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## **Rashomon**

*Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić*



In the moss like wet days you are agitated by the smell of the awakened earth. Springtime. One has to suffer through it.

The birches in your street open their eyes from sleep. The fancy boulevards rustle. The parks start to exude a sweet smell. And the gardens in the suburbs. The underbrush of your conscience begins to stir. Accumulations of pathological particles fatal for your nostrils float in the air. Microscopic dust of pollen. You can smell it.

Shorter nights, longer mornings.

What's the point of watching the sky? The weather has assumed all the characteristics of the climate turmoil, and you know it – your every forecast will be wrong.

It would be best to leave. Where to, when your palms are a bundle of nerves. You can't escape this sirocco. If only you could take it out on someone. You look around, searching for your brother. He's probably in the pub at the corner of the square. With his elbows on the bar, he's babbling about God knows what. Football, politics, football, politics, what this, why that, motherfuckers, assholes. You align the books on the stall, then go around it to have a look at them with an eye of a customer. Out of habit, you run your hand gently down the spines of the old editions in a box. One would think you were caressing them.

Not a single real customer today.

Not even the regular ones, who always come on weekends. With them you can at least have a chat, even though you know they are not going to buy anything. They are broke, they are old, they are former people. Professors, physicians, architects and similar geriatrics. An occasional forgotten politician. They touch the books, they smell them, they recognize them, and then they put them back to their place with devotion, like well-trained dogs. Nevertheless, you like having them around your stall. If you strike lucky, they'd make a fine, choice clientele for your shop, a small store in the centre of the city. In the pedestrian zone, where everything is nice and easy, everything classy. These books would be exhibits there, collectors editions arranged on the old larch wood shelf permeated with the smoke of your pipe. They would be the same, yet different. Because, antique shop is not just a word, not just a space; it's also a context, an atmosphere, a discourse. You would be different there, too; not another person entirely, but still – long hair, yes, but combed back from your face; small beard, yes, but trimmed; gestures, but slow; voice, but soft; language, but precise; black turtleneck, traditional tweed jacket, fedora hat, cashmere shawl and neckerchief in certain occasions; and definitely a good old watch, about which you will always lie you have inherited it. You capture, but you capture attention. You exude, but you exude experience. A collector of valuable books, a connoisseur, an expert, an *antiquarius*.

You know how to do it; you could do it.

You got lucky with that larch wood shelf, you bought it for next to nothing. The pipe was also dirt cheap. You keep them at home like an embryo; sooner or later it will grow into something. Sometimes you line up your most valuable books on that shelf, and it is a completely different picture from this here, which is just a cityscape captured by drone and published on the freshly updated portal of a daily paper. The photograph shows architectural objects on the square which is the epitome of Zagreb, thick with miniature human figures and groups of people. In it you see your tiny self, a man of indeterminate age in a sports ski jacket and woollen cap. You run your hand over your face, you feel your overgrown beard, but something else steals your attention. You will instinctively start to hum to an impossibly beautiful woman who has happened to squeeze herself through the narrow line of your perception. Look at me, just look at me... In her hurry, she has brushed against your stall and walked away, struggling with the Dalmatian dog pulling at its leash. She will stop for a moment, but close to the street, where a woman sells mimosas. If you are a flower, be a froth of yellow flowers of a mimosa tree. If only you were. She buys some mimosas, and they fit her perfectly. You almost feel like calling out to her – Viviana!<sup>2</sup> Sweet little Viviana. How else could you call her? All unreachable women always bore that name and they all disappeared in exactly the same way in other men's gazes, other men's arms, other men's limos. But they were worth it, they were worth every verse. What would Tin and Melkior say about it is something you can't show here. You need an audience, you need a stage, and that something Viviana-like in the air. *Libreria Antiquarius*. One day.

You touch your beard again; you should really spruce yourself up. Sometimes you go around yourself to the other side of your stall and look at yourself with an eye of a passer-by. When you're at your best, you may be called handsome. When you aren't, you look like a tramp. But one way or another, you are a vendor. Of second-hand books. You may not agree with that label, but just remember it could be worse. You could be seen as a reseller. Maybe that's exactly how your customers see you. If not, why don't they ask you about the books you sell, where they are from, how you got them? Why don't they think that each one of them has a story you could tell them, a former existence you should know something about? But no, the only thing they want to hear from you is their price, and sometimes not even that. Sometimes they just look at a book and tell you how much they are willing to pay for it. They want to haggle, they always want to haggle. They throw a meagre offer

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's Note: Viviana is the name which personifies the feminine „creative mystery“ in the poetic of the Croatian poet Tin Ujević, and the name which Melkior Tresić, the main character in *Cyclops*, a novel by Ranko Marinković, gives to the elusive woman who is his love-ideal and always just beyond his reach.

at you, offhandedly, or they hurl it at you like a bone, but they don't do it deliberately. They simply don't expect you to expect anything more from them, they don't expect you to expect their questions about the author, the story, the publisher, why should they. The only thing they need to know about you is that you buy other people's old junk and clear their attics, and that is something they sometimes ask you about, because they are old and everything around them is old, and one never knows if one day they might need the services you offer.

Sometimes you choose to ignore their indifference and surprise them with an unsolicited monologue about a book. You don't retell the plot, you don't talk about the story; that is something they can easily find out by simple reading. No, you go beyond that, you draw parallels, you pull out the threads of synchrony and you weave them together like a delicate cobweb; and then you go deeper and put the bricks of diachrony one upon the other into verticals resembling small red chimneys. They finally fix their eyes on you then, they listen to you attentively. Or maybe not. You are never sure; maybe you are disrupting their everyday life, their small expectations, their prejudices. Sometimes they just put the book back on the stall and leave without a word. Sometimes they flatly cut you short and ask for your last price. It is understandable and so very human. They would all rather buy some good stuff for a bargain from a fool who doesn't know a thing about what he's selling. They all want to go home with something they have recognized and picked up with their own senses, so that they can later talk about it as about a good „catch“. Using that horrible, trendy word you can't stand. But what do you expect? After all, you are a vendor at a flea market, and the rules of the real market, the laws of supply and demand don't apply to this environment. This market is ruled by other laws. The laws of the hunt, those almost feudal, dog eat dog or first come first served laws, and these Lower Town gentlemen are well aware of it, they long for such a rudimentary game, they are sometimes particularly eager to haggle and compete with the sly small vendors like you, they don't visit this market to philosophize, for God's sake. They are not likely to bite your rhetorical hooks, and no matter how hard you pull, they don't react, with an exception of an occasional student, who then lingers at your stall forever. The hooks then become nets for the shoals of philosophical sense and non-sense of the youthful enthusiasm you've long lost. Soon you can't stand that energy, that thirst, that baiting, and you send it all to hell, but the youth charges on, the youth always wants to compete, cite and provoke. In the end you sell the book for the price of one coffee, even though you know that the young student, that snot-nosed brat, will boast about it to his friends, describing his provocations, your duelling with words and his getting the better of you as a remarkable feat.

The squeaking of dry tracks makes you twitch, and you think – oh no. A gridlock. Low-floor trams stranded in a jam slowly open their bowels and disgorge their passengers on the pavement. They look like lazy

whales to you. The air gets filled with resentment, the air gets filled with saliva, viruses and bacteria. This unexpected crowd floods you, spreading its tentacles and moving in all directions, looking for permeable membranes. The large-headed monster surrounds you, tramples you underfoot and leaves. You will hastily reach under your stall, grope for a book in your hidden stack and take the first one your fingers land on. You will open it on a random page and read what is there, just to have something to clutch at, to hold on to, to tie yourself to, not to end up dissolved in helium droplets, which is something you would very much like.

Don Juan had changed his clothes. Or perhaps he had merely reversed his cloak. At any rate, he looked ready for a journey.<sup>3</sup>

Journey!

Is there a word you would like better today?

Don Juan's first impulse: to beat a silent retreat. But then he decided to stay and watch. It was a conscious, sober decision. He had to take in those two, whose bodies were conjoined and remained joined. There could be no question of averting his eyes. It was his duty now to register and to measure. To measure what? Don Juan did not know.

At all events, he watched without emotion and also without a breath of excitement. All he felt was astonishment, calm, natural astonishment. And in time that became a sort of frisson... That's what you are feeling right now. You feel chills down your spine. It's time for you to go away, but the horde has left someone behind, accidentally or deliberately right next to your stall. He is motionless and silent, and you will squeeze a begrudging how can I help you to him. Or not. His eyes are locked onto something past you. As if he were waiting for someone. Not here, for God's sake, your stall is not a post clock. This is not a meeting point. In his pocket, close to his heart, his mobile phone vibrates annoyingly, but he does nothing about it. You would like to snatch it and throw it far away. As if suddenly aware of your presence, he turns his back to you. And moves to the neighbouring stall with the old jewellery, where he just stands motionless and silent as before. You don't look at him for a while, but his silence has already exposed you to radiation. Anyone that silent must be up to something. Then a woman appears. She approaches him from behind with a wary step, like a cat. She covers his eyes with her hands, like in a peekaboo game, and then lowers her hands to his shoulders. You hear her saying she is late, not much else. An ugly curse reaches your ears, but maybe you have just imagined it, because the woman calmly takes him under arm and pulls him along. He pushes her away angrily, so you conclude your

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<sup>3</sup> Translator's Note: All passages from the Croatian translation of Peter Handke's *Don Juan (erzählt von ihm selbst)* (2006) have been translated by Krishna Winston in *Don Juan: His Own Version*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2010

ears didn't trick you. His arm hovers in the air, another curse, and she bows her head. You expect a blow and you're not sure if you can disappear quickly enough. Luckily, he turns his back to her, ignores her. But then she. She looks around herself slightly, brushing the people with her gaze, and you think it's a short, silent apology to all of you who are there. An apology for what? You can already see what's going to happen. She starts after him, her steps are wary but faster and faster, and they are both within your reach now. You would like to yell at her. Whatever befalls her now, she has deserved it. She should have let him go, now is not her time. They never recognize when they are superfluous, and that's why they usually spoil everything. The women.

You return to your book to escape what is bound to happen and then you quickly dig your phone out of your pocket and call your brother to come and replace you at the stall. He is not picking up, and you are sweating, you want to leave so badly that you have the feeling you are already evaporating from this strange constellation, from this potential scene of an event you don't want to witness. You immerse your gaze in the crowd of passers-by, coffee bars, little hearts, flowers and all the Biedermeier around you, so gaudy and pretentious that it is actually logical such an idyll should have a counterbalance in the form of a love drama. You don't see the hand that connects with her face, but you hear the blow. One, then another. It has nothing to do with love, but you recognize it nevertheless. A man never hits a woman he doesn't love. Something familiar trembles in you, your hands shake so hard that you are forced to close the book and walk away. You too feel like hitting something, punching someone, preferably her, with all your might. Because she will forgive him. The one who punches always finds the one who forgives. Only you didn't have that privilege.

You walk along the outside edge of the pavement. That way the people around you are within your sight and yet at a distance; you don't want anybody near you, but you shiver from the thought of being left alone. To give free rein to loneliness is not advisable. You search the depths of your mind for a foothold, a firm axis, because the thoughts running through your head are volatile and dishevelled. If they are not propped against something, they crumble apart in no time and roll down the street like marbles. You can't stand that never-ending sound. It starts with a rumble, followed by an echo. The small glass balls multiply and collide with one another, or find obstacles along their way. You don't want to know about it. You don't want to remember. Who don't you want to remember?

Dule.

Why him, of all people? You haven't seen him in years, you have no idea where he is or if he is alive; you

believe he is and you try to remember the last time you were in your old neighbourhood, but it is too late now, the marbles are already rolling.

You drop out.

You drop out of sight.

The book is still in your hand; for those others that you have left behind, you currently don't care. Neither do you care for the choice, rare editions. Let them wait there, like loyal dogs. It's not their first time. Someone will take care of them. They will fetch your brother. Or not. A police patrol once found your stall abandoned in the late hours of the night. They didn't know what punishment to give you. So they just warned you not to do it again and left.

Duško. Known as Dule. An absolutely cool guy, an idol of a generation. Your role model in music, morals and everything else. If you are going to talk about him again, look at him with different eyes. Grab the past by its rock'n'roll collar and drag it to the light. That's how it's done. Are you afraid of what you might see? A typical New Wave fan from the late nineteen eighties. An eternal student hooked on soft drugs. Two or three chords and a verse or two, nothing you couldn't have done. Now when you think about it, you could have done more than that. But you hadn't, and maybe it was for the best. To outdo one's heroes is not something one would call a bliss; it becomes a burden at one point, and one no longer knows what to do with them, what to do with oneself. Every head has its own headache, they say.

But not yours.

You loved him like a brother. More than a brother, that's what you want to say, but you won't say it, despite everything. Did you want to be a part of that family? Definitely. You always avoided your own. But you remember that his old man scared you to death. He was a bigoted, stern man. A military officer, just like your father, but a mean-tempered son of a bitch. His mother, on the other hand, was pure love. She spoilt all of you speaking in her funny Serbian dialect and she baked the best pies in round roasting tins. In your family it was the other way round. Your mother never baked anything. Or loved, for that matter. Your father was a wimp. Dule was the only child, you weren't. The fate has handicapped you in that, too. Dule went his own way, you didn't. You never held anything against him.

Not even when he fled to London in the late nineteen eighties. You were beside yourself. How could he go, and leave you behind? He left you, but he was still a legend in your book. You expected all kinds of things. You expected a lot. You saw a letter with your name on it, a plane ticked and *come join me, kiddo, I haven't*

*forgotten you.* How could you have known that he'd spend all his money in just a month and then live as a tramp in the subway? Your Dule! Not cool at all. The fact that he burst into the Yugoslav Embassy high on grass and begged them to send him back home before they kicked him out was nothing to brag about either, even though he later spun that story into some kind of heroic act. After all, his return home by airplane without a penny in his pocket was much cooler. Although he landed in Ljubljana. His flight back was not paid by the consul or the military attaché who was an acquaintance of his father, but by a nun originally from this area, whom he met at the Caritas there. Your Dule, the rebel with the Che Guevara's image on his chest, got that ticket as charity. Of course he lied to you about it.

And when he got off the train at Zidani most, what did he do? He quickly called his parents. His parents, not you. You would have moved heaven and earth to meet him there, you would have gone to the end of the world to fetch him, you would have brought him into your neighbourhood like a hero. As it was, his old man sent the military police for him, to teach him a lesson. They brought him in like a delinquent – and what did your Dule do? He burst into tears.

Fuck it, Dule, you've always been jinxed.

That's what you say now. But what did you say then?

Cross that zebra crossing, go back, your books are waiting for you. They are the only thing that really happened to you while you were planning something else, but that's life, isn't it? You love them and hate them, but life is often ambivalent. That ambivalence costs you ups and downs, sometimes it is your motivation, other times a burden. But you couldn't live without that world. Fiction helps you out of the everyday shit. You read every night, it's almost an addiction. Some books delight you, others make you shiver, or spit from the depth of your throat, without a real reason. You spit on the ground under your stall and the dogs later sniff your spit. Is there anything uglier than that? You know there is, when you think of a pyre. Today is one of those days when you could burn them all. The thought of it sends chills down your spine, and a new marble rolls towards you. You get out of its way, you twist, you let it pass. You are happy, as if it wouldn't graze you on its way back.

The small bench at a bus stop offers silence. You close your eyes, the book on your lap opens on its own, like a small accordion.

And as always, though always in different circumstances, Don Juan did not want to flee. He thought he should not flee. He must not flee. And as always there was no choice: he had to flee.

Every spring is the same story. You feel always the same smell of Slavonian mud. It sucks you down like a quicksand, but you resist it. You push it away and move on. You don't want to give in to that. You don't



care about the beginning or the end. It's obvious it was just a strange imbroglio you got caught in. A short trip, nothing more. It was never your story, and there is no reason for you to feel bad about it now, is there? But still, every year it takes you by surprise, just around the time when allergy season begins, when everything grows, sprouts leaves and blooms, and everything else stirs, including the things you have already forgotten. Some stories are buried once, and it should be the end of them. But, no. It is as if they wanted to be retold and were looking for a place for themselves again, so they crawl under your coat and cling to your spinal cord, and every, even the slightest movement of your body stirs them, your every thought feeds them.

He murmured his first story to himself, probably, I thought, because this experience, the incident with the leather-clad bikers, had just taken place. It was not ready for telling.

Will you call it a coincidence? And say that literature is lie? That tells the truth? A couple on a motorbike, a man and a woman. No leather, that's true, but everything else is the same, today, in front of you. The woman's hair is blond, like hers. If you stop to think about it, isn't that the sign that your incident is not yet ready for telling, even though it's hard to believe it after all these years. But if you allow that possibility, you will later read somewhere that ontological maturing of a story is not connected with time.

Thus there was no material to embellish. For now all he could do was pin down the facts, muttering a few cues to himself. He saw himself as still too prominent in the story; only when it was no longer about him could he embellish it at will.

Stories often don't run from the beginning to the end, and while you think nothing is happening, you are already telling one. Sometimes the things you tell are just fragments of your conscience you will later put together into a deeper meaning, but the trouble is you don't want to put anything together, and if it weren't for this hasty spring, you would be at ease now. Or not, as you aren't since you've heard the news. The news you want but can't believe is true.

Suzi is back in town.

Why would she return after so many years is a stupid and hypothetical question you have already asked yourself endless times. In any case, your life has been disassembled for days now. You see her at every corner. It's her, it isn't her, it's her, it isn't her; it doesn't matter, she has already activated your inner land-slide. Suddenly you remember everyone and everything, and what good is that to you? What do you need Dule for? True, he was your only teacher until you turned eighteen, but you shouldn't put him on a pedestal for that, everybody had such someone in their life.

Still, there are some things a man remembers. His first girlfriend, first cigarette, first soft drug, going

out with friends. Strangely enough, he despised alcohol, which is why you avoided it as well. He introduced you to her, they had just started dating. You remember it all as if it were today. Her parents were returned emigrants, and she just appeared one day, first at school, then in your neighbourhood, with nice foreign clothes, a Walkman and the trendy music she listened to. She had those infuriating hairstyles from the Bravo magazine, but you nevertheless embraced her into your sacred rock'n'roll gang. You used to spend the lazy afternoons together, vague about who you were, what you were and where you were going. You were a university student, but it was as though you weren't, she was about to take her final high school exams, but it was as though she wasn't, Dule was nowhere, but actually everywhere. You listened only to him. He used to leave the two of you alone in his room when he went clubbing in the city centre. You never knew when or if he would be back. You would wait for him until late into the night, ready to be happy like little kids, you were chaste and obedient. That was, at least, what he thought. How could he have known that you two would cheat on him every time the cops picked him up, which happened quite often, because only then did you dare do it, only then did you muster the necessary courage, suddenly grow up, suddenly feel equal to him. You would then go to those same clubs, tread in his footsteps. Zagreb was something it will never be again, and you, the unfettered, pre-war Zagreb youth, took the best of everything. How could you have even suspected that it was all a delusion? That your Dule was a local small-time dealer and an occasional police snitch. What else could he do, when they pressed him hard in those paddy wagons; raids were frequent in those days, and you know how scared he was of his old man. In front of him he was smaller than a microbe, a small-time dealer, a small-time snitch. And you? You can't say it never crossed your mind, but you didn't allow yourself to doubt him. You needed him badly at the time. Your father was invisible. Your mother, your brother... Well, Dule was Dule, even if he were a snitch! You of all people should know what the life on the margins is like. The first one takes it all, others wait for their opportunity. It was the same with you two. Dule drank first, straight from the spring, and you waited for your turn. You know it sounds awful now, but let's be honest, you didn't mind it at all at the time, because you loved him more than you loved her. And it was only with her that you could be him. You copied him and imitated him, you did everything the way he did it, she had to show it all to you in bed. And she didn't mind it. Now you think she was a slut, but she was faithful to you both. Do you know that she sometimes suspected there might be something between the two of you? After all, you wrote songs to him; him, not her. Some of them you still remember, even though you don't want to. Like the one you wrote when he went away. Just like that. To war. You closed yourself into your room and hammered on your guitar. Sometimes I spend the night in a park with the old gang and some pretty girls around, but it is always you I talk about under the moon smiling

from above. Why should I spoil the evening when wine starts pouring? Sometimes it knocks me down, but don't worry, I'm fine. Here's to you, mate.

Now on the square... you feel like crying. The bloody karma of missing someone crawled its way into your life back then. Things never fell back into their place again, and you will always miss someone, somewhere. Most of all you will miss her. Why didn't she stay with him? Maybe he would have been happy today, and the thought of him wouldn't burn you. You would have been the only one who suffered, but you would survive it, it's easy to suffer at the thresholds of youth, when there are many other doors waiting for you. Like this, everything stopped, as if it had been put on a chronic standby, and it doesn't budge. Everything has cocooned itself at the wrong place, somewhere around your heart.

A bus has pulled into the stop, some passengers have gotten off, others on, and you have remained invisible on the bench, like a dry leaf torn off from the branch. First lights are coming on down on the square, and the clock is ticking its last hours. The chestnut on your cupboard still smells sweetly in your quiet room, and the shadows shiver from memories. But don't worry, there are still windmills, and we will again be what we were before.

He promised you he would set it to music. That poem. He never did it.

He also wanted no music to go with his story, any kind of music. He claimed it made him incapable. Incapable of what? Incapable.

The wind closes the book on your lap with something close to compassion.

The moon is full, how about you?

You are suddenly grateful to him. The higher natural powers will make sure that all the roads you will take tonight are illuminated. Suddenly you believe that everything will be fine. And you want music, those two or three chords, the guitar from your youth, who knows where it has ended up, if it still exists somewhere, let it play, let someone play it tonight.

The night is stealing upon the city's jugular you enter with a confident step. Some vendors clear their stuff away, others clear it up, working hours are finishing, some other hours beginning. People move from the point A to the point B, and everything starts to resemble dance steps. The night is still young, everything there is to happen is yet to happen, and it's the most beautiful thing that this or any other night has to offer. The slow pace of expectation. You feel the smell of pancakes with Nutella spread, and even though you don't like them, you are suddenly hungry. That finally turns your steps towards your home, while your baffled brother is still

standing in front of the supermarket at the corner of the square where you usually meet, waiting for you. He is broad and awkward, and the people jostle him or go around him. The books are already carefully packed in their boxes, there is no money today anyway. You left in the middle of your shift. He won't say a word about it.

You deliberately turn in different direction and leave him to his futility. You don't want to know how many missed calls you have from him, so you switch off your silenced phone. You take the side streets to your mother's flat, in which you've been living in these recent meagre years. She has never accepted you, that you know for sure, but she hasn't rejected you either. Blood is thicker than water. You don't know what has made you turn first left, then right, and hurry down the empty road to the forgotten railway crossing. The streets here feel more familiar to you, meandering in softer bends. You would even say they are the same, but you have learnt that nothing can be the same, and nothing can be like before, and they may be as dear to your heart as they used to be, and as ragged, so your feet fall into the familiar potholes at similar places, but they no longer take you anywhere and they serve no other purpose but to offer you the brand new, disappointing views popping up along them; the views which are no longer those black-and-white miniatures that your teacher used to admire at the photography course you took at school. How much does it mean to you that you can discern the edges of a former life in the distance, when you are walking towards an unspecified goal, stumbling over the time, over the years, asking yourself which year it is and why that year exactly. That one was hard.

Most of your friends volunteered for the National Guard. As if they had to. You didn't, so what? They didn't either, but they did. They didn't, but they did. It was the matter of survival. Such was the neighbourhood. Ethnic intermarriages, the children of the Yugoslav Army officers, who would trust them? Nobody cared about tolerance any more. The homeland slowly coming into the view on the horizon may have been a centuries-old dream, but for them it was still a rather vague notion. However, Zagreb was the only place they belonged to. To run away or stay, to be or not to be. One way or another, they couldn't just sleep through that war. They feared both sides equally. They had to prove themselves to someone, somewhere.

Dule was among the first ones who left. He left you with her. With Suzi. You were confused. Why he, how did he find himself in that hell? You expected more from him. Everything, but that. You expected him to tell, to find a solution, to come up with a plan and take you and her along, far away from that chaos. You wouldn't have asked where you were going, you would have known you were going to a civilization, to a West.

You remember your father.

He prepared himself for work every morning as if it were the last time. Dressed in his uniform, shaved, ironed. But there was no call. When the shootings began in his native backwoods, he never contacted anyone

from his family again. The Log Revolution weighed heavily on him, but who could have known then what the whole thing would turn into. He didn't go to work any longer. He was waiting. He seemed calm, ghostly pale, as his heart pumped its least beats, but that was something you all realized when it was already too late. Your mother was silent. Anyone that silent... You didn't care. Dule was already gone. Suzi's brother too. And you?

You were in bed with her.

You made mad love day and night, as if the world were coming to its end. And then at weekends, you welcomed your warrior home; it was such a farce. And he? He was supposed to be your hero, but he was not particularly good at it. Not everything was Suzi's and your fault. He was simply not born for a hero. Then somebody told him. Neighbourhood pricks. Not to his face, of course, but with the song entitled "Who's Kissing You While I'm On Guard", which was then a standard in your local pub, and which they played for him ten times in a row. Ten! „Only for Dule!“

It was not simple, not at all. Even lying was impossible. You realized then that truth is overrated, and that a man's happiness always depends upon having at least a little bit of space for a lie. Or at least a slightest chance for manipulation. The horrible finality, invariability, inflexibility, that's truth for you, and who really needs it? Only the historians. All historical delusions and conundrums get unmasked and resolved in the end, let alone you and Suzi, who never really hid your affair. Anyway, that's when you lost him. Your best friend. It felt horrible at the time and it was horrible. Who would have thought that you would never ever have that again? A friend, let alone the best one.

He asked to be sent on the front lines right away and to finally get the bullets for the fucking service rifle he carried around for no purpose, because they always kept him far from the battlefield. He knew they didn't trust him. If some of them were asked, he, the son of a Yugoslav Army officer, would have never tasted the real action. Who in their right mind would ever trust him? His old man fled after his red star like an idiot. He took Dule's mother along, together with all the love she used to give him. Dule eventually managed to get to the battlefield, but he still saw no real action – his duty was to retrieve the dead, but not any dead. It's easier for you to retrieve your own, they said, go and collect your people. Small acts of malice stuck to him like ugly chewing gums. You imagine him dragging certain dead bodies onto a separate heap, and God only knows how he found himself in a crossfire and if it were the last thing that had flown through his mind when he downed the demijohn of the homemade brandy he had found on the table in an abandoned house, or the reason was his reckless drunkenness „that put other people's lives in danger, and for which he has been punished and sent

for treatment”, as stated in the military report some of the guys in your neighbourhood read, but not you. You knew Dule didn’t drink. He came back dismissed, patched up, addicted. He came back, but it was as though he didn’t. And when he later started drinking for real, he never took off the bloody army fatigue jacket.

He has a drinking problem, big deal! He was prone to it anyway.

One addiction begets another. Your father was also a Yugoslav Army officer, but you never played the prodigal son. Unlike Dule, who flunked his final high-school exams, you almost obtained your university degree, and that’s no small thing. If it hadn’t been for that unfortunate Banija, maybe you would have given those last few exams you had at the school of engineering, and today would have had a nice job in your own company or on a ship. You had your plans. But through no fault of your own, everything went downhill. At one moment everything was against you. And it was unbearable.

Fuck it, it was really unbearable.

Your first job was among the farmers, where you were sometimes knee-deep in the mud, always working in the field. They called you an engineer, because you repaired their farm equipment and machinery. They didn’t have the money, so they paid you in eggs and meat. The war was brewing all around. Psychosis. People disappeared overnight. Houses were locked, families were leaving for Sisak or Zagreb. Local Serbs grouped together, invited you into their houses, thought you were one of them. Aggression was in the air. To you, it was all surreal, and you wondered what was wrong with those people and what they were talking about. Of course, you were young. Overnight and without thinking, you accepted the job offered to you by a cousin who had the same surname as you, the job of a common repairman in the godforsaken backwoods, just to get away from Zagreb and out of Dule’s sight. To this day you don’t think you were a coward to have left her deal with him on her own, because you couldn’t have helped her. You couldn’t even look him in the eye, for heaven’s sake, and women have that power, they have the power to patch up and heal, she would make it work somehow.

When you think about it, you were the worst off. You missed everything: Dule, the neighbourhood, *The Hole*, the city... You could have expected to miss them, but she was the one you missed so much that it hurt. And that was something new for you, a new realization. You had no idea you could love like that.

The thought of her is a new marble. The one that burns like live coals.

When you managed to get to a phone, she was never at home. Her mother would always ask you the same *whereareyouhowareyouwhatareyoudoing*, and she wouldn’t let you get a word in, so you wouldn’t ask about Suzi. You waited countless times for her to call you back on the phone in the local post office, that the young clerk who was working there and always looked at you sweetly, what was her name, was kind enough

to let you use. For her you were someone with a degree, someone from the big city, a good catch. She always dressed up for you, but you did nothing. How could you be so stupid? You were waiting for a call that never came and you can't say you weren't glad about that girl's attention, but you were reluctant to hook up with a local girl. The weapons rattled everywhere around, and you had no intention of getting married. You were looking for a refuge and you found the library, and there you got addicted to books. How's that for a destiny? You spent long, lonely evenings in a provincial, working-class library, and in those few months you read more books than you had read in your whole life until then. Other men would drink their days away, the grape brandy there burnt the throat like hell, and you had bottles and bottles of it. But not you. You inebriated yourself with fiction.

It couldn't have ended well. And it didn't. The police station was attacked, and you left overnight, without your pay and without a goodbye, leaving a mess and a tear or two behind. The young post office clerk couldn't have known what you were going through. You had to choose between running away and losing your mind.

You took three suitcases of books with you. More than that you couldn't take. You don't consider it a theft; you saved them. That was the beginning, and since then you've been obtaining them in various ways. At wartime, one could get all kinds of books. And make some money on them.

The return to Zagreb – nothing good. You didn't know where Suzi was. The neighbourhood gang had dissipated. Dule no longer came home, Aki had disappeared. Aki, yes... You found out later that he had gotten killed on the river Una. He spent half of his life in a correctional institution. In the town of Glina, so he returned to that region to fight the war there. Who knows what old scores he was settling. You would like to know where he was buried, but you can't remember his name. His real name. He was always just Aki from the last street before the railway track. The one with the ugliest houses.