

Renato Baretić



Renato Baretić (Zagreb, 1963) is a journalist and writer. He has an incomplete degree in Comparative Literature and Phonetics at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, having also briefly studied political sciences and journalism. Baretić used to work as a warehouse assistant, assistant repairman of household appliances, assistant tile-layer, sales agent, street stall seller and worker in a factory of textile machines. He periodically works as a film and TV scriptwriter, copywriter, journalist and author of questions for the most popular Croatian TV quiz shows. Co-founder and art director of the storytelling festival Pričigin in Split and former leader of the movement for cultural revival of Croatian islands. Since 2014, instructor of creative writing in the Split-based "House of Creative Writing" and also throughout Croatia, from high schools to prisons. Member of the Croatian Journalists Association, Croatian PEN Centre and Croatian Writers' Association, he attended literary residency programs in Belgium, Austria, Turkey, Germany, North Macedonia, and Slovenia. Baretić was a co-screenwriter of the successful Croatian TV series *Black & White World* and *The Diary of the Great Perica*. His illustrated children's fiction *Little Wolf's Trouble* has been adapted for theatre (2017, The Mala Scena Theatre, Zagreb, directed by Morana Dolenc) and won several awards, while his stage play *Rejected* performed 180 times in two years. Croatian Radiotelevision adapted two of his novels into radio-drama: *Tell Me About Her* (2019, directed by Petar Vujačić) and *The Final Draft* (2022, directed by Hana Veček). Baretić's novel *Eighth Commissioner* won five major national prizes for fiction: Kiklop, August Senoa, Ivan Goran Kovacic, Vladimir Nazor, Ksaver Sandor Gjalski. French translation, by Chloé Billon, was awarded INALCO Institute in Paris Readers' Prize 2017 and short-listed for the Féstival des Littératures Européennes Award in Cognac. *Eighth Commissioner* also received two theatrical adaptations: Croatian National Theatre Split in 2005 (directed by Ivica Kunčević), and Gavella Theatre Zagreb in 2013 (directed by Saša Anočić). A movie adaptation

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(2018, directed by Ivan Salaj) won several national and regional awards, including one for the best screenplay at FEST in Belgrade, and was a Croatian candidate for OSCAR in Best Foreign Language Category.

His works have been translated into Albanian, English, French, German, Macedonian, Russian, Slovenian, and Ukrainian.

Works:

Words from Pockets (Riječi iz džepova, Feral Tribune, 1998), poetry

Eighth Commissioner (Osmi povjerenik, AGM, 2003), novel

To Whom Shall We Send Our Postcards (Kome ćemo slati razglednice, AGM, 2005), poetry

Frames of a Frame (Kadrovi kadra, AGM, 2005), non-fiction

Tell Me about Her (Pričaj mi o njoj, AGM, 2006), novel

Hotel Grand (Hotel Grand, AGM, 2008), novel

Dawn (Praskozor, Naklada Jesenski i Turk : Hrvatska radiotelevizija, 2015), co-author, columns

A Beginner's Guide to Split (Split za početnike, Znanje, 2015), non-fiction

Little Wolf's Trouble (Muka malog vuka, Naklada Semafora, 2015), children's fiction

Rejected (Otpisane, 2017, Moruzgva Theatre, directed by Nikola Zavišić), stage play

Last Hand (Zadnja ruka, Hena.com, 2021), roman

THE FINAL DRAFT

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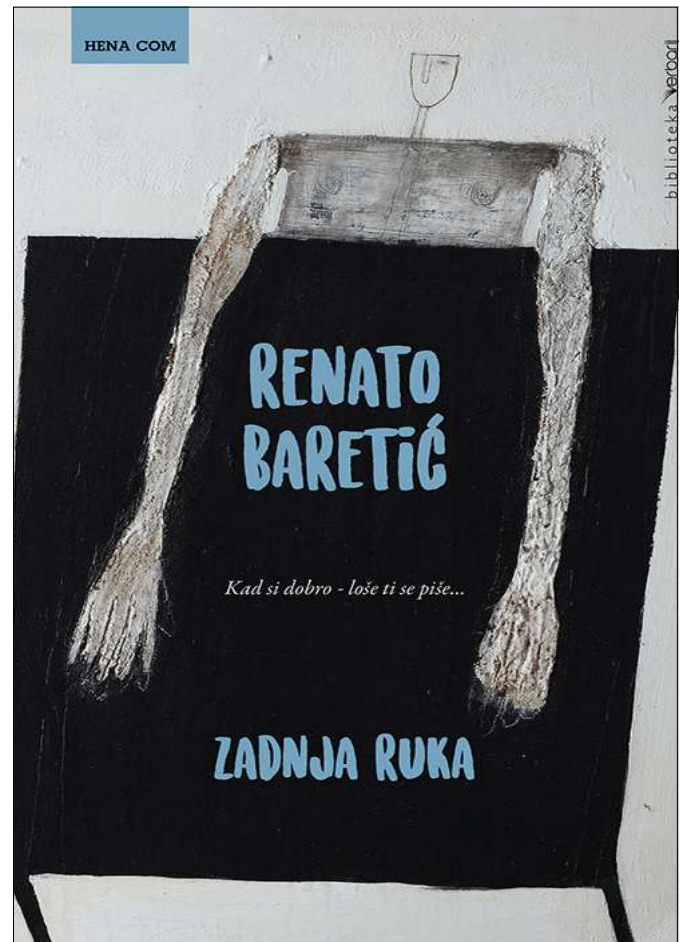
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About the novel:

Writer Zvonko Fild experiences a personal crisis caused by a divorce, moving to another apartment and losing his job, but he experiences a creative one as well – he just cannot write. Soon enough he starts receiving emails from the mysterious online character Mantovilka, and she constantly encourages him to start writing. He is very aware that his existence depends on writing, which only worsens the whole situation. The real plot begins unexpectedly: Zvonko begins to see the characters from his own stories in real, they persistently demand that he pulls them out of the status quo in which he left them in the works. Namely, they want to live on, and they can only do that if he starts writing about them again. There are a total of 237 of them, and the creative block just won't go away...

Zadnja ruka is as entertaining as it is witty, not only in level of the characters and events it talks about. The writing style is exceptional, and it inventively combines various Croatian dialects.



Renato Baretić
The Final Draft

Translated from the Croatian by Mirna Čubranić



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Zvonko sat down on the metal chair padded with stained sponge cushions. Not so long ago, he referred to *Demosthenes* as his office. Having a beer or two in that café used to be his daily ritual, a duty so to speak, and everyone knew they could find him here between noon and one. Then the waiter Matko quit, followed by his colleague Damir; then the beer offer completely changed, and Zvonko lost the taste for coming. It is tiring to accustom the make-do waiters to oneself and one's petty preferences. He had not been here for a long time. He moved to another part of the city, far from the centre, and looked for a neighbourhood café with which he could connect in a similar way, but none of the three he had tried worked out. He missed *Demosthenes*; he even missed its owner Pero and his stuttering jokes, even though they never lasted less than two minutes. Despite all the business changes he had been forced to adopt and implement, Pero managed to retain at least some of the old, regular customers, even if they were returnees, like Zvonko.

"Wh-wh-where have you be-be-been, for fu-fu-fuck's sake? Ha-ha-haven't seen you sin-sin-since the last snow!" Pero fired away as soon as he saw him, syncopating with his palm on Zvonko's shoulder blade. He was right; Zvonko had not dropped in since the last winter's two-day snow spell.

"What can I say, I got snowed under... and away," Zvonko replied as he stood up to shake the owner's hand.

"Wh-wh-what happened to-to-to you?"

"Nothing much. I got divorced. Moved out. Rented a flat. One third of what I earn goes to my wife and daughter..."

"Fu-fu-fuck those mo-mo-motherfucking judges, I me-me-mean..."

"Oh, it's okay, I was lucky, considering. I'll tell you later, when the crowd clears. For now, just bring me a small macchiato, mineral water and a small beer, any sort you have."

Pero hurried off the terrace and into the café to pass the order on to the new bartender, a proudly full-breasted woman, while Zvonko, hidden behind his sunglasses, glanced sideways to the back terrace table, where two employees of the bank at the corner of the street sat as usual at that time of the day. Those two women had become midday café fixtures, they had been taking their breaks here since forever and even found their way into his short story collection *The Seventh Curse*, which brought him some fame. Truth be told, his story depicted them as a lesbian couple, although in reality they had both sat out their pregnancies right here at *Demosthenes*, next to their office, and probably lived in one of those traditional, harmonious marriages described in beautiful, difficult books. That was precisely why Zvonko wrote an easy story (yet beautiful and profound too, as everyone said and agreed) and gave those two a chance to love each other as they might have in reality, had it been up to them.

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However, neither seemed to have read the story, let alone the book. For more than five years, the three of them had been sharing this café, often sitting next to each other on the terrace or inside, and had never exchanged a single word. If only either woman had read his smashing hit, she would have lent or gifted *The Seventh Curse* to the other. And they would have recognised themselves in it, they would have to, because he described them in so much detail, from their hairdos, earrings, shoes and nylon socks, whose edges would show beneath the leggings come springtime, to their age and under-breath conversations... But no, these ladies had not read the book yet! If they had, the one with the short, boyish blond hair would have probably hated it, and the curly redhaired would have loved it, or the other way around. Whatever. And they would have found an excuse to approach him. They would have told him that he was a male turd or an absolute genius – whatever, again – but at least would have said something. Or not, but would have found a way to let him know how they felt about it. He could populate an entire building block with the strangers who had approached him over the last few years to tell him something important about his books or their lives (“you could write a novel about me, man; a novel, let alone a short story!”) or their own, yet unwritten masterpieces. But not those two women, ever. They must have known who he was, for he had been all over the media for the last few years. For Pete’s sake, he was the central figure in at least five crossword puzzles... But no, they pretended to be blissfully ignorant, just like him.

Or perhaps they didn’t pretend, just like him. After all, why would they? This and the other books he had written were but a drop in a sea of books they hadn’t read or intended to read. He too did not need to pretend, for ignorant he was, or so it seemed. If not ignorant, then witless at best. Shattered by what had been happening to him over the last couple of years, he was now zigzagging between euphoria and suicidal thoughts, between the search for a meaningful reason to continue long term and the yearning for a closure as brief as the end credits of the films screened on commercial TVs. He once read that, according to research, divorce and relocation were the two most stressful situations in life. And here he was, not at the foot of a volcano, but on the brink of its crater. These two beautiful young women had no clue, nor should they have. He had used them on the sly, gave them fictional names and destinies, unbeknownst to them – and that was it.

Damn, Zvonko thought, they may have read the story, perhaps even liked it and talked about it, but did not recognise themselves or the drab character who shared the café with them around noon as its author. And he could never hear their conversations clearly, because they always spoke under their breath, like conspirators, which was exactly why in his narrative he had made them the two lesbians who could exchange endearments and sweet nothings during their lunch break only in verbal, bridled, whispered way.

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One way or another, the result was the same: whether they had read his story or not, recognised themselves in it or not, it made no difference to Zvonko. His books, published or not, had not made the world any better; or worse for that matter. They could not make it any worse because the world needed no writer in a language few people spoke to help it get worse by the day, and because all his short stories, poems and novels apparently brought some kind of encouragement and defiant optimism, that gave the reader a brighter outlook on reality. A far merrier outlook than it deserved.

Zvonko's neck got stiff as he waited for Pero or the new bartender to show up. Preferably the bartender, so he could take a closer look and hopefully exchange a few pleasantries with her, but Pero would do, as long as he finally got his coffee, water and beer. He closed his eyes, tilted his head backwards and made a couple of slow circling movements from shoulder to shoulder, making sure to open his eyes to the street across the café. Even though nothing changed for the better, he had a sudden feeling that this day could be his turning point, a new beginning perhaps, a start from which things would get better going forward.

Pleased with himself, he opened his eyes to see a man sitting at his table, all focused on filling a rolling paper with tobacco from a leather pouch and not dropping the tiny white cigarette filter.

"Ahem!" Zvonko cleared his throat aloud, and then again as he caught breath. The stranger ignored him.

"So-so-sorry for the wa-wa-wait, but the temp-temp-temperature is just ri-ri-right now. The cof-cof-coffee isn't too hot, and the be-be-beer not too cold, right?" said Pero.

Zvonko paid no attention to him; focused on the impostor at his table, he was waiting for him to raise his eyes from the unbearably meticulous cigarette rolling business. The impostor looked as if he had never smoked in his life, had all the time in the world and not an ounce of scruple for having taken a seat without asking for a permission first. Things must have really hit the rock bottom, when a guy can take a seat at your table without asking and roll his damned cigarette, Zvonko thought. He would not be surprised if the guy unbuttoned his shirt, flashed his Nazi tattoos at him and banged an unpacked spinnerbait, two radishes and the blood donor card on the table. There are more and more weirdos in this city, this country, abroad and all over the world.

Zvonko cleared his throat once again, more pointedly than the first two times, but the impostor kept ignoring him.

"Ask the gentleman what he'll have, since he can't speak for himself," said Zvonko to Pero.

Pero took a look around the terrace, then at Zvonko, then around the terrace again.

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"What gen-gen-gentleman?" he asked, confused.

"This one!" Zvonko nodded across the table.

"I do-do-don't get it," said Pero earnestly, looking at the empty chair.

"He can't see me or hear me," explained the stranger and licked the cigarette paper. "Nor can anyone else, for that matter. Only you, Dad. Only you."

"Beg your pardon?!"

"I do-do-don't get it! Wh-wh-what man?"

Zvonko looked at Pero, who was looking all over the terrace.

"I do-do-don't get it!" Pero repeated, his voice short of desperate. As someone born and bred in Split, he knew that a prank, if you don't get it from the third try, could easily metastasise into a ruthless joke that would follow you for the rest of your life.

"Neither do I," Zvonko replied. "My eyes must have played a trick on me. Probably because of the heat. I apologise..."

"Wh-wh-why don't you ta-ta-take a seat inside, wh-wh-where we have the a-a-air conditioning?" suggested the owner tentatively.

"Maybe later, I'm still fine here," Zvonko mumbled. He looked as though he was still staring at something across the street. Pero waved his hand and returned to the conditioned interior of the café. Zvonko shrugged and looked quizzically at the stranger, who was lighting his cigarette.

"We've found a passage," the stranger said, exhaling his first puff of smoke with pleasure. "In fact, doctor Mandić has found it."

"Who?!" asked Zvonko out loud, making the two cue balls at the adjacent table turn their heads around.

"Ahem! Ahem!!!" Zvonko cleared his throat as he realised that the tandem could not see the impostor either.

"All right. You are getting there. Mandić thought it would take time, but you're not that slow, which makes sense, considering that all of us are figments of your imagination."

Instantly drained, Zvonko had just enough strength to blink nervously.

"Wonderful," continued the invisible man. "Now just keep your mouth shut and listen. Nod if it's okay, or else you're going down and take us with you. They will declare you a nutcase, then you'll become one, they'll feed you pills, and that will be the end of the story."

Zvonko nodded, not quite sure why. Then he nodded again, just in case.

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"Excellent," continued the invisible man. "Now listen to me. If I ask you a question, just give me a little nod for 'yes' or a head shake for 'no'. Do you remember doctor Mandić? What the fuck? Don't shrug again. No shrugging, just 'yes' or 'no'. No 'maybes'... I don't believe it; you really are fucked up! Doctor Mandić – the shrink from the *Semi-Open Ward*! Hello, that is your story. *The Semi-Open Ward*. You are the one who has invented him, described him and left him perusing his notes on Vjeko, and now you don't remember him. Do you at least remember Vjeko, Vjeko Marmont, your protagonist in that short story?"

"For heaven's sake, man, do you know how much time has passed since I wrote that story? Six years, at least," Zvonko hissed, keeping the two cue balls in the corner of his eye. Phew, this time they did not turn their bald heads.

"Shut the fuck up. Didn't we just say to use your head? Only yes or no. Up and down. Left and right... Otherwise you too will end up in a semi-open ward of sorts. Don't you remember what happened to Vjeko? Now listen to me. Oops, hold on a sec... Are you telling me you have no clue who I am?"

Reluctantly, Zvonko nodded his head.

"Marvellous! No fucking idea?" shouted the stranger, but no one on the terrace registered his angry outburst as he flicked the cigarette butt on the pavement.

"Svjetlan Gaćina, ring a bell?! The repat from America, thirty-six, spent a few years in the US army, discharged dishonourably for smoking hash with the colonel's young adult daughter in the park just behind the headquarters. This is how you described me on page two. No prior history that I'm aware of. No follow up after the *Walnut Calendar* either. That's where you left me standing by the window, rolling a cigarette and watching Mirela march down the freshly hosed street towards the coast, the world, towards tomorrow... Your words, remember?"

Zvonko put his elbows on the table and rubbed his forehead with his fingertips.

"Brain-racking, eh? Now imagine how I feel. I've been rolling this fucking cigarette and watching that woman go further and further away for four endless years, but she never disappeared in the distance, and I never finished rolling! I couldn't have a smoke until a few moments ago. Can you imagine what torture that was? And the same goes for all of us. You and your 'open endings' can go to hell! We don't give a fuck for your fame and glory; we'd just like to move on with our lives, get it?"

Zvonko wanted to say something in his defence and he opened his mouth to retort. Hell, this guy sounded like his ex-wife. But Svjetlan Gaćina, the protagonist of one of his short stories, raised his index finger to admonish him:

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"Shut your mouth, man! Haven't we agreed on this already?"

Gaćina's author paused, rubbed his forehead again and raised his index finger in return. He produced a pen from the cargo pocket of his trousers, clicked it and wrote down on the back side of his bill: *If I can't speak, can I at least write at least?*. Then he crossed out the second "at least" and pushed the bill across the table.

"It's a bit blurry, but I can read it. I can write. Sorry, you can," replied Zvonko's neglected character with a smile. "You have a question for me, don't you?"

Zvonko nodded and called out toward the café:

"Pero, can you spare a notepad, please? Something to write on?"

Svjetlan spread the tobacco on a new cigarette paper and placed the filter, as if nothing unusual was going on, and Zvonko stared at the apparition sitting across him, hoping that it would eventually dissolve or at least become more transparent. Bloody hell, this is like a Woody Allen movie, he thought. Then it occurred to him that this could be an elaborate prank set up by his old gang. Of course it was! Those rascals, with whom he had lost contact for months, must have devised a scam and found a guy who would show up at the right time and place to pull a prank that would be recounted for generations of grandchildren to come.

"Wh-wh-what's up? Stru-stru-struck by a muse, eh?" commented Pero handing him a small notepad with a brewery logo.

"Something like that..." Zvonko replied and jotted down on the first blank sheet: *Let's go inside, please. It's too hot here!*

Svjetlan nodded, lit the cigarette and stood up. This is what Zvonko was counting on: smoking was allowed only on the terrace. If this guy smoked inside and Pero did not object – and he obviously wouldn't, given that he was in this prank! – someone else would for sure. So he entered before the pretend Svjetlan Gaćina and sat at the only free table in the middle of the room. There's no way that no one will notice a smoker and not protest, Zvonko thought. Two geezers were sitting at the slot machine, just as he left them last winter. They are frozen in time, Zvonko thought. Glued. Suddenly he felt safe, as if he were in a cocoon, surrounded not only by a flat but a real home. He stared daringly at Svjetlan, but the guy continued to smoke unperturbed, pointedly flicking the ash on the floor, as if he wanted everyone to notice. Only when he put out the cigarette on the tattooed forearm of a man sitting at the adjacent table did he open his mouth:

"What did you think would happen, punk? That I'd fall for it? Who is the private investigator here, you or I? You are the only one here who can see me, hear me, smell me or sense me in any other way, because I'm the product of your head, not theirs. Your head alone! How long will it take you to understand that? Just when

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I thought you had gotten it, you pull this *let's get inside* stunt. And here we are. What now? Sure, it's cooler inside and more comfortable for you, but what else?"

Zvonko did not feel comfortable any longer. On the contrary. It seemed that the apparition of Svjetlan Gaćina was more real than the reality and more unreal than a ghost. Nicely put, thought Zvonko. If only he could remember it. This is a total malarkey, he thought next.

Maybe he should really see a shrink, like his ex Sandra used to shout at him in almost every fight they had, more and more often over the last few years... Perhaps he had burnt out in general, and the stress caused by the divorce and moving out certainly did not help. Plus, as a cherry on top, money stopped coming in from royalties... Perhaps there was something else besides that, who knew, but he had clearly mixed and lost more than a few marbles. Oh dear, was he really losing his mind?! In truth, he has always been a kind of nuts, which is normal. Everyone is crazy in their own way, he said to himself, and we all pretend we aren't and that it doesn't show, but this... Zvonko took a deep breath, then one more, and wrote down on the next blank notepad page: *Okay, what do you want from me?*

"Mandić was right when he said this wouldn't go easy," replied Gaćina once he managed to read the note after three blinking attempts. "Alright, I'll try to explain it to you slowly... Not only I, but all of us, and you obviously have no idea how many of us there are – we all want to go on with our lives. You've given us a decent start, to most of us at least, but what are we supposed to do going forward? For years we've been stuck where you left us, waiting for something else to happen, for you to write something new about us. Write, man, write. Give us the chance to live some more! I mean, we'd all prefer better lives, but have made peace with the ones you've given us, if only something else would happen, do you follow? This is what I want from you, not only I, but a bunch of interesting people! We all suited your needs; now is the time to return the favour. Respect, responsibility, do you get it?"

"Wait a sec..." Zvonko whispered and started scribbling a new, longer note in smaller letters. It took Svjetlan Gaćina, or whoever he was, nearly a minute to place the paper in focus moving it back and forth, and read: *And what if I now put you all in a bus and send you down a ravine, will that make you happy?*

"Now, look, before you do that, why don't you let us live a little more. I doubt you'll come up with an explanation, a story about how we all ended up in the same bus, and write it down today, so you'd better start writing asap, if you really want to get rid of us. Am I right or am I right? Why don't you give us some more life, some more experiences? Doctor Mandić says you cried like a baby the night you completed your first short story collection. He's in it, so he should know. He says you cried because you had to say goodbye to the gang

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you had lived with for months. Besides, we know that from the interviews you gave, the ones to which you answered in writing, and I'm sorry to say this, but we are kind of fed up with your self pity."

This guy really sounds like Sandra, Zvonko thought. 'Let us live, we're fed up with your self-pity!' How many times had he heard her say that? Is she, God forbid, a part of this sick joke? She can't be; she could never stand his friends for more than a half an hour. And why would she be in it? They were divorced, everyone knew it, and there was no reason for her to be included. And what about this guy on whose forearm Gaćina put out his cigarette!? Who was he, a stuntman? Stuntmen cost, and not a single one of his friends had that much cash to spare for a crazy prank like this one...

Have you got any idea, a story which would restore you to life? Zvonko scribbled and handed the note across the table to buy some time.

"We've got nothing, Daddy, that is your job".

Why don't you think of something? I can't do everything! How many of you are there? I want to know how big a bus to rent...

"There are only four of us, able bodied, for now, but we're getting in touch with the rest, ninety-seven in total. For now there is the doctor, myself, nurse Sofija from the hospital, the one from the *Monstermind*, if you recall, and Štef from *Don't sing, please*. But he's totally useless. You've left him drunk as a skunk, but Mandić somehow managed to get him sober. Now he's drowsy all the time, mumbling something to himself, but he's with us."

Why have you come all alone, and not someone else?

"At first Mandić thought to come, but he realised that would be a mistake. Someone has to stay in charge all the time, at the command bridge, so to speak. Sofija is quite comfy in this head of yours with doctor Stanković groping her butt. That is where you left them to fall into oblivion, but I think she wants more than that. Out of the four of us, who would you prefer to visit you, eh?"

So what now, you'll shadow me all the time, watch me shit, piss, and the rest?

"No, at least for now. You see, that is exactly why Mandić stayed at the bridge. This is a test flight, so to speak, and I'm a test pilot. Not a real one, obviously, but the only one with some military training. We found – the doctor did – the only niche in which you still feel at home and the only passage to get there – not that I understand any of it. What I do understand is that we can contact you only in the places where you feel at home. So we waited and waited, and finally got you here. Man, you've got a serious problem... But it's okay. Great, in fact, that this is a public place, so you have to listen more and speak less."

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Why do I have to write to you? Can't you just read my mind?

"That's in the works, but we're not there yet. Don't you worry, Mandić will get it sorted out, and things will be easier for all of us. By the way, nice to see you write again, even if it's a simple note.

"Pero, I'd like to pay," Zvonko called out. "I have to go, I just remembered..."

He was furious, seething over his helpless confusion, and quite horrified too. Svjetlan Gaćina started rolling a new cigarette in a hurry, like a junkie.

"Th-th-this is on the house, no-no-now that you're back," replied Pero. "Co-co-come by any ti-ti-time in the evening, too. It's mo-mo-more pleasant wh-wh-when the betting shop clo-clo-closes. And put your no-no-notes away, you might need them..."

Zvonko forced a smile, thanked him and gathered the notes scattered all over the table. He took another sip of beer and hurried towards the exit. Gaćina followed closely behind.

"Hey, wait a sec. What am I supposed to say to Mandić? Have we got an understanding?"

Zvonko looked back at Svjetlan, shook his head and marched down the sidewalk, past the betting shop, towards a fast food stall, whose stench of fried oil and heat wave nearly knocked him over, leaving the private investigator Gaćina at *Demosthenes*, as his shouting after him faded away:

"Hey, get back! Get back!!! You must write about us, do you hear me? For Christ sake, are you really..."

Instinctively, for no apparent reason, Zvonko turned and took a step back, but Gaćina was nowhere to be seen. Zvonko scurried back to the café, took a peek inside, but Gaćina was gone. He closed his eyes, wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, opened his eyes and then noticed his phantom character sitting on the lawn by the terrace with his arms opened wide, as if to hug an old friend, and the smile on his face which was saying: "Finally, thank God. You got it!"

But Zvonko did not get anything. Last night he went to bed twice and finally nodded off at about three after midnight. Then this morning he argued with himself again whether to get up or give up. This was happening more and more often in the last few months or so, and irritated him immensely, because every single time he would choose giving up and then get up feeling remorseful for the rest of the day, until, come evening, he would vow to himself to get up earlier next morning and go to bed sickened by his self-delusion.

This episode with Gaćina was quite likely the consequence of his chronic fatigue, saturation and stress. Dear Lord, how many more stupid and pointless things did he have to endure only to make ends meet, only to preserve what little respect Sandra still held for him, only to make Jelena aware – dosing it gently as she grew up – that she did not have to follow in the footsteps of her peers... In truth, nothing of that was stupid or

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pointless. Without his wife and daughter, he would have had to deal with far more stupid and pointless things. But now they were gone. His wife, that is. And he had only one seventh of his daughter – one day a week. If she wasn't occupied with other things.

And that flat... All of a sudden, even before the divorce papers were signed, he found himself in an unfamiliar neighbourhood of high-rises from the socialist era, in a flat on the fourth floor and no elevator, with the visibly shabby furniture, a TV set connected to the old antenna sticking out from the façade, a makeshift study, separated for no reason from the rest of the living room by an empty, sagging plywood bookshelf... He moved far too many times in his life and saw far too many places as a tenant, not to be dispirited by this one.

And he was pretty sure that this hallucination was the consequence of too much strain; he was simply too exhausted and scatterbrained to reason normally and avoid nonsense like this. I need a good night's sleep, he thought; I need to turn in early, forget the worries, get up when the alarm clock goes off, without feeding on remorse every morning. Or everything will go to hell. He will never find a new steady job, and his head will roll off his shoulders and into some semi-open psychiatric ward, to be showcased to medical students...

These thoughts were running through his head as he was sitting on the low wall behind the bus stop in the flickering, warm shade of a weathered pine tree. He decided to take the bus home instead of the usual walk. The last time he had used public transportation in Split was four years ago, when he had to leave his car for a full-day repair in the suburbs. But buses, like all other forms of public transportation, had always been a place where he felt uncomfortable. He liked only subway trains, solely because they were always faultlessly punctual. Perhaps doctor Mandić and the self-taught private investigator Gaćina wouldn't be able to track him down through some other "channel". At least not before he got some proper rest. Until then, for about ten minutes he would be brushing against the damp, sticky strangers, and avoiding their dull, sweaty faces. He could manage that. He would gaze out of the window at the streets of the city which was slowly falling apart at all seams, just like him. And then he'd get off, enter the unassuming Zeko minimarket and buy a cold *burek* from this morning, yogurt and beer. He thought about buying a pack of cigarettes, but resisted the temptation, using the five-second technique he had mastered. He had quit smoking three months ago, because he had grown tired of his chronic morning cough of a dying man, and also because of the money, or rather the lack of it.

As he suspected, there were no vacant seats in the bus. He stood by the middle door and grabbed the hanging handrail, paying no attention to his fellow passengers. But after the first turn, when he brushed against a woman standing next to him, he couldn't resist stealing a glance at her. Noticeably younger, per-

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haps just turning thirty, shorter than him by a head, slender yet curved in all the right places as one could only desire, she was holding on to the handrail next to his. With the corner of his eye he slowly slid down her firm upper arm, over the unattractively pointy elbow and along the forearm with sparse, light hairs, until he reached the wrist... Christ, oh Christ!!! Her hand, clenched around the rail, was almost twice wider than his, with fingers half thicker than his! In that instant he remembered his short story *Our Girl in an SUV*, in which he had described a young woman in a city bus, with a divine figure and beautiful thighs and calves, but strikingly strong and wide hands. He attributed that incongruity between the hands and the rest of the body in most Dalmatian women to evolution, imagining that it was a genetic mutation caused by the centuries of hard labour that the great-grandmothers and great-great-grandmothers of today's bombshells had to endure as they worked in the household and fields, rowed boats and built dry stone walls... Christ, thought Zvonko, is it possible that his fictional character doctor Mandić, the "executive manager of Mentisana, the unjustly infamous private clinic for mild mental disorders", had already found a new channel, a passage, or whatever Gaćina called it?!

Throughout the entire ride between two stops, Zvonko was working up the nerve to address the large-handed beauty. And when the doors closed with a hiss, the bus moved on and their shoulders touched, he finally said in a low voice:

"Excuse me, Miss..."

"Huh?" The young woman gave him a look as vacant as the one with which she had been gazing out the bus window.

"This may sound like a stupid question, but do you happen to know Doctor Mandić?"

Her eyes widened, then narrowed, as if she were an angry Asian-Caucasian, one of those women you find all over the porn websites.

"Shame on you! You old pig!" she said and, struggling to maintain balance in her heels, wobbled to the back of the bus and stood in front of the last door. She got off at the next stop and sat down on a bench of the bus shelter seething with rage, while Zvonko was still trying to figure out what her answer was supposed to mean.

"That was the worst pickup line, if I've ever heard one," said the pimple-faced adolescent in the seat in front of Zvonko as the bus moved on. "If you had asked her about an eye doctor or a dentist, she'd let it slide, but a gynaecologist... Wow, dude, that was legendary! You may be an old-timer, but one learns as long as one lives..."

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Mandić! Doctor Mandić, Zvonko remembered now, was one of the well-known gynaecologists in Split. He followed Sandra's pregnancy. Zvonko named his *Semi-Open Ward* shrink after him! And now what?! Was the girl in the bus the same nameless girl from his story or... Which Mandić is her doctor?

If she too had been a figment of his imagination, she would have surely addressed him one way or another, Zvonko consoled himself. Besides, this kid had seen her as well; therefore... Then it dawned on him: in the story, she neither had a name nor a character; she was a nobody, just a pretext for the half-page long lamentation of the main character. She only had a well-shaped body, a beautiful face and inappropriately large hands like most women here. And she had every right to hate him for her entire, endless little life, that he so generously bestowed upon her and then froze it... And if she really were a real, ordinary person, then he had truly embarrassed himself, just as this kid said. Dear Lord, what if she had recognised him? From some damned crossword puzzle or who knows from where? If not she, perhaps someone among the passengers in this shaky, reeking metal box did... Embarrassed, he got off two stops too early and began to walk uphill, feeling the scorching black asphalt melting the soles of his cheap sandals. He passed by the Zeko store without even looking at it and climbed up to his apartment, somehow managed to wash himself, struggling to raise his arms and splash lukewarm water onto his chest, neck, and back, and then collapsed onto the old sunken couch that probably no longer remembered better days. He considered watching some TV, but he fell asleep before he could reach for the remote.