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The little castle springs out of the gentle landscape as if by magic, on an elevation from which there spreads a panoramic view beneficial to the soul. Rounded hillocks sweetly roll one after another, diving into the fluffy December fog on the horizon. The wrought iron gate of the estate is friendlyly open, there is no barbed wire at all, nor armed guard. Only the climb up the lawn is yet to be mastered. Its steepness prevents it from serving as a golf course, and it isn't steep enough to be a ski-slope; the architect built the spirit of Zen-Buddhism into it, shade, bonsai willows, winding pebbled paths and secluded corners amidst the decorative plants, no doubt dedicated to meditation. If Rousseau had written his "New Heloise" here, he wouldn't have let the heroine die, not even on page fifteen thousand. They had physical refreshment in mind, too, on the flattened top of the hill there is a tennis court, with lighting, oh, here comes a swimming pool, it is not extravagant, without trampolines and jets for massage, probably even without heating. The house itself is straight from Hansel and Gretel, all of chocolate, mottled candies and lollipop, with the addition of satellite dishes and surveillance cameras.

No excuse would work. Smiling Saturday morning after the whole week of pouring rain, and she is so keen on visiting her friend from her student days who has recently given birth to her second baby. It will be a thrill to watch her baby-talk in a trance over the infant, murmur about the temperature of pap and the quality of stool. For hours! Not even by a diesel engine will I manage to tear her away. In the meantime, we two males will also enjoy the abundance of common themes. For example, mid-term prognoses regarding the fluctuation of the price of a barrel of oil, or elements of meta-narration in Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist*.

Although newspapers claim that the oil-trader's main activity is nevertheless arms trade. At some time past they praised his contribution to the reconstruction of the Homeland, after that they mentioned him in the context of some investigative procedures, after he had got lost somewhere in Russia. Since the government changed nobody alive has ever mentioned those procedures, so he discretely returned and settled down on a plot of land about twenty kilometres from the city. And right he is. Yuck! That pissed on city pavement, completely overtaken by the rural brutes, one should seek consolation in the country. Nowadays all the business is done on the Internet, anyway. You download a catalogue of Kazakhstan *kalashnikofs* in a second.

The hosts are appearing at the gate. Not a trace on them of that irritating, gesticulatory, exalted and disturbed welcome, the pathetic sign of lowly folks who push a chair under your ass and a glass into your mouth right at the door and without any intermezzo run with soup and turkey and cakes. No, they are nonchalant in a decent, refined manner. As their faces clearly show, their day started quite recently and very slowly and it didn't even cross their mind to perturb its rhythm because of any guests, especially like these.

"Zvonkec, go and tell the little one to bring Lucija," says the landlady stretching.

She, one would say, is one of those women who grab their pregnancy as an alibi for capitulation in front of the mass attack of calories. Although she has recently yielded the fruit of her belly, it is hard to resist the impression that a few more are inside. Did Karmen find comfort for her ego in it, an opportunity to treat herself to at least some superiority, because her contours still hold water fairly well? Or as a mirror of her own upcoming transformation and she is well on the way to come to terms with it?

The babysitter comes with the wrinkled rosy suckling in her hands. The young one casts an

inquisitive look towards Karmen, then towards the Professor, then it breaths a sigh of boredom and closes its eyes.

Gee! How sweet she is! May I hold her?

This is it, she's out. Right up to the moment when they will try to call her back from hypnoses and pack her into the car, the Professor is destined to socialize with a smuggler. Who, as it is appropriate, takes him for a grand tour, but without the imposing historiography of every segment of the house that do-it-yourself guys tend to plague you with; no, he saw the house for the first time when it was furnished all the way down to the toothbrushes, so, yawning, he opens the doors one after another like noble inheritors all over France when they walk the groups of Japanese tourists up and down their huge patrimony. He just laconically mentions by the way:

"They say that I got rich owing to the HDZ. And the truth is that they owe me hundred and fifty thousand bucks".

However, there is no bitterness in his voice; he spoke out this *hundred and fifty thousand bucks* with a gentle smile, as if he were recalling a cup of sugar he lent to a neighbour from the floor below, a self-supporting, unemployed mother. By the tennis court he nostalgically adds:

"This is tough. I used to go and play tennis at least twice a week until we had this. Well, in the beginning we sometimes actually played a match or two. Aeljkec and me. But you somehow lose enthusiasm for something that's non-stop in front of your nose."

Professor appreciates his wisdom. Generally, he likes him more and more. They immediately switched to the informal "you". Perhaps they could go together on a Caribbean cruise, or on a safari to Kenya.

"And so you bite your retirement money," he says.

"Oh, no," says Zvonkec, "we have expanded the firm. With this government it is even easier to do business, things go on their own."

That's a man Professor would gladly look up to. Flexible, with broad views, with international experience and well connected, organized, focussed on the pleasures of life. Conversation, however, gets stuck. How can he contribute to it? Shall he ask for the price of a pressure-activated mine these days? Or the tradesman has switched to drugs and sex-slaves? Luckily, it occurred to him to ask him something, too:

"So, you teach Italian, right?"

"No, no, French literature," answers Professor and takes the question as an invitation to add a word or two on the same theme, so he describes his courses and three of his colleagues, then the unstoppable recession of French language in the global Anglo-mania, the consequent fall of interest in that study, then the upcoming reform of the University according to the Bologna Declaration, which will definitely beat any interest to death. Zvonkec encourages him with cordial nods, and in each break between two sentences he adds Aha... aha... And when Professor stays without inspiration, he concludes:

"Yes, Italian, that's good for tourism."