

THE CASE OF MY OWN PERIL

Kristian Novak

English translation: Ellen Elias-Bursac

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The AliExpress Creon

I was such a cool teacher, outside of school I'd even trade tipsy conspiratorial looks with my teen peeps. Some of them bummed cigarettes off me. And, anyway, the sight of me smoking was generationally exclusive. I did not smoke in front of my husband, my relatives and my parents. And not in front of my kids if I ever have them. One day.

One day.

One day when push comes to shove I'll heave the whole mess in everyone's face. I have pictured this moment in all kinds of ways. It was supposed to include some sort of closure. There has got to be a moral to this story because nobody sane would go through a breakdown this bad without expecting something meaningful to come from it. Like, after this you are all the stronger, or all the wiser. What's the takeaway, what's the takeaway? What about this: sometimes stuff that happens to you means nothing, so don't go around lying to yourself about being all the wiser or all the stronger, because you're not, because maybe you're all the weaker and all the stupider, so it goes, so take it.

Such a cool young teacher. Cool enough to use words like cool or backstory when I'm teaching, teacher enough to do that only once during a 45-minute class. Because as a cool young teacher I had to watch my back. At the time this is exactly what I was like, a role a lot like acting. All my decisions, all the big ones, I made motivated by one reason only—to steer away from anything that could mess with my life. No risk, no vision, just hold on to what you've got, the reasoning of a lowly serf. That's how I was raised: we the weak, we from little villages, be good to everyone, don't rock the boat, don't raise your voice, everyone has to love you. My life was a constant battle with fear over the very possibility of the hatred of others and an effort to always maintain a carefree, fun-loving expression on my face.

But within me there are high and low tides. First I passionately desire to be liked by everyone. This means I find it, literally, an uphill climb to accept that there are bearded, desert lowlifes out there who despise me just because I don't wear a headscarf and I'm not a Muslim woman; I want to be at least a little likeable even to them. Yet as soon as I get the feeling that everybody likes me—in comes the low tide. I start craving escape because I don't give a shit about the team I so longed to have like me. And there's no way for me to know which of these two is my real face. I can't tell where the real me ends and the one begins that I've constructed so people will love me. All I know is that when it's high-tide time, I pour on the charm. When the low tide comes in, my thoughts kick off with the formulation, "Ah, but one of these days."

But there is nothing final, nothing triumphant in that.

See, I adored my job. They gave me free rein, especially with the drama section so I suppressed everything and put up with it and was a fucking bouncing ball of diplomacy. I will be liked by all the teachers and they will leave me alone. Aha, now here's a takeaway, right here in front of my nose: these two things for whatever reason don't mix—being liked by everyone and doing what you love.

This means that before they all started hating me, almost all of them loved me because I wormed my way under their skin. My spiritual animal is a love-craving pug. The only one who loathed me may have been Božena, the catechism teacher. That is likely to happen when you elbow a woman out of the drama section she herself started. At the time I, the cool young teacher, figured that being hated by the catechism teacher made me the bomb.

At first Božena and I did okay, she was hired a few years before me and then she got pregnant. When she came back from leave, she needed someone to cover for her: hew baby-boo was at home cwyng while mommy was away doing dwama. We put on a terrific show of Božena's, but she kept foisting her baggage onto us. You can try to persuade me you aren't exclusivist when it comes to plays with a religious subtext, but don't sell me the new-cool-Catholic spiel and the who-knows-what-kind-of Catholic literary superstar nobody alive would have ever heard of if they hadn't identified upfront as faith-based. Like Laudato TV up against the bigtime broadcasters like RTL, but deeper and healthier. One little clash was enough for us to part ways and I believe I'm not exaggerating when I say that I played that hand royally. Went to the principal, said I don't want to be a pain, the drama section is all that matters, I'm last in so should be first out. She said "If you say so," with an undertone of restraint, so it goes. A week

later, here comes the principal with her husband and a lively crowd of the town's middle-aged creme de la creme for a tasting at my husband's place. She sozzled up a bit, began chirping, and asked again about the drama section. I was all torn up like a wild beast, *I won't say, I'll never say, I'm no traitor*. Louder and louder she pressed me, till finally I took a deep breath and said, *Well... okay... but just between the two of us*.

I poured her another and told her how I broached this with Božena: *Look, our school has never taken part in the country-wide highschool drama competition with a one-act play, never! But the kids are doing so brilliantly and you, Božena, are doing so brilliantly, and, I sure hope I have had a little something to contribute, but it's the scripts we're using. They don't cut it. Maybe there are members of the jury who are—look, how would I know—hardcore atheists, leftists, whatever, but this stuff doesn't make the grade and we can tear our hair out all we like. Cancel culture. For the kids' sake let's try something different this once. Super Sara Zamuda and Dreamy Danko Varga will be graduating soon so this is our last chance. And here we parted ways, Božena and I. Whatever, it was very uncomfortable...*

I dropped my eyes there before the principal, I stopped talking, as if to keep my voice from quavering, I mustered the courage to say I'd be miffed if anybody heard about this, all I wanted was to show that I'm no slouch, and that I still love and admire Božena... Ha? Was I queen-for-the-day or what?

Two days later, the catechism teacher, Božena, was named school scheduler and given a raise, and I was assigned to the drama section. What the principal told her, I'll never know, but ever since then not so much as a 'Hey there' from Božena.

I still needed to win over the rest of the faculty. A few days later there was a chance when I was alone with the principal and History who is, say, the chattiest of all the teachers. I told the principal, in a hushed tones to keep it on the down-low, that I'd sooner disband the drama section than have my colleagues mad at me. And the principal said: *Božena said herself that she was leaving drama. We'll be rotating through the functions—and she winked. Her wink was a semi-official hint: And then you do us proud at the drama competition and no more rotating off.*

At that moment I have everyone at the school on my side except Božena, but I think to myself: will you fry up this omelet? Crack open that one egg!

And besides, frankly speaking, who is the Croatian teacher here? Sure, Božena knew how to work, she even won some award in Poland for a troupe she was part of as a university student.

She knew how to shape the kids. But I spent two years in the Theater Studio at KNAP Theater under director Sutara. Just saying. Now that is something else again, my dear Božena, the things we did there were top notch and right at the edge.

This now... it all sounds like I'm badmouthing myself. Because there are other ways to tell this story. For instance, a dedicated young teacher had what it took to push the kids to the brink. But things took a turn for the worse, which is not exactly her fault, right? So why is it that I'd rather talk only about my own selfish motives? Because generally, of course, I criticize myself so I beat others to it. That way I'm safer. But, more importantly and crazier—because it frees me. Because maybe I snatch control of the narrative, when there is a back-and-forth going on between "how this system is capable of grinding up a decent person" and "the system is full of shit because assholes like me are making trouble."

While we're on the subject, that's how things seemed with Neno.

Everyone was in such a rush to talk about his death, just so nobody else could get control of the story.

To be perfectly frank: yes, I wanted the drama section for my own sake. And for the honorable profession and for the sake of those kids, for whom nobody was aware of the weight they were carrying, and because I think art can change the world, yes. But, most of all, for myself. I was new at this, offended by the scuttlebutt that I owed my job to a connection... I wanted people to speak of me as a damned fine expert, to value me because I know how to get the job done, because I had an impact on the kids and the school. That maybe I encouraged one of the talented kids to enroll in the Drama Academy, imagine that.

Within ten years I see myself still working at the school and directing cool offstream shows in Zagreb. You can obviously see that this cynicism springs from profound regret. The problem with my life is that, alas, I have no regrets about things that matter to other people. But, no matter what they may think of me, I really did want to be good for those kids.

Antigone 2.0 was supposed to be magnificent. A classic text in a modern setting. A genius director from Montenegro did that, and Spain and a whole slew of other countries picked it up, and this... wow. Teenagers are capable of portraying genuine emotion on stage, they don't rattle off their lines the way actors do on state radio, they don't imitate movie stars. All the teachers will fall on their asses while I modestly praise Božena's contribution and avoid saying how she contributes even more now that she is in charge of the schedule.

Antigone, yes, I know, it's that typical kind of story that aspiring young Croatian teachers swoon over, but it really is perfect. An isolated, disenfranchised individual, freedom and the right to citizenship, civil disobedience stoking conflict. Law and morals, public and private, male and female. Suffering for righteous beliefs. The more I thought about it, the more I saw that *Antigone* is a 21st-century teenager and Sophocles himself didn't grasp the reach of his prophecy. And no, I don't see myself as the *Antigone* here, I'm slitting the throat of anyone who says I am. If I'm anyone, I'm... someone from the chorus who dances to the wrong rhythm and sings off key because she didn't learn the part right, so they boot her. Or possibly *Ismene*, the spineless wimp who becomes tragic only when she has no other option.

But before the kids even had a chance to learn of my plan, the cool young teacher already screwed up royally while she was laying the groundwork. I wanted them first to leave behind everything they thought they knew about acting, and then I'd steer them toward a single possibility: drawing on their vulnerability. If I pull this off, I thought, we won't be watching child-adults on the stage who look and speak the way their teachers want to look and speak, we'll be listening not to passive reciters but to authors of their words. I must compel them to draw on their images, their pain, to bare themselves, I thought, only then will they be able to give themselves room to speak freely. I wanted them to perform for each other, not for the audience, especially not for the judges at the competition. The kids aren't stupid, let's be realistic. During my downfall I got to know some of them who will always be superior to me. And they have things to say, to us, the conceited crew of adults who are evaluating them using the criteria we endorsed, while giving up on ourselves.

At the first meeting after *Božena* left I gave them a week to come up with and present for the rest of us a work of art, any genre, which had absolutely knocked their socks off. Not a favorite, but one they couldn't shake. It did seem that several of them caught on right away and that this would be eye-opening, but the next Tuesday I was met by a few big disappointments.

First a recording from the *Child in Time* live concert in Tokyo where you can hear the gunshot of a suicide. Well, okay. Then a classic sculpture, writhing snakes biting a father and his sons. Two showed us scenes from the film series—*Saw*. Hello, young sadists.

Then Sara Zamuda: *Squid Game*. Those are gruesome deaths. Wow, Jesus, Sara. Come on, guys. But I think to myself, this won't be a problem. Sara has presence on stage, without having to work hard at it. She doesn't overact, she has sincerity and credibility. A manipulative

angel with a flaw. She breaks one boy's heart, then moves on to the next, breaks another heart, and always manages to look as if she's misunderstood and naive. The teachers knew she had already left a trail of carnage behind her in the ninth grade—two juniors were reprimanded after getting into a fistfight over her on the stairs. And her heart probably belongs to daddy. Now there's an asshole, there's nobody he hadn't fucked in Međimurje. And she loved him all the more for it.

Dreamy Danko Varga. A scene from anime, I can't pronounce it. A boy is chasing after his friend, he trips over a railway track and a train runs over his head. But there's nothing bad to say about Danko. Handsome as sin, tall, striking, almost macho, he brings us an interesting vulnerability that radiates from him. I know he has great parents, but I bet he hasn't come out even to himself let alone to others. I forgive him, because I see a nice story there in the future. At some point in the summer of 2027, the Croatian Theater Award —my teacher in the drama section gave me the courage and strength to accept myself and...

Then Ema. A novel about a Colombian priest who stands up to the local cartel. She reads a passage and on her face I see the moment when she realizes she had chosen badly. Ema is pouting. She was attached to Božena. A reticent girl, you'd think that behind it all there must be a lurking crater of emotion but nothing ever shows. I have no idea why she has been in the drama section for four years now and no clue as to how I might possibly get anything from her. She moves nicely, to be fair, so, hey, go and do dance, kid, don't mumble through your lines here. Wrap up the reading, most of us are indifferent, all I say is thank you, move on and then I feel afraid. She may be a source of trouble when I start pushing them over the edge.

And finally Renato: *The Human Centipede*. He shows us a scene from the movie—a total shot of a human centipede. A column of people on all fours. Their mouths conjoined to the asses of those ahead in line. Defeated human bodies. A defeat of art. I get it. Renato wants to see our shock. He wants us to plead with him to expose for us the deeper meaning of this idiocy. Renato is a boy who is constantly enraged. Most of the other kids are from more or less affluent households and he would give anything to punish them for that. He's not in my Croatian classes, but I hear that he relishes undermining authority. He feeds on conflict and exposing others. A frustrated ill-starred alpha who has managed to throw all of his teachers off balance, as far as I can tell. We who haven't taught him in our classes have certainly commented on this. Phys Ed would physically discipline him, Chemistry had a different tack: if you're so smart—how about a

seminar? Badaboom. And another? Boom again. Then a test? Boom. Then a presentation? Boom. And we'll see how smart you are. I suggested a third approach, how about friendly, wrongly believing that inside him there was a neglected child in hiding. When we were doing the Christmas special I realized he's in love with Sara. A totally different energy around him when she walks into the room. When she and Danko played a scene where they were close to each other, a semi-erotic embrace, I watched Renato. An impressive sight. He was totally enthralled, both repulsed and enamored, that sweet misery that, I believe, is felt by people who like to see someone pursuing the woman they love. "Cuckolds," is, I believe, a category on Porn-Hub. Renato would give anything to be at least one of her rejects, but chuck it, she doesn't want him, so he is despondent, like a little kid. He attends drama section to see the unattainable object of his desire and to incinerate the world along the way.

I interrupt him: thank you, Renato, very interesting, but we need to move this along. His humiliation floats in the air like a cobweb.

From the others, nothing. A few more movies, a poem, an image. Most of them superficial, a simulation of something dark.

—And what have you found to be the most moving work of art? Perhaps that will give us a way in, using an example of yours, Renato addressed me. I was torn about whether to respond, but I had no better idea.

—Rhythm0, I said.

They said nothing, the cobweb floated on in the corner.

—Marina Abramović, perhaps the greatest performance artist in the world, sat for six hours in a studio in Naples before an audience. She gave the audience members simple instructions. You have a pile of things on the table, from a bird's feather and honey to metal pipes and razor blades. You may use them on me in any way you like, do with me what you will. I am an object. But I take full responsibility during the six hours, in other words there will be no repercussions for anyone. And at first nothing much happened. Someone from the audience moved her body a little, someone changed the position of her arms or legs. As if she were a doll. They gave her cake to eat, someone kissed her, a third person handed her a rose. But after three hours things began to change. Using sharp objects they stripped off her clothing. They cut her and drank her blood. They laid her on the table and spread her legs apart, then simulated as if they'd penetrate her with a knife. If it hadn't been public, they'd have done it. As it was only the

table was damaged. An attempt at rape was prevented by people in the audience. With a rose's thorns they pierced her skin, they placed a pistol in her hand and rested it on her forehead, there were all sorts of things. After six hours she began acting like a human being again. And those who had been boldest couldn't face her. Face what she looked like after what they'd done.

Better that I hadn't said anything. Sara was indifferent, Danko agreed with me, but nowhere was there a bond, Ema didn't like it at all, she couldn't understand why art had to shock. Wasn't the message what mattered? But Renato awaited his turn and said coldly:

—Awful, because she was passive and that justified what the others did to her. It spurred them on.

Me, stunned.

—Brilliant, Renato – I turned. –You nailed it...

—Okay, but what to do with this now? – he interrupted – Do you want us to be moved by things like that? Was that the goal of the assignment? You told us to be sincere and free, but you were actually really dissatisfied with what we brought.

—Who cares whether I'm dissatisfied, what matters is that you...

—How is this free choice, if you're the arbiter?

—Renato, now you've cut me off twice.

—And you cut me off before. What happened to what you told us, that we're all equal here?

The cobweb stuck to the wall like a damp stain. The only thing in motion around the room now is my underarms which are exuding sweat and horror. How did everything already come tumbling down? I don't buy it that Božena's cooked this up, Renato is an evil spirit with no master. Sara stood up for me:

—Hey, you sound like you're in preschool, come on, now...

—In preschool we knew how to respond...

—You're rude!

—... to very simple questions. And I raised mine politely.

The battle was already lost before I knew it. Danko, Sara and a few others tried without success to impress the little psychopath, and the worst possible insult occurred to me. Renato, bud, if you only washed your privates a little more often, maybe the girl would notice you. Are you aware that in the sea of teenagers you stand out with your stink? The first few times

someone meets you, they'll think, the guy must be farting all the time, but no, Renato, your truth is far more dismal than that. With every move you make, every time you step or sit, your ass gives off into the air a little more of your sloppy asswipe. I hear the sticky sound when your butt flaps come unstuck. I don't know which is worse: that you aren't aware, or that you're choking us with your stench on purpose. Whichever it is, listen to me: water, soap. Cheap, accessible, bubbles, it won't hurt, believe me.

There's a volcano inside me, but I know I'm being faced with a decision that will determine a significant chunk of my life. I interrupt them.

—Please. Enough! Enough! Renato, please, forgive me.

They all freeze. Before Renato's empty and hungry eyes I hide my feeling of my flesh being ripped from my bones.

—Forgive me. I was unjust and I understand... That this pissed you off. Here, if you like, we'll go back to the laptop scene you wanted to talk about. Okay?

After a few minutes Renato mumbles that it's not important anymore, and Sara starts to hammer:

—You're not the one who should be apologizing, professor, but this dimwit...

—Enough, Sara, thank you, it's all okay. In fact I think it's actually good that this happened.

My sentence nailed it. I either sidestep blows or buffer them in the fetal position. I expose myself so people can see that my spiritual pug is no threat.

—I'll confess something. This was one of the most awkward moments for me of this school year, or actually ever, but I'm not saying—it was bound to happen, anyway, sooner or later. Let's use it.

Silence.

—Renato, is it okay if someone instead of us two plays out what just happened here?

Renato looked at me. And nodded.

—Wow, I'd like to play him, can I, can I? – asked Sara. No matter how sad this was, Renato was over the moon because she wanted to make him laugh.

—Come oooooon, somebody else – I sang, everybody laughed, even Renato.

—Wait a sec, but how? We can't go around imitating you –said Ema.

—Why not? Listen, there are no sacred cows here. Look, I'll go first if you won't. Have a blast, mock and exaggerate.

We imitated people from public life, and then some who were closer. I began with the teachers, with Phys Ed. They roared with laughter. Immediately, and I mean im-me-di-ate-ly, I wanted someone to take me on, purely for it to be crystal clear that this was not about people, I wanted someone to really vent on me. But Renato beat me to it and started in on Božena. A forcefully calm and gentle voice, a patronizing simper, Jesus who is waiting for us around the corner, asking of us a mouthful of crescent roll, and we are hungry, he hit everything. I felt Ema cringe so I stopped him:

—Renato, no. Please.

—Ha! So there are sacred cows after all? – he shot Ema a look, she on the verge of tears.

—I lied – I say, prepared to put an end to this if it goes off the rails.

—There is a limit, Renato. Ms. Božena is off limits. We owe her too much, all of us.

Renato started in, but I was louder.

—Renato, I know you get it, or at least you'll try to get it.

He shrugged, laughed, like: well okay, how come you're so devout all of a sudden. I know he was lost for that class session, he'd sabotage, but my approach was a good one. Ema sent me a look full of gratitude.

And this is where things began. Theater began. Sure, later I lost everything, but nobody can take from me those first few weeks. Scenes were born, dialogs and monologs, keenly spontaneous and alive. Most of the time it looked as if we weren't doing it, as if we were puppets, the medium through which people who'd long since been silenced were allowed to speak, or even those who would be silenced in times to come were speaking through us. Ghosts who were entirely different from ourselves. The terrain of drama had become the realm of the occult.

When you put two people in a space, you let them simply be there, without any clear instructions, you leave them long enough for them to sink into themselves and into their own restlessness, after a time they will start to give others a precisely determined pattern of behavior. I saw this in action when I was working under Sutara at KNAP and what I'm saying is that it borders on the summoning of ghosts. I see this from time to time in life as well. You know the thing when without any clear signal you know that the person standing in front of you is willing

to play and it starts to flow. Or the person feels you owe them something. Or you simply know, though you are seeing them for the first time, that they would do you harm if only they could.

We played as if by playing we were opening door after door down a long corridor stretching endlessly onward and after we opened them we dared to be anybody to anyone. Unstoppable things began to move. Alchemy and the beyond. To each other we were parents, children, doctors, mirrors, puppets and puppeteers. Renato was mostly puppeteer, he couldn't act against himself, Sara was mostly puppet, nor could she act against herself, only against the puppeteer. From one week to the next this became simpler and more profound. Danko, you are small, Ema, you are big. You're afraid something will happen to Danko. They immediately get what each has to do, they start with the grimaces, gestures, singing and speech. Danko tells me to take him over, that he'd like to watch. Performance and life, between them there is no longer any distance or boundaries.

Ema was next-to-last to join in. She was in the space with a boy who isn't too important for this story. For a long time, nothing, silence, too long, but we were all quiet and we waited, because it was clear as day that something was up behind the scenes, on its way. Finally Ema spoke, in a long exhalation of weary rage:

I am going to have to care for my sister. Meaning, for the rest of my life. There are times when this is unbearable. That my life is so set in stone. And did you ask? Did anyone? No, you had to have me. Another child, to serve the Lord and ingratiate itself with Him in all ways. Or to prove to yourselves that you are capable of raising a normal child. Go away. I hate you so intensely that most of the time I can hardly wait to get out on a Saturday, stupify myself as fast as I can and lose all sense of who I am. For you. As fast as I can get to the phase when in some dark corner I'm licking the salty sweat on the neck of someone who will ask for no explanations later. It doesn't matter whose hand is inching downward, as long as it isn't mine, isn't yours. I wade in deeper each time, because I know that lurking again for me on Sunday will be the remorse and promises to you and the whole world that I am all about every day but Saturday and that I'll be good. And I won't compulsively google how long people live with Downs syndrome what with the advances of fucking modern medicine.

For a half minute nobody moves, and then, with no guidance, the boy takes her position and speaks as if he is Ema. She watches and moves to argue, actually, with herself. After a time she retreats, and Sara jumps in with the role of the sister. Although she's never seen her.

Renato was the last to join. He was alone, and succumbed to a whole-body convulsion. He became disfigured and turned into something more like a rabid dog than a person.

Hey, motherfucker, what was that you said to me? Huh? Go on, spit it out. I didn't quite catch it. Cat got your tongue? I've never seen a kisser as big as yours. I'd say it's been a minute since someone smacked you one hard. You're talking like all this belongs to you. You'll see God and the devil and all the saints, you motherfucker.

And then he slammed his fist into his hand, powerfully, rhythmically, a dozen times.

Crying now are you? Ha? Sniveling like a bitch. Let's see your cunt if you're such a bitch.

I think each of us felt the urge to wrap our arms around him and make him stop, but nobody did. He stopped when he'd completely spent himself, one of his hands was swollen, purple, hanging like it was dead.

We were totally drained after the session. Sweaty, out of breath, some stood in the corner, some cried, but we were quiet because we'd turned ourselves inside out. Equally frightened of what had come out of each of us, we grew closer. Amid the mass of people streaming through the corridors of the school during the day we sensed each other; among us without hellos or formalities there ruled a special bond, the kind that forms among people who fall together. Even now, after all that has happened, I firmly believe this was healing for them... Or it would have been, if they had had in me someone who could guide them to untangle the knots that bind their lives.

To be clear, I was aware that art always always always seeks more than you're prepared to give it. But I didn't realize how much more. The so cool young teacher, who has lost everything now, paid the price, and asks herself where this fucking art of hers is now.

The chorus of Theban city elders sings:

*It is clear—Zeus most hates an arrogant
boasting tongue*

We imagine that they then prance around like old folk at weddings, with hips and knees that keep them from moving freely.

I know, I know, here is my art, always with me, shadow-like. Our *Antigone* played outside the space of the performance, and the director of arrogant boasting tongue was chewed up and spat out. Art becomes life in a way, though you may try to hold it back. Or perhaps for that very reason.

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NOT BY THE BOOK V.03

INT. EVENING - Stairway, apartment building

Four crisis intervention team officers race up the stairs. The first is POSEDI (32) and after him come MARLI (30), TURK (22) and ČAMBER (22). Cacophony rules the stairwell so what people are saying is garbled. Two screaming children and quarreling adults can be heard. The crisis team officers pass by a door where a NEIGHBOR (50) is peeking out, recording on his cell phone and commenting.

NEIGHBOR

Oh, whoop-de-do, the police are here, they're all we need now.

POSEDI

(to Marli, Turk and Čamber)

Balaclavas on.

(to Neighbor)

Shut the door.

NEIGHBOR

No way! The third time this month, we're sick and tired of this,
it's like we're living with riffraff!

While the four police officers pull on their balaclavas, Posedi winks to Marli, Marli easily nudges Neighbor back a half-meter and shuts the door behind him. The neighbor opens it again, Marli looks at him. The neighbor says nothing, puts his cell down but stays in the doorway.

The crisis team officers go up to the mezzanine, where two beat cops, COP 1 and COP 2, are standing. All of them stare up, unblinking, at the doorway to an apartment on the floor above.

By the door stands IVO (40), a gigantic man, wearing old jeans and a white t-shirt. From behind he's holding a MAN (35) up in the air and squeezing the man by the neck. The Man is smaller and better looking than Ivo. With his other hand Ivo is resting a large screwdriver on the Man's neck. The Man is only in his socks, he's squirming, trying with at least one foot to reach the floor, his face is nearly purple. As if an anaconda, not a human hand, is wrapped around his neck. At the door stands a WOMAN (37), she is yelling at Ivo and trying to keep her SON (8) and DAUGHTER (6) from running out onto the landing. The screwdriver is resting on the Man's neck, a millimeter from a stabwound.

POSEDI

(with practiced calm, gesturing to show Ivo his hands are empty)
Take a minute, look at me, look at me, I won't come closer, just put the screwdriver down. Put it down. Put it down. Ma'am take your children inside, come on. we're going to have a little talk, down with the screwdriver, there's nothing here to screw.

All you'll end up doing is screwing this up.

COP 1

(to Marli)

No point in talking. You ask him something, he talks gibberish.

Marli doesn't react, he stares, unblinking. Young Turk is impatient, breathing fast, shifting from foot to foot.

TURK

(to Marli)

So, we call for reinforcements?

Marli still hasn't said a word.

COP 1

If there were a hundred fifty of us here, it wouldn't make any difference.

MARLI

(not taking his eyes off the scene from the stair landing)

Do we know what this is about?

COP 1

The ex came to pick his kids up for the weekend, but she wouldn't let him take them because... I don't know why. Then he wanted to smash his way into the apartment, the new lover boy got involved and now he has a screwdriver on his neck. Can't you call in a psychologist, for negotiations?

MARLI

Who can wait that long. What's the father's name?

NEIGHBOR

Ivo. So, as you know, we have had just about enough of this...

MARLI

His name is Ivo.

POSEDI

(continues with the same conciliatory tone, but adding the name)
Ivo, look, we'll sort this out, just let the man go. You can't
explain what's going on while you're holding a hostage, listen
to me Ivo.

TURK

(losing patience)

Useless, there's no way back unless you agree straight away.
What's next, Marli, tear gas?

MARLI

(without taking his eyes off the situation at the top of the
stairway)

Sure, but not from there. Go down, then up the fire escape
ladder, try to reach them from above. But first call this in
over your Motorola.

Turk races off as if he's been let off the leash, hopping down
four steps as he goes. Cop 1 watches him leave, then turns to
Marli.

COP 1

But... there's no fire escape ladder here.

MARLI

(nods briefly, lays his index finger over where his mouth is
behind the balaclava)

Let him fidget somewhere else.

Marli shuts off his Motorola, Cop 1 and Čamber exchange glances.
Posedi climbs slowly up the stairs toward the landing, and Marli
and Čamber follow.

POSEDI

I know, Ivo, you came to pick up the kids, we'll sort this out.

I have the exact same situation at home, identical. If anyone understands you here, it's me.

Ivo mumbles through his teeth, drool dribbles down his chin, he mentions the kids by name. Posedi comes to within a meter and a half of him, gestures to the woman to finally calm the children. The daughter is frozen, the son shouts "Daddy." For a moment it seems as if the clench of the hand around the neck is relaxing, that everything is calming down, but then Ivo pushes off from the wall with all his strength, without releasing the Man, and kicks Posedi hard in the gut. Posedi briefly manages to grab Ivo by the leg, pull him off balance, but the blow is too much for him and Posedi tumbles down the stairs to the mezzanine. Marli yanks off his balaclava, leaps up a couple of steps and with one blow to the head knocks Ivo down onto the floor, flings the screwdriver aside, sits on Ivo's back and twists his arms up behind him.

Ivo lies on his belly, spits out blood, the Man sits leaning on the doorframe, struggling to catch his breath, rubs his neck, glances first at his hand and then touches his neck, can't figure out where the blood is coming from. Cop 1 quickly goes over to him, Cop 2 calls an ambulance. Čamber calms the woman who is shouting at Ivo – This is the last time, never again. Ivo cries so hard that Marli is bounced up and down on his back. Ivo calls to his children. His son pulls away from the woman, pummels Marli with his fists.

ČAMBER

Ma'am, get these kids out of here.

He pushes the woman and both children into the apartment. Posedi lies there on his side on the mezzanine, gasps for breath and holds his ribs.

COP 2

(to Posedi)

Boss, need any help? How are you?

POSEDI

(through his teeth, with a grimace of pain)

Fantastic. I'm just having a little nap before the end of my shift. (to Marli, who is still struggling to handcuff Ivo)

Missing your favorite daytime TV, eh?

MARLI

Well, obviously there's not much for us to say to each other.

POSEDI

(laughs as much as he can despite his aching ribs)

If it were up to you, we'd never talk about anything.

Marli leans over to Ivo's ear.

MARLI

Come on now, calm down. It's over. Gonna be good?

Čamber and Cop 1 move to lend a hand, but Marli waves them off. Ivo still isn't quiet, Marli presses down harder, still can't handcuff him, one of Ivo's hands keeps slipping out of the cuff.

Ivo's eyes are closed, first his breathing slows, then he sobs aloud.

IVO

I have never been violent.

ČAMBER

Posedi wouldn't agree.

IVO

He did that to me on purpose. For the third time. I never raised a hand against him...

COP 1

Like men always say who beat their wives and kids.

WIFE

It's not just abuse when you hit someone, you piece of shit!

MARLI

All of you shut the hell up!!!

(to Ivo)

Good God, what's that all over your hands?

IVO

Oil. My car broke down. That's why I couldn't get here on time, I keep trying to tell you. And she knows that on Friday I work till five and her schedule is tight for me. She does this on purpose so she can complain about me to social services. I was only twenty minutes late, twenty minutes...

WOMAN

You are not picking up my kids all filthy and smelly,
understand?

Ivo sobs again, Marli and Čamber finally get him to his feet, and now it's obvious that Ivo is a whole head taller than the two of them. They lead him down the stairs, another patrol arrives, they begin cleaning up. They help Posedi to his feet and he gets a look at Ivo's face.

POSEDI

Marli, you broke a few of his teeth. If there hadn't been an attack on an officer, you'd be in deep shit right now. Check and see if that stupid neighbor recorded it all on his cell. Enter only details in the record, immediately.

MARLI

(steps back a little from Ivo, comes over to Posedi' ear)
Posedi. My shift was over half an hour ago.

POSEDI

Nope! Write the report, and you and me, we'll be good.

MARLI

Posedi. Hey.

POSEDI

What.

MARLI

I have had enough for today. You can see the man is a wreck. I know he kicked you, but...

POSEDI

(looks around, listens to see if anyone else can hear)

What do you want me to say?

MARLI

You know. Come on. This is not the first or the last time.

Instead of us saying he assaulted you...

Posedi shakes his head.

MARLI

(to Ivo)

We'll say nothing happened and you, Ivo, say nothing happened. You fell on your face with all the roughhousing and that's that. Understand? Then you won't have to explain why you kicked a cop, and I won't have to explain why I punched you in the mouth. That way things stay simple.

Ivo nods.

POSEDI

Fuck this. Stuff always comes out wrong in the end.

I don't like it.

Just then Posedi's cell phone vibrates. He picks up, pain shoots through his ribs, air huffs through his teeth before he can speak.

POSEDI

Yes. What? Who? Don't tell me. Yes? Where?... Oh holy shit...

(looks at Marli, swallows, lowers the cell)

Neno.

MARLI

(sighs nervously, rolls his eyes)

I told him a hundred times I'm not his mother. There's no
talking to him...

POSEDI

They found him dead. Shot himself.

WHO WE'RE MAD AT

On Wednesday, late in the afternoon, I heard the news about Nenek. At the high point of my week. Teaching until 4pm, then a two-hour break before the drama section, I was having coffee with my roommate from student days, Sandra Čibarić, ex Pahek. We were almost done when a message showed up on her WhatsApp.

Jesus, no. What's up? It's Neno. Neno who and about what? Marli's kid brother. My violent physical reaction left me breathless. Pahekica said:

—Looks like he killed himself – and on she read while I struggled to swallow.

Both of us knew parts of the story, there was talk a year before, maybe more. As a young traffic cop Neno got into some sort of trouble, he fined someone he shouldn't have fined, the son of a person who'd done favors for the cops. Then they probably gave him a hard time at work and he defied them. While I still had him as a friend on FaceBook I saw he was writing more and more obliquely, but you could see he was out to skin alive those who otherwise got away without paying fines. I remember people talked about this, along with a particular mix of feelings: "go for it, kid, show them" and "nice, so all on your own you're going to change the world, are you?"

"I mean, how does that go, exactly?– I remember Pahek asking rhetorically when we were talking at the time. She, seven months pregnant, dressed to the nines, her clothes impeccably ironed, manicured, made up, charming, bright, energetic, her Žac also a shining example, good-looking, up and coming, keeping fit, playing tennis four times a week then hurrying home to make a healthy meal for his sweet Pahek, the sex bomb. Both of them committed to justice, ecology and sustainable development, because their child is coming into the world and they need to clean up the corruption for the child's sake.

—What?– I asked

—Well, that a driver goes to negotiate with the police? I mean how do you start that conversation? Like, Mr. Policeman, let's have us a little chat about this, you know who my daddy is...

—Gee, come on.

—What?

—Come on, Pahek. How many times have you been stopped for speeding and they let you off the hook?

—Well I don't know, three, four times, but one time I did pay the fine...

—So you see.

—What?

—My dear, with breasts like yours, you miss out on scads of life experience having to do with the communications strategies that we of more normal proportions adopt out of necessity. What does anyone like you have to negotiate over? You lower your car window, the cop stares like a numbskull at your airbags and forgets his own name, let alone that you were speeding.

For a while we hadn't heard anything new about Neno, then this. I was knocked cold, I couldn't hear or see a thing, sheer tachycardia. Pahek was nattering on, currently a slapdash mother of a baby who was sleeping only 45 minutes at a time, her greasy hair pulled back in a ponytail, scraps of fingernail polish on her nails, wearing a stained t-shirt, its neck all stretched out, giving off a light odor of sweat and sour baby upchuck, always angry at the world and Žac, who now, with five extra kilos on his butt, was fleeing for a beer four times a week. His tennis was limited to the TV set over the bar. I stared dully at her former tits, now mammary glands, and I started speaking somewhere in the middle only because an alarm went off in my head that I had been silent for too long. It was my duty to be appropriately sad and appalled, at arm's length, over this destiny and not to take it personally. So something along the lines of:

—I cannot believe it. How old was he? Just a kid.

We went back and forth a few times with "how awful" and "how old could he have been," I paid for the coffees and bitters, kiss-kiss and headed for school. With each step whole pieces of me fell away. How could I possibly hold a rehearsal that was even remotely normal, I wondered as the sun set on my last real working day at school.

I sat down, completely ashen, at the table while the kids came in, dropped their backpacks and took their seats, I strove to pull myself together, but kept scrolling through portals, most of them just giving his initials and his age in parentheses, the body found this afternoon, in a car, in the snow on a field, uniform, service pistol. I shut my cell, stared blankly ahead. At the end of today's rehearsal they were scheduled to hear the plan for *Antigone 2.0*, but I couldn't imagine how I'd get there from here.

We're missing only Sara and one other girl; they are at the Principal's office, something about their senior trip, so we start without them. Everyone is in an upbeat mood, they've stripped away all the excess, moved the desks to the side of the classroom, made the space their own, they are slowly warming up, some are starting to phonate or talk in a stream of consciousness of their own. Any other day I'd be revelling in how all I have been working on has become routine for them.

No way around it, pull yourself together, this is not a time for easy. I cough, get up, ask for the class to begin and for us to talk about anger. I (a girl) am angry at my dad, I could have strangled him with my bare hands, then a fragment of imitation of father mansplaning; I (a boy) am angry at the chemistry teacher, I could... her, and here an imitation of chopping with an axe; I (a girl) am angry at the official exams, why the fuck do I need this in my life, I (a boy) am angry because the bathroom smells bad, I (a girl) an angry at my butt because it's too big.

—I am angry at kids who drive fast cars – I say finally, and I feel like nobody can hear me. —Stop for a minute. Stop. I won't be able to clear the decks today if I don't share this with you, because it's really important for me, and it should be important for you. Did you hear of the police offer who killed himself today?

—Yes, Jesus, my bus drove right by where they found him – said Ema.

—I don't know whether you know the whole story, but he is gone because he was bullied. Only because he fined an arrogant kid, the son of some shitty Međimurje big shot, no doubt driving a BMW...

Danko chimed in:

—That makes me nuts, hey. I couldn't care less if someone has a fancy car, but if they behave like that, well they should go straight to jail.

Some nodded, some merely stared at the floor, they hadn't joined their own anger to mine.

—He was 22 years old – I added – just a little older than you.

—Those shitheads deserve to go to jail – added someone else softly.

— All he did was write a fine for someone who was speeding– I added.

—Someone has to take responsibility.

—He was one against them all.

The pack shared my anger, and I didn't have to carry all the burden alone. That was enough for me to survive, at least for that day.

Sara and the other girl came in with an entirely different burst of energy. Sara asked who'd died. Several of us worked up smiles, we had been through a little catharsis and somehow there was no feeling, with the logic of the situation, that we should repeat the whole story for her. To do that really didn't occur to anyone. But Renato.

—I think it's important for the girls to hear, so they can join us – he said.

No matter how close the group had come, no matter how close it's possible to get to that idiot, the thrill people like him get from running the show is too compelling to let it pass by. I did not catch on to what was going on, probably the only one there who didn't, so I reran the story.

—Jesus, what I'd do to that kid, that he'd never come out of Lepoglava Prison again, and let them go ahead and butt-fuck him...

Sara and the other girl giggled, Renato said:

—They need context.

I said:

—So today a young police officer killed himself, and the main culprit for this is that fat cat rich kid, that dimwit hotrod, probably wearing white sweats that cost what I earn in a month. The cop fined him for speeding, but little did the cop know that Daddy...

I felt a hush. I looked up, I saw them looking at Sara, and Sara and Renato looking at me. She furious, he—ecstatic. All he needed to ejaculate was to point to his contribution to the chaos:

—I think Sara might have an objection – he chuckled.

Sara began. Her voice shook. Her voice never shook.

—May I ask you something? What do you even know about this whole story? And about the boy, the one you're describing so nicely? Have you ever seen him? Were you there when this happened?

They all looked at me. My stomach felt like it had when I'd locked horns with Renato. But there was one small difference. If I now apologize, I'm done for. I don't mean as far as the drama section goes, or *Antigone*, I mean for myself. I cannot bow down once more. Yes, Sara deserves my apology far more than the little psychopath did, but this came a few weeks too late. There was no little village, there was no I-have-to-be-likeable-to-everyone, some things were clear.

—Some things are clear in and of themselves, Sara. No, I was not there, nor were you.

—Exactly! Exactly! And that is why I cannot understand where you get the right...?

—Where I get the right? What? To call out human depravity when I see it?

—That boy you're now insulting is one of the finest people I know...

—...Oh come on, how could he be a fine person, by what criteria? That he can adopt five stray dogs or donate to humanitarian charities means nothing compared to the fact...

—... To what fact?!

—.... That he called his daddy when the cop wrote the fine, and his daddy crushed the young person who did nothing wrong and who is now dead!

—If this is another one of your drama exercises, I decline to take part, because this is way too serious and I sincerely cannot believe you are rushing to such a superficial judgment about something you know squat about...

I hear my other self speaking, while my first self is too preoccupied with the fact that everything is revolving around it.

—I know nothing? I know nothing? Sara, come down off your ivory tower, take the silver spoon out of your mouth and have a look for a moment at how the rest of us are living who don't have the privilege of parents who sweep problems under the rug...

The world is no longer revolving, Sara is the one who turns on her heel and leaves the classroom. The rest stare at the floor. Renato turns to face the wall, to give himself a moment to exult in his little victory in peace. My legs twitch, one of me wants to go running after Sara, while the other is frozen and is collecting its strength to somehow finish the rehearsal.

—Gooooood – I chirped at some point, a good soul even laughed, hoping to ease the collective tension. – Let's not talk any more today. Let's do this. Find yourselves a place to work, each on your own, and give a little thought to a role you'd like to play and write it out on paper. Sometime in life. Under perfect conditions, with a perfect cast of actors... what do you think, what sort of emotion or character could you act supremely? You can refer to any movie or series or performance you watched or read. Okay? I am going briefly to the teachers' lounge, then I'll be back. You have 15 minutes.

I leave the classroom, I look toward the door out of the school, but Sara is no longer there. I whisper:

—Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

In the distance of the hallway there are three cleaning ladies, Vera, Mara and Spoma.
They don't see me while they chat.

*I see that from olden time the sorrows in the house of the Labdacidae
are heaped upon the sorrows of the dead;
and generation is not freed by generation,
but some god strikes them down, and the race hath no deliverance.
For now that hope of which the light had been spread above
the last root of the house of Oedipus that hope, in turn,
is brought low by the blood-stained dust due to the gods infernal,
and by folly in speech, and frenzy at the heart. [translation: R. C. Jebb]*

IT'S ONLY ME HERE

EXT. NIGHT - The parking lot in front of the Taradi Funeral Home.

Marli pulls into the parking lot. There are a few other cars and a black Mercedes hearse with beige drapes. On the side in longhand is the inscription: "Taradi Funeral Services www.pogrebitaradi.eu." Marli switches off the ignition, sits for a while longer with both hands on the steering wheel, takes a deep breath and gets out. Marli's sister, SIS (25), in black, is standing by the entrance, smoking. Marli comes over to her without a word, they hug, she buries her face on Marli's shoulder. He hugs her tightly for a long time and can't hear what she is murmuring through her tears. Only when her cigarette burns down to her fingers does she pull away. The wet stains from her tears form the shape of a large moth on his uniform. She brushes away her tears with her pullover stretched over her hand, while with her other hand she stubs out her cigarette and looks around to see if anyone inside has seen her smoking.

MARLI

(points to the door)

Here?

SIS

(nods)

Papa and Dražen are already in there.

Marli shoots her a meaningful look.

SIS

Don't, please, I don't have the strength.

MARLI

I didn't say a word. How's Pappy?

SIS

For the first half hour he couldn't grasp what was going on. The man from the police told me they'd found him and they'd be bringing Neno's Golf back once they were done processing it, but Pappy suddenly pipes up: "Why Neno can drive the car home hisself, he's got a license." Then it hit him – what happened, his legs gave way, he had to sit, and then back he went into the past and asked when Neno's shift would be over so they could have dinner. Right now he's sorta present.

INT. NIGHT - Reception area at the Taradi Funeral Home

Marli and Sis enter the spacious salon at the funeral home. Inside there is a lot of empty space which the indirect lighting hides, the carpeting and wallpaper are in soothing pastel tones, the spacious armchairs, the smell of coffee and flowers, from invisible speakers a barely audible synthesizer cover of an evergreen. PAPPY (65) and Marli's brother-in-law DRAŽEN (28) are sitting on one side, and TARADI (50), the head of the funeral home, is across from them. Well-dressed, he speaks calmly and softly, and has a notebook on his lap. Nobody notices the front door open; Marli holds his sister back for a moment.

TARADI

... just a few more particulars to attend to, shall we say, this evening. Your son was quite, you know, tall, and we don't have

all our models available in his size. But I can warmly recommend a very solid, high-quality model, the Kerub, made from a nice hardwood, with attractive metal handles. We have three colors available in our warehouse. White, then shiny black, I mean lacquer, very elegant, but perhaps a less shiny model is more befitting, shall we say, a young person, such as him, a little lighter brown in color, shall we say, natural. It can come furnished with an internal lining in several colors and fabrics, and all that is included in the package covered by the police union, but... From the time we prepare your son for burial, tonight, and until the actual, shall we say, burial, he will be kept in a closed coffin because of the condition of the body...

PAPPY

(hoarse, through a throat that hasn't spoken for some time)

Why's that?

TARADI

I regret to say that the body came to us with a head wound which we could not repair to a condition, with the means we have at our disposal, that would correspond, shall we say, to the appearance of the deceased while he was still alive.

Pappy reverted to the lethargic, hunched pose of someone who is not, really, there.

TARADI

Have you perhaps given thought either with your daughter or your son to the clothing you would like the deceased to be wearing for the burial?

DRAŽEN

Not yet, we came, like, straight here.

TARADI

Of course, you can let me know later, it's not urgent for the time being... And, as I already told you, the coffin will be closed, so perhaps this is not so important, shall we say, usually it's a suit of his clothing, with a shirt and tie, and since the deceased was a police officer, perhaps his uniform? We have already had similar cases.

DRAŽEN

(looks at Pappy, who does not react)

They sent the uniform for...

TARADI

...forensic processing, yes, of course. Perhaps you have his full dress uniform... That's fine, when you decide, later, just message us and someone will come to your home and pick up the clothing you have set aside, and the shoes. Any time. We work, as they say, 24/7...

(a smile that lasts a millisecond)

Here is a brochure for you, you have the options for the caskets I told you about, so give this a little thought and as I said, the lining, my proposal is we don't use it, but we can state this on the order so the funds can be used to reduce the expense of the gravestone should you decide to have us make it for you, but we can discuss that later, too. Once more, my sincere condolences, I'll be right here in the office if you have any further questions or need more tea or coffee.

Taradi and Dražen stand up, Pappy remains seated.

DRAŽEN

So Neno... the body stays here with you.

TARADI

(a circular gesture of the hand signalling that they will take care of everything)

Here with us, we see to everything having to do with preparation and transportation, we contact the administrators of the cemetery and mortuary, you needn't worry about that, the casket will be ready tomorrow afternoon...

DRAŽEN

No, I was wondering, doesn't he have to stay at the hospital, for an autopsy or something?

TARADI

No. The investigation established that this was... by his own hand... That dictates what happens next, so no autopsy is required (he notices Sis and Marli standing by the door). Good evening, may I help you? Were you sent by the union?

MARLI

No, I am his brother.

TARADI

Ah, yes, your brother-in-law told me you are also a police officer. Please accept my sincere condolences.
(he extends his hand, holds Marli's hand and gaze in silence for a moment)
I explained everything to your brother-in-law and father, and I am also here for you, should you have any other questions.

Taradi slips away with a polite, practiced bow, Marli comes over to Pappy, who is sitting there like a groggy child. Marli crouches down next to him. Pappy stares blankly at Marli for a few seconds, then finally focuses his gaze, leans toward Marli, hugs him and crumples to the floor. Marli holds him to soften the fall and then he kneels. Pappy slumps over Marli in a scene that is oddly similar to the reproduction of Michelangelo's Pietà on the cabinet by the entrance to the office.

PAPPY

He said he'd be home right after the end of his shift.

Sis crouches down next to him and tries to hug them both. Marli eases Pappy back up onto the armchair, Pappy drops his head back as if looking up at the ceiling but his eyes are closed, tears stream down both cheeks. Dražen and Sis confer in whispers, then they knock on the door of the office and go in to Taradi, leaving Marli and Pappy. Pappy lowers his eyes to Marli, gets up from the armchair, smooths his sweater. He looks at the front door.

PAPPY

Are they outside?

MARLI

Who, Pappy? It's just me here.

PAPPY

(staring at the door, then at Marli)

The criminal investigators. I thought they'd be coming with you.

If they come to our house we'll have to run out to pick up something for them to drink, a full house of people, then at the

mortuary at the deathwatch. But today they'll probably come,
won't they?

Sis comes out of the office, comes over to Pappy and takes him
by the arm, though he is now steady on his feet.

PAPPY

It's better if you call, you know the number, so...

MARLI

Who should I call, Pappy?

PAPPY

So, what's this now... Don't they have to come to sign off on
the investigation record or something? Call and find out if
they're coming today, or tomorrow morning, when I know I'll be
home so they don't have to wait for me.

MARLI

If there is something they need to know, they'll call.

Pappy stares intently at Marli.

SIS

What's so hard about calling them?

MARLI

Who am I supposed to call, the police?

Pappy looks at Sis, then at Marli.

SIS

(sternly)

Marko!

MARLI

Sure, I'll call them later, they're still at work on the car and on the site where they found him, I'm sure they have this in mind. Are we done here?

SIS

Yes, let's go home, we still have to set aside the clothes.

PAPPY

And pick up some drinks, the house will be packed with people, we'll need bread rolls or something else to put on the table...

Dražen joins them, they go out into the cold.

EXT. NIGHT - The parking lot in front of the Tarabi Funeral Home

Pappy gets into Dražen's car.

MARLI

Are you going with him?

SIS

Yes, and you'll be following us, right?

MARLI

I'm going home to change, I'll call later.

EXT NIGHT - the terrace of Marli's vineyard cabin.

Marli sits, looks out at the silhouette of the vineyard. His breath turns to mist in the cold. His cell phone vibrates. The name of the messenger: Posedi Minakitu, appears on the screen.

"I won't ask how you're doing. Call no matter what you need, call me or any of the boys, you know we're here. I'm putting you down for a week's leave. And we can prolong it if necessary."

Marli inhales the smoke of his cigarette and types:

"Don't put me down for anything, I'm coming in tomorrow as per usual."

His cell buzzes again.

"? If you change your mind, give us a call tomorrow. But if you do come in, first you'll have to see the psychologist."

Marli types.

"Oh goodie, fuck that."

Marli smokes. The cell buzzes.

"It's protocol, pal. Keep it together."

Marli gets up and walks through the balcony door into the cabin, edges the wardrobe aside with his foot, from the crack that opens he takes a sack of tobacco. Before he pushes the wardrobe back into place, he notices a nearly deflated green balloon in the crack. He picks it up off the floor, turns to the kitchen to toss it in the trash, but stops, examines it more closely, then

puts it on the table. After that he goes out onto the terrace and begins to roll a joint.