

Kristijan Vujičić

**When the Walls  
Came Tumbling Down**

(Kad su padali zidovi)

Novel

Translated by Ellen Elias-Bursac



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“If ever I make it to where fear ends  
I’ll be ready to forget

Certain torn streets  
The gleam of wet tracks  
The first tram through Trešnjevka  
The shine in your eyes”

Branimir “Johnny” Štulić, Azra



**FREEDOM**



“What *freedom can exist* in the fullest sense *without*  
assurance of *eternity?*”

Albert Camus





## The Wall Must Fall

**M**arvelous creatures aren't out to draw attention, I have a feeling that I always sensed something along these lines deep inside, though I first said the words out loud as I watched a girl who looked like she was about my age walk down the hall in a diaphanous nightgown.

"What are you staring at, young man?" my thoughts were interrupted by Comrade Kuduz, the girl's father, a high-level Party functionary in whose apartment Toplak and I were about to demolish the wall between the kitchen and the living room. He glanced up from the headline in the newspaper he was poring over, and if his scowl was any indication, he wasn't pleased about it.

"I didn't see a thing, Comrade Kuduz," I protested lamely. "We were up till late last night so I'm still in something of a fog,"

While I said these words, Kuduz shook his bald head sourly, he got up and went off to the girl's room so that he could, I assume, lambast her. Meanwhile my high school buddy cackled away while cheerfully chomping on a sandwich heaped with bologna and cheese. Toplak opened his mouth to say something and spat out two or three globs of pink bologna.

"Holy shit, you're such an asshole," said Toplak, inflating his broad chest. "You're really going to step in it one of these days, ha-ha."

There was no hint of warning or real concern in his words that this might actually come to pass. We'd known each other six or seven years and our full repertoire of winks and jibes was old hat: I had the feeling we could no longer surprise each another. I looked over at yesterday's paper. Below the date, November 9, 1989, the journalist asked in a solemn tone: WILL THE BERLIN WALL FALL? We examined a little black-and-white photograph on which East Germans, I assume, with their arms raised, shouted frantic slogans about the despised regime or famous chants like "Wir wollen raus!" This was what I'd been waiting for. My eyes met Toplak's... We were not indifferent, the thought that something like this could spread to where we lived had caught our youthful imagination. I was

especially overjoyed at the prospect that some of the limitations having to do with religious freedoms would be lifted in Yugoslavia and was hoping for a transition to democracy and a multi-party system.

“So what do you say?” I asked Toplak.

“How do I know... You know me... I’d like it best if everything went straight to hell, right?”

He took his pocket-sized transistor radio out of his jacket pocket and switched it on. The time was noon and the news was just starting on Radio Zagreb. The speaker, in a solemn, steady tone, said:

“... that Honecker, former General Secretary of the German Democratic Republic, publicly predicted in January of this year that the Berlin wall would still be standing for the next fifty to one hundred years is widely known. But yesterday, on November 9<sup>th</sup>, in response to pressure from the demonstrations and the international situation across Eastern Europe, the Politburo of the Socialist Party of German Unification with Egon Krenz, Honecker’s successor, at its head, decided to allow emigration to the West—and this was announced to the press by Günther Schabowski, spokesman for the Politburo. Late last night, as the TANJUG Agency reports, some of the people who had gathered began, spontaneously, physically to smash portions of the Wall...”

“Turn that off, goddammit!” Comrade Kuduz ran out of his daughter’s room and lunged toward Toplak, covering the distance between them like a super hero. “Are you out of your mind? What’s wrong with you... turn that off!” he cried in anguish, talking fast. “Come on, time to get to work or I’ll call them at the Youth Temp Office and tell them you didn’t do your job. Where’s your boss anyway? Get to work and demolish that wall.”

Toplak first dug in his heels, probably deciding whether to punch Kuduz, but then he went down the hall to the other room. I froze again because again the scantily clad girl had appeared in the doorway to her room, clearly set on defying her father. She seemed different from the other girls I knew, more refined somehow, both intimate and distant at once. From her room came Mladenović’s soulful plaint: *You are alll myyyy paaaaain!* Well, well, young lady, I thought, so you’re an EKV fan. Nice... The girl with long blond hair shot me a coy look, leaning on the wall by the door jamb.

Her father grabbed the newspaper from the table, rolled it up and began whacking me on the back, shouting that I was a beast and a voyeur, but the grin never left my face. The girl smiled, too.

“Please, Booojaaanaaaa, Daddy’s little darling!” Ah ha, now I knew her name. “Please don’t prance around half-naked in front of these savages. Look at this one here with all that shaggy, greasy hair and so scrawny, he looks like...”

“...Jim Morrison,” said Bojana with a lilt in her voice.

“Come on, who’s Jim Morrison, anyway, he reminds me more of that creep in the *Roheri s Moravu* band. Come on, get going, back to work.”

“*You are all myyyy paaaaaiin!*” hummed Bojana, casting a glance my way, but I sped off, not wanting to completely ruin any chance that my colleague and I could earn a few dinars, while behind my back Comrade Kuduz rained his insults down upon me.

I found Toplak in the living room, his head resting on the wall we’d been told to demolish. He was holding a mallet and gasping with laughter. After our eyes met, I, too, burst out laughing, clapping my hand over my mouth to stifle the sound. Then at a mad moment, as if in some movie, I picked up a thick marker and wrote on the wall the words: THIS WALL MUST FALL!, paraphrasing Tito’s famous command to the Partisans before the Battle for Prozor in 1943: “tonight Prozor must fall.” That message had always struck me as laden with pathos... I heard steps coming from the hallway, Kuduz was headed our way, cursing, and Toplak, taking the marker from me, crossed out the word ‘WALL’ and instead of it quickly scribbled “Yugoslavia.”

Holy shit, I thought and just before Kuduz stepped into the room I began swinging the mallet at the word “Yugoslavia”—to cover the tracks of our “crime.” I smashed the wall with all my might, while my friend was doubled over, hooting with laughter: there were moments when I thought he might choke; he was wheezing like a bagpipe.

“Fuck a duck, Blackie!” he gasped, choking, “you’re crazy as they come, hee-hee-hee!”

Just as our host, the Communist functionary, neared, Toplak began bashing the wall with his mallet so a Yugoslavia-shaped chunk of wall was soon smashed out and began spewing plaster into the next room leaving only a hole in the wall as a memento of the name of the country, while, beet-red, Comrade Kuduz wailed, almost sobbing:

“Oh no! No!”

I thought at first that he cared so deeply for the country that the very thought that someone would demolish a wall that boasted his beloved name was sending him into fits of moans and groans. But the issue was quite different in nature, something that outstripped our two overworked brains and instantly clarified the entire situation:

“Nooo, not that waaaaallll, you imbeciles! Not the fucking kitchen wall! The other one.... the dining room!” Kuduz brayed, desperate as a donkey.

Toplak and I stood there, frozen in place, as if we were characters from the *Pat & Mat* cartoon: he sobbing with laughter, me—seeing how stupid we’d been.

And behind Kuduz's big bald head with him promising that we'd "pay for this and end up behind bars" that smiling creature appeared—the blond-haired, beautiful, ethereal girl named Bojana.

Okay, so sometimes even marvelous creatures like to draw quiet, barely noticeable attention, I thought, watching Bojana and leaning the mallet on what was left of the demolished wall.

pp. 13-19

## 10.

### Revolution

**A**lthough I was still just a kid, I knew there were women who bear the weight of their existence like a hallmark, at once sadly and proudly. I saw this hallmark of jaded youth, premature aging, a plaintive joy, a smiling frown and a dying restlessness in my mother's eyes and on Bojana's face. Both of them carried the burden of their lives without complaint, calmly and without showing other people that they had difficulties to deal with in their lives. They were like a rare spice or scent which isn't accessible to everyone or a precious kind of chocolate you will have the chance of savoring only a few times in your life, but beyond the rarity, in the little flask and gold cellophane was wrapped a mystery of life that wasn't so simple to resolve, or rather a secret of a sense of existence that not everybody was able to discern. I knew we should accept these people for what they are and appreciate their proximity, love, and life.

My thoughts about these beloved beings, who stood side by side before me in my mind's eye, was interrupted by my father, in his bathrobe, when he declared: "Ceaușescu is done for!"

That Christmas was chilly, and the difficult and bizarre year of 1989 was drawing to a close. A revolution was underway in Romania, the state television station had been occupied, and people stood up to Nicolae Ceaușescu and his dictatorial regime from Temesvár and Bucharest. And furthermore Ceaușescu, who reminded me of Louis de Fines, was taken prisoner a few days before after he attempted to flee by helicopter and his photograph was being broadcast over television.

"They'll kill him like a rabbit," he said, quoting a line from the old movie *The Marathon Family*, more to himself, forecasting a very probable outcome.

I said nothing. Incredible things were happening around me in Yugoslavia and East Germany like acoustic and visual backdrops; all of the USSR was in

turmoil; Bush, Thatcher and Gorbachov met, raised a question of what would happen with the Iron Curtain, and then suddenly the revolution erupted in Romania. But I felt as if these things had nothing directly to do with me and I was still burying my head, ostrich-like, in the sand. Still even I knew this illusion of non-happening couldn't be sustained for long, I would have to face up to it all. And besides, I decided I'd spend Christmas with two worlds that were otherwise unrelated: Barbara's and my family's. I wasn't worried about how my mother and sister Nasja would take to Barbara, whom introduced I as Bojana. Least of all was I thinking about how she was coming from a Communist family while my old man was telling off-color jokes in local bars about the collapse of Communism. My big problem was how to explain to Barbara what was going on with my dad: how to give her a feel for his depression, his neglect, his candor in communication, and, above all, his singing of chansons and pop classics in his bathrobe.

Višnja—my mother, Nasja and Barbara hit it off right away. The cakes, the Christmas festivities, decorating the tree and the agreeable conversation interwoven with mother's inquisitive glances, gauging whether Barbara was my girlfriend. We have always celebrated the holiday this way, modestly both outside and in, and I looked forward to its coming.

"My folks don't actually celebrate Christmas," Barbara blurted frankly, "but it's nice... it's nice here, it's lovely here with you, warm and full of color."

"That doesn't matter, dear child, what matters is that we understand each other. It's more about tradition for us; make yourself at home. This is how it was for me growing up, I'm from around Zadar, lots of kids, people and the love of Christmas, there was always enough to share."

"Thank you..."

"Are you two dating?" Mother winked at Barbara.

"Look, Mama. No need for that now, we'll be heading out soon enough anyway." I steered the conversation.

"But not before," chimed in Father, ready to go and primed like a shotgun, "I sing a..."

"Now Ivo... why a song first thing? Hold off for now, what will the girl think of us, she's meeting you for the first time."

"Auntie Višnja, let him sing... Ivan told me everything, we even brought him a present. We brought Mr. Kovačić a genuine..."

"Don't you mean to say, a genuine child's..." I added.

"Yes, that's right. A genuine kid's microphone from the NAMA department store, so here you go."

Father quickly tossed away the hairbrush he'd been going to use, opened the present and took the plastic black toy which really did look like a microphone.

"Thank you, my children! Today a special song just for you," Father's eyes welled with tears. He struck a pose, eyes fixed on the distance, and sang: —*This is your country / here is where you'll make your home...*

He flung wide his arms, repeating the chorus several times, taking care that his bathrobe didn't open, occasionally forgetting that he should hold the microphone close to his mouth while he sang, and his voice, despite the occasional quaver, was deep and lovely. Mother disappeared into the kitchen, Nasja behind his back imitated all of Father's moves, Barbara laughed, and I thought Vice Vukov would have been gratified to know that there was a family singing his song at Christmas.

Barbara and I soon said goodbye to my folks and ventured out into the Zagreb night. We walked around town, it was about 11 o'clock, we crossed the Square by the Manduševac fountain, then next went up to the Cathedral to where Nova Ves starts, then over and down to Ribnjak Park and the old part of Vlačka St. There, by the Šenoa statue, I turned to my marvelous creature and, lit by the barely visible light of the street lamp, I began to speak:

"Barbara, you'll be leaving here sooner or later, I understand that. Everything's going to go to hell here, it will burst into flames like a torch, it will disappear and be born again from ashes like a phoenix. But meanwhile people will change and the light will die in their eyes," I stopped for a moment and then finished sadly, "That's how I see it."

She came over and hugged me.

"And you? What will happen with you, my little blockhead?"

I was quiet, not knowing what to say, hugging Barbara, who was actually Bojana, and imagining that the two of us lived somewhere far away, in another part of the universe where everything was possible and doable.

"I need to stay here!" I said firmly, and from one of the windows above the consignment store we could hear the beats of the Azra song "Flash"... I hummed along quietly while her water-blue eyes began, like the surface of a lake pocked by raindrops, to fill with tears. —*If ever I make it to where fear ends / I'll be ready to forget / Certain torn streets / The gleam of wet tracks / The first tram through Trešnjevka / The shine in your eyes...*

I'll always remember this moment, I thought. I wrapped my arms around the girl and drew her to me, I was a head taller and looked at her from above, her tears trickled down my coat, and I wished the moment would never end.

"I know why you have to stay. Becauuuuse..." she said, first quietly brushing

away the tears, and then heedlessly flailed her arms left and right and affecting a deep voice, she sang:— *This is your country / here is where you'll make your home!*—We burst out laughing. “Come on, cutie pie. You’re coming with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To my place,” she announced and pulled me by the hand.

“And Kuduz?”

“Kuduz? Who cares...”

The night was stealing our bodily warmth and with the dark crannies of the dimly lit big city it led us to doubt whether we really exist and everything really happens. The city cannot satisfy all human desire, but sometimes in its innermost self it can conceal from unwanted eyes the drunks, the thieves, the forsaken, the sad and joyous, the victors and the defeated, or only the freezing lovers. And this city is like that, it carries you through the night for a moment, and then around the next corner it may disappoint you with what it hides tucked in its bosom. I happen to love this city and this country and it would be hard for me to leave it regardless of what the future brings: this was the feeling that had been simmering inside me for a long time, maybe since my childhood, but now under the flickering light of the street lamps I had touched it in the depth of my soul, shaped it and articulated it before this creature who had come from another city and another republic. She understood my feeling, and maybe that was because I was able, that night, to embrace her apartness and the understanding gap that comes up among those who come from elsewhere. This lack of acceptance sidelines people, it isolates them from the mainstream of this place where circumstances have compelled them to live, and they remain outsiders forever in the new place, longing for distance and where they’re from.

There are moments in life that are so beautiful that they cannot be preserved in their original freshness, but require a superstructure—a backdrop of colors and sounds. On our way to Martićeva St. Barbara told me that old Kuduz was away on business, we went to her apartment, the kitchen wall had been patched, she put on one of EKV’s albums, we opened a bottle of red wine and then another, sang along to the songs from *A Few Years for Us: this circle I designed, this circle I made, this circle I smashed, scattered to the wind*, midnight and Christmas had long since passed, we lay, fully dressed, side by side, we didn’t touch, we just listened to the fragrances of the night and smelled the sounds... I felt as if I’d always been sleeping with your name on my lips, and *you’ve always slept with my name on your lips*, the wine mingled with the poetry, next to the bed I found a book and read Baudelaire’s “Albatross” aloud to Barbara, I watched the ceiling vault above me, on the mattress we ate the meat of some animals and to be frank I’ll never know



what really happened that night, and what I've only imagined, brandishing my vast wings. And the circle, like the encirclement of the revolution, closed in around us and we're hurt... We're hurt... by love.

pp.67-73



# **SOMETHING IN BETWEEN**



“I hate nothing. I only reject what’s superfluous.”

Ranko Marinković



## 15.

### New Times

**H**ey people, new times are on their way and only a person who is ready to see into the heart of the matter, who can adapt, or who has enough knowledge and desire for power, will be capable of responding to the challenges before us.”

“Oh, Branko, you are so right!” agreed Kuduz’s sister, bringing her glass of wine to her lips.

“Boys, what do you say?” asked Barbara’s father.

“Well, I think that may prove tricky,” I replied while slurping my soup.

“What?” Kuduz glared as he looked around the table where we—his mistress Mara, his sister Ivka, her friend, a Mr. Feletar, his daughter Bojana, and Džoni and I—were sitting.

“It simply is. If all of us are distracted by having to adapt, the question remains of who could ever know what the truth really is and what is the initial guiding thought...”

“Young man, I forgave you for fucking with my wall, but...”

“Branko, please, language,” interrupted his sister.

“Fine, fine, I apologize... Sorry sorry sorry... Look, Ivan, spare me the philosophy.”

Barbara slipped her hand over my knee to quiet me. We’d been served Mara’s soup which was not particularly tasty. I looked over at Kuduz’s sister Ivka Bunjanin (she’d kept her late husband’s surname), who tirelessly gulped the hot soup, daubing her mouth now and then with the decorative napkin. She has already embarked on the path of the new glory, late last year she joined a newly founded Croatian political party and persuaded her brother to do the same. Greedily gobbling the soup dumplings, she watched Džoni as if he were a weirdo who didn’t belong at our table.

“The Croatian men must finally take charge,” declared Kuduz, and I noticed that all references to Yugoslavia had been stripped from the walls. Tito’s photo-

graph had graced the hallway wall only a few months before, and now in its place hung a picture of Tuđman.

“Oh, you’re so right, Branko! And not only that: it’s high time to put an end to the disgrace of always having someone else lord it over us: Budapest, Vienna, Belgrade...”

“But what if it turns out that we’re not very good at running our own state? What if it turns out that precisely because of our history we haven’t had our own independent state for ten centuries, so what if we don’t know how to run it?” I asked.

“Young man, that is simply out of the question. Do you truly believe that this long-prepared concept of our state will be undone by the frailties and ineptitude of the Croatian spirit? This here is the centuries-old Croatian dream and the elaboration of everything which is necessary for that selfsame dream to come true, understand? There are countless people who have been working on the sidelines, in the wings of the so-called Communist Party, such as myself, to undermine the apparatus from within...”

“The system, Branko, the system!” Ivka insisted.

“Yes, yes... indeed... to undermine the system from within... I spent years as a high-ranking director within the petroleum company INA, and I have firsthand knowledge of all of this. I allowed my name to be stigmatized in the outside world by attending Party meetings, taking part in various bodies of the so-called people’s government, while on the inside, in silence, I was hard at work at two key tasks: on the one hand I sabotaged the Communist regime as such, while meanwhile I was doing all I could to make this company as successful as possible, so its untold potential could be harnessed, one day, by an independent Croatia...”

“You were bringing down the system from within?” I asked with a simper.

“Well, yes, exactly.”

“And was anyone aware of your efforts?”

“What do you mean? Who?”

“Well, I don’t know, did you regularly inform Tuđman or Veselica, for instance, that you were on the inside, conspiring from the shadows against the Communist regime?”

“But, young man,” interrupted Mrs. Ivka, running her tongue over her teeth, stained red by her lipstick, “then that wouldn’t have been from the shadows, would it?”

Barbara, Džoni and I choked back our guffaws, while Ivka’s friend, Mr. Feletar, solemnly agreed, nodding and repeating:

“No, no... that wouldn’t have been acting from the shadows...”

“Exactly, Miško, no it would not! The true heroes like my dear Branko pass



unnoticed and do what they do without ever expecting a medal or acclaim, is this not so?"

"Fine, let's leave the children out of this," said Kuduz, blushing red as if he, himself, didn't believe the story about himself he had just uttered. "Let's eat in peace." Then he added, "You have an interest in theology, young man? You go to church, I take it? That's what my Bojana told me."

"But, Ivan," her aunt wouldn't relinquish the floor, "Listen... I see it this way... without institutions and a well-charted belief system..."

"Sorry, what is this 'well-charted belief system'?" I interrupted her.

"Why the belief system prescribed by the teachings of the Catholic Church, and..."

But I was no longer listening. No need, because she was interested only in listening to herself and her tirade. She was incredibly boorish, and represented the type of woman who, babbling on without stop, inserted herself everywhere and because of whom the savvier, more vital and wiser women couldn't get a word in edgewise. Her notion of religious belief, even by the unconservative standards of Catholicism, was at the very least heretical, and her view of the head of the Church, the pope, flew in the face of the decisions published by the Ecumenical Council.

"The Pope for me is always and everywhere infallible."

"My dear lady, you yourself know full well that our Archbishop Strossmayer at the First Vatican Council decried the dogma of papal infallibility, and thanks to him and others we have the premise that the Pope is infallible only when he speaks *ex cathedra*..."

"Please, do not utter the name of that Yugoslav hireling ... Strossmayer..."

"Ivka! Why don't we leave this for now," Comrade Kuduz, now Mr. Kuduz, hushed his incoherent sister.

"Daddy, hey, did I tell you that Ivan knows all sorts of things about theology and church history?" interjected Bojana.

"Good for him, and so he should. The two of us, young man, might have a frank conversation about these things now and then. I find them very interesting, but haven't the time to study them all day long and think them through... the way you do."

His sister Ivka was not pleased by these words. Mrs. Bunjanin felt that only she had the right to inform her close family about the proper and eternal truth. I, too, wanted change for this country, I wanted freedom so people could without fear voice their faith, their religious sentiments and, if necessary, their national awareness. But I did not believe there to be only one truth, and that only one nation and religious faith had the privilege of claiming this truth as theirs. Ivka

looked at me with her deep, dark eyes, full of scorn and fear—but not embarrassment—at the way her ignorance had been bared on the fundamental issues she was invoking and which she, ultimately, espoused, and her prematurely sagging and puffy countenance acquired a new, grayish tinge, a patina of envy. I had the sense that she was beginning to hate me. Then she swiveled her penetrating gaze from my face to the face of an innocent soul at the table who would in no way be able to defend himself, and, while chewing the chunk of veal she'd just popped into her mouth, she asked a question which instantly froze the blood in my veins.

“Do tell, Mr. Džoni, if that is your real name... Is your father a Serb?”

Silence reigned for several seconds. Even Kuduz buried his face in his hands. Bojana abruptly stood up from the table, and Džoni, unprepared for such a situation, for whom a dumpling was literally lodged in his throat, answered softly:

“Well, I guess... he's sort of...”

“We're going out!” said Barbara firmly, showing Džoni and me that dinner was over. “I don't want to eat at this table anymore.”

“But Sunshine,” her father called. “Your aunt meant no harm...”

“We're going out, Dad, don't be mad...” she kissed him on his bald pate.

Mara fled from the awkward situation into the kitchen. Mr. Feletar first extended his hand to us, but after Mrs. Ivka shot him a fierce look, he pulled it back, and like a castoff it was left dangling midair.

The three of us went out into chilly Martićeva St. Džoni was visibly shaken and seemed to be thinking about the new times that were coming, wondering, in quite practical terms, what they would mean for him. Barbara stared at me carefully as if she wanted to tell me again: *there, you see, the world will do all it can to pull us apart.*

And I, staring into the distance, pulled up the collar of my leather jacket and uncertain now that I was faced with the times to come began reciting the lyrics of a song by Azra: *I come to you like a phantom of freedom / so show me what you know / I come to you like a phantom of freedom / to take you...*

“...straight to the bottom!” we all three of us shouted at once.

## Guess Who's Fucking For Dinner?

Spring went to our heads, each in our own way: I fell in love and Barbara and I made love sometimes, Toplak waited for the Sunday derby with the Red Star soccer team, and Džoni ran into Branimir Johnny Štulić, the rock star from Azra, in town—a huge deal for him. But everything went haywire and at my friend's request for his autograph in his school notebook, ornery Štulić turned his head away and said:

“Cut it out, don't you start fucking with me, too, now, kid!”

Džoni confessed that this turned his world upside down. While we sat in class waiting for Comrade Rudar, our computer teacher, to come in, I kept my eye on Džoni's shaved head and was thinking about how he was feeling. In fact it didn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to imagine his mental state, because I'd spent the night before in the Travno neighborhood at Džoni's family's apartment. He was disappointed: he was struggling to separate the artist from his work in his head, that's what he told me.

Comrade Rudar, the school's meanest and most terrifying teacher at school, walked into the computer lab. He was an unflagging Communist who gave more credence to child abuse than he did to Communism, which was, after all, on its last legs. Barbara told me that Comrade Rudar and Kuduz had once worked on an atheist bible of some sort, whatever that was, but half a year ago they'd stopped writing it, in part out of a rift between them, and probably because they knew too little about the material they intended to mock. In any case, he was known to say “children should be like trampled grass, and we know how trampled grass behaves: it no longer comes back up and will never bother anyone.” He'd stride into the computer lab with his hair slicked back, straighten a photograph of Comrade Tito—the only thing left in that classroom that was a constant (except his hair style), and speak in a stern baritone:

“Turn on your Orao computers by pressing the...”

Just as he was about to say the magic phrase “X key,” someone at a desk behind me scraped his chair and this, as usual, provoked a short circuit:

“You, kid, you from the junior class...” Tireless Comrade Rudar wailed and berated, “you like scraping your chair, dragging your feet across the floor, leaving scuff marks on public property and you’re making a ruckus here in front of your classmates!”

“It was random... Pwofessow,” protested Presečki.

“First of all, stand up you loser!” Rudar bellowed. “Secondly: that’s Comrade for you, not Professor... And thirdly and most important: nothing in the world is random, everything is deliberate.”

“But...” unhappy Presečki strove to defend himself.

“No interrupting! Understand? You are cattle! What’s your name?”

“Pwesečki,” he lisped his way through the ‘r’.

“Rrrr,” Rudar’s hard ‘r’ reverberated through the room, “not wwww. Now you try...”

“Wwww...”

“Rrrrr... Fine, Presečki, now get yourself home and tell your father you were sent by Comrade Rudar and he said you’re ignorant cattle...”

“I haven’t got a father,” said the boy.

“Fine!” the wiry crank went on without a hint of compassion. “So go home to your mother—you have a mother—and tell her you’re cattle!”

“Now?”

“How many classes do you have left today?” Rudar asked the class.

“This is our last class today,” the whole first row sang out in unison.

“So go after class. And now, at last... turn on your computers by pressing the...”

And then someone in the last row asked a classmate whether he had a pencil sharpener or some such thing, and again, like usual, we never had the chance to turn on our fucking computers, and I began to wonder whether it even worked.

“Ho ho! You joker, you reject, you misery... Yes, you! Why so surprised, ha? What are you staring at me for? You like the way I look, is that it? Stand up, you bum!”

“I’m standing!” said Hlebnjak.

“First name?”

“Leopold.”

“Last name?”

“Hlebnjak.”

“Booooy,” Rudar bellowed, “you are cattle! Understand?”

“I undewstand, Siw, I want to tell you, Comwade...”

“Wait a minute, are all of you fucking with me? Don’t you know how to pro-

nounce an ordinary hard rrrrr?" He began asking the other students, one by one, wondering whether someone had sent him a whole class of students who couldn't pronounce the letter R properly. But soon, after a dozen students pronounced the problematic letter properly, Rudar picked up where he'd left off with the insults: "Hmm, no surprise that you're the 3H junior class. I see, I see. Fine, Hlebnjak, get up!"

"I am up!"

"Yes, yes, I see... what a smart aleck. After today's class go home and tell your mother you're cattle, that the Comrade said so..."

My thoughts began to wander back to the night before, away from the insults and threats flying around the room. Around me I saw the frightened faces of boys who were waiting to be called on and whose fingers probably would never have the chance to click on their Orao computers by pressing the "X" key.

I remembered how the night before at the high rise we called the Mammoth I slept on a mattress on the floor of Džoni's room, after he'd told me all about how miserable he was about Štulić's rude behavior, and then a bed began banging against the other side of the wall.

"Yes, oh yes, oh, big boy!" rang out a woman's frenzied voice.

"Tonight Prozor must.... ooh... ooh... fall!" the man shouted back at her.

"Are you fucking me, big boy?"

The woman must be from Prozor, he thought. Why would the guy be quoting Comrade Tito otherwise in the middle of sex?

"At least he's fucking," whispered Džoni.

At that moment Joco Rakočević, Džoni's rumpled father, appeared at the door to our room and while he was tying his bathrobe he banged back on the wall and shouted:

"Guess who's fucking for dinner! Hey! Who's that fucking there?"

There was a momentary lull. And then both of them, at least that's how it sounded, started jumping crazily around on the bed, and now along with the dull thuds we could hear creaking.

"What's up, little Mr. Officer?" we heard from the other side. "What do you want from us? Hey? If I'm fucking here, I'm fucking on my own dime! Hear me, Officer Shithead? Hear me, Comrade Captain?" shouted the man on the other side for another minute, and then everything went quiet.

Comrade Rudar's voice brought me back from my reverie. Apparently, he was addressing me personally. Exhausted as I was from my lack of sleep the night before, I imagined, as he opened his mouth, that he was asking me, "Guess who's fucking for dinner?"

And of course I laughed out loud.

“Well, lookee, lookee here! He’s not just lost in reverie, he’s laughing...” shouted Rudar, furious. “Okay, kid, stand up... Go home at the end of class and tell your mother that you’re...”

Then the bell rang. Frazzled Rudar, to my great surprise, ended his sermon that instant, grabbed the classroom register, and with the threat “we’ll pick up next time where we left off today,” he strode out of the computer lab.

“Lucky you,” said Grof, thumping me on the shoulder.

“Guess so,” I said tersely.

I felt the world shrink and turn into a battlefield on which on one side are the types who disturb and abuse others, and on the others are those who put up with it. How to interrupt this indecent interaction, I wondered. How to strip the power from those who don’t know how to handle it and return it to those who have none? I didn’t know the answer. Maybe the answer was on the ‘X’ key on the Orao keyboard: maybe when we press it the world will come undone or things will get better.

I lingered in the computer lab.

I pressed the ‘X’ key on the Orao for the first time in the course of my schooling.

And nothing much happened.

Several green letters blinked on the screen.

I wrote a few words and left the lab.

On the screen were the words: “Guess who’s fucking for dinner?”

pp. 189-195

## The Colors of Violence

I sat, tipsy, at the edge of the dance floor at the Lapidarij club, leaning against the wall and watching the sweaty bodies moving to the beat of the Depeche Mode song “Personal Jesus.” In my narrow field of vision I watched Džoni, Ranko and Šomski, while an interesting scene was playing out behind them. First Kizo the bouncer was chasing Burek who was lurching across the podium, and then—just when we’d come to the last lines of the song (*Reach out and touch faith / Reach out and touch faith*) which almost every remaining dancer was chanting with me in a delirium—the strapping guy in a leather jacket with the shaved his head turn and ran from Burek who was puking all over him. I laughed, sipped my beer and enjoyed the respite of the moment. Amir was sitting to my right, and he and I were talking about Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*. To my left sat taciturn rockabilly Speedy, named after the cartoon character Speedy Gonzalez, a good-natured and slightly sluggish character; I’d been working with him recently a few nights a week at the Peščenica bakery, and next to Speedy stood my buddy Toplak, blowing smoke rings, and looking more and more each day—with the clothes he wore and the way he behaved—like Alex Delarge from Kubrick’s movie *Clockwork Orange*. First I read Burgess’s book two years ago, and then last summer Džoni, Toplak and I watched the movie. Toplak, who wasn’t keen on reading, was particularly intrigued by the violence in the movie.

“Who gives a fuck about your Rudolf Hess. Why have you been jawing about him for like half an hour?” interrupted Toplak, muddling his names, as usual, and continued to mutter on his style; “That bouncer, Kizo who Burek just puked all over his collar, really pisses me off. He deserved it. Fucking Serb!”

“Hey, first, the man is Montenegrin, his name is Petrović, and second: so what if he’s a Serb? The only question that matters is whether he’s a decent human being,” I told him with Speedy’s nod of approval.

“What makes you so fucking smart?” Toplak blustered, squeezing in between

me and Speedy. "Same diff. We'll be driving all the vermin out of the country soon anyway."

"Two things matter, Toplak!" I placed emphasis on his last name and smiled. "First of all... you, who along with all the other idiots in Serbia and Croatia are stoking the possibility of bloodshed by talking like that, even war, you'll be the first to hotfoot it out of here when push comes to shove... you won't be driving anyone anywhere. And second of all, even more important, this violent thing you've been so into ever since you saw *Clockwork Orange* is not going to make the world a better place."

"Fine, fine... What are you bugging me about?" Toplak snarled, sipping his beer. "Didn't I tell you the guy's Montenegrin, I mean, fuck a duck! No point in talking about this."

"It's not okay that you're talking like this! You're irresponsible... Take our Džoni. Who the fuck cares what someone's ethnicity is? Until a year or two ago he was your best friend, we swanned around town together, scrounged for the cash to pay for admissions tickets and went every summer to stay with his dad on the coast. Am I right or am I right?"

"You're right, but why'd you bring up that dickhead?" sulked Toplak, shaking his head. Amir and Speedy thought my words were entirely reasonable. "What're you getting at?"

"Someone filled your head with garbage and hatred. In your thoughts lately all you're thinking about is how you'll fuck someone over, wring their neck, insult them about their background and drive them away. But the truth is simple," I pointed to Džoni, "this dejected Azra fan has never done anything bad to you or your family nor has he ever, in my presence, said a single word against you."

"So what?"

"So nothing, nothing!" I went on talking with as much calm as I could muster. "Džoni's ethnicity matters not at all, what matters is he loves this city and this country, and the people who live here. And I tell you he loves all of it. I don't know a more Zagreb kid than Džoni... that's what I'm getting at."

Toplak briefly bowed his head, dropping his eyes, so like his hero Alex, waiting for the moment when he'd punch back, and I whispered:

"Toplak, you have to see that the most important thing is to be a decent human being, and nothing else matters."

"Brother, you are so full of shit!" within a few seconds Toplak was back in high dudgeon and went on spreading the foul breath of the madness that the fools on both sides of the spectrum had embraced, instead of taking a critical view of the world they lived in. "I'm telling you, you're going to be sorry if you keep talking



like that. You're ours, and everything's swell while you're on our side, but thin is the line between what's ours and what's theirs. I hate them because of everything they've done to us for centuries..."

"But who are you hating then? The Venetians? The Turks? The Austrians? The Hungarians? The Serbs? Or is it people in general?"

"Everyone together! And nobody in particular. What matters to me is for things to get going, for the pace to pick up, for the violence to kick in."

"All you care about are the different colors of violence, is that it?" Toplak laughed lightly at my words. "All that matters to you is that violence has its continuity: if you lived in Israel you'd hate the Palestinians, if you were a Protestant in Glasgow you'd be violent to the Catholics, and if you were a Nazi during Hitler's time you'd have turned on the Jews..."

"Ah Blackie, have you forgotten? I am a Nazi," his eyes flashed like a wolf's fangs in the dark, "and I hate everything under the sun. See? But if I were in Ireland I wouldn't be a Protestant, I'd be a Catholic and a Celtic fan..."

"I know you really meant Scotland there, but sure. Hey, aren't you a fan of the Bad Blue Boys?" I asked him, surprised.

"Ivan Kovačić, don't you ever dare correct me again!" he snarled into my face and then went on, more calmly. "Here I'm all for the BBB, there'd I'd be a Celtic fan, and I'd always be on the right side. I'd always be a Nazi."

"Toplak, what you're saying is terrible. You know full well how many millions of people were killed by the Nazis. You're drunk and you're talking rubbish."

We stopped for a moment with this pointless conversation. *Film's* song "I'll come to you in your dreams" had just struck up, and I was thinking about what had changed in Samir Toplak's mind, this bumbling blond boy I'd gotten to know in fifth grade on Šalata. Who brainwashed him into hating everything? Amir and I jumped to our feet at the same time, while Speedy dozed resting his big mohawk on the wall. It was nearly morning and our shattered, bedraggled crew was the last to still be on the Lapidarij dance floor.

"Hey, Blackie, fuck it, you always were the naïve idealist... just like cracked old Fritz," barked Toplak while he eyed me, sneering, from a sideways glance. "You'll see when the war comes. Your idealism will evaporate, and you'll have to take a side."

"I took my side a long time ago," I answered him coldly. "I don't want a war, unlike you and the other rabblers."

"Don't give me that crap. Like you're my old man, police officer Amir Toplak, giving me shit."

"The only problem, my friend," and I leaned over and pressed my lips to his

ear and repeated more softly while the lights were turning on, “is that when things get serious here, you’re going to be the first to turn tail and run. But I told you that already. And that, after all, is your business.”

Toplak and I stared at each other for a few minutes, his eyes seething with loathing; he clenched his hands in fists and looked like he was about to punch me. Then he shoved me away and jumped onto Petrović the bouncer who had just come out on the podium, behind my back, announcing closing time.

“Kizo, you bastard. Fuck your Montenegrin father!” screamed Toplak and began trading punches with the huge half-groggy bouncer who probably had just spent the last half hour scrubbing Burek’s puke off the collar of his short, well-worn leather jacket.

Toplak and Petrović looked like two roosters who, after all the fights they’d been in, had more eyes than teeth in their heads. They leaped into the fray, hinting, with their primitive little duel, of all the things to come...

Violence foreshadowing war.

pp.201-207



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KRISTIJAN VUJIČIĆ was born in 1973 in Zagreb, where he earned a degree in Philosophy and Religious Studies from the Zagreb University. His fiction and reviews have been published in a number of culture-oriented magazines and daily papers. He works as freelance editor. He received the Kiklop Award twice (for the novel, 2006.; as the best editor, 2014.). In 2017 Kristijan won the prestigious “Večernji list” Short Story Award, and in 2020 he won the “Književni petak” Short Story Award. He has published six novels: *Kad su padali zidovi* (*When the Walls Were Falling*, Fraktura, 2019), *Knjiga izlazaka* (Naklada Ljevak, 2015., shortlisted for the Gjalski Award), *Ponavljanje: zaigranost proljeća i života* (Knjigomat, Zagreb, 2012; semifinalist of the Tportal Award for the novel of the year); *Udruženje za mravlje igre* (Naklada Ljevak, Zagreb, 2009; shortlisted for the SFERA Award), *Gospodin Bezimeni* (Naklada Ljevak, Zagreb, 2007; shortlisted for the Fran Galović Award) and “Welcome to Croatia” (co-authored with Ž. Špoljar, Naklada Ljevak, Zagreb, 2006; the Kiklop Award 2006).