

Boris Škifić

Boris Škifić was born in 1957 on the island of Zverinec. He graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy in Zadar. He has published two story collections *Adios amigos* (2013) and *Butterfly Flight* (2008), and three novels, *The Story of Four Cypresses* (2003), *Letters from the Hospital* (2022) and *Stone, Flower, Amen* (2023). He lives in Split, Croatia.



Works:

Adios amigos (*Adios amigos*, 2013), stories

Butterfly Flight (*Let leptira*, 2008), stories

The Story of Four Cypresses (*Priča o četiri čempresa*, 2004), a novel

Letters from the Hospital (*Pisma iz Vinogradske*, Hena com, 2022), a novel

Stone, Flower, Amen (*Kamen, cvijet i amen*, Hena com, 2023), a novel

LETTER FROM VINOGRADSKA HOSPITAL

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About the novel:

After a diagnosis that separated him from Zagreb's streets and student life, and turned him into a hospital resident, after numerous surgeries, drugs and catheters, pain and short-lived moments of hope, it is understandable when the protagonist does not care that someone compares his life to literature. Boris Škifić wrote an incredibly convincing novel, a poignant chronicle, a naturalistically detailed account of the hospital atmosphere. This is a story about life, a story of Eros that does not surrender to Thanatos without a fight until the last breath. Because behind the fogged hospital windows, life happens in all its beauty, at least until death, or the nurse on duty, comes in. Through skillful dialogue, and humor when it is most needed, Škifić shapes the story of hospital and illness as a witty metaphor.



Boris Škifić

Letters from Vinogradska Hospital

Translated from the Croatian by Mirna Čubranić



CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

My back is hurting from lying, the air reeks of decay, the windows are seldom opened; closed within myself, with a notebook and a ceramic ballpoint pen beside me, I start to write and add to the unsent letters to nowhere and nothing, the letters that no one will ever receive or read.

In Osijek

I was in the bed by the door. Fragments of memories. How it all began... And how briefly it was supposed to last.

It was... I was urinating more frequently than usual. And I was bleeding while urinating. Just a few drops of blood and a sharp pain.

It was cloudy, two or three drops from the sky on my face, I was exposed, but I thought... there wouldn't be a downpour even though the dark clouds had come down to my eyes.

It's no big deal, I thought at the time, just the exhaustion from the journey and too many beers downed upon the return from Osijek. There is always an explanation. At the very beginning.

The journey to Osijek was tiring. Because journalists get to travel, I joined the journalistic group at my freshman year, even though I was never interested in journalism; on the contrary, it triggered a significant level of unbearable nausea within me.

And so it happened that the moustached editor-in-chief of the Student Paper sent me and Miroslav, the photographer, to Osijek to conduct an interview with the winner of the annual acting award, an actor from the Osijek National Theatre, a former student of our college, later of the Zagreb Academy. The guy gained fame overnight, receiving the Croatian theatre's annual award for the role of the young Glembay. The theatre, stuck in the abyss of Krleža-esque influences for the last hundred years, hadn't budged an inch. Thus, it echoed far and wide when the provincial bells of the baroque Osijek cathedral had chimed his name.

We had a room waiting for us in a small, cosy hotel of about a dozen rooms at the outskirts of the city, and the actor protested saying we were crazy, because nobody who was somebody read our paper.

We had arranged a meeting with him for the next day at a café on the main square. After dinner, we sprawled into the armchairs in the hotel lobby, drinking, smoking and slowly slipping into the blissful pre-sleep state. We were bored. We went to sleep. The room was pleasantly minimalist, dark but clean, with the walls in an unrecognizable colour and hard beds.

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But there was no sleep for us that night, because from the neighbouring room we heard the repeated screams and moans of the same female voice, and tried to imagine what was being done to that woman to make her so excited and horny. Her serial orgasms triumphantly soared into the calm, provincial Osijek night.

We heard the voices of two men as well, but we couldn't make out what they were saying. "An orgy, huh? How about we knock?" the photographer suggested. "My camera is ready, we can take some photos. What do you say?" Desire grew in our eyes as the weariness from the uncomfortable bus ride overtook us.

Towards morning, instead of the alarm clock, we were awakened by her screams again. Half-asleep, Miroslav muttered: "She must be a nymphomaniac", and rolled over, but I couldn't sleep any longer. I got up, opened the window to the warm April night embraced and smothered by the early morning. I smoked and imagined how somewhere, where I was regularly absent, an interesting and exciting life was being lived.

I went to the toilet and there, for the first time, noticed a few drops of blood in the bowl. A flush of running water washed away my concerns. Three drops of blood, too stupid to be convincing.

At breakfast, we eagerly watched the table of the adjacent room, to see who would sit at it; the tables were marked with numbers, like everything else in a time in which everything is countable. Finally, an elderly gentleman with thin grey hair and a thick moustache sat down. We waited with curiosity for the arrival of the horny lady, but a young man of our age appeared instead. Miroslav and I exchanged glances. The woman was nowhere to be seen. Could they have suffocated her, dismembered her, and thrown her into a container after her tenth orgasm?

"She died from a night-long fuckfest!" Miroslav whispered.

It was time to go to our interview, so we asked the receptionist for the directions to the main square. On our way out of the hotel, we came upon the grey-haired gentleman with a bag over his shoulder and the young man guiding a girl slightly younger than himself by the arm. I stared at her; she was blinking at something above our heads with a wildly nervous look in her eyes. She stopped in front of an open taxi door and let out a muffled scream. The young man covered her mouth with his hand; she bit him, he cursed. The grey-haired gentleman stepped out of the car, firmly grabbed her other arm and shoved her into the backseat.

The car glided away down the long street.

"She is crazy", I said to Miroslav. "On our way back to Zagreb, our bus will tumble into a ravine, or that actor will shoot us after one of your bad photographs or one of my embarrassing questions. You never really know where you stand with those actors and their acting."

"Fuck off!" Miroslav snapped at me.

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I wanted to say something witty, not ominous as Miroslav took it; words are the source of all sorts of misunderstandings, but wittiness aside, the frantic expression on that girl's face stayed with me for a long time. On the journey from Osijek to Zagreb, I tried to push it out of my mind while gazing into the night, but without much success.

Miroslav was a smart-ass. Miroslav was a fancy-pants from the capital. Miroslav was the big shot at our college because he had an expensive camera and photographed the girls in short skirts. He said:

"Even if they had picked her up in the street and raped her or bought her like a slave or something, and then fucked her all night, they wouldn't have dragged her like that this morning. That wouldn't make any sense, unless they completely destroyed and tore her apart, so they have to hide her somewhere until she recovers."

"Hasn't it occurred to you that she may have some mental health issues? Have you seen the crazy look in her eyes? Those two guys could be a father and a son from a Slavonian village, taking the sick girl to the asylum in Osijek. They could have arrived late last night and stayed at the hotel," I suggested, defending a more normal explanation of the abnormal.

"I don't give a fuck!" Miroslav waved his hand dismissively.

"I know", I said.

We were some hundred meters away from the square, where our actor was waiting to leave his heavenly throne for half an hour and spill utter nonsense, as actors, conceited kings of absurdity, usually do when they explain their roles.

Then the bus and the five-hour night ride. We had done our job, wrote everything down, photographed it all; the actor was already covered by the sands of oblivion. And that girl's bewildered face flickered in front of my eyes on the bus, and her screams echoed in my ears.

The tram stop

The whimsical autumn in Zagreb brought the scents of the first snow in the air. I urinated blood in the toilet at my college. And that was not good; that was definitely not a good sign. When the toilet bowl turns completely red.

Feeling pain and nausea, I started to return to the lecture, but my bladder was almost bursting again, so I rushed back to the toilet and took a quick leak of just a few drops, with knives cutting through my urinary

tract. I grabbed onto the wall to keep myself from falling and breathed in the fresh morning air coming through the window.

Instead of snowing, it was raining. The temperature was still lingering above zero; my body's temperature was rising, sounding the alarm.

After a round of antibiotics, I still urinated blood, so my puzzled neighbourhood GP sent me for an examination at the student health centre.

The day was sunny. The doctor at the student health centre shook his head and said that something was seriously wrong. Then he called someone and scheduled an examination for me at the urological clinic of the Vinogradska Hospital.

At the tram stop, waiting for the tram that would take me to Vinogradska Street, I watched the trees that had turned green again; a spring breeze between the buildings foreshadowed warm days.

Trams came and went. People got off, new passengers got on. Everyone was in a hurry, no one spoke to anyone, no one looked at anyone. They all just stared at nothing.

I snapped out of my thoughts, having no idea how many trams going to Vinogradska had passed by without me noticing them.

Back in reality, I got into the tram, took a seat and watched the pedestrians through the window; they were all in a hurry, the weekend was starting.

Cystoscopy

It was Friday. The waiting room was packed, there were no free seats, and many had to endure standing on their feet, even though they were on the verge of collapsing. They rolled their eyes and breathed heavily. I looked around; all of them were shrivelled old men. I must have wandered into the antechamber of a mortuary or hell itself. Urology Clinic at the Vinogradska Hospital.

I gave my medical documents to the receptionist at the front desk and received a number, a double-digit one. If I just get through this examination and this day, I thought, I'll get a medication, I'll bleed for a few more days and then, or even before then, I'll pee completely normally.

And it is not a rocket science to pee yellow without a drop of blood. I exited the hospital grounds and went to the pub across the street. I observed the people around me; they were in a hurry, they had a quick drink and smoke, and then each went their own way.

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When I returned, there were only a few latecomers in the waiting room. Around noon, I entered the examination room as soon as I heard my number on the loudspeaker. The doctor, a sturdy man with a shaved head, read my test results and said:

“Undress behind the screen.”

I looked at him in astonishment; he was not normal. I wanted to tell him that it didn't make sense, but he was stronger than me and he didn't notice me. Indifferent to my fear of nudity, he was immersed in some papers.

A young nurse with curly blonde hair and soft blue eyes showed me the screen. I looked at her, thinking I would definitely die of shame. She noticed my confusion and smiled, probably to encourage me. Screw life and whoever brought me here; had I known what awaited me, I would have bled out, but I wouldn't have entered that examination room and taken my clothes off in front of the curly blonde.

On an examination table that could serve for delivery, the curly nurse tied my legs to the bars protruding above the table. Lying there with my legs spread out, I just looked at her wondering why they had tied me up. Were they hidden Nazis, who would slaughter me without a word? Were I never to see the light of day again?

The curlyhead oiled a long, thin metal tube. It didn't bode well. The doctor took the tube from her and without any warning jammed it straight into my bladder with one practiced move; first he inserted the tube halfway, then pulled it strongly downward to avoid damaging the urethra, and finally pushed it all the way in, watching with one eye what was happening inside to understand why I was bleeding and urinating with difficulty. He established the diagnosis. The devil knew what he saw inside, because he said nothing, just smacked his thick lips.

I didn't make a sound because of the curlyhead, it wouldn't be manly, but the pain suddenly shot from my heel to my head, and in the next moment I thought that there was a point of pain beyond which everything became indifferent, and if I could have died from shame and pain at that moment, I would have, so completely exposed and skewered on something resembling a spit.

The doctor removed the tube from me and I felt relief; the curly nurse untied my legs and with a smile on her face told me that I had just lost my virginity and that I should get dressed. Without any emotion in her voice. Matter-of-factly, even though what they had done to my body, almost killing me, seemed a big fucking deal to me.

As soon as I got dressed, the doctor's strong hand wrote down the diagnosis and a referral for urgent treatment.

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"Young man, you will be admitted to the ward on Monday," he said. "I'm your doctor and I'll treat you. When you get to the ward, find Nurse Ruža, she'll know what to do."

He wrote out a prescription for painkillers, and I said:

"I'm not sure I can make it. I have lectures, you know."

"You'll be out a week or so after the surgery. Your absence won't be noticed."

I left the hospital, thinking: What surgery now? That doctor is crazy, and his curly nurse... she didn't even register I was naked in front of her. They are characters from a horrid, surreal dream. But the pain of that tube being inserted into you, that pain was real; there was nothing surreal about it.

Before

The three days after the cystoscopy and before checking myself into the Vinogradska Hospital... a lot of wandering, little sleep, and a lot of craziness.

It was Friday when I had the cystoscopy, and after the procedure I roamed the streets of Zagreb with Sora, swallowing painkillers. The midnight bell echoed from the cathedral tower. Ravaged, I was still urinating dark blood.

At Štef's, the only joint open at that time of night, we ran into Sever, who was drunkenly shouting "It happened, it happened in Odessa", as he ordered a round of drinks that we would pay for. He promised us a party, there was one going on nearby.

We dragged ourselves through the empty streets. We entered a doorway and stopped in front of a nameless door. No sound, no joy was heard from behind. Sora and I exchanged glances; there was no party going on. Sever pressed the doorbell and kept it pressed for a long time, hitting his head against the wooden door, until footsteps were heard from the inside. A drowsy woman opened the door; she cursed Sever and hit him, but she still let him in, telling us to go back to where we came from.

"Never follow a drunken poet. You'll get nowhere", Sora said.

Saturday and Sunday melted into one big pub crawl with Sora, Brigita and Nina. High on pot, we wandered around the city under the flickering light of the street lamps until the first glimpses of dawn. We stopped at the Student Centre for a final drink; a band was playing in the hall. In the toilet, I urinated blood again.

"You're dying, man, your kidneys are bleeding," Sora told me, wide-eyed.

I just looked at him, thinking about all the bullshit he could blurt out without thinking.

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On Monday morning I was ready for Vinogradska, leaving a suspended moment behind: an untouched cup of coffee, an open mayonnaise tube and two slices of bread on the table, an open book by the bed, the unwashed laundry scattered on a chair. My flatmates still asleep in the other two rooms.

I left the basement student apartment at 1A Pokornoga Street and went for a drink near the high school in Klaićeva Street, where I had arranged to meet with Sora. Brigita soon joined our table; Nina stayed in class. We smoked a joint around the corner, returned to the pub, drank and laughed our heads off. Brigita kissed me. Then Nina arrived, displeased that we had smoked without her. She ordered a beer and went to the bathroom with Sora to get high. We smoked Sora's good-quality weed. The waitress was annoyed; she cussed us out and asked us to leave, which we did, leaving a cloud of pot smoke behind. I boarded a tram at the main square, heading off down Ilica Street towards Vinogradska, and they waved at me, growing smaller and smaller, until they disappeared when the tram turned in front of the NAMA department store.

I entered the hospital on Vinogradska Street, where an unbuttoned, busty nurse received me. This isn't a brothel, I thought. She said nurse Ruža was distributing lunch. I gave her the referral with doctor Hanza's signature, and she handed me a blue hospital robe, a light blue pajamas and a pair of plastic, slip-on slippers. She took me to the room number seven, where Stipan, a bus driver from Sisak, welcomed me with a smile.

I left the room as soon as I changed into the hospital pajamas. I thought that if I moved away, I would distance myself from all the misery that hit me like an unbridled northern wind. In the corridor, I realized there was no way out. I recognized the blonde, curly nurse from the other day. I greeted her, but she walked past me as if I didn't exist or had ceased to exist.

The bird

It was raining. A bird landed on the windowsill. It turned its head, shook the rain off its feathers, gazed through the glass at the room number five, pecked its beak on the glass a couple of times, chirped, spread its wings and flew away.

Room number 5

At the very beginning I was in the room number 7, but when Stipan started to rot away, I was transferred to the room number 5 because of the risk of infection. Three metal beds and three flickering lights on the ceiling, a sink and a mirror to the right of the door, a large three-part window from wall to wall, three narrow closets against the wall by the window, a nightstand with a rusty night lamp beside each bed and above each bed a hanging hook for lifting yourself if you are immobile, and a switch to call for assistance from the attending nurse, anytime, day or night.

The stench

That first day in the hospital, which haunted me like a frequently recurring dream, I dreamt that someone wanted to tell me something, but no sound was coming from that person. Straining to hear, I woke up in sweat.

The party at the table at the end of the hallway told me that when you were first admitted to that ward, the hardest thing to get used to was the terrible smell.

I avoided my room; I was always in the corridor after the morning examinations following the doctor's rounds. I expected to leave in a week; I would survive the stench of the hospital room.

At night, I covered my head with a pillow to avoid that awful smell, so it wouldn't enter me and stay there forever. I'm just passing through, I thought. Why get accustomed to it? I hardly breathed while sleeping, but it didn't help. When I woke up, the smell of stale urine mixed with blood enveloped me like the smell of a corpse in the advanced stages of decay.

Stipan, a Slavonian settled in Sisak, the man suffering from cancer, whose bladder had been removed and kidney ducts connected to the colon, watched me. He had been there for three months already, and his wound, the incision from the chest to the navel, refused to heal; it leaked like an old, rotted ship. He rarely slept. He watched me as I turned on the light and opened the windows wide, and he laughed; the old warrior transformed into the horrible stench from head to toe. Then he said sympathetically:

"Don't worry, it'll pass. After three days here, you won't register any smell anymore. It will become the old hospital perfume. Haha! That's the trick, turning a stench into a perfume."

Stipan's wife and son visited him on Sundays. They travelled for free by bus from Sisak to Zagreb, courtesy of the Bus Transport Head Office. His daughter, who was in the third grade elementary school, stayed

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with her grandfather; the grandmother died a year before from heart failure. Before the Sunday visits, a nurse washed Stipan with scented water so he wouldn't smell too strongly of the mixture of faeces and urine. The orderly shaved him. The wound on his abdomen had opened again. They had patched him up three times, and as that was no longer possible, they were waiting for the wound to close on its own. I looked at him and thought: This man is falling apart, and in a very ugly way. Why don't they end his suffering with an injection, so he can die like a human being, in the silence of our hospital room, room number 7?

Stipan was impatient and excited; it was a Sunday afternoon, holiday time. He counted the minutes until three o'clock, when the door would open, and his wife and son would enter the room, bringing a piece of cheerful brightness with them. He talked on; on ordinary days he was taciturn and worried.

"I got ill from sitting and stressing all day long. How many times have I narrowly escaped death? Who can count them all?"

I thought about his words, and it seemed to me that Stipan would not escape this new death. He paused, lost in thought like a man with no future, who was returning to the past through a fog. His future was an ancient history, because he was living the moment of erasure; he was living the time that had passed.

"Listen to this, you won't believe it. And it is exactly what happened. There are times in life when things align into a kind of miracle. The hand of God, they'd say, touches you from heaven, and you are not aware of it. And I believe in God. It was dark, just before dawn. I was driving through a snowstorm. I had five passengers. A woman who was taking her feverish child to a doctor; two municipal workers who worked in Sisak, and a high-school girl. We were descending from their village into the town. Fortunately, the road was covered with a thick layer of sand. The drive was smooth, the early morning music was playing on the radio, the workers were having their morning shot of brandy; they offered me a cigarette, I lit up. I drove slowly, knowing I couldn't brake; I was completely in control. I was used to it. At a bend in the road, the bus started to dance like crazy on the ice. I immediately knew that the worst had happened, and my heart sank, because I know what would follow. The wind had swept the sand off the road, leaving only the ice. I turned the wheel and somehow managed to turn the bus toward the cliff to save us. I avoided the abyss, but I felt I was losing control of the vehicle. The bus hit the cliff and started hurtling towards the precipice. We were falling, and then suddenly, as if by God's hand, we stopped. The bus got caught on an outcropping rock and was gently swaying in the wind. We quickly got out of the bus, and as soon as we were all out, the rock gave way, and the bus tumbled into a gorge over five hundred meters deep. It took me ten minutes to regain my composure and catch my breath. The snow was still falling heavily in the strong wind. I saw the woman crying, holding the child to her chest to warm him up. Then

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I spotted a light in the distance and headed towards it. It was a snowplough, and it took us to Sisak, to give our statements at the police station. They offered us hot tea there. That Sunday, I lit a candle in the church and paid the parish priest for a mass, vowing never to doubt the existence of God and the strength of His power again."

Stipan, my man, not even your God will save you here, I thought to myself.

It was well past midnight. I was sitting at the table in the hallway, smoking. Everyone was in their rooms. I didn't feel like sleeping; I was getting used to the hospital. I had only just arrived, and getting used to the hospital took some time. I expected a few more days of tests, then surgery, seven days of recovery, removal of the stitches and leaving the hospital never to return. All this misery would remain somewhere in my memories, until the quick oblivion took over. The power lies in forgetting.

Stipan came out of his room and headed to the bathroom. The unadulterated happiness shone from his sunken eyes. His wound had closed up, and he was readjusting to a new way of life. For the umpteenth time. He needed to urinate and defecate at the same time, which required a certain effort. After about ten minutes, he got out of the bathroom, but he didn't go back into his room; instead, he walked uncertainly towards me. Like an apparition. He emerged from the hallway darkness and stepped into the light above the table at the end of the corridor, holding his intestines in his hands to keep them from rolling onto the floor. Straining, he had completely opened up. A trace of blood was left behind him. I just stared at him and extinguished my cigarette. Without a word, I headed to the infirmary; the nurse woke up the doctor on duty and turned on the lights in the operating room. Stipan needed to be patched up again.

As the risk of infection had reached a high level, they transferred me to another room the next day; the room number 5, to the first bed by the door. Stipan, the bus driver from Sisak, known for his skill in avoiding accidents, happily married, with a son who had just started the high school in economics and finances, and a daughter in elementary school, was left alone with his thoughts and the wound that would never heal.

The relocation itself was brief; one last look at Stipan, the man who introduced me to the secrets of the hospital patients, a sad smile instead of a farewell. Like a betrayal.

After that, Stipan completely lost it. He didn't allow the nurse or the doctor to enter his room; he threw at them anything he could get his hands on. They had to tie him to the bed for the rounds. I stood next to the infirmary and eavesdropped curiously. Hanza was speaking to his wife and son:

"We have done everything we could, but he won't last long. A week or two. When it is convenient for you in these following few days, come to take him home, for him to die there. It will be easier for both him and you, and you will get enough morphine and everything else you need for his care and pain relief."

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It was the last time that Stipan's wife and son came to the hospital. Hanza was right; Stipan died after a week. The hospital staff aired his room for days, before they allowed other patients to enter it and lie down on Stipan's bed. The Sisak Bus Transport sent a special van for Stipan's remains. It was driven by Blaž, Stipan's lifelong colleague, a fellow driver of Sisak's urban and suburban buses.

The Dream

After the surgery and the intensive care unit, they moved me back to the room number 5.

I was more asleep than awake. Especially in the morning. Before dawn and the waking day, I plunged into the darkness of a black, bottomless pit at the end of a dark and endlessly long road. I dreamt of the long hospital corridor, which turned into a dusty road ahead, of the hospital rooms transformed into windowless, lightless apartments with closed doors. I knocked like a bird on a window frame, but nobody opened it. I walked down a long, poorly lit road; there were no passersby, no cars, nothing, just a long road in the shape of a hospital corridor, with a black hole at its end, into which I fell in the midst of a dream and just before waking.

The door creaked open, and the busty Nurse Nada, always unbuttoned, pulled the sheet off my bed and said: "Good morning."

Good morning, my ass, I thought as I get out of the bed, dragging behind me a bag full of black and yellow urine. It would have been a fucking good morning if we had woken up together in the same bed, covered in silk sheets and muffled moans.

The Snow

I counted the days; a dozen of them were behind me. That should be it. I opened the wardrobe and looked at my civilian clothes.

My catheter had been removed that morning, and the bag was thrown in the bin. I felt more or less normal; I thought about how I would go home for a break before returning to the lectures.

Through the bathroom window, I watched the cloudy sky above the Vinogradska hospital before the snow. I couldn't remember the colour of the transparent sky when I first walked into there, and what day it was. I thought it was a Tuesday, maybe a Wednesday; no, it was a Monday, and it was autumn, like now, but it wasn't snowing. Memories were fading inside me, even though it had been just over a week. The old-timers

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at the table at the end of the hallway said that all those medications, anaesthetics, antibiotics, painkillers, morphine and what not eroded the brain cells and killed memories in your consciousness, shortening your life and turning it into the day you were living in that moment. There were no memories, and no plans. Memories and recollections ceased to exist here. I needed to remember something if I intended to walk away from there before noon.

Lost in thought, staring at the toilet bowl, I contemplated how there was no God there or anywhere else, nor anything resembling that illusion, and how God was just someone's wicked hoax. It was not because of loneliness; I was used to it. It was for a purely prosaic, but obvious reason: the man was too damned and wicked a creation to be brought into existence by someone all-powerful and benevolent, whether they were called God, Devil, or Ante the Hologram. It was just an illusionist apparition for the naive strollers among the paper trees or the malevolent reptiles among the fragile porcelain. Always before peeing, I thought about nonsense like that.

I urinated with difficulty, and the wound on my abdomen began to ooze again, despite being closed so well. So damn well. The wetness to my knee turned my bus ticket home into a worthless scrap of paper. Unusable. Just a futile intent and nothing more. I remained stuck where I was. And the dazzling morning had dawned so brightly during the morning rounds, with the sun and the freshly signed discharge letter accompanied by the note saying I was all right.

I stepped out of the bathroom and walked slowly down the hallway toward the large glass partition that separated us from the outside world. The sky was cloudy. It was snowing. Snowflakes fluttered in the air and stuck to the glass, forming some kind of melting and reforming macrame pattern. I couldn't recall the last time I shed tears, but I felt something trickling from my eyes. I watched the snow fall, and I felt ashamed. I wiped my eyes so that the smokers at the end of the hallway wouldn't notice anything. They invited me to have a smoke with them.

"I'm tired", I said and I opened the door of my room, the room number 5.

I lied down on my bed. I needed quiet and loneliness. I pressed the button, and the blonde, curly nurse Brankica came to see what I needed. I looked at her and thought how beautiful she was, like from another world that was unfamiliar to me. Then I said:

"I need a catheter. I'm leaking."

For a few moments she just watched me in surprise, as if she didn't believe me. Just a minute ago, she wished me a happy return home. I lifted the sheet and added:

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"And a dry pair of pajamas."

With a touch of sadness in her voice, she responded:

"I'll tell Milan about the catheter, and I'll bring you the dry clothes."

Then she left, closing the door behind.

The male nurse Milan, known as the Quiz Man, came in with a smile on his face. He lubricated the catheter and skilfully inserted it into me all the way to my bladder, without a word. He injected water into one part of the catheter to create a small balloon at the end of it, anchoring the catheter to the bladder walls. He attached the catheter bag to the edge of the bed. Of all the ward staff, he was the one who inserted the catheter most painlessly. He was a catheter genius. He was experienced, and he was retiring soon. I thanked him with a smile. He patted me on the shoulder, as if empathizing with me. He never said anything; one might think he was intellectually challenged, but he wasn't, quite the opposite.

I felt the urine slowly trickling out of me as the wound on my abdomen dried. Brankica brought me a dry and clean sky-blue pajamas. She averted her gaze while I changed. Without a word, she took the wet clothes and left. The bag filled up, drop by drop.

The Marlboros

That morning during the rounds, Hanza decided that they would remove my catheter; it was the time for me to leave the hospital.

"It's too soon", I said. "It should be left in for a few more days."

To that, Rifaj, the resident from Lybia, said to me:

"It's not too soon, I guarantee you, the wound is good, holding firmly."

Then, in front of the entire ward and with Hanza's approval, I made a bet with Rifaj for a carton of red Marlboro cigarettes. It was for the amusement of the doctors and nurses. It was always cheerful when anything disrupted the coldness of the hospital routine.

That morning, just before leaving the hospital, my wound leaked, and I didn't go anywhere. Rifaj never bought me that carton of Marlboros.