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Fairy Tale from a Coffee Machine

Translated by Vesna Marić

I was living in Zagreb, a central European city near the Adriatic coast. It's where I was born, and where I felt at home - though I felt at home in any larger city I found myself in.

Nika was with me. A beautiful Indian woman whom I met in London. She wasn't interested in money, or travel, or expensive clothes. She didn't mind getting under the sheets and going to sleep. She had nothing against my getting into bed with cold feet.

She would just wrap her legs around me and it would all be finished within a moment. I'd be warm, she'd stroke my face and go to sleep quietly, as if she had completed her daily duty. I couldn't sleep. At all. I felt more and more useless every night. I lay awake and watched her mesmerising body, as it rose and fell with her breath. Someone might have delighted in such a sight, but in me it merely awoke an emptiness, a void so vast that it made sleep seem impossible.

One such night I got up and went to the TV. I started watching a movie. Two people met in a supermarket. In the next scene they were already home and taking off their clothes. He seemed unsure of what he wanted, but she rapidly reassured him by rubbing her bare breasts on his face. I thought it was maybe a porn film, but it couldn't have been since I knew the actors from the stupid evening series. I got up and went to bed. I wondered - should I wake her up or carry on watching the film. I did what I always did. Covered her with the sheet, turned around and stared at the wall for a short time, and then hopped over into the kitchen to get something to eat. I always eat when I don't have anything else to do. Sometimes this helps me sleep, but needless to say, one cannot enjoy marijuana on an empty stomach. I did not, however, smoke grass every night, because Nika didn't like it. In her country, people go to prison for years for smoking marijuana. I took my first toke and started thinking about an Indian prison.

'It must be tough!' I hissed between my teeth while looking at myself in the mirror. For a moment I felt satisfied with myself, but then I heard Nika's voice from the bedroom: 'What are you doing?' I got up from the armchair and, suddenly dizzy from the marijuana, staggered into the bedroom. I knew I was in trouble, but I couldn't stifle a snigger. She looked at me with disdain, got up and whooshed past me naked, free from the shame or spite that she usually demonstrated if our eyes might have accidentally met in some formally nude situation. I wasn't thinking and she knew it. How could I resolve her problem? I listened to her putting on her clothes in a hurry in the other room. Should I stop her? The door slammed. How can a person get dressed so quickly?

I have held on to certain principles, more or less, my whole life. One of these was not reading other people's post, and other private things. I wondered why. No one is ever going to know that I had a look through Nika's diary. But no! I must dispel such thoughts!

Life had been good to me until now and there was no point in testing this fact. But that's how it goes! She leaves, slamming the door more and more often, leaving me behind with her diary. I guess she runs off in a frenzy to her friends from the embassy and then they sit together being horrified at the thought that this brute is now reading her diary and getting off on the details of her intimate life. I moved to her side of the bed and watched the navy hardbound notebook, a red page-marker ribbon dangling out of it. It looked as if she had already used more than half of the notebook. I tried to imagine what was written inside. 'Dear diary..' No! That's silly, her diary would be a mass of chaotic, half-finished sentences. For example: 'Heat, everywhere around me, yet it's soo cold, unbearable...' I caught myself laughing at my own joke, again. How was it possible that I was not angry or even a tiny bit dissatisfied with myself? And I was laughing at her misery! Well all right, it was not real misery. Maybe she felt just like I did about the whole thing. Hm, I wouldn't like that! OK then, let's have a look at what she's hiding from me!

'HELP ME!' was written across the entire marked page. I quickly shut the notebook closed, put it back on the bedside table and turned on the overhead light. What was that? Perhaps I'd had too much to smoke? I was being silly! She wrote down her private thoughts and she probably just wanted to vent. Maybe she was praying. Shit! I don't even know if she is a Hindu or a Muslim. We have never talked about it, except for that time on the ferry across the Channel. It was getting dark, we were on the deck and she talked about India. All of her memories were dull. She mainly talked about the moments when she would go to the cinema to see a new American movie. She understood that I was staring at the sea not because I was carefully listening to her, but because I was counting the foaming wavelets that were bouncing against the ship. A nasty wind had started to blow, and I asked her if it was ever cold in India, just so I could break the silence. 'No, only in a mosque,' she had said and burst out laughing. I also laughed because I liked her laughter. I started to feel uncomfortable, here on the bed. What if she had been laughing at some Indian joke, and I had never even thought of that as an option, and I made her realise that I thought she was talking crap. To make things worse, I liked the fact that she was talking crap. It literally made me happy.

I always told others, 'You know, the time will come when you will realise that your life is banal!' and I really believed it. Nika had left. I had read her entire diary that night and had worked out how to resolve our problems. But, she came back in the morning, packed and left before I woke up. I knew that she was gone as soon as I opened my eyes and saw the navy notebook in the bin. I was alone. I had no more money to travel.

XXX I'd go to my uncle, he might help, he loved my dad.

'Uncle, uncle!'

'Nephew, nephew!'

We baby-talked to each other whilst climbing up to the first floor of his house on Srebrnjak, from where you could see the entire eastern part of the city. We sat down on the comfortable armchairs while my aunt prepared tea.

‘What’s new, uncle?’

‘What’s new, nephew?’

‘Nothing much, how’s Aunt Silvija?’

Of course I didn’t ask for money. Deep inside I was pricked by the memories of my father’s and grandfather’s bickering over money. And there I was, in the street, walking and thinking about how I had nowhere to go except to my stinking flat, which I inherited as a token of my safe future. The future was sure to come, no doubt, but what kind of future?

‘Eliminate the undesirable element!’ states the formula for successful living. ‘Find the cause of your dissatisfaction and - eliminate it!’ I had attended such seminars once upon a time and I was convinced that I was on the right path. Right now, as I was walking down the hill of the posh neighbourhood and peering behind the front yard fences where there were always new, freshly washed German cars. The owners are those who had completed the seminars. And when they are nailed to the seat inside the three and a half litre diesel machine, the problems of the little man start to worry them and a whole new horizon of success opens up. I stopped. I wanted this too. Why wouldn’t I admit to myself that I was jealous of these bastards with their beautiful wives and nice cars. Those are merely the symptoms of their real status - their power. I have been wandering around the world delighted to not have any burdens of that kind, but those burdens are actual happiness. Those men came home from work, took off their burden and put it on a hanger, where it obediently awaited until the next business meeting, which was usually the following morning. Then the wife took the burden out of the wardrobe, ironed it lightly and, with a warm kiss, helped put the burden back on their backs. I loved such scenes. They were like the movies, my unrealised life story.

‘Excuse me, where is number 115 a?’ a young postman turned up from nowhere. I remembered Nika and her stupid diary.

‘That’s my post, let me have it!’

‘It’s too late now!’ I thought while he stuffed envelopes containing bills into my hands. I had hoped that the person whose post I was stealing was not expecting anything important.

‘See you!’ I said and walked downhill towards town, while the postman zipped up his bag. I loathed myself. Would I have ever got the invitation letter from my distant cousin in Australia, or a postcard from a girl who invited me to the seaside because she was home alone, had some fool stolen my post? But now there was email, communication had reached new levels... I did not make myself feel better. I would take the post to the address on the letters and stop this nonsense I had started. In fact, I could be the good neighbour who made the young postman’s job easier.

‘We need more people like you!’ the old lady said as I walked into her house. ‘Make yourself comfortable, young man, I’ll make you something to drink.’ What was I doing here? This was worse than stealing her post. I could hear her moving stuff around the kitchen. I didn’t want to sit down, so I looked around. Lots of books and small figurines on the shelves. There were no pictures on the walls, and I couldn’t see an old photograph of any kind. I had a headache! I wanted to get out of this geriatric neighbourhood! I grabbed a random book off the shelf and started to leaf through it. I stopped on the second page, where a beautiful hand had written a dedication.

‘Leave that!’ The old lady snatched the book out of my hands and replaced it with a cup of coffee. ‘Here you are!’ I was confused, which she used to get me to sit down and start talking: ‘I’m not married, and I’ve never been married. But there is a man who...’

‘I’m sorry, but I have to go!’ I was already uncomfortable because I had no intention of providing the old woman with a shoulder to cry on.

‘Ah OK then, go. But I thought you might have been interested in my story. Otherwise why did you bring me the post!’ We were both silent for a minute. A stupid situation.

‘Great coffee!’ I took another sip, leaned back into the armchair and relaxed. The old woman started telling me her life story, and I glanced over to the TV in the corner every now and then. A satellite channel showed mesmerising adverts.

She finished talking after twenty minutes and walked me to the door. She looked inside her post box. ‘Ah, silly me! You brought the mail. What a lovely young man! I hope I didn’t bore you with my stories!’

‘You didn’t, it was very interesting to listen to you!’

I dragged myself to the dump that is my flat and started thinking. I even concluded: I have never been of much use. This fact didn’t make me feel particularly defeated. ‘Enough!’ I said to myself. No more conclusions, **helping (??)**, striving. There was no utopia, optimism, pessimism! There was nothing, or rather, there was everything.

And that’s how it was.

‘What shall we have for breakfast?’

Alko, me and drugs sat in a dark room. Not serious drugs, just something to whet our appetite.

‘Well, I don’t know. I’d like some pate. No, no! Cheese! Fresh cheese! Cheese and cream, that’s what I want. With cured meat. No, actually not! You know what we can do! Let’s fry a bit of onion and cured meat and then we can throw some eggs on top of that. Eh?’

Alko just watched me. I waited to hear what he would say.

‘I’ll have a beer.’

This time I was not backing down. I had had enough of eating breakfast alone, while he drank beer and stared at the ceiling. Today he would eat with me and that would be it. But, how do I make him?

I collected a few empty bottles off the floor and ran out of Alko's flat. I thought that maybe Alko was just his nickname. Who knows. In any case, I did not want his alcoholism to get in the way of my breakfast. I bought some warm pastry, two pates and a couple of juice packs. While I climbed the stairs back up to the flat, I imagined us both finally enjoying the food. 'It's so good!' he would say while he gulped the pastry down and I drowned in juice. 'From now on, we will always have breakfast like this, like you say,' I imagined him saying while my stomach rumbled hard. But as soon as I walked into the flat I saw him drinking beer and leaning against the window. 'What took you so long, man? And where's the beer?'

We smoke in the mornings, in the afternoons, and people come over in the evenings. Always different people. And we all smoke together then. It seemed that Jaksa would be coming over that night. I knew him by sight only, Alko was friends with him. I didn't know what he did for a living, but always had a smile on his face. And the most amazing thing was that it was a genuine smile. One of those that only senile old men have.

Evening came, Jaksa rang the doorbell, a smile on his face. How are you, what's new, and so on, let's have a smoke.

Alko started provoking him immediately.

'Fuck, Jaksa, I feel something's not right today.'

Jaksa kept on smiling.

'Everything OK with your wife?'

Jaksa took a drag on the joint, his face still smiling.

'How's the kid?'

Jaksa sat across the table, unmoving for a little too long, watching Alko and smiling.

'But come on man, what - is your private life really that perfect?'

Jaksa took another drag.

'Nope!'

The next morning I woke up on the floor. Alko was sleeping in the bed, and Jaksa in the old armchair. I grabbed a blanket and wanted to go back to sleep, when I was startled by a loud knocking. I saw that Alko wasn't stirring so I got up and opened the door. A perfumed creature walked past me, stopped over Jaksa, went through his pockets and stormed out, leaving the door open. I didn't try to shut the door, I didn't move, I just thought about this creature. She had not been inside the flat for even a minute but she had filled it with the smell of a thousand of my mother's friends, from my early childhood, who would spend the afternoons chatting in the living room. The image was becoming clearer. I realised how beautiful this creature was, who had briefly walked past me.

'Jaksa, Jaksa!'

'Don't wake me up...'

'Your wife just came over, she took something from your pocket!'

'What the... my wife is on holiday!'

I realised that things had gone too far, so I said bye to Jaksa and Alko and I went to my flat. These last few weeks of living on alcohol and marijuana had made me feel lifeless. So much so that I didn't pay attention to my own mistakes. I enjoyed doing nothing. I didn't think about anything. And this thing that had just happened required too much thought. Jaksa had worked out that money was missing from his pocket, and accused me of stealing it. Alko didn't want to get involved, but by the way he was looking at me I saw that he thought I was guilty.

'I'll find this woman and bring her!' I said as I left. Did I really mean it? Of course!

The search started on my sofa. I watched the painting on my wall, which my great-uncle had painted. Two steep hills covered in trees. A meadow and a ruin of an old fortress stood on one hill. I watched it with care. I had never before paid attention to the details. The lower hill, where the fortress stood, had a small, almost invisible path, which disappeared half way inside the woods and reappeared again at the top and wove its way behind the fortress, probably leading to the entrance gate. As I noticed this I felt that I had suddenly sobered up, even though I wasn't drunk. I looked at the bottom of the painting, where there was a quiet, grassy valley. Another discovery! The pale shadow of the large mountains fell over a large part of the valley. I suddenly had a realisation. That place actually existed somewhere. I don't know why, but I had always thought that this was an imagined place. I couldn't remember if anyone had told me, but now I was sure that that this landscape was real. In fact, had I known it was a real place, I would have probably not been as interested to observe it with care - a painting is only interesting when it's a product of the imagination, and if one is feeling a bit merry it can even seem mysterious. But right now, it was sending a different message. My great uncle had been there, whether it had been a real place or not. I suddenly felt dizzy, I fell on the floor, and felt so weak I couldn't move. After a while I started thinking again. I wanted something else. My life is a painting. But I don't want to be a painter. I want... Shit! I started to feel better, lifted myself off the floor and sat down in resignation. Yes, one could not get out from here.

I had lost a woman and two friends. OK, the woman hadn't loved me anyway, and I hadn't cared much for her either. Jaksa and Alko? Just carry on self-destructing, boys, I am going to be a better person!

I got myself a job in a secondary school. As a history teacher. What could I do, that was my profession. This was a school that specialised in Economics, all the kids were lost cases, they called me 'Kiddo'. 'Hey look, it's Kiddo!' or 'Kiddo, where's your nappy?' They shouted this as I walked down the corridor. I guess it was because I was younger than all the other teachers. The students were calm during classes, but I couldn't get rid of the feeling that there may as well have been a rubbish bin standing there, instead of me, and it would have attracted as much attention - if not more - as I did. I tried to change this once. While I was explaining the French Revolution to Year Three, I asked two of the biggest troublemakers to act out Louis XVI and Robespierre in a made up conversation. It was quite free from historical facts, but I had noticed in previous

classes that those two, who were otherwise busy cracking in-jokes with each other, were actually commenting on the Revolution. ‘The king’s ass got whooped!’, ‘Dumb masses!’, ‘Hm, Marie Antoinette was quite sexy... but dumb!’ Such comments made me realise that only Majnaric and Santini were actually listening to my lectures. The others had listened too, but had not had a single original thought. So I decided to make the rest of the class laugh, if that was the only way to make them think about what I had been trying to teach. I asked Santini to be king, and Majnaric was to enact Robespierre. I sat at the back of the classroom and let the two of them improvise. The class was laughing their heads off as soon as King Santini and the **Jacobian** Majnaric stationed themselves in front of the blackboard. I watched their mutual desire to resist laughter and act this thing out properly.

‘King!’ Robespierre started, and the class went quiet. ‘It’s no good, this thing you’re doing!’ He turned to the class and sniggered, but Louis XVI retorted.

‘What am I doing? You guillotined me after I lost all power!’

‘If I could, I’d chop your head off again!’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re a dick!’

‘Fuck you, you asshole!’

And before I could tell them to mind their language, the King was on the floor with a bloody nose. ‘Long live the Revolution!’ the class roared.

‘How could I know that Santini was dating Majnaric’s ex?’ I was trying to justify myself to the Head Mistress, who had threatened to cut short my trial period.

‘You’re the teacher. Watch them. Study them. Lead! Don’t let things get out of control. Honestly, where did you get the idea of a verbal standoff between Robespierre and Louis XVI? I know enough about history and about teaching to be able to say that it was a ridiculous idea! Thank god that the logic of bad teaching ideas always ending up in chaos never fails. It’s pretty simple. Actually, it’s obvious. And do not let it happen again! And do not get into the private problems of the students! That is what their tutor is for!’

I was having a beer with Majnaric, Santini and his girlfriend. ‘So what’s the deal, tell me now that we’re all a bit out of it?’ They laughed at my euphemism for being drunk. I also call it ‘wasted’ like them, but I wanted to make it clear that I was older in this case, so I used an old-fashioned expression. ‘No, seriously! So, Majnaric, you loved Helena... Helena? ... (I turned to her, she nodded)... now loves Santini! How so?’ Everyone went quiet. I wanted to cry and scream at the same time, suddenly. Why was I planting the seed of eternal conflict into their sane minds?

It was noon of the following day. I was sitting in the teachers’ room, I had another class. But after only half an hour I was sitting around with the three of them again, at Helena’s house. Her stepdad was a car

mechanic and had a large garage with heating and a TV. He had gone to Germany to get some parts, so we could hang out there and have fun for two days. Maybe other people wouldn't have found it entertaining to watch Santini and Majnaric compete for the attention of a fifteen-year-old girl, even though she was Santini's girlfriend at that moment. I was, however, loving it, and competing for her attention myself. It would have been heartless not to participate, and they would have noticed it.

'What is your mother going to say if she sees that you're drinking with your history teacher in the garage?' I asked Helena.

'She'll kill you!'

I thought a lot about Helena. I even tried to convince myself I was in love. But it was nothing but my mourning a lost time, a time that was lost quite recently. I was just loving sitting next to that girl in the shadows of a teenage hideout, drinking cheap booze. By degrading my social status of a teacher, I had turned into a useless bag of half-ideas, in search of a break from doing nothing, or in other words - a young man.

'But you don't have a wife or anything like that?' she asked me while her ex and her current boyfriend were having fun opening an old bottle of wine. I wanted to answer wittily, but I couldn't come up with anything. Then I thought that perhaps I should respond with something educational, but the silence was getting longer.

'I don't know.' I said.

'Hey, Marko, Slaven, did you hear this? He doesn't know!'

I noticed that the two of them suddenly felt awkward, because she was making fun of and pointing at their teacher. I felt ten times worse than them, ashamed and exposed. But my self esteem returned suddenly when I realised that 'he doesn't know' referred to my insistence of having an answer to every question, as I was always doing at school, and not to the fact that I really didn't know something. I quickly calmed things down. I took the bottle from their hands and skilfully opened it with a bottle opener. Helena was laughing quite hysterically, but that was how she usually laughed. Later, I had to think about what had happened at the garage.

I called an old friend.

'Nooo! Don't ring on the landline! Ring him on his mobile!' I heard a screeching female voice.

'Hello, who is this?' Mane was wondering. Who was calling him, and he didn't have their number?

Half an hour later we met in the park near his house. He was walking his dog.

He nodded. 'You're afraid of women, that's your problem! You're a little frustrated teacher who fancies a student!'

I was silent.

‘Look, I know you. I know that you wouldn’t fuck things up because you always think twice before. But in reality, you’re a massive piece of shit!’

‘Thanks for the reassurance,’ I said. I meant it. At least I’m myself, and not some lunatic. If Mane says it, I believe him. When we were in Year Five, he said I’d always go back to him for advice.

‘Ah, when you get close to a woman and feel that bliss! As if your mother is beckoning you into her arms...’ he was sneering, ‘...not like you! When you’re in front of a woman - you shit your pants! Come on, light that joint, stop fiddling with it!’

It was getting dark and we went to Mane’s house. The area was called Voltino, and it was full of modest, family houses. Maja, his wife, was preparing something to eat.

‘Maja!’ Mane shouted towards the kitchen while we sat around the table.

‘What?’ she said from the kitchen and her voice mingled with the hissing of the oil on a frying pan.

‘Are we bothering you?’ Mane winked at me.

‘Why?’

‘What do you mean why? Because! Look at this!’ said Mane in a quiet voice, crossed his arms and tried to get as comfortable as possible in his chair. There was a complete silence for a few moments. There was no hissing coming from the kitchen, or any other sound at all. Mane was looking at the ceiling. Maja stormed into the room with a frying pan in her hand, which she slammed on the table with all her might. The omelette flew all over the room, and hot drops of oil whipped Mane and me. Flushed, Maja shouted: ‘Fuck you and your friends! Did I not ask you nicely not to take the piss? Did I?’

Mane kept staring at the ceiling. All of a sudden Maja’s frying pan whacked Mane on the head and he was on the floor.

‘What’s the point of all this?’ I thought.

I hung out a bit longer at Mane and Maja’s place. Maja fetched ice from the neighbour and I helped Mane get up. When she returned with the ice, Maja started apologising and asked me to stick around, that we’d have fun, that her and I would play chess, but that Mane would dictate her moves while lying on the sofa so that his nose wouldn’t bleed.

‘Sounds great, but I think I’m going to go.’

‘Hey send me a postcard from... wherever you’re going!’ Mane mumbled. They were laughing as I left.

I sat on the bus home, thinking that Mane was always right. Was it possible that the whole performance he had just played out was so that he could prove his theory? And what was his theory?

I was on this stupid bus and imagining that Mane and Maja were getting into bed at that moment. Mane's nose bleeds and stains the white linen, while Maja softly presses the cold compress on his burnt forehead. He kisses her neck, and she gets him close to her, and all of their troubles are resolved on the edge of the bed. They float through the night. The bus stood still at the station. Through the window I saw that there was a kiosk still open, so I tried to get off quickly, but the driver shut the door and I got trapped. One of my legs was still inside the bus and I was hardly touching the street with the other. The bus moved. I managed to pull my leg out, and rolled around the pavement, shoeless. I hobbled to the kiosk and realised it was closed. It was just lit quite brightly. I imagined that I was buying my cigarettes and matches, watched the empty road ahead and walked home.

In the first few years of primary school I had an old, strict teacher. Every other class in my year had young teachers who had just come out of teaching school and who smelled of fruit and flowers. Only my teacher shouted, slapped us around the face and wore a big fur hat in the winter. The other students seemed to me to inhabit a paradise. I had got used to living with daily abuse. My parents said: 'It's a good thing that you have a strict teacher, you'll see how you will have good work habits, unlike the kids from the other classes!' But I was experiencing the opposite effect. I was comparing my state with the inflexibility of Russia, the mother of barrenness, and the other classes with the luxuries of the USA, the homeland of crisps and adventure films. But I didn't like either one of those options. If I had been in a class with the younger teachers, I'd have been the most obedient student in the world, as opposed to those little thugs who, not knowing the meaning of self containment, went to the bathroom when they felt like it and basically did whatever they wanted.

I never did what I wanted. Always filled with self-criticism I proudly broke through the icebergs of temptation and thus lost the mounds of pleasure that always hid under the surface.

I got home, my foot blistered and filthy. I sat down, lit a cigarette from my stash packet, turned on the TV and watched.

I dreamt of a tree. A large, old oak tree. A young woodcutter showed up and whacked it. Once, twice, three times... The whacking echoed louder and louder. Startled, I woke up. Someone was knocking on the door.

'I'm so sorry to wake you up so late,' it was Santini, 'but your doorbell doesn't work...'

'OK, OK,' I interrupted thinking of the pain in my heel, which was getting stronger by the minute.

'You won't believe what happened to me tonight!'

'You won't believe what happened to me!' This confused him.

'She told you she was pregnant?' Silence. My face showed my surprise, even though I tried to say something teacherly, like: 'Well, if you're not careful, you...' But Santini just walked past me and sat down in the armchair in which I had just napped.

‘Teacher, please, don’t tell me this doesn’t concern you! I saw the way you looked at her!’

Santini thinks I was involved with his Helena. Who knows if she was really pregnant or if she was just trying to get this little boy to go a bit crazy. But I decided to act as if this was a serious situation.

‘First of all,’ I started authoritatively, ‘I have nothing with Helena. Get that into your head now!’ He watched me, going pale. I thought maybe I was acting too strict. But then I thought that he was probably going pale because he knew he was the father of the child. ‘Second, did you use...’ looking at Santini’s unhappy place made me throw off my mask, ‘You know what, let’s have a drink!’ I took out a bottle of cheap booze from the shabby cupboard and poured a glass. Santini swallowed with a grimace, while I slowly sipped the bitter liquid.

‘Could it be Majnaric?’ I asked after a few glasses.

‘No!’

‘How do you know?’

‘He told me!’

‘Aha!’

We drank more that night.

When I woke up on one of the following mornings I realised that it was a beautiful day. I didn’t need to rush, I started teaching at 9.45. Relaxed, not at all hung over from the drinking, which was turning into an evening routine, I dressed and went to get the morning paper. It was not a custom of mine to do this, but it was such a beautiful morning that I wanted to enjoy all its blessings. Walking down the street, under the light autumn sun, I wanted to walk all day long. My steps were beating a rhythm and I had all my favourite songs playing in my mind.

‘You motherfucker!’ thundered down the street. Some twenty metres away from me there stood a woman, with greying hair and a youthful face, which was set in a raging grimace. She had a gun in her hands. I realised that it was aimed at me and I quickly hid behind a parked car on the pavement. I tried to remember her face, but I couldn’t. ‘Why is she attacking me, of all people?’ I wondered, and when I raised my eyes I saw the gun some ten inches from my face.

We sat in my flat, I on the floor and she in the armchair, her gun still pointed at me. It had all become clear quite quickly. She was Helena’s mother. Helena had accused her history teacher, i.e. me, of getting her pregnant, and in a roundabout way (but I don’t know what that means). Helena’s life has been, as her mother says, destroyed and I will pay for it. When she had said all this, I had not yet uttered a word.

She was quiet and watched me, and then she said: ‘What do you have to say for yourself, you piece of shit?’ I understood that she had no fear, that she just had an odd hatred inside her. I felt as if I was dreaming. As if she was seeing someone else in me. But it was still so incredibly real that I felt trapped in another’s body, which had become a target and could not get away. Like a cornered animal. Was this the punishment for my dirty thoughts? Or acts? I would be shot, right here, in my shitty flat. So this is how it is! Someone gets a

terminal illness, someone steers into an oncoming car on the road, someone simply falls asleep from old age, and someone... gets accused and sentenced right there, without the option of an appeal. OK, I'll accept it. I looked into her eyes. She was not at all impressed with my decisiveness. She just squinted a bit every now and then, as if defending herself from my gaze. She had big brown eyes and a symmetrical swarthy face. She didn't look as if she was from around here.

I thought of my class. 'What's your name?' I asked quietly, saying goodbye to my life.

'Nela.' She answered. She was not surprised by my question, didn't even blink. I was terrified. So I was going to die. I may as well know what my executioner's name was. I tried to face my death more thoroughly. I imagined the bullet going through my head and my body falling over the coffee table. Blood pouring out of my ears as I died in agonising fear.

But Nela started talking.

'Scum like you are the reason for the failings in my life. You're not even worthy of a bullet.'

Something was off here. A crazed woman was threatening to kill me, while simultaneously sounding like a school teacher who wants to get her students to speak properly, so she's having a hard time putting together a normal-sounding sentence. This gave me a bit of courage to think of what I might be able to do. Trusting my instinct, and based on those two sentences that she had uttered, I decided to look defeated. I fell on the floor and started to weep. It was very difficult to focus on the slobbering while keeping an eye on the outcome.

When I turned my head away from her, I heard a gunshot and felt pain in my right thigh. Hurried footsteps resounded, she was gone. I managed it, I was alive...

'When I tell the truth, I'm fucked, and when I lie, I am rewarded! Is that normal to you?' I told the policeman who was noting down my statement. I felt like confessing to him, which he didn't know.

'So what did the attacker look like?'

What could I have said to the poor policeman? My statement would have cost that poor woman, Nela, at least a few months in prison, and for what? A shot wound in the leg, a slightly hurt muscle. And even if the damage had been worse, I wouldn't have asked for revenge. The woman had her reasons, which I was interested in, first and foremost. The authorities had nothing to do with it. Which was why I made up another lie.

'It was a man... around forty years old. You know, I got into some debt recently...', the policeman looked up, and I looked down, '...I don't really recall his appearance...' I took my head in my hands and shook it lightly. The policeman left the hospital room looking satisfied. I was calm. They would not bother me again.

I left the hospital on crutches. It just so happened that the hospital was in the area I grew up in. Suddenly, the noon sun shining on me, I understood the fear that had been haunting me forever. As a boy, I wandered around the quiet streets of my area, all the way to the hospital. This was where my world ended,

and theirs started. A world ordered by rules, lit by sunshine, which gave strength to the weak and lead us onto a straight path. The smell of medicines amplified this impression. The repulsive image of existence which had always made my throat tighten. A young doctor grabbed the buttocks of an already ageing nurse, retirees grabbed hold of things to help them sit down on a bench and feed pigeons, children nibbled on the bitter bribes of their parents in the shape of sweets... all this needed to be brought to an end. I will liberate you, you miserable creatures, and then give you over to the authorities!

Just a bit further up the road I bumped into an acquaintance, of course.

'Hey, how are you?' asks Mirko, a school friend, 'Wait, why the crutches?'

'Ah, some woman shot me in the leg!'

'Dangerous, dangerous...'

I noticed a smirk on his face. Which was why I said the following:

'Remember that primary school teacher, of course you remember, your daughter is in her class... Year Two, right? Well, you see, I saw her a couple of days ago, that teacher of ours, Marica, right? I met her and I told her, I told her that you used to wank off thinking of her even in Year Four!'

A silence. Mirko looked at me as if to understand where all this hatred was coming from. He glanced at my leg.

'You're nuts, quite nuts...'

'I'm not, I swear!'

He left.

Since I couldn't really walk, I needed help with everything. I sent in a letter to the school, in which I quit my own trial period, but Santini and Majnaric came over to visit on day one.

'We know everything!' Majnaric said, while Santini just sat in a corner, mute.

'Helena told us that her mum was going nuts around the house and cursing everyone she can think of!'

'Sounds like a witch.' I tried to be witty.

'Well, you're not far off, she's a Gypsy!'

'Helena's mother? A Gypsy?' I wondered what we were actually talking about here. What were these two even thinking? They knew that Nela shot me, but they were acting as if there was nothing odd about that. It seemed as if it hadn't been me who had initiated the weird hanging out of teachers and students. In their eyes, I could constantly see a cruel realisation of sorts that they were protecting me from. They had been playing with me the entire time. Perhaps they were still playing. But enough was enough! This bullet in my leg was demanding to know what was hiding behind their looks, Helena's smile and Nela's trembling hand.

'Come on boys, enough talking! I am tired.' I let them know I wanted quiet. They got up, Santini gave me an uncertain look, we said goodbye and I was alone. Why was I suddenly afraid of my favourite students? Well, I guess because their best friend's and girlfriend's mother shot me!

Fuck!

'Alko, it's me!'

'What do you want?'

'Some woman whacked me, you should see it!'

Alko, of course, came down, and was quite surprised by the fact that a woman had not 'whacked' me but shot me.

'I actually really want to apologise to you and Jaksa for that money. I must have been that stoned that I hallucinated and took...'

'No, no, that was Jaksa's shit!'

'What shit?'

'You know he has a wife and a little kid. And this was some looney that he got involved with, I don't know how, and she won't leave him alone!'

'Well, I don't know the guy, really, but you could have told me. I wouldn't have told anyone!'

'Yes, I know, but he asked me not to tell anyone!'

'So why are you telling me now?'

'Because Jaksa is in Australia!'

We looked at each other for a few moments, and then I took my head in my hands, and Alko burst out laughing. What else could we do but have a drink?

'But you know,' I told Alko a little later, 'I understand him!'

'Who?'

'Jaksa!'

'Ah, him!'

'Yes, you see, he went to where there are no problems!'

'Yeah right, I thought he went to Australia on a day trip!'

'No, no, you're not getting it, or you're not listening. There is always a place that has no problems!'

'Yeah right! And where would that place be for me?'

'And for me?'

'Stop talking shit!'

The next morning, everything reminded me of waking up in Alko's flat. But the pain in my leg brought me back to the present moment. I managed to enjoy the state of utter hangover for a few brief moments, until the

first proper thought took over. Today I would look for Nela! What did this woman think - that she could (almost) disable me for no reason and then not talk to me? Well, yes, most probably. She was probably capable of murdering me, if I turned up at her door. Ah all the beautiful scenarios one can imagine! For example, I turn up at her door dressed as a postman. But she immediately recognises me and stabs me with a kitchen knife in the gut. I get away with heavy injuries. Or I break into her flat in the night, through an open window. I go past Helena's room, I see she is fast asleep and I go into Nela's room. I sit on the edge of her bed and, mesmerised by the beauty of her supple body, I start to caress her leg. She awakens from her sleep and stabs me swiftly with a pair of scissors, straight in the neck. I bleed profusely while she says: 'You did this to my daughter, but you won't do it to me, you bastard!' Ah, everything is so easy while you're drunk. And when you sober up and your mind is clear, you realise that you're vainly looking for answers, because there are none. That's why Alko and I carried on drinking. **XXX OVDJE SAM IZBACILA RECENICU**

Over the next few days, Mane and Maja visited me. We kept talking about my wound and I felt as if I might find the courage to finally find out what was going on with Helena and her crazy mother. But it didn't work out like that. Instead, I found myself having dinner one night with Alko, Mane and Maja, Majnaric, Santini, me, and you wouldn't believe it, Helena. She came with Majnaric and Santini to apologise for all the 'inconvenience she had caused.'

'You know, I was frightened...'

'I don't know, but it doesn't matter. Did your mother tell you to come here and apologise? Because it's not your fault. It's your crazy mother's fault!'

I wanted to get her to react. People can't just toy around with me, the way I toy around with them. I cannot allow that. Maja hugged Helena. I knew what they were all thinking: 'Poor girl, she's pregnant, and this idiot keeps going on about it. As if she could be held responsible for her mother's actions!' Of course she could! I looked at Santini. He couldn't wait to leave. He was probably already plotting about getting away Jaksa-style.

All the people present at that dinner were people I enjoyed spending time with, and frankly, it's absurd to realise that I was attracted to misery. Misery as a dry, palpable thing that enveloped me entirely. Mane was talking to Helena and I saw the shimmer in his eyes. Alko was downing beers with Majnaric, and Maja was making Santini feel better - he really looked down.

'Teacher!' Mane shouted the moment I left the table and lay down on the sofa to rest my leg. 'We're going to go out, are you OK? I can see you're tired, we don't want to be bothering you!' I heard them giggle, but I had had enough of their drunken looks, while I remained sober.

'Go, leave!' I blessed them like some old priest.

When the door closed, I looked at the phone.

'Good evening, general directory?'

'Yes, how can I help?'

‘Could you please give me the address for the Krizanic family, the first name is probably Nela.’

‘Just a minute...’

Soon after I was in a taxi. Then I found myself outside Nela’s house, thinking. I realised that I had to go down the dark path. I rang the doorbell. Nela opened the door and I pushed her inside and went in myself. I took her by the wrists and put them behind her and I felt her resist. The pain in my leg was gone. A healing strength took over my body and I dragged her over to the bathroom. They live in a beautiful house, I thought. I dragged her to the bath in the spacious bathroom, opened the cold water tap and put her head under it.

‘Fuck you! This is for your daughter and the rest of it! You think you can shoot people as you like! Well, not me!’ I was saying shit like that until she stopped resisting the cold water. Then I let her go and she hobbled over to the other side of the bathroom. She took her wet shirt off, moved her wet hair away from her face and sat down on the toilet seat. I found myself standing before the embodiment of live beauty. She lightly covered her dark breasts, and her brown eyes shone on her wet face. I forgot what I was there for. This was where my story ended because it was no longer interesting. Let’s just say that I listened to a load of Nela’s stories.

NELA’S STORIES

I found a towel and threw it over her shoulders. She shivered and looked lost. I left her like that, on the toilet seat and went into the kitchen. I was looking for coffee or tea, but I couldn’t find anything except a bottle of mineral water and a glass bottle with a cordial and no label. I smelled it and nearly fainted. This would do.

‘Have a sip of this!’ I was putting a bottle-cap full of this bitter liquid to her lips. She looked at me, opened her mouth and swallowed. Her expression didn’t change. This was a bad sign.

‘My great grandfather was shot, my grandfather was shot, my father was shot, and I’ll probably be shot too.’ She said and looked at the tiles on the wall. But I wasn’t going to swallow this bullshit anymore so I changed my attack strategy.

‘Of course they will. They deserved to die, and so do you. I haven’t come across such a pointless mass of feelings in a person in a long time!’

‘And what kind of person have you come across lately?’ she genuinely asked, interrupting my monologue. I didn’t know what to say. But I retorted.

‘You, when you shot me!’

‘Well, that was quite recent.’ She carried on staring ahead of herself blankly, but I felt that her presence was filling the room. I understood that her every word was heavy with wisdom and understanding. She seemed to see everything so clearly that I started to see myself through her. She took over my personality completely and my body had to follow. I had never experienced anything similar. All of a sudden, I saw all the

scenes of my humiliations, from wetting my pants to the secret reading of my girlfriends' diaries. I could not understand who I was and how I had found myself there. If the devil existed, he was surely in charge of my actions. If anyone had ever paid as much attention to me as Nela had just staring at the bathroom tiles, I would have realised I didn't exist, that I was invisible. We sat down in the living room, she on the sofa, and I on the armchair opposite. She spoke and I drank in her words. Everything she said had already been spoken before, imprinted upon me as the stamp of absolute truth. And why she was telling me her life story, only God knew.

'I grew up without a father. No one knew him, but everyone knew his name - the Gypsy. The authorities shot him before I was born. For some offence, the wrong political opinion, smuggling? I never knew. My mother said it didn't matter. But, let's go back to my father's name. He actually got this name through me. I know that in the natural order of things this seems impossible, but everything in my life has gone the wrong way round. As a child I was very dark skinned, as I am today, so they called me the Gypsy. My mother, a red-haired woman from the village, could not gift me those genes, so the entire responsibility had fallen on my unknown father, about whom the neighbourhood, logically and with best intentions, had decided was a Gypsy. Mother didn't try to deny it, so I soon started looking for my roots around Zagreb's suburbs, finding groups of Gypsies and copying their speech and behaviour. I liked them and I started to hate my peers and the environment in which I lived. And so, as if in a dream, I had my daughter, Helena, with this shithead that I was even married to for a few months. You can't see Gypsy genes on Helena. Why? As soon as I asked that question, I got my answer. An old neighbour, who had lived through WW2 and the rest, came over to my house when the Communists came to my door. She has known me since forever, but she looked at me strangely over the garden fence that day. After lunch she opened the door of my back yard and slowly walked over to the kitchen, where I could always see her from, and sometimes we'd yell over to each other while we were making lunch, she for her grandchildren, I for Helena. She came in to the house, sat down, wiped her hands on her apron and moaned: 'You know, your father wasn't a Gypsy.' I had been sure of my roots up to that moment. I was even a member of a Roma organisation. I was helping abandoned pregnant women, beaten and abused children, I was learning to speak Roma. I had learned to express my opinions freely, I was a proud, reborn Gypsy. And then Mira the neighbour told me the truth. 'The Communists got him, but fifteen years after the war. He was a tough one. He wanted to organise some kind of resistance here in Croatia. He hid in Bosnia and everywhere. He was a real ustasha!' While she was saying 'real' her eyes had widened so much that I saw her pupils for the first time. She had tiny light-brown eyes that were always so sunken and covered with the fallen, wrinkled skin of her eyelids. Her expression follows me around and I recognise it in everyone. I recognise it in myself, I even try to practise it in the mirror at home.

I don't know who I am anymore. I just want Helena to have a normal life, a life without deceit. I want at least her child to have a father!

Yes. And just as I was trying to put myself in her shoes, Nela's husband walked through the door. I had completely forgot about him. Damn bitch! She wanted the child to have a father, and now some stepdad car mechanic was going to beat the crap out of me. He walked in with a huge wrench in his hand, and my wounded leg had gone to sleep from sitting down. Helpless and sitting in the armchair, I watched the mechanic's sneering face. I could tell a story of my own at this moment.

COMA

I was once in a coma. It was not an 'ordinary' medical coma, however. It was a state of nothingness. Bodily and spiritual. I vegetated with my eyes closed, something that some people did with their eyes wide open. One time, when I was with Stanko - a guy whom everyone had forgot about except for Alko, who remembers him but refuses to talk about him, calls him Zero - we filmed me sleeping, and I had an incredible realisation. My face contorted into horrific expressions, which later, when awake, I could not reproduce. The first question was: Why did we film ourselves sleeping? The second questions was: Were we on drugs or under the influence of alcohol? And the third question: Who would believe me? The answer to all three questions is the same: Stanko.

There are other names for worthless people. Such as - scum, garbage or a nobody. But Zero talks of Stanko in the way that he wished to see himself. He wanted to reach nothingness, a balance of all values, an equalising with everyone and everything. I was not delighted with this concept, but Stanko's methods, with which he wanted to realise his aims, were very interesting and, indeed, attractive as a lifestyle. It all started one summer on the coast. Stanko, a guy from the island and I sat on a bench and watched the land on the other side of the channel. Stanko suddenly suggested that we remain seated there until the morning.

'Why?' The island guy asked.

'Because we have never done it before.' responded Stanko.

The things that you'd never done before help you see all other, familiar stuff, from a different angle. Your perception gets another dimension.

'But it makes no sense.' I said. 'We have never jumped off a ten-metre height and so what?'

'You think it's useless, but what, you think people jump off rocks from no reason?' XXXX NEJASNO MI

JE OVO

I thought about this all night while we sat on that bench, Stanko and I, freezing. The island guy left and said we were idiots. But we did arrange to play cards after lunch the day after.

I was freezing, my arse was numb, but when it dawned, I felt like I understood everything.

'I feel like I understand everything...' I said to Stanko.

'Yes, fuck, this is it, this is what I'm talking about!' Stanko was addicted to the 'it' moments. He tried to make them happen whenever he could.

'I'll become a smuggler.' He said with satisfaction when we stood up from the bench and, numb, moved towards home.

'That's not much fun.' I said.

'That's precisely why!'

I didn't know how to argue with him, exactly because he had no goal in his arguments. He didn't want to prove anything, but he was still always right.

That's how he got to the idea to film himself sleeping, but he needed an assistant. In fact, when I think about it, the world never believed him, but was his perfect witness. **NI OVO MI NIJE JASNO.**

Of course, I jumped in out of curiosity and helped him set up two cameras in his house, directly connected to the video recorder, which could film for eight hours non-stop. He asked whether he could film me first, so that he could give me better instructions the next day. I agreed. In the morning, I saw a brilliant collage of edited grimaces. I laughed like crazy but Stanko interrupted me and said: 'When I make these faces you have to wake me up and make me tell you straight away what I had been dreaming about.' I agreed with delight. He lay down and fell asleep quickly. I placed the camera so that his face was in the centre, and large. I watched him for a few hours, but his face was expressionless. Then, Stanko's face suddenly stretched, was he yawning? No, his mouth remained closed but his cheeks were lengthening. What is this, his hair was greying, his eyes were falling deeper into their sockets... Suddenly I was startled by a strong light. Stanko woke me up with a spotlight and asked me to tell him my dream. This went on for days. He persuaded me all over again, made tasty dinners, we watched good movies, and if I couldn't sleep he read me the Bible or the Kur'an, claiming these were meditative texts. He already had around thirty of my different and simultaneously told dreams, which were preceded by grimaces. The dreams were mostly different and I never dreamt of the recording again. We had given up filming Stanko.

One night I fell asleep and started to dream. I was in the middle of a large city, in the rush hour. Everyone was in a hurry to get somewhere. I walked into a bar and sat down. The waiter came up and asked me what I wanted. 'Nothing, I'd just like to sit for a while,' I said. 'Sorry, but that's not allowed,' says the waiter. 'Don't fuck with me,' I spat, and the waiter took me by the shoulder and dragged me off the chair. I had become aware of when I was dreaming, and so I pushed him away and said: 'Suck my dick!' The waiter came up slowly, took me by the shoulder again and punched me in the belly. I felt real pain. He hit me again. And didn't stop. I fell on the floor. He kicked me... A strong light shone on my face. Stanko was in my face with the camera. 'Move that shit away from me!' I said, but he stood above the bed, despite my pushing him away with my hand. He wavered like a hat stand, fell and shattered into a thousand pieces. 'Wow!' I thought. 'What a dream, this will be worth telling!' I opened my eyes and realised that I was laying in a hospital bed, my refuge, my safe harbour after every battle. A handsome nurse sat in a chair and was helping the patient who was sitting next to me eat his soup.

‘Thank God, you’re awake, you were asleep for three months!’ she said, with delight. I remembered the dream well, but when I wanted to tell Stanko about it, I had to wait for a while - he was serving a prison sentence in Morocco. And this is how he got his nickname - Zero.

The night I fell into a coma, he drove me to a hospital and escaped to Italy. I only found out a year and a half later what had actually happened, when they released him from the Moroccan prison by mistake, thinking he was Zuhr Ibn Muzuf Al-Khatta. And then he was quite taken by the story of the real Zuhr Ibn Muzuf Al-Khatta. He said he knew I was going to fall into a coma as soon as he didn’t wake me up after a strong grimace. Because that was when I was waking up in a dream, he had it all written down in a notebook, which had disappeared when his landlady moved his stuff out while he was in Morocco. Another day he also said: ‘The doctors thought I’d overdosed you, how silly! And even if I had, what was the problem, you had a young nurse washing and changing you every day for three months!’

It was a miracle that I got out of Nela’s house without injuries that night. I walked down Savska. It’s a wide street. Deserted at night. Back in the day, it was the way that travellers from the north entered town. At the end of the road was a raft on the River Sava, over where they have now built a bridge. The raftsmen would take you over to the other side, to the Balkans. Fucking hell!

I was also walking south. My flat was in an area that’s very close to the river. I walked slowly. My leg hurt pretty badly, but I wanted to walk to the river bank. Throw in a coin and not make a wish. I walked past the tram turning point and got to the bridge. I saw the dirty liquid mass of the river through a dim mist.

‘Where are you going?’ asked a man in a raincoat just as I was about to step onto the bridge. He was sitting on a plastic chair next to the edge of the bridge.

‘What’s it to you?’ I answered. Anyway, I hadn’t heard that they’d introduced a bridge toll.

‘I’m the raftsmen!’

Interesting. I had no idea when the first bridge over Sava was built, I guess some two hundred years ago. Well mister, you’re old!

But this was a man of around forty-five, a little wrinkled, skinny and I guess going grey, which I could not see because of the raincoat hood, which covered his hair. He really mostly looked like a policeman, because the raincoat was a greyish blue. Perhaps he had gone mad or was just simply wanting to see my documents?

‘Are you sure that you don’t want me to take you to the other side!’ I got closer to him. It had started to drizzle and I could not see his eyes well. I think he was looking at the floor.

‘What do you mean by that?’ I took a neutral and cautious stance.

‘Whatever the cost, you’d like to go to the other side, eh?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘You heard me! Come on, what’s your offer!’ I didn’t understand what this man was after. And I’d had enough of nutters.

'Watch me cross!' And I stepped onto the bridge. True, as I took a step I was enveloped by a strange fear. The river flowing under me was fast and dull. I had crossed to the other side in two minutes. What on Earth was I doing there anyway? I would go home and sleep.

I crossed back and walked past that man again.

'You crossed, eh?'

I stopped. He was taking the piss out of me.

'Limping, eh?'

I looked at his face a bit more closely. His light blue eyes glistened as if he'd attack me.

'Yes, I'm limping, yes, I crossed over, and so what? Do you have nothing better to do with your life but to take the piss out of those who are not the same as you?'

'It's a good thing that you understand!'

'What do I understand?'

'That you can't cross over!' This drove me mad. I'd offer him a drink.

'Wanna have a drink?'

'Why not?' We went to the first bar. It was already late and the bar was about to close.

'You can have a quick drink because I'm about to close!' the owner said.

'I'll have a beer, and he...' I glanced over to the 'raftsman'. I could finally see him, under the lights. My guess was that he was definitely an early retired policeman.

'... an orange juice!' Cannot believe it, he drinks orange juice! Oh well!

We sat down. No one spoke, we just sipped our drinks. I had my beer and he had his orange juice. After some time, I'd finished my beer. The 'raftsman' kept glancing over his shoulder to the door.

'Well, it was good to meet you!' I got up, paid the bill and left. As I was leaving I saw the 'raftsman' glance at me. He wanted to say something.

I wanted to see that madman again. My leg was still recovering, weeks later, but I still walked, on an almost daily basis, those several hundred metres to the bridge, usually in the evenings, lest I should meet the 'raftsman'. But it was in vain.

I slowly forgot about the past months' events, and started to feel that I was getting stronger and healing.

Stanko appeared out of nowhere. He immediately threw a big party in his parents' country house. Of course, I received my invite by post, like everyone else, it was his way of attracting everyone's attention, from those who loved him and those he drove mad. And me? I drove him in his parents' car, since he had no driver's licence.

'I mean, I passed my driving test in Rabat, but the fuckers won't recognise it here. You know? Croats won't accept Moroccan documents!'

'For real?' I asked him as we drove down the straight road to the house. Hills were rising in the distance.

'Yeah! But fuck that! It's been ages, man! This thing you told me about is proper shite. Why did you get involved in all that shit anyway?'

'Look who's talking. If I were dead now, it would still be better than the mess of your life!'

'I disagree!'

'You disagree? But half of the people you know think you're garbage. They even call you 'Zero!'

'That's a fucking compliment!'

'How so?'

'I always want to disappear, to remain a mere memory on someone's lips...'

'You talk like a poet. Which I know you're not. And who the fuck are you anyway?'

He didn't answer. He took out a cigarette and lit it. A tiny smile escaped him.

I helped Stanko tidy up the spacious house. There wasn't much to tidy up. Most of the time we argued about how much wine we should bring up from the basement.

'Ha ha, I am saying that we need less wine, just so you'd oppose me and say we need more!' I told him after he said that at least a hundred litres would be consumed that evening.

'And I'm saying that we need more, just so you'd keep insisting that we need less!' he said.

'But you're right. If you think there'll be a hundred people, that means a hundred litres of wine!'

'No, no, you're right! You can't drink a hundred litres at a wedding, let alone here, tonight. There'd be too much left over and I'd have to trash it!'

'Well, it's better to trash it than for the host not to have brought out enough drink. Your parents will never drink all this! Putting this away is like being buried with a kilo of gold!'

'Why a kilo of gold?'

'Because you're keeping hold of things until they lose their value!'

'Oh God, just shut up now, will you!'

'Why what happened?'

'You think you're always right! And if you're not right, then you're clever! I don't give a shit about this crap of yours! You're fucked up!'

'What, are you in a bad mood? Is that it?'

'Me? In a bad mood? You're in a bad mood! You think I fucked you up, but you've been fucked up since you were a kid!'

'Fine, fine, I'm fucked up, and what are you?'

'I'm fucked up too, but at least I'm aware of it!'

'Well I'm also aware that I'm fucked up!'

‘Well, it’s a good thing you’re aware?’

‘Well yes!’

There was no other way to talk to Stanko. I could never talk to him like I could for example, to Mane. Mane used to help me with maths at school, and chemistry, and later he lent me books and told me what to read. And since the two years between us seemed like a big age difference at that time, he felt confident enough to show me his girlfriend’s breast. I had felt uncomfortable and saw it as abusive to the girl. But he later tried to convince me that she showed her private parts to her younger sister. I was in a good mood on the day of Stanko’s party. All of it would happen again. Old friends would gather, those who had forgot about each other and really didn't want to see each other again. And this would inevitably take them back, to a time that has in reality moved on, but is measured in how old a notebook might be or how worn out your oldest pair of shoes is.

The house quickly filled with people, or at least Stanko and I thought so, because we were already tipsy. We soon separated. Iris turned up and they had to talk. The house was full of people who were standing around and filling the space with smoke, getting stoned and drunk, or had arrived stoned and drunk or perhaps under the influence of various pills.

‘Why do they call you Pigtails?’ I asked the girl in the kitchen, who was trying to find something to eat. I don’t actually know if I should call her a girl or a woman, because her movements were youthful and her hands were soft with long fingers, but her face was narrow and dry. Wrinkles seemed to cover her forehead, cheeks and chin, but disappeared if she changed her expression.

‘I used to wear pigtails for a while - you know?’ She said and fixed me with her green eyes.

Many thoughts went through my head at that moment.

‘I’d like to eat something too.’ I said. We took out half of a roast chicken from the fridge. Stanko had left it on the side for his breakfast.

‘So, what do you do?’ asked Pigtails. I was really enjoying the chicken, but my stomach tightened from this question.

‘Nothing. I’m a fired history teacher!’

‘Ooooh! Teacher! What might you teach me today, Mr?’

She said this in such a way that I felt the pain in my leg return. And I felt that she could see through me, simultaneously, realising all my privileged hangups.

‘Knowledge is my weapon. Which is why I’m still unarmed!’ I tried to impress her.

‘I love fools! Do you?’ She went back to the food and I tried to come up with a response.

‘What, you don’t want to say something controversial? You don’t have to. Anyway, whatever you say, we’ll be shagging upstairs in an hour.’

‘Excuse me?’ I was trying to look like I didn’t get it, because I didn’t really know what to say. My instincts, my rational mind - everything was off.

I mean, I know it’s a natural reaction, but can it be the case that I have spent my whole life trying to shape myself into a permanent erection, so that I might end up shagging upstairs? I don’t see this as a bad idea but it still seemed too banal, too simple. I probably still had a lot left to learn.

‘Listen, I still have...’ she got up from the table and started taking money out of her pockets. ‘... a hundred, two hundred, two hundred and fifty, two hundred and seventy ... three hundred! And you? How much have you got?’

I counted my money.

‘A hundred and thirty!’

‘That’s enough.’

But we could not agree on how to spend the money. She wanted to get drugs for both of us with all of it, and I wanted to borrow Stanko’s car and spend half of the money on petrol, and the rest on a cheap apartment on the coast. But, funnily enough, it turned out we could afford everything. First we took drugs and then we got on the road. I’m sorry that I can’t tell a story without it being about getting drunk or high. But that’s how it’s always been. How can you attack me, when I had not even tried to defend myself? What is the reason for this state? Are these actual words? (XXXX - provjeri jel ovo ok?)

Waking up. I woke up next to Pigtails. I heard waves through the window, and her hair was touching my face. Ha! I realised something funny. Whenever I was happy I thought in English. ‘This is a lovely day. And I couldn’t have spent the night better, either.’ I had thought. I was probably doing it to multiply my experience by turning it into something lived, and witnessed too. Yes, I had always been a voyeur. To watch someone, in their sorrow, in their joy, left more of an impression on me than my own experience. I didn’t think of it as a bad thing, it was more of an advantage, I knew what others wanted and that’s not a bad thing to know. My experience, however, sometimes turned into my seeing myself through another’s eyes. That was, in fact, how I always communicated with myself. Through a mass of media, of course, but there was always just Me and Me. The sacrificial Me, the sincere Me, the inspired Me, the humane Me, and that’s how it remained. ‘You’ was, in my eyes, a sign of attention, an indicator of my ability to notice; it was basically superficial. (XXXXXX jesam li ovo dobro shvatila?)

And now Pigtails was next to me, watching me. She was looking into my eyes. What should I do? This drove me crazy! I was forced to think about what she was seeing, and I didn’t like that at all. Was I always like this or was it the substances I’d consumed that were making my mind go out of whack?

‘You poor thing!’ she stroked my head. ‘I’ve finally found someone more miserable than myself!’

This knocked me over.

‘But I’m not an addict!’ I got hold of that fact, hoping it would offer some sense of superiority.

‘Neither am I.’ She ruffled my hair, got up from the bed in a silly two piece night gown, which looked like a kid’s nightdress, and went to the kitchen. ‘There’s no coffee, go to the shop quickly and fetch some!’

On the way to the shop I worked out where I was. A little seaside town that, empty of tourists in spring time looked deserted, but peaceful too. Were we here just for the day? Pigtales had said nothing.

I bought the smallest coffee pack, for which I had barely enough money.

‘Are you staying up there, at Jardovic’s house?’ the young shopkeeper asked as I was leaving the shop.

‘No, I’ve rented a place near the church...’ I answered, confused.

‘Ah, at Juric’s, that’s it.’ She smiled as a goodbye.

I returned to the apartment. Pigtales was showering. I put on the water to boil for the coffee. I thought for a while. Pigtales came out of the bathroom. Her long brown hair dripped on to the floor.

‘Shall we just stay here? I won’t return the car to Stanko. He owes me a lot, it’s time he paid up!’ I said.

‘You’ll return the car,’ she towelled her hair, ‘but we’re going across.’ She points to the island through the window.

‘What’s over there?’

‘My house!’

She had plotted this out quite cleverly, I must say, we were having a good time. We were living on the islands for two months already, and had crossed over to the mainland three times. The whole island consisted of one neighbourhood and five surnames, one of which belonged to Pigtales’ family. She was born in Zagreb, but liked it here better.

‘Why didn’t you move here earlier then?’

‘I needed someone like you!’

Pigtales had her father’s pension money from Germany. That’s what we were living off. Every few weeks, when we crossed over to the mainland, we got a lift from the neighbour, who had an old, unregistered car, and he took us to the nearest town to stock up on food. (XXXXXX OVU SAM RECENICU POJEDNOSTAVILA VIDI JEL OK) In our free time, which was almost all of the time, we fished, cooked and read.

We borrowed books from the local library, which was in the same town as the shop.

THE NEIGHBOUR

The neighbour, Ive, appeared to be an ordinary guy. As we knocked about in the ripped up back seat of his Renault 4, on our way to get supplies, he was mostly quiet or, if we’d pass a police car parked by the road, he’d mumble: ‘I know these!’ or ‘These are new!’ But, since we’d had dinner at his house several times, I understood that Ive was mostly quiet because he was thinking about the things that he cared about.

‘I care about her,’ he said, referring to his boat one day, as we sat on the beach.

‘She needs a lick of paint!’ said Pigtales. She said this in the island way, using the local expressions, and I liked it when she did that. I’d even started to say things the island way myself. XXX ovdje nisam znala kako prevesti dalmatinske rijeci pa sam ih izostavila.

‘Would you like to have dinner at ours tonight?’ I asked Ive.

‘You need to stop being so polite!’

‘I know Pigtales is more informal, but I have only just met you really!’

Ive narrowed his eyes, looked out at the shore and turned to Pigtales.

‘Bring him to me tonight. This kid can't tell his arse from his elbow!’

They both laughed and Ive went home. I felt like I didn’t know why I was there but Pigtales quickly jumped into the water and was lost under its surface. The sun was hot and I had no reason to worry.

Pigtales wore a light sleeveless dress, and I put on a pair of shorts and looked around for a T shirt I could put on.

‘Go like that!’ she said and came quite close.

‘I can’t go to someone’s house shirtless!’

We stood, embracing and looking at each other. We stopped talking. I tried to think of the dinner, but my shorts were getting tighter.

‘Is that love?’ she asked.

‘What do you think?’

‘If it is, then it’s big!’ she said and pinched my cheek, which I didn’t like because it signalled the end of fun.

‘Put this on!’ she threw a T shirt at me, slipped on her sandals and ran out of the house.

‘Come on!’ I heard her shout.

The dinner was nothing to write home about, some fish with vegetables and olive oil.

‘Do you know which fish we are eating?’ Ive asked me.

‘No!’

‘You know what,’ he said, ‘go to the other room and pick out a book!’

I looked at Pigtales, who nodded at me, so I got up and went to the other room. The other room was darker and had two walls covered with bookshelves. The old wooden shelves were dusty and the book spines had nothing written on them. The first book I picked out was XXXX and I put it back on the shelf.

Then I took out a thin hardback volume, which had been bound recently. ‘A party or a conversation about love, Plato, Trieste, Austrian Lloyd, 1857.’ ‘Dear God!’ I recalled a quotation from a book I had recently read. I leafed through this book and read this sentence: ‘Everyone agreed to not spend time in this company by getting drunk, but to drink as each wished.’ I went back to the table.

'Ive, do you have anything to drink?'

'That's my man!' he said.

I got up, and by the heat that was coming through the window, I realised it was after noon. I was drenched in sweat. There was a message from Pigtails on the table: 'I've gone to Buric. Come when you're up.' Buric was a rocky bay on the other side of the island. That's where we went when we wanted to be alone. I ate a couple of hard peaches and left. I needed about ten minutes to get there. The sun was beating hard, and I wondered if Pigtails was on the rocks or had moved to the shade under the pines.

I approached Buric. I moved off the path to see if I could see Pigtails, if she was perhaps under the pines. But she wasn't. I came out onto the rocks, but she wasn't there either. I felt a small waft of fear, but then I spotted our beach bag and was relieved. What had I been frightened about? That she was gone? That she had left? Why would that even cross my mind?

I came to the edge of the rocks and looked over the surface of the water. I couldn't see Pigtails. Then someone pushed me from behind and I was flying head-first into the sea. I crashed like a stone, in my shorts, T shirt and flip flops. I had to swim to the spot where it was possible to come up onto the rocks. As I climbed up the rock I wondered why she'd pushed me. I was about thirty metres from the spot where I'd fallen from. I saw her lying calmly on her back. She was not wearing her bikini. I sat on a rock and watched her, liked that, from afar. And the longer I watched her, the more I wanted to be farther away, I wanted her to had not seen me as I came out of the pine forest, moments earlier. I knew that she was aware of my watching her, but if she had not been aware I might have been able to grasp her as she really was. Which she might have wanted anyway. To see if we understood each other. If we actually communicated?

The whole thing might have lasted longer, had I not once again come across the elements of my fragmentation. It was the middle of July, and I bumped into Nela at the shop.

'Ha ha ha, you were so funny when you ran away from Franjo as if he was going to do I don't know what to you!' She acted as if everything that happened at the beginning of the year had been some kind of a party. I accepted this attitude, just to see where I'd end up. I knew I couldn't tell Pigtails about this, she does not understand this kind of masochism. I regressed back half a year in a second.

Nela took me to the campsite where Franjo, and Helena with a large belly, were pumping up a beach mattress, one of those for floating on the water. Helena was a bit confused when she saw me, but she quickly put on a wide smile. Franjo came up to me and squeezed my hand.

'I'm sorry if you got the wrong idea at our house that night. I was on edge and didn't know yet about all the things that went on with Helena. OK?'

'OK,' I said even though I was thinking: 'What a prick!'

'People are good,' my father used to say when I was a child. 'No one is evil. It just seems that sometimes people have bad intentions, but in fact what you're seeing in them is your own malice. You're your own biggest enemy.' I wonder where he got that from. But anyway, here I was, facing a man I despised even though I did not know why. Well, I'd decide now! From now on, I would no longer despise him. I'd have dinner with him, talk to his wife and stepdaughter and leave with a pure heart.

Unbelievable. They treated me like a true friend, throughout the course of the dinner. They offered me food, wine, told me about their experiences, even brought up the mess with Helena so that we could have a good laugh about it, all together.

Shit, I was too drunk, we were all singing, Nela was dancing...

I got back the next day on the boat, which left for the island at 5.30pm. As I sat on the boat with two old men, I thought about everything. Watching the crimson sky behind the mountains in the distance, I rolled a joint. I smoked and sat alone on the edge of the deck. I get very stoned very quickly. The waves come up onto the deck, as if we were under the sea.

Pigtails was sad. It was the first time I had left her alone overnight since we got there.

'Hey, listen...' I came up to her after we had not spoken for half an hour in the kitchen. 'I met that crazy woman that wounded me. And her crazy daughter!' I didn't really think this. 'Fate is a crazy thing, no?' And then the moment came. We looked at each other, but each of what was trying to work out what to do.

'This is our first crisis!' I said.

'You don't know the meaning of crisis.' She said.

MANY YEARS AGO

I tried to cheer her up, but it wasn't working. Come on, it has been nice for a couple of months, why not carry on like that, or OK, be angry later, but let's go for a night dip, I'll carry everything, the stuff and the food, you carry nothing, and so on... but it was all in vain. As I said this, she turned away, as if my words hit her with a weight and made her wince and step away, so that it looked as if I was following her around the house and she did not want to listen.

'Shall I stop?'

'Please.' she said.

'Then you talk.' I felt that there was a distance forming between us and gave it my last shot.

She sat on the wooden floor of the bedroom and looked at me blankly. I stood and tried to comprehend her gaze, then I sat on on the bed, and then lay down and fell asleep.

'You're really crazy.' Pigtails was whispering into my ear. 'I was thinking about committing suicide and you fell asleep like a child. You really don't care.'

Her green eyes were drinking mine in, so intensely, like never before.

'I thought you didn't care.' I could have perhaps said something different, but I wanted her to speak first.

'Will you listen, if I tell you a story?'

'Yes.'

'What now? You want me to tell you my life story?'

'Well, only if you want to...'

'OK, I'm feeling very edgy. Do you remember when I told you about my dog?'

'I think so!'

'For fuck's sake, what kind of a person are you? Where the fuck were you last night?'

I was surprised by this. She never showed a sign of worry before. But I was interested in her story.

'Yes, yes. I told you. I saw Nela, the one with the gun and that. But come on, let me hear this big thing that's weighing upon your soul.' Maybe I'd gone in with a bit too much cynicism, but it worked out for the best.

'You shithead, coward, cunt!'

'That's me,' I raised my hand.

'You think I'm going to fall for your crap, eh? Dear God, who did I bring into my home?'

'Perhaps we should insult each other more often?' I said calmly.

'Maybe.' She accepted the game.

Although I knew that the future of our relationship was hanging by a thread, I felt good. Finally we stopped arguing and walking up and down the flat, and sat down at the wooden kitchen table. Pigtails took a deep breath and looked at me questioningly.

'What?' I was confused.

'Give me a cigarette!'

'Here!'

She lit the cigarette. Her eyes and the end of the cigarette glowed in the semi darkness. 'Whatever she tells me, everything is OK! I thought. I felt happy again.

'You know that my father left my mother when I was two?'

'I do!'

'And you know that he never contacted us again, but he lived in Zagreb?'

'I do!'

‘And I told you that my mother didn’t want alimony, because she was repelled by having any kind of contact with him?’

‘You did!’

‘Right. So my dog, a half-golden retriever, was already a few years old when mum and I took him in.’

‘What - someone abandoned him in the street? Well, no wonder. You only ever take vagabonds in.’

‘You’re incredibly witty. But anyway, Chewbacca was no vagabond!’

I burst out laughing. ‘Chewbacca! You didn’t tell me that that was its name. You must have named him yourself!’ Her gaze was getting more empty. ‘OK, OK, I’ll stop talking shit,’ I carried on listening.

‘Of course I named him. When he wandered over to our house behind the Ministry of Justice, where we lived at the time, I was thirteen years old. I watched all parts of Star Wars and I was in love with Chewbacca - you know that big half-dog, half-ape thing that just roars...’

‘I know I know, but I didn’t like those fairytales. I watched only Westerns and horror films...’

‘...and read comics!’

‘And read comics. You see, you know everything about me and I only ever find out weird stuff about you, such as that you were in love with Chewbacca.’

This had pissed her off. She watched me with pity. She had decided that I was a child one could not take seriously. But that’s all I had ever wanted. To be taken seriously. Now she was going to tell me a watered-down version of the thing that is bothering her, because she thinks that I can’t understand. Unfortunately, that’s how it ends up working for me, because I have no courage to share the burden of reality with anyone. I stroll through life.

‘Mum and I always went to see granny on Saturdays. Granny lived in a different part of town, and it took half an hour by tram to get there. I liked that ride. Everything creaked, the wagons of the tram bent on the tracks, and mum held my hand all the way.

Until one day we stopped holding hands, I guess because I had entered puberty. I suddenly became a separate unit and everything started to affect me directly. Men looked at me, but I was no longer protected. Drunk men stank, but I could no longer stick my face in my mother’s shirt. And then we found Chewbacca one Saturday. In fact, we heard squealing from the stream, into which all the sewage from the neighbourhood was drained. We approached the ditch by the edge of the road and saw this skinny, hurt dog lying in the dirty water and crying.’

Pigtails gazed ahead of herself, deep in thought. Crickets chirped in the small back yard.

‘And then you and your mum pulled him out?’

‘No.’ She answered quietly. ‘We left. It was another five minutes’ walk to grandmother’s house.’ It was as if she had sunk into a tranquility I had not known before.

‘When we got to grandma’s, we found her in the kitchen, sitting on the floor completely pale. I thought for a moment that she was dead. I was afraid and wondered why my mother was so calm. She took

her and helped her get up. When granny recovered, they sent me to another room. They did this often. I knew then that they were talking about something I was not meant to hear, but I was used to it. I'd watch TV or leaf through grandma's magazines. Suddenly, mother charged out of the kitchen, face red, and started towards the front door. I leapt from the sofa but mum stopped me. 'Stay here!' she ordered and left. I walked into the kitchen. Granny was making coffee on the stove. We were silent for a while, and then granny said my father had come over just before. I couldn't take it literally. I had never seen him before, I hid all thoughts of him, and now they told me he had been here. And not just that. He had come every Saturday, just like us. He left money for mother and me and questioned granny about how we were doing. Granny said that now I could know all about it because I would definitely not see him again. He got a job abroad. Soon after, mum came back with that dog from the sewage in her arms. 'Here, this is what your father left you,' she said and put the half-dead animal on the floor. I didn't cry. Chewbacca had been rescued and I stopped believing in reality!

'But, that's OK,' I said, and I really meant it.

'And is it OK that the next piece of news I got about my father was that he was dead? I have his German pension, which he left and nothing else. Chewbacca died a month after my father. I was left alone!'

'Well, you have me...' I started saying this, knowing that there was no truth of this in reality, or in my voice, but Pigtails interrupted.

'Fine, fine, I know that you already have other plans in your head. Oh, fuck it. You always had it. That's how it is with you...'

'Us, who?' I asked, even though I knew the answer.

'You, men, fathers, daddies, whatever. It doesn't really matter, it's nothing new! Not at all. When I left my mother a year ago and started living off his retirement payments, I started to investigate who my father was. I found out a lot quickly. But the most important thing I found out was from his neighbours. Apparently he took Chewbacca for walks several times a day, and even went running with him on the hill. Do you think he was a bad person?'

'Am I a bad person then?' I thought. 'Well, it doesn't matter. You know what?' I took her in my arms. 'I am going to go to Zagreb to find a new job, and you come after me. We will live together and nothing external will mess us around. Eh?'

'OK,' she said.

We took our towels and went swimming.

I was in Zagreb. Again. Looking for a job. I wasn't going to go back to that school, and I didn't want to be the first among the lost cases, or rather, a teacher. I slept all day when I got back. I walked through town the day after. The hot asphalt, the lost people, children at play, everything was so ordinary that it could not, must not, be any different. I wanted the summer to last forever. I was sorry to have left Pigtails. My thoughts were all over the place. We'd see what happens...

Stanko got a job at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Apparently he was travelling the Mediterranean as an Arabic translator. He first started working at the Ministry for Economic Affairs, then Agriculture, and then went onto his latest post.

When we met, he told me: 'It's nuts, man! Hey, what are you looking at me like that for? OK, OK! You get it better than I do. You're laughing inside, thinking Look at crazy Stanko with his connections all over the place, and now he's complaining! Well, it's not like that. I too can be a serious person when I need to be. But fuck them! Who gives shit about them?! Do your work and keep quiet! And have a great time while you're at it!'

'Yeah, I also need a job. What's your fucking problem? You think I moralise around this kind of shit? It's you, Stanko, and it's me, and of what use are we?'

'Well, we are of use to all the various Ministries!'

He then told all sorts of political gossip and anecdotes from his travels.

Stanko put in a good word for me at the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration. I went for an interview. I had been recommended, so all I needed to do was complete the interview and turn up for work on Monday. The official who was talking to me said something about a trial period of three months, I wasn't paying much attention. I was imagining the sea. I tried to concentrate on the conversation imagining a sea of papers, in which I would swim as an official at the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration. However, the woman was now saying something about bureaucratic disease and the rise of unemployment in Argentina.

'That was my MA thesis!' she said and only then did I realise that she was not as old as I first thought. She was around thirty but was already sunk into the greyness of the daily burden of hitting stamps on various requests for the upkeep of this and that.

'Absolutely...' I paused before finishing the sentence. I wanted to say something like 'Most interesting!' or 'Really amazing!', but I had started with 'Absolutely!'. I don't know what came over me, but I had to finish the sentence: 'Absolutely... beautiful!'

She stopped talking. She looked me over her glasses and put away the papers that she had been holding.

'You think this is some kind of a joke?'

'No, not at all!' I tried to be my most polite self. But I overdid it again. 'I know this phenomenon myself. The developing Argentine economy experienced a shock by the British landing on the Falklands, which was followed by the general Anglo-American pressure on the whole of Latin America...'

'Enough!' she was angry. 'You're applying for a job of an assistant to the chief of Public Administration! What you're talking about has nothing to do with that!'

At that moment, the Minister himself came into the office and interrupted us: 'Fucking hell Mirjana, I asked you to finish that thing for me!'

‘Sorry but I didn’t have the time. I had too much work already!’ I found myself witnessing a fight between the Minister and his inferiors. I’d soon be one of them. Oh, well, but at least you were in the Minister’s proximity, never mind if he was hassling you or not, you had a job at the top government sector and that was the most important thing. The Minister was still very cross.

‘What do you mean you didn’t have time? I also told you not to have visitors during working hours!’ he was referring to me.

Public servant Mirjana still appeared calm: ‘This young gentleman is our future employee. We were just conducting an interview and I was giving him instructions...’

The Minister interrupted: ‘Aha, you’re the new guy for the assistant position. Ah, if you only knew how many assistant jobs I opened up this year, it seems that the entire government sector is about assisting!’ He laughed in my face and I responded with stretched lips. Public servant Mirjana was going through papers at random, obviously trying to suppress her sniggering. Who was laughing at whom here?

I walked down the hall with the Minister. He was patting my shoulder, or actually holding my shoulder as we went into another room. A large room with the view of the square, with pleasant timeless furniture, a large desk with a computer on it and an empty chair.

‘This is your new office!’ said the Minister somehow shyly. And before I had understood what he had said, he added: ‘Only joking! But it would be nice, no? Let’s be serious now. My assistant, Hardsman, is coming now.’

I said nothing but I was confused by this ‘hardsman’. I thought maybe it was his bodyguard. Perhaps he’d throw me out, because I had laughed at him.

‘I have to go now,’ said the Minister and left.

After less than a minute, a middle aged guy walked into the room. He seemed very familiar. We shook hands, he was chewing something and did not want open his mouth. He sat down and I was still trying to work out where I knew him from. He finished chewing, swallowed and spoke.

‘I’m the Assistant to the Minister, Miroslav Hardsman.’

I remembered then. It was the ‘raftsman’! What was he doing here? Had it been a dream?

‘Why are you so quiet?’ he turned the computer on and looked through the drawers. ‘You’re new, I know you came by recommendation, and we will do everything to make our collaboration smooth and efficient!’ Was it possible that this was him? He looked identical. Even his moves and expressions. Did he recognise me too? Perhaps not. Perhaps he was drunk that night on the bridge and doesn’t recall our meeting at all. What was I to do?

‘I can see some doubt on your face. Do you like my office? Do you think it’s not cool?’ He was trying to force a friendly chat.

‘Are you always this friendly?’ I asked.

‘Not really. But I can tell I can trust you. So there is no reason not to be friendly!’

‘That’s nice to hear.’ I started to enjoy this new, meaningless conversation. ‘I think you will not be dissatisfied with me.’ The ‘raftsman’ or ‘Assistant to the Minister’, I didn’t know how to refer to him anymore, really behaved like an assistant to the Minister. He took me to my desk. A faceless room with three desks. There were two forty-year-old public servant women typing at the other two desks, while the third was free.

‘A man sat at this desk and he died,’ one of the women said and both burst out laughing.

‘Come on, girls,’ the ‘raftsman’, Assistant to the Minister, said, ‘your colleague here will help you finish the audit!’

‘Oh!’ one says and then both laugh again.

‘I will leave you so that you can work out your hours with them, I have to go to a meeting. Welcome to the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration!’ the ‘raftsman’ Assistant to the Minister Mr. Hardsman, said quickly, squeezed my hand firmly and left.

The two officials, my new co-workers, sat at their desks and did not pay attention to me. I leaned over one of their desks to see what they were writing and what computer programme they were using.

‘Hey, don’t bend over to me like that!’ the redhead sternly said, the one with more make up.

‘I just want to know what computer programme you’re using!’

‘Sit down at your desk and we’ll show you!’ the other said from her comfortable wheelie chair.

I did as she said. I sat down at my desk, turned on my computer and waited. I had a feeling I would be terrorised.

The woman who got up had bleached, semi-curved hair and a brown two-piece of skirt and blouse, separated by a dark brown belt, tightly bound around her small waist. I could see she had shapely legs. She said.

‘Before you, a real arsehole shared the office with us!’

I said nothing. She said nothing for a while either and I tried to understand what the silence meant. The redhead was keeping an eye on me the whole time, as if to make sure that I wouldn’t get away.

The blonde woman carried on: ‘That person is no longer around. But I mean like, seriously not around - anywhere. The guy’s dead!’

‘Which has nothing to do with us.’ The redhead added.

‘We did hate him, but we’d never commit any illegal act!’

‘We just wished that he would disappear and then one day he just never showed up to work. A few days later we heard that he had drowned in the bath because the water heater had a gas leak!’

‘It was a total relief. He never let us smoke and he kept cheese in his desk drawer!’

‘Everything about him was disgusting, but he himself was super gross. He would shove messages inviting us for dinner or to the cinema among the administrative papers!’

‘But he never spoke to us directly, except when he forbade us something. He was not our boss, but he went to Mr Hardsman for everything. And Hardsman, a decent fellow, could not see what a bastard this man was, so it seemed that this monster was getting the instructions from the Minister himself about how and what we should be doing!’

The women thus spoke, taking turns in explaining their relationship with ‘the monster’, whom I had come to replace.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ I said after a long silence.

‘Say nothing. Tomorrow you’re coming to the graveyard with us!’

THE TOWN GRAVEYARD

‘We have gathered here to say goodbye to our faithful friend Mario Zuzulic!’

I stood at the back of the crowd with the two women from my office and listened to the speech. Just minutes ago, the women were commenting on my black suit (which I had borrowed from Mane), and now they were stony faced.

‘Mario was a good man. He did love solitude, however, and never married and did not leave bereaved children behind. But more than anything he was - which he has shown with his way of life and his work - a philanthropist. He completed university studies at seventeen-and-a-half years of age, and read Law at university. After finishing that, he started working at the City Administration Office and simultaneously studied Sociology, which he completed in three and a half years. What can one say? Despite the fact that he invested his youth in work and the general good, he carried on loving the world. He organised the employment of young lawyers and economists during the University Olympics, and some of those young people went on to become world experts in their field. His thesis for his Master’s degree in Sociology was ‘War: the mindset.’ He was present in all systems, because he was needed, and so modest that in 1995 he asked to be moved from the position of Assistant to the Labour and Social Services Minister, to work as archivist at the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration, because, as he said, he wished: ‘that young people take the places of those who are getting older.’ And then, he was gone, before his time. Just as he had settled into the peace of his middle age, and when he announced that he would publish his memoirs, his life was cut by this sudden death. As Kant, the great German thinker, said, if you live a moral life, then that life should be lived in a respectable way. Mario Zuzulic lived in this way!’

Weird. My arrival to the Ministry had coincided with the death of Zuzulic and now I was taking his place, his chair empty because of a gas leak in some run down bachelor flat.

The two women didn’t want to wait for the end of the funeral. They took me for an ice cream.

‘Is this not a little bizarre?’ I asked the redhead.

‘Why?’ said Sanja, the blonde.

‘Well, I don’t know. It just is.’ I had no answer. The sun was shining, everything was looking different and I no longer knew what was correct.

They walked me to the tram stop and went on their way. ‘See you tomorrow at work!’ they shouted. ‘Yes’, I thought. I have been initiated into the world of bureaucracy - the pillars of society that grind everything in their way, like steamrollers that correct and flatten irregularities. I wanted to call Pigtails and tell her this, but I couldn’t. I knew she would tell me to go back to the island and I wouldn’t think twice. Or she would come here which would return us to the harsh reality that we kept trying to get away from. That’s why I don’t have a mobile phone. Or a phone. When I arrived, I sent her a postcard from the station. I received a response the other day. A photograph of our island. There was no message written at the back, just my address. I tried to find a hidden message, but I couldn’t.

I was home. In my old flat. I tried to think about everything that was happening to me. Why was I getting into situations again that I’d want to get out of later? Did I need a radical change? I remembered one of Mane’s analysis of my personality: ‘You’re a Ulysses, but you’re just being called up into the army. No, you’re Hannibal ante portas. But actually, I always fall for your historical interpretations. You’re an official of this shitty system, with dreams about the past and the minimum wage in your hand, that’s you...’ He said this while I was still writing articles ‘It happened on this day’ in a provincial weekly. Now those words felt too close to reality. But that wasn’t the only thing that worried me. What was the ‘raftsman’ doing in the position of the Minister’s second in command. It seemed that I had fallen into one of my own projections, of my happiness/misery, but I had not foreseen how to get out of it. I had to meet Stanko, he held the answers to such questions.

‘Listen, it’s your second day at work, and you can’t be late to the office because you’re talking crap here with me. I mean, I know that you’re hypersensitive, right? But fuck it! You have a piss easy job. Plus you were lucky that the guy from the archive died. You’re going to be working as a nail filer, I don’t know, a head scratcher! And you still complain! Raftsman! What fucking raftsman! Listen. Everyone knows that that coma, which I was the cause of, changed you. I mean, it fucked you up. But that’s why I carry you on my conscious, you know? I’m trying to find you a job and that! I know I fucked up and you’re always around to remind me of that, but don’t make shit up! Leave the job if you want, but don’t come here talking crap!’

Stanko went home, and I went to work. I was entering the office, Iva and Sanja greeted me, and I sat down at my desk. Images of Zuzulic’s life went through my mind. In fact, I was imagining the pages of Zuzulic’s memoirs.

‘I shall describe one of the harder, perhaps the hardest period of my life. As I withdrew from the position of the Minister’s second in charge, I got a job at the Ministry of Justice and Public Affairs. My desires

for a more politically active life had not come to fruition, and I had stepped into the forty-fifth year of life. Something had to change. It would be quite irresponsible to blame others for one's own lack of success, or even to blame the system in which I failed. I simply didn't have a choice. I helped so many people that I got to a point where I could only regress.

I was young when I finished my studies. I went into life with no hangups. Everyone was older than me. I learned from them and gained advantage by reaching their level slowly. I was always open to all possibilities, and my aim was to help as many people as possible to succeed. People started to appreciate me quite early on because of this. I was invited to Party meetings, to intimate dissident circles, all because I was so open. I had nothing to hide in my past, and I did what I wanted. When I spoke to a priest some fifteen years ago, I was horrified by this fact. I met the Jesuit Father Mauner at the University Olympics. A seminarian, a theology student in Zagreb, was swimming at the state competition. Father Mauner came to watch. Since I used to swim as a youth, the only thing I had time to watch - so busy at work was I - were the swimming competitions. I happened to be sitting next to Father Mauner at one of these and we started chatting. He told me that he too used to swim when he was young, but that at the end of WW2 he had lost both his parents and his home. He became a priest and has never regretted it. In this conversation with the older, polite gentleman I understood that my progression had a purpose. It was undefined, but was there, like a sketch for a great artistic work. Although I am not a man of faith, by which I mean I don't go to mass, I confessed to Father Mauner at that moment. I asked him whether he thought that I was blindly heading for success and power. 'No', he said and told me to read the Bible and Saint Augustine. 'You know enough so that you will not misinterpret things.' That sentence ended our discussion of my personality. We spent some more time together, and then I carried on progressing.

And only now, fifteen years later, I have relinquished my progress, even though I was consistently aware of where it was taking me. I refused the offer to become a Minister, and asked to become an archivist. My pride was too strong for me to witness being cut down and degraded, so I did all this voluntarily. I hit rock bottom, fast. They didn't even give me my own office, but put me in a room with two solicitors, fresh out of university. I became bitter and resentful...'

'Look at him!' Sanja's voice stirred me from my reverie. 'You're sleeping! Oh dear! Well, I'd rather have that than to have that creep still sitting here!' What had made them hate Zuzulic so much? I had a feeling that Pigtales would soon be arriving. Which is why I had to work out as much as possible in the period before her arrival. Anything at all! Perhaps Zuzulic would help me, from beyond the grave.

I looked for Alko. We had not seen each other in a while, but everything seemed the same - his flat, the clothes he wore, his facial expression.

'What's up?' I asked while we sat in the room where I could find some solace in the form of a half-drunk bottle sticking out of various corners, the TV on and the radio too.

'Nothing. Nothing at all.' says Alko. 'And you, haven't heard from you in a while. You probably didn't need anything!'

'Well, yes, something like that. I was on the coast.'

'What coast?'

'Never mind.' I stopped the conversation. Alko was right. I was there because I needed something. 'OK Alko, I know you know me really well, so listen to me and ... don't talk shit!'

'Why would I talk shit?' he asked, confused.

'Because that's what you usually do!'

'You see,' he turned towards the window and took a deep breath, 'you just don't get me!'

'How did you work that out?' I ask without thinking.

Alko looked at me. There was much I didn't know about him. And I had come here mostly so that his mother, a doctor, could sort me out with a week's sick leave, so that I could come to my senses.

'You need sick leave, right?'

'Yes.'

'Write down the dates you need. Come back tomorrow to get the letter. I guess you don't feel like having a drink?'

'I don't.'

ID NUMBER: 0507957330023

My name is Mario Zuzulic. I was born in 1957. I am writing this about an hour before I am going to die. I don't know if anyone will read this. It doesn't matter if I crumple up this note and throw it away before I kill myself. I just want to write down how I feel, if that's possible. And I am not doing this for no reason. I have been overwhelmed by fear for the last few hours. My last hope is that the fear will become so strong that I will give up going ahead with my decision. I know. It probably won't. In fact, I'm pretty sure that Zovko will deliver a goodbye speech for me on Saturday or next Tuesday, in the Institute's yard or at the graveyard. And so? Is there any reason for this to make me angry or even worried? I don't think so.

I am laying down in the bath. It's really comfortable. The hot water is relaxing. I haven't had a bath in a long time because it makes my skin crack terribly. Now I'm not worried. I am enjoying this endless bath. There is no cracking skin, I won't have to dry my hair, I don't have to rush anywhere after. I am sipping a glass of milk. No, milk doesn't give me diarrhoea, I just love milk.

I didn't forget anything, I wanted to make it all just right for myself. I have put my stereo in the bathroom and am playing my favourite CD. A compilation of light soul hits from the 1970s number two. Such a shame one doesn't die several times. Everything seems so precious.

I shall look back at myself and my achievements. I was raised in the Hapsburg fashion. I did not recognise things like rest, lazying about, lying around or being bored. I recognised work and creatively spent free time. That creatively spent free time soon swallowed everything else. I went riding, collected stamps, played handball, learned Italian and French, rode a bicycle, went hiking, studied at the university library, read Freud, took girls to the cinema, licked ice cream, walked my dog, contemplated philosophy, studied Law and finally remained the same. Should I have changed? I don't know. That was just well spent free time.

Pigtails arrived sooner than she'd said she would. She surprised me. When she rang the doorbell to my flat, I was sitting at my desk and writing, increasingly convinced that I was Zuzulic. I could trace a different person in my movements and words.

'You're weird. Is something bothering you?' she was direct, as always.

'Not at all!' I answered in the most unusual way. 'Everything is okay.' I imagined how Zuzulic might have interrupted a casual relationship during his studies, because it was becoming too much of a burden.

But still, I didn't want new complications. I told Pigtails about my new job and what was in my head.

'How's it possible that we are not the way we were on the island?' I asked her.

'What was the way we were on the island?' she looked at me piercingly and stuffed her hands in her pockets. What has happened until now? I asked myself this question so many times! Is it possible to think too much? OK, let's start from the fact that I am OK. I decided to find a job in Zagreb, because things had become meaningless on the island. My words, my acts, my reactions, my thoughts. And that wasn't not so bad. The bad thing was that Pigtails would have accepted it. That was horrible. But, why was I unhappy with such a situation when before meeting Pigtails I knew no one who might have accepted me in any way whatsoever? The conclusion? There wasn't one. I carried on writing Zuzulic's memoirs. That gave me peace. Everything I did before starting that job at the Ministry seemed unimportant, even meaningless and petty. I wanted to feel the power that Zuzulic had. Things like money, a home, food, understanding, love, were no longer important. What was important was spending money, homelessness, rejection and hatred. I was totally possessed. A monster lived inside me, and it had now been embodied.

I knew I was stuck. Stuck in those waters that one cannot surface from, except by radical moves. Anyway - how does one exorcise the devil, how does one stop smoking? Health, health! I sacrifice you in the name of carrying on this story!

They made us rise at five in the morning, we ran every morning, covering several miles, and the end of my military service was another ten months away. But I didn't find it difficult. I knew it was something I had to do. The military was a necessity at that time, not connected to war, but to ideology. A kind of baptism, like for

the anabaptists - you get christened as an adult. You become part of the community only when you can carry a gun.

I met Iztok in the army. We soon became good friends. He was from Kopar, a Slovenian port, and I from Zagreb. We served the Yugoslav Army in Ulcinj, Montenegro. Iztok felt at home, and I couldn't distinguish the smell of the sea from the smell of the fish soup at dinner. But our ideas matched. He graduated Physics at the University of Ljubljana, and I did Law in Zagreb. We were older than the rest and everyone kept their distance from us because our talks seemed too sophisticated. The two of us talked of the same things that the rest of the soldiers talked about: women, food in the canteen, our leave time, but we'd occasionally have a one-upmanship contest about who knew more. It could happen out of nowhere, or when we stood guard, or in the middle of a lecture about the social and political state of affairs in the country. We would get into the subject that had been mentioned and try to win over the other, impress the other with our knowledge. It sometimes happened that we'd get into an argument during gun handling lessons, about the speed of a shot bullet, or the psychological effects of biological weapons. And at breakfast I liked to state my thesis, that used to get on his nerves terribly, that humanity had the full right to the Earth's natural resources.

But I was soon sent over to Kosovo to serve the rest of my service. We wrote to each other for some time, but that waned after the army - in his last letter he wrote that he had fallen in love with a girl. I went through his home town several times later on my way to Italy, but I always had people with me and so I never visited Iztok.

I spent one summer, in the late '80s, in the company of a famous English theatre actor and his wife. We sailed on the Adriatic and docked in island ports. Somewhere towards the end of the trip, the wife was not feeling well so we had to dock in a tiny place on the Peljesac peninsula. I saw Iztok in the port. He looked the same as when I saw him last in the army. He even wore a uniform. The English actor went to look for accommodation, where his wife could rest, and Iztok and I went to get a drink. He let his soldiers go for the afternoon, and happily told me about how he had remained in the Army, and was honoured and what his plans for the future were. He planned to attend the Military Navy Institute in the autumn, and work on the construction of the new submarine, built locally. He was tanned, full of strength and joy.

Whilst talking we realised that our lives had always been fundamentally different and that we actually had nothing in common except our conversations. I asked him how he would explain such a thing. He thought for a while, and then got up suddenly and gave me a sign to come with him, as if I were one of his inferiors. I walked behind him in silence, feeling that a surprise was ahead. I tried to work out where he was taking me by reminding him that he had left his soldiers behind, and I the English actor and his wife, but he didn't care. He just turned back a couple of times and smiled. The only thing I could think at that point was that he was on drugs. When we got to the top of the hill, from where there was a vast view of the sea, he stopped, took out his officer's gun from his belt and shot himself in the head. I stood for a while next to his curled body. At some point I turned and left.

Pigtails read what I was writing. I didn't stop her.

'What's this gay shit you're writing?' She had got her old confidence back.

'Did you ever think that something you imagine becomes reality?' I ask her in order to dispel stupid conclusions.

'You think the Ministry of Shit has made you very clever?'

'No!'

'What are you trying to say? That one day you'll take me by the hand, take me to the park and shoot yourself from your granddad's shotgun? Is that it?'

Pigtails and I made a deal. Or rather, we worked out that our lives were OK, but that I kept looking for a reason to everything. I gave up looking for a reason.

'Would you sleep with my mother because she gave birth to me?' she started asking.

'I don't think so.' I said.

I suggested I should see a psychiatrist. That's how we would get a proper insight into my condition. OK, I'd given up on my interpretations and insinuations, and now we'd hear a neutral opinion.

Pigtails agreed.

I spent all morning in preparation for the visit to the psychiatrist. I was clearing my brain from various desires and longings, which would manifest as some kind of moaning during the session. I wanted Pigtails to have a clear picture. To hear my diagnosis without my being present, to decide what was good, and what was bad. I started enjoying myself again, this time in the role of a helpless child.

But the psychiatrist, as if on purpose, immediately said: 'Why are you making a fool of yourself? You have a good job, a lovely girlfriend who you get on with, and you're healthy, which is the most important factor of all!'

'Do you think I'm a hypochondriac?' I asked.

'Maybe...' he looked me over his glasses, '... and homosexual tendencies often come out of the fear of one's own powerlessness!'

'I didn't know that!'

'I'm glad you have a sense of humour, but you will have to de-ironicise your being!'

I have to say he got me. I didn't exactly understand what he was saying, but he probably got what he wanted, because I spent the rest of the session answering his questions normally. Everything was going well. I left the office, Pigtails went in. I felt that I could listen to every instruction that Pigtails would give. And then the worst happened. Pigtails came out with a sad look on her face.

'What happened, what did he say?'

'He said you should carry on writing about that guy whose place you took at work. Even when I told him desperately that it was exactly what you wanted, **XXXX jel ovo ispravno?** he didn't change his mind. He said: 'Basically, he lacks responsibility!'

I was told to carry on writing Zuzulic's memoirs. I can't. I don't want to. You uncover a part of yourself, your deepest thoughts. Just so they could become the common law. What was the point?

I would go to work regardless of how I felt there, I'd had enough of sick leave. Does a person realise themselves through work? I'd rather not answer that question, I could get in trouble.

I walk into the Ministry building, where everyone was smiling, everyone greeted me, even the 'raftsman', the Minister's Assistant, who invited me over 'for a chat'.

'You were sick?' he asked with a pleasant tone.

'Yes.' I answered. I was becoming increasingly aware of a strange symbolism in the meetings of me and the 'raftsman.'

'No worries. It's not easy to work with those two witches. You have now shown them that you don't care about your position. They will now treat you completely differently.'

'Like Zuzulic?'

'Well, in a way, yes. Zuzulic had no ambition left, and acted superior. They despised him. But they also respected him. You don't have to worry. You're much younger than Zuzulic was, you're calmer, and you don't have a career behind you that would make anyone feel inferior. Please understand I say all this without belittling you!'

'Thanks for your support!' I said sincerely.

'No problem! Do you want a drink?' he got up from his armchair and opened a door in the cabinet. I could see a pack of orange juice.

'No thanks, I really don't!'

'OK then. Do come and talk to me any time you need anything!'

'Aha!' I said to myself.

Sanja and Iva really did act differently. When I walked into the office, they were each busy working and hardly noticed me. I sat at my desk and tried to imagine myself in that same place, in the same position, in a few years. It was quite possible that that's exactly where I'd be. Realising this I opened the first of the twenty files I needed to work through. I looked through it. Long descriptive titles, many names with signatures, certificates of certificates... I knew what I'd do! Why would my work be boring? Quite the opposite. I was in charge of those twenty files. Everyone waiting for my signature would have to wait until I said: 'You've got to correct this!' or 'The Assistant isn't back yet!' which didn't guarantee them anything. I was the boss, this was my system, and I could only be fired by death.

