

*Trojica za Kartal:  
Sarajevo Marlboro Remastered*

Four Stories

Miljenko Jergović

*Translated by Jacob Agee*

## A TEACHER

“And what school did you go to, son?”, she asked, so as to somehow break the silence.

“I’m no one’s son, my mum went to Paradise”, he answered darkly.

She recoiled at this, simply stopped speaking, pulled her head back a little more between her shoulders, and kept walking. The asphalt was moist from this morning’s deluge, but the sun shone and everything around was fragrant, like the sweet smell that spreads in summer in this city after rain. Look at you, all sibilant, she thought to herself, routing the malaise: *sweet smell that spreads in summer in this city after rain.*

Up ahead went a tall black man. She knew him. Before the war he would stand in front of the supermarket by Sveti Ante, smoking and drinking beer from the bottle. Sometimes he would load charcoal into basements for people. An idler, though a good-natured one. He knew how to greet people.

Now he’s going and he doesn’t look back. His gun barrel is hitting the buckle on his belt, and so with every other step that queer metallic clink is heard. Nothing more than this. Just the sound of their trainers on the wet asphalt. And the patter of her slippers.

When they came, they were harsh. They didn’t let her wear decent shoes, and so she’s in slippers instead. Probably they were scared. This is all new to them too. It’s new to everyone, she sighed, troubled at the woes of the world.

The boy went behind her. Fair-complexioned, blond-haired, beautiful as an angel. So much so that even her experienced eye had difficulty in placing his age. He could be twenty-five, but could just as easily maybe be fifteen. Children have left for war. Her children. Except that this war’s not somewhere faraway, on the front, but right here, on the street, as soon as you step out from the doorway and yard.

Unlike the black guy, he’s considerate and careful. He knows that she cannot go fast. Even if she were in shoes, she wouldn’t be able to. And it’s lucky that the slippers are new. She bought them during that month before the war. She went a little ways down through the bazaar, it was a beautiful day, just like this one, and suddenly she felt that everything would be ok, and so she went into a shop and bought the slippers. That’s what she was like. And so you see, now these slippers are doing her good.

“Boriša Kovačević”, the boy quietly answers.

“Ah, you went to the Boriša Kovačević Primary School!” She’s delighted at this.

She attempted to remember the female teachers there, but nothing came to mind. That was long ago. And she never was good with names. She remembers the faces of all the boys and girls whose teacher she was. She remembers too where they were, in which part of the classroom and at which bench they sat, but no names whatsoever. If, after thirty years, she saw them again for the first time, she would still recognise these children by their faces, even in the bearing of grown-up people. Then she’ll turn to them on the street, but their names she doesn’t know. And so she says to them: “my son.” To girls as well as boys, and in fact to middle-aged ladies and bald, potbellied clerks, workers, engineers and doctors. Then they look at her, and recognise her only with difficulty. They don’t remember that they went to school. She then says to them: “shame on you, I was your teacher.” And then every one of them laughs. She knows how it is with children ...

Similarly, she doesn’t remember either even the names of the teachers from the Boriša Kovačević school. But, she knows every one of them by heart. There was also one male teacher

amongst them. Young, sheepish and ruddy as a little girl. And a Montenegrin too! Everyone teased him.

Below her feet it's becoming steeper. The asphalt drier. Soon it will not even be evident that there was rain. Whenever she looks back – and something impels her to look back often – she sees how the city is evaporating in the stifled silence. Her city, she was born here and stayed here. They could have left, but they didn't do so. He now reposes at Bare Cemetery. Luckily, he didn't live to see this war. He wouldn't have been able to hack it. His heart would have burst. While they were young, she was all for going away, seeing the world and other cities. Belgrade was somehow more to her liking, as Belgrade was big. But Zagreb too. And so he said to her: "be quiet, stop it, you poor thing, where will you go from here?" And she to him: "cities, cities, cities." And then, when he no longer knew what to say to her, he'd say to her: "but how will you be able to leave the children?" She'd then say to him: "well, first I'll see this class through, and then we'll go." And so, they never left. And that good-for-nothing, he cheated her! He didn't care about her children, he cared about FK Željezničar. Every other Sunday he would head by foot to the Grbavica Stadium, to the match. He always wore that badge on his lapel. It remained on his coat even when he died. She took it off to see what was underneath. And underneath were crumbs, particles, time. Life. And what would he have done had he gone along with this? What would he be, like that? What would he do every other Sunday? But thanks to God that she'd had him. Not only because of their only son, who is thankfully on the outside, in Germany, but also because if she hadn't had him, perhaps she really would now be in Belgrade. Alone and with no one, amongst people who don't care about anything. They don't care that they are killing her all around Sarajevo – her, who would now be looking them in the eyes – every livelong day. How could she live with them? What would they talk about? Hence, it's good that he'd refused them going.

"And what kind of schoolboy were you?", she asks.

"Very good", he answers immediately.

"So be it, that way's the best. First you're very good, and then through life you just get better. Though some excellent ones later degenerate. And what were your best subjects?"

"Physical ed, music, art."

"Ah, I'm a fool to ask! Of course that's how it is. There's no boy who'd answer differently! Physical ed, what else! Because now you can ..."

And then, suddenly, she no longer knew what she'd say to him, how she'd finish this sentence. She wanted to say to him something like, "now you can be a warrior, you can be a city defender". But something didn't let her say it. And there was nothing else she could have said in place of this. And so she just shut up. Just as old people – she comforted herself – often shut up. She didn't feel like an old woman, but that's how others saw her. And so, why not exploit this.

Since they'd set out, walking – already a whole hour, so that it's now much steeper underfoot, her feet already slipping a little down her slippers – not one explosion had been heard. Not one shell, mortar, bomb. Only, occasionally, the peal of a lone rifle, like a hunter shooting boar in Turgenev's forest. She thought there hadn't been such a peaceful day since the beginning of the war.

"Something is quiet about today", she says, but the boy does not answer her. Maybe he recognised something in her incomplete sentence. This worried her.

Whenever the days of heavy shelling would fall, like from Monday all the way until the day before yesterday, which went on and on – today is, it seems to her, Saturday – something would change inside her. First of all fear would seize her, like everyone. And then she'd do everything which people do when they're afraid. When the fear disappeared, and it disappeared as soon as the shelling went on too long, or as soon as she heard the sound of glass falling somewhere, some strange peace would set in inside her. And some feeling that everything's in

order with the world, because in the end justice is always done. And so she is, by some occurrence, part of this justice, and of this paying back of every evil.

Afterwards she'd be amazed with herself. Such a justice, was it not abject? And so too, such a paying back of every evil?

She'd be amazed, and laugh up her sleeve, because it seemed to her that in her old age she'd lost her intellect and become religious. Because all this that had come to her, was some strange religious formulae. Both justice, and the paying back of evil, and in the end even peace! And where will you go, you sad thing, to be peaceful when the shells come even closer to you? It's not peace: it's a defensive mechanism, of the sort that exists in every human being.

She had never become a member of the Party. She was the single non-Party member amongst the teachers. But while Mejra, Rasema and Katica celebrated their Eids and Christmases, and secretly believed in this Something, her Heavens were forlorn, just like those of Lenin and Karl Marx. There was nothing. And there's really nothing now. But, then, it's as if there's something in these strange moments when it seems to her that she needs to pay this evil back with something.

"What day is today?" she asks, because now she is no longer sure if it is Friday or Saturday.

"What does it matter what day it is today?" The black guy, unasked, surprises them, looking back, and digging in, so big and dark atop the cobblestones. Above his head is sky, ruins and pines. A world turned awry.

On the pocket of his black uniform – she had seen this while they were still leaving the building – and stitched with golden thread, was an ivy leaf of Arabic letters, signs and words.

She's scared and so suddenly stops, so that the boy hits her under the kidney with his gun barrel. He crashed into her. But, how do you crash into somebody going uphill?

She thought quickly of what now to say and do. She didn't know where they were going, and was no longer able to ask. So she had to say something else.

"And what's that written on your pocket, son?"

He looked at her and fell silent. His eyes were peaceful and empty. He wasn't irate. He was just keeping up appearances. As a matter of fact, he was just as he used to be while he stood in front of the supermarket by Sveti Ante, drinking beer.

"Let's go!" – he says turning, and keeping going step by step.

She felt a callus growing on the big toe of her right foot. But it didn't matter. There's no damage from a callus anyway. There's no longer time for calluses.

It's something else that's killing her. First of all, she didn't want to think about it, and instead she drove other thoughts through her mind, but now there's nothing more to it. She's tired, and doesn't have the strength to think about anything else. She wouldn't even pose questions to the boy any longer. It's not alright, if he already doesn't want to speak. And it's not alright anyway. Who's she to now pester the city defenders like that. How beautiful that sounds – city defenders. For what else can be defended on this melancholy earth, other than a city. A city is a conch of memories. Everything hers is deep down. And this vale is in her head, and not on the earth.

In vain she tries to chase away this daylong nightmare. This torment which, she now thinks, came to her precisely because of these sudden swerves of faith of hers, this peace in the soul after great fear. And she feels that it's deeply just that she be this victim, by whom all victims will be compensated. "Hey, God give you strength, is that what you thought, that you're Jesus?" For a moment she heard his voice inside herself. Him laughing, and standing in the middle of the room, in the coat, with FK Željezničar on the lapel, mocking her new-found religiosity abruptly.

If she'd had a mind, she wouldn't have let such thoughts slip into it during the days of heavy shelling: instead, she'd have peacefully and collectedly rummaged through the

underwear drawer, found a decent pair of underwear and bra, a *négligée*. All clean and unpatched! But she's not like that now. What would people say?

And then, there was no longer either asphalt or cobblestone. There wasn't even a road. Only something muddy and stony. There were no more slippers, either. Only her bare feet, on which her socks were coming unstitched. Thick woollen ones, so that she wouldn't be cold. Old people socks. Although she didn't see herself as an old lady. But others saw her so. And this can be sometimes used to one's advantage. There wasn't even a whiff of breath. Instead, it's all some battle for air, some strange attempt to satisfy the lungs, which are already completely outside the self. And it was a slope. The steepest she knows of. It's only now she knows. Though she lived her whole life in Sarajevo, still she hadn't known, though she'd had to look towards this place here whenever she'd find herself on the other side of the Miljacka. From the sunny side, that is, and not from her own side on which she lived, the dank side, as they say. How had she been able to look up, yet not see that this slope is so steep?

She was no longer able to say or ask anything, because her lungs didn't let her. But if she were able to, she would've asked what this place is called. It's important to discover new knowledge. For the whole of life. That's what she taught them. And she wouldn't teach them anything which she didn't also believe herself. For the whole of life, right up to the last breath. Only, she doesn't need to breathe any more.

"Go on!" – said the black guy, to the boy who was still at her back.

It's good that he'll do it, she thought, happy. He was able to do it too, this unamiable one. A feeling of happiness completely flooded her thoughts, so that there were no more of her disintegrated underpants, which someone might now see on her, dead. On her, who suddenly can no longer lower her upcast skirt with her hand.

This one was after another far-off shot, heard already on that peaceful summer's day.

## A JOINT

I remember that moment well, because there's something to remember in it. Like how it used to be on Republic Day, at six in the evening; when it's already dark in Sarajevo, and fog's falling in on the hill-ringed valley, at that same instant, as if on the order of a duty officer, around noon, on the second serene and sunny day of May – by tradition a non-working day – five or six explosions went off. They struck very close, probably in the vicinity of the Central Post Office. Then, the falling and smashing of glass was heard somewhere, and loud manly swearing from the street, bursts from a Kalashnikov, and then explosions around the city.

We were sitting in the café of Hotel Belgrade, Little Belgrade, Zemun. In front of me was an unfinished double espresso and a Coca Cola. I still hadn't started to smoke, though I had smoked marijuana mixed with tobacco almost daily over the previous year. This too would pull me back. Or that first heavy shelling would pull me back. It's impossible to determine. Some psychoanalyst could carry out an investigation.

I remember everything: the sounds, swearing, the schedule and rhythm of explosions, the melody and syncopations of those thirty seconds – maybe even a full minute – which flow from a moment of cannon fire. But I forgot who I was sitting there with, at the second table by the window, the one I always haunted in Little Belgrade, and it's impossible for me to remember. I can no longer ask anybody.

I know that it's a man, and that he's sitting opposite me, with his back turned towards the bar.

We're standing there briefly. Then I grab my denim jacket, and we head somewhere inside, where it is, apparently, sheltered. Though actually, nowhere is sheltered, because the Hotel Belgrade, with those big windows, is one big spacious, glassy dome. There is the maître d'hôtel. A rather short and broad man, in black trousers and a red waistcoat. The waitress is Gina. Beautiful and black-haired, a Gina Lollobrigida of the last Sarajevo summers. Afterwards, I'd never see her again.

There already, I have lost my companion from the table. Did he go inside with me, to the indoor restaurant in which I would spend the afternoon, evening and night, or did he disappear somewhere? I hallucinate that he flew out, into the rain of bullets and shells, saying that somebody's waiting for him at home. I don't know where this came to me from. Probably an imaginary, invented story was already being assembled in my thoughts. Today, I don't want such a story. It's important to me to know what really happened. In order to preserve, in the face of dreams and oblivion, what I do remember thirty years later.

The Beetle was the first thing I took account of. I would already write a report about it then, either a few days or a week later, but certainly during May 1992. This would become the third story in the *Reconstruction of Events in Sarajevo Marlboro*. All this childlike amiability in the story about the car amazes me today. As if I'd been attempting to justify something I felt.

And probably I was.

The first thing I thought about during that first artillery salvo which the war began with – and which would, in one day and in that one moment, flood my life and all my identities – was that car. What had I needed to go down town by car for? Some reason did exist, maybe I needed to go to some store, had had some plan, needed to go somewhere for something after I drank that midday espresso and cola, but I'd forgotten all that in the meantime. And nothing about it was important any longer when the shelling began, and when all that was on my mind was that I'd parked the Beetle those few hundred steps from the café, at the parking lot under the children's playground at the bottom of Dalmatinska Street.

I thought that had I left it at the house, nothing would have happened to it. Before we'd left for town, it had been parked at the top of Abdićeva. As if shells couldn't fall there.

I didn't fear for my mother, who was in her house on Sepetarevac. Probably in the basement. I wouldn't see her until the following day, in the morning. But during that afternoon, before all the phones in the city centre died, I would call her, number 510-343, but she wouldn't answer me. I left a message on the answering machine, which I would listen to for the first time ten years after the end of the war. By which time, my intonation and accent were beginning to change, because I speak now as if I'm from nowhere, so it's strange to me that I spoke Sarajeivan at all that 2 May. My mother never heard this message.

But she didn't fear for me either. Just as I didn't fear for her, but thought only about my Beetle. In the time of that first report, the one from May 1992, I couldn't deal with this. Either I was afraid, or, it wasn't possible to live and to think about oneself and one's dear ones in such a way. I had exactly twenty years of life left with my mother, and there was no time for thinking about why we didn't fear for one another.

Or perhaps we did, but today I can't think about it?

Flames completely engrossed my Beetle over the following hours. We sat down there, in the glassy restaurant, at the table nearest to the wall. I can already tell apart who's there at the table. I remember the names. I remember the anecdotes, which would then be retold during the war and post-war years. Through these little stories, we would be certain that we'd experienced something. We would go on to wear them like decorations on the blouse, right above the heart, tiny emblems of greater medals, until the war grew old for us.

And although it all happened almost like in those anecdotes, what's in them can't also be memory any longer. That which isn't in memory can't also be in a story.

And so, I can't narrate anything about sitting at that table. Only that at some point during the evening, they all dispersed. They stepped out into the shooting, which did thin out a little, but didn't cease, while every ten or so seconds somewhere nearby the odd shell would smash down. They exited like people who, after becoming bored with waiting for the deluge to stop, go out into the rain without an umbrella. And they disappeared from the story. Some of them, I've never seen again in my life. After the war their graves, which I haven't visited, have sprouted at different ends of the world. But they all got home that night.

I didn't pluck up the courage to head out, though I was in dread over the Beetle. I wanted to see what the deal was with it.

Around midnight the maître d'hôtel led all of us still remaining up to the rooms. There, we were able to lie down a bit, speak, drink whiskey on the house. The war was just beginning, there was everything there, and in this general downfall nobody was worried about settling up.

In the room, there were six or seven of us. Mainly journalists. Two foreign, it seems to me that they're French, but from different news outlets, and are well known war reporters. Both are in bulletproof vests. These are the first civilians in bullet proofs who I've seen. Afterwards, there will be many. They're chatting loudly and clearly, as if there are no explosions and bursts of gunfire to be heard outside. What's happening outside concerns them in a different way than us. This is the first time I am experiencing this. And I feel something like the pain of separation, somewhere in my chest. As if I'm a lap dog they've taken out of a litter, to find a home for. For me, this is no longer pleasant.

I'm thinking about the Beetle. Then I'm no longer thinking, because the journalist next to me quietly says to another journalist that battles are happening around the Central Post Office. "Our guys held their ground", he says to him. The other answers him that their guys may already have penetrated the city. "Niš Specials", he says. At that moment I'm not thinking about this – but later, not until years after the war did it occur to me, the first has a Muslim and the second a Serb name and surname. What kind of name and surname did I have at that moment? And what would have happened if the Niš specials had burst into our room? For a

short time only, this pulls me away from thoughts of the Beetle. Ice pierces me, but then I slowly get used to the thought. If they come here, I will say for myself ... What will I say for myself?

I can clearly imagine, at such a moment, the peace of the two young French in their bulletproof vests, as they hold out their press cards in front of themselves, their passports and those round and slippery names – so difficult for us to pronounce. They leave; we stay. Yet to be apportioned by our names, which we carry around only for them to serve us – on such a night as this – by deputizing for fate. There, where names were the fates, there exists no ancient tragedy. Only mass graves, from which food for the next war is gathered. But while imagining those two leaving freely, I don't think about this.

The Niš Specials have still not come.

Around two, she takes a small bag out of her pocket, with tobacco, skins and largish lumps of hashish.

I smile, and say something to the pair of journalists next to myself. They shrink away. They are from some earlier generation. As students from up in the hills, they grew up in student dorms where there was a lot of drink, but no drugs. I feel superior and secure. (As if I will, by the grace of the hashish, leave freely along with the two of them, after the Niš Specials show up ...)

The girl is expertly filling and sealing three skins, and with one hand she then twists them into one big joint. I've still never seen anyone so skilful and secure. Not one grain of her tobacco crumbles off. The hashish smells of Dalmatian summer pine, as it melts in the flame of the lighter. I'm eroticised to the verge of tears. I'd melt into sobs in her breasts.

But, probably, she didn't even see me. I'm a shadow in a dark room.

She holds out this big cigarette, which she'd so carefully constructed, to the young guy, who takes a Zippo out of his pocket, and taking it carefully from her hand, torches the paper tip. Then he brings it up to his lips and scowls while he lights it. He inhales two or three drags, then returns her the cigarette. They talk and smoke in turns. So a smell spreads with the smoke, which probably not everybody in this room recognises, though everybody knows what it is.

That's how the war began in Sarajevo, the siege which would last the following three and a half years. The Niš Specials would not enter the hotel, or our room, that night, but they would kill one of us in this war. This we still didn't know, just as I still didn't know that in spite of the explosions and shooting – which would intensify throughout the night, and throughout their joint – my Beetle was alive and well in the parking lot. And would stay that way till tomorrow.

The two of them will – probably already by Monday or Tuesday – travel out of the city. Before that, they'll send reports to their newsrooms, containing words about what happened that day, but there'll be no hotel, no room in the hotel; and none of the seven local journalists and people who found themselves there by chance, and who would amiably offer them whiskey – to the last drop in the bottle – and, in that devout native silence, see them through the combustion process of that thick mix of hashish and tobacco, which would pass through both of their lungs alone.

Around six the maître d'hôtel came along. "It looks like it's calmed down a little", he said. Our room was without windows. Somebody went into the room opposite it, and opened the window. Through the open door, then, fresh air pushed in for a few moments. It smelled strange: of arson, of dusty lofts, of petrol. Our city will smell like that from now on. So I thought. Or, so today I think, that I thought just that.

But I went out not looking at those two French. For some time I still attempted to take consolation that, in their world, perhaps, a joint is not for sharing, like it is in ours, not even with those whom you find yourself with in the same hotel room, at the beginning of one war –



only over time to grasp that no such world exists. And that we didn't exist for them either, in that room in which we all found ourselves by chance.

## A HOUSE

People here, as soon as they hear how you speak, ask you where you're from. The first time I was in America, they didn't ask. Or, I didn't notice that they were asking. But now I shudder, as if an icy drop is dripping down my neck. I say – "From Europe!" And I flee, before some smart aleck asks "where in Europe, brother?" "What do I know where from, fuck off, man, I'm not here to tell you these stories." All our people are like that: as soon as they're asked where they're from, it's like they've been hit with something. "Listen to where I'm from. I'm from here, as soon as you see me here. So, how about that?"

I returned to Sarajevo before the war. In one month my mother and father died, one after the other. She was sickly. In her youth, she'd recovered from a rheumatic fever, but was left with a weak heart. The doctors said to her that she's not allowed to give birth. The child would die. But she gave birth to me all the same. And by God, she lived almost to seventy-five. Almost as old as I am now. Longer than any of them had given her. And she died on me while she spun pita. It's not good for the heart to spin pita, but my old man loved potato pita. She fell, and while she was falling, she was already no more. A beautiful death. My phone rang, my father announced himself, saying, "son, do you know why I'm calling?" "I know", I said. "When", I said. "Right now, a minute ago." "Call an ambulance, maybe she's alive." "She's not, I know." "Call an ambulance anyway." "But what am I going to do with all this dough, she's just stretched it?"

Imagine him asking me this. He's lost himself, poor thing.

He was healthy as a healthy winter's day. He never saw a doctor in his life. But just as the mother departs, so the old man is put to death. As if in one month, his whole life had leaked out through some invisible hole. We would speak every other day. I spent a lot of money on the phone that month. I would say to him to snap out of it, muster himself, and he would say "I want to, son, I want to". But he still stayed silent. So, such were our conversations. One day he says to me: "what a shame, son, that dough"! "What dough, dad?" "What a waste of those pitas", he says, "your mum gave her life for them, and I nothing." He says this, and weeps. Now I know that it's the end. When, the following day, a neighbour called me, Savo the baker, a good guy, a friend of mine from before that war, I knew what it was.

Then I knew I needed to get to Sarajevo. A house was left to me after them, a big single storey in Kovači, dad's granddad erected it during Austria-Hungary, from adobe and oakwood. There were no houses like that in Sarajevo. I knew that I had to look after it, but I didn't feel up to it at all. I'd made do over here, and wouldn't have ever moved from California again had they not died off like that, and had the house not been left alone. What was on my mind? Sell it, rent it out, let someone move in, only so that my house wouldn't get lonely? I've no idea. I went for the house, and believe me, I didn't even know what was happening in Yugoslavia, nor even that communism had fallen in Europe. I flew in in November 1990. The first elections were just ending. Believers came to power. It's fine, I said. I too believe a little, and so I think that it will be easier for me with them than with the communists, who made believe that there is no God. But if there isn't, how can you pretend, pal, that he's not there? And what sort of life is yours if he doesn't exist for you?

My '91 was spent getting acquainted with the situation and cleansing the house. Amassing all manner of things from a person's life. And the two of them were shy people. So I know, had they known that someone found their things, their graves on Bare would fall from the black to the even blacker earth, from the shame. So I said, I'm putting all that away, so that those poor parents of mine wouldn't be shamed.

And then, after some time, it was necessary to do some kind of work. I didn't need dough, I had dollars enough for a decent life, I could have lasted three or four years, but a

person can't not work. It's like it is with the house. A house in which no one lives falls in from its own weight. That's how it goes with people too. Your pension, my dear fellow, is like a death sentence. They send you into retirement, like an elephant into loneliness. So that you perish and are no more. And so I set myself up here, from where no one will send me into retirement. Not until I'm stretched out myself next to those dead parents of mine.

Bakije was near me, a Muslim burial society. I go there, I greet them according to custom, I ask is there any kind of work for me there. One of them looks at me – he's in a greasy grey suit, light green glossy tie, exactly as according to custom – and I can see that he sees, in me, a final chagrin. But it didn't worry me. After you have lived a little on the West Coast, and seen the ocean from the end of the world, how they see you at Bakije is no longer any worry. "Can you dig?" he asks me. "I can", I said. And so it fell to me to dig graves, first of all at Bare and Vlakovo, and afterwards also at Alifakovac, where not one of them would dig any longer except me, since this graveyard was in the snipers' palm. But I dug, calculating that it's not worth it for anyone to kill a gravedigger. I entered into the head of that sniper, saw myself through his eyepiece and sights, and pondered whether I wanted to execute this pathetic creature. It would be interesting to watch his head burst like a watermelon, and him falling into the grave he has just dug out, but wouldn't it be boring by tomorrow already without him? And he digs at least one grave for you every day. Besides this, to kill a gravedigger is, so I calculate, a bad omen. Unlucky and bad luck. Like a black cat and the number thirteen. Better to kill a woman, child, pensioner, a father shaking out a crumby table cloth after lunch, than a gravedigger. So you see, that's how I thought, and dug. They said – "look at him, he's crazy!" The one who'd accepted my request for work – now in a new suit and with a new green tie – sent an American journalist to me, to speak with me. There was a documentary about me on CNN. It was handy for them that I knew English.

Meanwhile, '95 came. With the war nearing an end, people were trickling out of the city, and so there was less work. One Monday, they order a little grave. It's really more a half-grave, so the price is half-off. "Don't worry, just dig a little", they say, "even half a grave will be too much!" But digging real, big graves is dear to me. Not because of money, as I already said, my cash wasn't running short. But I dig a big grave for somebody who's lived long, and when I dig a small one, it seems to me like I'm committing some sin, like I'm driving into the earth a life which didn't even get to live. When, suddenly, a man appears there. Tall, big, with that blue worker's cap on his head. He stands and looks at me from above. "Get down from there", I said, "the sniper will kill you". "Let him kill me", he says. "Don't do this, man", I say to him. He falls silent. "He will kill you", I repeat. "Let him kill me" ... And so the two of us conversed like that. "But why are you watching me while I work?" "Because", he says, "you're digging the grave of my child." He said this like he'd said nothing, and in one instant that pick, that hoe, became heavier for me, like it weighed a hundred kilos. "Do you want me to help you?" "Go on", I said, "I don't know what's suddenly gotten into me". And so I'm sitting on the grass, while he digs below my feet. Maybe that sniper will kill me now, I think. Now that I'm a gravedigger no more.

But as you see, he doesn't kill me.

I was at the funeral. The only one there, besides the father and one young hodja, who was numb with fear. It's hard when people who are so afraid are conducting your connection with God. The father's name is Ragib. A mason from Goražde, a refugee. Amna was his only daughter. She was killed in front of the house. He still has three sons. She was his youngest. He also has a wife, and his wife's parents. They live in some sort of cellar near Slatko čoše.

So I said, "come and live with me, the house is big". "I can't, it's inconvenient!" "How can you not, you poor thing, it's a war? Come", I say to him, "you'll be doing me a big favour". And now I'm already thinking of how I'll leave the house to Ragib, and escape back to

America. Sarajevo is beautiful, like every true sorrow is beautiful. And I would still live there, if it were at all possible. But I don't care for beauty and sorrow.

"I'll send you a picture once a week!" "What kind of picture, pal?" "A picture of the house, so that you know that everything's ok." "You don't need to" ... "I want to!" "Ok, if you want to."

And from that time on, my dear fellow, Ragib has sent me pictures of the house at Kovači. I have three shoeboxes full of these pictures. Those which he sent me by post. But on the computer, there are my photos from the digital era. He asked me: "Mate" – that's what he's always called me, mate, and I love that he calls me that – so, he asked me: "Mate, will it be inconvenient for you if I send the photos by e-mail from now on? You know in Sarajevo it's getting harder to develop photos, everyone's getting these new cameras, nobody takes photos with film any more, and so there's no longer any photo developer" ... He explains this to me, and apologises for everything. As if he's personally to blame that technology has modernised.

So, take a look at my house. Ragib whitewashed it this summer, he does that every other year, and next summer, he says, he'll change the woodwork on the outside. He says that some people came from the Bureau for the Protection of Monuments, and marvelled at the house and photographed it. "I said to them: I don't know, my God, anything, look, the owner's in California, so ask him." "And what did they ask?" I ask Ragib. "Really, nothing. They marvelled at the house. And I love that," says Ragib. "By Allah, I love that too", I say to Ragib. "My late father and mother would have loved that too." "This is important", says Ragib. "It is", I say. "And so it'd be good then for you to return to Sarajevo." "Yes, very good", I answer. "Because if it weren't for you, who knows where we'd be now." "Ah you'd make do somehow", I say to him ... "The only thing is, they killed my little girl. Now she'd be at university. Architecture," says Ragib. "Why architecture?" I ask him. "I reckon she'd have studied architecture," he says. "If she got any traits from me. And also, her mother draws beautifully. Surely she'd have been one for architecture." "I think she would've been too", I answer him. This is how my Ragib and I converse.

I arrived in Los Angeles on 1 November 1995. I'd spent exactly five years in Sarajevo. But in those five years, it was like everything had changed. Nowhere were there these people of mine, my Yugoslavs. It was like, in the meantime, they too had become Americans. Except that they didn't also ask me, "and where are you from, sir?" I've no idea where I've come from. I went to find a home for a house, and so I luckily found it a home. I couldn't have found anyone better than Ragib for my house, not even if I searched the whole world for one. The only sad thing for me is how we got to know one another. So it's as if the life of that child's in the foundations of the house in Kovači. Or, as if my house has continued to live Amna's life. Who will ever know it! I don't know it, and more and more it seems to me that even dear God doesn't know it. As far as I'm concerned, God is perplexed.

As soon as I returned, I got a job here, in this old peoples' home. I've no friends, I've no other work, I don't get on well with my countrymen, instead I come here hours before work, and sit, thumb through the papers, or take along some book from the house, Andrić, Ćopić or Selimović, and read. And I watch the people around myself. They think that I'm working as a gardener. Or that I'm a resident myself, or that I'm the *hausmeister*, as a Super's called in Sarajevo. But I'm not allowed to tell them what I'm really doing there. It would be inconvenient; it would unsettle them. And an elementary thing is not to unsettle old people. Such is the rule of service.

On average, two of them die per week. Sometimes there's three of them, once there was even a fifth one, and there are also weeks when none die. A male and a female care worker, always in such a pair, take the dead down into the basement. Here, there are rooms which the residents are not allowed to know about. If a death has occurred outside my working hours, the body is placed in a fridge. If death occurs over the weekend, they call me in for overtime, which

I'm paid specially for. During the time when I'm on leave, a colleague steps in for me, an Armenian by birth, from another home. There are hundreds of homes for old people here, and round Los Angeles there's more old and dying people than children and young. This is the end of the world, here where it's slowly dying.

After the male and female care assistants bring down the cart with the body, and return back up, I come out of my office, in which there's only a table, a chair and an upholstered cabinet, and without any big hurry, I head down. It's important that nobody links my descent with their return. I enter into a room lined with colourful ceramic tiles – you've never seen anything so colourful; it's for death to not be depressing, so that death doesn't kill through depression – in the centre's the cart with the covered-over body. I uncover it, look closely at what state it's in and how much work is needed on it. I don't look too much at the face. Sometimes I recognise what I'm dealing with, but this isn't important to me. There, I'm amongst people at the point of departure, in a world which is at the point of departure. Their death somehow doesn't concern me, because I don't know anything about their lives. It's not that I don't like them. God forbid, these old people are dear to me. Dearer than they'd have been to me in Sarajevo. America teaches you to love and honour unknown people. In the final instance, it teaches you too to freely question where they're from. And, afterwards, to also ask them everything else, which to me is like plucking my nails out, one by one. But their deaths don't concern me, although I love them. Just as their lives, about which I know nothing, don't concern me either. I love them in the way you can grow fond of people who you'll only see once. And of people you share neither life nor death with, but only that terrible moment in which one of them approaches you, and asks you where you're from. And you then keep cursing yourself because a foreign accent can be heard in your speech, and you keep cursing the English language for not being Bosnian. People speak in a different language, only to be liable to fall prey to the torturous question: "where are you from?" "Listen to where I'm from! I'm from somewhere you've never been. And God forbid you ever come. So, that's where I'm from!"

I wash the dead, and cover them with dead-person's underwear. This is my work, ever since I returned to America. It could be said that I took a step backwards in my career. In Sarajevo, I buried them. I dug out the graves. This work is harder. It often lasts longer. It's not easy to cleanse a human body. Only when you have a dead person in front of you, do you see what an infinite geography this is. People should associate more with the dead, so that they'd then have a greater respect towards living bodies. And would have a greater respect towards their own body. Sometimes, after showering, while I'm sitting naked on the armchair in front of the turned-on television, I look closely at my own body; and I imagine, who will, by God, cleanse and wash all this? And for whom, given I have no one of my own here? Nobody who would complain that I'm dirty, that I smell and that it's not possible to bury me like that. The only ones I have are Ragib, his wife Mirsada, and their sons. The youngest one would like to study film in America. I said, "send him, Ragib, I'll show him everything, he can live here at my place too, even bring girls over, the house is big." And Ragib says, "I can't, it's inconvenient"! "But, how is it inconvenient again, man?" I ask him. And Ragib laughs. I said, "it's all your doing, my dear fellow, from you photographing the house once a week, and sending it to me. That's how the little guy fell in love with film." "It is", says Ragib, "and it will be so."

I was never in Sarajevo again. Why would I go, with Ragib looking after my house like that. It would be like I suspected something in him. But I believe in him more than in myself.

## THE DRAGOMAN DOSSIER

“My goose, my goat, my little turkey” – he caressed her like this at night, covering her, should she reveal herself in sleep. She’d hear him, and smile every time, even though he entered into her sleep with his words, running through it as a sudden wind over a valley routs the fog. Her sleep was like this for nearly forty years, half-interrupted, unfinished and without any point, because whenever he would wake up during the night he would look for her in the bed, and say, “my goose, my goat, my little turkey”. And he would wake up, just like every neurotic, at least ten times, and often much more often.

In the morning, she didn’t remember what he’d said to her. Perhaps he didn’t remember either. But they lived like that, and this is how their marriage was. Night conversations primarily constituted their love, and then life-routine. In these conversations, she would retort with one or two words – “be quiet”, “I’m sleeping”, “I’m not a turkey” – but, she lived from this, these affections of his. Actually, no, she lived, like all people, from food, water and air, but these words of his were like Vitamin D to her. They were her night-time sun. Though this shouldn’t be experienced as a sentimental account, which would turn this into a love story about two old people, on the basis of which a film could then be made. Because there are no films here, nobody would want to watch this in a cinema or on television. The thing is, simply, that for almost forty years, she would hear every night, a few times through her sleep, his light awakened voice, “my goose, my goat, my little turkey”, and that it would be a terrible night on which he would say something else.

They slipped into the war imperceptibly, as if into an illness that first of all doesn’t hurt at all, but then, day by day, takes elements of soul and body away from a person, dismantles them like a child’s train set, and in the end reduces them to just one fragment of rail, on which locomotives can no longer pass, and on which nothing goes on any longer. Him, they immediately took to the headquarters of UNPROFOR, where the Indian general Satish Nambiar was holding court. He came in handy for them, because of all those languages of his. “My god, this translation is like a holiday on the Balearics to me”, he said, “I let my mind go to pasture, and the language translates itself, from Russian to French, and from French to Russian. And don’t, I beseech you, woman, ask me anymore, ‘what are they saying, what did you translate between the French general and Nambiar’, because that stuff I don’t know. I’m telling you”, he said to her, “I was thinking about the beach, the sea and sunbathing, and you either believe me or don’t believe me.” She, naturally, didn’t believe him. She knew what he’s like. Trustworthy with every job, upright in every way. He takes care of an official secret. But all the same, he could tell her what the two of them had been saying, is this going to stop soon? “I have no idea”, he says. And he shrugs his shoulders. She thinks that he’s teasing her, like he teases her at night, calling her every kind of name, but he’ll say that he’s serious, and that he was never more serious. And he’ll say that he’s never taken a break like this since he started working for the United Nations. “I was totally wrong about my profession, love. I studied to be an engineer, killed thirty-five years in civil engineering, built dams in Africa, redirected the River Nile, worried about whether the concrete would hold up, had three heart attacks on the way, and so I didn’t know that God created me as an interpreter. I had to go into retirement and watch a war break out to find this out.” “Don’t abandon me now for some female soldier”, she’ll say to him now, as if worried. He laughs, and is now twenty years younger than what he was last year, when the third heart attack hit him, and when the commission sent him into retirement.

They come for him every morning. A white UNPROFOR personnel carrier squeezes its way up through the lane, there where not even any city garbage truck has ever frequented – since the driver wouldn’t be sure he’d know how to return in reverse – and it comes, so bulky

and wide, right up to in front of their house and blows its trumpet, and so every time it scares off and scatters the thin cats of the cellars and those two or three leftover pigeons. At this point, he exits the yard. He has a flak jacket on – they said to him that as an employee of an international organisation, he's not allowed outside without it, though he doesn't hate wearing it either, hard as it is, because with a flak jacket he feels somehow important – and he barely slips into the personnel carrier, because it's so tight there that the hatch can't even be fully opened.

While they are driving in reverse, a couple of times they will, perhaps, scrape against houses on both sides of the lane, iron posts and traffic signs, which they've already completely warped. But the neighbours will not rebel. Who would do so in these calamitous end-times, when a person can no longer manage to get from A and B without a bullet hitting them in the forehead; and anyway, they're impressed that their neighbour has so climbed up in the hierarchy. He's not just a translator. He's much more than that. He likes the purpose of all of this, establishing contact between those who – but for him – would no longer understand each other in any way, not even a little. “Do, something, man”, Sifet says to him, an old and greying kebab man, they knew each other while they were children ... once he, when they were eight years old, smashed his head with a stone, and so Sifet's dad came to his mother to complain, and she said to him “I'll give him a good smack, neighbour, but I'll say nothing to his father, because his father will kill him if he hears what he's done”, so that Sifet's dad became worried about this and promised that he'd say nothing to him till death, by God ... “What can I do, don't be sad, Sifet, I'm not the authority there!” he answers Sifet. And he hugs him, just as old people in Sarajevo, who've banged heads together since an early age, always hug.

“Men of God”, he said to them, “you don't need to come to right in front of my house, it's narrow in our lane, a baby Fiat can't pass through here. I can handle the fifty steps down to the street.” They dismissed this with their heads. “It's the rules,” they said. Just as the rule is that he cannot stick his nose outside the house without a flak jacket, it's also the rule that the personnel carrier must meet him before work at the closest possible point, and that it must return to the very same spot after work.

While driving across Marijin Dvor, and then down Vojvoda Putnika Street, past the Marshal Tito Barracks, and then down the wide avenue by which you approach town, a peaceful day would differ from a thunderous one in that, on a peaceful day – of which they were fewer and fewer – the personnel carrier would cross the city at some normal speed; while, if shells were pouring down and snipers taking aim, it would rumble through at lightning speed down the avenue, moving as if on the edge of a flashing sabre, which curved just a bit at Čengić Vila and by Otoka, and whose tip pointed somewhere faraway, towards the south, the sea and the way-out of every trouble. Ok, maybe not towards the south, but for him it was there, behind Ilidža and over Igman – that envisioned south. And youth.

In his youth he would drive by this route to the sea, in twelve hours. His father, mother, sister and he would arrive in Ploče dirty, as if they had been rolling in charcoal all night and day. On the first day in Zaoštrog, his mother would stay in the house – their holiday home was the first in the place, everyone else was still local – and would wash by hand everything they'd had on on the road. This was the time before washing machines. And then, in the courtyard in front of the house, from where the whole place could be seen, as well as the sea enclosing the Pelješac on one side, and on the other Hvar, Sućuraj and the lighthouse on the point of Hvar, she would hang out their trousers, singlets and shirts, her own colourful summer dress, and the father's broad white shirt. From below, neighbours and acquaintances would come up to greet her. “You've arrived, madam!” they would say to her, smiling amiably, and she'd answer them with a voice that was as if out of a deep winter fog, but which would warm up over the following days, cleansed by the July sun. By this point, the three of them would already be in the sea. Only the sister would get irritated: “Why does everything have to be washed right away!” For

the two of them, this was no bother. They didn't think about it. Although over the years, after these vacations of theirs were over, and after 1966, when they opened the new railway with standard gauge, electrical locomotives and wagons – by which you arrive in Ploče in three and a half hours, and from which you step off clean, just as you'd entered – this smell of laundry drying in the courtyard, and already dried-off in minutes as they returned that first day from the beach, often came to his mind. He pushes his nose into a moist fold of his father's white shirt, breathes in the smell of old-fashioned detergent, and loses himself in the view towards Hvar, and further, and further, towards the islands, the seas and the mainland that cannot be seen with the eye.

This is what he thinks about on the mornings and afternoons of heavy shelling, while travelling to and from work, protected by the armour of the combat personnel carrier and by the untouchable integrity of the United Nations and the entire international community. The deafening motor rumbles, so that he hears only those explosions which are very close, mortars and shells which would, he thinks, kill him were he outside now. And then he feels protected, as if he had covered his head over with one of those very thick quilts. Nothing can touch him. The quilt's between him and everything happening around. Impenetrable as the dreams of a dying man. This journey, which unsettles her so much – because she's never sure whether he made it to work alive, and will return from there alive – relaxes him, silencing all nervousness, calming him and leaving him feeling like a believer – so he believes – is left feeling by his own prayer. And while he's being driven like that to work, from the hilt of the sabre towards its point, pinned in somewhere faraway in Ploče, these same departures for the sea are always on his mind. On returning from work, his thoughts are mostly scattered around, the morning's magic lost, and so while he's shuffled along towards the golden encrusted pommel of the sabre, and the sunsets atop the hills, thundering up the narrower and narrower streets, and finally crawling in to the narrowest little lane in which they live, and grating against the facades, fragments of unfired clay falling from them, much darker episodes of return from summer vacations come to his mind.

He thinks about how he buried his parents. First of all his mother. She died in mid-May. And how then his sister and he, in his sister's car, drove the old man to Zaoštrog. She left her children and husband in Sarajevo. He sent his wife and children on to Bistričak. They cleared out their calendars, cancelled all commitments, and he postponed his trip to Aswan until August, all simply in order to take their father to Zaoštrog. They thought that in this way, they'd rout the sorrow which had spent and ravished him faster than any known illness. They stopped at Restaurant Kod Gojka, in Jablanica, for lamb, their father once loved lamb. His sister and he ate, chewed noisily under their teeth, the spring onion was torn up and disappeared. Even now he could clearly taste this under his tongue. Though he didn't remember the lamb. Their father wasn't able to eat. He ordered blueberry juice, the Bosanka Doboje one, in a little transparent bottle. The glass was a little potbellied, the catering kind, measurements near the top. Two decilitres. And while he drank, two or three drops sprinkled from his moustache onto his shirt. Both of them saw this at the same time. They exchanged a glance. He was no longer hungry. He ate more by force. Who knows what he was thinking then. Perhaps he thought of how one day, not far away, as it then became clear to him, he would bury his father on Bare too. His sister, probably, already was thinking then of how, when they arrived, she would wash her father's shirt. A race between woman and stain. If she washes it fast enough, nothing will remain of the stain. When they arrived, father unwillingly agreed that the two of them would immediately head out for the beach. The sister washed the shirt. The stains disappeared as if the blueberry were not real. And perhaps it wasn't. He tried to make a joke, but his father didn't laugh. When they returned from the beach, the shirt was already completely dry. He plunged his nose into it, but he didn't smell the detergent. "The foreign-made detergent smells of nothing", said the sister, "and there's no more local ones." His father died on the final day of



his stay in Aswan. It was at the end of August, they called him from the hotel reception. The receptionist, an elegant older Arab, came out from behind his counter, told him, and embraced him. He whispered to him two or three English words. He could have said this to him in Arabic. They always spoke in Arabic. But then this is, perhaps, more formal. The day after the following day, in early dawn, he was travelling by taxi from the airport towards the city. Down Vojvoda Putnika Street, deserted just as it's deserted now too. The end of August was approaching, the morning returning the colour to Sarajevo. God is a tidy child, who colours the city in his colouring book with the wooded colouring pencils of the rounded peaks.

"I don't like this", she said to him as he returned from work. "What don't you like, love?" He got roiled up right away, thinking she was again going to try and dissuade him away from his work at UNPROFOR. What will this do for them? They have more than enough money. Why would he work if he's on a pension? Leave this war to the young. Does he really think that he's doing anyone any good by going around and translating, translating, translating? That he'd got to know Izetbegović, and Mladić, and Karadžić, and Mitterrand? And they're people? As if you didn't know this earlier? But no, this stuff was not on her mind. Since it wasn't, he was immediately more at ease. "I don't like this", she said to him, "up there, they can see how an UNPROFOR personnel carrier passes through the neighbourhood twice daily, and then up our little streets, and straight to in front of the house. Huge troubles could come from this." "What troubles?" he asked, frightened. "I don't know", she answered him. The question is, however, whether she knew, and whether what was going to happen – and which, as it now seems, had to happen – had already unfolded in her imagination, or whether she actually didn't know. Women, he thought, always know that bad will happen, but they say that they don't know. Women are scared more by words than by pain. And men are scared more by pain than by words. Unless they don't understand them, and so are in need of a translator. Then, words are important to them – until they hear the translation.

Then seventeen days passed. Fifteen times, the personnel carrier came for him, and fifteen times it brought him back home. Two days, it did not come for him. These were the Sundays. On Sunday he sometimes worked, but also sometimes didn't work. "Sunday", said General Nambiar, "is neither God's day, nor a free day. In war, there are no free days and no holidays", he said. But, all the same, there were Sundays without any work.

On the eighteenth day, it was a Thursday. The personnel carrier, operated quite skilfully by now by Ziyad – a Pakistani soldier with whom he'd even become a little friendly, so that Ziyad taught him Urdu, and he taught Ziyad Serbo-Croatian, each giving the other, every time they met, three new words, and so they'd joke that Ziyad's service, like this war, would last long enough for the two of them to become poets in the languages they're just learning now – no longer even scratched against the façades in those tightest parts of the little lane, but passed through by the millimetre, exactly and precisely, and so it even seemed to him for one moment that this was the beginning of some happier time. It seemed to him that a time was beginning in which, by some miracle, and despite all the violated ceasefires, the shooting would stop.

And indeed, that morning was peaceful. Ziyad drove more slowly than ever along the sabre's edge, by way of Vojvoda Putnik Street, like a tourist guide on a tour of the city. And as the motor was working more quietly, it was no longer a wild rumble of a monster; instead, a beat was clearly discernible in its sound. And then, in this beat of the hard and powerful motor, of who knows how much force, produced in some military factory, he heard the beat of an old motor boat, the small wooden boat of the fisherman Mijo, from nearby Drvenik, which his father had borrowed just for that one day. Mijo asked him, "and is it for the engineer that you want my boat?"; but when his father said to him, "I need it to follow my son, he's got it into his head to swim all the way to Sućuraj", Mijo was horrified. "But how can you?" The father cut over him immediately, answering, "it's not that I can, it's that I must, because if I don't follow him, he'll swim out alone, and so he could, God forbid, drown. Parents have to

follow their crazy children, this is the only way they save them.” Mijo halted there, as if a heavy curtain of rain had descended on him over the horizon: “my pops followed me to the Partisans too. He was nearly fifty, he said that he had to, because I’d do shit in the Partisans without him. We all crossed over together. Only, I crossed the Sutjeska, and my pops didn’t, he stayed at the bottom of that stream deeper than the deepest waters. I’ll give you the boat”, he said to the father, “there’s nothing else for you but to follow your son.” And so, in the early morning, while the mother and sister were still sleeping, they headed for the sea. “We’ll go out by boat”, they said, “and we won’t be back till evening.” The sister was suspicious: “Where are you going?” “Guy stuff”, their father answered her. The sister rolled her eyes. She thought it’s nothing. And it was nothing, because he really did swim to Sućuraj. A number of times he almost gave up. Once, it seemed to him that he would drown, and that he wasn’t fit to even climb up into the boat. And the father, the father wasn’t strong enough to lift his ninety kilos up. Fear seized him, claustrophobia seized him in the salty water. But he continued to swim, simply because he didn’t have any other choice. His shoulders shook as he swam up to the rocky shore, right there, next to the lighthouse. As he was trying to get out, he stood on a sea urchin. He was properly stabbed. For a long time, maybe even an hour, he picked the sea urchin’s little needles out of his sole, with a needle. Heading back, he barely managed to board the boat. It was like all his muscles had broken down. He was a paralyzed old man. He would never again be so old and powerless. Night had already fallen. The father steered the boat back towards Mount Viter’s shadow, and towards the blinking light at the top of the Franciscan bell tower. Fra Aleksander had promised that he wouldn’t turn off the spotlight until the two of them arrived. He’d also promised that he would go to the mother and sister, and tell them that everything was all right with the two of them. He wouldn’t tell them where they were, but he’d say that everything’s all right. He kept his promises.

He thought about this while he was driven down the sabre. But a few hours later, going back along the sabre, anxiety seized him again. For a moment he reckoned it would pass this time too, as soon as they arrived. He reckoned this time, he should remember this feeling, get into his head the knowledge that nothing bad had happened upon returning, so that it could then have been recalled at every subsequent encounter with discomfort while driving along the sabre, and then past Mejtaš, past Bjelava, and then on to the little hillocks of Old Sarajevo.

Afterwards, he thought that he’d prompted evil through this thought.

The shelling, she told him, had began as soon as they rolled down through the neighbourhood. Around thirty mortars fell, those lighter ones, as she said – these are, probably, those 82-millimetre ones and those heavier ones, 120 millimetres. It was like they were taking measure, searching for something. And then the last one fell in Sifet’s yard, straight under the ground floor window.

“It killed his granddaughters”, she whispered.

“Suada or Minka?” – he asks. Suada is four, Minka two. Both restless as quicksilver.

“Both”, she said. “Nothing was left of the children.”

“What do you mean nothing” ... he uttered. Senselessly. Only for something to say. Only to step over time with words. And for the time to pass as fast as possible. For a thousand years to pass immediately, and for them to be no more, for everything to be forgotten, for no more buildings to be in this place, lucid mountain brooks instead, and archaeologists digging around with little hoes, and then, with brushes, taking the dust off this long-ago civilisation ...

Not even a few seconds, however, had passed.

“You need to go to Sifet’s, he asked for you” – she said.

And then he set off for Sifet’s. Suddenly, he was completely conscious of two things, which are not things, but rather are that which moves and shuffles destinies, having no names nor titles in human languages. The single motive of this shelling was, that those ones had watched from the hills, for days and months, how, twice daily, an UNPROFOR armoured

personnel carrier haunts this neighbourhood, and this little lane. The mortar which should have fallen into his yard – because that’s where the personnel carrier comes to – fell instead into Sifet’s yard. But that mortar would not have fallen, were he not working where he worked. And the second thing of which he was immediately conscious, was that only she and he knew this.

And nobody else.

Indeed, to this day it has not occurred to anybody in the neighbourhood why mortars spilled over the district, because of which those children perished. Even if somebody did reckon something, they would have understandably concluded that even if this had had some connection with him and with the personnel carrier that always came for him, the mortars would have been rained down that afternoon, when he returned from work, or the following morning when he set out for work.

What sense is there in firing into the yards when he’s not there?

Or perhaps they didn’t know that his grandchildren are in Germany, and only Sifet’s were here, next to the window? But they were here.

“Let’s not hug each other”, said Sifet. “Just be here.” He sat him down on the corner sofa. He poured him rakija, and then they fell silent. There was no one else. “Raza’s with our daughter-in-law in hospital. She’s not injured, but where can a mother, who’s just been left without both children, be other than hospital. Mirso’s at the front. We haven’t informed him. The commander knows, but he’s not allowed to tell him. So, that’s how it is,” said Sifet. And they said nothing more, just fell silent. And when Sifet would say something, this would again be within silence. Towards dawn, he let him go home.

The next night, she didn’t hear him say “my goose, my goat, my little turkey”. “I didn’t sleep”, he said to her. “So why didn’t you say to me that you can’t?” “Because then you wouldn’t sleep either.” The following night it seemed he fell asleep a little. She knew this by the fact that he spoke in his sleep. What did he say? She says to him that she doesn’t remember. She says that he said some absurdities. But this, obviously, isn’t the truth. He said something terrible, something which she’s not able to say to him now.

Never again, not one subsequent night, did he ever utter “my goose, my goat, my little turkey”.

And the following night was still only the eleventh.

On the twelfth day the personnel carrier, as usual, came for him, but it did not return him in the afternoon.

On the twelfth night toward evening, Goran came, Nambiar’s other translator, with a French officer. “Something happened”, said the Frenchman. “He disappeared.” “How did he disappear?” “He went outside, he said he was only going to have a cigarette.” “Nobody said: but you don’t smoke! Nobody said anything, they just let him out instead!” “But how could they not let him? Can they tie a guy with chains to his workplace? And why would they do this? People need air. And now we don’t know where he went to. Whether someone kidnapped him.”

For days they searched the city for him. The news reached New York and the Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali himself, about the disappearance of an official interpreter at Nambiar’s headquarters, a prominent retired Sarajevo engineer, the man who built the dam at Aswan ... A kidnapping was suspected, and the suspects were, actually, everyone. A group of officers responsible for internal security, together with French, Ukrainian and British intelligence officers, thought up and assembled theories about who might have an interest in the kidnapping of an official translator. There were, in the end, seventeen theories. All of these are part of an official classified document, of the highest level of secrecy, code name Dragoman, printed on seventy-eight pages of compact spacing, written in English and translated into the French and Russian languages. As far as is known, nobody in the Bosnian-

Hercegovinian or Serbian civilian or military structures is familiar with the contents of Dragoman. Probably not a single former Yugoslav – whatever they are today, and however they've treated their own forsaken identity – has read Dragoman, although everybody knows of its existence.

Probably they will not read it, either, considering that it all happened long ago.

A full four months after the disappearance of the official interpreter, and when she had already left Sarajevo, having crossed over through Pale by bus to Belgrade, since she had lost any hope that he could still be alive, with the agreement of the warring parties, at the demarcation line at Mojmiro, a sanitary team pulled seven dead bodies out from the line of fire, six male and one female, which had lain unburied for months and, obviously, had encumbered the spiritual imagination of a few Bosnian monotheistic religions. In the identification and reassigning of the decomposed and already totally macerated human carrion, whose last remains had just been gnawed through by some kind of fat white worm, the body of the disappeared interpreter was identified on the basis of his teeth.

A French intelligence officer swore he would finally uncover what had happened, and who had hidden the death of this exceptional man. He went to her place in Ljubljana, promised her that he wouldn't stop until the culprits were severely punished, whoever they were and however high a position they were in in the Bosnian or Serbian government. The only thing he asked her, was to try and explain to him and his people the contents and meaning of what was written on the piece of paper found in the pocket of his jacket.

"It's his handwriting", she said to him, "he always writes in Cyrillic when it matters to him that his handwriting looks good. You know, he imagines that he has ugly handwriting. That's what this man's like," she smiled. "That's why he wrote this in Cyrillic. You see how beautiful these letters are. But what this means, that I couldn't tell you. I don't know. Maybe it doesn't mean anything."

"Nothing at all?" he insisted. She shrugged her shoulders. She wanted to be polite and kind, she offered these people coffee and whiskey, it mattered to her that she leave a good impression – after all, he's doing this for him! – but really, she wanted them to go as soon as possible. She couldn't say this to them, but they were pursuing a vain endeavour. Attempting something which has no point. They don't understand what happened. And she wouldn't be able to explain this to them, not even if she wanted to. She wouldn't be able to explain it to them even if she wanted to betray her own man. Naturally, she wouldn't do this.

She really didn't know the meaning of what he wrote, with a green ballpoint pen, on that paper. But she had just tried to explain to them that, while writing this, how those letters would look was more important to him.

"Trojica za Kartal!", she says.

"Trojica za Kartal!" The Frenchman, who doesn't know our language, enunciates it after her, breaking down these compactly arranged, craggy consonants, which he would enunciate many more times in life, before giving up, grieved by everything.