

Short Stories



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Contemporary Montenegrin Short Stories

Sreten Asanović | Ognjen Spahić | Vladimir Vojinović | Andrej Nikolaidis

Lena Ruth Stefanović | Balša Brković | Zuvdija Hodžić | Bosiljka Pušić

Dragan Radulović | Aleksandar Bečanović | Jovan Nikolaidis

Edition **Katedrala**

first edition 2010.

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Authors & Festival of Short Stories

Odakle zovem, Podgorica 2010

Publisher

Sibila d.o.o.

Obala Ribnice, 81000 Podgorica

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e-mail: karver@t-com.me

www.karver.org

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Design

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Print

M-print, Podgorica

Circulation

500 copies

COBISS.CG-ID 16026128

ISBN: 978-9940-9215-3-8



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Publishing of this book is supported by

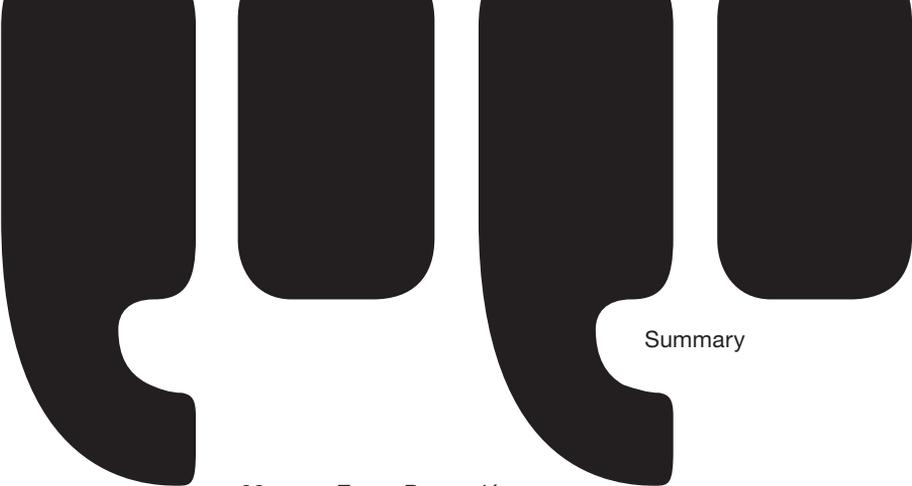


**Government of Montenegro
Ministry of Culture, Sport and Media**





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Zoran Paunović



**TO MAKE
A SHORT STORY LONG:
CONTEMPORARY MONTENEGRIN
SHORT STORIES**

The short story is probably one of the oldest literary genres, dating back to the oral tradition of the distant past, when telling stories was practically the only pastime and was also the only way of preserving the collective knowledge and lore of a community. Through the ages, that genre has developed into a refined literary form, highly praised especially for its brevity, which very easily reveals either the ineptitude or the masterful craftsmanship of its author.

The stories in this collection certainly provide eleven examples of the latter: they testify not just to the literary skills and merits of their authors, but also to the vitality, freshness and diversity of contemporary Montenegrin literature. Written in a variety of approaches, voices and styles, these stories manage both to build themselves into their rich national literary tradition and to announce new possible paths for its further development. This is quite obvious from the very first story, in which Sreten Asanović creates an apparently archaic atmosphere, in perfect accordance with the almost mythical environment in which 'Playing with Fire' takes place – showing that all stories that are properly told or written are indeed timeless. Ognjen Spahić's piece, comparable with its predecessor only in its striking impressiveness, offers a stark contrast: powerfully written, poetically condensed and emotion-

ally highly charged, 'Cut, Copy, Paste' points to the fact that life and art stand in a much closer connection than is usually assumed - death and art even more so. 'Transition' by Vladimir Vojinović, in a somewhat similar mode of 'dirty realism', offers a piece of real life, raw and passionate, permeated by a discreet vein of the metafictional spirit: apparently dealing with the troubles of storytelling, it turns into a full-blooded story about the futility of life and purposefulness of creation.

Creation, in a slightly different sense, is also at the centre of 'The Body, a Story', written by Andrej Nikolaidis. Set in a recognizable urban milieu and within the distinct framework of contemporary popular culture, this story deals with the difficulties of attaining spirituality and solving the dichotomy between body and soul in the civilization of fast food and Coca-Cola. Such a world is partly present in the story 'Teshuva', executed through subtle and sensitive writing that focuses upon the connections between past and present, everyday life and myth. Employing the cultural and literary legacy of thoroughly different civilizations and epochs, Lena Ruth Stefanović strives at creating new myths, deeply personal and strongly universal at the same time, firmly built upon the ruins of the old ones. With at least partly similar intentions, Balša Brković draws a map of the world that belongs to the very recent past, but is nevertheless permeated with a strong air of mythical timelessness. 'An Occurrence in the Life of Parmenid Pejanović, 1958' is a story whose title character, in spite of all the facts his fictional life is shaped from, stands as a fine embodiment of the ineluctable elusiveness of human existence.

In his story entitled 'The Dance', Zuvdija Hodžić, on the other hand, gives potent expression to an almost metaphysical yearning for ideal beauty, in a world deprived of any ideals. In a clear-cut, meticulous style, with a strong lyrical dimension that never stands in the way of the precisely structured and executed plot, the author reminds us that in this world of deep and multifarious alienation, beauty may very well be one of the last things that is still able to create bonds between

people. Such bonds are examined in the story 'Mad Živan', by Bosiljka Pušić whose artistic vision is characterised by a sharp eye for meaningful detail, and power of insight into the complex metaphysics of so-called 'ordinary life'. Pervaded by deep humaneness, this story is also saturated in odours, colours, tastes and sounds – all of them joined in a kind of Joycean synaesthesia of childhood. 'The Raft of the Medusa' is one of the most striking artistic symbols of the horrors pertaining to the epoch of the end of history; in the eponymous story by Dragan Radulović, that raft is sailing through the chaos and disorder of the contemporary Balkans and Europe, carrying human wrecks that are not even sure whether they want to be saved, so they waste their lives in trivial, futile rituals, waiting for an answer to the question they do not dare to ask. In a similar vein of gloomy existentialism, illness becomes a powerful metaphor in the Poean atmosphere of Aleksandar Bečanović's 'At the Stroke of Midnight', a masterfully performed journey into the very heart of desperation, that reaches its climax in the eerie, paradoxical triumph of life. Finally, 'The Circle', written by Jovan Nikolaidis, sums up many of the topics and motives that have been tackled and explored in the stories that precede it – mostly homelessness as a permanent individual and collective state of mind, and an eternal lust for travel as a means of escape from the fact that there is no such thing as home. Or that it exists only in dreams: people, places and events are nothing but landmarks in the unceasing quest with no ultimate goal; apparently based upon firm, undeniable facts, human existence attains reality and importance only when it is turned into a tale.

And this is what all the stories in this book are about. In their colourful and captivating diversity, they persuasively demonstrate how every authentic and vivid national literature, Montenegrin in this case, easily and naturally finds its place in the global context of imaginative writing. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the eleven authors from this collection show us how any life can be turned into a story, any story into life. ””



Short Stories

Contemporary Montenegrin Short Stories

Sreten Asanović



PLAYING WITH FIRE

As soon as the first summer dry spell came, the anemic spring near the town would run black like a petrol lamp and the town's fountains would gradually begin to wane, letting out an occasional teardrop that was not even enough to wet a traveler's lips, and certainly not to quench the thirst of the town surrounded by the bare karst. This year the drought hit much earlier: the fountains gasped hollow and muffled, quite different than usual when the water would dry up; they gasped the stench of rusted pipes. The waterworks soon gave out, and its job was taken over by two aging water tankers, around which would gather crowds of sleepy, tousled women in the early morning, bringing their water-pots and jugs, their ewers and pans, their canteens and flasks. Around the wells, lines began to form, the first since the war because nothing was being distributed in the recently liberated town, and the enemy stockpiles had been carted off in the postwar chaos.

In the evening, the townsfolk longing for a breath of fresh air sat next to their open windows, not daring to step out into the street because things kept exploding all the time. Gunshots rang out without reason or rhyme, sometimes accompanied by a song and sometimes by a scream, and good news and bad was gathered along the way, its meaning becoming evident only later, when folks were alone or at

home with their families. When the scarcely found radios would announce that another town had been liberated, gunfire would spread from Headquarters all over the town, louder and longer than what was heard while the battle for the town raged. Yet, the most common were the 15-gun salutes at soldiers' funerals.

Thirst had its own laws that were not easy to understand, not even by those who knew them best. But an internal tie existed between the thirst and celebratory gunfire; the explosions amplified the thirst and the poverty, and brought about a kind of restlessness.

At the edge of town, several hundred yards after the last house, beneath Suva Greda, the explosions never ceased; as the heat began to rise, they became more frequent and more deliberate. Nobody knew when they had begun to ring out, but they somehow gradually grew into a sort of ritual: the town was aware that those explosions had nothing to do with the other gunfire. The silences between them were long, sometimes even up to an hour, but there was no sound that could pass unnoticed in the parched town, by day shackled by the roiling and heavy silence and at night by the icy quiet that drew the stars down seemingly within arm's reach. Everyone nervously awaited the blasts coming from the house on the sunny side, not allowing the nauseating emptiness to depart from their stomachs, ever present since the war had begun. Those explosions, marked by an inexplicable indistinguishability and internal rhythm, seemed to dry out the already torrid air.

Only the children remained unimpressed by that from the very start. As far as most of them knew the blasts began on the day of their birth, and so they felt that that bit of the soundscape was something natural and inevitable. It was not a small number of children of whom it was said that they were born during the first bombing, the second capitulation, or the visit of Emmanuel III, who was angry because there was more shooting than applause along the road where he passed.

And the house on the sunny side of Suva Greda was full of children. During those days of sultry uncertainty, they did not play with their friends in town. The folk on the periphery saw them hurrying off somewhere and stealing back, carrying something concealed and secretive. This business of theirs, or so it seemed to the townsfolk, was in no way related to the explosions that went off as if according to schedule.

It was difficult to withstand the long pauses between the explosions, full of an emptiness consisting of silence and fear. As the moment grew ever nearer that would tear through the illusory peace of the town, and especially that part of it, they became ever more nervous, everything bothered them, they answered family members gruffly and were constantly bellicose.

Yet, it was the children who first tried to approach the solitary house, to peek into the garden at the very foot of the sunny side. However, the curious little ones were quickly sent packing by their comrades from the mysterious house, as if they hadn't played together until recently. This also gave the explosions beneath Suva Greda an even more puzzling interpretation.

The temptation could no longer be avoided; several of the townsfolk from the nearest street over decided to walk up to the house in the interval between two explosions. They had to find a convincing reason to visit that house, until recently just a regular old house, and its owner, a withered and war-weary woman about whom even the closest neighbors knew very little. All that was known was that she had a sharp tongue and that she was raising, with great difficulty, a whole passel of children who were solely her burden after her husband's death. She supported them by herself, although her oldest son could easily be eighteen years old; they knew that young man to be unruly and even unpredictable, courageous in his own way. He broke into the well-guarded storehouses of the occupiers, or into those of their mer-

chants, slashing the tires on their military transport trucks. No one dared to council him or instruct him because Danilo was willing to start a fight at any moment. Seemingly weak and anemic, but hot-tempered and intolerant, he once stuck a knife through his own hand to win a bet. After that event, Danilo was the unreserved master of the house and the immediate environs; his mother, whose tongue was feared by many, would do whatever he asked of her.

When the townsfolk reached the house, the woman was waiting for them on the threshold and caustically asked them if they had perhaps come to offer her aid, to see if she could feed so many children. She was surprised to receive a positive answer and dubiously stepped back from the door so they could enter, and then led them down a clean hall to the other side where, under a crippled vine in the garden among the stones, a cot had been placed. Danilo was lying on it, his cheeks feverish and puffy, his eyes somber. The sick man did not move an inch as the visitors drew near; he just kept staring at the stones, wheezing. What was lying next to him surprised his visitors even more than his illness, which they were told was “galloping”. Several red Indian hand-grenades, one square one like a pineapple, and two with strong wooden handles. There were several others there whose origins could not be determined because the visitors did not dare to pay special attention to them, to have a good look at them. In a roundabout way they asked the sick man how he felt, not really waiting for the answer, unconvincingly mumbling that it was nothing, that it would pass, that one could see he was already feeling better. As they quickly withdrew from that unpleasant and artificial situation, striding to reach the street as fast as possible, they did not hear Danilo’s groaning:

“I’m certainly not going to kick the bucket today...”

When they went out into the street, they had no desire to recount what the walled garden looked like. Before their eyes was that pile of grenades and the upturned soil, like in the field once the potatoes have

been dug up. The ground was sprinkled with small, sharp bits of limestone, thickly strewn over it like white flowers. They were tiny bits of stone broken off by the rhythmical explosions of the grenades, but the hot stones were sprinkled and peeled, overgrown with an unusual moss, not the lively and light-colored one that gives stone tiles their shine, but some sort of dark, autumnal one, that brought to mind the moisture and humidity of a shoreline cave. Striding down the street, the visitors concluded that the small wall of piled stones protected the sick man under the awning of vines from the bits of stone that were being scattered around the yard.

They were shaken from their recounting by a powerful explosion. Even though they expected it, were afraid of it, they took it harder than before. Now the game seemed somehow clearer to them, the struggle with life. They forgot about their thirst and the drought, and before their eyes was Danilo, using the last of his strength to stretch and throw a grenade over the wall in the garden, while his younger brothers made sure that he did not run out of ammunition; a mortal shattering the silence that loomed over him and over the broiling tiles of his sunny yard.

For a few more days the explosions continued in a sort of erratic rhythm, and then they stopped altogether. ”

Ognjen Spahić



CUT, COPY, PASTE

*Got to hurry on back to my hotel room,
Where I've got me a date with Botticelli's niece.
She promised that she'd be right there with me
When I paint my masterpiece.*
(Bob Dylan, 1971.)

He appeared at the door and said: *I came for the pictures*. In fact he said: *They sent me for the pictures*. And when Andrej asked: *What pictures?* he stuck his hand through the crack in the door and said: *Those over there, the red ones*. He said *red* though that color actually only appeared in one of them. Strong male hands in the foreground and two fingers pressing on veins that had just been cut. Dots of oil paint, some fine and indifferent; some larger, shiny and foreboding. The right hand bare, smeared up to the elbow. Blood being squeezed from the canvas. The sleeve of the white shirt neatly turned up to the middle of the forearm. Andrej waited for several seconds, glanced back at the wall once more, and then opened the door wide and gave a sour grin to the man who had come that morning for his pictures. The man said his name was Tod and at that same instant a white envelope appeared, going through the door of the apartment led by someone's right hand. On a small piece of awkwardly folded paper, it said in thick letters: *I need the pictures. Exhibition*. In the lower left-hand corner, next to the signature, the pen had punched a hole in the paper, and this led Andrej to think that his ex-wife had composed the ultimatum on her knees. He sniffed the envelope and the piece of paper but he did not find a trace of anything except the stench of the cellulose and paper industry. It occurred to him that the tone of the text

was also in accord with that smell and for one instant he had the desire to smell the being waiting on the other side of the threshold just so he could complete the picture. *Your wife sent me, you know... It's probably all explained in the letter. I didn't read it... believe me. I just want to pick them up and go. A picture is just a picture,* he said and took an uncertain step, placing his heavy black shoe on the doorstep. Andrej stepped back from his body and caught a whiff of the metallic smell of sweat mixed with that of cotton and shaving lotion. *So, tell me what does my wife look like?* he asked as if he were demanding a confirmation of her identity, though he really said it just to have fun. He had never heard a description of his wife in the words of another man. He hoped that this guy would start to analyze her body, he hoped that he would be vulgar. *If you don't believe me you can call her,* was all he said as he took a telephone from his pocket. He was trying to leave the impression of being a professional. He took another step forward and was standing with both feet on the dirty tiles, nervously looking at the pictures through the French doors of the living room. Andrej stepped aside and gestured that the guy could go in and take the pictures. Those were the last things she had left behind. In the first months after their break up she came by once a week with her younger sister and, without comment, emptied the closets, the shelves in the bathroom and the kitchen cupboard. She took everything, even the half-empty body milk, the coffee cup with Dali's moustache, the tweezers, the nail clippers and the incense. She gathered up things as if she were hiding the evidence of a tragedy, the traces of a catastrophe that had annihilated a town that, now, it would be better to wipe from the face of the earth, to destroy the artifacts so that the whim of oblivion could open the door wide. Her smell disappeared from the apartment two weeks after her departure. The room where she painted and which she did not want to call a studio, that was the one she emptied last. She showed up one morning with two tipsy workers who took cardboard boxes and filled them with her painting utensils, together with the garbage, furnishings and the clumps of paint stuck to the parquet flooring. When they had removed the boxes, they reappeared with two buckets of freshly

mixed paint and did the walls. While this was going on, Andrej sat in the living room trying to concentrate on gulps of whisky and Sibelius' *Violin Concerto in D Minor*. He watched them coming and going through the filthy glass where he could still see her fingerprints. Through the glass where the man left his fingerprints as he took away the last traces of her, thought Andrej. The fingertips are the most intimate parts of the body. The bundles of nerve endings that define the tangible world, that define foreign objects. Once the pictures were gone, he would soak a rag in alcohol and polish the glass. He believed that that would bring him some sort of tranquility. He sat in the armchair and watched the man who looked at the pictures carefully for a few minutes, as if he were deciding which he would remove from the wall first. *Whoever it was that painted these things...* he said, looking at Andrej, he shook his head and grabbed the first one in the series. He worked quickly and skillfully. He worked with the dexterity of an executioner who is about to hang four victims. Taking pictures off walls, that is what he has actually devoted his life to, Andrej thought watching him as he carefully laid the frames on the wooden floor. When he took down the third one in the row, his strong masculine hands went to his face as he tried to see the cut on the canvass that was pushing the blood out. *There's no hope for this guy*, he said, looking at Andrej and smiling. *Wounds like these don't heal*, he said in serious tones, acting as if he had said something smart and significant. *I'm leaving now*, he gathered up the frames and headed toward the door. Andrej looked at him and wanted to say something, but then he started to feel that atomized confusion of thought that would, either in a few minutes, hours or days, form into a monster made up of sadness, loss, depression and death. He realized that he would not manage to cope with that and that, as the last of her pictures departed, so did the last bits of sense that gave life meaning. He no longer loved that woman and he had reached closure about that a few months ago. Occasionally he imagined her naked and attempted to masturbate but his erections were forced and short-lived. He was surprised by the speed with which all the memories became two-dimensional flashes,

colorless, odorless and tasteless. He felt a different kind of effluence, and at one moment he even compared himself with that painting, with the open veins from which his will, strength and love were draining, cold-bloodedly, without sound, movement or haste; everything that he normally thought of when he said “life” was disappearing.

After he had seen off the man with the paintings, he double-locked the door. He looked at his feet and concluded that his nails had grown too long. He imagined what toes would look like in one of her paintings. He rinsed the dust from the bottom of a glass and filled it half-way with whisky. A large gulp slowly descended into his stomach. The smell of the smoky fluid filled his nostrils and made his lungs tingle. He delayed his return to the living room. He was afraid of the absence and of the empty wall that he did not wish to face. She had given him the picture with the sliced veins for his thirtieth birthday. At the time, he had taken that as the final act which gave evidence of the certainty of their relationship and indicated love. He waited for her in the courtyard of a hotel, drinking espresso in the sun, and she appeared, carrying something that looked from afar like a large white envelope. *For you. Happy Birthday*, she said. He accepted her kiss and tore the wrapping paper. For a few seconds he tried to find a trace of gentleness and emotion in the scene of sliced veins and bloody hands. He thanked her and said that he liked the painting. He said he would hang it on the wall as soon as he got home. He said that the picture would hang in the living room in front of the armchair where he liked to spend his time. She ordered two scoops of vanilla ice cream, and he took another espresso. He set the picture on a nearby chair. A gust of warm wind rustled the white paper, and then it carried it a few yards away, sliding it along the marble floor tiles of the hotel terrace. They hung the picture on the wall together. Then they made love in that big armchair. She straddled him and, the whole time he was kissing her perfumed neck, he could see the bloody reflection of the hand through the locks of her hair. Paintings that were *untitled* irritated him. Andrej considered the forfeiture of words to be pretentious and sinister.

He quickly drained the glass and poured another like it. He shut the window, closed the blinds and drew the curtains. He took a bite of an apple that had been sitting on the refrigerator for days, and then spit it out on the floor. The stench of sour-rot filled his palate. That stench mingled with the smell of whiskey in his breath and made him clear his throat. He lit a cigarette and took a long hard drag. He imagined the smoke descending into his alveoli, going down into the invisible hollows and filling them with particles of artificial meaning. As he walked over to the armchair, he looked at his feet. The nail on his left big toe was a bit shorter. The blue outlines of his veins looked like a tree without leaves. He put out his cigarette in an ashtray that had the ocean and several cypress trees portrayed on its bottom. Only then did he slowly look up and observe the wall. The place where the hands had hung was framed by a rectangle the color of ash and dust. He felt his stomach turn; the blossoming of some dark substance, he thought, that slowly spread throughout his body, announcing finality. He looked at the absence on the wall and tried to assign a meaning to it. He heard the north wind rushing through the pines and felt a steely cold in his very bones. Tiny drops of sweat gathered on Andrej's brow. With his right hand he wiped his forehead, and then he quite precisely turned the sleeves of his white shirt up, raising them above his elbows. He squeezed his fist and observed the flexing of the muscles beneath the tightened skin. He had powerful hands and a lot of blood had flowed through them. With a cigarette between his lips, Andrej filled another glass of whisky and turned on the heater. The rising heat made the iron expand and pop. He returned to the armchair and closed his eyes.

The speed with which it all took place surprised him. First he felt a pleasant warmth on his right palm. The pain came only a few seconds later: when he opened his eyes, when he raised his right hand, when he dropped the shining blade from his left. He didn't believe that he could cut so deeply. The cut was now lost under the rhythmical spurts of blood that flowed out and left dark spots everywhere. He got

up and walked slowly toward the wall. With two fingers he pressed the wound and pressed his smeared forearms into the outline of the frame, trying not to betray the original. The similarity defined metaphors that he had not managed to express in words. Then red lines slowly ran down the white surface of the wall, and the only thing Andrej thought at that moment was: that the picture was coming out of the frame, that it was finally being liberated, revealing its true nature, defining some kind of meaning. He suddenly felt a heavy drowsiness. Small green sparks glittered before his eyes. Each blink of his eyelids changed their color, and among those colors Andrej believed he saw the black limbo of some ancient warmth that would suck up his body at any moment. When he took his arms from wall, the outlines of his hands remained within the outline of the frame: steady and eternal, he thought as he tried to control his steps. He staggered over to the armchair from where he could look at the wall in peace, along with the new meaning on it. He wished, in addition to all of that, that he could hear a gentle whispering: a calm voice explaining phenomena and things. He tried to keep his eyes open but when he tried to rub his eyes he realized that his hands were lying with their palms facing upward. He looked at them as if they were objects someone had taken from the wall and accidentally placed in his lap. Like just-painted shapes that were slowly drying. After that thought, Andrej inhaled and exhaled seventeen more times. ”

Vladimir Vojinović



TRANSITION

The front door slammed.

“The Montanaro is closed,” she shouted from the kitchen. “I saw Vesko, he climbed up on the scaffolding and took the ad down... He said that this town doesn’t need Montanaro jazz... He almost started crying... And then they took away the portraits of the jazz artists.”

He pushed the keyboard away, swiveled the chair with his feet and stood up. Go ahead and connect two notes into a compound sentence, he thought. He went over to the shelf, grabbed the vodka and a dirty glass. Indeed, that shitty idea had crossed his mind seven hundred days ago and he could just never bring it to a conclusion. It seemed to be the perfect topic for a novel. And he planned it down to the last detail. He knew that he had to break it down into two parallel story lines that then needed to be interwoven. He knew that the key to it was that each of the separate stories needs to have a stylistically perfect ending, and that in essence both had to remain incomplete. He also knew a thousand other ways of connecting the seemingly unrelated characters, time and space, and all of that was going well for him until two months ago, but he was left hanging over the last few lines. And now he remembered how many times he had cursed at his colleagues who had preached at him about how you first write the title, the final sentence and only then do you begin with the narration. Perhaps he even envied them now.

“You still haven’t finished that text,” she looked at him across the kitchen counter.

“*No.*”

“OK, if you think that vodka will finish up that chapter... I told you, the *Montanaro* is closed!”

“I heard you the first time,” he shouted.

He tilted the vodka back and went back to the desk. Who cares about the *Montanaro* any more, he thought. That dive meant something only to them, of all the people in the city. In fact, recently the gathering of all the political shit-heads had become more rare, together with the stench of their aromatic cigars. They no longer ordered peanuts and wine together, and the music could be heard because the drunken politicalized shouts had vanished – the *Montanaro* had stopped being a fucking billboard for political slogans, but the place was no longer the same. If he dared to drop by, he thought, he would find a few lonely souls who weren’t even interested in the newspaper. Eyes filled with ennui would search over every accidental customer. Even Vesko himself rarely dropped by. And – he was sure of it – Vesko had had enough the day he buried his father. During the procession, they both noted that they didn’t see any of those great friends who used to drink all day on the house.

“Where will we go for coffee now? Or to listen to good music... We’re going to miss all that.”

“*Yes.*”

“... Especially old Darko. He was actually the one who kept the regular customers coming.”

There's the fucking word I need, he thought. *Community*. He greedily grabbed the keyboard and began typing at the speed of an Olympic sprinter.

She looked at him over the kitchen counter and gave a gentle smile. Make him spaghetti with his favorite sauce, she thought, and that will enhance his imagination even more. Like when he had missed the deadline for the essay he was doing for the Croatian publisher. It was three in the morning. She made the same spaghetti, they ate, drank some white wine and he put in the last full stop before dawn broke. And then they made love, almost till noon...

She filled the pan with water, put the stiff pasta in and turned on the stove. The timer was on, she just had to make sure the mushrooms and tomatoes did not burn. She turned toward the shelf and noticed that there was no wine. She looked under the sink. Nothing. There was also none in the cupboard. It must be in the pantry, she thought. The spaghetti slowly sank into the water and she went quickly to the pantry. Where is the... The timer started beeping.

“Just ten minutes of fucking quiet! Is that asking too much?!”

Neither the timer nor the keyboard could be heard any longer.

He stood up quickly, put on his shoes, pulled on his jacket, and went out. Snow mixed with rain was falling outside. Of all times for Vesko to close the bar, he thought. He whistled and a taxi stopped.

“Do you know a place where they make good coffee?”

“At my house, but I hope you don't mind, I can't really take you there!”

“Never mind, thanks anyway. Drive me downtown, wherever...”

“Yooooou got it!”

He got out at the parking lot behind the shopping center and strode up the street where all the artisan shops are found. A goldsmith's display looks like a grave, he thought. He remembered his sister's wedding. Their relatives and the wedding guests decorated her up like a Christmas tree. Later, thus weighted down, she looked at him over the empty bottles and glasses. Even if she had wanted to dance, she wouldn't have been able to move. He went over to her, caressed her hair and kissed her forehead. "Promise me something," he said to her. "What," she fluttered her eyelashes. "Before you get home, throw away all those big crosses and crap." He managed to make her laugh. And then they asked the band to play Johnny Stulić's *Partisan*, they clapped and tried to guess which one of the wedding guests was most shocked by that bit of madness.

He went into a bar. It was hard to adjust to the change of light at the bar. He noticed one of the Montanaro customers in the corner and nodded his head in greeting and sympathy. He ordered coffee and a newspaper.

"We don't keep newspapers," the waiter said.

"I didn't mean that you should..."

"...I mean, it's not a problem to pay the 50 cents, but the owner thinks it's a bad idea to attract customers who want to save half a euro on a newspaper. And I'll be damned if he ain't right."

He had no answer to that. He glanced over at the corner. His acquaintance was staring out the window. He hardly fit in the chair. It was comical when he tried to cross his legs wide like at the Montanaro. Soon thereafter another familiar face entered the bar and joined his acquaintance. It seemed to him that everything they said had to do with their attempt to define the new state of things.

He paid for his coffee and went out.

The slush had stopped falling. As he passed down the street he

bumped into a couple of shoulders, and that reminded him of the pain in his back. Hopefully she didn't throw all the spaghetti away, he thought and quickened his pace.

It was unlocked. The door slipped from his frozen fingers and slammed. She was curled up on the couch, holding the remote.

“You're right, there's nowhere to drink coffee!”

* * *

Three hundred and thirty pages. More of it has to be thrown out, he thought. Who reads such thick books nowadays. Two whole months, after he had finished it, polished it and edited it, and then again – 330. He began to dream the novel, with its letters carved into lotus petals. Yesterday he gave her the text and asked her to highlight all the descriptions in green. She finished it in less than two hours. She was happy. “It's nice,” she said. “It's you, and I have to tell you - you're your old self again.” She told him that she'd waited too long for his “return”. And that was the nicest thing the text offered her. To her it is, he thought, but who else will be able to understand that business about the return. Anyway he wasn't even thinking of how it would be if he had gone beyond his dead end in order to return to her. And the whole story about the number of pages was actually just an excuse for avoiding critiques of the nonsensical end of the novel. Yes, he had put in the last full stop, but it was not the one he hoped it would be. But she was not talking about that either. And he wasn't asking her that of her, but she should have just done what he asked her to, because the last thing he needed right now was her subjective story about some kind of return.

“You know,” he said, “you are one of the guilty parties for my ‘departure’... So, if I ask you to do something, please just do it.”

“No, according to you, I never play fair...”

“...Come on, I just need to shorten the text.”

“Well, what’s stopping you?”

Indeed, the one thing that no one in this world could prevent him from doing was - to shorten his story. But he just couldn’t stop babbling. And so the current ending was a consequence of his drive to tell the story to the very end, to clarify down to the stages, for him so painful, of the inertia of reception. He stared at the monitor. He tried to find page 312. Here, he thought, this is where it gets tangled up, here is where the two story lines collide. He looked at the sentences. The joining of the two had to be more conjugal, he thought. And then he turned to the shelf and grabbed her copy of the manuscript. Clearly, there was not a single letter of description here, but the whole page was highlighted. So was the next one. And the one after that... He looked up. She had her back to him. They had not exchanged a word since yesterday.

He got up, approached her quietly, and pressed his lips to her neck. He felt her breathing speed up. He slipped his hand onto her breast.

“Tomorrow is the opening! We got passes, look...”

“You are cordially invited to the grand opening of the cafe bar *L’Ombelico*. Please join us!” he held the fancy paper in his hands. It removed even the last hope for the *Montanaro*. The whole summer he listened to all sorts of positive gossip, he even ran into Vesko who gave him a few hints, but then in late summer Darko said that Vesko had gotten an offer from the owner of a chain of watch stores. The place was rented out for six or seven years. He didn’t believe that either, until this invitation arrived...

“Can we go, I’m really interested to see how it looks...”

“*Sure.*”

He was stuck on page 312. He had not budged for months. He could not unify the two damned story lines. It occurred to him that he could step out of both of them and determine the ending from an absolute distance, but that position also frustrated him. He did not see himself whatsoever in the role of an omniscient anything. Himself as separate and radiant. Because if he radiates, he thought, then he attracts attention to himself, and the last thing he wanted was for the characters he created to pay homage to him, especially not after the full stop he had placed. That was one thing, and the other - he did not believe in the least that everything that began to live in the novel was so dirtied that it needed some sort of purifying light. Why, everything he had written till now, he thought, was far removed from any sort of religious thinking. By God, he was a liberal! And the natural position of such a subject is the depiction of reflections. And, devil take it, who else's other than his own. Everything we depict, he thought, are our own reflections. There is nothing there in which we are not seen. Even icon artists, those superfluous creators of the Bible for the illiterate, they paint pictures of themselves! Of who else...

He looked at his watch. It was almost midnight. She came out of the bathroom in boxer shorts and a spaghetti-strap chemise. She still had her toothbrush in her mouth. She went to the bedroom and came back quickly. Immediately after that she put out her clothes for the next day, packed her laptop and fed some electricity into her cell phone from the plug.

“You’ve certainly got all your ducks in a row, sweetie...”

“All except you, honey. Wish me good night,” she said through her smile, and she pursed her just cleaned lips.

“Good night.”

She watched him as he slowly pulled on his new jeans. This action also told her a lot about his mental state. And it had gone on for

months. He had lost at least thirty pounds. There was nothing left for her to try in the kitchen. If she decided to open a restaurant now, she thought, she would make a bundle of money. And even now, she also did not really feel like going to the new bar, with its awful red interior, but she wanted to get him out of the house. He could drink some red wine with Marina and Ivan, and he would feel better. In the end of all things, at least he wouldn't be thinking of that damned novel.

"Shall we go?"

"Let's!"

She drove. They picked up Marina and parked the car on the square. Ivan was waiting for them at the door of the former *Montanaro*. They went in.

By habit they headed for the back of the bar, but they were intercepted by a ravishing hostess who directed them to the cellar. He did not hear what the hostess said to Ivan.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"...Tonight, sir, we have a unique chance to listen to the hits of Queen. Would you like for me to reserve you a table? Down there, in the concert hall..."

"Do we have to listen to live music?"

"No, of course not."

"Then we'll be at that table over there, and if we change our minds we'll call you over and go on down. *Okay?*"

"Okay."

He noticed that Ivan was a little embarrassed because of his reaction. The new owner was leaning on the bar. He was watching everything from the sidelines, but his disapproval could be seen in the way his criminal square jaw was set. They went over and sat down.

He looked so seductively at that little tramp, she thought. There is no internal breakdown that can disturb his concentration when there are new women around. If she were to put on a mini-skirt, just like the little tramp, and those same sheer stockings, with high black heels – he would pass right by her, uninterested like he was for their anniversary when she tried to look her sexiest ever. He didn't even notice her tight sheath-dress, freshly dyed hair and new mascara. He opened her present, gave her his, they drank some vodka, had sex - and that was it. She took the dress to the seamstress the very next day. So much for his attention.

“Maybe we should go downstairs later after all,” he said to Ivan.

He did not see how she was looking at him. He was preoccupied by the loud interior decoration. The old musical instruments that had hung on the walls of the *Montanara* for an entire decade had been replaced by ornate, mirror black frames containing vulgar photographs. Where the photograph of Sarah Vaughan used to hang, taken in the fifties in Manhattan, now there was a black and white photograph, an “artistic” one, with the motif of the female navel. Not far from it was a photograph of women's nipples, beside it the motif of lips, a little further – knees in nylon stockings, and in the juxtaposed corner there was a photograph of a woman's spine. That's the way the butcher shop looked, he thought, that he used to go to with his mother on their way home from the market, and then he would go to throw up in the nearby entranceway. He looked at the wall across from him. The famous Montanaro piano used to be there. He remembered when Žaro tried to stop his five year-old daughter from “fiddling” with it. Vesko came over to him, whispered something and the little girl went on playing. It was her first solo concert. In place of the piano, there was a bright red seat at the free-standing bar.

“Whatever,” Ivan answered after a long pause.

The wine arrived. And the rest. He didn't manage to figure out the DJ's repertoire. Ten minutes ago he heard a song that seemed to come from the San Remo Festival, followed immediately by *Sweet Home Alabama*. He looked at the man planted among the barstools, surrounded by photographs that revealed his own fetishes. He imagine how it must have happened that the owner first brought his new mistress to the *Montanaro*, and how – it must have really been that way – he told his companions that the *Montanaro* would be his. His, or no one's! Then, he thought, the number of his mistresses tripled. Why, the hostess from Serbia could not pass by the bar and not feel his fingers on her behind.

“Do you need something, sir?” the pretty hostess asked.

“Yes... Please reserve a box for us downstairs. The concert hasn't started, I hope?”

“Of course, everything will be ready for you. It will start in about ten minutes. . . If you like, you can go ahead and move now.”

He was surprised that the table was ready so quickly. He reached out to catch her overcoat and hold on to her, but she nervously pulled out of his grasp and rushed off with Marina toward the cellar. He looked at Ivan. His face was paralyzed. Only the hostess was smiling.

The table in the cellar was red, the armchairs as well. The photographs hanging on the walls had even more open motifs - in one of them a woman's groin could clearly be seen. There were kids sitting at all the other tables. Mostly with long hair, dressed in plaid shirts and leather jackets. He looked at her silk scarf and neat hairdo. Her chin resting on her hand, she was infinitely beautiful, but he wondered – where did this sudden tension come from? It was her idea for them to

come here. Anyway, not only did he have more urgent business to attend to, but also this interior design was frustrating him to the point of impotence.

One kid, with a moustache, hardly managed to keep his balance as he came down the stairs, and everyone looked at him. Ivan shook his head.

Very soon, four kids occupied the drums, synthesizer and two guitars. The room went dark. A couple of tuning noises, and they started. Smoke rolled out. A spotlight flashed. That was the signal for the scruffiest kid to play a solo. *Then he stopped.* All the lights came up, the song started again and the audience screamed. He looked at Ivan and Marina, they were gaping. And she had raised her head from her hand, now interested. In rushed the “lead vocal”. White officer’s pants, a white jacket with gold epaulettes and braids on the chest, white Adidas tennis shoes... He hopped about like a monkey and then turned to the audience. It was the epileptic, the kid with the moustache! He had given himself fake sideburns and he really did look like Freddie Mercury. He started with *Living On My Own*. He was even more convincing than Freddie. He danced about, patently raising the microphone and staring into “the heavens”. At one instant his hand got caught in the owner’s new chandelier. He pulled it down elegantly, broke a couple of the light bulbs and danced around some more.

The audience screamed with laughter. He saw fear in Marina’s face and hers. Ivan crossed himself.

There it is. That’s the fucking scene, he thought.

He dropped ten euros on the table and quickly left. ””

Andrej Nikolaidis



THE BODY, A Story

For Aleksandar Bećanović

“Horror does not exist outside that of the body,” Petar said, taking a sip of Coca-Cola. “Its boundaries are marked by the contours of our body.” Pavle was observing him through the tobacco smoke that streamed in a thin curly line from the Rothman’s he had pinched between his fingers. “Coca-Cola will kill you,” he said. “Nothing ruins the liver like it does. Every can you drink destroys a bit of your intestines. When you order Coca-Cola from this blond busty waitress, it’s as if you’re asking her to stick her hand in your gut and cut out a piece of your body.”

“It’s interesting that you of all people would be preaching to me about my health when you smoke three packs a day,” Petar said. “Look, every cigarette destroys 200 mg of vitamin C in your organism. If you drank Coca-Cola, and if the waiter brought it to you with two slices of lemon, you would have to drink at least 50 cans a day just to make up for the vitamin C you lose by smoking. Not to mention the lung cancer from which you will, undoubtedly, die. As far as I know, it is an exceptionally indelicate death. I wouldn’t like to get into a detailed description, but you can take my word that it is certainly a more elegant solution if you put a bullet in your brain.”

“We can hire a neutral judge of elegance, I’m sure that he would agree with me that death caused by lung cancer is terrible, but that it

is childishly naïve when compared to the blood gushing from your anus, which is what happens when your liver is ravaged by Coca-Cola. If it is any comfort, the gushing blood is not just any old blood: it is full of vitamin C from the lemon slices,” said Pavle.

“That is only partially true,” Petar said, “because we are, primarily, talking about habits: I can quit drinking Coca-Cola whenever I like, while those same words couldn’t be used to explain the connection between you and your tobacco. Therefore: you will certainly die from lung cancer, while I will live to a ripe old age drinking my beloved Coca-Cola less often and in smaller quantities. And Pavle, fix the bandage under your eye, a piece of your flesh just fell on the table.” Pavle looked at the greenish piece of flesh stuck to the skin which was covered with fungus. Then he looked around to see if anyone was watching him. When he was certain that no one was paying attention, he swiped the greenish chunk from the table with a quick movement of his hand, and dropped it into his pocket. Then he looked at Petar again who, accompanied by a bitter smile, was pointing the metal prosthesis that served as his right hand toward a boy at the table next to theirs. And the boy was pointing in their direction as he excitedly whispered something to his mother. Then the child vomited up the cream-cake he had just eaten onto the marble floor of the restaurant. The waitresses led the naughty child off to the bathroom while his mother, fuming with bitterness, explained something to the restaurant owner, from time to time pointing at them. Ultimately, it happened again: the owner of the restaurant asked them to leave, because seeing the two of them prevented the other customers from enjoying the specialties of the house. The owner, as usual, offered to pay their bill, so once again they ate for free. Even in spite of that, they felt a bit embittered once out in the street. For a whole year now they had eaten for free in restaurants all over Podgorica. The same thing always happened: they would go in, quickly eat their meal, and then, sooner or later one of the guests would be offended by their appearance and make a theatrical scene, including some obligatory vomiting and hysterical shouting.

This had been going on for more than two years now, ever since Petar concluded that, if he wanted to reach a higher sphere of spirituality, which was worth reaching because he could thus be closer to God, ever since, therefore, he concluded that it was necessary to reduce his body to a minimum. He invited Pavle over for dinner, he served pizza and Nikšić Beer, and informed his friend that he intended to rid himself of an arm and a leg. “Surely you have noticed,” Petar said that evening, “that the body is what drives us to sin. A man commits each of the seven mortal sins just to satisfy the whims of his body, and thereby reserves a place for himself in hell. And indeed, the tortures of hell are tortures of the body: heat, pain, all the forces of torture - isn’t this repertoire of punishments for our body, quite precisely and justly measured, because is it not our bodies that lead us to hell? I don’t want to leave anything to chance: first I will remove one of my arms, then a leg, and finally I will completely protect myself from sin by castrating myself. Hence, because of my appearance I will attract the loathing of the masses to myself, and therefore horrible persecution and suffering which will, all together, catapult me into Jesus’ embrace.”

“You’re right,” with seeming naïveté Pavle agreed, “but you should consider the following things: if you remove your right arm, it would be better that you leave your left leg intact. Or vice versa. However, this is only true if you think it is necessary to take balance into account.”

Less than a week after this conversation, Pavle went out with his girlfriend and her friends to a restaurant where some musicians were playing, of rather scanty talent. While the singer attempted to imitate Miroslav Ilić, Pavle slipped off to the restroom with the waitress who had been winking at him all evening. The waitress was a ravishing brunette. She had large breasts and a beautifully shaped rear end. She also had, however, AIDS, and Pavle was soon to find that out.

Pavle was a benign, tolerant Christian. His grandmother, who had raised him after the premature death of his parents, had supplied him with an immeasurable fear of God, as a moral filter that would allow Pavle to do only just and humane things his whole life. And when a

man behaves justly and humanely, he usually lives humbly and with difficulty, so that his own death seems like one of the rare bits of joy he will ever experience. Thus, Pavle tended to constantly contemplate a means of dying honorably and, purified, going to face God. And therefore Pavle, who was always a positive character in every story, as he waited for the results of his blood test in the corridor of the hospital, had no reason to doubt that he would turn out to be HIV positive. The blood workup allowed him to think more concretely and precisely about the date of his death. When the fear was removed that he might have infected his girlfriend and therefore become a murderer, she left him despite the fact that she was touched by his concern for her. Pavle was left alone with his enormous sexual potency which had, among other things, gotten him in trouble. Or, if you look at things from his vantage point, it finally drew him closer to God.

When Pavle went to the hospital to see Petar who was recuperating there after successfully managing to cut off his arm once he had gathered the courage to do so, Pavle complained to his comrade: "You know, my friend, at first I was afraid that the disease was a punishment for my infidelity. I was horrified by the thought of Ana, who was sitting in the courtyard of the restaurant and innocently humming with the band, never guessing that I was inside another woman at that moment. But, then I realized that the evil was done to me, and that I actually had not done it to someone else. Because I have infected no one, and I will die as the victim of human evil - or even worse, the evil of the waitress. Though I must say that I also don't have any negative feelings toward her: the poor thing was herself the victim of human evil and she was just getting even. However, I have escaped the trap of revenge that she fell into: she decided to hate, and by infecting me she became a murderer. Thereby she deserves to go to hell, although, since she was first a victim she was set for heaven. So, actually, I love her - for was it not she who, by killing me, helped me to deserve heaven?"

Petar and Pavle had been best friends for years. They were close because of their mutual love of Christ, so rare in this age. That is why Petar understood so well what Pavle was telling him. He felt sorry for

his friend and, forgetting that he had recently rid himself of his right hand, he tried to stroke his friend's head with it.

“Did it hurt?” Pavle asked.

“You bet!” Petar said. “Do you remember those universal saws, the ones that cut both wood and metal, that I bought off of Teleshop? I used one of them to cut my arm off at the shoulder. I held up well, but in the end my strength gave out: I passed out from the overwhelming pain. When they brought me to the hospital, my arm was still hanging at my side: a thin strip of flesh and skin under my arm wasn't cut through. I looked at that naughty thing, then I yanked it free and threw it behind me. When I threw the arm the technicians stopped the gurney and stared at me, their faces pale. I heard the doctor screaming at me, telling me that I'm a moron, that he's not paid to see such scenes of horror, that there are institutions for maniacs like me. I was lying there, crushed with pain, because I felt the hate and disgust of the people around me instead of their love and compassion. My solitude had never been so clear and unambiguous. Nor had, among other things, the evil of others and their refusal of Christ been so clear. I knew that I was on the right path: as they pushed the gurney into the operating room, I looked at the arm that, lying on the filthy linoleum of the hospital corridor, was left behind me. I thought of all the indiscretions that hand had done, from masturbation to the stuffing of food in an already satiated mouth. I felt like an avenger after the vengeance has taken place. Later they tried to sew the arm back onto my body, but I resisted: I made sure to cut the arm off with a rusty saw, so that the flesh was already rotting even before they took me to the hospital. In the end, they gave up on sewing on a thing that they would later have to amputate. But that's not all,” Petar went on, “the best is yet to come. Before I cut off my arm, I used the rusty saw to cut into my thigh, but none of the doctors know about it. Gangrene has already infected my leg. The pain is overwhelming, but I'll put up with it until I'm sure that they will have to amputate my leg. I'll get rid of my arm and my leg all at once. I figured that I would never have the strength to rid myself of both, so I looked for a clever solution. The

next time you visit me, one of my legs will be gone as well. At least I hope so,” Petar sighed melancholically.

Pavle was enthused because of his friend’s success, but he was still tormented by his own problems. Even though he had come to the hospital intending to complain to his friend and hear a comforting word, he decided not to bother Petar with his problems. When he first learned that he was infected with a lethal disease, Pavle behaved with dignity. Then, he became worried when he was completely overcome by the powerful sexual drive that he had struggled with all his life. Soon his torment became unbearable because masturbation was not solving his problem. He longed for the warm embrace of a woman. Yet, out of fear for the lives of other human beings into which he would like to introduce his organ, he refrained from intercourse with them. He arrived at a saving solution, as it so often happens - quite by accident. Explaining his situation, he told someone that he was “actually already dead, excluded from the world of the living and that, instead of the appearance of a normal life, he would actually be better off in the company of the dead.” The very next evening, armed with a pick and spade, he slipped unnoticed into the city cemetery.

During his next visit to Petar, Pavle confided in his friend what happened next. Fate would have it that, as he wandered about the graveyard, he came across the freshly covered grave of a seventeen year-old girl, who had died four days previously. The family had had her photograph engraved into her tombstone. Looking at her, Pavle figured out that she was a true beauty. Blond curls hung next to her thin face the color of alabaster, which must have been even paler after her death. Her coal-black eyes revealed a happy person with a curious spirit. And then her plump red lips, as if they were pursed in expectation of a passionate kiss... The girl’s face enchanted Pavle. “I laid the tools down and sat on her grave, entranced by her beauty,” Pavle told his friend who had, as soon as he saw him at the door of his hospital room, proudly announced the successful amputation of his leg. Petar, visibly intrigued, listened to Pavle who described the impatience he felt as he dug up the grave with quick movements of the shovel. “My heart

was thumping,” he said, “so loudly that I was afraid that its treacherous beats might even wake up the guard and ruin my encounter with the girl whom I so desperately and incurably longed for. I will not deny that I expected a lot out of our first meeting... But only God knows that what I received that night was an experience that, in its fullness, exceeded even my wildest imagination. When I realized that I should look for lovers among the dead, I quickly overcame the horror of such, only superficially blasphemous, thoughts. Since I had been tormented the previous week because of the unsatisfied desires of my flesh, the only way for me to save my soul was to ultimately surrender to the desires of the body, and thus do an evil deed to another human being which would distance me forever from Christ. The powerful manhood that had accompanied me from my childhood days was now so powerful that it could not longer be ignored. I knew that the dictate of the flesh, if I went on trying to lend it a deaf ear, would muddle my mind completely. I could not allow the disease to triumph absolutely over me in that way - one should stand before Christ with a clear mind. I realized that the only modus that would allow my mind to control my body was... the fulfillment of my carnal desires. My body was already being punished by the disease. When the disease beats it like a helpless dog, it will rot in a grave under a tombstone. The soul needs to be saved. If I was troubled by doubts in the propriety of the path that I had chosen, they all vanished like the wisps of darkness before the first streaks of morning light when I opened the coffin and saw the girl who captured my heart in an instant. Dressed in white velvet, her curly hair stretching down toward her newly blossoming breasts, she was resting peacefully in her new home. I thought of the sadness that her premature departure must have caused in those who loved her. How unhappy her mother must have been! I hoped that, somehow, the temptation that was brought upon her by the death of her daughter had not taken away her faith in Christ. I wept quietly. I knelt beside her head and lowered my lips onto her eternally sleeping eyes. I realized that I missed her gaze which had enthralled me from the first moment when I saw her photograph on the tombstone. I took

two matches from my pocket,” Pavle went on, “and propped open her sagging eyelids. Unblinking, she observed me with her sharp eyes. For a time we looked at each other in silence, aware that words at such moments are superfluous. I felt that we had known each other since time immemorial. Someone once said that a man can be sure that he found the right woman when his silence with her speaks more than all the words that a man has been given to misuse. You know,” Pavle was preparing to state the point of his story, “I never liked to talk about the details of my love affairs – I always thought that was primitive male bravado. I will only say that my darling was pristine - that night I discovered that I was the first man in her life. When her hymen broke under my gentle pressure, I understood that her beauty and purity had saved my soul. Even though it conceded to the demands of the body, that night my soul got satisfaction, because it felt love, strength and edification that it had never even dreamed of in this world among mortal men.” Petar listened to his friend, secretly afraid for him. There was no doubt – love had overcome his heart. However, all things must come to an end, Petar thought, although he kept that bitter truth to himself. He did not want to ruin the joy of the pure feelings that Pavle was steeped in, like when a child is dipped into the water at baptism.

When Pavle visited him again, he came dressed in mourning black. Without asking, Petar expressed his condolences and hugged his friend as tightly as he could. Pavle sat on the edge of his bed. For a while, they shared his sadness in silence. Black destiny, that ominous vulture that hovered over his dear friend with its wings, also cast a long shadow on Petar’s otherwise good mood, brought on by his successful further reduction of the body, which he had carried out in the meantime, between Pavle’s two visits. Namely, Petar had cut off one of his ears with a nail file, and then, dulling the point of that tool, he had taken out an eye. All he had to do was castrate himself and his body would be reduced to a minimum, and thus be disabled from inflicting evil on his soul.

Pavle looked at his friend, wrapped in bloody bandages. Petar had listened to the advice he had given him back then, as if joking: he had removed his right arm but kept his right leg. Likewise, he had plucked out his right eye, but he could still hear with his right ear. The wounds he had inflicted on himself had made Petar's body reduced, but it was now more complete than earlier, for isn't the purest beauty always found in simplicity? Pavle finally decided to break the silence, aware that Petar would not do it out of respect for the mourning clothes he was wearing. "And so," he said, "Tamara passed away. It was a sudden and therefore more terrible death. Our love lasted almost fifteen days, but the memories of her will last as long as I breathe and trod the ground of this vale of tears. The night before last I went to see her like always. I splurged on flowers and a bottle of champagne, because I wanted us to celebrate two weeks of our love. But when I dug up the grave, I wished to remain there forever, to rest in peace for eternity beside my beloved. Her marvelous body was unrecognizable. Her alabaster skin had turned the color of the earth in which she was dreaming in her eternal sleep. Brown lichens and greenish fungus had inhabited her skin, and puss-filled sores scarred her bosom where I used to love to daydream. Her soft hair had dried up and begun to fall out and now, right in front of my horrified eyes, the night wind was whisking it around the bottom of the coffin. And her black eyes! Lord, that I had at least never been born, never to see that horrible sight which will, oh how it frightens me, slowly and treacherously eat away my soul! Instead of her black pupils, from the eye sockets of my beloved, fat white maggots were staring at me. I screamed and ran off into the night through the gates of that sinister place. I waited for sunrise on the bank of the river, watching the water flow by. After a while I decided to head home – I hoped that some sleep would do me good. After a warm bath I stretched out in bed, staring at the ceiling. I quickly fell asleep. But it was a dreamless sleep. I could not escape the horrible sight that completely occupied my thoughts; I awoke with a shout, with sweat running down my face." With difficulty, Petar pushed himself up and hugged Pavle. The other patients, feeling their great pain, broke off their conversations out of respect for human suffering.

Petar finally left the hospital. Pavle spoke of Tamara less and less. Their life, at least on the surface, went back to its old rhythm. But every time the south wind brought in rain, Petar was awakened by his newly healed wounds. At those times he would sit on the bed and smoke, guessing that, on the other side of town, the glow of the cigarette that shone in dark was in the dark of Pavle's room. Those sleepless nights seemed to make their friendship even stronger. Even more so because Pavle, even against his will, began to look ever more like Petar.

After the unfortunate ending of his love affair with Tamara, Pavle sought solace in the embrace of other women. In vain. Not a single grave he dug up, not a single woman he kissed, ever offered a single minute more of satisfaction. What would come after those nocturnal adventures – a profound, muffled nausea and remorse – only made his agony worse. When he found out that one of those lovers one night had infected him with leprosy, an almost forgotten but no less horrible disease, he only turned his head away in disgust, long now indifferent toward all the troubles that could happen to his body. The lethal virus had already greatly weakened the ability of Pavle's body to defend itself, so that the incubation of the leprosy took place unusually quickly. Within a month, a small but noteworthy hump appeared on his back. At the same time his elegant body began to become deformed, it also began to exude an unpleasant smell. The horror of his own body that would happen every time when he, accidentally, looked at himself in the mirror, drove Pavle to desperate thoughts of suicide. "Your father is still alive," Petar told him, "and some things are simply not allowed. You don't confide in your parents, in that way, that you have concluded that life is in vain. It is a matter of proper upbringing: you always say thank you for a gift, even when you don't want to. When the parents of a man who wants to commit suicide pass away, the last moral barriers that would stop him from doing so also disappear. This, of course, is not true for Christians – our Father is always alive."

Petar's words helped Pavle to stop thinking about his disintegrating body. When his arm was amputated because of gangrene, Petar wished him a warm welcome into the club. "Do you feel that your

soul is now stronger,” he said to him, “do you feel that as your body grows smaller, your strength grows along with your resistance to earthly temptations?”

Pavle understood clearly what his friend wanted to say, but even still he sometimes felt sorry for his once beautiful body that had been loved by so many women. When Petar and Paul, wrapped in bandages, leaning on crutches, entered the restaurant, when Petar said that the boundaries of horror are marked by the contours of the human body, when a piece of Pavle’s cheek fell off and caused the child to vomit in the middle of the restaurant and his mother convinced the restaurant owner to throw them out, they knew that their friendship, which had helped them to survive all the temptations their bodies had thrown before their suffering souls, they knew, and it was certain, that their friendship was drawing to a close. And they mourned for the one who would stand over the grave of the other.

Petar and Pavle were thinking about that when they went out of the restaurant into the rain drenched street. “Let’s go to the movies,” said Petar.

“What will we watch?” Pavle asked.

“A romantic comedy, like always. You know, I never asked you if you noticed that in good romantic comedies there are no sex scenes, no naked human bodies – the characters are almost incorporeal, as if only their faces exist,” Petar said.

Pavle laughed out loud; the laughter accompanied the echo of their steps as they went down the street. The street lights threw the shadows of the two men on the wet sidewalk. In those shapeless, asymmetrical silhouettes, no one would have recognized two human bodies embracing. ”

Lena Ruth Stefanović



TESHUVA

*At the moment you are no longer an observing, reflecting being;
you have ceased to be aware of yourself;
you exist only in that quiet,
steady thrill that is so unlike any excitement that you have ever known.*

May Sinclair

Podgorica is my private Biblical Egypt, I am enslaved here, I spend my days in self-imposed isolation, in a mental prison of the highest security where I've locked myself up voluntarily. At night I am afraid, the fear attacks like a crazed demon, overwhelming me: a silent, sinister, cruel fear and I do not dare to fall asleep because I know that I will have nightmares that will painfully resemble reality.

When I lie in my wooden bed, I do a kind of *teshuva*, repentance and return, rewinding and going through each scene of the previous day, every conversation, all the parts of books I read, the texts I put out on the Internet, every little thing.

When rewound, my day goes like this: I comb my hair and wash my face before bedtime, every time I brush my hair I feel guilty for dying it blond; naturally blond hair is one thing, it is a burden which one must live with, but in this part of the world women with naturally light-colored hair are a rarity – this is the Balkans, women here are swarthy and dark-haired – at least that's what they say; I did not dye my hair to attract the attention of rutting males, I am actually a natural blonde who was accidentally born with dark hair, that's really how I feel, as if the dark pigment was accidentally planted at the roots of the hair that grew on top of my head. My skin is quite pale, almost transparent and I have almost no body hair - only a thin blond strand

of hair, here and there; quite unexpected for such a fair complexion and hairless body, my hair is jet black. (These are my thoughts as I brush my bleached hair before going off to sleep.)

I think a mistake has been made. In the middle of the mix-up, at the moment of my birth, when I was accidentally given dark hair, I got something else that did not belong to me by birthright – an old, tired Jewish soul. I don't know how it came to that, but because of that mistake, both my soul and I both suffer a lot.

The chances for something like that to happen were minimal, my mother's mother left the tribe of Israel and became a Christian. This was not spoken of in my family, not because it was a dark secret of some sort, but because we lived in a communist state and because it was nobody's business any more. My grandmother, a first generation Christian, prayed to God in her own words and never went to church, and to be honest nobody really noticed because in the communist times no one went to church anyway. My grandfather was a Partisan and was shot during the war under horrendous circumstances which were actually noted down in one of the good novels about it, even if it was only as an episode. When that book appeared, some of our family members were happy because the memory of my grandfather did not die in 1942 with him, but I thought it unfair that the tragic epos of his fate should be reduced to a mere couple of paragraphs. My grandmother never married again, she wore a long black dress and tied her hair up with a black scarf for the rest of her life.

My parents, for their part, had their own polytheistic pantheon, they believed in the holy trinity of Marx, Engels and Lenin who brought forth Tito, the hallowed deity who, though sprung from the loins of the trinity, was in fact its forerunner. I continue to rewind my day. Before going to bed, I read my prayers, cabalistic prayers that cannot be found in the *siddurim* in the synagogues. The rabbi who composed this prayer book was ostracized from the Jewish community, though that is a little known fact.

I wonder if the prayers can be all right if the rabbi is no good? So what if he was banished? What happens if the soul, like in soccer,

receives a red card? What happened to the excommunicated soul of Baruch Spinoza? Who has the right to give the soul a red card? Rabbis in this world decide who is Jewish, but are their decisions legal in the upper world or does God have his own standard? Exhausted from wandering around the hinterlands of convoluted religious laws, my mind moves on to another topic.

That afternoon, Chikyo came to visit me. That is his spiritual name which, in one of the languages spoken at the foot of the Himalayas, means “mirror of wisdom”. Chikyo belongs to one of the four streams of Buddhism that differs from the others because its followers, as they meditate, keep their eyes wide open and breathe through their mouths; the others close their eyes and breathe through their noses, while the story of the historical Buddha and the Eightfold Path is, according to them, true to the last detail. You will say, big deal, some people kiss with their eyes open, some with them closed, some people breathe only through their mouths when they’re asleep, some people go through their whole lives as if their eyes were closed even though they are wide open, so what, you will say – that doesn’t change the fact that people pass through life, kiss and sleep, right – well, there you see, in Buddhism it seems that this changes things a lot, to the extent that its adherents are even divided into different groups. I wonder how the historical Buddha feels about that in his everlasting existence.

Before Chikyo’s visit I shuffled the tarot cards – I’ve become fairly skillful at that, like an experienced card-dealer with years behind me, who mixes the cards with a practiced hand, flipping them and riffing them from hand to hand, then drawing out two cards, I placed them face up... The Pope and the Devil, what a pair! The latter is familiar to me, I experience him as my sparring partner, my personal trainer if you like, an opponent I have chosen in order to train the strength of my will and physical stamina, but the role of the Pope in my life is not clear. I looked at the cards, the stocky Pope in luxurious robes lounging on his throne, two priests with shaved heads are kneeling before him, the Pope’s left hand is hovering above them, the index and mid-

dle fingers extended while the others are point downwards – this sign represents a blessing, I suppose, but it reminds me of a child playing with shadows on the wall, when a child puts his fingers in this position he actually wants to cast the Devil’s shadow; the Pope’s head seems to be weighed down by the golden crown above which the Roman numeral five is impressed, the number five, the Pope’s number in the Tarot deck, looking like a naughty child has put up rabbit ears at the moment when the picture was taken, but so that the Pope doesn’t notice it. In his left hand, significantly larger than the right in the picture, the Pope is holding a crosier, a symbol of his sacred power, and on his left forearm, quite heretically, there is a tattoo of a Greek cross, while his gaze is directed to the left, at the Devil.

As opposed to the Pope, who is looking away, the Devil looks me straight in the eye while standing on his throne – yes, he’s standing because, I reckon, he’s bored of sitting, the Pope is eventually replaced by another but Satan has been on his throne since the beginning of eternity, with no fear of being replaced (although they say that there have been those who pretended to the Devil’s throne), he sat long enough and decided, for a change to stand for a while on his throne; two naked followers are chained to it, all three are wearing cute little hats decorated with plumes, the Devil has wings and is holding a sword in his left hand, while his right hand is waving in greeting – a devilish business. The Devil’s number is fifteen, written with a block form Roman ten and a slanting five – identical to the pope’s; the block form Roman ten, without the addition of the five, is the number of the card of the so-called Wheel of Fortune, which Tarot experts claim to represent the will of God, but that card did not come out in this deal. I think about the two priests kneeling in front of the Pope, one of them has what looks like a bishop’s hat slung over his shoulder, while his arms are spread out as a sign of surrender; I wonder how strong his faith is and what it is based on, if he has personal experience and his own mind, or does he blindly believe the man hovering over him, the one whom he considers to be God’s representative on Earth? The way the bishop, with his back to us, is kneeling and hunched over the Pope’s

skirts (the Pope is still looking away) leads me to think that Sigmund Freud – who said that the human religious drive is the pure sublimation of the sexual libido – was perhaps not so far from the truth.

I go on rewinding my day, moment by moment. In the afternoon I stood by the window of my living room which looks out on the Greek Embassy. As I watched the blue and white Greek flag being beaten by a raging Podgorica north wind, I reflected on the idea that the licentious liberalness of the Hellenes did much more damage to the Biblical Israelis than the tortuous slavery of Egypt ever did.

At the beginning of the story, Abraham the Babylonian says his historical “no” to false idols; his belief in one God, naturally, is adopted by his son Isaac who, then, passes it down to his son Jacob; Jacob is blessed with twelve sons of which one, Joseph the clairvoyant, ends up in Egypt via the mysterious ways of the Lord. The other brothers soon follow Joseph’s path, as free men who will, after a dramatic change in the leadership of Egypt, end up as slaves. In the incredible history of the Hebrews, the time was now ripe for the appearance of a new super hero, Moses, who agrees (upon God’s insistence, after a lot of naysaying – he’s already eighty, he’s never been a leader) to lead his people out of Egypt. For forty years they wander around the desert and, even though they see many miracles, some of the weak-hearted are fairly homesick for Egypt...

Here I make a cut in the further history of the Jews and my thoughts race to the future Greeks who, long ago, about eight hundred years B.C., while still a barbaric tribe from northern India, take the road to Macedonia, mercilessly slaughtering native peoples along the way; after many adventures, they arrive on Crete, where the local population is already settled, the cultivated Semitic Cretans... Another cut in the historical seam, and I will testify that the Kingdom of Israel fought bravely against the Assyrians, while the Greeks were founding Athens, Sparta, and Corinth, preoccupied with scholarship, philosophy and literature...

As opposed to the mostly illiterate pagans, the literate monotheistic Jews took great pleasure in reading Greek philosophy, scholarship and

literature, and the Jewish God with his lessons and morals must have begun to seem somehow old-fashioned when compared to the sensual Hellenic gods who, seemingly, spent most of their time enjoying orgies and bacchanalias. The Jews absorbed the intellectual achievements of the Hellenes, the fashionable spoke Greek among themselves, calling each other by Greek names, they were childishly overjoyed by the Greek dramas and, to the horror of their Jewish mothers, they wrestled naked in the gymnasiums. However, it all went sour when the high priest, Jason, threw the doors temple doors in Jerusalem open wide to the idol worshippers and foreign pagan-types, strutting around in Greek robes; the enraged anti-Hellenes cried out to the heavens, slaughtering the problematic pro-Hellenes and toppling their statues, thus beginning the first nauseating religious war in the history of civilization. That's what I was thinking about as I stared through my living room window at the Greek Embassy.

In the afternoon, I read, as usual. I read Doris Lessing and completely identified with Martha Quest, I felt her painful duality, that deep dichotomy between intelligence and everything else, the obsession with that which is widely believed to be Jewish thought, but at the same time with fashionably tailored robes. I compared the Sports Club with the clubs in Podgorica and the similarity is obvious, Doris put her own thoughts in the third person and ascribed them the attractive, semi-rebellious, semi-snobbish Martha, and I wondered why I don't do something like that, why in heaven's name I write in the first person, again they will ask me if my writing is autobiographical, while I tirelessly repeat that it is all a product of my imagination. No matter what person the writer uses, the writing is always autobiographical – the feelings and thoughts of heroes and anti-heroes are all equally the writer's, they belong to one of his numerous personalities which are contending and competing in him, one repressing the other.

Doris Lessing is simultaneously the rebellious Martha and her mediocre mother and her hypochondriac father, and the bright Jewish boy Sol, and the brave leftist Abraham Cohen who dies in the Spanish Civil War. The various personalities of the writer, in accordance with

their characters, live out the destinies they deserve – the melancholic, pill-popping father will remain forever (that is till the end of the novel) on the veranda watching the naked embrace of heaven and earth – her choice of words again convinces me that indeed everything has been written already and that there is nothing left for me to do – and from that thought I digress and ask myself why in heaven's name do I write when I can hope for nothing profitable from those efforts; it is forced work, my own numerous personalities are connected only by the manic need to be heard and to express their opinions in writing; writers, it seems to me, no matter how consciously they cling to a single choice in life, at the same time flirt with all the other available thoughts and opinions, skillfully ascribing their own, contradictory ideas to various literary characters...

The benign, cute and not-so-bright English girl Maisie entangles her fate with the completely uneducated and pathetic but influential and intermittently tyrannical first typist, Mrs. Bess; Doris Lessing is also the oppressed group of blacks who are arrested because of misdemeanors, at the same time, she is also the shallow, spoiled young man from the Sports Club, and his mother, the British lady who became that through marriage; Doris Lessing is also the paranoid Polish Jew who changes his surname to King, and the Judeophile Martha and the anti-Semite Donovan and the Jewish Stella and her dark-skinned native and the Greek merchant and the Dutch housewife – all of that simultaneously. I wonder how it is possible that my city, where I'm living and writing these words, is so painfully reminiscent of a British colony in Africa just before the First World War, and I wonder if we, for heaven's sake, are living in a sort of black hole where time has stopped and in which the people Doris Lessing described have gone on living.

Perhaps all of these people, her heroes, drank a sort of magical youth potion and never grow old or even change here in my town – they have just changed their names, the slogans they use in conversation and the places where they meet, however, have remained completely the same... A small group of leftists, to the horror of the majority in society, goes on supporting unpopular opinions, already con-

scious that they will be banished, and there are also those who think about nothing and live like marionettes manipulated by social conditioning, the latter are in the majority. However, the hypocritical conservatives, whom I recognize in the modern politically correct employers, are not exploiting African resources and natives, but rather their own country and fellow tribesmen, and I wonder – is the sin of our times, that they are oppressing their own people, is it greater and less forgivable; I remember the blank faces of the oppressed cashiers in the nearby supermarket – their working hours and salaries have absolutely nothing in common with the laws of the European Union about which so much noise is made on the news...

Later I read Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein* and felt that I had met another kindred literary spirit who, in the character of the narrator Chick, flees from people into solitude, into nature; I follow the thread that winds through the spiritual evolution of Abe Ravelstein that Chick is narrating – the wisdom loving, eccentric and brilliant professor, a great respecter of Jerusalem but also admirer of Athens – all great philosophers were atheists, weren't they? – while slowly, infected with AIDS, he loses his physical strength, his body loses its domination over his Jewish soul and the latter begins to reign over him. His future posthumous biographer, Chick, in spite of the extent to which he is hindered by optimistic American English, unsuitable for absolutely black Jewish thoughts (Chick himself is a believer, but not a fanatic), follows Ravelstein's final transformation just before death, predictably (for me) turning his back on Athens and turning his gaze to Jerusalem. For me, reading is quite a special ritual, to which approximately half of my entire waking day is dedicated, not wasted on other, when compared to reading, fairly banal activities. Even though I put *Ravelstein* away, one thought from the novel kept haunting me – you will admit that occasional thoughts from certain novels continue to preoccupy readers after the book has been placed forever on the shelf; the thought was that even God rests when in Paris, since the French are so irreligious, so that God can relax there like any other tourist. It occurs to me that, if this metaphor at least partially describes the true state of

things, then it is possible that some of it in that great novel is the skewed thinking of another Jew, Yehuda Leyb Schwarzmann, better known (though still not very famous) as Lev Shestov, a philosopher of despair whose existential philosophy (infinitely paradoxically) is lacking in systematization and coherence, including his theoretical explanation of philosophical problems, and whose work is aimed at generating metaphysical problems instead of solving them. Fleeing the October Revolution, Yehuda-Lev settled in Paris where, they say, he had an influence on Sartre, who after all had a notable influence on the formation of the thoughts of many Paris intellectuals in the twentieth century; I think about how this philosophy of despair rose from the Ukraine, arrived in Paris and infiltrated the Sorbonne; via the Sorbonne, quite expectedly, it arrived at the Faculty of Humanities in Belgrade where it strengthened and gained momentum on the fertile soil of the reigning socialism and the proverbial love of the Serbs for the French; this, by definition tragic, philosophy was absorbed by some of the Montenegrin intellectuals getting educated in Belgrade; later this thought will become tragically evident in their personal destinies as they turn away from their Montenegrin origins and ultimately deny them completely, as it is known; the historical influence of French thought and diplomacy has often been fatal for Montengrins and their statehood.

During the day, I don't remember exactly when, I wrote something like a poem: I was born in a magical circle which the cursed tram number two outlines, around the innards of a city that used to be completely white, quite near the Synagogue on a street named after Marshall Biryuzov. However, we only lived there briefly. Then we lived in Sofia, on the very transition from socialism into communism, when everyone got what they needed and gave as much as they could, or something like that. Most of what they could was quite humble, and their needs were politically correct – like the Biblical Adam and Eve, the people were naked, barefoot and happy as long as they lived far from the temptations of the snakelike West. Yet, this idyll did not last long, the serpent of western propaganda offered a can of Coca-Cola to

the girl with the sickle and she forgot her partisan name and bargained off her badge with Lenin's face for a McDonald's hamburger. For a while I lived in Moscow, a long time before the young man with the hammer broke up with the girl with the sickle. In Moscow I was, quite properly, sad. Most of the time most of the people were drunk on cheap vodka because reality was too painful when we tried to look it in the eyes while sober, so that my memories, by my own choice, are fogged by vodka fumes and the breath of the icy winter frost.

The last event of that day which I remember was my morning walk on the hill called Gorica and the small hidden meadow that carefully guards an evergreen forest in its loins; there I speak with my country; this is our chat-room, here I pour out my despair, and it sometimes comforts me, and often criticizes me. My country tells me that I don't feel enough gratitude that it adopted me and gave me a chance to start life over, it says that I destroyed and gambled away my life in other countries, giving them much more than I give to it, my homeland, I shower it with a neurosis that it did not cause, it says; like a wounded mother, my country reminds me that those other countries are not flawless, far from it; my country, scolding me, says that it would have rejected me long ago if it did not pity me so; my country knows, it says, that my intentions are honest and my heart pure, insofar as that is possible, but – my country goes on – it is high time for me to grow up, whatever that means, to part with my idyllic vision of myself and of it, and to leave it and its other children alone, because they defended it and died for it long before I came around... I retort that I am not to blame because I didn't have a chance to die honorably for its freedom, it snipes back that I would not die for it but because that would be a legitimate cover up for a long-planned suicide, our conversation does not die down, but some other people are approaching the meadow, I see them from afar and I know that it will soon want to attend to them as well, I know that I must share its love and still I ask what advice it would give me (I don't like the council of other people, but I believe that it is all right for me to ask for the advice of my country), and it answers in a shoot-like whisper that I should finally see that light and

darkness are inseparable, and that I should finally understand that there is no ultimate answer, that I have to live with my questions in the absurdity that is choking me and that - it adds in the end - like any mother manipulating her confused child, I must discover joy and happiness precisely in such a way of living. ”



AN OCCURRENCE IN THE LIFE OF PARMENID PEJANOVIĆ, 1958

The father of Parmenid Pejanović – royal lieutenant Dionizije Pejanović, whose exceptional height was said to prevent anyone from looking him directly in the eye – fled the Kingdom of Montenegro in 1926. The revolt by the old king’s supporters had been crushed, surpassing even the direst predictions of the most ardent opponents of the new state and its foreign king.

By Easter of 1927, the new emigrant had landed in Buenos Aires. Apparently he had been invited by a close cousin, Major Grigorije Zuber, a graduate of the Imperial Military Academy in St. Petersburg. Zuber had left the homeland in 1921, finding suitable employment for himself in the Argentine armed forces: he held the rank of colonel, and was often required to travel on official matters to Gran Chaco. (“GC for *Gran Chaco*, CG for *Crna Gora*: the letters of the homeland wherever I go, like fate,” Zuber says to his wife Jelisava, *née* Krivokapić, as he presses against the grimy window of the railway car, the train monotonously chugging its way towards Resistencia, the sun-baked city.)

Montenegrin officers were highly regarded everywhere, except in the state they had just lost. “If only I had a dollar for every time some foreigner calls us latter-day Spartans,” wrote Zuber towards the end of 1926, in a letter that would reach Dionizije Pejanović in Tangiers.

(It was there that he met M., a mercurial Croat who was just beginning to deal in art and self-aggrandizing mystification; and the mad Berber Tarikh, who brought him hashish and costly books with salacious engravings; Spanish anarchists with guns in the air and bottles at their lips; French pimps and sailors; the German revolutionary Linke; the shameful incident with Mademoiselle S.F.; impenetrable Arabic words; the smell of the port; Genady the Russian who would die in the room of the whore Aziza; ‘the disgusting way these people haggle’; the days and nights melting together in every recollection of Tangiers, that sultry, trembling, gasping place. As if it were about to burst...)

And for nine months, not a single Montenegrin. The place was just right for avoiding fellow emigrants and the ruin they brought upon themselves with their hard-headedness, their unwitting entrapment in the snares and wiles of their country’s new rulers.

During his years in the Argentine capital, where he first dragged himself ashore after a two-month journey from Tangiers to Montevideo aboard the Norwegian *Kristiania*, he would demonstrate a flair for business as well: the erstwhile captain of a vanished state had sensed the winds of change, one might say.

Dionizije Pejanović opened one of Latin America’s first tourist agencies: ‘Traveler’, in the city’s *judería*. It was on the very same premises in 1937 that he laid eyes on the modest young woman – Polish, or rather Polish Jewish – whose job was to arrange visits from Poland, Czechoslovakia, the new Baltic states, from throughout Central Europe. As a sideline, the agency also dealt in arranged marriages with decent girls, primarily from Russia and the other Slavic lands, brought by Traveler to Argentina into the waiting arms of their unknown husbands. There was money to be made in such a venture, in a land where the demand for women outstripped supply, where even the tango had begun as a dance between men in a colorful *barrio* of Italian and Uruguayan immigrants.

This young woman – twenty-four, blonde, with her dignified bearing and small frame – went in seven days from being Miss Liviana Borowski to being the wife of Dionizije Pejanović, who was now

thirty-five, a man of much sense and few words, despite his acquired fluency in Spanish, or rather the local variety.

In the year to come, the lives of this enterprising immigrant and his bride would see several interesting events.

For our story, it is important to note the year, 1939. (A good year for Argentina, while Europe hunkered down and waited for the blasts to begin.) Dionizije meets the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, holidaying in Argentina (arrangements courtesy of Traveler). The German invasion of Poland – the beginning of the Second World War, as it turned out – would extend the writer’s stay in Buenos Aires almost until his death thirty years later. Throughout his exile, the agency did not stint on donations to this ironic great of modern literature, whose desk always sported one of Traveler’s calendars.

“Such an analytical mind, but always so cheerful,” as Dionizije would say, wondering at the combination. He knew the qualities were mutually exclusive. “The deeper you look, the less you can smile. Happiness is the privilege of ignorance,” he said to Zuber, speaking about Gombrowicz over dinner *chez Maréchal*, where stories of the old country were always welcome. Zuber once told him: “Did you know, Leopold is writing a novel about this city.”

And, most importantly, on the 12th of July of 1941, Liviana gave birth to their son.

It was Gombrowicz who christened him.

“Listen, Pejanović, I got the whole story from Zuber. You’re Orthodox, the Greek faith.” There was curiosity in his voice. They were at the Café Mendoza. Zuber had cognac, while Witold proposed a toast with red wine from Spain.

“That’s right,” said Pejanović.

“Then name him after Parmenides,” shot back the Pole, a crafty look in his eyes. “The noblest scion of the Greeks.”

He raised his glass and said, “To Liviana and to your son, the Montenegrin of the Argentine, Parmenid Pejanović, and to Poland!”

“And to the Montenegro that once was...” added Zuber, reluctant to mention such things on his friend’s happy occasion.

But Dionizije echoed the toast. “To Montenegro. It can never be gone, so long as the two of us draw breath. So long as someone remains to speak its name, it exists...”

“I like that,” said Gombrowicz, raising his glass again to his fellow Pole and her newborn son.

Skipping ahead: Parmenid grew up to occasional visits from Gombrowicz, and tales about him every day.

As for me, I grew up to stories about Parmenid Pejanović.

Such stories were lucky to feature a hero on the other side of the world, whose faraway absence prevented any meeting and allowed him to attain mythical stature in my mind.

Growing up, I was certain I would never meet Parmenid. Nor did he seem consumed with desire to visit Montenegro. His reputation alone would have been a stumbling-block, if the idea ever crossed his mind.

During the seventies he had published some books, a mix of political essays and sociological studies, which were branded throughout Tito’s Yugoslavia as ‘detestable anticommunist scribbling’, ‘mercenary hackwork for the CIA’ and so forth. The newspapers would run a piece every once in a while, denouncing him and his writings.

Meanwhile, I’d spent fifteen years listening to my uncle Isak telling stories about Parmenid (or ‘Parm’, as my uncle called him): his days with Che Guevara; Paris with Cortázar the traveler – no such thing as a coincidence – who was writing his story *La autopista del sur*, and who would read bits of it every day to him, to Antonia and Bruno and Paquito, (“Carried away by this holy relic of their language, so far from home,” as uncle Isak told it, always with the same intonation); followed by the famous story of the shootout in the northern Brazilian town of Salvador de Bahia (which my uncle always pronounced in full, with an affected flourish on the *de Bahia*, the pronunciation of those who are keen to leave no doubt as to their expertise); then the three marriages – first to a Peruvian revolutionary who was killed by the police twenty days later (“a honeymoon soaked with blood,” as my uncle called it), then to a Russian scientist who defected to the United States and went around bashing capitalism. Number Two had no need for the police.

Democracy, fortunately, offered her a wider choice of deaths, with alcohol doing the job some months after Parmenid had left for Barcelona, the city where some years later he would meet his third and final fellow-traveler. All I knew about Number Three was that she was some sort of critic, maybe film or literary, maybe social, and that she lasted the longest. Later it would turn out that one of his marriages was not on the books, the Russian having refused to appear before a justice of the peace. Too many documents, she claimed, too much systematic control and repression. After three months with Parmenid she wanted to rip up her passport and head for the hills of Montana. Parmenid's answer? "No Montengro. No Montana. Never. And that's that, my dear."

Simply put, Parmenid was one of those *engagé* intellectuals, attacked alike by right and left. (In the Latin America of the seventies, as in a large part of Europe and even the United States – paging Angela Davis – such a position fell just short of being a highway robber.) He described himself as an anarchist. He wrote his books and was invited to teach in Caracas, Santiago, Mexico City, and even spent a short time in Cuba.

Actually, I never did quite manage to piece it all together, his wanderings across the world and through ideas.

When Montenegro seemed poised for independence, he appeared out of nowhere.

This was in 1999. Up comes this 57-year-old man, graying and thin, a cigarette always in his mouth. After a reception with the newly elected president of Montenegro, Parmenid held two public lectures in the auditorium of the Law Faculty. One was dedicated to the Montenegrin diaspora in Latin America, but not in the classical sense. He had a postmodern way of looking at the whole thing, and the point of 'Montenegrins in Argentina' was *identity*, the kind that evades us and the kind we have to achieve. It was great, though over the heads of most of the smiling hosts. The other lecture was on the concept of statehood in the postmodern era, a sort of advice session for the current government and the 'state-building movement' here in Montenegro. The way he put it, if you've got the privilege of making a new state

today, do it without rebuilding the same old matrix of repression and manipulation that such undertakings always involve.

Now the powers that be started looking at him a little ‘funny’. He told me, “I have to be consistent. If they don’t start pointing the finger at me soon, I’ll be disappointed.”

He stayed in Montenegro for four months, from September to the beginning of January. Then he said he missed the January heat, and off he went to Buenos Aires. In those four months, I heard a good dozen stories about his childhood and Gombrowicz. He told some of the stories over first-class Albanian weed, and the high gave the stories an extra level of inspiration.

In fact, I’d like to *pass one along* to you.

This story was told to me by Parmenid in my apartment, as I furiously rolled joint after joint.

He’d ducked out of the luncheon with the academic crowd, so we were sitting alone and riffing on the language. It fascinated me to hear Parmenid speak. The way he explained it, he spoke the Montenegrin of long ago as learned from old Dionizije, who ceased being a full-time resident of his language in 1926. In Buenos Aires the Pejanović family had a strict agreement: on Saturdays they would speak Dionizije’s language, and on Sundays Livijana’s. So Parmenid was fluent in both Montenegrin and Polish. But many of the people he was meeting around the city were Poles, and there were Polish magazines on hand from the United States and Europe, so his Polish grew and changed. Meanwhile, his Montenegrin – a language he could speak with no one but his father, Colonel Zuber, old Radonjić and a handful of others who had all left Montenegro in the wake of the First World War – was doomed to fossilize. Words for things like shoes, table, skirt, fork, scissors, spoon, ceiling...

(‘I say *cipela*, you say *cokula*, let’s call the whole thing off’ – as the song goes.)

There weren’t many, but the old words that did pop up in his stories would make me think of a linguistic time-machine. When you’re stoned, an idea like that can strike you as amusing.

Parmenid was telling his story:

“Witold asked me once, quite interested, whether I played chess. Yes, I said. I follow Najdorf, I root for him, and I myself am a player. I adore chess. Chess is such a good way to cancel out the time. And Gombrowicz sizes me up and says, ‘You like it because it *cancels out* time?’ Now, I was seventeen, just a ‘squeaker’, and I took his reaction to mean that I’d put my foot in my mouth. And I couldn’t go making a fool of myself in front of *him*. So I threw in something else along the lines of how it was over a game of chess that I’d come to believe in Einstein.” Witold laughed at the memory. “And that’s how I got out of it. And then he said this: ‘If you want to get ahead, you must always play with players who are better than you. What a lovely paradox – as you’re losing, you’re making progress, and when you start winning, it means you’re stagnating. The road to defeat is paved with victories. People never remember that when they start winning...’ Ever since then, I’ve tried to keep his words in mind. I can’t say whether it’s helped.”

Witold was silent for a minute or two, then went on. “If other people are the frame we grow on, some will be high and others will be low. On the low ones, there’s no room to spread out and flourish. Whereas...”

Somewhat later, a lively soccer story was interrupted. I was just telling him how I’d begun to root for Argentina, when he started up again about Gombrowicz.

“And he had this way, when he’d come to our house, of telling the same story for hours and hours, the story of his cancer. He hadn’t been to the doctor, he wasn’t planning to go, but there was this *feeling* he had: it was some kind of cancer. That’s just what he’d say, ‘some kind of cancer’. Mother would get so worried, she always did, and try to persuade him. ‘Witold, you’ve got to see a doctor. Doctor Schultz is excellent, so thorough, such an expert, and a friend of ours besides...’ But all for nothing. Dionizije also tried to talk him into doing something about it, at least the first seven or eight times. But when he saw that the man had no intention of doing anything, he gave up. One day

he told me, ‘Son, Gomb is as fit as a fiddle. This whole business about cancer is just a mantra for keeping it away. Take my word for it.’”

Several days later, we were sitting at the outdoor café by the theater. That evening, seven or eight hours later, Parm would hold his second lecture in Podgorica. There weren’t many people out. It was an autumn sun, but merciless, as if it didn’t know that the summer was over. “Real scorcher,” he said. Halfway into his espresso, and W.G. was with us again.

“Once I saw him by a run-down house on the edge of Retiro. I was taken aback. What was he doing there? It was one of those marginal areas you find described in Borges, in his essays on Evaristo Carriego. Those places in the city where underground rivers bubble to the surface – transvestites, hit men, drug dealers, black marketers, pimps, and poets and songwriters, *milonga* and tango. My first thought was that he didn’t want me to see him there, so I kept going as if I hadn’t. When I first spotted him, he’d been picking his way out through a broken wall, a sort of gateway to the inner sanctum of badness beyond. But he called out after me, ‘Menido, Menido!’ Which is what my parents sometimes called me. I turned around and pretended to be surprised, not overdoing it, though, so as not to offend him. ‘Going home? I’ll walk with you,’ he said. Well, the surprise at seeing him there was nothing compared to the surprise of our conversation as we took our little unplanned stroll towards the bus station by the Jewish restaurant. I’d never heard him so scattered. He jumped from one topic to the next, surprising me more with each one. He asked me what I thought about my Montenegrin background. I told him that any ‘native’ feeling I had was based on nothing but stories told by father and his friends about the old country. ‘The smell of defeat, of injustice, that’s what comes out of those stories,’ I say. ‘I try not to get involved. It’s only a short step from feeling that way to turning fascist. Now it’s part of some communist state, and it’s even less clear how I should feel about that little corner of Europe.’ Then I go on to tell him that somehow because of my mother, but also because of him, it’s my Polish identity that I feel more clearly. ‘But I’m Argentinian, Witold, so this

business of fretting about identity comes naturally to me.’ That makes him smile, and then he says, ‘Every nation on earth has its own way of being difficult and tiresome. The whole concept of nationhood is difficult and tiresome, but you can’t just argue it away.’ Then Gombrowicz says to me, ‘There is something you must do, at once, and that is to determine which matters most. Your country, or yourself. You have to know which is your greatest truth. Which is more important, that you are one man in this world, or that you are a Pole. Or a Montenegrin, whichever.’ I tried to answer him in my timid way: ‘They don’t have to be mutually exclusive, though, do they? I mean, can a dog just be an animal? Of course it *is* an animal, but as such, as a dog, it’s either a greyhound or a mastiff or a bulldog...’ After a short pause, Witold answered. ‘Young man, you’ll never reach any absolute reality if you don’t take your feelings to the limit. That’s how you know what’s real, and that’s the line that concepts can’t cross.’

“Two buses had gone by, and still we stood there. Witold made some sort of sign with his hand to keep walking to the next stop. At least that’s what I thought the gesture meant. Whatever the case, we kept walking. As we go along, Witold continues his story. ‘A Pole is a Pole by nature. Therefore, the more the Pole is his own man, the more of a Pole he becomes. If Poland, for whatever reason, prevents him from thinking or feeling freely, that means that Poland is not allowing him to be fully himself, fully a Pole. You’ll say I’m splitting hairs,’ he says. This from a Pole who’d spent the last twenty years exasperating and delighting other Poles half a world away. But it strikes me as reasonable, what he’s saying. So much so that I don’t want to agree or disagree. I don’t say a word. We come to the next bus stop. Standing there by the lottery kiosk on Calle Mar, waiting in the shade for the bus to come, I notice something odd about his eyes.

“Your eyes are all red, Witold.’

“I’ve been staring at Poland for too long,’ he says, ‘and the distance is tiring them out.’

“Somewhat later, I’d realize that Poland wasn’t the reason.”

During those years, Witold would often talk to the young Pejanović.

Sometimes he would visit Dionizije, either by himself or with other Argentine Poles, and there were many opportunities for him to invite the young graduate for walks and conversations in the city.

Once, in 1958, in one of the cafes across from Mendoza – which is always busy in the afternoons, so they'd had to sit in the tourist-trap Tango Bar – Witold gave him a look that was part serious, part mischievous grin, and asked him in a low but perfectly clear voice, “Ever smoked grass? Marihuana?”

Parmenid stared back at him, not answering.

“You’ve heard of it, marihuana?”

“Yes, of course I have,” said Parmenid.

This is how he told it to me: “Naturally, the question knocked me for a loop. I hadn’t tried marihuana yet, but several of my school friends had given it rave reviews as a vice. Argentines love tobacco, and they’re always drinking *mate*, a sort of tea from *yerba*. They drink it through these special metal straws with a mesh arrangement at the end to catch the loose leaves. They’re usually made of nickel silver, though you can get ones of gold, brass, and so on. The whole thing predetermines you for similar rituals. Drinking **mate** has a distinctly ritual aspect...

“My prolonged silence led Witold to continue with his explanation. ‘You see, for the last three years I’ve been getting grass from this man. Fifty grams a month. Young, Polish, nice enough. But now he’s gone and landed in Bolivia, of all places. He’s the cousin of that arrogant Daniecky I’ve brought round with me a few times to your parents’ house. I can’t do without it. In fact, I think I’d go mad without my little pipeful at night. Since he’s gone, I don’t know how to buy more. Can you help me?’

“The very next morning I set to work. I tracked down Porfirio Dida, figuring he was the only one who could help. I met him in the attic at old Lazar’s place. Dida was about thirty then, but he looked as though he’d lived three lifetimes already. He was sharp, didn’t talk much, and wasn’t afraid of anything. He said something like, ‘And what does mama’s little boy want with the grand old herb? Been reading Kerouac, Ginsberg?’ But still he helped me out. Witold had given me a lot of

money, and I remember Dida selling me about two hundred grams. Dida was quite the guy. His street name in La Boca was Ángel.

“Proud as could be, I called Gombowich in the late afternoon. Trying for an air of mystery, I said I had something for him. He told me to come at once. He insisted on my taking a taxi, he’d pay the fare to La Cabana.

“He was waiting for me at the door and ushered me straight to his study. This was a room with a lovely window and not an inch of wall to be seen for all the books on shelves and in piles right and left. I was surprised to see that his desk was turned so that his back was to the window. Maybe the window would disturb him at his work, I thought, every window being a concentrated view of the world. But his explanation was much simpler: this way he wouldn’t be bothered by the morning sun glaring through the enormous window.

“He motioned me towards the little sofa by the desk. I sat and – not without a certain staginess – produced the packet I’d brought from Dida. The grass was in a multilayered paper bag meant for loaves of bread.

“At first I felt quite uneasy, but he set to work preparing the grass and filling an enormous pipe. Rosewood, he told me.

“Then he lit up, and as he took the first few puffs, he began to watch and shoo away a fly that was making a nuisance of itself, circling round his desk. He talked about flies for the next fifteen minutes.

“My first smoke will remain in my memory thanks to his talk of flies. Everything had suddenly shifted and become amusing. As if time were starting over again and again with each new moment.

“It was thrilling. And that’s how I remember 1958.”

It was the end of the story I was hearing from Parmenid Pejanović, there in the café by the theatre, in Podgorica.

Parmenid still turns up in Montenegro from time to time, never staying long. I’ll hear from him occasionally, we e-mail each other... And always he tells me about the latest grass he’s been trying. His enthusiasm for it is simply amazing, as childish as the first time Gomb offered it to him. It’s like with women, always the same build-up and delight.

Hell, I say to myself sometimes, it makes a difference whether your first joint is with some snot-nosed kids behind the bicycle shed, or with Gombrowicz in the very same study where *Trans-Atlantyk* was written, and the famous *Diaries*.

Which, by the way, is where I read that absolutely everything worthwhile we undertake is in fact 'the struggle for maturity by someone in love with his lack thereof.' ”

Zuvdija Hodžić



THE DANCE

Ten years had elapsed since the explosion that ruined his hearing, drove out every sound, burdened him with a deafness so thick and heavy that he bowed under its weight.

Even now, when the weather changed, especially when it clouded over, the explosion still echoed in the empty chambers of his ears, so many blades pressing into him.

The roar and the familiar pain would knock him down. His body contorting, he would fall into a half-conscious weightlessness.

At each new spray of shrapnel he would flinch, gasp, cry out. The sweat stood out in large beads, spittle flecked his mouth.

Yes it hurt, but bring on the next assault. He would show them – defying himself, defying everyone, revenge on his own misfortune.

He was willing to undergo it – to hear the music that followed the explosion, that spread through him like a soothing balm.

It his only consolation. He believed it was the only thing he lived for, to hear those rare, brief snatches of music. Abruptly it would cease, leaving behind a thin track of light. This he would follow into the past, into happiness.

Nightfall in Skopje, at the Madrasah. Instead of the mosque, the call to prayers, a new, unsettling sound.

Passing by the mausoleum of Gazi-Hasan, the *turbe*, he stopped in his tracks at the music. Slowly, as if moving the hands of a great clock,

he reached out towards it, then pulled back in confusion.

He could never rid himself of that music again. He moved towards it, entranced, moving his hands as if fending something off, his body tensing, his mouth repeating over and over the first line of his prayers.

On the low stone wall sat a Bulgarian, head thrown back, drawing the bow with reckless abandon across the strings of his violin.

He wanted to turn and run, to forget what he'd seen and heard. He couldn't. Frozen to the spot, he heard the music out to the very end. The violinist looked at him, disdaining the young man who seemed about to toss him a coin. When he realized his mistake, he sighed.

At the Madrasah he was seized with fear. Everything was turning into music, the music he had heard at the *turbe*. He was growing deaf to everything else: to his friends, to thoughts of home and homeland, to prayer. Even to the verses of the Koran being read aloud by the imam, who frowned sternly at him, noticing that he was not reciting along.

He heard only the music. It sprang from everything: from the fountains in the courtyard of the mosque, the yellowing scrolls, the high minarets and the great clock tower. When the imam reached for the holy book, he saw it as a black wooden case from which a violin would be produced. Carefully he would place it under his chin and draw the bow across the strings, setting the hidden notes free.

The music was still playing in his ears the day he decided to run away from the Madrasah, to leave it all behind, to break his vows and turn his back on God's grace and to live only for the music, knowing the hardship that awaited him in any new place. Let alone in Gusinje, if he should ever return.

Luck was with him for the first few days. He found work in the shop of a Greek merchant. The pay was poor, but the Greek also loved music and promised to teach him the violin. He was delighted at the quick success. It was wonderful to see the love and passion in the young man's playing, the fire.

But it wasn't to last. Above the city where his new life was beginning, the advance German squadrons filled the sky with bombs.

Right beside him came the blast. No time to take cover.

The earth shook and spun. He was flung far away. When he awoke, he wondered what had become of the music. With horror he realized that it had been blown apart. He would never hear it again.

The music, his own voice – never again.

Only pain.

Ahead, the lonely nights, sleepless and sad.

For months he heard the explosion almost every day. It would thunder inside him, knocking him down, and he would cry out, the spittle flying from his mouth. Later it seemed to have spent some of its force. It came less often, but out of the blue, blasting him apart. Then came the music which he had almost forgotten.

In the end, even the music went away.

Lost, he tried to drown his sorrows in drink. His skin clung to his bones as though ravaged by consumption. One night, through the gloom of a half-open tavern door, he saw a violinist. His eyes widened and he stood fixed to the spot, watching the mute gestures. He stepped through the door.

He began to tremble. Somewhere inside him he could hear that first sound, feel the gentle balm. The first few notes of the well-known melody. Just as he had stood at the *turbe*, confused and excited, so he stood now. His back straightened of its own accord, he moved aside a chair, and then he began – slowly at first, unsure of himself, then with greater confidence – to move his feet, to dance.

Free now, he spread his arms and let himself be carried away. Let it all spin round, let everything dance: the people, the tables, the trees.

He can hear. He hears.

At the sight of the dancing, the player moved the bow faster and faster, as if he knew what was taking place in the man's soul, as he climbed onto the table, as he spun and flailed, lost in a dance that no one had ever seen. Joyful and sorrowful all at once, the dance seemed the thing that made life worth the living.

His music had something of the dance in it, the same running flight. It carried him away, and he knew he'd never play again the way he played that night.

Bosiljka Pušić



LUDI ŽIVAN

Some events resist the rust of years, shining in memory with the brightness of the present moment. Others are half-obsured to the mind's eye: we peer out at the rushing landscape, but the window is covered with grime, the train carries us swiftly along. Still other events return to us under a changed aspect: suffering which long ago spurred us to contempt of our fellow man – now transmuted, gold among scraps of iron. Such are my memories of the town drummer, which lead to memories of *Ludi Živan*: Živan the Mad, Živan the town fool, the only villager exempt from reporting at the sound of the drum.

Živan truly was mad. Most often he could be found galloping through the village on a branch, like a child on its hobby-horse. People said he had been known to gallop all the way to Kragujevac without stopping for breath. From Jagodina to Kragujevac, taking the old road through Bunar and Sabante, is nearly forty kilometers. Come summer, come winter, Živan would be dressed in the same rough leggings and jacket, never a shirt or shoes. In summer, no one remarked at his bare-foot gallop from Jagodina to Kragujevac and back again. But even in winter, Živan went without shoes.

If the sound of the drum reached him in the streets, he would stop and join the gathering crowd, widen his rheumy eyes at the drummer

and mumble to himself, wiping his nose on his sleeve. Though Živan never learned to speak, he could make himself understood with his mumbling and his gestures. Even in his madness, he knew the drummer was announcing something important, and for long minutes he would stand with the crowd, quite still, staring at the people around him and muttering, until he rode away again on his branch.

In winter my father's shop was one of the few heated places in the village, and you could always find someone there who had not come to buy. Pensioners, usually, who would work their way quietly through the newspapers as father attended to a delicate bit of work, perhaps a new spring for a tiny wrist watch. When he'd finished, father would put down his jeweller's glass and ask for the latest news. Then, over the obligatory glass of hot plum brandy for the biting cold, the talking could begin.

If the repairs were complicated – work turned down by the other local watchmakers – his success would be celebrated with serious drinking. I would be coming home from school as he was closing up shop, for the working day was strictly enforced by law: from seven to twelve and again from four to seven, with not a minute's difference in either direction. I would enter the hallway of the house, and if I was met by empty baskets and saddlebags, I knew that father's country cousins had come to lunch. That's why I loathed those Saturdays and Sundays, the market days in Jagodina. Not because I came home to an empty pot, but because of the stink of warm plum brandy, the smells emanating from the sheep's leather worn by father's cousins.

One such market day, when the road was nearly impassable with slush and manure and a thin frost had formed on the surface of it all, I entered the hallway to find a mound of sacks and baskets and saddlebags. The noise of shouting reached the hallway, as if from an argument.

“Why, you're even softer in the head than he is!”

It was the voice of my father's uncle Milić, from the village of Vitanac. He rarely came to Jagodina, preferring to sell his wares in Despotovac, a shorter journey for him of two kilometers. My father was always careful to show respect and had never contradicted him before. What could his uncle mean?

When I entered the room, I found my father kneeling on the floor. In the blue enamel washbasin were the feet of Mad Živan, who was sitting in a chair and staring at his feet and my father's hands. My father was washing his legs. He lifted one of Živan's feet, wiped it with a towel, and said, "Isn't *this* the sin? See how many wounds he has."

After cleaning the other foot, my father asked my mother to hand him a jar of his homemade elderberry ointment. It took him a long time to dress the wounds. He tucked the clean feet into new woolen socks, then laced up the hunting boots he had bought for himself. Živan chuckled to himself throughout. His eyes were running, his nose dripping, and he would use his sleeve to wipe them both. And all the time my father's uncle Milić continued to berate him.

"He'll get no further than the first corner with those before he takes them off. It's a shame and a waste! In all the time I've known him, never once did I see him with anything on his feet. Summer, winter – never! I ought to have taken those socks and shoes and hurled them right in the lake for all the good it'll do *that one*, and you on your knees before him, the great fool."

Živan continued to stare at the boots he was wearing. My father, still kneeling, looked up at Živan, who sat there mumbling and grinning, and said gently but firmly, "You're not to go around barefoot till your cuts have healed. Understood?"

Živan nodded once, still muttering to himself, and from his reddened eyes there seemed to run reddish tears. My father's face shone as

it did on those rare occasions when he wanted there to be no doubt of his great happiness. The voluminous skirts of my father's aunts filled half the room, the hems sodden with muddy snow. I had to step gingerly around them to reach my bag of books. I was overcome then, I remember, with the bitterness of it all: the smells of warm brandy and the smells of the sheep leather worn by the many aunts and uncles, their smacking kisses with the stink of garlic in them, Živan the fool in the middle of our room, slobbering and snivelling, our family washbasin filled with the water in which his wounded feet had been bathed, the cries of my cousins, the same words over and over:

“Look at you! How big you've grown!”

I remember how hungry I was. I remember the knots that filled my throat, my stomach. I remember the first stirrings of nausea, the disgust that was welling up in me. I remember the struggle to contain my anger, the struggle not to hurl ugly words at my father for others to hear. I remember the tears I fought to hold back.

And now, after so many years, this memory has turned to gold. In all its brilliance, outshining the shame, the disgust, the bitterness that filled me, enclosing it all like the golden halo of a saint in his icon. It shines out with strength and kindness, a new flower unfolding, one that might never have taken root, might never have blossomed from its thick heap of dung. ”

Dragan Radulović



THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA

I'm no good at comforting people, never have been. When things go wrong, give me something to do and it'll get done, no grumbling – just don't ask me to hold anyone's hand if they're crying, in pain or about to die. No can do! What can I tell you? My ex-wife claims this is just one of the reasons why I'm a heartless, selfish bastard who goes all logical when I should be displaying emotion, and she's probably not far wrong. For a while there she was trying to pin my attitude on my childhood, on some trauma I supposedly went through and never faced up to. So her favorite way to spend a free hour was rummaging through the junk drawer inside my head, even though I tried to be helpful and told her it wasn't there, not the thing she was looking for anyway. I tried to explain how I'd had a standard-issue, happy childhood just like any other dumb kid, but she wasn't buying it. In the end I got sick of all the head-shrinking, and the only thing she managed to do with her ham-fisted attempts to save me from myself was drive me crazy.

Over the last few years of our marriage, we seemed to be bickering all the time, outdoing ourselves in coming up with new ways to hurt each other's feelings, two people who'd fallen out of love and didn't have the guts to admit it and stop it all from going down the tubes. Until one morning she said she was leaving, and I mumbled OK and rolled over and went back to sleep.

We were lucky not to have kids, so the divorce was by consent decree, quick work for the lawyers. Later she went around telling our mutual friends that we never would have gotten divorced if only I'd wanted children and had tried a little harder in that department. My answer was that the divorce was bound to happen sooner or later, so it was just as well for all concerned to get it over with while we were still relatively young and raring to go, and not years later when the only spot of color left in life is the fistful of pills you have to swallow every morning and every night. My wife claims that the cause of our divorce was my refusal to get treatment, and I say that's just a convenient excuse, that the real reason was our irreconcilable differences, which were bound to surface sooner or later. My wife's response would be that our 'irreconcilable differences' first showed up the minute I refused to undergo treatment, and in turn I would point out that – ah, forget it! We went back and forth about it by proxy for months after the divorce, until one night I told our friends that I didn't care anymore, and that they'd better drop the whole thing if they wanted to keep me around. And not another word was said.

Seven years of life, vanished into thin air. Kaput. But still, when you come to think of it, maybe my wife was right, maybe I *am* a heartless bastard? Two years of therapy for the old sperm cells ("sluggish and poorly motivated" as the doctor described them, making them sound like characters in a story), and nothing to show for it in the end but boredom. I got sick of the little plastic jars to be filled, of the labs and the private clinics, of the humiliation that comes when treatment fails. One day I really let my unmade child have it:

"Even if I thought you were going to be Super-Baby, I'm not putting another drop into making you! Now get lost!" And with a few choice words I had said good-bye to the virtual tadpole who was making my life such a misery, and called off the treatments.

That evening when I shared my decision with the wife, she tried the humanistic appeal: new birth, 'a little world made cunningly', nature's greatest gift, yadda yadda. Then she tried to put the fear of God into me, banking on any vestiges of religion: did I truly dare defy

His command to go forth and multiply?

“But don’t you want *a son?*” she asked at one point, expecting me to cave in at this classic appeal to Montenegrin manhood.

“No,” I said coolly. “Don’t give a rat’s ass.”

When she finally realized the conventional arsenal wasn’t getting her anywhere, she reached for the biochemical weapons. Her clock was ticking, she panted, and time was running out.

“Tick *you!* I got your clock right here,” I swore in one long breath, then did my caveman laugh, the one my family has been using for generations. And that’s how our first serious fight began, the first of many to come, all leading to the irreversible breakdown of our life together, and even though I’m not denying my share of the blame I’m not saying sorry either.

We split up eventually. It took me a while to get used to the bachelor lifestyle. Say what you like, but man is the most adaptable of creatures, so I got the hang of it surprisingly quick. Work helped keep my mind off of things: I got the tourist agency up on its feet after its first few years. In-season I organize boat trips up and down the coast and visits to Dubrovnik for customers from Serbia who are vacationing in Budva, and off-season I sell real estate to the Russians. When you do the math, it doesn’t add up to much, but I’m not complaining. Anyway, even if I wanted to, no one would listen. That’s what I’ve come to realize about people and the world we live in.

My sex life isn’t setting off any fire alarms. It’s no porn movie, but we’re not talking Kalahari Desert, either. That go-getter from the *Kompas* agency has been happy to exploit me for a while now. If you don’t mind my saying so, she even seems to enjoy it, the occasional exchange of shop talk and bodily fluids. You can feel the charge in the air between us, over seafood at some fancy restaurant – don’t get me started! I’m running the risk of getting all romantic here, and that’s the last thing I want. I wouldn’t have even brought up my divorce if something hadn’t made me suddenly think about it again. Here’s what happened.

Ivan G. and I went to grade school together in Budva. We also played on the same local volleyball team, but he had talent and practiced hard while I was always iffy about the whole sports thing and quit soon after. The one thing we both stuck to was our fishing trips. Ivan went off to Titograd to study engineering at the technical high school, while I stayed behind in Budva and barely managed to earn a vocational diploma in tourism. We ran into each other again in Belgrade as college students and it was just like old times. Things were good, with a new band playing every weekend at one of the student unions or the arts academy. Those days of drinking and playing cards, of soft drugs and easy sex all around us – they were all part of our outlook on life. But our friendship was for real, too, and the proof came one April afternoon when he asked me to go with him to visit his father.

His old man was in the army hospital, recovering from a throat operation. From the few sentences Ivan mumbled in my direction, I gathered that it was cancer, that this hadn't been the first operation, and that the man wasn't likely to recover. I just nodded, of course, no questions. Because if I knew one thing about my friend, it was this: he'd talk about anything under the sun *except* his relationship with his father. I didn't know why, could only guess, and only to myself, because I respected my friend, respected his right not to talk about some things. His parents were divorced, and it wasn't until he was seventeen that he'd spoken to his father for the first time. The old man hadn't even recognized him when he opened the door, just looked at the stranger on his doorstep and asked him what he wanted.

"Maybe he thought I was the meter man," Ivan laughed. It was night and we were high, going over old memories. He ended up telling me the whole story. But by the next morning I'd forgotten it all and, truth be told, I still can't remember.

We went to visit his father. It took fifteen minutes of searching because Ivan didn't have all the information, so we went from counter to counter, floor by floor, asking the same thing over and over until we finally hit on the right room. If the old man was surprised to see his son, he didn't show it.

“Who told you I was here?” he asked.

“My mother,” said Ivan, and the old man nodded as if that was the most natural thing in the world.

They made small talk, scored a few laughs off each other, and I stood to one side and got a kick out of seeing how similar they were, especially in their sense of irony, their way of laughing at their own expense. When we left the hospital, I offered to buy a round of drinks. He shook his head.

“Where are you going?” I asked, worried.

“To the movies,” he said. “*Kinoteka* starts their Howard Hawks retrospective today. I want to see it.”

Ivan’s father died two months later. As far as I know, that was the last time they saw each other.

After college, we both moved back to Budva. He was a construction engineer now, and I was an economics major. People in the know predicted successful careers for both of us, which of course never came true. It didn’t take long to see that Ivan and I were out of step with the times, that we had a surprising resistance to political involvement with the ruling party. We didn’t sign up for membership the first time it was offered, convinced that the promises of eternal happiness were really the voice of the devil. I think we even made some noise about the bullshit they were passing off as wisdom towards the end of the eighties.

At first the local apparatchiks were nice about it, all soft voices and sweet nothings. Then they turned relentless, modern Chichikovs out to acquire dead souls at any price.

When even a blind man could see that war was on the horizon, I emigrated to Italy and spent the next five years in Milan. I worked on and off at a company owned by a business friend of my father’s. I studied Italian and steered clear of anyone from the former Yugoslavia, no matter which group they belonged to, because away from home it could only drag you down and into trouble. I wasn’t homesick, but I followed every story in the Italian news about the sudden descent into bloodshed, cannibalism.

Ivan refused to fight and got into an argument with the MPs who came to serve the draft papers, and it almost landed him in jail. I asked him and asked him to come and stay with me in Italy, but he said no. Every morning he'd put on his suit and tie and go off to work, only to take heat from co-workers whose men were on the front lines. People are cruel, especially when they're in the wrong. Two months later he was fired. His boss explained that there was no room on the payroll for traitors and cowards. When the news reached me I said: it's all right, just let it end there, things have gotten so bad that Ivan could have ended up in a ditch somewhere. Shortly after he was fired, somebody made a mess of his doorstep and spray-painted sexual and political insults all over the front of his house. Later he told me that he couldn't care less what a bunch of thugs might think, but his mother took it hard: the poor woman had a breakdown and her brother had to come and take her back home with him. Until she gets over it, he had told Ivan, blaming him for the misfortune that had befallen them. That same day Ivan left town. He packed up a few of his favorite books and whatever savings he had and went off to some property they had up in the hills, about ten miles from Budva, determined to start life over in a house that had been standing empty for forty years. When I asked him afterwards what those four and a half years in the country had been like, he'd laughed.

"Best time of my life, believe you me. Surprising how little you actually need to keep your strength up, so long as the food's good. Took me a few months and I got my grandfather's old grape arbor and fruit trees back in shape, stuck up a few fences, cleaned out the rain tank and patched the roof. Bought five nanny-goats and got a billy-goat from a neighbor, bought twenty laying hens myself and got a pup and a rooster from another neighbor. One of the women in the village gave me a pair of thick woolen socks and told me to wear them everywhere I went, layered over the store-bought ones, in case of snakebite. Don't get me wrong, though: it was no walk in the park. We're talking sixteen hours of backbreaking labor every single day, with plenty of overtime to boot, until you fall dead asleep, just so you can get up and do it all over again."

“What was the scariest part?” I asked, all ears.

“In spring and summer, the vipers, crawling all over the place. Fall and winter, the wild boars and jackals that make their way down the mountainside towards the sea.” Ivan’s voice was cheerful, but then he spoke into his half-empty glass. “Actually, the scariest part was the house and the first night I spent there. The place was falling apart, abandoned, full of family ghosts and history. It was strange, I felt as though the house was watching me curiously, trying to decide if I could live there or not. I didn’t manage to fall asleep until just before dawn. And then I had the strangest dream: this enormous snake lying coiled up on my chest, its forked tongue flickering in and out just above my lips. I sat bolt upright in the dark and checked all around me. No snake.”

“A dream is just a dream, but God is truth,” I said out loud, and when I crossed myself it was for real, with all my heart, for probably the first time in my life.”

“If I’d had a camera, I would’ve shot some footage for one of those nature documentaries. Once I saw a rooster kill a viper. The whole thing was over in a matter of minutes, maybe five at the most, but it seemed to go on for an hour, I couldn’t take my eyes off it. The rooster used his wings to shield his breast and legs, just like a boxer in the ring, ducking and dodging so the snake was only hitting his feathers, not sinking its fangs in, and after every missed strike he came back with a counter-blow, wham, right on the snake’s head with his beak. Once he’d killed the snake, he spread his wings like a champion and started crowing, and all the chickens who’d been huddling at a safe distance from the fight came running to him and pecked away at the snake till it was all gone.”

We laughed. I knew about cats killing snakes, but this was the first time I’d heard of a rooster doing it.

“How could you live with all those snakes around you?” I asked.

“You just watch your step and keep an eye on the branches overhead. When they’re on the ground they lie coiled up. If you startle one he turns into a spring and comes right at you, a clear couple of feet through

the air. That's why they're called *jumping* vipers, right? And whenever I'd go out walking, I'd carry a long forked stick with me," he said.

"To kill them with?" I asked, imagining my friend in the role of St. George slaying the dragon.

"No." He shook his head. "To shake them out of the trees. In spring and summer they head up the trunk and curl around the sunniest branches – not too high, though: maybe six or seven feet off the ground. They bask in the sun. If you spot one, you give the branch a shake with the stick and he drops right off. If you don't see him, though, you might startle him as you're passing underneath, and then he'll land right on top of you. Which can be sort of unpleasant, I guess."

"Ugh, snakes," I said, making a face. Ivan shrugged. His expression came across this way: they're not crazy about you either, so it's a tie. "I don't know how you managed to make it for four and a half years up there with all those snakes," I said.

Ivan reflected. "It was just the first two summers. After that they didn't come back. They were all gone."

"How do you mean, gone? You killed them off?"

"I never killed a single one!" he said indignantly. "And I never will, either."

"How do you mean *gone*, then?" I persisted.

"Never mind," he said mysteriously. "You wouldn't believe it anyway."

"Screw you, nature boy," I said, offended. "Give my regards to Jane of the jungle. Oh, right, just remembered: there was no Jane up there, nothing but goats and chickens on a Saturday night for you."

"You got it," Ivan laughed. "No ladies' night in the country. Just your trusty old right hand and the sweet sounds of the barnyard."

We laughed.

We both moved back home at about the same time: Ivan was done with the country life and I was sick of Milan. He ran a package store out of his house, wholesale-retail liquor and beer, and made a decent living. For a while we kept the friendship going, meeting up with the guys for cards and wine and shooting the shit. But we saw each other

less and less, until finally we just stopped. Like a fraying cord that gives out. One week it would be me who didn't show up, the next week it would be him, and the week after that we'd both end up forgetting it was time to get together. Not the end of the world, I figured. It happens. People just grow apart. Every once in a while we'd see each other in town, say hi and ask how work was going, how's life treating you, but... it just wasn't the same as before. *Shit happens*, I told myself. No reason to go poking around in the shit to figure out where it came from. Soon we each had our own families and were well on the way towards our individual destinies. It was that same year when his son Luka was born. My little tadpole, apparently, was to remain forever in the realm of possibility.

So it was something of a surprise when he rang me up. I didn't recognize his voice, it had been so long since we last spoke. At first, as I was running through the usual phrases, I wondered what the hell he was calling me for. He must have hit a rough patch, I figured, run up some debts, needed X amount to get back on his feet.

"What can I do for you?" I cut in, maybe a shade too rough, certainly more roughly than I meant it to sound.

"Nothing," he said flatly, then switched to a friendlier tone as if afraid of alienating me even more. "Fishin' time," he said. "The squid are back. We could head out on the water one of these days. What do you say?"

Plenty, I was about to answer, but I kept my mouth shut.

"I'm beat," I told him. "I haven't gone squidding in a long time, at least ten years. I'm not even sure where my tackle is or what kind of shape it's in." I was trying to wriggle out of it.

"Don't worry about the tackle. I can give you a reel of 25-millimeter filament and any kind of lure you want." The challenge had been issued.

"I sold the boat last summer." It was the last thing I could think of. "What are we supposed to go out to sea in?"

"My boat," he said.

"Didn't know you had one," I said in surprise.

“Three years now,” he said.

“Wood frame?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

“That’s what I had my heart set on,” he said regretfully. “But the day I went to buy it in Tivat, they were out of matching boat-slaves – you know, the ones who spend all spring fixing the damn thing up and nailing all the boards back down? So I had to settle for low-maintenance fiberglass, with a cabin.”

We laughed, the first laugh we’d shared in years.

“What’s the word from Croatia?” I asked. “What’s the forecast for the Adriatic?”

“I watched the five-day last night. A perfect day for banana-squid.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

“Tomorrow. Meet you at ten p.m. in front of the gas station. That’s where my tie-up is.”

“Who’s bringing the drinks?”

“They’re on the house.”

“Just the way I like them,” I said in my best hired-gun voice, then hung up laughing.

It’s not that I don’t trust the TV weather forecast or anything, but by the time we ordinary mortals get the satellite picture, the whole thing has already been changed three times. So I headed over to the store and picked up a few cans of beer, half a loaf of bread, some cheese and some vacuum-packed slices of prosciutto: now I was ready to walk down to the harbor and get the straight story from a reliable source before setting off on tonight’s adventure.

The guy they called Elmer Fudd was on the job. He lay on a bench, wrapped in a tattered and dirty down jacket, watching the harbor through half-closed eyes. The last of a prominent Budva family, born with worn-out blood in his veins, he got by on hand-outs now, muttering and shuffling his way through life. Things had been different while his father was still alive: at least he’d had clean clothes to wear and something to eat every day. It wasn’t to last. The old-timers who remember can tell the story. Even though his father had made a deal with the town a few months before dying – the family’s

house in the old part of town in exchange for taking care of his simple-minded son – nothing came of it. Lasted less than a year, in fact. The town gave him a job down at the harbor as watchman, with a studio apartment in one of those new buildings that went up after the earthquake of '79 – built with the aid money that came pouring in from all over what was still Yugoslavia – and a guaranteed monthly income, enough to live on. But once the father died the payments slowly dried up, until one day they just stopped. Meanwhile, the old family house had changed hands several times, right up to the end of the 90s, when it was sold off cheap to cancel somebody's gambling debts. The new owner was from Podgorica, one of those robbers who made it big in the transition economy after the war. He turned the place into a brothel.

"Fudd!" I shouted.

When his eyes opened up, I tossed him a can of beer. He caught it deftly in mid-air and popped it right open.

"What do you want, you fucker?" he asked, gulping down the beer.

"Anybody out squidding these days?" I asked.

"Sure, sure, plenty to go around! Pfft!" Happily he eyed the clear plastic bag I was holding.

"How's the weather?" I asked.

"Wind's in the south! Thick as stew. Seaweed washing up everywhere. Nasty stuff coming to the surface. But it'll be clearin' up tonight and tomorrow, it will."

"What's the best lure for going out tonight?"

"Not those Japanese ones. The ones you get at the stores. Ain't Japanese squid, are they? Not tonight they ain't." He shook his head angrily and tossed the empty beer can away. I offered him another.

"If the Japanese ones are no good, what'll work tonight?"

"Pfft! The old kind. They're all gone. The ones that light up. All gone."

I laughed. "I got a few of those at home."

"Who the hell are you, you little bugger?" he asked curiously.

I told him who my father was. His eyes registered confusion for a

few moments, then he started to smile. “You’re the little bugger with the eel that got out of the bag! And there you were, knocking its brains out with a rock on the boardwalk while all the women were screaming *snake, snake!* I remember you.”

I nodded. “That was me.”

Fudd was laughing now, his mouth gaping. People walking by would take one look and speed up. The conversation was over, I realized, so I set down his bag of treats and nodded goodbye.

I must have been thirteen, I think, that late afternoon when I was fishing for mullet off the shore at Mogren. Nothing was biting, so I’d decided to go home. As I was boxing up my tackle, two old guys from Cetinje showed up, bent on catching eels with squid for bait. We got to talking, and one of them handed me a chunk of squid, saying, “Stick this on your hook, kiddo, and throw it in – no point going home empty-handed!”

I did what he told me to. I baited my hook with the whole chunk, moved a dozen yards away, and cast the line. I set the rod into a beach-umbrella stand and pushed the release button on the reel – set it and forget it. After almost an hour, when I’d finally made up my mind to go home, there was a surprise.

“I got something!” I shouted.

“What kind of filament you using?” one of them asked.

“Point-eighteen,” I said.

The man had some four-letter words for the thickness I was using, completely the wrong gauge for eels.

“No screwin’ around, kid! Wind her in nice n’ easy now. Don’t go pissin’ yourself and screwin’ the whole thing up,” he said.

After twenty minutes or so of the slowest reeling I had ever done, I managed to bring it up on shore.

“He’s a good one! He’s a beaut!” said the old men in chorus.

And as they were exclaiming, the eel slipped off the hook. Where’s my fish, I wailed. One of the men tried searching that part of the beach with his cigarette lighter, but it was no good. The eel was in the sand and lost to sight.

“Why didn’t you bring the fuckin’ flashlight?” the man with the cigarette lighter demanded.

“It’s back in the car,” said the other, painfully aware of his oversight.

“So what did we come here for, night fishing or day fishing? You leave your brain back in the car too?” shouted the man with the lighter.

To redeem himself, the other man rolled up his newspaper and offered it as a torch. By the flaming light we spotted the eel.

“Grab ‘im! Watcha waitin’ for?” said one of them. Seeing me hang back, he laughed. “Get a bag, kid. I’ll catch him for you.”

Rather than go straight home, I decided to take a little walk along the waterfront and show my catch off to the other kids. I couldn’t resist the chance to brag. As the tourists strolled up and down, the eel wriggled its way out through a hole in the bag and made straight for the sea. Women screamed, and everyone froze at the unexpected sight. There went the strange and menacing creature, slithering among them as I followed along, scared, trying to hit it on the head with the handle of my fishing-rod. Naturally, I kept missing. To everyone’s amusement, I used the stick to fend it off from the water’s edge, until at last I picked up a rock and, with a few strong blows, bashed its head in. I remember somebody calling out, “Leave some for dinner, kid!” and the loud laughter that followed. When I finally made it home, my father’s expertise established the following: the eel weighed 1,623 grams, and the hook was still hanging from its mouth. My father said the hook had probably torn the bag, and then the eel had squeezed its way through.

Now I was arriving a few minutes early, because I make it a point never to be late. It’s so disrespectful to keep people waiting. It’s such a cheap, rude form of power to hold over someone, making them wait. The game involves two kinds of time: the valuable kind belonging to the person who’s running late, and the worthless kind belonging to the person who’s waiting, who obviously has a surplus of it. I’ve lost a few job opportunities in my life for not waiting around, but I don’t regret it. Anyone I deal with on a mutually beneficial basis – which is the

only kind of arrangement that's worth it – knows about my little quirk and is never late.

“What do you say – of the three boats here with a cabin, which one is mine?” Ivan’s voice came from behind me.

I turned around and noticed the dark circles under his eyes, the smile that was struggling to spread across his face.

“I’d say it’s the one we’re just about to get on,” I wisecracked.

We hugged. That’s what guys do in Montenegro.

“Wasn’t sure you’d come,” he said as he pulled the boat in closer.

“What for? I told you I’d be here, and here I am. What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know,” Ivan said. “Just wasn’t sure, that’s all.”

“Cut the crap. You bring something to drink?”

“Yup, whole bottle of fire-water. Your old favorite. Don’t worry, I didn’t forget. Only question is, have your tastes changed since then?”

I laughed instead of answering, and my stomach warmed to the idea in advance. If I’d understood correctly, there was a whole bottle of Jack Daniels eagerly awaiting us.

“It’ll come in handy tonight,” I said, watching the sky grow clear above Budva.

“You know it,” he said absently.

While Ivan pulled the boat in, I thought about how much time had passed since my last little foray at sea, worrying whether I’d be up to it. The Adriatic, a boat... who knew? Maybe I’d lost my touch, how to walk, how to keep my balance. Maybe I had a landlubber’s stomach now, and the waves would set it off full blast. That’s all I need, I thought: Ivan holding on to me as I emptied my guts overboard. But as soon as I set foot on deck, I realized I was worrying for nothing. Walking came easy, and my body stayed upright of its own accord. When I got amidships, I set my rucksack of supplies down and asked Ivan where the sails were so I could get them ready while he finished the lines.

“Don’t need them,” he said. “We’ll motor out of port.”

“Need any help?”

He shook his head. “Just sit back and enjoy.”

OK, I thought, you got it. I unzipped my rucksack and unloaded my gear for night fishing.

“Which way?” Ivan asked from the aft deck.

“The lighthouse past Sveti Nikola, then head on out to sea?”

What I wanted to say is that it made no difference to me, I’d leave it up to him – but instead I said the lighthouse on the island, and the current could carry us towards Sveti Stefan. “Seems to be running pretty strong tonight.”

He nodded and gave the engine cord a yank, starting it on the first try. Skillfully he positioned the propeller, and the boat began to glide backwards. When he was clear of the other boats, he made a turn and opened the throttle enough to leave the harbor behind in about half a minute. I think I dozed off as we were going along. My eyelids were heavy, and the motor thrummed in my ears. I couldn’t have been out for more than twenty minutes, when a sudden silence awoke me. Ivan had cut the engine.

“Here we are,” he said.

In the silence all around us, his voice rang out eerily.

“You got a lamp or something?” I asked, trying to shake the uneasiness I was feeling in my half-awake state. Instead of answering outright, he murmured something about the virtue of patience, but I couldn’t quite make it out. Anyway, it didn’t matter. Soon the boat was bathed in the dim fluorescent light of a lantern that did double duty as a radio. If the manufacturers had been a little more enterprising, I thought, it could have been a thermos too, but of course I kept this to myself.

“In the mood for some music?” he offered.

“No,” I said. “I do my fishing in silence. When I’m out for the kill, I don’t want to hear my own thoughts, let alone somebody else’s. And besides, there’s nothing on that dial you’d call music now. Hasn’t been for a long time.”

When he saw the lures I was planning to use, he made a few comments about how old they were, how they were probably no good any more, how much time you wasted recharging them after only a few

throws... I paid no attention. I was waiting for him to stop running his mouth, but when he showed no signs of it I was forced to do it for him.

“Ivan, do you know why I was always a better fisherman than you?” I knew he wouldn’t be able to resist.

“Huh, I *would* like to know. Why is that?”

“It’s not a matter of sheer skill,” I said. “We’re evenly matched in that department. And it’s not a matter of luck, since neither one of us has ever been lucky.”

I paused, giving him time to wonder what the reason could be. I waited until he started to get annoyed before I finished my thought.

“Here’s what it is: unlike you, Ivan, with the non-stop chit-chat while we’re supposed to be fishing, I know how to keep my mouth shut sometimes, which the fish recognize *and* appreciate. They like it a hell of a lot more than your blabbing, that’s for damn sure.”

He swore at me, laughing too at his own expense. He opened the bottle and handed it over without a word. I took the inaugural swallow and cast my line. Now we can get some fishing done, I thought.

It only took a few tosses of the lure for me to realize how much I’d missed fishing. I listened to the water lapping at the hull of the boat, felt the current carrying us along, and after a while the rest of the world ceased to exist. The noises in my head quieted down. There was nothing but our matching movements as we cast and reeled, no message at the end of the line for the fish. (I used to think about my reasons for fishing, sometimes not very systematically, but by process of elimination I’d come to the following conclusion: I believe the filament is a sort of conductor for the fisherman’s mental energy, which travels down the line to the bait, and from there to the fish itself. Meaning that if the fisherman is desperate to catch something, the bait gives off the same energy, and any passing fish can see that it’s not food, that there’s a hook hidden inside – and so much for the fishing that day. That’s why the successful fisherman doesn’t think about his prey while he’s fishing. In fact, he doesn’t think at all. I’m more convinced than ever that this is the secret.)

At first I didn't notice that Ivan had stopped casting his line. I was lost in what I was doing, not paying attention to anything else around me. Over the last half-hour I'd managed to reel in two decent-size squid, so if I was feeling anything at all, I was probably feeling pleased with myself. When I think about it now, after everything that happened, it's as if a little warning light went off in my head, jolting me back to my senses. The evening of peaceful fishing, I realized, was not going to turn out as expected.

I don't know when I looked up at him. I must have registered that he was sitting on the aft deck, arms hanging at his sides, not moving, just staring emptily into the sea.

"Why aren't you fishing?" I asked. "What's with you tonight? You still got a chance to beat me here." I figured the challenge would shake him out of it. "You give up too easy. And you suck at bluffing." It was a sharp dig.

He shrugged and gave a painful sigh. "I just can't anymore," he said. "I'm all worn out."

"Worn out? After half an hour of fishing? Come on, princess, cut the shit." I was just ragging on him, trying to get him to pick up his rod and have some whisky and stop doing the worst thing that people can do, which is dwelling on themselves.

"I can't go on," he said, indifferent to my cursing. His voice sounded like a final farewell. "My own life has just worn me down." He said this in the distant tone of a doctor informing a patient that he has only a few months left, with no guarantee of even that much. I looked at my friend, and for a moment it occurred to me to stop and really listen to what he was saying, but instead I sang the refrain to that sad old song by Toma Zdravković. It's not in English, obviously, but the basic idea is *I'm tired of life / tired of drinking / tired of lying awake, just thinking.*

"You're singing it wrong, dickhead," said Ivan, smiling at my tuneless attempts.

"You sing it, then," I said. "How exactly *does* it go?" I was trying to keep the smile on his face for as long as I could.

He waved away the suggestion. Not in the mood for singing. The frown came back and he hunched over, as if ashamed of the smile he'd just been wearing. As I was trying to think of a new way to cheer him up, I forgot to keep track of my line, and the lure ended up hooking the bottom. Kiss that one goodbye, I said to myself, slicing the line angrily with the razor. I looked up at Ivan, furious.

“Well, now can spend the whole night singing, you idiot, since we obviously won't be doing any more fishing.”

He shrugged and muttered some sort of apology, but I didn't care enough to listen to the exact words. I grabbed the bottle of whisky and took a swallow, came up for air, then went back for another mouthful, slightly bigger this time. I didn't want to offer him the bottle. I wanted to set it down in the no-man's land between us, but maybe an inch closer to my side. This isn't what I did, though. Instead, I looked away and held out the bottle towards him. I was angry, but part of me still wanted things to be all right. I felt him take the bottle. Life's a bitch, I thought.

I don't know how long we sat there, not speaking, because time grew thick and heavy and turned into the darkness overhead. I don't know how many times we sighed, each of us wrapped in his own thoughts and feeling sorry for himself. After everything that happened that night, there are so many things I can't remember, but that doesn't make it any easier, because the things I do remember are things I'll never be able to forget. It's a blow to my ego to realize how I was being manipulated that night (as they say, the devil made me do it), especially since I still can't answer the question I keep asking myself: why me? I've come up with so many answers, and sometimes I even manage to talk myself into believing them – for a while. But then I realize that I've got the whole thing wrong, and that I'll never know why it had to be me, of all people, not for as long as I live. Not much consolation, really, like the song in that movie: *Life's a piece of shit/ When you look at it...*

“I feel like I'm living somebody else's life,” said Ivan, beginning what would be the most serious conversation of our lives. “Like I'm

standing off to one side, watching everything happen. Like it's somebody else, not me."

I was going to say something to cut him down, like maybe you need a good proctologist for your mouth if you're going to keep on talking shit. But there was an edge to his voice, something that made my skin crawl, and I didn't want to set him off.

"Oh, come on, man!" I said. "What do you mean, somebody else's life? What are you talking about?"

He tried to smile, but in the weak light of the lantern it became the grimace of a disfigured face. "Something went wrong," he said. "It's like by magic – my father's life has become mine, and my life has become Luka's."

Even as I was absorbing these words, realizing that Ivan had mentioned his father, I knew there was Someone Else with us on that boat, and that something bad was going to happen before the night was out. When I think about it now, I can almost see the cloven hooves on the deck of the boat, the outline of the horns against the sky. Almost hear the hellish laughter ringing out over the dark water.

"Hang on," I said. "Get a grip on yourself, buddy. Things can't be all bad. In God we trust! What's this all about?" I spoke softly, open to any answer he might give. At first he didn't pay attention, as if he hadn't heard what I said, or as if it had nothing to do with him. Only after the silence between us had grown tense and unbearable did he answer.

"I can't forget the face he made. Going out the door, when he kicked me. Right in the shin with his boots. A little kid's face, but full of fury, asking *Whose fault is it?*

"I wanted to give him a hug. I think I was even starting to reach out towards him, but when I recognized the disgust in his eyes I froze. Right in mid-hug.

"It's my fault!" I called as he went out the door. 'It's my fault,' I shouted, knowing that if I didn't make it clear right then, he'd spend the rest of his life blaming himself. I don't know if he heard me, but I sometimes think he did, that his mother wasn't quite quick enough at dragging him down the stairs and bundling him into the car. Until

the divorce went through and I got court-ordered visitation rights – every other weekend, half the summer and winter breaks, every other holiday – I had a real bitch of a time getting to see my own son. Whenever I showed up she'd say he wasn't home or didn't want to see me. I'd keep saying I wanted to hear it from Luka's mouth, and she'd go get the kid from somewhere and he'd stand there parroting a few sentences in her words, blaming me for everything. I don't know whether I saw something in his eyes, something that told me he didn't really mean what he was saying, that he was being emotionally blackmailed by his mother, that he really did love his father but just couldn't show it. Or maybe there was nothing in his eyes but anger, and I just imagined the rest? After a while I stopped going by their new place. Seemed best, at least for a while – better than fighting, anyway. I figured things would settle down when the court order came through. At least I'd be allowed to see him. We'd be able to spend some time together, get to know each other in spite of everything, maybe even become friends. Kids grow up, and before the parents realize it they're thinking for themselves. The game's not over yet – that's what I was hoping. Once we could meet a few times, somewhere outside his mother's radar range, it would be only a matter of time before talking felt easy and natural. That's all I ask for, I thought. I'll get him to laugh a few times, we'll go fishing together, build a lean-to, get a campfire going... There's lots of stuff for a dad and his seven-year-old son to do, I told myself.

“The first few times with Luka were pretty awkward and tense, I remember. We were both walking on eggshells. It took some careful effort, but by a month later things were good, as far as they could be. We did all the things kids like to do, and I found myself turning back into a kid too. When fall came and he started first grade, we'd set aside some time on our weekends to do math homework. I remember him asking me once in surprise, ‘But, dad, you work in a store selling drinks. How do you know about numbers?’ Who knows what they've been telling the poor kid about me, I thought. What did they think I was, a mouth-breathing illiterate? Bunch of Budva social-climbers:

they have a little property to their names – inherited from someone who worked himself to death in an American mine – they sell some of it off, build a few houses on it, buy a nice car, and then they go around looking down their noses at the rest of the world. I wanted to show my son my diploma, my degree in civil engineering, but instead I just showed him the books where I kept accounts. ‘So many numbers,’ he said, surprised. ‘Look at all these numbers, dad!’ He didn’t say anything for a while, just moving his lips as he read the lines of figures and decimals, and then he asked his dad in a low voice, ‘What are all these numbers for?’

“Now I was on home ground. ‘They’re for building,’ I said in that way fathers have, you know, kindly but rough at the same time. ‘All the numbers that exist, all ten of them, are for people to use in building something. For themselves and for the people around them.’ I was getting wrapped up in my own words, really believing in what I was saying, the way believers believe that their prayers are actually heard. Then he asked me, ‘Did you ever build anything, dad?’ I nodded.

“‘You want to see it?’ I asked, maybe smiling a bit at the way I was getting back at them.

“‘Yes, I do,’ said Luka.

“‘What a straight-up answer for a little kid! That was my son. He was looking me right in the eyes as he spoke, like a little grown-up. Maybe that’s what he had just become.

“‘Well, let’s head out to the village,’ I said. ‘And I’ll show you.’

“I know life doesn’t play favorites, and that existence is a handful of dust and ashes, with the odd moment of happiness thrown in. But when I get to thinking about my own life, that one day just stands out from all the others – free from all that emptiness. Not because I managed to impress somebody with my talk about civil engineering, but because it was my son who was interested in what I was saying, who was asking question after question to keep his dad talking. He wanted to know everything. What’s this, what’s that, what’s a plumb, what’s a level... Why don’t the bricks fall down? And I tried to answer every question as best I could.

“That night we got home late. He fell asleep in the car. I wanted to carry him into the house and put him straight to bed, but his eyes popped open as soon as we stepped inside. And you know what he asked? To do the last two math problems we hadn’t finished. ‘Tomorrow,’ I told him. I was tired. ‘No, tomorrow we go fishing,’ he said. His voice was sleepy, but he sat right down, took out his notebook and got to work. I sat beside him, watching how he held the pencil. He was still holding it too tightly, like it might try to get away. I watched him working away, spotting mistakes, crossing out and turning the page to start over, and as I watched I felt pride beyond any words I can think of. My son, that day – even me, why not? – were all part of something outside time, something set apart that I’ll never forget.”

He stopped talking. For a while neither one of us spoke, as if we were both searching for the right thing to say. I don’t know how long we sat there in silence, but once I looked at him more closely and saw tears running down his cheeks. On the verge of joining him, I looked away. As I looked out at the waves around us, I don’t remember actually crying. Even if I did, what difference does it make now. After about ten minutes of silence, when we had both recovered, I spoke.

“Nice story.”

“The hell it is,” he said coldly, his voice not shaking a bit, as if someone else had been crying and not him. “Wait till you hear what happened next.”

How much more of this *is* there? I wondered, and I felt a sudden desire to make Ivan stop talking, forget everything I’d heard and get back to port. But I kept quiet, and he took that as a sign to continue.

“A few more months went by, a few more interesting Saturdays and Sundays together, and just when I was tempted to think that it hadn’t all been lost, I noticed something odd about Luka. At first I couldn’t figure it out, but I started to wonder why it was getting harder to talk him into going places with me, why he would drag his feet as his smiling mother saw him off at the door, why he would push me away at first, only to act like a wide-eyed happy kid again after a few hours with me. Actually, it wasn’t until later, after everything had already

happened that couldn't be fixed, that I started to think about it. Now I think the little guy must have been trying to warn me, that he had something important to tell me – but he didn't know how to go about it and I didn't catch on, and now it can never be forgiven.

“Christ. One Saturday afternoon, while he was with me, he broke his right arm. He was jumping on the couch, miscalculated, and came down hard. The bone snapped. He only cried out twice and then he got quiet.

“‘What happened?’ I asked. ‘Let me see.’

“‘It's nothing, it'll be all right,’ he said through clenched teeth, like a child who was used to pain.

“Of course I took him straight to the doctor's. We made it to the hospital in Risan in less than an hour. The doctor on duty examined him and sent him for X-rays.

“‘Has he ever broken anything before?’ the doctor asked.

“I said no, not as far as I knew. This was the first time. ‘But I've only got Luka every other weekend,’ I added in a hurry, to explain the family situation.

“The doctor nodded and asked me to wait outside. Soon they brought Luka back and put a cast on his arm. Then the doctor called me into an office where another doctor was sitting, and this is what he said:

“‘The X-rays show three previous fractures of the right arm which were left to mend on their own, obviously without medical treatment. What can you tell us about that, as his father?’

“‘Nothing,’ I said in confusion. ‘This is the first time I'm hearing about it.’

“‘We're going to keep him here,’ the doctor said, ‘to take some more scans. You call the mother to have her come.’

“‘I'll do that,’ I said.

“As I was closing the door on my way out, I saw the doctor out of the corner of my eye. He was shrugging his shoulders wearily, as if answering the other doctor's unspoken question about what might have happened. I called my ex-wife, and less than an hour later she

came bursting into the hospital, foaming at the mouth. As soon as she set foot in the place she was after me – and she’s not just a barker, she’s a biter – but I was ready for her and I just sat there and took it. Let her act out in front of the hospital staff, I figured. I’m not going to stop her. Finally the hysterical outburst let up when the doctor called us both into his office. We sat down and the doctor spoke to her.

“Your son has a broken arm. Nothing too serious. We’ve put a cast on him and he’ll be fine in a few weeks. My concern is the signs of previous fractures. Has your son suffered any serious falls? Has he complained of pain in his legs or arms?”

“No,” said my ex-wife. She looked at me. I shook my hand and confirmed what she was saying.

“Luka’s got good balance,” I said. ‘He’s not one of those kids who goes around falling.’

“The doctor was watching us closely for signs that we were lying. He must not have found any. He sighed and opened a folder that was lying on the desk, then took out some X-rays and talked us through them.

“When your son was admitted, we X-rayed his right forearm and found three prior fractures that have since healed. I asked your husband whether he knew anything about it, but he said no. Then I ordered X-rays on his left arm, which confirm two fractures there as well. I ordered scans of his ribcage, and finally of his skull. The results haven’t come back yet, but I hope we find nothing suspicious. While we’re waiting, would either of you care to provide a reasonable explanation for your son’s broken bones?”

“Neither of us spoke as we sat there, staring at the X-rays and thinking about what they meant.

“Do you discipline your son physically?” asked the doctor softly.

“No!” we both exclaimed at the same time. Then we each added our own justifications. The doctor sat there looking at us as if he couldn’t even hear what we were saying.

“We’ll be keeping your son here for some time,” he said. ‘I’ll take you to see him now.’

“The doctor was in the room while my ex-wife and I talked to Luka. He was watching us closely, but I wasn’t aware of it until afterwards. We left the children’s ward. The doctor said goodbye and went back towards his office. My wife and I didn’t speak as we walked down the hallway to the exit. But then she opened her mouth. I could hear the sounds, but it was just empty noise, it didn’t mean anything. I don’t know how long it lasted, just like I don’t know why I suddenly felt this terrible and overpowering urge to make her shut up. I couldn’t understand a word she was saying and her mouth just kept flapping... And in one second, just the shortest imaginable instant, I did something that can never be forgiven – I punched her in the head.”

I looked at Ivan and swore at him, suddenly realizing where this story was headed. He laughed bitterly.

“That’s what my defense attorney said when I told her what happened. Same exact words.”

“Tell your lawyer that great minds think alike,” I said. “So? What happened next, you bastard?”

“Nothing. After I knocked her down, two nurses came running and took her to the nearest examining room. The doctors treated her and wrote it up, and they got their answer to the question that had been bothering them: how had Luka gotten hurt? A few days later the shit really hit the fan. I knew I didn’t have a chance. I’d done a stupid thing and I was going to have to pay for it. At one point I figured I should just let things take their course. But that’s not what I ended up doing. I knew I’d never hit my son or abused him in any other way, and I wasn’t about to sit back and let them pin it on me.

“Jesus, the shit I’ve had to swallow these past few years: the lawyers, the psychiatric evaluations, the social workers – everybody looking at me like I’m some kind of war criminal, a born loser. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve wanted to give them the answers they’re looking for, the answers they expect from a vicious animal. But I rode it out, hoping all the while that things would turn out all right. I was wrong.

“The thing that sealed it was Luka’s statement. They took his deposition with a social worker and a child psychologist in the room,

then played the video in court, because the judge ruled that the victim shouldn't have to undergo the strain of testifying in public. Besides him, the social worker and the psychologist testified. My lawyer wanted to have Luka's deposition ruled inadmissible so he'd have to appear and confirm his story in open court. But I didn't let her. I was sure somebody had been making the kid suffer, but it wasn't going to be me.

"They're going to put you away,' my lawyer kept saying.

"I don't care,' I said.

"My testimony turned out to be 'surprisingly credible' according to my lawyer. I accused my ex-wife of abusing Luka – either her or someone related to her, punishing the kid for spending time with his father and actually enjoying it. I gave a detailed description of the way he'd look nervously from side to side as his mother walked him out of the house, all the signs of being afraid that someone would hurt him, of what he knew would be waiting for him when he got back home. I did the best I could under cross-examination, and a few times I managed to see the trap the other lawyer was setting for me and avoid it. At any rate, I think I managed to cast some doubt. I must have, actually, since the ruling confirmed it. I didn't get sent to prison, first of all, but I did get a restraining order: no contact with my son until he turned eighteen. Second, his mother's custody was upheld, but they added mandatory monthly visits to a doctor and a social worker. She could lose custody if she didn't comply, and be prosecuted if they found any signs of abuse. As for the father, I got access to the monthly reports through my attorney. 'The court wasn't sure which one of you was abusing your son, that's why the judgment came out this way,' my lawyer explained."

He stopped speaking and picked up the bottle. He took a swig, swished it around, then spit it out into the sea as if he wanted to wash the filth out of his mouth.

"You didn't make out too bad," I said, taking the bottle away.

"Ha! Lucky in court, unlucky in life, right?"

"Shut the fuck up," I said. "Nobody gets a free ride."

He laughed. A little too much, if you ask me.

“The relief after the court’s ruling didn’t last more than a month or two, because all the time I was thinking what it would be like when I tried to explain everything to my son one day and he didn’t believe me. In my mind I’m talking to him and he’s nodding and smiling, but in his eyes I can see him blaming me for all he’s been through. I imagine that look in his eyes and it tears my heart out. Whatever heart I’ve got left. I imagine that first meeting and wonder if it will be like the time I met my own father. Maybe I won’t even recognize him when he shows up, the way my father didn’t recognize me. Maybe I’ll think he’s the meter-man, come to take a reading. And when he finally says who he is – after getting a twisted kick out of watching me not realize, the same way I watched my father not recognizing me – what am I supposed to say? What do I tell him?”

“The truth,” I said quietly, though seriously doubting that such a thing even exists in human relationships. Then I launched into a stupid little routine about stepping outside your problems and treating them as if they were somebody else’s – the best way to get some perspective and figure out what to do. I sounded worse than Paulo Coelho: lacking in empathy, only interested in selling my canned wisdom. *No muss, no fuss. Just heat and eat. Side effects may include nausea.*

Disgusted with myself, I grabbed the bottle and took the longest swig of my life. As if from far away, through wind and swirling snow, I could hear Ivan saying something, but I didn’t know what. I didn’t understand and I paid no attention to his words. I had a more pressing problem: draining the bottle to the last drop. Then I heard the shot ring out over the water, the way God’s voice must have sounded in the very beginning. I dropped the bottle and turned to look at Ivan, who was still sitting on the aft deck but with his head strangely askew. For a few moments that will stand forever outside all time, I didn’t know what to do. I took two steps towards him but turned back at the sight. I swore at him and cursed him for what he’d done, and choking on the words I fell to the deck and howled. Like a dog that’s been given a chunk of poisoned meat.

In the dead of the night I realized I had to do something, that I couldn't float forever on the waves with my friend's corpse. I pulled myself together and did the first thing that came to mind: I called the police. No one picked up at the station. I scrolled frantically through my phone's memory, looking for the name of the only inspector in Budva that I knew. Sure, this wasn't his line of work – he was in Narcotics – but we were distantly related and I was sure he'd pick up the phone when he saw it was me, no matter how late it was. On Miko's end it would ring and ring until the line was cut off. Then I'd dial again – I couldn't say how many times. I was holding my cell phone in one hand, getting ready to hit redial, when he rang me back. I picked up.

"This better be something serious," he said.

I told him what had happened.

"Don't touch anything!" he ordered. "Where are you?"

"Between Sveti Martin and Sveti Stefan. I think the current is taking us out to sea." I was trying to be precise.

"Don't touch anything and don't do anything stupid! We'll be there in half an hour. Everything's going to be fine, don't panic."

When they motored up alongside and came aboard, the first thing they did was photograph Ivan's dead body and take a preliminary statement from me.

"Have you moved anything?" one of them asked politely. He was bald and wore glasses, and later Miko told me that he was on Felony.

"No," I said. "Not a thing."

"And where exactly were you when the shot rang out?"

I showed him.

"Take your seat," he said. When I sat down, he ordered more photos to be taken.

"Haven't been washing your hands with salt water by any chance, have you?" he asked softly.

"No, I don't remember," I said in confusion. "I don't know why I... I mean, we were squidding, and there's probably still some salt on my hands, but..."

“That’s fine,” he said calmly. “Would you mind getting in the patrol boat while we finish up here? We’ll get the details down at the station. No objections, I assume?”

“None at all,” I said.

From the deck of the police boat I watched the inspector shining his light on the exit wound under Ivan’s chin. He spoke into his dictaphone. He took the gun from his hand, shined his light and looked at it for a few moments, then dropped into a see-through plastic bag. The whole thing took them less than half an hour. They hitched Ivan’s boat to theirs, and slowly we headed back to the harbor. I don’t know whether it was fear, shock, stress or just the cold, but I started to tremble. I didn’t think anyone had noticed, so I was a little surprised when the inspector handed me a plastic mug of hot tea.

“Here you go, sir,” he said quietly. “It’s a cold one tonight.”

Once we reached the station, the inspector had the technicians administer a diphenylamine test. They wanted to know whether there was gunpowder residue on my hands: antimony, barium, lead.

“We used to do this with melted paraffin and gauze strips,” the inspector said regretfully, “but the modern world has caught up with us and now we use these special sheets.”

I didn’t know what to say to his memories of the days when suspects were coated with hot paraffin as a sampling of what awaited them in Hell, so I figured it was best to keep my mouth shut.

“Let’s go to my office,” said the inspector, once the technician had finished. “You can tell me the whole story about what happened tonight.”

I nodded my head and stood up, saying I had nothing to hide. Nothing at all, I emphasized. The inspector smiled thinly.

“Sir, everybody’s got their secrets. Only difference between this job and a priest or a psychologist is the jail time those secrets can get you.”

I made a quick resolution to keep my mouth shut so I wouldn’t go sticking my foot in it again.

The police officer was interested in everything, especially my

familiarity with Ivan's financial situation: had he been borrowing from loan sharks? Was his credit at the bank maxed out?

"So, you don't know whether he was in debt?"

"No," I said.

"And would he have turned to you if he had been?"

"I think so," I said.

"So why kill himself, then?"

"I already told you! Because of his son."

"Tell me again, would you? I'm worried I might have missed something."

I did what he said, and once again I told him everything that had happened that night on the boat. As I spoke, the inspector followed along in his notebook, sometimes adding to what he'd written. Once the phone rang. He listened to the person at the other end, nodded a few times, then hung up.

"All right, you can go," he said. "In case we need you, we'll be in touch."

I told the same story to Ivan's mother. Miko and I went straight from the station to her house, woke her up, waited at the door for her to let us in. I don't know what I was expecting, how she was going to take the news of her son's death, but the woman listened calmly all the way to the end, only sighing a few times. When I was done she said she was surprised that it hadn't happened sooner, and her voice didn't quaver at all. Miko and I looked at each other, shrugged our shoulders ever so slightly and offered to help the woman with the funeral. She didn't answer, just sat there smiling into space. After a few minutes of awkward silence, we said goodbye and left.

A strange and unexpected death will pack 'em in at the funeral, like a fashion show for sad faces and fake sympathy. The way I saw it, people weren't there to pay their respects so much as to satisfy their curiosity about why the man had blown his brains out. I didn't dignify this with a response. The police knew why. Ivan's mother knew why. That was good enough. One of these days there'll be a knock at my door and it'll be the kid, wanting me to answer the question that's

been eating him for years. Maybe he'll be meek and mild about it, maybe loud and pushy. Either way, I'll give him his answer, if I'm still around. And I'll still be around. Because I read. ”

Aleksandar Bečanović



AT THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT

The illness was driving us apart. Not abruptly, as so often happens with a terrible malady, but little by little – as if the thing wanted us to feel the full weight of loss, as if it were using each day to further impress its inevitability upon us. At first the signs were too small to read clearly, though unsettling enough in their heartlessness. Their magnitude increased, much as a scratch differs from a puncture. Once the first line of defence has been crossed, the skin ruptured, it is nearly impossible to save the body. The object is lost, but symbols remain to focus the meditation, two ways of understanding pain.

It was only our first year of marriage, and already Kristina was experiencing weakness, first in her chest, then throughout her body. One night she complained of an overwhelming tiredness, and I took her by the hand and led her upstairs. Before closing the door of her chamber, I turned for one more look. It struck me that Kristina, propped up in bed, was already looking better. The following morning she was in her usual mood. I had always been charmed by the mirthfulness she managed to keep under such well-mannered wraps. After lunch she sat in her favourite armchair and asked me to read to her. Outdoors it was cold, but the sunlight shone through our dining room like glass, and I found myself somewhat carried away by the book she had chosen. Afterwards I blamed myself for this lapse of attention, for

the failure to notice that something was happening to her. When she rose from the armchair she fell heavily to the floor. I ran to her side and held her head. I called out for the servant and ordered him not to spare the horses until he had returned with the doctor, my old friend. I took Kristina in my arms and carried her up the stairs, slowly, loath to disturb her deathly stillness.

The doctor came quickly. My look of fear spoke volumes, and he merely patted me on the shoulder. He told me to leave the room, but I insisted on staying. I did not want to leave her alone, not even in his well-meaning hands. The doctor pushed his stethoscope into the neckline of her yellow dress. Her breathing was regular, as was her heartbeat, he said. It may have been nothing but a fit of exhaustion. Perhaps her nerves were strained, for whatever reason. Or might she be – and here he abandoned propriety to give me a curious look – expecting? In any case, he continued, there is no cause for alarm. Let her rest up, and tomorrow she would be herself again. I saw him out, then returned to her chamber.

The following days brought something of an improvement, though the indefinable ailment seemed to remain in Kristina's body. She could do everything as before, but her ease was lost. She appeared startled and confused at my courteous enquiries. At my insistence, the doctor was a frequent visitor. He attempted to gloss over my dissatisfaction with Kristina's condition by playing the self-assured physician. When it had been established that Kristina was not with child – in my concern, I neglected to express disappointment – the doctor pronounced it a passing cold, most certainly, one that could suddenly weaken the body but do no worse. I voiced my doubts – for nothing multiplies doubt like fear – but my friend waved this away with some irritation. The gesture wounded me, for I could understand its meaning: It is the body I treat, and not the mind.

I suggested to Kristina that we leave at once for our summer home at the coast. Winter was drawing to a close, and surely it would be warmer at the seaside. The warmth should help. I thought this would cheer Kristina greatly, but I detected no enthusiasm in her agreement.

She was wan and listless, I realized, and willing to let others make decisions for her. There was no joy in her voice, but she clung to me pleadingly as I ordered the servant to make ready for our departure on the morrow.

Kristina bore the journey fairly well. And yet, as we drew up before the summer house – a rather gloomy building it took time to get used to, time to love – her white-gloved fingers began to tremble. I refrained from speaking as she gazed at the surrounding hills, particularly Rumija, still capped with snow. When she got down from the carriage she gripped my hand. There was a sea-wind blowing, so I told the servant to lay a fire in the hearth. Night had not yet fallen, and time remained for the drawing room, but my attempts at conversation brought only forced replies from Kristina. Frowning to myself, I fell silent.

We had been at the coast for a week, but instead of a swift recovery, instead of fresh high spirits, there was only the illness to watch, its coils tightening round her. Anyone else would surely fail to recognize the signs of deterioration, but not I – for I thought of nothing else, was *unable* to think of anything else. Not even the smallest indication escaped me, no detail of the fate being written upon Kristina's body. I wanted to take full advantage of the sea air, and as soon as the cold had passed I began to invite her outside. She would grimace, but still she would sit in the wheelchair. I would tuck a blanket round her legs, then push her along the path overlooking the sea, still mantled in its wintry grey. Much time would pass without either of us saying a word. When we reached the end of my land, there we would stop. I would stand beside her and run my fingers through her hair. If the clouds began to roll in, I would turn the chair around and push Kristina back, my pace quickening. Along the path to the summer house I would observe her, noting where she turned her head, where her gaze wandered. Her eyes were blank.

Kristina had never eaten much, but now her meals consisted of nothing but the few mouthfuls she could be induced to take. She would rise wearily from the table and retire to her chamber. Up the

stairs she would go and then – filled with her sadness – wave to me where I stood below. I would stay behind in the drawing room for half an hour or so, unable to occupy myself. Rather than wait for the servant, I would put out the lights myself. Once more before bed I would look in on my dearest one. Silently the door would close behind me.

Each new day brought fresh indications of the advancing illness. My mind registered everything in sharp detail, but still I did not send for the physician. I suppose I was clutching at straws, ignoring the obvious in favour of the slightest consolation. In the morning, Kristina would seem somewhat rested, but the illusion lasted only briefly. She would take her seat on the sofa, embroidery in hand, then slowly fall back into a fitful sleep. I would watch her neck bending, her head slowly drooping onto one shoulder. I could not take my eyes off this scene, nor determine whether I was entranced or merely keeping watch with extraordinary devotion. I wanted more information, something to either ennoble my speechless bewilderment or to lend some mystical quality to my dejection.

I watched closely – as the sun sank below the horizon and strange shadows flickered round Kristina's unmoving form. How pale her skin seemed: as though the slightest touch would injure it, shatter the alabaster surface. Her forehead, more prominent with each passing day. Her flaxen hair, shining like a halo of suffering round her head. Her feverish cheeks, their former freshness gone. With enough contemplation, Kristina might almost have become a spirit, bewitching in her disembodiment, or nought but a body filled with pain. Her stillness became mine, and there we remained in the drawing room – one of us insensible, the other all too keenly aware – until Kristina woke. Instantly I would be at her chair to take her hand. In her eyes were gratitude and fear. I feared to question her, feared anything spoken aloud that might upset the fragile balance. Only when the servant entered the room would I understand that night had fallen, that the lamps must be lit. Supper came as a reprieve, for – despite the nausea I knew she must feel – Kristina always maintained her grace and elegance throughout.

As I watched her, no matter how fixedly I stared, I could not help but drift off into memories. As though it were necessary to reconstruct the brief time I had spent with her, to compensate for lost moments, to fill out the days, as though it were necessary to rebuild our shared history from the very beginning.

Kristina came late to my life, when I was already certain that I was to remain alone, that no woman could ever fully rule my thoughts. Until I met her, I was not even conscious of the lack. The ball was dull – oh, how people do go on about politics, particularly when they can't stand each other and are on their best behaviour – and I wandered from one group of acquaintances to another, hoping to make the night pass quickly. In my mind I saw myself as a phantom, drifting aimlessly through the grand building. Kristina was sitting in a corner with her parents, far from it all. No wonder I failed to see her until the very end, when the ball had ended and the guests were departing from my friend's villa. When our eyes met, she did not look away. At once I began to ask about her.

Her family were from Kotor. The father had served for many years on Austro-Hungarian ships, but since receiving his pension had been returning to Montenegro with increasing frequency. The mother was hardly thrilled at his desire to build a house near Cetinje, his hometown. She had managed to delay the final move on the grounds that their daughter must finish her education abroad. Kristina was said to be withdrawn, to prefer books to social gatherings, but also to possess a cultivated and lively spirit. These meagre facts could not satisfy my hungry imagination, and so I arranged through mutual acquaintances to call on the family in Kotor. When I think of it now, it seems like something from a dream – the cloudy night sky as I entered the city, the kind words of welcome from my host, Kristina on the stairs in her long white gown – as if everything happened too swiftly, all at once. It was not long before Kristina and I obtained her parents' blessing, though the difference in our ages was a full thirty years.

I am sure my age was no hindrance to Kristina, either, as she entered into our married life with all the naturalness of a girl entering

womanhood. I adjusted my habits and ways to hers, and she assumed her place as the elegant and self-assured mistress of our home. For the first time I was truly happy, the black moods that had hung over me since earliest childhood having vanished without a trace. Was it a sin, the terrible, unforgivable sin of happiness? Was the answer to be found in Kristina's sudden illness? Happy hours unbalance the pendulum of life, and memory is the wound that pains us most.

I caressed Kristina's cheek, pulled the white sheet up to her chin and kissed her forehead goodnight. Her eyes were quick to close. All seemed well, with a peaceful night in store, but an hour later I jolted fully awake to a terrible scream. I ran to her room and flung open the door. Kristina was gasping for breath, suffocating under some weight, her left hand outstretched as if reaching for help. When I seized her in my arms – not knowing what else to do – I could just make out the words of her choking plea. I called for the servant and sent him for the doctor at once. Kristina's body went rigid, and she fell back on the bed. I called her name and shook her by the shoulders. Kristina gave no sign of life. I pressed my ear to her heart and heard nothing. I placed my fingers on her pulse and felt nothing. I looked into her face, her unmoving face. Had the end come so suddenly? So irreparably?

I clung to her with tears in my eyes. I cannot say how long I remained in this position – the servant and the doctor had not yet arrived – lost, inconsolable. I could not quit our deathly embrace, my love, my despair. My sobs grew softer, and silence filled the room. There was nothing but my breathing, and then I felt the warm touch of air on my cheek. I sat upright: Kristina had still not moved, but she was breathing indeed. A spot of colour had even returned to her cheeks. It took me some time to realize what was happening: Kristina was alive! I stood over her and watched. There was no doubt, a miracle was occurring before my very eyes. Up and down went her chest as she breathed in and out.

The doctor and my servant entered the room. I was barely able to describe the miraculous turn of events that had just transpired. The

doctor looked at Kristina. She was fast asleep, he said, and should not be disturbed. He would come again in the morning to examine her fully. I feared that something similar might happen before then – my emotions had gone from one extreme to the other in only minutes – but the doctor assured me that she was out of danger for the night. I did not know how he could be so sure. He looked at me sideways and asked whether the whole fuss might not have been the result of my own nerves. Might I not be exhausted and have simply imagined that Kristina had stopped breathing? I was in need of complete rest, he said. Too much worrying was always counterproductive. He put on his hat and bade me good-night.

The doctor's rationalizations – though I refrained from saying so out of respect – struck me as feeble attempts to describe Kristina's condition. As for myself, I knew what had happened: Kristina had come back to life in this very room, back from the dead, from the valley of the shadow of death. I neither knew nor cared what power had done it – whether some outside force or something within her own body. All that mattered was the fact. Hope filled me once again. Was this not the best possible sign, the beginning of Kristina's recovery? Filled with fresh assurance at this miracle, which was certainly no figment of my imagination, I decided to remain from then on at Kristina's side every night – no matter how weak she had become from her recent sleeplessness. I would remain in her room, at the ready. I would stay and keep watch.

In the morning the doctor was relatively satisfied with Kristina's condition. The shock of the previous night, whatever might have caused it, seemed to be having a tonic effect on her body. When she opened her eyes, they were depths of blue. I promised her that we would soon resume our little walks. As soon as the skies were clear again, and the gathering clouds from the south had gone. In the afternoon Kristina came down to the drawing room, leaning on the servant's arm, but complained of the feeble sunlight that was trickling in at the windows. I drew our red curtains. The drawing room became a crimson chamber, a place unto itself, cut off from the world.

My hope – that is to say, the part of my hope that had not yet succumbed to nervous fancies – was intertwined with a strange and sudden idea: the idea of resurrection. Since Kristina had returned from the sleep of darkness, I proceeded as though her vitality had also returned, as though the crisis were already past, or at least contained within manageable bounds. Kristina's rising was the incontrovertible proof.

However, even in my imagination I could not ignore what was fast becoming obvious: hardly a few days had passed since that eventful night, and already Kristina's health was worsening. Her body was always at rest, and yet it seemed to be exerting an unbearable effort. Kristina no longer came down to the drawing room, and I remained at her side. Always on the edge of consciousness, she would bend her neck at each new attack of migraine. The doctor would arrive and leave our home again, his expression growing darker and darker. He said he had done everything in his power: performed a thorough examination, consulted the relevant medical texts in search of the proper treatment. He was baffled by Kristina's condition. The individual symptoms were recognizable, but their combination defied solution. He could only venture that Kristina's malady was somehow related to the blood – something hereditary, perhaps – and that the answer was hiding in her veins. For the first time I asked him how long she had left. At the question, we both fell into a deep silence.

The days went by slowly, and I could no longer tell them apart, for I had eyes only for Kristina. I ordered the servant to draw all the heavy curtains, and the summer house was plunged into a terrible half-darkness. To remain beside Kristina, I had to give up everything else. I accepted no telegrams, opened no letters. I could not bear the sound of knocking at our door, nor could I even conceive of any news from the outside world that might interest me. In a closed room, suffering becomes palpable, spreads out into the very structure, fills all the corners. Even the sea could no longer be heard, and only the rolling thunder hinted at a world where things happened. The servant had permission to interrupt my reverie from time to time, by tapping me lightly on the shoulder. He knew I would brook no advice, and he did

not trouble to offer any, merely indicating that the table had been laid. Kristina would eat with clockwork gestures, and every mouthful seemed to catch in her throat. Her upper lip would draw back, revealing the cold white of her teeth.

As I say, I could think of nothing but Kristina. I cared only to record – in my mind – the further signs of her body’s degeneration. I watched as the pulse in her temples grew faster, then slower, then faster again, as her skin beaded with great drops of sweat, as her fingers trembled in reaction to the thing that was taking place inside her. Kristina was an unfinished statue – perhaps the sea had washed her ashore, perhaps she had lain buried for thousands of years – that cast no shadow.

My own state – that of pulsating attention – caused me to confound the keenest attention with unwitting sleep. That evening I sat for longer than was my custom in the drawing room, in the dark, in the stifling air. The servant had already helped Kristina upstairs. I lit a candle and climbed the steps to her chamber. Kristina was lying in bed. I took a chair and sat to one side.

I must have nodded off for a minute or two, I could not say for sure, for when I opened my eyes the scene had changed. Moonlight was streaming through the terrace doors, the slow, heavy light of the moon, the lunar clarity that makes our thoughts to shine. This light, together with the glow of the candle on the bedside table, illuminated Kristina’s face. The light from within met the light from without. She slept on among the objects in her room, which had fallen into place around her as if by gravity. The room was under her power. If not indifference, then the arrogance of an aristocrat; if not care and attention, then the irresistible power of attraction. Her lips were slightly parted, her flaxen hair loose and flowing, as can only happen when the slightest breath of disorder has been banished from the room. Melancholy floods the still world, a world contained in a picture, its outlines fixed forever.

It may have been the vantage point from which I regarded the entire scene, or the strange angle of the new light: Kristina’s head

looked different from the loving memories of her that I had stored up against future contingencies. The light seemed to tinge her face – the face which had shown so much pain of late – with its yellow and white. The hue of pale moonlight, the most rarefied of all. The light seemed to smooth out every wrinkle, every mark of pain and suffering. Her skin was smooth as the new-fallen snow. As if she were dreaming a beautiful dream, resting in peace. Or – more likely – not dreaming at all, suddenly left to her own being. The incomparable stillness of absence. Her face in the moonlight was a timeless mask, too valuable to wear to any ball: an expression that no mirror can give back, the ceremony of being laid to rest.

I was compelled to hold my breath. It had all been leading to this. I rose silently and stepped to the small table at the other end of the room. I opened the drawer and took out the long, thin knife, the one I had bought long ago from an antiques merchant in Florence, purchased under the pointless impulse of beautiful objects, the pointless desire to give. In my hands it did not gleam, not even as I stood beside Kristina's bed. Her left arm was sticking out, a fragile white bough. Again I peered into her face, the outline of her body under the covers.

At the stroke of midnight, before the clock could finish striking twelve, I made a sorrowful cut above Kristina's elbow. She did not move, she did not flinch. Two drops of blood were the first to appear at either end, becoming a crimson line along the path of the blade. I knelt beside her, bowed my head, and thrust my tongue into the dripping wound, and I drank her blood, Kristina's blood. ””

Jovan Nikolaidis



THE CIRCLE

My life is passing quickly. Like a tree when it loses its leaves. I'm in Chicago, living out what are obviously my last days. As the wind picks up off Lake Michigan, the wind that blows at the end of autumn, I get to thinking: until death comes, you can always start again, over and over.

Sotir Athanas is born at the far end of the world, in the mythical village of Valdinos, on the feast of St. Nicholas, in 1896. He grows up in a numerous family of Greek-speaking Arvanites as the eldest child of Naum and Helena: *Sotiros*. He remains on the cove of Valdinos, shielded from the vanity of the world, though not from the woes which fill even the most hidden life, until his father's death.

He becomes the man of the family at fourteen, full of the young person's desire to turn nothing into something, and then into everything, as the young always believe they can. At the outbreak of the Balkan wars, disease comes like the wind off the high plain of Čafe. Hunger takes root on the cove. His youngest sister and his uncle die of cholera. For food there are young leaves, snails, dormice and seaweed. The uncle's children die of poisoned fish.

With his mother's blessing the boy goes out in the family's row-boat, determined to row his way to the America he believes is 'across the sea', as his father used to tell him, pointing out at the water.

That same night the autumn *garbinada* blows him ashore on the sandy beach at Medova. Shivering, he stumbles through the nights and days along the empty coast of Albania, fearful of the Calabrian boot-leggers who use the swamps to smuggle tobacco to Sicily. In Valona he encounters a cousin, a merchant who deals in dyed cloth. The man quickly arranges a position for him as ship's mate aboard the Italian *Leggero*. On this wooden merchant vessel he voyages from one end of the Mediterranean to another, unable to send word to his family.

He survives his initiation into the world of sailors. The First World War reaches him as news from far away, as he sails along the coast of Northern Africa.

The *Leggero*, however, does not elude its fate. A cannonball from an Austrian gunboat strikes the battle-shy ship and sinks it off Malta in 1917. Ship and crew are crossed out of the naval logbook kept in Naples.

I wonder if I'm sorry to die. I can't answer. Just asking the question is enough to make my soul shrink back from the unknown, to freeze the old man's sour grimace on my face. If I look behind me, I'll begin to tremble. That's why I say: Enough. But if I look ahead, I want to see the falling leaves turn green once more, to see spring in the maple trees in front of the Stock Exchange building.

The year is 1920. Sotir Athanas writes to his mother for the first time from Saint Louis. With the wire for 200 dollars he includes his address: 724 Souldard Street. From that moment on, his life follows the rules of all migrant workers hailing from our wretched corner of the world: work hard, eat, sleep little and talk less, write home regularly to

your sainted mother, send money even more regularly. And love the distant homeland, love it more the older and the lonelier you grow, immune to everything foreign and its various challenges. Live as if you were sleeping, dreaming but one dream: a suffering land somewhere far away, the way it was, the way you and everything will never be again.

I am closed up in the last days of my life like a snail in its shell. The further I retreat along the dark and curving corridor, the more peace I feel. I'm just a patriarchal provincial, used to crawling through the dark with a heavy load on my back. I'm afraid of freedom. For too long I have been preoccupied with half-freedoms. Isn't death the very last freedom of them all?

It is 1936, and Sotir Athanas is still living on Soulard Street. But the number has changed: all the buildings from 724 to 816 now belong to him. A year later he writes to his mother that he has gone into business with Vangelis Hristopoulos, splitting the income from the tenements 'up and down the noisy street, where you can hear languages from half the world', and that he is moving to 818 Lafayette Avenue.

This period marks the first of many donations to the Maritime Society of Valdinós, *Pelagos*. Upon receiving the check for 500 dollars, the residents of Valdinós hang Sotir's photograph on the wall of the tavern that serves as the Association's headquarters. Portrait of a hometown boy who made it big. His mother relates the news to him with pride.

Where I'm from they used to say that when you eat the first ripe fig of the season, you think: I'll eat every last one till the branches are bare. After a few figs, you can't eat any more, and the figs might as well not exist. The desire is gone because you're full. But tomorrow you're hungry again. It was my luck (was it luck?) to turn everything to a profit, but always the desire for something new was eating away at my success. I kept moving,

taking on new work, new fruit hanging on the branches. It must be something we have in our blood, something Greek. No matter how rich I became, I always needed more. The sweetness of that first fig doesn't take away your taste for all the other figs, but a man is lost when he begins to reach out his hand for other fruits. Their taste fades just as quickly. So many kinds of fruit in this world. The only thing missing is time. Even the best laid plans get swept away. It makes me sorry to think of it. All that fruit ripening on the branches, and me not there to pluck it.

In the midst of the next Great War, 1943, the mother of Sotir Athanas goes up the hill for the last time. The timid wish to return home for her funeral becomes the indifference of a middle-aged man from another country.

The family is scattered by the winds of war. In 1949, with the help of the Red Cross, he receives information about his relatives. His older sister is married in Dubrovnik. Two brothers are in Scutari, now Communist Shkodër, with no hope of their being deported to America. His nephew is aboard a Yugoslav merchant vessel. He will meet him briefly, in a bar in Vancouver, a few years later. His aunt Persida and her daughter still live in Valdinos. They are alone in the family's house. The rest have been killed or have disappeared without a trace.

I think no one ever says, 'Ay, padre,' no matter how hard life becomes. They say 'Ay, madre mía.' Dear mother.

A collection of poems by Sandro Galeb, a Montenegrin poet, is printed with Sotir's donations. The poet thanks him personally, desiring to enter into correspondence. Sotir Athanas sends his answer to Sandro:

“The last great war occupied the attention of all right-thinking emigrants from our country. Many things were being said here about

Montenegro, and ideological mines were exploding right and left. We felt one thing only: it was our people that were fighting, and so our people would be victorious. I will never forget any of you, or Valdinos. I do not write letters, and I am not fond of correspondence. It was your kind words that spurred me to answer. But no more.”

The letter is handwritten in English, and is the only message sent by Sotir Athanas to Valdinos after his mother’s death. From now on he will conceal his whereabouts, fearing to open old wounds. The money, however, continues to arrive in the village, via the American consulate in Cetinje.

It’s still there, a reason to shed a last tear in the gathering darkness. I still believe that something beautiful can happen to me too. It still exists, tucked into the coast, wet with rain, swept by the wind, deaf and blind to the newness around us, hopelessly stuck in its narrow part of the world. It’s still there, an island in an imaginary sea, where one day another will take its place. τόπος γεννήσεως, topos yenniseos, the homeland.

Meanwhile, we know that Sotir Athanas moved yet again. 214 Ferdinand Street, Chicago, Illinois. This is his final residence. The place where he lies dying.

We know that in Chicago he acquired a chain of bakeries. His employees are Greeks, Macedonians, Albanians, and two Montenegrins. He’s rich, of course, but alone, so it’s as though he had nothing. He has no children, and he never married.

Valdinos, thanks primarily to its benefactor, has grown from a once-occupied handful of houses into a small town. Those who knew the archipelago before can look around them now and appreciate the fruits of generosity, the donations of the far-away man who sent the money to care for the long-ago homeland.

And yet no has ever seen him, for his generation has died out. At the Maritime Society (no longer housed in the tavern but at the *Kapetanija*), the photograph of his younger days is fading. The ugly little face with the big frightened eyes. Next to it is the letter he sent to our local poet, framed.

No one in the town knows that Sotir Athanas is already a dead man. In his last will and testament, signed by his own hand with its liver spots and yellowed nails, the Greek Arvanite from Chicago leaves his entire fortune to Valdinos. The large sums of money, as directed, arrive periodically at the local council, the little house on the hill above the cove. In that house, they say, long, long ago, the first members of the Athanas family once lived.

My life is going out. Prepi na anahoriso, it's time for me to go. I don't think about the tree anymore when the leaves have fallen. Death is sitting beside me on the bed. Waiting patiently to take it all away. I seem to see the brightness of midday in Valdinos. Mother is there, in black, on the hill by our house. She's standing there like an olive tree, elea. She's waving.

All is well. Poli kalo. ””

About the Authors

Sreten Asanović (1931, Donji Kokoti, Montenegro), former editor-in-chief of *Odjek* and *Stvaranje* literary magazines, president of the Association of Writers of Montenegro and the Association of Writers of Yugoslavia. He has published the books *Long Moments*, *Don't Look at the Sun*, *Playing with Fire*, *Beautiful Death*, *Inebriant Liquor*, *Night on Bald Mountain*, *An Earth-like Face*, *Martini and Pellegrini*, and *Nomina*. He has received a number of awards, like the Award of the Association of Writers of Montenegro, the Liberation of Titograd Award, The Award of July 13th, as well as Goran's Award for the Book of the Year. His novel *Traveller* was published in six editions, the last one in the edition of Montenegrin Novel, published by *Vijesti* independent newspaper. His selected works in four volumes were published by 'Plima' publishing house in Ulcinj.

Ognjen Spahić (1977, Podgorica, Montenegro) is the author of the collections of short stories *All That* (2001) and *Winter Quest* (2007). For his novel *Hansen's Children*, he received the Meša Selimović Award for 2005. His short stories are regularly published in literary magazines in Montenegro and the region. He works as a journalist in the cultural section of the *Vijesti* independent newspaper, and lives in Podgorica.

Vladimir Vojinović (1978, Nikšić, Montenegro) got his B.A. and M.A. at the Faculty of Philosophy in Nikšić. He has published three novels: *Pawns from the Hill*, *Nafaka* and *The Portrait of Igor Đukić*; a collection of short stories entitled *Stories from the Montanaro*, as well as the scholarly work *Sinful Judge: a Study of Montenegrin Movement of Social Literature and Articles and Stories of Milovan Đilas between Two World Wars*. He is also the author of dozens of essays and scholarly works, published in national and international magazines and collections. He works as a teaching assistant in three programmes of study at the Faculty of Philosophy in Nikšić, and also as a journalist in the cultural section of *Vijesti* independent newspaper. He lives in Podgorica.

Andrej Nikolaidis (1974, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina) is the author of the following books of prose: *Essays on Indifference* (1995), *Why Mira Furlan* (1997), *A Cathedral in Seattle* (1999), *Them!* (2001), *Mimesis* (2003), *Son* (2006), *Arrival* (2009), as well as of collections of journalist writings *Balkan Rhapsody* (2007) and *A Sunny Day at La Plaza De La Constitucion* (2009). He is a columnist of the *Monitor* and *Slobodna Bosna* magazines, and of the *Vijesti* daily paper. He lives in Ulcinj.

Lena Ruth Stefanović (1970, Belgrade, Serbia) got her B.A. in Russian Language and Literature at *Klement Obridski* University, where she also defended her M.A. thesis in contemporary Russian literature. She attended graduate studies of Chinese Language and Culture at Beijing Language and Culture University in Beijing, and graduated from the Diplomatic Academy *Gavro Vuković* in Podgorica. She worked as an assistant of State Protocol in the Government of the Republic of Montenegro. Lena Ruth Stefanović writes short stories and is the author of the books *Archetype of Wonder* (2006) and *Lo triumpe* (2008).

Balša Brković (1966, Podgorica, Montenegro) got his B.A. at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, and works as an editor of culture and deputy editor-in-chief of *Vijesti* independent newspaper. He has published the books of poetry *Horses Eating Peaches*, *Silver-Coloured Philip*, *St. Mary's Cape*, *Contrapposto* and *Doubling*, a collection of short stories *Berlin Circle* and the novel *Private Gallery*, that was published in three editions and sold more than 20,000 copies. Translations of this novel were published in Czech Republic, Slovenia and Albania, and it won *Miroslavljevo jevanđelje* Award for the Best Book of prose in Serbia and Montenegro 2001- 2003. He also writes theatre criticism.

Zuvdija Hodžić (1944, Gusinje, Montenegro), graduated from the Faculty of Philology in Priština, and is the author of the following books: *On the First Sleepover* (poetry); *Deaf Bells* and *Somebody Is Calling* (short stories); *A Year in Gusinje* and *The Star of David* (novels); *A Day in the Life* (travel writings). His novels and short stories were published in Albania, and *The Star of David* also in Poland. For *Somebody is Calling*, he got the Award of July 13th.

As a visual artist, prominent in drawing and graphics, he has had several solo exhibitions. He also published monographs of drawings and writings entitled *Through Old Podgorica* and *The Discovery of Homeland*. He lives in Podgorica.

Bosiljka Pušić (1936, Čuprija, Serbia) is the author of seven books of poetry: *Wings of the Same Bird* (1970), *An Illusion of Play* (1972), *Mugwort in the Lapel* (1976), *A Hand Reaching for a Dream* (1980), *The Other Water* (1980), *Drummers on the Square* (1985), *Summing up of Words* (1989) and *Ashes and Scream* (2000); three collections of short stories: *The Cage* (1981), *Melting* (1994) and *A Trip to Žanjice* (2000); several novels: *Opening up of a Doll* (1985), *How to Survive Marriage* (2002, 2003), *Orange and Knife* (2002), *Orange Bloom* (2004), and several books for children. As a successful painter, she has had fifteen solo exhibitions and has taken part in thirty group ones. She lives in Herceg Novi.

Dragan Radulović (1969, Cetinje, Montenegro), a Montenegrin writer. He got his B.A. in philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, and is the author of the following books: *Petrification* (2001), a collection of short stories; *Auschwitz Cafe* (2003), a novel; *Knights of Nothingness* (2005), a catalogue of grotesques; *The Raft of the Medusa* (2007), a collection of short stories. He teaches philosophy at *Danilo Kiš* high school in Budva.

Aleksandar Bečanović (1971, Bar, Montenegro), Montenegrin poet, fiction writer, translator and film critic. He worked as an editor of culture in Montenegrin weekly magazine *Monitor*, while now he is a member of the editorial board in *Plima* and *Ars* magazines for culture. He is the laureate of the *Risto Ratković* Award for the best book of poetry in Montenegro in 2002. He translates from English, predominantly in the field of film theory. His published books include: *Ulysses' Distance* (poems, 1994), *Indeed* (poems, 1996), *The Trap* (poems, 1998), *Places in the Letter* (poems, 2001), *I Am Waiting to See What Will Come of It* (short stories, 2005), and *Genre in Contemporary Film* (film critiques, 2005).

Jovan Nikolaidis (1950, Ulcinj, Montenegro), worked in Sarajevo at the *Oslobođenje* daily paper from 1974 to the beginning of 1990s, when he moved to Ulcinj. There he founded the *Plima* publishing house, as well as *Plima-Batica* magazine, printed in Montenegrin and Albanian. He is also the founder and publisher of the *Chronicle*, the first magazine in Albanian in Montenegro, and is the author of the following books: *Velasquez* (a short novel), *Valdinos 33* (a novel), *Letters from Ulcinj* (a chronicle) *Phosphoric Rosaries* (a chronicle), *Phio* (a chronicle), *Montenegrin Guilt* (political commentary) and others.

