokesman said.

For a moment, for the first time after almost twenty years, Siniša remembered the kid who moved into his neighbourhood sometime around the fifth grade and moved away the next summer. He had something similar to this and it was the worst the first time it happened: they were playing football in

front of the school between two small goals and the boy, a newcomer, was the designated goalkeeper. He petrified the minute he was supposed to run out a bit. The entire team screamed at him because of the goal scored, and he didn't move a muscle. The crazy Fish, who played for the other team, was the first to realise what was going on and started dribbling around the brick goalpost: "Goal... goal... goal... and another..." All the other kids got scared, only Fish span the ball around and the score was already, by his account, 32:1 when the boy came back to life. He stood confused, looked at them and just kept repeating: "What's the matter? What's the matter?" Poor soul, these autistic canyons started to engulf him at first twice a week and later on a daily basis. Just as they got used to it, him and the entire school, summer came and the boy and his parents moved away, some said to Slovenia, because of the climate. Siniša later remembered him maybe only once or twice in his life, and now, his long lost twin brother became his only connection with the least bit logically arranged world.

- What now? Will he really come around in five minutes, or will he wait for pneumonia?
- We caen goe, ee'll fallouw us...
- And what if he sleepwalks and falls down in the sea?
- Doen't bee afraeid. Ee never mouves an eench.
- Hmmm... If I understood well, you are suggesting we move on and he'll follow us when it passes?
- Pasitive!

Siniša tried to take the newspaper bundle from Tonino's shoulder, to save at least this precious load from the rain, but the poor man's fingers were blue from the strength he clenched the rope with.

- Okay then, let's go - said Siniša.

A hundred metres away the trail meandered to the left, around the slope. Tonino's spot by Siniša, behind the donkey, was now taken by that suspicious welcome leader. Around seventy, short and broad, of disproportionally big hands, in a relatively well-kept black suit and threadbare hat, he looked like an old school Sicilian don. Who knows, Siniša thinks, maybe there are two short rifles, locked but always loaded hanging on the inside of his front door... The rain waned and the wind, changing direction, grew colder and colder. On the bend, Siniša stops once again and looks back. Tonino was standing motionless like before, akin to a monument of a legendary hero eternally vigilant over the peace and safety of the cove.

- Dear God... - Siniša mumbles more to himself and looks at his Sicilian, smiling compassionately. The man replies with an identical smile and a brief, helpless shrug. He lays his fat palm on Siniša's back and mildly pushes him forward.

- Whoa...

Siniša was expecting to see the first Trečićan houses around the band, but the trail only continued, now nestled in a shallow ravine between two hills. It led only to the next band, slightly upwards. Siniša suddenly felt a terrible need to pass these hundred metres in a conversation, albeit in Swahili.

- Does this trail have a name? Of the local kind?

– Da trail nat – the native replied, stopped and pointed to the left hand hillside, the taller one, the one they just passed by. – But thees eere is Frant Mur and thees eere Baeck Mur. Frant Waell – Secand Waell...

– Oh! Aha, so, this the Front Wall and this is the Second Wall! I'm sorry... but you speak an English of sorts, right?

– Stralean.

Stralean, Stralean, the government's commissioner kept repeating to himself, trying to figure out where he heard this expression before and what it meant.

– Oh, Australian! Stralean – Australian! Right? See, I'm here less than half an hour and I'm already making good progress! – he was ranting, surprised at his rant. The old man seriously nodded and only encouraged Siniša to keep babbling.

– Mee Siniša! – he slaps himself on the chest, and then puts his hand on his interlocutor, – aend yu?

– Mee Bartul – the man answers readily. – Bart.

– Bart! Bart Simpson! – Siniša makes a loud joke and regrets the second. Bartul's face petrified as though he heard sudden thunder.

– Negetive. Bart Kvasinožitj – he mumbles and puts on speed.

The rest of the climb was silent. And there, where the Frant Mur and the Baeck Mur converged like giant labia. Siniša petrified like Tonino did just a while ago. Down there, to the right of the trail bend, a valley stretched as though on a kitschy postcard. The widest street in the village expanded along its bottom, stone-paved and glistening from the rain. Along the street, on both sides, down mild slopes and in two or three regular lines, stone houses perched, mainly one-storey, around thirty of them to the left and the same to the right. On both ends of the main street was a smallish church without a tower, only with a tiny, flat belfries above the portal. The entire village was surrounded by dry walls and patches inside them. Down the left slope, facing south, only vines grew and...

– Whee, I didn't lose you by far – petrified Siniša heard a familiar voice in a familiar language behind his back. The panting, drenched Tonino was smiling like a child. A wisp of wet hair was hanging glued to his nose.

– What do you say, commissioner? Impressive, right?

– Yes, yes... Looks amazing. What about you? You alright?

– No problem, no problem – Tonino mutters uncomfortably. – I'll explain, but believe me, it is not a problem at all... And the village, like this, right?

Tonino puts down the wet bundle of newspapers to the ground and joins his slightly bent palms as though he is about to wash his face.

– You have two churches? – Siniša asks, not knowing what else to say.

– Yes – Tonino readily replies, completely devoid of his former stupor. – Saint Eusebius and Saint Pollio, like in Vinkovci. It is only that in Vinkovci they have a church together and here each has his own... Saiseebi and Saipoglio.

– Saiseebi and Saipoglio... – Siniša repeats after a few seconds of silence. He feels entirely overwhelmed by a sudden rush of fatigue, accompanied by internal, invisible shiver, like he does every time after a long and hard journey.

– I think I've had enough for today – he said. – Where are you putting me so that I can have a good sleep and be ready for action tomorrow?

– My place, of course, like a real commissioner. You'll have a nice dinner, make yourself at home...

– No, Tonino. I'll just lie down and sleep. Take me where you must and don't say a word, please.

The last words Siniša uttered were slow, cold and warning. He felt beset by 'the real Siniša'. That is what Željka called his bouts of terrible nervousness, even anger, that occasionally befell him, suddenly and intensely. 'The real Siniša' didn't worry him in particular, all until Željka named him so, half an hour after he tore the shirt she wanted to iron and he didn't let her. He started to think about this demon of his, looking for the bell to summon it, but all he could reasonably deduce was the fact that 'the real Siniša' at the moment of his appearance was connected with the irrational and terribly strong need to be alone that very moment, in a finger snap. Given the characters he hung out with these past few years, there was nothing odd about it. The odd thing was that the 'real' one appeared even when he was in quite good company. Over time Siniša has learned to control and mask the 'real' one all until the moment he was left all alone, but then he would usually be too exhausted to enjoy the victory won on two fronts.

Here and now, for a moment, on this pointless, superfluous island in the middle of the Adriatic, he seemed to feel much better all alone, no matter what, than in the company of these dark apparitions and their ominous welcome. He determinedly speeded up the mild, lumpy downward slope, bypassing the donkey and its guide, and the legged Tonino silently tried to catch up. Stepping onto the glistening stone, the first among the many that paved the entire main street, Siniša slightly slipped and stopped. On his right hand side was a small church and a small loggia in front of it. He turned on his heel and, while still turning, said in a decisive voice:

– Gentlemen...

However, the gentlemen were good fifty steps behind him and Tonino. They were not driven by a 'real Siniša' and they continued to walk in their monotonous pace. Like this, from below, vague under the darkened sky, they looked like a fat black worm slowly creeping towards him, grinding the pebbles and gravel from the path. A huge, sluggish worm with a tiny donkey's head.

– Gentlemen – he said again once the donkey obediently stopped, lowered its head and frowned a meter away from him. – Tomorrow is Sunday. What time is your mass? I'm asking because I'd like us all here, after the mass...

Tonino coughs by his ear.

– Khm... No mass. There is no mass – he said quietly.

The ‘real Siniša’ gave him a delirious look.

– No mass? No mass on Sundays?

– No – Tonino shrugs, as though he was embarrassed.

– With two churches in this... Two churches, but no mass, not a single one? What is your priest doing?

– We don’t have one. I’ll explain.

The ‘real Siniša’ honks charge and his cavalry rushes in galloping from all sides. The eighth commissioner, feigning courage, yells at his troupes:

– Okay, no mass! Tomorrow at eleven I want you all here, in this loggia and around it! There’s a lot to do and I believe it’s best that we start immediately. Tomorrow at eleven. And... thanks for the welcome. I am certain we’ll work together well. Good night.

The crowd starts to dissipate straight away, with brief, murmuring goodbyes.

– Where do I sleep? – Siniša asks Tonino.

– My place, like I already said.

– Take me, Virgil!

He was awoken by a rooster crowing. He sat up in his bed, mortified, convinced for those few seconds that he was in that little house in Dubrava. Blinded by the light coming from the window, he carefully lifted his eyelids: odd furniture and crooked, freshly painted white walls informed him with silent glee: “No no, my man, this is not Dubrava, no...”

– God, why is it not Dubrava... – he sighs and covers over his head. For the next half hour he turned from one side to the other in the too soft dented bed and, only half conscious, tried to place at least the first piece of the puzzle. Last night he felt hypnotised, all focused on the battle with the ‘real Siniša’; he walked along the main street in the town, then along the meandering alleys, all until Tonino brought him here, upstairs, to this little room. He took off only his trousers and socks, cocooned under the cold quilt and... the meeting!

What time did he arrange the meeting in front of the church? Eleven? It’s seven, it’s fine, he can get some more sleep. All of a sudden he has to piss, and it’s getting more painful by the second. He lifts the cover, lowers his feet down on the threadbare carpet and gets up. The cold creeps up in a second from the creaking floorboards up his legs, all the way to his crotch.

– Fuck!

He remembered another detail from last night: while he was absent-mindedly taking off his trousers and repeating in his head “Get lost, off with you too!”, Tonino was at the door explaining that the

bathroom is downstairs and that “in case of utmost emergency there is a chamber pot under the bed, right by the ‘foothill’. Siniša cracks open the door, hears a muffled rattle of dishes downstairs and quickly closes them. He takes out the enamel chamber pot from underneath the bed, places it in the right spot, and begins.

– Whoa! – he yelled at the sting of the cold metal on the lower side of his penis.

– Whoa! Motherfuckin’... – he repeats when the brim of the chamber pot touched his thigh. Jittery and intermittent, this was his hardest piss ever. Towards the end, when he already couldn’t care less, he peered in the window. The beauty of this light blue rectangle fully awakes him and brings him to this consciousness. Only the sky was visible, but in the upper right hand angle outside, in the breeze, the edge of an embroidered sheet, tablecloth, whatever fluttered, suspended from above. Only this little white piece spoils the perfect blue window geometry and the morning sky before him. In fact, maybe it didn’t spoil it, maybe its bashful flutter even added to its beauty, doubling the impression of timeless benevolence... Siniša felt gently stung by a sudden sweetness, only partially related to the fact that he had just squeezed into the pot the very last drop of his poetic insides. He puts down the full cup by the bed and approaches the window, desirous of a vague, through and through Mediterranean scene, a panorama whose beauty will encourage him for life, imprinted in his memory as a most profound mark...

– What the fuck is this shit?! – he swears whisperingly, noticing the roofs the Trećić Village: every last one in sight was covered in solar panels! Just like it seemed to him last night in the dark, but he immediately attributed such a nonsense trompe l’oeil to his nerves and fatigue.

Tonino was standing before a stone sink and rinsing a plate, and at the table, in a wheelchair, an old man with a gloomy, wrinkled face was sitting and, not too willingly, eating bread crunched in café latte with a spoon. The black waxy eyeglasses were taped below his right glass with a piece of prehistoric band aid.

– Good morning! – Siniša greets them, acting cordially.

– O, good morning to you to, commissioner – Tonino cheerfully replies. – Did you manage to restore your body and soul for the upcoming duties? Sit down, have breakfast with us.

– Thank you, I’ve never learned to eat in the morning...

The old man only now became aware of his presence, only with a twitch of the eyebrow above the band aid.

– Let me introduce you... My father, Tonino Smeraldić, and thees eere is ovr niew commosso.

The old Tonino now looked at him with both eyes, but again just for a second, and silently returned his gaze to the little bowl in front of him. The son was visibly embarrassed, but Siniša indifferently withdrew the hand and shrugged.

– Tonino, where can I go wash my face and, you know, set myself straight?

– Here, I’m sorry, here... I’ll show you immediately.

Fifteen minutes later, the commissioner came back to the kitchen, all washed, shaved, fragrant and inside incredibly angry at both Toninos.

– Would you at least care for some coffee? – the younger one beats him to it, just as he was thinking about what he saw in the bathroom. – Turkish, espresso, latte?

– For fuck sake... Espresso, in fact, make it a macchiato, with just a drop of milk.

– We have only sheep and goat milk. No cows on Trećić, I’m afraid.

– Any.

Goat milk and Italian tiles in the bathroom. Solar panels and a stone sink. A chamber pot and this old grumbler in a state-of-the-art wheelchair. Ancient glasses secured with a band aid and a shiny hospital mechanism for lifting disabled patients into the bathtub. Vacuumed Lavazza in a credenza about to fall apart... Too many opposites, too many differences for the usual morning Siniša. His thoughts mixed and jumped over each other, he was trying to calm them down with occasional squints, but he couldn’t. Physically, strangely enough, he felt great. Rested, easy, perfectly capable for a day full of tasks... which weren’t as clear as they were yesterday, nor he had the yesterday’s will. The same thing happened half a year ago, when he quit smoking and survived the first week of abstinence: his body yearned for activity and his brain, incapable of categorising daily priorities, kept repeating: “Have a smoke, remember!” have a smoke? Here he could, he and Željka quit the day their Boss told them to stop fuming, at least in public. Here there is barely any public. As there are probably no cigarettes, these people smoke shrubs and weeds...

As if he was reading his addictive mind, the old Tonino took out from his pullover pocket a pack of white Marlboro and a darkened gas lighter. He slowly took out a cigarette, closed the pack and silently pushed it across the table, only an inch away from Siniša. Then with a mild twitch of his fingers he delicately removed the filter and started to insert it slowly in a holder. Finally he lit it, inhaled a smoke to the bottom of his lungs and even pushed the lighter to the other side of the table. Siniša yearned for a smoke as though he had never quit, but his politician instinct forbade him from reaching for the pack. This old grumbler is not hoodwinking me! Look at him watching through the window, like he couldn’t care less, the old stooge!

Tonino readily placed an ashtray in front of his father and then translated the offer to the commissioner:

– Be my guest, if you want one...

– No, thank you, just coffee.

The tasted, the pleasant one, were something Siniša has always been translating into an internal geometry of his. Good wine always tasted like an ellipse, in one colour or the other. Fresh green lettuce, seasoned just right, was an equilateral triangle and warm, full coffee – a rotating circle, like a wheel without spokes. The one he had just sipped immediately made him see two concentric circles turning

slowly and harmoniously, each in its own direction. The outside was just coffee, fresh, good and fragrant, and the inside...

– Tonino, this is goat milk you put?

– Sheep, sheep. Ewe, in fact.

– Man, the coffee is amazing. Like...

Trying to think of a compliment to say, Siniša again yearned for a cigarette and then he realised: these two were actually seducing him, trying to win him over for some reason. No way Jose! He quickly slurped the rest of the coffee and got up.

– Tonino, would you show me around the village before the meeting.

– By all means! With special pleasure! Just five more minutes of your patience, I need to groom myself. Take some more coffee, there is some in the moka pot, the milk is right here, I'll be with you in a second.

He was gone for a good quarter of an hour and then he reappeared with wet hair combed to the back, in an old black suit with too short legs. In the meantime Siniša didn't even try to communicate with the old man. He decided to wait stealthily for the opponent to reveal his weak spots. And when Banderas (that was the first thing that went through his head: "Look at him – Banderas!") finally appeared at the kitchen door, the commissioner was already on the edge of his fragile abstinent nerves. He was just thinking about stealing a smoke from the old man without him even noticing...

– Now you wait for me – he said. – I'm going upstairs in my room to get my jacket and my notes.

A few minutes later, as soon as they turned around the first corner, he asked Tonino:

– Was it you who emptied and washed my chamber pot?

– What is your point? Oh that... Yes, who else? The three of us are the only tenants.

– Tonino, it was my chamber pot... I mean, the packaging was yours, but the content was mine. I would have done it myself, sooner or later, now I feel really stupid, like, you know...

– Don't sweat small stuff. And what do you think I do all day with my father? Who empties the bowl underneath his chair? And he consumes beer like a maniac!

– Okay, but man, I've known you for half a day and you emptied my chamber pot, made my bed... I feel like down in the mouth. Let's make a deal... If I don't ask and don't call, don't even enter my room while I'm there with you. OK?

Tonino remains silent for a few seconds.

– Fine, if that's the way you feel about it. Just tell me, did you like the window view this morning? The petticoat in the breeze...

– What petticoat?

– Last night I hung my mother’s old petticoat in snow white down the window in the attic, to make your morning prettier, when you open your eyes...

Siniša stops.

– Tonino, is this the way you and your old man drive every commissioner nuts?

– I don’t know what you mean. As far as the petticoat is concerned, the thought came to me only yesterday, while you were sleeping on the boat. Neither of your predecessors got it... Truth be told, I never took it out of the chest since mother died.

– Oh lord, oh lord, oh lord... OK, OK, forget it. Thank you for your attention, I am really moved, but don’t do it anymore. And now kindly show me the sights of Trećić. We can, for example, start with these solar panels on the roofs...

An hour and a half later, the eighth government commissioner on the island of Trećić, instead of a multitude of locals, stepped before the altar in the empty St Eusebius church. Not even whole fifteen minutes after the arranged time, in the arranged place, was there anyone. And not even in the loggia – the entire Pioz (the name of the main street was only one hundredth of what Siniša learned from Tonino this morning during their walk) was empty, emptier even than the commissioner’s head, in which everything from before and everything from this morning, like melted lead, seemed to descend down his legs and solidified between his soles and the stone pavement... No one, not a single person came to the meeting! This, of course, was not surprising, given the fact that this was the execution point of seven of his predecessors, but still... This was a boycott of epic proportions, the most terrible event in Siniša’s political career, more shameful than the affair that brought him here. It has been known to happen that only two people come to a panel or a press conference, by chance or by order, but this was a brand new experience. On top of everything he had heard from Tonino in the last hour and a half, it seemed even more horrific.

– Madmen! – he yelled, turning from the altar to Tonino, who stopped in the small doorframe of the church entrance, a leggy silhouette in counter light. – You are all madmen – the commissioner added more quietly. – You too, complete with all of them. What is it that you’re trying to do here? What are you making? A Utopia, Arcadia, what the fuck?

Tonino coughs slightly: – Khm, the church...

– What church? You don’t have a priest, you don’t have masses, this guy up in the painting is the spitting image of St George, unless Eusebius was a horseman in his youth and then repented! What the hell are you rambling on about, man?!

– How should I put this, ahem, that too is a long story. This at first indeed by the votive church of St George, but in the sixteenth century, if I’m not mistaken...

– Oh please, oh please... Please don’t... You and your long stories. And this holy water here, this which is really sea water, that too must be a long story?

– I can make it shorter for this occasion. Perhaps you heard that in conservative catholic communities by the sea it is customary for the parish priest to bless the sea little after Easter. We haven't had a parish priest here in almost sixty years. Which means, we don't have a person authorised to bless regular water. But if you call to your memory the ancient saying "a finger in the sea connects one to the entire world", it turns out that the only truly holy water on this island is the sea water. Therefore...

Siniša shrugs helplessly.

– Logical. Everything is logical. But that doesn't mean that you are not complete nut jobs. I like you, but you're also bonkers.

– I'm just trying to be helpful. On this island you will surely not find another one like me. Sound corny, but I'm your only friend, at least for now.

Pierced right through the heart, the commissioner takes his translator by the arm, takes him out of the church and sits him down to the nearest corner of the loggia.

– Okay, my only friend, fuck... I'm sorry if I offended you, it really wasn't on purpose, but everything you told me, I mean, plus this total boycott... Tell me now, what shall we do? I'm new around here, you must be experienced in such situations...

– To be honest, if you now start to ask around the village why no one arrived, they will surely tell you that it was a misunderstanding and that they thought the meeting was at eleven in the evening. But don't accept that. If you really call a meeting at an hour before midnight, they will declare you mentally insane, unaccountable and they will boycott each and every one of your future initiatives. All until you really become one. Like the third commosso. Or the fourth, wait... Was it the third or the fourth?

Tonino thinks deeply and immerses himself in the analysis of this dilemma, as if it were fatal.

– Tonino... Tonino, hey! Who gives a shit which commissioner it was, hey! Oh fuck, not again... Tonino! Of for fuck sake...

Pressing the tip of his finger against the peak of his nose, Tonino stood still and gazed beneath the stone bench on the other side of the loggia, if not further. A melancholy smile froze on his face.

– What the fuck is this shit? – Siniša mutters desperately and starts pacing up and down the loggia. He looks at his watch, as if it mattered. It's ten to noon. What did that Simpson guy say yesterday, how long does this last? Five minutes? Ten minutes? But what if it lasts five hours, what's going to change? Walking to and fro, he noticed movement within his peripheral eyesight: a bent old man on the tip of his toes, like in a cartoon, was trying to cross Pioz unnoticed, towards the middle of the street.

– Stop!!! – yells Siniša and casts a quick glance at Tonino, who didn't move a muscle. The cartoon character stops, looks around and straightens up, continuing at a more normal pace where he was heading, paying absolutely no attention to Siniša.

– Hey! Stop or I'll shoot! – screams the commissioner and runs from the shade to the sun, letting one side of his brain to wonder at the other: "I'll shoot?!?" "Fuckin' high noon, I got you now, high noon, more or less" he thought, quickly pacing towards the petrified peasant.

– Where do you think you're going? Where are you going when I'm calling you? – he asked the poor man angrily, stopping a step before him.

– What is it, are you a cousin or something of that guy of mine? Why did you freeze like this? Where are you going, I'm asking you? Maybe the villagers meeting, huh?

– Ee oonly waent for...

– Oonly-oonly, for-far! Do you parlare Croatian?

The villager nods, frightened.

– Great! Now first tell me, were you with that gang of outlaws that welcomed me last night?

The old man spins his head. Siniša looks into his eyes, expecting a spark of deviousness, a hint of cunningness seeking only a crack through which it will jump at and humiliate him. He saw nothing. Anyhow, if the poor soul were any smarter, he would surely avoid Pioz through alleys instead of tiptoeing across it. On the other hand, if he was getting ready for a prank, he wouldn't be this scared shitless. With that conclusion, the commissioner continued in a more reconciliatory tone:

– What did they tell you, when is the meeting today in front of the church?

– An our baefore meednoight...

– Always like the first time, right? – Siniša pretends kindness and puts his hand on the man's shoulder.

The peasant nods with relief, pleased with the fact that things seem to be progressing favourably.

– What is your name, sir? I am Siniša Mesnjak, the commissioner of the government of the Republic of Croatia on your island.

– Zani... Smeralditj Zani – the old man replies after a short break, accepting Siniša hand.

– Mister Zani, the meeting was at eleven in the morning, an hour ago. And it will take place tomorrow, same time, same place. And if you double-cross me again, I will bring special police and arrest each and every one of you for jeopardising the constitutional order of the Republic of Croatia. Tell this to everyone. Tomorrow at eleven. E-le-ven in the mor-ning. This is your first and last chance to repair the damage. Otherwise I'll spread the word and you idyllic life will go bust. Okay? You can go now.

Zani quickly turns where he came from and puts on some speed, making a sign of the cross. When he disappeared in an alley, Siniša slowly turned back to Saiseebi. On film such a scene would be accompanied by music evoking the righteous man's upcoming vengeance.

– The third! – scream Tonino, suddenly rising and looking around. – It was the third one after all!

– I'm right here, Tonino. Tell me, man, is Zani Smeraldić by any chance a relative of yours?

Fandatia! The closest to the pronunciation. Old Bonino's foundation, in A. went as a kid, mine, got rich. Terribly, millions. Lawyers care, loiters – as they say here. 1 t a week two speedboats from Italy come, Friday: beer, flour, sugar, all. Solar p. and house eq. And cigarettes, clearly, tea, coffee... And Australian pensions. Cooperative – shop. "Cooprive". All cheap, for noting, money goes to Italians, smugglers 100%, for more. For Fandatia. A circle. Good to them. Good to everyone. Two churches, no priest, they pray themselves. Whenever. A lovely island, otherwise. If only we could evict these folks and enjoy!

First meeting – shit hit the fan.

Tomorrow he let them wait a good ten minutes in front of the loggia and then, from a shady alley, slowly, coolly, with hands casually in his pockets, he stepped out onto the sunny, deserted Pioz. And then, in front of Saiseebi – not a living soul!!! Fifteen minutes ago sent Tonino to recon and told him to come back if there is no one there at five past eleven, and if over a dozen villagers appear, he should stay with them.

– What the... - he asked himself out loud and spread his arms, helplessly letting them fall back to his thighs. – You sly...

He turned slowly, barely containing himself from shouting out a terrible curse, and then in front of Saipoglio, St Pollio, at the other end of Pioz, he saw a group of about fifty locals. Each and every one of them was fixing him, dead serious.

– Alright – said Siniša strictly, stopping in front of them, – although there are too few of you and you came to the wrong place, we will begin our first meeting. For those who may not know yet, I am the commissioner of the government of the Republic of Croatia on your island. My name is Siniša Mesnjak, but my name doesn't matter. What matters is that I am the commissioner with a task to establish here a local government unit, the Trećić County, fully aligned with the constitution and the laws of this state. I don't know and I'm not interested in why my predecessors failed to do so. I'm interested in succeeding and leaving you as soon as possible to live your chosen lives, but with a democratically elected county council and two elected councillors in the Prvić-Drugić Municipality.

– Aend whoay? – a loud voice from the crowd echoed.

– I beg your pardon?

– Someone asked the question why, what for? – Tonino the translator readily jumped in, for the first time in an official capacity.

– Why? Because all the citizens of Croatia are obliged by the law on local government. You too as citizen of the Republic of Croatia, according to this, need to have your representatives in the local government. Respecting this obligation brings you many rights, participating you advocate for your interests in the joint decision-making process.

– Wee are faen thee vay wee are! – another unknown background voice replied.

– We are happy the way it is right now – Tonino whispers.

– I am sure you are – said the commissioner, – but you are breaking the law. Many people are happier breaking the law, but then they get caught and punished, sooner or later. No need for this to happen to you.

– Si, naw need far thees – Bart Kasinožić steps out energetically from the second row, – but theis need for awrgumenti, far makein pawrties, lists, far screwein ova the naighboa, for deeveedin the villaggio! Ma che! And whoay? Oanlee to seet with thas Drugitjans that deednt coam far tempi eere and that waent awrways bee lowder?

– Wait a second – the commissioner said even before Tonino finished his whispering. – We can argue here until sundown without concluding or doing anything. I realise it's better for you this way, with the Fandatia and all these Australian goods smuggled by Italians, but you need to know that I came here to enforce the law, an ordinary, banal law, which no one in Croatia seems to mind but you. Moreover, they are over the moon to have it and are able to implement it. So, let's enforce it and done deal, you can live the way you used to, only two among you, after we organise a local election, will have to go once a month to Prvić and take part in the work of the Prvić-Drugić Municipal Council. That's it.

– Whoay wad wee need thees wark and thees council? – a voice from the crowd said.

– Oh for goodness sake – Siniša cries, – you must have an infrastructural problem. Water, electricity, sewage... – he starts to list, become growingly aware that these natives have none of these infrastructural problems. – And finally, what is your connection with the mainland? A ferry, for example? And what if someone gets sick? Wouldn't it be good to, say, have a helidrome on the island?

– Thaet doont exeest on Prvić, ow's it thaen gonna bee on Trećić? Aend waet shoold wee doe waeth it? Wee aeve Muona, the dactor af aoll the sick and inferm! The faerry is evol! – more voices sounded at the same time.

– Een if wee needaed all thees, ow'd wee gaet it with them Drugićans. Drugić – Trećić – seex to two. Zeero points far aes! – said Bartul again.

– Steady on... The problem, if I understood correctly, is in your relationship with Drugić. I realised even before I arrived that the dislike is mutual. What is the matter? Could you kindly explain, so we'll try to find a political solution convenient for both you and them...

– It's something I didn't have the chance to explain yet. It is not that simple, there are countless controversies.... – replied Tonino quietly with a worried look on his face.