

Counter Camouflage

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(Translator unknown)

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"Daddy, come and see something... Daddeeeey..."

"Coming in a minute, cutie." Where is Olja? Is this a way to look after a kid?

"What's the matter, cutie?"

"Ah, why was that man shot twice?"

"What are you watching?"

"A partisan movie. Here, I'll rewind so you can see."

"Don't rewind. This is not a movie for you; daddy will play a cartoon for you now."

"I don't want a cartoon, I want to watch this one."

"OK, OK, just press 'pause', I'll be right back."

This is outrageous. She let a four year old watch a partisan movie. I walk into the kitchen - she is on the phone, as always, slowly raising her finger to her mouth, meaning - I shouldn't interrupt her. I hear one way communication: "It all happened spontaneously. A couple of years ago, my husband gave me a copy of a medieval ring that totally fascinated me. Later, I met a craftsman who made that copy, so I decided to start my own medieval jewelry collection ... Yes, yes, the craftsman is called Ljubisa, don't forget to mention that. Just a moment, I have to check up on my kid," she puts her hand over the handset microphone and talks to me, a little rudely.

"What's the matter?"

"What do you mean - what's the matter? Our child is watching some partisan movie full of violence. Where did you get that garbage?"

"It came with the newspapers, you know, the ones that Socialist party hands out. There was no parental advisory sign on it."

"Well, next time pay attention to what you put in the player. Now go and reason with her to watch a cartoon. She won't listen to me."

"Are you crazy? I'm giving an interview for 'My Jewelry' magazine. Go tell her a story or something until I'm done."

"I don't have time for stories, I just started soldering something. I can't leave it now."

"Come on Branko, I busted my ass to get to this interview, I don't care, deal with it."

While the kid was very small she didn't give a damn about me, but at least she took care about the girl. Now, she doesn't care about either of us. As I'm leaving, I hear the voice of a vampire - like woman: "yeah, now I'm here, I had to entertain my kid for a moment, you know how it is....oh, yeah, you can write that I'm a mum of a four year old girl..."

"Cutie, let daddy play a cartoon for you ... you know, the one about the cat who..."

"Alright, but only if you promise you'll explain why they shot the man twice."

Oh, goodness...

"Come on, rewind, let me see the first time he was shot."

Rewinding doesn't last long, since the kid is a remote control master. I recognize the scenes from 'The Red Land'.

"Daddy, that guy in blue suit wearing a hat is shot twice. Look, he's in the middle the first time, but the second time he is at the end. How can they shoot him twice?"

“Look cutie, that’s not real shooting, that’s only pretending. Remember those actors from the theatre? That guy only acts that he was shot. He just pretended that he fell down. So he just got up for the next shooting and fell down again.”

“But why was he the only one acting twice?”

“Look here, the guys who made the movie... they are not the same guys who acted, but some other guys... they got the task to make a movie as quickly as they could, so that the enemy could be condemned as soon as possible...”

“The Germans?”

“That’s right, the Germans. Since they didn’t have time to hire more actors, they asked some guys to act twice. Understand?”

“Yes. And do they still make movies that fast nowadays?”

“Come here both of you, give mommy a kiss, oh, my cuties...”

past

“Colleague, I’m sure you’re wondering why I left you for the end.”

“I thought maybe you’ve accidentally skipped me.”

“By no means. Unlike other students’ programs, yours uses significantly less memory and is completely functional. All thanks to a completely different approach to the problem. I admire you...”

“I don’t know what to tell you...”

“You don’t have to tell me anything, your program lines speak for themselves. Would you agree with me that micro controllers are the future of electronics?”

“I completely agree. It will be impossible to even imagine devices without them.”

“What do you think, will they reduce reliability of devices?”

“Not at all. Micro controllers were designed to increase device reliability in the first place.”

I can’t believe it. The man admires my program, yet he smiles at such a triviality. So, the rumours are true – he really is full of irony and is acting like a jerk at the exams. This surely was an introduction to one of those Catch 22 questions.

“You see colleague, when one designs a product such as micro controller, one also has to ‘design’ the explanation of that product’s purpose...”

“I apologize, professor ...”

“Oh, no need to apologize. Laughter is sometimes hard to control. Such an explanation often serves to divert the flow of thoughts, to prevent someone who is not chosen from coming up with an idea to use the product for reducing the device reliability. Imagine that, for instance, a keyboard company produces certain specimens which will stop working after some time. What would you think of that?”

“I would think that it is not fair.”

“Ah, it would not be fair if they would stop working in the afternoon and during the weekend since it would spoil the gig, but on an ordinary day, in the morning, why not? The user will have time to understand what has just happened, and the authorized service will perform a cheap repair, charged at higher rate, and the device will continue working properly after being loaded with the proper software. You see, pharmaceutical companies sell many drugs

which cure only the consequences of the disease, not the cause, since they are aware that if they cured the cause they would soon be bankrupt. Is that fair?"

He really got into it; he even started tapping his fingers on the table as if he was playing the soundless keyboard. I don't know why he is telling me all this, but it makes sense.

"It's not fair at all, but still we have to behave as if it is, since we have no alternative."

"That's correct. However, as you can see, everything functions perfectly and no one feels any remorse. Imagine yourself working as an engineer in a keyboard producing company and your supervisor, completely legally, instructs you to program some specimens the way the company wants. What would you do? Of course, we will exclude the possibility that you are instructed to do such a thing in company producing healthcare devices, and we'll also exclude the possibility of you keeping the position should you refuse."

"I don't know what to ..."

"Sorry to interrupt you. I hope you have in mind that a keyboard has a large number of components which can fail after some time without anyone's help, thus making it dysfunctional. As for the exam, we are done. You got a straight A, I only wanted us to elaborate on the topic and exchange thoughts."

What a nutcase. All this babbling has nothing to do with the exam. What would I do?

"I'd probably say yes."

"The company policy wouldn't bother you?"

"It probably would, in the beginning, but not later on since I believe that each company has some policy of its own."

"Of course it has. Mother company produces pesticides, while the daughter packs clay for detoxification. This is the case all over the world. Do you now believe that micro controllers have been designed exclusively to increase device reliability?"

His smile makes my throat tickle, which actually disguises my attempt to cover laughter skillfully. I even put my hands over my nose until the first outburst goes away. Somehow, I manage to answer, very shortly though.

"It depends on the way they are programmed."

"That is correct, colleague. So, we're back to programming. It would be my pleasure to be the mentor for your graduation thesis. I have a fair cooperation with a German company which produces home security systems, so if you are willing to write the thesis related to that subject I could provide you advanced study training in their company."

"Professor...I've never thought about going abroad, you caught me by surprise..."

"Yes, yes I understand, you do not have to make a decision immediately. Think about it and let me know."

"I would like to ask you one more thing before I start thinking about it."

"Of course, ask."

"Does that company have special requirements?"

"We have just agreed that every prosperous company has some specific requirements, and it's up to you to accept them or not."

* * * * *

I accepted and worked hard to design a home security system, which was actually a modification of the existing one, since it all boiled down to changing

the micro controller and completely programming a new one. The justifications for controller change were future expansions, which, to a degree, explained a large number of unused pins. I earned professor's sympathy because of my inventiveness and hard work, which enabled me to turn the advanced training abroad into a slam dunk. The only thing left to do is for me to come to the final consultation, which the professor planned to do in some joint which was commonly known as 'the joint'.

I was drinking beer at the bar, occasionally looking to the stairs, waiting to see the professor's legs. Waiting took longer than expected, so I stopped checking out the stairs so often - no wonder I started talking to a bartender, who was the only soul in the joint.

"I can't believe that this rotten cassette deck is still working, and it even sounds as if it just came from the factory."

"Music comes from the computer, deck is only a camouflage."

"Yeah, I get it now, some mechanic reworked your deck and it spins the tape endlessly, and these VU meters are switched to recording."

"I've no idea what he did, but I can tell that it works."

My smile gave away that we share the same opinion, since I was probably the next jerk in line who got fooled. He winked back and kept his eyes on the stairs, which was a good indicator that someone was coming down into the joint. It was the professor, who else. He came to us smiling; by bartender's expression I figured out they knew each other. When he came closer, he nodded, looked at the bartender, then me and mildly put his fist on the counter. He bought bartender a drink, and ordered us a couple of beers. I was just finishing mine, so I didn't mind, but even if I had half a bottle left it wouldn't make sense to turn down the professor. Professor turned to the bartender in an almost commanding tone of voice, demanding to prepare the pool table. While they had their - most likely usual - conversation, I realized, like so many times before, what a piece of work professor was. It was much easier to accept such a fact than to cope with the fact that I haven't touched the cue since high school. Hoping I haven't forgotten how to hold the stick, I came into the room where, just a few moments ago, I saw the bartender piling some tablecloth as if it was a dirty sheet. Lack of talk and a small and a bit cramped pool room made me feel a bit uneasy. Professor gave me a hand sign to go ahead first, but just when I was ready to break the triangle of balls, his hand imitated a stop sign.

"Let me get this clear, the loser pays the token," he pointed at the chair with a bowl of chips on it.

I nodded and hit the cue ball. The balls started flying across the table, but somehow remained close together. Clinking of the balls in the rhythm of a broken metronome started to interrupt the music coming from the speaker. I soon realized that the green cloth battlefield wasn't on my side, but the battle was nowhere near boring, since with each hit, I felt more confident. Soon we even started making jokes about collision theory. We were totally absorbed by the game, so we occasionally used beer just to keep our throats from getting dry. There were no more chips in the bowl. With the air of modesty, professor broke the harmonious set of balls which, after some random movement, will be in harmony again. He stepped away from the table, slightly leaned against the cue and for the first time today addressed me in a serious tone.

"What do you think, colleague, which of these balls is the most important for the game?"

"The black one."

"Why?"

"Because it can end the game if you make even a slightest fault."

"That is correct, but you overcome carelessness by practice. However, there is something called strategy. In pool, and very often in life too, what's relevant is not the position of the black ball, but of the cue ball. If you leave the cue ball in favorable position for your opponent, he will surely defeat you. Don't ever make it easy on the opponent. This is the first piece of advice from me. I noticed that you took the chips from the ball just like that, hoping to reverse bad luck. This was only entertainment - that is true, and the chips are cheap, but still, think about how far you should go, because life is a game as well. Anyway, I am telling you this because in the situation when you are winning, the opponent keeps quiet and waits for you to make a mistake. One mistake is never fatal; you can only lose a game. But, unless you realize that someone is watching your mistakes, you'll lose much more than a game. If you figure out that you cannot defeat someone currently, lay low and leave it for some other time. It's time to go..."

Everything was in accordance with his story. I was losing, but he was the one who suggested leaving the pool table. Maybe he was in a hurry to get home or he simply didn't want to make a mistake. He paid for three beers and two chips, just as I expected. While we were getting out of the joint we took a deep breath and clearly showed each other that we preferred the freshness of a spring evening to the burning stench of the joint. He shook my hand and added, semi-officially.

"Did you notice that ancient deck over the bar?"

"Of course, the bartender told me that some mechanic made a camouflage."

"That mechanic would be me. Remember, the most important thing in life is camouflage. Many species would be extinct if it weren't for camouflage. Sometimes when you don't know how to avoid danger, camouflage yourself, and perhaps the danger will avoid you."

* * * * *

Finally it's the end of the school year. No more kids trying to annoy me. Just today and then it's no more menace till September. I have never filled in the class record book in such silence. Why are they so quiet, what's happening?

"Teacher, on behalf of the class I give you this humble present. We would like you to be our teacher next year, but we have to end primary school."

They are laughing like jerks, but why am I laughing with them? I just had to; since they talked this brat into reciting their crap... we have to leave primary school blah, blah, blah...

"Thank you, children. I have to say that I am really sorry that such a fine class is leaving me, but primary school is not a place to stay for too long. I wish you a lot of success in your future schooling and of course in life. "

"Teacher, will you open the present?"

"Of course, just let me find the scissors..."

Sorry, but I manicured my nails this morning. I don't feel like fooling around with the duck tape. By the shape of the present, it seems like a book. I'm just curious if they were able to choose something normal. Hardcover... but it doesn't have to mean anything, since trash also wishes to last longer... well, it's my novel! To Professor Olivera Andric, a gift to remember us by... they all

signed their names. Take a deep breath, that's right, try not to tremble, it's a menace...

"Thank you children. You really touched me..."

"We wish you many new novels."

II

For three months I have been working in a company which employs two German chicks and three Serbian guys. I am the fourth Serbian, but since I get my humble salary in cash and have no social insurance, I can't count myself as an employee. The owner, one of the three Serbian guys, is a big hustler, so he got me a working visa for a year without problems, even though I am not registered as an employee. Before I came here, I was afraid that I would have language barrier problems, but as the time went by I realized that I didn't even need to know the language, since I barely communicated with the German chicks. One was the secretary and the other was the accountant. I slept in the office and, as luck would have it, was a night watchman of a company which sold alarms, since they didn't want to pay the rent for my flat. Anyway, I haven't complained, because I used the reception room which was much better furnished than any of my accommodations in Belgrade, and I could also save some money. My job included two things. Either I was with the mechanics installing the alarms, or I was developing a device for communication with the alarm through electrical system. This device is called intercom and is nothing new in the world of electronics. There's even a publically available protocol for communication between the two devices, which, in engineering sense, spared me the trouble of thinking too much about the software. However, I was presented with several requirements, which really troubled me in both engineering and crafting sense. One of the hardest was a request for a miniature, which was automatically part of the simplicity requirement. Making something functional with as few elements as possible has always been the engineering challenge. Assembling the elements so that they occupy as little space as possible has always been the crafting challenge, since we were supposed to assemble this newly developed device manually, unlike the basic alarm which was assembled by a robot somewhere in China. When I told them, in the most serious manner, that I dried out all my miniature related potentials, they told me that it was about time I met Mr. Fingerprint.

I met Mr. Fingerprint in the workshop, which was in one of the larger rooms of his flat. During the handshake I realized that Mr. had a simple Serbian name, Ljubisa. Right after I came in, I was greeted with a courtesy of coffee and homemade brandy. I accepted the courtesy, since I never refuse a brandy, especially so far away from home. He ended our relaxed conversation by getting up from the workshop corner where we sat at a miniature table, walked to the long desk and returned holding something in his hand. Not recognizing the object he brought didn't discourage me, because I knew he'd show it to me. He put the micro controller, the one we use on central stations, on the table and smiled mystically.

"I'm sure you know what this is?"

"Of course..."

He touched the microcontroller with the tip of his fingers and like a real dicer, revealed something unexpected to me.

“Are you sure you know what this is?”

“It is a micro controller, convertible model.”

“You can’t be fooled boy.”

“No way... A couple of years ago I cut open a burnt one, so I know what it looks like on the inside.”

“Excellent. Our task is to place the device you made into this housing.”

“I don’t understand. There’s so much space on the basic panel or next to it, and we are cutting the chip. It’s really crazy and has no economic explanation... it’s risky, makes no sense.”

“Ah, young man, I got the obligation to make you listen to reason, and to point to the logic and economical justification. It’s risky, that’s for sure. Anyway, it’s up to you to decide whether you’ll do it or not, no one will force you.”

“I still don’t understand, decide... what?”

A deep breath followed by the sigh of relief. Slim face of my companion floating through the cigarette smoke seems a little unearthly, but his confident voice makes that image go away, even before the smoke clears.

“You see, this device should disable the alarm, until some stuff is done...”

“Until the theft is completed?”

“Something like that.”

“So I should actually decide if I want to be a thief or not?”

“I’d prefer calling it assisting to thieves.”

“That still makes me an accomplice.”

“Now, now ... If you want to, first let me explain it to the details, and then you call it what you want.”

So, these are the special requirements the professor was talking about. I’m up to my neck in shit, but I’m definitely not going to get out of it by taking the first plane back to Serbia. I have to see exactly what they’re up to. I nod affirmatively and pour myself a brandy. I know that this gesture reveals my nervousness, but I’m aware that I can’t hide it even if I want to. Ljubisa continues:

“Controller is only a camouflage for the intercom you made. There mustn’t be any additional parts on central station panel looking from the outside, since that would be fatal in case of doubt or investigation. During the break in, the false controller is removed and the new one, with the proper software is placed instead of it, so no one can connect the company with the burglary...”

For a moment I felt like an actor in a low budget thriller, but when a pale and slim face of a fifty year old emerged from the smoke screen, I realized that this was happening to me, in a Nis-sized city, the name of which I can’t even pronounce right. He even used the word - burglary.

“How much time will we get if they catch us?”

“We don’t consider that option, because this is a hundred percent sure thing.”

What’s a sure thing these days? – I ask myself, and go on –

“What would my task be?”

“It depends on the case. Sometimes you’d just disable the whole alarm, sometimes simulate burglary just for the sake of check. In general, you would do it remotely. You wouldn’t have to get into the house.”

“Mister ...”

“Ljubisa.”

“Yes, Ljubisa ... you forgot one tiny thing.”

“Tell me, I like tiny things.”

“In order to make it as indistinguishable as you want it to be, all the settings have to be downloaded from the old microcontroller and uploaded into the new one. That’s where you enter the codes, sensors’ settings and some other parameters. It is true that this could be done in a few minutes, but it can’t be done remotely.”

“You forgot that you’re working with the experts. That’s their job.”

No mistake, yet. At least, not one I can see.

“It’s obvious that what I made can’t be put into that convertible micro controller, and I still can’t figure out how we’re going to make the plastic cover.”

“That’s my part of the job. That’s why you were sent here. I’m the one working under magnifying glass and I want to train you. You’ll solder micro parts under magnifying glass by a robotic arm and when you connect all that with the controller, I’ll plate it with plastic in a special mold. It’ll be just like the original. Actually, everything is like the original.”

He made that dicer’s move again and showed me a new controller, which was different from the old one just by the lack of numbers. He didn’t even try to tell me that printing is the most trivial operation in the whole process. He saw in my eyes that I have faith in his skills. The only question that remained is - do I trust him as a man?

The toughest night of my life followed. Decision time. I played my favorite compilation of classical music and started solving equations with multiple unknowns. Each unknown started with “what if”. It didn’t take me long to figure out that I have more unknowns than equations. I decided to say yes, in the first place because of the money, and all the unknowns were erased by Mister Ljubisa’s calmness. He didn’t solve the unknowns, but his appearance made me forget about them. I forgot about them all but one: what if I never get the chance to make some dough, return to Serbia and carry on with my miserable life? I know that I won’t hang my diploma on the wall, but with the money waiting for me there, it’ll be the same as if I hung it on the crooked wedge.

The moment I formally shook hands with them, the five of us started meeting and analyzing every single detail that might screw up the plan. During the first meeting, I realized that they were actually bluffing, because they weren’t absolutely sure if they could overcome some obstacles or not. Still, they were only the handymen who installed other people’s knowledge. Our strategy was very simple. I was supposed to disable the alarm, and that would be indicated by three consecutive blinks of the entrance light controlled by the alarm. In case there wasn’t a sensor on the roof, one guy would climb on the top of the house and simulate that the theft was committed through the roof, not worrying that he would watch the police arriving from the rooftop. The other guy would open the door elegantly and take all he could, while the third guy would replace the microcontroller. Of course, it was for the cops to figure out who were the acrobats who jumped on the roof and cleaned and performed the robbery. In case there was a sensor, the break-in would be done through the window, and the alarm would go off with a three minute delay, which would give them a big advantage for the escape. This would be justified by the

accidental alarm resetting, which took the whole three minutes, due to the alarm complexity. The intercom installation shouldn't be a problem because it could be two miles away for all I care; I would only have to be close to the target object and turn off the alarm by simply text messaging the intercom. Oh, wouldn't it be great if you could just put a cell phone into a microcontroller. Some day, but an opportunity like this won't exist then.

For the next six months we all did our usual jobs, and Ljubisa, thanks to his operative work, decided which houses would have a reworked alarm installed. Part of the plan was also for Ljubisa to find out when the house will be empty. I spent a lot of time with him and realized that he was the brain of the operation, and this firm is only the necessary means to an end. He didn't point that out, but didn't hide it either. I didn't find the courage to ask him if he'd agreed with the professor about my transfer, but from what I saw, I knew that the professor wouldn't even want to shake hands with those three handymen. I discovered the history of his nickname on his own initiative - he was casting a piece of plastic with someone else's fingerprints while I was making a micro intercom in the same room. If he'd wanted, he could've told me to take a paid leave, since we had remodeled controllers for four or five chosen houses on stock any time. However, I witnessed the presentation of a perfect combination of technique and filigree. I have no idea how did he manage to get other people's fingerprints, but I doubt that those were the fingerprints of ordinary people. I also doubt that the other three blokes knew why exactly he was called Fingerprint.

Action time! Before the first job, I asked myself the same questions, running around in circles. What if they get caught? Ljubisa said that they wouldn't sing even if they'd put them on medieval torturing devices. All the same, they'd come to the company and turn it upside down, and I don't have the alibi for that night. The two German chicks would confirm that I work there too. The hell I work - I live there! The endless question loop was stopped by the awareness that Ljubisa will be by my side the whole time. At one moment, I thought that he was a kind of psychotherapist, hired by the three guys who wanted to talk me into doing this crap. It was just a moment of weakness due to my misperception of reality. Ljubisa was by my side in every action that followed. Realistically speaking, he could've sent text messages with predefined numbers, but I was always the one who did that. I came to the conclusion that they don't pay for my physical presence, but for the physical work of making and programming the intercom and its field testing.

After the first few burglaries, I realized that these guys are the masters of their craft, which gave me hope that they wouldn't get caught. Just to secure myself, I rented a small flat and didn't even go to the office any more. When we were supposed to install an alarm, they would pick me up and we'd talk about the job at Ljubisa's place. Ljubisa used his authority to convince others that there was no need for me to come to the company, because objectively, I had no need to. On the other hand, my paranoia managed to convince Ljubisa, since I mentioned, at least five times, that I didn't want to get caught because of some nonsense. I was even scared that the cops would figure out about text messages and catch us, which was the greatest paranoia of all. He just smiled ironically and told me that I've seen too many movies. I didn't know what I wanted exactly, except for the cash, but I didn't want my life to become a movie with the bad guys being arrested in the end by default. Five hundred Euros per

break-in didn't leave me much to save from, but all I had in mind was to save enough money for a small apartment in Serbia. As always, life creates a chance, and it's up to me to take it or leave it.

For the first two months we did eleven houses. The papers didn't write about the break-ins through the roof, so they decided to keep using the same strategy. The only problem was that the roofs left to do were harder, so one more guy was supposed to be up there. Suddenly, I became the fourth guy who had to replace the controller. As always, Ljubisa controlled the situation, but now with an extra task - turning the alarm off. Coincidentally, I even helped with the lock picking. The tiny detail that I'd mentioned to Ljubisa eight months ago no longer existed. Worst of all, Ljubisa knows that the tiny detail which really annoyed me at that time wasn't just my acting. If it wasn't acting then, and it doesn't bother me anymore now, this change might mean that my fear backed down. Luckily for me, the fear was just lurking in the dark, and it temporarily disappeared only because I got five hundred Euros for each break-in.

The fear came back when Fingerprint found a short article in the paper about series of break-ins through the roof. We decided to lay low and simply forget about the roofs before someone gets interested in the pattern. We didn't completely forget about them though, since the owners of the houses without secured roofs started demanding the assumed 'safety' addition. Surprisingly, the Serbs decided to use this legal chance to make money and forget about the burglaries, but for how long - no one knew, since they continued installing reworked controllers in some of the houses. My visa was about to expire in a week, but I didn't have the guts to mention it to anyone. Three nights in a row the sound of hitting the cue ball kept awaking me. I'd hear the cue hit the ball, but the moment it started flying towards my head, I'd wake up. I started thinking where the hell I was leaving the cue ball for the opponent. I never thought about this until now, but if they got caught red-handed, the reworked controller would go down with them, and the cops would start to unwind the thread. The brain behind the controller might be more important to them than ordinary burglars. What if they put milk and cookies on the table and ask them - who made the intercom? Not even the Nazis tortured their victims, if the milk and cookies trick worked. They wouldn't give away Ljubisa, that's for sure, but what about me? I decided to get out, but how could I go away just like that, like a coward? What do I care, they don't carry guns and they definitely won't go after me. And what about Ljubisa? I'll just tell him that I'm sick and tired of it, and he can tell them whatever he wants, for all I care.

I bought a ticket to Serbia for the third time. This time it was a one-way plane ticket.

III

Why didn't the cab driver drive all the way into the yard? How the hell will I get to the street with my shaky legs across this bloody ice? I'll just go slowly by the garages. It's so cold and I forgot to bring my gloves. Oh, good, hankies are here. We drove over Karaburma,⁽³⁻¹⁾ and in the rear view mirror the cab driver stared at my tears which followed one another faster than lanterns in the

street. If you're not decent enough, at least show some compassion and look straight, you damn male creature. Good thing is at least I remembered to take off the makeup. I wouldn't even remember to do it if I hadn't been crying in the house too. He has never seen a woman just looking through the window and crying? He has never seen a woman crying like this.

* * * * *

"Olja."

"Tanja my dear..."

"Take it easy, everything will be ok, just take it easy, don't cry. Let's move away from the door..."

"How can I ... stop ... crying? Are you ... laughing?"

"I'm not laughing, I just smiled, go ahead cry...just cry, I won't speak..."

Well I smiled, you silly, because you take everything literally. She leans her weight on me and she's crying, I have to close the door somehow, people will hear us. She doesn't feel that I'm walking for both of us; she just squeezes my shoulder and cries. Then, at least I'll drag you to bed. That's right, sit down...

"Why the hell... you won't speak, tell me... that he is a piece of shit ...isn't he a slimebag?"

"Yes he is Olja darling; he's a piece of shit and a scumbag."

"And a pervert..."

"Well, he's a man... I'll go get some cognac; I'll be here in a second."

Where the hell does she find the strength to sob so much? She's crying her eyes out. I knew it was about him the moment she told me on the phone that she'd be sleeping over at my place. They must've been fighting; maybe he even threw her out. He was always pretending to be a nice guy, but he's actually a typical Balkan man.

"Hey, slow down, this is cognac..."

"The hell I'll slow it down... pour me another glass."

It's actually great that she choked a bit, maybe the cough will bring her to her senses. At least she sobs less.

"Now, let's toast to us, screw the asshole..."

"I won't screw him anymore, that's for sure... Tanja darling, he's a thief. A lousy, filthy burglar..."

"Who, him?"

"Yeah, him. He got caught last night. He broke into some flat ... This morning he rang on the door and as drowsy as I was, I opened the door wearing only a nightgown, thinking he was so hammered he couldn't find the key... he was just standing there, staring at me. I was just about to ask him something when suddenly two guys appeared showing me their police badges. They introduced themselves and told me it was not that bad. Poor thing, he wanted to hug me, but he forgot that he was handcuffed. In all that misery I just smiled and said: of course, it's not that bad."

"Ah, Olja darling, you know that he loves you..."

"If he loved me ... he wouldn't steal ... and humiliate me..."

"It's not that simple. So what happened then?"

"They showed me the search warrant, stared interrogating me - how long I was with him, did I know what he was up to... I just kept crying ..."

"Will they press any charges against you?"

"No, no, I just gave a statement. They searched the flat for hours and found noting. They went over every single rag, moved all the furniture, took apart the

entire bathroom, they even took minced meat from the freezer and defrosted it in a pot.”

“Bloody cops.”

“Well, Tanja darling, they acted quite normal, they treated me real nice. He is a sleaze, who kept his eyes to the floor all the time to avoid my glance.”

“I guess it’s so ... anyway, it’s all over now, relax.”

“It’s not over! I’d bite my ass off if I could. It’s all my fault. I’m a naive sucker.”

“Oh, that’s the easiest thing to say. Like my granny used to say – what’s done is done, may it never return.”

“I approved of his car parts store and smuggling of parts from Turkey. I’m aware of where we live and don’t want to split hairs. But Tanja darling, that was just a part of what he was doing. I just figured it all out...”

“What did you figure out?”

“It was all planned. Getting hammered with the guys in a bar was just a cover. He was actually breaking in, and he probably had a shot of booze at the front door on his way back, just to have an alcohol breath. He never raised his voice; he would just smile and come to bed.”

“Please don’t cry. Stop thinking about that jerk.”

“How can I ... not cry? When we were travelling to Zlatibor, I hit myself on the forehead in a shock and said that I forgot my birth control pills, and he just said that there would be nothing wrong if it accidentally happened.”

“He was only kidding; I guess now you realize how serious he is.”

“No ... he wasn’t kidding. He said that he was ready to work even more because of the kid... to feed it from thievery ... my kid, growing beside a thief father...”

* * * * *

It’s already nine o’clock. Tanja must have put something in my cognac so I slept for so long. It’s Sunday. Oh, thank you for getting caught on Saturday so I can rest on Sunday. I’m thinking about him again. Where is Tanja? She must be in the kitchen. I’m calling her with a hoarse voice. I hear her clogs clattering.

“Good morning. Are you still down? Hey, coffee and cookies will be ready in three minutes.”

I’m cold. I wave one hand showing her that I agree about coffee, trying to reach the remote with the other. Am I down? What, am I supposed to be laughing after everything that happened? Cartoon ... news ... shop from your couch ...oh, here it is the morning program. They’ll surely babble about the freezing rain.

Dear viewers, we have Mrs. Dragana Dokonic, high transparent crime Prosecutor and she will offer us advice on virus protection. We have slight problems with the line, but I believe that you can hear us. Good morning, Dragana. As we know, computers are more and more present in our everyday lives, and that is encouraging, but unfortunately, there are malicious people whose activities, especially the viruses they create, can harm us. Please tell us how to protect ourselves against such people and such activities? Close all the windows, close all the windows... I suppose that there is something wrong with the line. Direction, do we have Mrs. Rada from the emergency service? No. The direction says that this was Mrs. Dragana. Unfortunately the line is dead. However, listen to her advice, since it’s very cold outside, and we will continue with the latest news. The Ministry of Recommendations recommended...

“Olja my dear, I knew that I’d see a smile on your face again.”

* * * * *

Pension is the biggest deceit of the modern age. In capitalism, you work your ass off so you can afford bare survival after you retire. You have to save like crazy if you want to enjoy basic life. However, you spend all that you saved on medications, ‘cause you’re so worn out that only a handful of pills can keep you in a state of bare functionality. You’ll attribute pleasure to the deceit willfully launched by the system, against which you are incapable of fighting in such a worn-out state. Socialism had a catch that was hidden better. You worked your ass off, you couldn’t save anything but they guaranteed you a handful of pills for free, which was basically the same thing. People are well known for their dislike of the hidden and occult, so they’ve moved from socialism to capitalism and got trapped into the state of transition, which doesn’t imply the guaranteed handful of pills. I’m in a better position than other pensioners, since I’ve saved for bare survival and medications. I’m not completely worn-out, since I have retired early. I simply had to, because there was only one single factory in Serbia which was not privatized yet. When that happens, no one will be able to buy apartments without being asked about the origin of their cash. I was quick and bought two. After I have bought them I decided to retire, because I could live in the smaller apartment and lease the bigger one for a living. If these misfortunate circumstances didn’t force me to do so, I would blend into the crowd of many fellow pensioners. However, I have worked long enough to become infected with a common disease called habit. You have to buy a new wristwatch when you are getting retired, because the scale on the old one got stuck, but then, the scale in your brain is stuck as well, so you soon realize that you don’t really need a watch in your retirement days.

Another morning in New Belgrade. By habit I open the window to get some fresh air and head for the bathroom. In the middle of shaving I feel the freezing air coming from the room. I can close the door, but I like to listen to the news while shaving. They said that it was minus twenty six degrees Celsius in Belgrade last night. An oak tree would break on that temperature, but oaks in Belgrade are long gone. I had to wait a bit with washing the foam off my face, because the Ministry of Recommendations’ announcement: Ministry of recommendation recommends the citizens not to leave their homes, unless absolutely necessary, since working and moving conditions are very bad. The Ministry repeats yesterday’s recommendation to the employers to announce a non working day today. Also, the Ministry recommends to ministers from other ministries to announce a non working day, as it won’t be possible to visit various institutions, depriving the ministers of their basic function. Now I can wash off the foam, since they didn’t recommend it staying on after shaving. I have to buy bread, no need to go to the newsstand for the papers when I can get it in a small local store.

Politicians are being smart-asses, entertainers singing on the squares even if it’s not New Year, strikers cutting their fingers off, kids beating the hell out of their professors; and let’s see what the criminals are doing. Poisoned her mother-in-law with a pesticide...kept his dead father in the freezer to keep receiving his pension...convicted for breaking into a newsstand.

Today the First Base Court announced the final verdict on Ekrem Ljatifi from Borca.⁽³⁻²⁾ The court proved that two months ago Ekrem broke the lock on the newsstand and took a bag full of cigarettes and alcoholic beverage, total value

of eight thousand six hundred and thirty RSD. For the performed deed, Ekrem was sentenced to two months. The court considered mitigating circumstances of his remorse, as well as the fact that Ekrem lives in a cardboard box settlement by the river Danube and has no income. Court spokesman added that the court, in cooperation with the police forces, is determined to reduce the crime rate in Serbia. Therefore, it's very important that no one is protected from justice or privileged. Spokesman emphasized that the judicial reform is giving great results in practice. This process, ended within just fifty two days, is an excellent example.

That's right, that's the proper judiciary, everything is transparent, especially journalism, since they published the man's photo as well.

What kind of poll could I conduct? I'm thinking about some social poll, but it would be stupid to give people false hope that someone is finally paying attention to them. And maybe they are sick and tired of polls and they'll simply ignore me. A survey of beer? It will be suspicious, where the hell from can they get the money for beer? Cigarettes? Bingo! Gypsies can't live without them; they'll give their last dime for a smoke. Sheets with eight questions about cigarettes. List of random names, one of them being Ekrem. Ball pens, and, yes, I have to exchange some money, because without it, nothing would happen. Well Ekrem, I hope you are not collecting raw material today.

Finding a gypsy settlement in Borca by the Danube is not a big philosophy. They have been living here for a long time and got accustomed to the local community. I left my car by the bulwark and headed for the cardboard box settlement down the frozen road. Hounds announce my arrival, but obviously no one feels like going out in this cold. A few degrees difference in favor of a cardboard house means a lot. I come closer to the houses and realize that they are not made of cardboard only. If there were kids outside, it would be a lot easier; this way - it'll take a while. I come to the first house and knock. A lean, toothless guy opens the door. Bummer.

"Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon to you too."

"I'm doing a survey on tobacco and I pay two hundred Serbian dinars per survey, so..."

"Come in, come in, bro."

"I'll ask you some questions about tobacco and you just give me short answers. You sign, I give you two hundred and move on. Ok?"

"Ok, bro."

I guess I really made their day. They even offered me coffee. Their kindness is both for the sake of the profit and general culture, but in favor of culture. I'd like to have some coffee and chat, but I know my priorities. I mechanically read the trivial questions and the offered answers, trying to speed him up. Of course, I have to go through the same thing with his wife. I make some funny kind of partisan hand salute to avoid getting my hands dirty and I leave. I leave the door filled with coarse faces and little children's heads behind and knock on the next one. Some lean guy again. Miss number two, but I have no choice but to blubber my text and go in. These guys are also hospitable, but a bit more demanding.

"All my kids smoke, d'ya wanna talk to them too?"

"I really can't do that, only the adults are the subject of this survey."

“Awright, awright, just asking. Hey, I’ll call my brother and sister-in-law, so you can ask them.”

“What’s your brother’s name?”

“Elvis.”

“Just a second, let me see... Elvis is not on the list. I guess he’s not registered anywhere. But, c’mon I’ll ask them too, but the registered ones have the advantage. Just a minute....do you know where Ekrem Ljatifi lives?”

“I know bro, of course I know.”

“Great, let’s go and do the survey with your brother and sister-in-law and then you’ll show me where Ekrem lives, because he is registered.”

It makes perfect sense, wherever you are on the planet. If you ask for a favor, you have to return one. He didn’t suspect a thing. I somehow managed to talk him into not following me to Ekrem’s doorstep, because I didn’t want Ekrem to hear he was registered somewhere. He has surely had enough of being registered. One thing is sure - that he will go through an unpleasant registration into the prison files. Ekrem’s house was not much different from the others. One wall, a timber and four improvised columns, hopefully stuck deep enough into the ground. This wall made of large prewar bricks is bordered by three walls made of various handy materials, mostly construction lumber and tin plates. Roof is made of all sorts of things that remind of tiles, but definitely are not tiles.

A giant opens the door and I realize it’s him. He looks just like in the photo. The reporters probably got a shot made in the remand. He is gloomy, but he lets me in and accepts to participate in the survey without asking many questions. He just sits on an empty crate of beer and occasionally takes a glimpse of me while answering a question. Two boys in windproof jackets sit on the iron bed and listen to our dialogue.

“Thank you, just sign here.”

“I don’t know how to write, my son will sign for me. He’s smart, just like his mother.”

“No, no, you have to sign by your own hand. It doesn’t have to be a nice signature, just doodle something like doctors do. I must have your mark to justify the cash, and no one really cares what your signature looks like.”

“Give it to me,” he frowns, as expected, “the pen won’t write.”

“Ah, sorry, I forgot to take the foil off, it’s ok now.”

“Ok ... what kind of pen is this? It looks like out of space.”

Yeah Ekrem, this is a space pen, with a perfect finger grip.

“Well, they gave us these official pens, but they forgot it was freezing cold and that they could stick to the fingers. Where is your wife, I want to do the survey with her too?”

“She’s in heaven. She saw that I still don’t know how to write, and I promised a long time ago...”

“I’m sorry...”

“But, she’s watching the children write.”

I visited three more houses just to avoid him getting suspicious about the space pen and the survey. Nervous hounds saw me off with the same fury like when I was approaching. I soon merged into an infinite line of cars, leading towards the jammed bridge. Ekrem, good for you that I’m retired and I did all this just by habit.

* * * * *

I could give Branko a call. I promised to get in touch with him as soon as I arrive to Serbia, and it's already three months now. It's not so cold any more, maybe he'll be up for a walk.

We're walking along the river Sava promenade, planning to continue along the Danube as soon as the smaller water starts making love to the bigger one, running further to splash some other banks. Not much has changed visually, then again, one couldn't expect a young man to change so much in two years time. Our communication is the same as before, warm, without inhibitions and fine tuning of vocabulary. However, I feel what connects us the most, our joint life in Germany, is hanging in the air all the time. As if all the stories were already told, but the words are still flying in circles somewhere in the air, waiting for a landing signal. Does he still feel sinful to the people who have no clear moral boundaries? Does he really think that he left anyone in the lurch just because he didn't give a notice? If he explained them nicely that he was afraid, then he would be a sissy and a traitor, and this way he was only a traitor - but in his head, because it turned out that those three had no brains at all. I hope that admitting my mistake will loosen up his feeling of being a fellow sinner.

"I owe you a story about what happened after you left."

"No, you don't owe me a thing."

"When I tell you all about it, you'll understand that I do. First of all, those three got caught."

Suddenly a strong, cold wind started blowing by the Danube which made him frown.

"How? I hope you weren't caught?"

"As you see I wasn't, 'cause if I got caught it wouldn't be so easy to get out. Well, they wanted so much, started doing so much, but had no knowledge at all. After you left, it was logical to find the man who'd replace you. But, they used your departure as an excuse to keep the five hundred in our pockets. You know that I'm not an expert in electronics, so had no idea that something could go wrong, but I left them instinctively. Years of experience and my innate caution helped me decide to leave them."

"You taught them how to use a robot hand and weld the controller?"

"Of course."

"How the hell did they get caught then?"

"Your design of the intercom was great. You made every alarm have a special address, to exclude the possibility of setting off by mistake. They took one piece and cloned the software. They used the software to make the controllers. They didn't know that turning off one alarm would turn off the others within the signal range. So it happened that they accidentally tuned off the alarm in the neighborhood which sent a cell phone alert. Since the alarm wasn't reset in ten minutes, the owner got suspicious and called the cops. The house they were breaking in was down that same road, so the cops literally ran into them..."

The wind stopped the way it started, suddenly and without announcement. Thin wrinkles on his forehead lost their relief and turned into curves which melted with the natural lines of his face.

"How did you find out?"

"From the newspaper, of course. The press made fun of their stupidity for a whole week. I picked them without checking if they were dumbasses. That's

why I told you I owed you a story. In a way, I'm grateful to you for leaving so suddenly."

"C'mon Ljubisa, don't say that..."

"No need to attribute coincidence to some higher power, with the living people around."

"Then we should both thank our friend, the professor."

There's no use in pretending, he probably figured out that we had the professor in common, even back in those days.

"Why him?"

"I owe you a story, too...about the cue ball."

IIII

present

Saturday. My only day totally devoted to rest, but now I have to review their written assignments. The only comforting thought is that I'm going to treat myself with visit to the exhibition once I'm done with this menace. Jewelry, from the eighth to the eighteenth century. I can't wait to see medieval rings and earrings. I'm happy to hear that someone tried really hard to exhibit the jewelry, because there's a good chance that, by the time they build the Belgrade Museum, I'll be in my menopause. Jesus, why am I thinking about menopause, when I didn't even turn thirty? Oh, I'll have my fair share of the action by then, and after that they can launch a virus causing impotence; I won't give a damn about guys waiting in line for a vaccine. Yeah, but if I want to get my share of the action, I have to try harder, since guys obviously stopped hitting on.

New notebooks on the desk, red pen and eraser, all I need for now. Page after page, line after line, paragraph after paragraph... my senses craving for coffee. Topic of their own choice, however, no fantasy, no future or love. Silly me, how can kids write about butterflies when there are no flowers to be found anywhere? What? You wrote this on your own? I really don't want to be a witch throwing suspicion on everyone, that's why I didn't check the initials, but now I have to. Well, let's see what this eraser can do. Erase-erase-erase... nothing. Oh, boy, you nicely faked my initials and pen color, but you didn't know that I wrote my initials with a special pen which is paired with the eraser. All the trouble ordering them on eBay really paid off. You'll have to learn that all frauds and cheats get caught in the end. You couldn't have known that it's been two years since I broke up with that thief and, ever since, no one screws with me unless I let them. But I choose the screwdriver. I'm not afraid of the menopause, I'm afraid of my brain being worn out before it happens, because then the shiny jewelry in showcases won't mean a thing. So, heading to the Residence of Princess Ljubica right now!

* * * * *

Since I started dealing with the alarms independently, I use every opportunity to learn more about new technologies. I visit fairs and presentations on regular basis. Some things can look like from out of space on paper, but only a practical presentation can sell an alarm, not the photos with

beams. It's a lot easier for me to measure and evaluate other people's experience than to wait for the complaints in order to find out if something is worth installing or not. Ljubisa was my faithful companion on fairs, but since he completely retired, we find other excuses for having a couple of beers.

At the entrance, a young lady is smiling and welcoming me to a time machine. This time, role of the alarm is to protect some rusty jewelry. Showcases, just like some portable stands, show neatly displayed jewelry, with even more neatly arranged alarm sensors. Silence is so persistent that it becomes irritating. If only someone coughed - some worker, or this blonde standing by the next showcase. No, she definitely won't cough, 'cause it looks as if she forgot to breathe. I bend down from time to time just to check out how is the sensor band attached to the glass and then I see her face, with contemplating expression all the time. Her eyebrows often get closer, as if she disagrees, but that doesn't spoil the impression of contemplation. Each time she starts bending down; she puts her hands between her thighs, but moves them quickly and turns her hair over the shoulder. Then, she puts her hands together as if in a prayer. It's nice to look at contemplating women, but if I keep just looking, then I won't have the opportunity to look at her much longer. I saw the alarm and figured out there was nothing new for me to see. I start looking at the rings more careful in an attempt to start a conversation. Finally, I hear footsteps.

* * * * *

I came into the second hall, where my bronze colored eyes turn into silver. Thanks to human stupidity, all I know is that the rings are made of silver, and nothing else. I enjoy the beauty of medieval trinkets less and less. A ring, which used to be in a grave, is now just a number in a showcase. Doesn't it at least deserve a label saying where it was found? No one to ask, since there is only one more visitor, very much interested in rings, in the entire hall. Doesn't he mind looking at the ring without even knowing what century it is from? Maybe he is an expert in medieval jewelry. I hear footsteps, some gentleman walks in, says hello to the girl standing at the front door, and asks if there are any problems. Practicing the width of her grin, she answers that there are no problems. Of course there are. Elderly gentleman in smart clothes walks boldly, planning to go down to the lower level, which I visited already. I turn and our eyes suddenly meet.

"Excuse me, do you work here?"

"Yes, yes, I am the author of this exhibition. Feel free to ask."

"I can't ask you anything specific, since I don't have any information on the jewelry. These numbers mean nothing to me..."

"Ah, yes. The idea was to hand out small booklets with appropriate text about each exhibit. The printing office let us down, so the booklets weren't delivered on time. I have their promise that they will be delivered on Tuesday. Anyway, doesn't the exhibition deserve another visit?"

"Well, I have to tell you that I came all the way from Kragujevac just to see the exhibition. I paid my ticket and now..."

Our conversation was so interesting for the only museum visitor that he gave himself the liberty of joining.

"I am sorry for interfering, but I came all the way from Nis just to see the exhibition. I think that it wouldn't be fair of you to deny us information about such wonderful jewelry."

“I ... I deeply apologize, but I really do not have time to walk with you across the halls and give you information on each exhibit. I am sorry, come after Tuesday.”

I just opened my mouth to make a comment about his arrogance, when my fellow visitor started speaking.

“You are the only one we can blame, but on the other hand I can understand what it’s like to be let down. If you could print one copy for us on the printer, the problem would be solved.”

“What would happen if I printed a booklet for every visitor? No, no, I really cannot.”

“But, there are no visitors, we are obviously the only ones, and we need just one copy. I see that you have a computer with a printer at the entrance. Would you please try, for the sake of the miles we traveled?”

The guilty man accepts his mistake, nods unwillingly and forces himself to go to the desk. No desire to say anything to support the remorse. Now the stranger and I remain alone, trapped by the silence, waiting for the printer sound to break it. We made a silent pact; otherwise we’d reflexively start exchanging comments on the situation. I move my hand as if I want to introduce myself, but the next second my other hand makes the same movement and both of them end up crossed on my chest. My movement exposed my intention and initiated his hand to move too. We crossed words with names, looks with smiles and two palms in a shake. Now we are no longer complete strangers. Grayish gentleman approaches and gives us the papers. I somehow squeezed “thank you” between my teeth, and took the papers without a smile. I called Tanja to keep me company, and I got this stranger. Anyway, I don’t find him repulsive, and it’s quite obvious that he was very useful. Still speechless, we’re heading to the ground floor where the numbers start. But, why did he start this tour from the end? Well, nothing strange. It’s not marked where to start from, and I also saw the silver jewelry by the door, so I intuitively headed down and started from the bronze. Maybe he’s only interested in massive male jewelry and seal rings. I’ll find out soon. When we came down to the ground floor, he finally spoke:

“I suggest that we split, with one half of the papers each, and later we can switch. You take the first half, and I’ll take the second.”

“Yes... but, aren’t you going to follow from the beginning?”

“I’ll rather take it from the middle. It’s not a problem to get the whole picture in my mind after I’ve seen it all. The problem starts when I don’t know what I’ve seen.”

While I’m counting the pages, I nod and give him a smile. I’ve counted eight pages and separated the last four. He smiled back and headed to the middle of the ground floor. The guy is resourceful and considerate. It would really be inappropriate to walk side by side, taking peeks into the papers. Of course, if every dimwit came into the museum, it wouldn’t be just the two of us in the entire building.

* * * * *

I came to the imaginary middle and matched the number by the exhibit with the number on the paper. It would be really lame if she saw through my disinterest in jewelry. Anyway, these earrings are not so bad, considering that they are about thousand years old. I bend from time to time, and gaze through the showcase from another angle just to take a look at her. So far our eyes haven’t met, but there’s still time, two hundred exhibits guaranteed that.

Unfortunately, her devotion to the jewelry makes the guarantee weaker and weaker. Each time I look at her reflection in the showcase glass, she seems like sitting in a train that's waiting on a traffic light in front of Kragujevac.

* * * * *

He came back from the ground floor. I finished my tour about ten minutes ago, so I was prepared to exchange our paper trophies. There was a trace of pleasure on his face. He wouldn't have behaved like that if he hadn't cared about the exhibits. He approaches me with a hint of smile, and I make some stupid expression, with enormously long "here you go" with a special accent supposed to stress out the extensibility on "o". I had no idea what he thought at that moment because he did not react visibly, but sometimes I make a silly face just to show someone I appreciate what they've done. I'm doing my best to make a closer contact, but holding a chalk in my hand just in case I need to draw the line at any point. So I start the conversation:

"Pay attention to the ring number thirty eight."

"Why?"

"It's the only one with petals and it's radiant in a way."

"Ok, I'll take a look. And you check out those earrings from Vinca site, especially the ones with clusters."

"Oh, yes I noticed those, but I didn't know their origin. Now I know, thanks to you."

"It's ok ... anyway; we could exchange impressions a little later."

"It's a deal, I'll be waiting upstairs."

He nodded in approval and I somehow suddenly turned to a showcase. I didn't even glance at him, but I have the feeling that he was a little bit caught off-guard in the hall surrounded by showcases. I accepted the so called exchange of impressions without hesitation, but what's the point of hesitation when I'd really like to get to know him better? I know that beneath one layer of impressions there is another layer, but we didn't meet in a cafe, where such indicated attributes are expected to make an impression. It's obvious that the two of us already exchanged impressions; all we have left is to round them up.

Giggling of a couple at the entrance made me look away from the showcase. I move away from it as well, since I lost my concentration, and eighteenth century jewelry is no news for me.

I believe that the air in front of the residence is no different from the one inside, but I took a deep breath when I stepped out.

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I am heading quickly toward the entrance. Each step is heavier than the previous one, despite being closer to finding out if she is waiting for me. The feeling that she's just outside the door is spoiled by a blinking light bulb in my head, shedding the light on her face in some train compartment for a second. The light bulb starts blinking faster and faster. I open the door, and blinking turns into yellowish brightness of the nearby lanterns. The bleached locks of her blond hair take on the color of evening primrose. Not saying a single word, we walk down the stairs and look down the wide path. We are walking on the massive flooring plates which are supposed to emphasize the power of this building while entering or help our senses keep the feeling of superiority this building has always embodied, while exiting. I don't feel superior on exit,

because this is a lady's residence after all. I somehow manage to start the conversation, but not about the exhibits as I announced.

"When are you going back to Kragujevac?"

She gives me a cold look and starts giggling.

"I am from Belgrade, I just lied a little bit to make it more effective, but Nis is even farther so it had an even bigger effect."

"Then, why didn't you say that you were from Nis or Leskovac?"

"I thought I'd get busted because of my accent, but the man obviously paid no attention whatsoever, since he didn't figure out that you are not from Nis."

"I didn't think about it, just wanted to make it more effective."

"I figured out that you were bluffing, pretending to be from Nis, but you can't bluff your interest in jewelry."

Of course Miss Smarty, anything you say.

"It's not just jewelry; I'm attracted to antique in general, so I visit exhibits quite often."

"That's nice."

"We could have a cup of tea, just to get warm."

"I'd like that too. Let's go down the road."

We're walking to Zelenjak, a very dirty part of the city. Reflection of filth is visible even at this moment, since the wind started swirling a pinkish plastic bag in the air. We smiled at the sight of the bag which spontaneously initiated the talk about our city dirt. We started with garbage bags being thrown out of windows and ended up on the sidewalk of Pop Lukina Street talking about the chewing gums on the pavement which stick to your shoes in the summer.

"Branko, thanks for a nice warming walk. I'll wait for a bus to Novi Beograd."

What a cheap trick. As if we are kids. She rides a bike and I ask for a quick ride round the block. She raises the front bike wheel and says: "here, have a round." Then, I should be even more banal.

"It was a pleasure. Can I have your phone number? I'd like to exchange impressions from the exhibition."

"Oh, yes, yes, type it..."

* * * * *

I walked into the bus donated to Belgrade by the Japanese. These are the only buses in town where you can relax, even if you're standing. You feel no bumps, nor hear the usual deafening noise which wins over the loudest volume of my mp3 player. The shining window shows my reflection clearly. I find myself staring at my own figure, but with a comforting thought that my stare reaches farther. I hardly ever close my eyes on the bus, but now I want to. Colors flash in front of my eyes, I lift my eyelids from time to time and see myself. I blink less and less, sinking into the world of bracelets, earrings, diadems, rings and necklaces. Earrings with a strawberry motif, petal ring, and bracelet with a blade of grass ornament. I lost weight, so the ring might be a little bit bigger, but the one with five stones in a shape of cross will fit perfectly. No, no good, the berries on strawberry are too small for ring stones. I'll try the one with a star carved into it. Maybe I could change my earrings. Just ordinary ring earrings from interlaced string would go with that bracelet...

"Hey, girl, could you move, I can't get through."

"Sorry, I must have dozed off."

"Yeah, right, staring at yourself like you're on a catwalk."

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I rang to check if she arrived safely, but actually we both know that I called just to check if she gave me the right number. I could've done that on the traffic light, but probably this had more charm for the both of us. It turned out ok, she accepted the game by telling me that some dogs followed her, but she somehow got away. I thought that real hounds know how to smell a woman's needs, and the imaginary ones just have to let a man know that a woman has her needs, but I knew how to control my dirty thoughts. Why did I want to check if she'd given me the right number or not? Lack of sex, or I really liked her? I'd like her athletic body even if it weren't for the lack of sex. Her smart talk wasn't that much attractive, though. When I think about it twice, maybe she's not Miss Smarty all the time, but she just wanted to make a good impression. I also pretended - to be interested in jewelry, since it sounded better to be interested in jewelry than in alarms.

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I went out with him to some club. He called me on Wednesday, simply expressing desire to go out with me, and without too much theory I explained that I can go out only on weekends. I don't know why he was so sure that I'd like that club, or maybe he wasn't particularly interested in whether I'd like it or not. We didn't mention music, and the fact that you meet someone at the exhibition doesn't mean that he is not a fan of raft nightclubs. My cell phone didn't ring, so he couldn't figure out my music taste. He is just a guy making a suggestion and my not asking him about the choice of music in the club just reveals, only to me though, my desire to see him.

I couldn't hide my surprise when he told me that this club had been functioning for about ten years. It would be silly of me to play know-it-all and I planned having at least one drink with him, which necessarily meant exchanging words, since he wasn't the quiet type. We were in the distant part of the club where we couldn't see the musicians; however we could hear them muffled enough for the vocal and drums not to interrupt our talk, regardless of the fact that they played rock. The scent of black wine got me drunk even before I finished my glass. He drank a mug of beer, sipping it as if it was wine in the beginning, but later he saw the mug's bottom in just a few large gulps. Both of us babbled during the first round, but summing it up, I babbled more. The second rounds of conversation and drinks somehow came together. During the second round it was more giggling and less talking. I wasn't even aware of my stupidity when, without hesitation, I said that he could become a millionaire if he made an alarm which would act as a chastity belt, since we agreed that medieval gear was no longer fashionable, but male possessiveness remained the same. Luckily, he didn't start about women being possessive, since I would agree to who knows what. I was not so surprised by his agreement on possessiveness, as I was by his guts to put his fingers under my sweater just like a flea. He looked me straight in the eyes and in the middle of the conversation his fingers were under my sweater. He didn't touch my hand though. As our talk was losing intensity, he continued looking at me, as if penetrating, with not such penetrating brown eyes and touched the vein on my hand with the tip of his finger. The wine numbed my reflexes so much that I didn't notice his sneaking, but not so much to ignore his touches. Reason forgave the senses and I pretended not to notice all this, until he gently moved

his fingers to the open palm of my hand. He couldn't see or feel the trembling of my body, but he must have felt my fingers shaking, so I used the other steady hand and moved them in the direction of a glass with lipstick on it. It seemed to me that I sobered up, once I suddenly saw the lipstick on the glass. If I had the impression of immediate sobering up, it automatically means that I must have been drunk at some points. Complete ending of the game would definitely reveal my numbness, but continuing it would only put a stress on my sensuality. I'm trying to find a halfway between the two. I toasted him with a smile which can tickle a man, but isn't promising. The hand that was touching me a moment ago was now firmly squeezing the mug, and eyes which tried to hypnotize me suddenly lost their depth. The second round ended with me looking at the watch, midnight being very close – a turning point to a new day, but a turning point to public transportation as well. I refused a ride home, but I didn't refuse him walking me to the tram stop. Car headlights were cutting through the snowless February night while we were walking silently down the sidewalk that was surrounded by fresh waste, usual for the night partying. A couple of middle aged people were at the stop, waiting for the salvation tram lights to appear behind the hill and drive them to a place where they would probably be welcomed by a warm bed and comforting words. I would definitely be welcomed by a warm bed and night program on the radio rich in pleasant words and verses. The lights slowly begin to appear on the hill, the sound of rattling rails, Branko comes closer and I hear: "Olja, your face is magical" and I turn this magical face to the side, slightly turn away, bend my head and pray to the nameless God to open the tram door in front of me. My prayer was granted and after only three steps I disappeared into the night.

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Body rhythm inspired the lines on her face, and I watched her from far enough to avoid my vision getting blurred. She was balancing on my lap, just like a pan on the scales, and I was counterbalancing on the other pan. Her hand was wrapped in a bluish sheet. My hand was craving for touch and searched for hers, which was intoxicated by the rhythm and didn't feel my touches. My fingers thought that her fingers would be a perfect match, so we started the interlacing game. Something happened and the rhythm became numb. Silence was interrupted by a sudden draft which moved the curtain and shed the lantern lights on her face. Her face was magnificent and simply calling for awakening of the silenced rhythm.

I coveted her only once. It was fatal in my mind, and in reality it turned out to be devastating. I'd give anything to change the direction of my desires. I'd give anything, but I didn't give it a try. It was about time I did.

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There's no worse prison than having a subtenant status in Belgrade. As soon as I get my pay check, I throw away half of it on the rent immediately and use the other half for bare survival. If I didn't have to pay the rent I could afford the trip around half the world with just a year's savings. Maybe I'd get over this lost imaginary trip if it weren't for this inevitable moving. I'd be over the moon if I could live in one flat for at least a year.

Women's day is in two days, the city is euphoric, and I'm labeling my gift bags, wrapping them and waiting for Tanja to arrive. I already know my way around the trash bags, crisps boxes and the red marker. My nervous steps echo

in the room, since only walking up and down can help me concentrate on the list that I have on paper, and in my head. The phone starts ringing, maybe the carrier is early. I come closer, the phone is now within my reach. I mechanically put the phone closer to my eyes, which clearly see his name - Branko. Should I answer it? Why not, at least now I don't have to lie that I'm busy.

"Hi, Branko."

"Hi, Olja. I haven't heard from you in a long time, so... I just wanted to say hello ..."

"That's nice of you."

"How are you spending your Sunday morning?"

"Don't ask - I'm moving. I'm in total mess."

"Oh, I know how it is. I have also been a subtenant for a long time. When does the action start?"

"Well ... in about an hour. I'm waiting for the moving carrier to call me. I just want to survive through this day and throw myself into bed. How're you doing?"

"Give me your address."

"Oh, no ... no way ..."

"I have no intention of persuading you that I won't abuse your future address, I really want to be of assistance."

"C'mon, we're not kids. I just don't want to bother you. That's all ..."

"Great. I just want to help you, and that's all... give me your address."

Tanja was closer, so she opened the door, and from the back of the room I saw him skipping over the boxes skillfully. A guy who came with him was no less skilful in this discipline. He introduced him as the only worker in his humble company. I had nothing to offer them but crisps, so we ate them from the bag, just like kids do. Out of nowhere, we started talking about the possibility of having high speed internet in my new flat, and Tanja, a well known movie freak, used the opportunity to discuss the latest movies with them. I don't get the magic of watching a movie which someone recorded with a handheld camera in the cinema, but this time it felt good just to listen to any conversation without actually participating. I enjoyed his eloquence again, and at the same time checked out their outfits. Two men in front of me, dressed in sports clothes, one of them very trendy. White air sole sneakers, white tennis socks, blue T shirt under a yellow silk tracksuit, all expensive, tasteful average, and of course not worn by Branko. He's wearing linen sneakers (he probably cut off label by razor blade), dirty grey colored socks, linen blue pants with two white stripes along the seams and red T shirt with a modest pattern which is under a black zip shirt.

The carrier calls me, says he's half an hour drive from the flat so we speed up the process of taking the stuff outside. This time, neighbor living across, instead of playing the benevolent spy, plays the role of stuff guardian. It wasn't too hard for her, because there's always someone in front of the building ready for a chit chat. Tanja follows the stuff in the elevator; the guy is taking the stuff out with Tanja downstairs. I carry the stuff out of the flat with Branko and put everything by the elevator. Branko wanted to be on the ground floor with Tanja, but I told him in a commanding tone to stay in the flat. I acted like some kind of a witch, but I just wanted to be closer to him. I didn't know why. For a second, I just thought I felt good while he was around, but I later figured out that it was a matter of intuition, since we had a perfect understanding without a single word. When we loaded the elevator for the first time, we were alone in the flat. The

first thing I said was: “thanks”. He skillfully avoided giving me a confirmation for my gratitude by a sudden question:

“Where did you get that Sansui receiver? It’s older than us. It’s a rarity.”

“My late father bought it in his bachelor days, and I took it as a memory. It’s now six years since I’ve had it.”

“It means ...”

“Yes, six years since my father died.”

He made a compassionate face; he’s getting ready to say something. Whatever he says, it’ll be emotional. I interrupt his sigh, and probably his thoughts.

“It’s great that you reminded me, we will bring it down last. Can we put it in your trunk?”

“It’ll be wrapped in an old blanket, I won’t let it get scratched anywhere.”

“Thanks a lot.”

New flat in New Belgrade again, but this time much closer to the city. Maybe one day I move to the city itself. We took the stuff out of the van and started the same moving pattern as before. Branko and I get into the elevator, and his friend pushes the boxes in, between us. Tanja slammed the door and waved through the obscure glass. I press number seven, feel a sudden twitch and the light goes off. The boxes are separate our bodies and we share the dark and stale air. After the second floor I realize that the light turns on when the elevator goes through the floor and turns off while it’s in between floors. I see number four and his hands over the boxes... I use one moment of darkness to grab his warm hands, press his body close to mine, close my eyes and bend over the boxes. I feel the spectrum of colors over my eyelids, but I don’t feel his lips. Another moment of darkness starts. For a moment, I had the feeling that his hands wanted to hold me longer, but it didn’t happen. I put my hands back in their original position and wait for number seven to appear at the door. His revenge for the unrequited kiss and fondling was complete. I could have gone to bed with him right after the club, but I need something long lasting. Now I realize that he offered me exactly that, but at the time I didn’t understand it. I guess now we’re even, we can even be friends, since all my so called friends are always busy when I’m moving.

All the things are in the flat, most of them in the room which is quite logical since this is a one-room flat. I invite Tanja into the hall and tell her to be at their service, since I have to go out for fifteen minutes.

While the old van tried to squeeze between the parked cars, I saw a small store in the nearby building. The guys really helped me selflessly and I doubt if I could ever pay them back, so I have to treat them with something to bite at least. When my father wanted to thank someone, he used to give them a bottle of wine or a box of chocolates and tried to highlight that it was only a small token of his appreciation, and he hoped that life would make sure they were properly rewarded. Guided by the same intent, I approach the liquor shelf, take brandy and a coke and continue to the meat product department. An elderly woman is in front of me, so I can’t overhear her order:

“Two hundred grams of smoked pork, but cut it very thin and diagonally so that it looks like there’s more of it. I’m having some guests, so...”

“Madam, two hundred grams is two hundred grams, and it can’t be more.”

“Oh, young man, I know how much two hundred grams is, but if you cut it nicely and I spread it all over the plate, it’ll look very rich. The looks matter, I don’t care much about the rest.”

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The woman was more than serious, and the guy just wanted to make fun of her. Luckily - he wasn’t very successful. Maybe the ponytail was just a disguise for this hair loss. When the lady moved away from the refrigerator, I started harassing him into cutting some tea sausage and cheese and spreading them in two styrofoam plates. I took care of toothpicks and olives personally.

As soon as I got into the flat, I peeked secretly through the half opened room door and saw cups of coffee with hints of residue at the bottom. I arrived just on time. They were chatting, and I sneaked into the kitchen to spread the olives all over the plate and make an illusion of abundance of food, like the elderly woman said.

IIII

It wasn’t the first time that Serbia declared war against criminals, but it was the first time that it decided to do it thoroughly, in layers and publicly. The police, as the pillar of the action, hired well known experts in order to increase the efficiency. Everyone considered capable of contributing to solving this complex problem was summoned. This time the position and opposition united, and the police made a public oath that they would serve for the benefit of the nation once again. Experts showed loyalty to the nation, so they gave up their daily wages in support of the public soup kitchens. Top secret multidisciplinary analyses were performed for two months and the conclusion was that crime rate was in a big decline, but the public wasn’t informed about this fact in an adequate way. High percentage of illiterate and semiliterate population represented insurmountable obstacle for proper perception of crime indicators in Serbia. Work group came to the conclusion that the country would have a double benefit from educating the population. General literacy of the population would be increased and proper interpretation of crime indicators would be achieved. However, the experts were told they were charlatans and that such methods were not accepted, and the police announced major expanding of the white book in which even the pettiest of thieves would be recorded. However, it was only a trick, so that the true information wouldn’t reach the criminal circles. Reality was completely different. Police listened to the experts’ advice, and the criminals were kept on the leash by means of a well tested method – expansion of the white book.

If the name of Rodoljub Stojanovic would appear on top list of richest people in one of the women’s magazines, hubby hunters would pull all the silicone and salon strings to somehow meet the gentleman, while other people would wonder what the hell he stole to be a twelve million dollar worth. Of course, his name was a well kept secret, since finding out the amount of money that the state of Serbia invested in his education would cause nausea to most of the hubby hunters, and the others would start talking that there were who knows how many more of such Rodoljubs who spent people’s money without mercy. Hubby

hunters wouldn't agree that education is the best way to invest one's money, and others would never believe that there was only one Rodoljub. If we also take into account the fact that the people lost confidence in the statements of officials, then it's quite obvious that this man has to stay fictional or a hero of a cheap genre-free novel which is sold on the newsstands or can be found anywhere on the Internet for free.

For those few believers, Rodoljub really exists, but he is invisible unlike his deeds which are quite often visible, but are simply attributed to the police.

If it hadn't been for the democratic reforms, Rodoljub would still be an obedient Belgrade police inspector, constantly in touch with petty thieves and big bullies. He thought that luck was finally on his side when he was invited to an important talk, but he later understood that he owed everything to his spotless twelve year career. The new authorities wanted to have only the honest staff. Oh, he knew very well that it didn't apply for the entire police force, since in that case they would have to retire even those with ten years of service, which really wouldn't pay off. Plus, that would be a disgrace for their own staff. All of this was confirmed when, during the first working day on a new position, he was explained what the police intended to do with its personnel in the future period. Police took over a new model for long term employee selection, which implied constant cooperation with psychologists, which would eventually bring remorse for things already done in the past. Public repenting wasn't expected, but experienced psychologists would always know, even from a relaxed conversation, if someone truly repented. Experts know very well that everyone can make a mistake, but the one who makes a mistake and repents later is very likely an honest man who accidentally faulted once. The one who doesn't repent has no business in the police force. If a judge accepts the honest repent of the criminals, why wouldn't the police forgive its employees, who are not criminals? Since the experts knew that repenting is a long lasting process, the police leaders decided to educate Rodoljub in the most prestigious academies, so that he could constantly transfer knowledge to the personnel which were supposed to join simultaneously. For this reason, twelve years of his education cost twelve million dollars, and no - there are no more Rodoljubs - that's for sure.

Finally, all the conditions were met, as there was also the objective need to establish a special police department which would be in charge of appropriate presentation of police activities. Department had eight members, including Rodoljub, who was the Chief. Since everything in democratic society is as transparent as in a bookstore, without even checking if the book has a wraparound cover, this department was presented to the people as the department for improving relations with the citizens. That was done so that the citizens would be as close to the police as possible. It was planned as a two way communication with one direction to get closer, since the police got so close to the citizens in all these years that there was no need to get any closer. The department was public, but its actions were secret. The workers themselves guaranteed the secrecy with the only thing they had - their honesty. In another building, kind female personnel answered calls to a free phone line and noted all the suggestions. At the beginning, citizens thought this number served to forward their complaints about police work, but as the time went by, patient and kind female personnel made them get used to forwarding only suggestions, all of them being reported to Rodoljub.

Rodoljub knew his subordinates very well, since he taught each of them a specific skill for at least a year, but he was slightly afraid of team work which was something new to him. Besides, it's not the same thing to be a lecturer and to be the leader of such a serious project of national interest. He was writing the introductory lines all night, trying to emphasize what they were expected to do, as well as how to do it. Trained not to write anything down on a paper, he, as always, wrote everything in his head. He divided the speech into parts and marked each part with a different color - all in his head.

When he stepped into the hall, size of a smaller two room apartment, he smiled at his subordinate colleagues, but not as warm as he used to do to each of them individually. The colleagues understood his position and were completely aware of their own responsibilities, so they didn't want to spoil the moment. Without the usual morning coffee, which he as a lecturer used to drink with the colleagues, he started his speech.

Dear colleagues, the time has come to apply our knowledge in practice. I'm deeply convinced that we will not have the opportunity to apply all of it, but the parts that we apply will have to be flawless or with minimum mistakes possible. As you know, we are the best of the best and therefore the results are expected from us. Precondition for results is discipline; the rest will come out from the team work.

Red colored lines appeared in Rodoljub's mind signaling the beginning of the second part.

Our task is to somehow enable our citizens, even those in Diaspora - since they'll return to their homeland one day, to adequately comprehend police actions and efficiency. Moreover, we have the obligation to show the superiority of the police to criminals, thus constantly deterring them from potential criminal acts. These two goals will be inseparable and will overlap each other.

Orange colored lines appeared in Rodoljub's mind signaling the beginning of the third part.

If I already mentioned the word "somehow" it's my duty to explain how we should accomplish this. To make the long story short, I'll just say - through the media. We watched several times all of the episodes of CSI series and analyzed the procedures to the tiny bits, but we never discussed the reasons of making such series. If you think that the Americans made them to help us train our personnel, you are so very wrong. Namely, such series were made to prevent the future violators from even thinking of committing a crime. The average American spends a lot of time in front of the TV and availability of television signal to everyone is not an issue any more. Each damn new village is first provided with television transmitter and then with a healthcare station. Since the TV series are very convincing, and availability is implied, it's logical that an average American somewhere in Iowa believes that the closest bigger city has the exact same CSI team. Just one thought is enough; the hundreds and hundreds of watched episodes do the rest. Anyway, let's go back to Serbia. For such a small and poor country it's unacceptable to film such series, but skillfully arranged short forms with the similar concept are acceptable, and hopefully will be effective. If each arrest is cleverly combined with directing elements, it could become an episode of domestic CSI, only in shorter form... Starting from today, all police material recorded during the arrests will go through our hands first, and after it's properly processed it will be sent to the media. There will be no more wasted arrest scenes.

He made a short stop, and then the yellow lines appeared in front of his eyes which meant the beginning of the fourth part. Rodoljub was trained in electronic engineering, so he simply applied the well known resistor color code to everyday life.

I would like to end this short speech with the story about the media. Up till now the media were used to violating the Criminal Proceedings law by publishing the names of the suspects, which sometimes interrupted the investigation and the suspects quite often experienced immense consequences. However, the times have changed... the law has to be obeyed. Any changes create repulsion and this is normal, for both regular people and the press. If the current journalists are not in the mood for cooperation, find the new ones, better educated, more sober-minded, the ones who will understand the significance and the need for a new approach to old issues. Use all your connections and acquaintances to find such journalists. Thank you for your attention, I hope that... pardon me, I almost forgot to mention one thing. Such journalists have to be prepared to publish flash news which are not supported by facts or are untraceable. That would be all. Do you have any questions?

The speech was concise and it seemed that everyone understood it. After a quarter minute, the youngest member of the department, Borivoje, wanted to ask something.

“Could you just clarify the idea of flash news a bit? I’m a little confused with the part that such news would not be supported by facts.”

“Ah, yes. As always, the best thing would be to give you a practical example. The news could sound like this ... Special forensic department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs started close cooperation with the fellow department in Bulgaria for the purpose of exchanging the knowledge and further regional cooperation. Of course, this didn’t happen, but no one would investigate such news or try to dig up a story beneath it. If someone starts to dig, they will get an answer that this is strictly confidential. Such flash news would improve the reputation of the department amongst the citizens, and wouldn’t have any negative consequences. Any further questions?”

Borivoje hesitates for a while, but in the end he dares to ask another question.

“I’d like to comment on such flash news. With such wording, it turns out that the news is a lie.”

“It’s only an impression, since a lie is not a lie if it has no negative consequences. More questions? ... No.”

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Global economic crisis has changed lives of many. Some became depressive and added spiritual crisis to the economic one, thus reducing the chance of getting well when the crisis is over. There’s a group of people who, having faith in the old saying “easy come easy go”, are calmly waiting for the crisis to pass. A certain minority however, used the crisis for personal development, in order to be prepared for economic recovery and make up for everything that the crisis took away from them.

Just before the crisis, Ranka Milosavljevic was a wandering reporter, who would jump in with interviews and reports wherever needed. When the crisis knocked upon the door of television network she worked for, the executive knocked on the door of the wandering reporters’ office and with obvious sadness in his eyes announced the decision on dismissal. He was fond of all

his wandering reporters and they all had quality, but one of them had to go. Only Ranka didn't have a college degree, and it prevailed in his choice. He didn't have the courage to leave Ranka on the street, so he found a compromise solution and found her a job on the street. He fired one brat who reported on market barometer and public transportation, and put Ranka in her place. Degradation of this kind would be hard for anyone, but the weight of the crises somehow softened the fall.

She found herself in the same place as ten years ago. Everything was the same but the phone numbers and faces on the market place. She breathed in deeply and, just like the economic crisis, erased all the years of rushing and trying to prove some point with one stroke, and when she breathed out, she was ready for the new beginning. She firmly decided to spend the next two years rushing and trying to prove herself, but this time to the professors. Her parents expected her to continue her education and made her really happy when they presented their savings which were quite enough to cover the scholarship for the remaining two years of her studies. She half-assed her job, with elements of shirking, and completely devoted herself to her studies. After two and a half years of diligent work she was awarded a diploma of graduated journalist and finally got the feeling that instead of a piece of paper she was holding a mighty stick, ready to defend her from bare handed aggressors. However, Ranka didn't understand that this was not a police baton, which served only for defense, but a completely different stick made for attack. The crisis ended, but she was still in the gutter. This time she had the weight of the diploma as well and couldn't stand the burden for much longer.

Diploma built her self esteem, and years of being a journalist increased her acuteness. She decided to try herself in research journalism. She kept her eyes and ears open to find out about some injustice or extraordinary story. Luck finally smiled at her on St. Tryphon's day when she was at the feast and heard a bitter confession of a peasant living near the river Drina. He wasn't complaining about the Drina, which stole a meter of his fields every year, because the river is whimsy. Anyway, he was complaining about the state which didn't let him get over with the field and start dealing with gravel, which was a God's gift nowadays, just like fertile land. The story wouldn't be strange at all if he didn't mention that just a few miles downstream a private company takes the gravel from the river and loads it on the sandbank, with all necessary permits and without any problems. The gravel that the Drina is piling under the fields ends up on the bank, where some other people take advantage of it. The same moment, Ranka's heart was filled with righteousness and she instantly saw the headline: gravel mafia. Just like the gravel sellers, she started digging, but not the shallow reef but a little deeper, hoping to find the promising sludge. Since all the roads and waterways lead to Belgrade, Ranka moved from rummaging in a small village by the Drina to the Capital, where she was supposed to continue digging for sludge. Sludge was covered by tree branches, and uncovering it would definitely draw someone's attention.

Borivoje got the assignment to make contact with Ranka and check if she was ready for the future cooperation. He had a wide spectrum of well tested tricks for making contact, but they were all colored in naivety, and this case demanded high level of seriousness. Meeting by accident, followed by a flirt, then a sudden confession in an ordinary cafe that he was one of the people whom the newspapers quote as "a source close to the police". He chose the

direct approach and even prepared a short instruction: "Ranka, if you want to know who the real owners of gravel factories are, come tomorrow morning at 'Petao Setao' cafe at 10 a.m.". Ranka was so confused that she couldn't say a word. The wall was behind her table; still she turned around in panic as if she wanted to make sure that there was no one behind her, listening to this phone call. Before she breathed in, intending to ask his name, Borivoje said calmly: "you'll see me sitting by the window, wearing yellow leather jacket, drinking coffee and watching passersby".

March 8th slipped into 9th and completely melted into 10th, when women forgot about another humiliation, organized by men annually, with their silent approval. That was Borivoje's opinion and he wasn't a type who would treat women differently on that day, secretly hoping that things in Serbia would forever be the same - that only on that date women and men were equal. He called Ranka on 9th on purpose, just to avoid meeting her during the euphoria.

The question was constantly bothering her - who was that stranger? The lines of a strange man would be on the surface of the glass each time she wanted to have some water. His face was always there - while she was washing her teeth, peeing, cooking or making herself a cup of coffee. She wasn't frightened, she just had chills. Then, suddenly, the alarm on the phone reminded her to go to the meeting.

When she left the television building, she walked to the first bus stop. She nervously waited for the bus but knew that it wouldn't arrive. Nervous waiting implies constant peeping out, walking around in all possible directions, and in her case - casual glancing at every living creature that her eye could catch. Someone else would be really pissed off when the bus wouldn't arrive for the whole fifteen minutes, but she just looked at her watch and continued walking along the winding streets of Dorcol,⁽⁵⁻³⁾ until she came into a supermarket. On the corner of a stand, which had a direct view of the street, she started picking from children's candy bars. Then she left the supermarket and continued steadily down the sidewalk, the edges of which were cut by car hoods of various colors. Collection of American action movies in which someone was always being followed ended at the moment when, thought the cafe window she saw a yellow jacket, partly covered by branches of a nearby tree whose image was created by the reflection of freshly cleaned glass. The strange man was watching her entering the cafe. All she could do was smile, because she finally figured out what he looked like. Two steps away from her, Borivoje stood up and offered his hand.

"Hello, Ranka, I am Borivoje. Please, have a seat."

"Nice to meet you."

They both saw the waiter, who was approaching slowly and they waited for him to serve her without saying a word. She ordered black coffee, looking straight in his eyes, waiting for him to begin his story. Upholstered, high bar stool made her feel safe. Suddenly, this strange man became just a stranger whom she should interview.

"You're probably wondering how I know what you need?"

"No, I'm actually wondering who you are."

"I am a police inspector in charge of communicating with the press. Now it's probably much clearer how I know what you need."

"Yes, yes... it's much clearer now, but I don't understand why you didn't say your name when you called me."

"I just wanted to see how much you care about the information."

"Aha ... now you see that I really care."

"Yes, and I'm glad it is so."

They made a short stop, waiting for the waiter to turn away and start his five meter swinging walk with an empty tray in his hand.

"You'll give me the names of gravel factory owners, but what do you want in return?"

He knew that there was nothing much to explain, but the thing wasn't so simple that he could clarify it in one single sentence. He pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket. It was folded into four. He put it on the table.

"This is yours. You don't owe me anything. These names and biographies are just an excuse for our meeting..."

"Wow, even the biographies are here. Criminal ones, I suppose."

"We all know what people want. Anyway, I'm offering you long term cooperation. We would provide you with the police material about current criminal acts, and your task would be to nicely present them to the people. We give you the material, and you, as a journalist, make a story."

She couldn't hide her excitement, but tried to cover it with an ironic question.

"Why are you fooling around with me?"

"I am not. Can't you see that I'm serious?"

"Well, that's part of your job... now, I'm fooling around a little... Borivoje, you forgot one important thing, I don't have my own TV show."

"I know. I'm offering you a chance to make your own show."

She startled suddenly, maybe this is only a scam which would be revealed later, so she started, clumsy though, checking how much truth there is to his story.

"Yes right here in the cafe. We can call it... call it... Rotation."

"That's an excellent name. It captures the spirit of the nation and the police."

She was trying to make funny comments, but he was so serious and used her comments for his own benefit, which was in words only, since they haven't come to any agreement yet.

"Alright then, when can I take a closer look at the material?"

"Right now would be fine. My office is five minutes away, by car, of course."

"Aha... ok, let me just finish my coffee."

She wanted to buy some time with the coffee excuse, just to pull herself together, since obviously she didn't have that feeling of interviewing a stranger any more. She felt like walking through the swamp full of quicksand, him being the only person who knows where the quicksand is, and offers her a gentleman's hand from time to time.

"I'll make you another cup in the office."

They both stood up at the same time, without saying a word. He put the folded piece of paper back into his pocket and walked towards the bar, while she started walking to the exit. His leading the game turned into insolence, but now she was stuck. She patiently watched him chit chatting with the bartender and thought he was a real cop, using each situation to recruit someone or get some new information. Maybe they knew each other or he just wanted to get to know him better. Who the hell knows, he's a cop after all. She was standing on the clean sidewalk, peacefully looking at the cars parked down the street, as if she wanted to show him that she would follow him to the next level of his little

game without question. She was trying to guess which car was his, watching his footsteps with the corner of her eye. He appeared at the door and apologized for the delay, so she didn't have enough time to figure out which car belonged to the inspector, because they were all average, except for a few cars of a former working class which melted under transition and which would disappear completely when their vehicles melt in a blast furnace one day. They made some ten steps and he stopped by a red Yugo, opened the door and showed her to come in. Ranka tried to hide the surprise in her eyes and laughter in her sometimes disobedient mouth. Before he started the car he pulled out a pocket mp3 player and plugged it to the radio with some cable. Peaceful Portuguese music covered the buzzing of the perfectly clean car, which started rolling somewhere towards the Danube. She enjoyed the music, and he enjoyed his success, as he presumed there were no more obstacles in his assignment. He drove to the settlement on the banks of the Danube and parked on the car park. They went out of the car. He could not see suspicion in Ranka's eyes, as he was locking the door, but he heard her upset voice.

"Show me your badge."

"You don't believe me?"

"There's no police here, only residential buildings and an old Yugo. I want to see your badge."

"Do you want me to pull it slowly with two fingers?"

"Any way you want, just show it to me."

Silence and mutual casting of furious glances didn't last long, since Borivoje elegantly unzipped his jacket, went around the car and calmly showed her what she wanted. A little bit angry at herself, she just took a glance at the badge and nodded her head, as a sign of trust. She wanted to reduce the tension she had just made.

"Sorry, I forgot that this was your car."

"It's not mine, it belongs to the police."

"C'mon, you drive - this?"

"Yeah, it was confiscated from some criminal."

"What, you don't confiscate jeeps?"

They are walking silently to the entrance. Even though Ranka feels him ignoring her, she continues tactlessly:

"Jeeps sometimes do get confiscated, but they are sold and the money is returned to the people."

"Exactly. Anyway, an inspector shouldn't look conspicuous."

She knew him for about an hour, but the changed tone of his voice clearly indicated that she went over the line. She reminded herself of self control. Two courteous door openings and one minute of silence in the elevator preceded entering a poorly furnished, but clean flat.

He made the promised cup of coffee, and she chose liqueur from a wide range of offered drinks. While he was making coffee, she discretely put two candy bars on the saucers.

He pulled out a CD from his briefcase and put it in the player without further explanations. Motion pictures started, and she was drinking her coffee in frequent small sips, trying to hide the saliva of excitement in her mouth. She watched the first short film and couldn't help commenting:

"You really did your best in recording and editing. Congrats."

"We're making progress, aren't we?"

“Obviously. Play another one. How many short movies do you have prepared?”

“About twenty or so. You’ll have enough material for one month of that Rotation of yours, and since new arrests are being recorded, we’ll constantly provide you with new films. All you have left is to fill in the show with comments and statistical data and... you are creative, you’ll figure out how to fill in. You can even make a special edition about that gravel mafia of yours; some other mafia will come up later on...”

“Now there’s just a small matter of convincing my editor and director...”

She said it in such a deep thinking way, as if she had an uncertain business in front of her. However, they both knew that the offered material would do all the convincing. She had in mind some more questions, which popped out in her head during the short ride, but which she, euphoric as she was, immediately forgot. When she smelled the liqueur glass and toasted to the Rotation, she could remember only the question related to this apartment, but since she promised herself not to tease him anymore, she continued chit chatting without thinking of business related questions.

Chat didn't last long, because the elegant movement of the female hand towards the purse gave the signal to the male brain that it's time to say goodbye. She has never had any experience with the cops, but at that instant she decided to take advice of the elders, who used to say that one should not become close with the cops easily.

She closed the car door in the street opposite the TV building and firmly headed to the pedestrian crossing. She saw people on the bus stop, leaning over and nervously looking into the distance or at their watches.

IIII I

Darkness suffocated daylight and allowed billboards to show the extravagance of the city. Mixed lights confuse my senses. I can't hear the fountain just ten steps away, but I see it as if it's only three steps from me. I'm captured by lights and nervous thumps on the sidewalk in front of the ticket service. My feet are waiting for my head to give them a sign to continue moving on. My head is waiting for the eye's signal. The eye is waiting for him. What if my feet uncontrollably start playing hopscotch? Then I would have to throw the chalk, which I didn't have. He appears. A hello without a handshake and we move on. We are talking about my getting used to the new flat. It feels good to see him; we can speak of alarms as far as I'm concerned. I don't know where we are going; all I know is that we are walking on the sidewalk, slowly cutting the illuminated shop windows. We stop in front of a gallery, where he, as a true gentleman, moves aside and gives me a hand signal to go in first. The sound of the sensor at the entrance didn't allow the upcoming chill to make a triumph over my body. But I finally felt it, that's important. String dolls on the stands and walls make curious people smile - it's enough to just look at them. It can be seen from afar: no vulgarity in them, just pure erotica. Without saying a single word, we come closer to the first string doll. Someone's already playing with it. It shows a girl tearing off some guy's shirt, and he is bending his head. It looks like a poster from a twenty year old magazine. We head to the other

doll. Two people facing each other, holding hands. Just looking at the doll was a signal for him to move it. His hand makes their hands move and their bodies get closer, just close enough for a kiss. We're just standing there, fascinated by this sight. I give him a little nudge. The kiss lasts for such a long time - I whisper. He raises his eyebrows in agreement. One string doll is trapped in a dimly lit corner. I can't foresee its movement. We come closer to the stand; the light from under the doll is coming through the wires and shining on our faces. I stare at the doll, and start moving it, waiting for something to happen. I feel his fingers in my hair... his look upon my face. What's just happened was unexpected - our first kiss, next to the string doll of a guy fondling a girl's hair.

This time, I had no objections to a kiss lasting too long.

* * * * *

The papers said that the string doll exhibition was full of sex, so I was a bit frightened of Olja's reaction. Fortunately for me, but unfortunately for the masses, erotica was completely identified with sex.

Her face, covered by the string doll's shadow, reminded me of the scenes of touches and failed kisses. Just when I thought I was about to start another scene doomed to failure, I figured out that I was actually the actor of the extended old scenes. My fingers stuck in her hair, my lips in an exploring campaign of hers. Confusion in my brain, a short breath, a moment of pure pleasure, our lips separating; they're letting the eyes develop the craving. I hear footsteps coming closer to us from behind; the corner of my eye catches the approaching silhouettes. I unravel my fingers from her hair, and knot them with her fingers.

We were moving the string dolls, following their transformation with our looks crossed. After moving them all, we parted out hands at the exit for just a moment.

The first sparks of spring aroused the flame of romance in both of us. Wishing to keep it burning, I suggested going for a drink. She smiles in approval and says that she feels like going to some place quiet. We're walking slowly, out hands swinging even slower. I have the feeling that our hands are just like one big skipping rope which could play with all the cars parked here. The sidewalk is very narrow, so the street seems even more cramped. Each step gets us closer to the street end and the lights get dimmer and dimmer. We come to a small crossroad.

"Let's go left."

"No, we'd better go right."

The skipping rope has two ends, held by two different people.

So we went straight and stopped after about thirty steps. Our looks agreed that there was no point in standing in front of the cafe. There was no loud music coming from it. Entering the cafe, I noticed an empty gallery. This time, I took the lead and climbed the narrow stairs first. We sat at the table surrounded by comfy seats.

We're sipping our coffee and talking about the string dolls we saw. It didn't take us long to continue where we left off. Our coffee probably tastes the same, but each time I taste her lips, coffee gets sweeter and sweeter. Each kiss makes us closer, each touch makes us braver. When my thighs touched hers, I thought our getting closer was at its end, but in one dexterous maneuver Olja suddenly moved her legs over mine and found herself in my lap. There is

something that people call practical intimacy. We no longer had to bend our heads, and we completely took advantage of the absence of other people's looks.

* * * * *

Seven days after moving the string dolls, he called me up for dinner. He planned to cook. A clever invitation to substitute the string dolls with our bodies. I wanted that to happen the other night, but I have to admit that three more days of kissing in parks and walking through the city, including everyday talks on the phone, created something more than lust. I wanted to wake up in his bed. I haven't woken up next to a man ever since that jerk was arrested.

I forgot to ask him what kind of fish he would be cooking. If I ask him right before I come, I'll be a curious witch. I'll buy rose wine, so if he's making an oily fish it'll be perfect. It won't be a miss even if he's making a whitefish. Well, what the heck, I'll buy both mild white and rose wine, because I don't want such a triviality to spoil my evening.

It didn't take me long to find the building since I worked in school in Dusanovac⁽⁶⁻⁴⁾ in my first year as a teacher. I haven't been in the neighborhood since then. Nothing changed, except some newsstands which were removed and a bunch of modern graffiti that were added. The wave of urban expressionism is splashing all parts of the city. There is not a single building without graffiti. I heard that graffiti artists have some kind of code which says that they can draw only on buildings which were older than ten years.

We start kissing right on the door, and the smell of fish mixes with the smell of brandy, which he's obviously been sipping for some time. He lets me in to the only room in the flat. I see two beds and I immediately figure out that one of them must be very comfortable. As soon as I sit down, he crouches in front of me and starts petting my thighs, offering me a kiss. I accept, but I get a little daring and ask for a drink. My restless eyes are trying to paint the entire room in invisible paint. Walls are in relief, painted in dirty white and chaotically sprinkled by gray. Instead of paintings, there are a lot of shelves with CDs and books. I'm crazy about books, but I'm not really interested in colorful covers as much as in the titles, which I can't see unless I get up. The closet is within my reach and its shelves are full of knick knacks, which I'm always interested in, but this time, all I can concentrate on is a floor shelf right across me. The moment I came in, I've been drawn to the shelf which is at the height of my breasts. The shelf and the speakers, which are of approximately the same height, make me feel like I'm witnessing a miracle. Still life becomes alive because of the deck with enormous scales, dancing in the rhythm of the music. My living miracle appears, carrying two glasses and overshadowing everything else.

"You play the music from the deck?"

"No, it's only a camouflage. I play the music from the player."

"How come, when the deck spins the tape and those scales are moving?"

"Deck is auto-reverse and it keeps spinning the same tape over and over again. I just connected the scales directly to the player."

"I can say that this is one hell of a camouflage."

We couldn't camouflage our desire for kisses which we exchanged in breaks between sipping the drinks. Actually, we would take a sip in between kisses. When we made a mixture of brandy and cognac on our lips, we went to the kitchen.

I am not surprised by his tidiness in the kitchen, since I have already witnessed it while visiting the bathroom. Candle tears are slowly coming down their longish cheeks, ending up on a brass stand. He slowly brings a pan with mackerels and slices of oranges between them. I'm used to eating fish with garlic. It's not a problem to ask, but I don't want to be the only one having a garlic breath. I have to do something.

"I know a recipe for an excellent dressing, it takes five minutes and I'm sure you'll like it."

"It's not a problem, I'll make it, just tell me how."

"Squeeze half a lemon and add some olive oil, parsley, salt and two garlic cloves."

"I don't have parsley."

"It's ok without parsley, I tried."

He didn't even blink, but started squeezing lemon immediately.

"Hey, open the pantry and pass me the olive oil. It's on the shelf to your right."

I'm opening the door of the room which has shelves from the floor to the ceiling. I think I can see the olive oil bottle, but still I turn on the light. Flash of a big bulb in a small room causes sparks in my head. I see a large number of decks, just like the one in the other room. I wait for the sparks to go away and erase the illusion that they've created - the deck from the room, multiplied in numerous copies. The sparks disappear, but the decks remain neatly arranged on floor to ceiling shelves. Black and silver decks are dominating, and there are two on the top in champagne color. I figure out that my eyes didn't fool me, but I just couldn't understand what this sight actually means. Maybe he would react the same way if he saw my shoes in the same place, neatly arranged in boxes. If he ever asks me why I have so much shoes that I have to keep them in the pantry, I'll ask him about the decks. After all, shoes and decks are not the same thing.

"You collect decks?"

"Yeah, yeah... you saw well."

It was totally confusing and unexpected. He felt my excitement. I take a glass of rose wine and make a toast to the decks, but in my mind only.

"Are you kidding?"

"I'm not kidding, I'm serious, but I only collect those with VU meters."

"I admit that they look mighty. When did you start collecting them?"

"Two years ago."

"And what made you collect them? Sorry, I... sound like some kind of inspector..."

"No big deal, I like talking about decks. My folks had a record player since ages ago and they were never interested in cassettes. When I was sixteen, my dad decided to buy a new player and I used my pocket money to buy a second hand deck so I could record music from the borrowed CDs to the tapes..."

"Yes, CDs were extremely expensive back in those days."

"Extremely, but they pushed out the records and became the only source of modern music."

"Let's not forget the radio."

"Of course, good old radio. That's how I discovered that a device from the mid '70s can sound almost the same as a device from mid '90s. I would play music quietly before I went to sleep. I still don't know whether it was the music or

large VU meters with discrete yellow backlight which made me fall asleep... I kind of remember that. Since I wanted to indulge myself a little more, I started reviving memories, so eventually it became my hobby.”

“I like your hobby. Are they all working?”

“Yeah, they are all working, but not all of them perfectly. Time takes its toll.”

It was so nice watching him talking and cutting garlic. Decks evidently inspired him, and he obviously knew all about chopping. Now I'm looking at him, through the candlelight, as he skilfully separates the bones from the fish and holds the stem of the glass with two fingers. No music in the kitchen, so we're enjoying the silence, chewing and occasional buzzing of the fridge.

We finished the meal, washed our hands, and he poured wine in clean glasses and invited me to the room. I ate like a well fed cat: slowly, picky and not too much. I don't know why a cat eats like that, but I ate because I didn't want my stomach to get swollen. We are toasting and he gets closer and cuddles my cheek with his hand. It's time for desert. I don't know when I'll be able to enjoy such a moment again. Desire for pleasure overcomes all the barriers of politeness. I'm touching his arm with my fingers, looking at him imploringly and sighing deeply.

“Branko, I'd like to ask you something ... I want you to bring as many decks, put them in front of the shelf and make a camouflage.”

“Oh, that...”

“And what did you have in mind?”

“Nothing, nothing... come and pick the decks.”

Now I get it. He probably thought it would be something related to sex. Maybe he was afraid he's not going to get it. Oh, men. Who knows what I would think about if a guy wanted to ask me for something?

“How many can I pick?”

“Four.”

“Oh, now I'm on a crossroad with ten possible roads ahead.”

I am looking at the decks, and he is looking at me.

“I don't have enough cables. I'll just go to the neighbor to borrow some. If he's home, there'll be enough cables for three more decks.”

He didn't wait for my reaction, but just turned around and disappeared in the hall. I went out of the pantry to get a better look at all the decks from distance and make numerous combinations with four and seven decks from the neatly arranged pile.

He came back. The smile, cables in hand and a slap on my ass made a slight cramp in my stomach.

“I want those two champagne colored, that wooden Sansui, the silver Kenwood and Kardon, hmm, the black Yamaha aaaand... the silver Technics.”

He took them from the shelf and piled them on the floor and I moved them into the room and arranged them as I liked it. He brought seven cassettes and cables. The idea was to put cassettes into each deck and press record and pause, connect the output of the first with the input of the second and so on until the seventh deck. He turned them on. As he pressed each switch, the lights on VU meters appeared. We revived thirty five year olds. I'm starting to put cassettes in and he's installing cables. His voice interrupted the sound of the clicking cassette deck doors and rustling of the cables.

“We're a hell of a team.”

“The best.”

Piano Concerto no.1 by Tchaikovsky started up the VU meters. He turned off the lights and pressed his body close to mine. All I wanted a moment ago is now in this room and all that's left for me to do now is to enjoy.

Ringed piano tones were silenced by our sighs, and the deck scales followed the rhythm of our bodies. Of course, I wouldn't have known that if I hadn't looked at them fixedly while his scale penetrated in me sweetly. Scales were floating all around me. I would see them as in a mist, clearly, in flashes, sometimes upside down, shady, through eyelashes or eyelids, pubic hairs, but they were always a part of me.

A good night kiss. Just like in dreams I'm running away from a stranger, between some buildings, familiar staircase and scribbles in the elevator. At last, safety; I unlock my apartment door.

All the scales went silent because of the missing "would you like to sleep over?" sentence. Only the scale on my receiver stayed on.

* * * * *

Our usual aimless walk through the city center turned into a walk with the aim of trying on all shoes that she laid her eyes on. She is very demanding. She doesn't stick around a model for long, but if her eye catches something likeable about a model, it's a good sign that new troubles are about to begin, since, besides aesthetics, a shoe has to meet a number of criteria. Eventually, it all ends with a sentence that it's such a nice model on the outside, but full of synthetics inside. Each fashion style needs a victim, but she admits to being a victim only in walking during the search for the fashion object. I don't even dare thinking about the mileage she walked to get all those shoes in her pantry. I thought that this search would never end and that I would witness her walking in front of the sloping mirror until late afternoon, but she proved the opposite when she suddenly walked into a bookstore in Knez Mihajlova street. That was the place where we could both enjoy.

We didn't buy anything, but at least we thumbed through the books and talked quietly. We go out of the bookstore and move to Kalemegdan to take a short break. As always, people are passing by each other. But this time a whole bunch of people was getting around those who are peacefully reading newspapers, scattered all over the street. Yes, it is Saturday, relaxing day, but I don't understand the enjoyment of reading the newspapers in the middle of the street. Maybe they all just stopped for a moment to read the important news.

"Hey, Olja, the government has resigned."

"C'mon ... what are you talking about?"

"Take a look around. Everyone is holding the papers and the headline says 'government resigns' "

"Oh, that. Don't worry; they'll be back in the saddle in a few minutes."

"If they had a player in reserve, they wouldn't publish this."

"This government won't fall, it can only slip. By the time we get to the next street, they'll recover."

We keep on walking, but fortunately, we very often meet couples where the wife is smiling and the husband has a worried look. As if commanded, they all put their papers down and continue walking. I'm stopping in confusion, trying to figure out what's happening.

"Branko, what did I tell you? Like nothing happened. It's only flash mob."

"It's fucking around..."

"Whatever it is, don't let anyone fuck around with you like that."

“No one fucks around with you?”
“Hardly...”

IIII II

On the northern slopes of Jelica Mountain, under the hilltop called Cucanj, there is a place where once was a forest which was cleared and turned into a grassland. Locals call that place Ranko's grave. A five minute walk from there, among over a century old oak trees, is grandma Stana's grassland which was created in the same way. Unlike Ranko, Stana is still alive, so the grassland carries her name, but when she dies it'll be called Stana's grave, since she's the only soul living in that area.

She lost her husband a long time ago in an accident. Occasionally, she gets some news about her two daughters, just to confirm that they're alive. That's only when someone from the village sees them in Belgrade and brings her their regards. Her only companions are sheep, grazing on the grassland all day long. She's accepted an old Serbian recipe: if you want to survive - eat a little, sleep fast and work all day long. Maybe all this would not be enough for survival if it weren't for her famous woolen socks. No smuggler has ever seen grandma Stana, since going all the way to the mountain would be a waste of time, but none could be cheated since grandma Stana used the softest wool all the way from Golija Mountain down south to Rudnik Mountain up north. Some natural scientist from Kraljevo once followed the trace of her socks and determined that her grassland was in a zone that science calls biogenic zone, but no one really cared about the nature of such a soft wool anymore. The socks were all that mattered.

While she was younger, Stana used to carry two baskets of cherries or some little pears on a shoulder pole all the way to Kraljevo, but as the years went by, she only visited the tavern next to the cooperative in the village of Lazac. She went to Kraljevo on Fridays, since Friday was market day, so she grew a habit of visiting the tavern on that day to hear the latest news. Years back, Stana used to play cards with her age mates in the tavern, but since her last mate stopped remembering the cards right, Stana lost a card partner. Youth today follows trends and either plays bingo or bets on sport matches. Very soon, Stana started following the modern trends herself, and found bingo and betting on sports very amusing.

Stana started sinking into betting, so she visited the tavern on one more day besides Friday, and started getting into regular debts in exchange for socks. The owner believed that Stana would knit the socks, but he was afraid that she would change the place of residence before she knitted her debt off. He couldn't do anything else but take that risk, just like Stana did while she was betting, and it was also in his interest to please the grandma because he made good money on her socks.

* * * * *

It's been almost two months since our first intimacy. It took us about a month to finally wake up together one morning. This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't told him one night that I would like to sleep over. He wasn't against my

proposal, but I felt some kind of unease in his eyes. He lost a part of his total freedom that night, and I stopped doubting the possibility of making our relationship more serious. All I had left to determine were the limits of that seriousness.

He didn't complain, but even over the phone, I could hear he stopped breathing for a moment when I said that I would like to go out with Tanja on Friday night. He started being kind of possessive, which could have its good sides, but only if distributed equally.

I don't have a clue when people start filling bars on Friday night, that's why I came in around eleven. The bar is packed, so I got it right. I'm trying to push my way through the crowd and find a good place to stand. Smoke and sweat are uniting female and male perfumes into a recognizable mixture of an unpleasant odor. Real perfumes become unrecognizable, because the owners of bad copies took a bath in them so the perfume wouldn't fade before the dawn. I feel the smell of ammonia and follow it, since I have the feeling that there must be an empty spot somewhere in that direction. A corner with a table without chairs is waiting for me. I'm moving a few bottles and putting my bag on the table. The waiter comes right away. He probably saw me going through the crowd. I order two small draft beers. I can hardly wait two beers to arrive, since I want to make an impression of waiting for someone. The last thing I want is for someone to hit on me tonight, so I have to drink one beer as soon as possible, and get the hell out of here, because otherwise people will think I'm a drunk who can be pressed against the wall after just one drink. I take out the cash and exchange two bills with the waiter for two beers. The waiter says thanks, turns around and leaves. I start drinking from one mug right away; put one between me and my purse, and the other one on the opposite side of the purse. I don't like a dark bar, but that's ok for tonight. Disharmony of music irritates the ear much more than its volume. If only I smoked, I would seem more relaxed. This way I'm only focused on drinking beer, but I guess tonight isn't my night. My mind is wondering away, but never too far, since I interrupt it by a sip of beer. The wondering came to an end as soon as I saw the bottom of the mug. C'mon Olja, unzip your bag and take out the hankies. Why hesitate - it's a pure routine. Don't think what will happen afterwards, just take them and wipe your nose slowly. Put the hankie into the pocket, get the pack close to the mug, then grab the mug by the foot and put them all together in your purse. Stop being petrified, it's just a moment and only you are aware of it. No, I can't do this, I detest stealing.

If I had put the mug in my purse, I wouldn't step out on the sidewalk so peacefully. In the morning, I'll figure out that this was a smart move.

It is noon and the bar door is wide open. Recognizable mixture of last night's smells slowly disappears into the air and tends to become unrecognizable. I see a bartender, obviously bored, since there is only one couple sitting in the garden. I hope he would like my company. I sit at the bar and order an espresso. He says nothing outside of the necessary communication. What now? Empty bar, great day, and I'm sitting at the bar, saying nothing. How many glasses of beer should I drink to get a free mug? That's not good, because he might be dumb and get this the wrong way. How much would it cost to break a glass? He'd have to be even smarter to dig this. Yeah... the sound of steam from the coffee machine made me stop thinking all this through.

“I’d like to ask you something... it’s a little bit strange, but I hope you’ll understand.”

“No one has ever asked me to hold their head while they are throwing up, but other than that, I’ve heard more-less everything. Say it...”

“I’d like to give my boyfriend a present... a beer mug, since he adores that beer... so, I don’t know how I could...”

“Heard it already. It’s not a problem; I’ll give you one as a present. We had three stolen last night anyway.”

“Wow, I don’t know how to thank you... I’d like to give you my book. “

“Are you a writer?”

“Yes, and this is my first novel. Here you go...”

I planned to make his favorite dish gibanica⁽⁷⁻⁵⁾ for Sunday breakfast. He often has burek⁽⁷⁻⁶⁾ for breakfast, but on weekends he drinks beer instead of yoghurt. If he was a construction worker I think he would drink beer every morning and have a beer belly. This way, his job is keeping such habits under control. I went into half the supermarkets there are in this city trying to find Topvar, his favorite beer. I would never know that if he hadn’t mention once that from time to time, he went to a Dorcol cafe just because of that beer. He said that there was a poster of a Slovakian girl wearing a shirt which was the same color as the beer, with tits boiling over the shirt just like the beer head from the mug. From the moment he took a sip of Topvar foam, he knew that this beer would be on the top of the list.

Gibanica cooled off a bit and was ready for serving. The yellowish - brown oval tray broke the monotony of a white table sheet without texture. I open the kitchen cabinet, take a longish wrapped present and put on the table in front of him. He looks at me, somewhat surprised, since until now I have given him only small presents, spontaneously, without wrapping them in colorful paper. He starts opening the present, just like a child does with chocolate it sees for the first time. The beer mug, which he has often seen, but never had the chance of holding while eating homemade gibanica, suddenly appears. He says nothing but his eyes follow me walking to the fridge and taking out a bottle of beer. While I’m pouring beer, he’s nodding as a sign of approval.

“You’re something else... I don’t know what else to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I saw it in your eyes when you opened it up.”

I pour myself a beer in a regular glass and we toast. He had the opportunity to compliment my gibanica couple of times before, but this time he did it with a gourmet-like sigh. I like looking at him eating with his fingers. I got the same feeling of attraction, just like when I first saw him eating fish. I think it’s about time to serve him one more thing with beer and gibanica.

“I was thinking about pairing my Sansui receiver with your Sansui deck.”

“Just tell me which of the two Sansuis you want and I’ll bring it tomorrow.”

“I want to bring my receiver to your place.”

“Wait, wait ...”

“Yes, I’d like to move in with you.”

“Just like that? Shouldn’t we get to know each other better?”

“I got to know you well enough to be sure that we could live together. It depends on you, but I don’t want to rush you.”

At first, he didn’t say anything. He just looked at me, then started nodding and put his greasy hand over mine and said:

“I have to think about it for a while...”

I don't have to think a lot to figure out that this is a case of weekend possessiveness, because us going out on Friday night together turned into a habit for him.

* * * * *

I used to think about a couple living together, but they were always fairy tale characters, not real life ones. Later, when I replaced those two with real characters, someone would always disappear and interrupt the thoughts, and the real characters would again become imaginary. When I started thinking why the real characters become imaginary, I figured out that I was thinking too slowly. If I have remained a slow thinker as to why the real characters become imaginary, Olja and I would never become real characters. I started thinking faster.

Vacation season is getting closer. People would like to go to vacation without worries and at the minimum possible cost. As a rule, these two functions should never intersect, but a strong desire always leads to an acceptable solution. The cheapest one is to leave your pet at home, because it can't adapt to an environment change easily, to be fed several times a day by the neighbor. Those who don't have such a pet or such a kind neighbor usually buy electric timers which turn on the lights and TV when programmed, thus creating an impression that someone is in the flat all the time. When I was a schoolboy I earned my pocket money by making car alarms for my neighbors. Those alarms were soundless, but had one LED diode and blinked just like the real ones. Not a single car was broken into or stolen, but to be honest, I'm not sure if the alarms or the cars' age were the reason. Nowadays, I cover my everyday company expenses the similar way. I made leaflets, presenting timers which I bought on the flea market, as a way to scare the potential thieves. Of course, leaflets show just some box, so the potential buyers couldn't figure out what this was all about and run to the flea market to buy it. When they come to my company, I give them the usual cheap story and a practical demonstration, and they forget that they could maybe get the same thing someplace else, only cheaper. These are the cheapest in the entire store and are a total hit. What's most important, they have effect; mostly on the psyche, and maybe even the petty thieves could get fooled by them.

A text message from Olja. She's going to Tanja's after work again? I can't believe it. Two days in a row she is going to Tanja's place and she texts me both times. Why didn't she tell me last night? We both have needs, often sudden needs, and we also have the right to fulfill them without being disturbed. I have nothing against her need to see Tanja all the time, but I have the right to have my doubts. Could Tanja be a friend acting as a cover? I could call at Tanja's house, but she could just say that Olja just got out, text her that I called and problem solved. I can't forget my ex girlfriend going out of the cafe where we were sitting and answering the phone. I didn't hear her voice, but I saw through the slightly curved glass that she was smiling. I was really glad to have a happy girlfriend by my side, but when I started wondering why she went out of the empty cafe, which she had never done before, it was already too late, since she was smiling to another guy live. I really care about Olja, and this is not jealousy talking, but the fear of wrong emotional investment. I have to check this out. I'll close the shop. I don't care if the inspection fines me.

I'm wearing a baseball cap, which is supposed to hide my face. I stand at the bakery counter, right across the schoolyard. I'm eating some sticks, carefully watching the schoolyard exit, hoping that Olja will use the street crossing, otherwise I'd have to use the newspapers, like spies do. I got them ready, but they would definitely be suspicious in the bakery. If she goes across or down the street, that's a good sign, since the bus stop to Karaburma is on the bakery's side, further down the street. But that's only a sign, since she could go past the bus stop and turn to the first cross street. The boring silent movies flash in my head; kids pushing each other and provoking even more suspense. I couldn't hear the school bell, but the kids exiting the school yard were a sure sign that the classes were over.

She goes out of the school building with a female colleague. Smile on her face while they're talking. She seems cheerful. She's never come from work cheerful. She always needed an hour to pull herself together. Complaining that she's fed up with the kids, but it seems now that she collects all the negative energy on the way home from school. Well, I guess today is a very special day for her. They stop at the gate and part. Olja goes up the street. I believe she'll be even happier when she gets to her destination.

It's not windy, but her hasty and fast walking cause air flows which make her hair, blow-dried yesterday, wavy. I keep the distance, taking her long blonde hair for orientation. She's headed to the Republic Square. So far, two guys looked back as she passed them by. Women don't turn around, but I know that some of them are giving her moderate looks with envy or sympathy. She didn't stay long at the Square, but continued to Kalemegdan. I don't have to keep the distance any longer, since Knez Mihajlova is crowded, as always. She is in such a rush that she doesn't even look at the shop windows. The longer I look at her the more my curiosity turns into anxiety. I want to see them meet and get the hell out of there as soon as possible, but she just keeps on walking, almost like she does it in spite of me. At the end of the street she turns to the Gathering Orthodox Church. Maybe she's religious, but only shows that in special moments. She goes past the church without hesitating. I guess this was not one of those moments. Her tireless walk continues, and I make a short stop about twenty feet from the church. She comes to the end of the street and she stops at the traffic light. I'm waiting as well, getting ready to speed up, not to lose her around the corner. She crosses the street and gets out of my sight. I can't wait for the green light at the crossing, so I jaywalk across the street to the corner of a building. I breathe slowly, and peep around the corner even slower. One eye sees behind the wall, but it doesn't see her. I stick my whole head out, since two eyes can see more than one. She's not there. I make a few steps behind the corner which obviously got no one to hide anymore. Across the street, Olja was walking away along the tiled path which ends in front of the enormous staircase of Residence of Princess Ljubica. I returned behind the corner, this time with both eyes and less anxiety following her swaying body, which became smaller and smaller and finally disappeared behind the massive doors.

I have to slow my thinking down if I don't want to turn the real character into an imaginary one again.

Sudden eclipse of the Sun, without announcement. It's so dark that even the facades lost their drab, because the street lights weren't turned on yet. The ever shiny cross at the church steeple lost its glow. I walk carefully along the

sidewalk to the pedestrian zone, hoping the shop owners will turn on window shop lights. No light in the pedestrian zone either, but no one seems to mind. The street is full of people, perceived as shadows, but they don't collide. Even the street pirate-CD sellers are here, waiting for the policemen to lighten their stands with flashlights, because, when in trouble, friends are always there for each other. There is no sense in making any more excuses, since I'm well aware that the only thing that's really eclipsed here is my mind. I have to find an adequate place for my eclipsed mind. If one would follow me, he'd probably be disappointed by the choice of place I'd take him to.

Despite the darkness I found the joint which is immune to the eclipse of the Sun, because it doesn't have any windows and the lights inside are always turned on. I haven't been here since I played pool with the professor. Nothing has changed since then, even the situation is exactly the same: the same bartender and not another living soul inside. He removes the cloth from the pool table, counts the chips in the bowl and leaves me alone. He doesn't ask who I'll be playing, since I'm probably not the first one to be playing against the invisible opponent. A penetrating hit of the cue ball to the others marked the beginning of the most righteous game. Branko against me, and the loser pays the beer. We are both trying really hard not to leave the cue ball in favorable position, but beer thirst always tricks one of us into making a mistake. I'm leaning over the table, just like Olja is now leaning over the showcase. Maybe we could be both leaning over the showcase. Did she figure out I'm not into jewelry so much as to see the exhibition twice, or she just wanted to go alone? What's the purpose of all these questions? What do you mean - what's the purpose? Couldn't she tell me nicely that she would like to see the exhibition again? Don't you get it? This is at least the third time she's at the exhibition? I haven't thought about that. Of course you haven't. Now, try to put yourself in her shoes, she wouldn't be indifferent if you'd think she went cuckoo. I guess so. Order a beer, I'm leading three to one. You took the opportunity, since I lost my concentration because of her. Yeah, she's your excuse again, stop looking for excuses, only insecure people do that, and you're not that type. You're wrong, why would she think I wouldn't understand, when she told me she got to know me well enough to insist on living together. You got that literally, it's so hard to get to know someone. She just needed was safety and support. You got it all wrong. No, I didn't, and you're not the one having all the cards in your hands. Now you're looking for an excuse. No, remember when you told her you were installing an alarm, but you actually went to Novi Sad to see the deck you knew you couldn't afford, as it was too expensive, but you just had to see it. Cut the crap! Oh, we're getting angry now... you lose again, pay another beer, it's four to one. You know that I'm losing because I'm thinking about her. When you understand that everyone has the right to have his own obsession, you'll be losing less often. Just this one more beer and I'm leaving the game, you're not fit for either conversation or a game. This time anger is on your side, but look out; you're becoming hotheaded and tactless.

* * * * *

A publisher called and said he wanted to speak to me in person. So far, I've been the only one calling, asking how things are going with the novel. The only response I got was a corny phrase "same old, same old". We've been lying to each other for more than two years. He's been lying that my five hundred copies from the first edition haven't been sold yet, and I've been lying by saying that I

understand the situation. We're both aware of lies and the game in which everyone is a winner - he earns on my intellectual property and I'm trying to jump on the springboard in order to earn later. I can understand myself - I'm putting up with all of this for a higher cause, but I can't figure out the state, which swallows the story of the sold copies easily. In the past, people were always wondering how come that all of us could see some phenomenon, except for the state. However, if we would start digging deeper, it wouldn't be surprising that the state was behind all this. Anyway, the eternal waves of optimism, like a high tide without ebb, flood our memories and let the curtain, moved by the state, remain dry. By inertia, I always start by refusing to understand such things, but then I put my feet back on the ground thinking - if something is transparent and illegal, then the state must be behind it. Why would my publisher be afraid of illegal book printing when the state encourages him to do it? They don't need better support than the officials who compete over opening the Book Fair, the greatest generator of grey economy in the world of literature. If I'd ask those kids, who saw me as a slave driver during the fair, what did candy apples sold outside the fair and books sold inside have in common, they'd all answer that both were sold without fiscal receipt. I could add that some people sold candy apples before they started selling books, and they wouldn't mind going back to apples if the book sales would fail. This is exactly the case with my publisher, but still - he's the boss.

"Olja dear, do sit down. What would you like to drink?"

"I wouldn't like anything, I'm in a hurry. I've told you I have classes."

"Ah, yes, yes ... I have some good news. The sales of your book went up, so I hope we'd soon be able to print the second edition."

"Really? I can't believe it ..."

"Ah, I told you it takes time to get things going... it really does, while certain group of people finish reading and start recommending the book. It's much easier after that."

"I'm really glad to hear that..."

"I was very glad myself when they called me. Now, I wanted to offer you a business deal. It's not typical, but I hope you'll like it..."

"I'm all ears."

"You know that this publishing house doesn't have an editor and that writers come with references..."

Why doesn't he say it, instead of asking my confirmation after each sentence? He's such a drag.

"I know, I know..."

"Well, now, there's an objective need for a temporary editor..."

"You mean part-time?"

"Something like that... I came up with an idea to make a collection of short stories that would be called "European Stories". It's very popular these days, so I'm sure it'll be a total winner. Two months ago I organized an open competition... and people started sending their stories. Anyway, I thought that you could be the editor of that collection..."

What a sleazebag. If I ask for a fee, he'll find someone else and the covers of my novel will never say "second edition", which would mean a lot to me.

"OK, but I can't do the proofreading and I wouldn't like to be signed as the editor."

“No, no, there’s no need for proofreading, I read some of the stories, they’re literate enough... and, I’ll sign as the editor. All I need is someone to choose quality stories, and I fully trust you.”

“If that’s so, then I’m in.”

* * * * *

She is in love with medieval jewelry. I want to help her with that love in some way, but I don’t know how. I’ve always considered myself as inexhaustible source of ideas, but now I’m no longer sure of that. I visited the museum to make sure they don’t sell replicas. The useful things I found out on that occasion were that the exhibition would be moved to Pancevo on July 1st and that they sell medieval jewelry replicas in the museum in Krusevac. The jewelry is still so close, and she’ll be crazy enough to go to Pancevo and look at it again. I was afraid of that word, crazy, but eventually I used it anyway. The worst of all is that I’m still not clear with myself if I want to make her happy because of her or because of myself. Let’s cut the crap, I’m just a regular guy and as such I’m a selfish creature. I’m in love with her and she’s in love with the jewelry. If I was a wizard and used some kind of spell to make jewelry, she would shine with happiness; and I would shine as well, since I would have a happy girlfriend by my side. Such a relationship wouldn’t be essentially new to us, since we practiced that, unconsciously though, in sex as well. I don’t like that pose so much, but if it makes her happy, it’ll return to me as a boomerang in the form of better sex. Actually, seeing her happy face is enough for me to feel richer, and I leave to her feelings as to what my happiness does to her. She didn’t actually pee in her pants when she gave me the mug and beer, but her voice gave her out, which was quite enough for me to figure out how does she feel when she makes me happy. I didn’t discover any magic powers and I still don’t know if I am a wizard, but I know what I am. I’ve never asked myself if a wizard can predict desires and fulfill them, or people do have to say them out loud. Would she be satisfied with the replicas?

I’m very lucky that she doesn’t drive a car, since it might happen that she remembers the last mileage, and then I would have to come up with the explanation as to how I drove three hundred kilometers in one day. I’d probably say that I had to install an alarm in Krusevac.

The road to the museum leads across the plateau where Lazar’s city used to be. It is still Lazar’s city, but only on postcards which no one sends any more. All that’s left of the city walls are remnants of the main city tower, height of a six store building, and favorite site of passersby, travelers as well as the locals. Huge white pebbles, almost jumping from the wall, show the earlier strength of the Morava River, which was at that time navigable almost all the way to Krusevac. In Lazar’s city itself, on the hill next to Lazarica church, old tombstones can be seen from the freshly mowed grass. Churches were sanctities for the Turks; they enjoyed demolishing or turning them into horse stables. The only good thing in this misery was that the Turks turned Lazarica into a horse stable without the need to demolish the city walls. Unlike the Turks, Serbs respect sanctities, so they built the surrounding houses and stables from the rocks taken out of the city walls.

Souvenirs are just where they are supposed to be, right at the museum entrance. Without a lot of conversation, I manage to signalize to the man at the entrance what I’m interested in. Everything I’m interested and not interested in is here. I focus on the jewelry. I don’t even want to look at the bracelets since

she didn't look at them much when we first met. I try to create some kind of visual mask and reject the big seal rings, since they aren't for her thin fingers, and in general they aren't convenient for female hand. I'm looking at the simple shapes and start wondering more and more what has Olja seen in this jewelry? How come that a woman who is wearing rings with various stones, engravings and tiny details, suddenly becomes obsessed with simple shapes? The more I look at the showcase, the more I have the impression of looking at emptiness. Bronze melts with the silver and makes a new bronze, only lighter in color. The rings lose their glow, gain on their age and tend to become identical with the original exhibits. Such faded bronze, carried by the silver smoke gets out of the showcase and continues the same way that all the visitors go. The smoke is gone, and the showcase remains empty. The smoke probably sneaked into the showcase with the original exhibits, and I looked with the eyes that Olja's been looking at the jewelry all the time. No, it's not an illusion, but a specific way of looking at jewelry. Time itself made engravings and tiny details, which are not visible on the replicas. Someone tried to use the ring molds to mould the time, but obviously failed. My mission in Krusevac ended and for the millionth time in my life I confirmed the knowledge that nothing was as it seemed at first, especially medieval bronze ring in a showcase of some museum.

* * * * *

I visited the museum in Pancevo twice. First time by daylight, I saw the exterior and the interior, the second time at night - but only the exterior. It's positioned in the center of the city and it's tucked in between two streets, one of which is a part of the city park. Museum is located in a very beautiful old building, meant to be entered from the city park through the enormous doors decorated by high pillars. There's another door, opposite of the main door, which leads to the yard. Unlike the entrance door which reminds me of a monastery, this door can be treated as regular house door. If I wanted to go through the side door, I'd have to come from the other street, jump over a small ramp which prevents the intruders from parking, and go between garages and museum main wing which stretched between the two streets. That would be the only logical way for the honest ones. On the other side of the garages, there's a yard which could be entered from the park and from the street. Next to the entrance on park side there's a bank, and since every bank has security cameras, this entrance path is not convenient. There are not any institutions near the entrance from the street, so for the less honest ones that is the only logical entrance to the yard. And, for those even less honest, there's a narrow passage between the last garage and the building leaning on the museum building. The passage is narrow and fenced by a small wall though, but taking into consideration that the museum side door is three steps from the other side of the wall, going around some dog shit and using muscles for jumping are a small sacrifice compared to what is behind the wall.

In normal circumstances, the museum smells of poverty, which is slightly jagged by a stone board with Roman inscription of unknown content, and the enormous clock, against which the tenants of the neighboring building probably wrote a petition, since its massive gong turns dreams into nightmares. Temporary arrival of the exhibition caused the museum to glow with jewelry, but didn't attract visitors, since it was obvious that people, who lived from today to day after tomorrow, so that they'd see tomorrow, didn't really feel like jewelry.

Tricking the stationary showcase alarm is not an easy task. It's usually reserved for the movies, written by directors with great imagination. However, in case of travelling exhibition alarm, you don't even need imagination. The only connection between this alarm and the outside world was a pair phone cable, over which it communicates with the centre that monitors all the alarms. If the alarm registers some illegal action, it calls the center, and I can only imagine what's happening after that. Someone from the other side makes an evening call to check if the lady clerk turned on the alarm when she left the building, thus leaving the exhibits to the mercy of darkness and quiet of the museum. Each showcase has a sensor which informs the base remotely if everything is ok. The worker who set up the alarm did everything by the book; he screwed the base to the wall. He used the base to cover the telephone plug, thus securing that no one could cut off the line. At first glance, it seems that the alarm is able to inform the center of any potential problem, but looking at the next room with showcases, one can also notice the same plug, which is of course positioned in the same place like the one on the other side of the wall, since these two rooms used to be offices. If the alarm was connected to mobile telephony, I'd really have to fantasize for a very long time. In this case, I'll save my imagination for more creative purposes.

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While I was in Germany, Ljubisa was like a father to me. What we had between us could be called love, which was by no means a one way feeling. Ljubisa has never mentioned children, but it could be hinted that he was deprived of that periodical torture or pleasure. I doubt that he would ever train his own son to steal, but since the stork brought him a temporary son in the form of developed personality, he had no choice. We don't see each other nowadays as often as in Germany, but our relationship hasn't changed. He knows about Olja, but Olja doesn't know about him, which is the consequence of our silent agreement, since we still haven't figured out how I should introduce him. If you're good friends with someone, you should have a proper story, because you don't become good friends with someone overnight.

I've never asked him what kind of job he would do if he'd been married, since we've never talked about marriage, but now I have the need to ask him this.

Kalemegdan has always been our meeting place. This time we sat on a bench by the River Sava, and as so many times before, admired the grebes, which we declared the most relaxed inhabitants of rivers Sava and Danube. The only thing we haven't found out was if they would still be so relaxed if the ice chained the rivers. Even though it's the beginning of summer, I'm not as relaxed as a grebe. I'm looking for a proper moment to interrupt the mutual enjoyment, since we would often observe grebes for half an hour without saying a single word. It's not a problem to ask for a piece of advice, but it's a problem to return to the part of our life together, which we both seemingly removed, like an appendix. As luck would have it, it didn't hurt, but we did it as a preventive measure. I might ask someone else, but that would boil down to some universal advice, since I wouldn't have the courage to present to anyone else what I had in mind. Since the universal pieces of advice are reserved for profound novels, read by those in search of morals or messages, all I have left is to talk to Ljubisa:

"If you had been married in Germany, would you have done all the things you did?"

He froze his look somewhere in the distance, and the grebes stopped diving as if he froze Sava with his look. I saw that for only a moment, with corner of my eye, and I couldn't turn my head towards him. He obviously didn't like the question, just like I don't like his look. He started speaking though, but he didn't answer. Instead, he asked me a question:

"What kind of question is that?"

"I need some advice, so I'm making a short introduction."

"Ah, I get it... tough one. I probably wouldn't."

"Why?"

"It's a long introduction..."

"It's a long question too."

"Aha ... Because I doubt that I could find a wife who would put up with a thief, and if she didn't know that I was a thief and found out later, the marriage would definitely fail. Children would despise their father, and that's probably a nasty feeling. And now, let me hear the question."

"Yes, I thought so too... I wanted to steal something from the museum..."

He rapidly turned towards me. I got the feeling that I froze as well.

"Branko, son, isn't that all in the past?"

I knew that he would use the term son, sooner or later.

"Listen to me first, and then judge," he nods his head as a sign that he is listening, so I keep talking, "I want to steal a ring from the museum and give it to Olja. Just one ring, nothing else. I can pull that out, but I'm afraid that she'll start to doubt, because if she starts, she'll leave me. On the other hand, I feel that the ring will really make her happy..."

"You need advice if you should take the risk or not."

"I knew that you'd understand."

"You really want to see her happy?"

"Very much..."

"I hope that you know that temporary happiness has nothing to do with permanent happiness."

"I want to see the moment she starts looking at the ring..."

"All right, all right... I get it. My advice is to take the risk, but I would like you to let me work out a plan."

"Oh, Ljubisa, you know how much I appreciate your knowledge..."

"Ok, ok, but you have to promise that you'll respect every single detail of my plan. In other words, you must not screw up anything."

"I promise."

We stopped talking instantly, since the grebes started playing their game of diving and emerging. It seems like a relaxed game to us, but they play the game of existence, as all other human beings do.

IIII III

Branko is still gone. He started closing business deals in restaurants, like most private entrepreneurs do. What would it be like if they brought their wives to the restaurant and they'd talk about perfumes and creams at the other table? Even though we wouldn't be able to hear what they're talking about, we'd definitely spoil their concentration. Isn't the point of negotiation that one side

makes the wrong decision so that the other side can gain? Yes, it is, but they would probably remain silent because of our presence and couldn't make a deal. Then, it's better this way. I'll read the European stories and let him do the negotiations.

The Griffon Vultures

When Djordje was in the third grade of elementary school he was walking down the Imperial road along the Uvac River, as many caravans did before the Turks came to Serbia. Walking wouldn't be a problem for him if what were left from the Imperial road weren't just a few stones or rocks chiseled to widen the old road. Going along the overgrown road was no different than paving a new path, so after several years of everyday walking he made his own Imperial road towards the school which was not as winding as the original one. He created short movies in his young head, where he would fly together with Griffon Vultures over the abyss, touching their wings. When he finished elementary school, his wish came true. However, every desire has its price.

Griffon Vulture has been bringing people together for centuries; either on the coat of arms of Nemanjic dynasty, or by making people look up to the sky and temporarily forget about quarrels and disagreements. No one would believe that a miracle happened and that the locals of a village by the Imperial road were in a quarrel over that bird for five years. Anyway, miracles don't happen so often, so once in a while they ought to be accepted as such.

The village began dying and the locals were so discontented with the state support that they decided to take the matter into their own hands. They renovated the school from the kingdom period at their own expense and thus reduced the troubles of sending children to schooling, and they were no longer afraid that children would stay in the city as soon as they finish school, which happened earlier. They got rid of their suffering, but when they realized that their children were suffering, since there was no road to school, they decided to deal with that problem as well. They addressed the local authorities and asked for help, but they sent them to one of the European non profitable organizations which were always ready to help. This time it was the organization which fought for preservation of rare bird species in Europe, Griffon Vulture being one of them. The organization proposed a model from which both the locals and the birds would benefit, and if the birds had benefit - the organization had benefit too. All they needed to do for the next five years was to sacrifice one calf every two weeks to the population of Griffon Vulture and the asphalt road would connect the whole village to the school. The only condition for the following five years was that the Griffon population got used to the feeding place, which would be at the top of the village. If they got used to it, that would be a justification for building an asphalt road through the entire village and the organization would buy off the calves for the need of feeding the Griffons later on. Everyone did the easy math and realized that one hundred and twenty calves cost one hundred times less than the asphalt road. No one had doubts that the Griffons would be well fed, but half of the villagers had doubts in funds intentions and proposed that they should cover the road themselves, at least in the width of the path, so the children wouldn't get

muddy on their way to school. The other half trusted the fund, so the village divided. There are a lot of villages with adjectives upper and lower in their names, and no one would be surprised if this village was divided in such a way, but in this case the village name got the attributes Serbian and European. Since miracles don't happen so often, once in a while they ought to be accepted as such.

Thanks to the European part of the village, the project was successful. Each year, the experts observed the birds multiplying at the expected pace. The last year of the project, fund's delegation arrived to the village with the intention of fulfilling the promised. Since Djordje was the best at foreign languages, he led the fund delegation to the feeding place. They arrived to the plateau from which they and the Griffins could see the entire village. This time, the Griffins didn't look at the village from the air. Chief of the delegation started talking to the boy:

"Why are they so quiet?"

"We have been feeding them for five years."

"Wonderful. Go chase them, let's see them fly."

The boy started running towards the Griffins but they didn't run. Their strange screams and neck movements showed the signs of tameness. Delegation chief started running to the Griffins but they just came closer to each other and gave some strange neck movement signals. Chief angrily stated that the wings of these noble birds atrophied, turning Griffins into turkeys. The entire delegation demonstratively went down the steep path which led out of the village.

Djordje closed his eyes, walking slowly toward the abyss, intending to fly high to the clouds. He was flying with his arms down, touching the wings of Griffin Vultures.

The locals stopped feeding Griffon Vultures and very soon the village lived in harmony. Bird lovers said that they saw new colonies of Griffons in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Albania.

This guy tells a story nicely. He's got lots of imagination and a great sense of humor. Hmmm, he repeated himself. He wrote in two consecutive sentences about birds' strange neck movement signals. However, it won't be a problem for him to see that, and if he keeps on writing, he could put me in the shade. Maybe he has a finished novel as well, and this is only a springboard for him. I'll put you to the side, just in case. Let's read on...

The Aliens

Some alien creatures, which people named Martians, even though they didn't know which planet they were coming from, easily enslaved the Earth. With rays of unknown structure, they burned down several abandoned objects in all the major Earth cities and showed, in a humane way, that they wanted a dialogue. Besides being humane, they proved themselves honest, so they sent a letter to all the world's states saying that their planet experienced climate changes and they could no longer grow cabbage, which was necessary for the survival of their species. Of course, they didn't want to mislead anyone that the raw cabbage would be transported to somewhere in space, so they emphasized that they actually needed a cultivated bacteria, which was a result of cabbage

pickling. When they made sure that the Earthlings wouldn't abuse their humanity, they simultaneously sent their delegates to all the countries of the world, so that the Earthlings couldn't make strategies in negotiations. One delegate announced his arrival to Serbia. He only demanded that the president should be alone at the Assembly at 10 PM, and he would present himself to the president adequately.

At 10 PM sharp, local time, alien knocked on the Assembly door. The president knew who was coming, since the government circles knew about his arrival, but not in the form of a human with headphones. While waiting for the creature, the president felt seven cold sweats, but when he saw it, he stopped sweating since all his life functions went down to a minimum. The alien addressed him in fluent Serbian:

"My respect, Mister President. Nice to see you."

"Me ... too," the president managed to stutter somehow.

"I'd like to ask you to go for a walk around the city, and we'll talk on the way."

"I think it would be ... better to talk in the Assembly."

"Why?"

"No one will interrupt our conversation."

"I don't mind, and I would really like to see Belgrade. Are you afraid to walk around the city?"

"No, no, not at all."

"You seem very frightened to me. I'll make an invisible shield, so you will be safe. Let's go."

They went for a walk. It didn't take long for president to go back to normal, since the alien started talking about sports. He admired Serbian sportsmen, which impressed the president. The alien stopped by a shop window.

"What a lovely shoes."

"Yes, yes, they are Italian."

They continued their walk in peace and harmony. The president relaxed, as if he had a president of a neighboring state by his side. They stopped at the newsstand.

"President, could you buy me a chewing gum; I am out of your money."

President just smiled and headed to the newsstand. He bought about a dozen of different chewing gums in order to please the alien. The president opened his hand and offered gums with great trepidation. He was afraid of the touch. The alien just took a look at the gums and added:

"Don't you have Bazooka Joe gums and those that look like cigarettes anymore?"

"That is long in the past, try the imported ones, they are excellent."

"No, thank you, I have already tried them."

The president was relieved, since if he asks for a sandwich next time, he could give it to him easily, without touching. They continued walking in peace and harmony. They stopped by a large bookstore window. The alien looked at the shop window for thirty seconds and kept on:

"President, let's cut to the chase."

"I agree..."

"All the cabbage we buy will be paid in gold, since we have gold in abundance on our planet. We are aware of your capacities in cabbage production, so..."

"We can increase our cabbage production tenfold."

“Don’t interrupt me while I am talking. I completed my mission here. I see that you produce nothing, even the European literature dominates in your bookstores. That’s why I decided to incorporate you to the European Union. A factory for sauerkraut processing will be established in Germany. You shall be informed later about the quantities you are to deliver...”

“But...”

“Be democratic and do not interrupt me. My task was just to decide on the center you should be incorporated in, and the centers and quantities have been predefined to facilitate the exploitation of resources. President, I shall leave you now. Have in mind that the shield doesn’t work anymore.”

No one saw the alien coming to Serbia and the president was in cold sweat, so he didn’t notice how the alien have disappeared.

History books of all the countries around the world noted the date of aliens’ arrival to Earth, and the Serbian history book finally noted the date of Serbia joining the European Union.

This one doesn’t have such a good narration, but he hits the bull’s eye. He is not dangerous, so he is ideal for this collection. Oh, my eyes are closing. No more stories for tonight, I could grade someone wrongly, and that wouldn’t be good.

* * * * *

When the lady director of Pancevo Museum typed the code of the alarm on the wall right by the entrance door, she made a deep sigh and thought how this was going to be just another ordinary day. She had the same feeling while she was climbing the stairs to her office on the first floor. While she was unlocking the door, she mechanically looked down the hall, partially cut by sun rays which clearly indicated the position of the windows. Somewhere in the middle of the hall, where the sunbathed purple carpet lost its royal marks, she caught sight of some small objects which her experienced curator’s eye couldn’t miss. Maybe she would blame the cleaning lady’s poor work for what she saw, if it weren’t for the silver ring on the sun rays’ way. She didn’t stay long by the rings which seemed randomly scattered, as she recognized them at a glance and headed to the room where they came from. When she appeared at the door, she put her hand over her mouth, because the sight was quite terrible. She immediately informed the police, in accordance with the rules.

The local police inspector conducted an investigation and since his estimate was that this theft was specific, he contacted the special department of the criminal police in Belgrade. The only one available was inspector Majstorovic, who immediately headed with his team to the place where the crime was committed. A local inspector and an engineer from the security company waited on the scene. Majstorovic introduced himself to the colleague first, then to the engineer, and started his tour around the museum. The colleague showed him the door where they suspected the thief entered the museum, but Majstorovic only signalized the technicians to start processing the place and went upstairs to the only possible exhibit place. A frightened face of the museum director was waiting for him in front of the office, thinking that Belgrade inspector would interrogate her, but it all ended in formal introduction. The three men were walking down the hallway in silence, and the scattered rings that were close to the door weren’t very interesting for the Belgrade inspector. He just peeked into the broken showcase room, took a cursory glance and continued down the hall. He took a short look into every room, until he saw the broken alarm case and

approached it with great caution as if it were a bomb. He started curiously looking at the alarm, the largest part of which was right next to the wall, while the other pieces were spread out over the parquet floor to the middle of the thirty square meters room. He looked at the crashed alarm case for several times while kneeling down, then he got up, cleaned the small alarm pieces from his trousers and said decisively:

“Why did you call me? Isn’t it obvious?”

“Inspector, nothing is obvious here,” colleague from Pancevo answered.

“The thief crashed the alarm, took what he wanted and ran away.”

“That’s exactly the problem, since this alarm is very hard to disable. Here, the engineer can explain you about the alarm in more details.”

The engineer waited patiently and, once more, got the opportunity to confirm his theory.

“You see, it only seems to you that this alarm stopped working just because it was smashed, but in practice it’s impossible to do that without the alarm sending information about the attack to the center... there are sensors beneath the case and on the first hit, the alarm would send a message. To simplify it, the alarm was disabled in some other way, and smashed afterwards.”

“Slow down... You mean that if a footballer would kick such an alarm with his boot, the alarm would make it to signalize it to you in the center?”

“If the first kick would destroy the electronics it certainly wouldn’t, but if the alarm survived the first hit, it would definitely signalize it to us, since it needs only four seconds to send a message to us in the center.”

“Let’s summarize. There are two scenarios. That the thief disabled the alarm with the first hit, or that he disabled it in some other way.”

“Exactly,” inspector from Pancevo added.

“Do you and mister engineer have any ideas how a thief could disable the alarm without kicking it?”

“The entire electronic which records changes was broken, so if the alarm had recorded any changes, and hadn’t sent it from some reason, I can’t register it now. But I seriously doubt that it was disabled by kicking,” the engineer said first.

“I don’t have a clue either, that’s why we called you, since we believe you to be more experienced.”

“Thank you for such respect. Does this alarm sound some siren in the museum?” he addressed the engineer.

“There’s only a beeper which informs the workers that something illegal is going on.”

“Yes, yes ... and, is it possible to intercept the message sending with a hit, and keep the beeper working properly?”

“It’s theoretically possible, but I don’t know if it could be done in practice.”

“Practice always beats theory. Mister engineer, thank you for your cooperation, I’ll contact you in case we need additional information. I’d like to ask you to let me know if you somehow manage to put the pieces together as to how the alarm was disabled, without entering the code or by kicking.”

Inspector tore a piece of paper from the small notebook and wrote down his name and cell phone number. The engineer could hardly wait for him to leave the museum, since he didn’t like the mockery with his expert knowledge, which the inspector did consciously. He took a piece of paper, said goodbye and headed down the hall, walking closely to the wall, trying to avoid stepping on

some of the rings. The two colleagues were all alone in the silence of the museum, since the two technicians were processing the lock downstairs, and the lady director and other workers were stuffed in her office, quietly commenting on the event. They started walking towards the scattered rings, and Majstorovic was the one who started the conversation:

“How many exhibits were stolen?”

“Only one ring.”

“One, but valuable.”

“On the contrary. It has no value whatsoever.”

“You think so?”

“The lady curator says so.”

“When the museum buys it, then it’s worthless, but when it’s smuggled to the West, it’s suddenly valuable.”

“Hm, who would know...”

“I know. Everything related to Orthodoxy is very valuable in the West.”

“Yes, yes... you know what confuses me the most?”

“The scattered rings?”

“Yes, but I’m even more confused with the fact that the alarm is in one room, and the showcase which the thief broke is in the next room. He seems like a sloppy professional, and there’s no such thing as sloppy professional.”

“It seems to me like a work of some crude thief, ordered by a professional smuggler. What do you think, why are these rings all over the hallway?”

“I don’t know, totally confusing.”

“That’s right. It was thrown like that just to confuse us. To make us think that the alarm went off and he was in a hurry and dropped the rings. Hit the door frame and dropped them, whatever... The point is that only one ring was ordered, and the other rings are just a red herring. Anyway, we’ll see what the prints and other evidence have to say. If he didn’t wear gloves, he must have left a fingerprint somewhere on the tape he used on the glass. Our technicians will dig up something.”

“Let’s hope so. I think that the man who just arrived is the exhibit author. I asked the lady to give him a call.”

Majstorovic made flattering remark about his colleague’s diligence which was accepted with a toady smile. They went to the place where the hallway begins and the stairs end, as the lady director and exhibition author were standing there. The usual handshakes and introductions followed, as inevitable part of the job, but the part he loathed even after thirty years of service. He trained himself to act mechanically and polite for various formalities in communication with people, but he still wasn’t able to train himself for handshaking and introductions. He addressed the exhibition author:

“If you could tell us something more about the ring...”

“It’s a fifteenth century ring, made of cast silver. It has a stylized arabesque engraved in niello technique.”

“What is niello?”

“It’s a substance of a very strong black color. It was applied to the engravings in order to intensify the lines.”

“Alright. Do you have a photo or a drawing of it?”

“No, unfortunately I don’t. But there is a very similar ring which is exhibited and, as far as I know, has not been stolen.”

They all went together toward the rooms with the exhibits. The lady director turned around after two steps, because she remembered that she needed keys for showcases. However, when she appeared on the door, she realized that she had returned in vain. The author and the inspector were kneeling down by the scattered rings.

“Yes, yes ... I see. Could you explain the difference between this ring and the stolen one?”

“Trust me, no essential difference, except for the slightly different pattern. They’re both from the same period and locality. There is a possibility that the same craftsman made them.”

“Do you have any idea why the thief stole that ring, and not the one we’re looking at?”

“It’s not really up to me to be the judge of that, but the difference between the two rings is very small. The one on the floor is even in better condition than the stolen one.”

“Interesting... tell me just one more thing, is the ring male or female?”

“It’s a male ring. If I may say - the rings on the floor have a very strange glow.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t explain, I only know that they have never been so shiny before.”

“The Sun.”

“I’ve seen them in the Sun many times; I wouldn’t say that’s the reason.”

Majstorovic said goodbye and headed to the stairs, thinking he’s collected enough information. He was quite convinced that adding any unnecessary details would only interrupt the investigation. He approached the technicians in a large ground hall and started enquiring about the fingerprints. When they managed to convince him that everything was going in accordance with the plan, he ordered them to take prints from the duct tape on the showcase right away and compare them with the ones from the door. Walking toward the exit, he added that he would be drinking coffee in some nearby tavern.

He said in some tavern, because he didn’t know Pancevo well enough to say the name of a particular tavern he’d be in. All he knew was that he needed coffee, but not that much as just a drink. He also needed a reason to get away from the silence of the museum which didn’t allow him to think clearly. He was in a hurry with the investigation, because he knew that the ring would already be in someone else’s hands the next day. He didn’t exclude the possibility that the ring already is in someone else’s hands. When he left the museum, he looked around and saw the tables on the plateau on the right, which unambiguously indicated that he found what he was looking for. He went past the pizzeria with a front board menu written in chalk. He didn’t really care what they were offering, because right next to it, he saw a waitress in dark blue skirt, white shirt and black vest. She was holding a tray, leaning against the doorframe that lost its paint a long time ago, observing what’s happening outside the tavern.

The waitress kept an eye on his moves while he was hesitating, trying to pick a table. When he pulled a chair which was right next to the park, she started walking towards him with a specific, body-relaxing walk of a woman in her fifties. Carrying a tray in one hand, while the other one was stuck to a large wallet sticking out of the vest pocket, she approached and wished him a good day.

“Good day. Coffee, brandy and mineral water, please.”

“We don’t serve anything except coffee, which is free.”

“I’m sorry, I’m a little tired, I don’t quite understand you...”

“We’re on strike, so we serve only coffee... which we don’t charge. I can’t get you a brandy...nor a mineral water.”

“Aha, ok... then I’ll have a coffee and a glass of tap water. Why are you on strike?”

The waitress made a half turn and signaled to the lady at the bar to make a cup of coffee, and then calmly answered:

“Our enterprise has been bought by a businessman who wants to turn this tavern into a pharmacy and perfumery, and he offers us social program. So, we want to draw attention of our citizens to support us, since they’ll lose the only place where they can drink real coffee. From now on, all they’ll only be able to get that 2 in 1 or 3 in 1 instant slop.”

He couldn’t offer an encouraging answer, so he just kept on nodding his head, showing her that he understands the situation. He wanted to make a joke and ask if it was some controversial businessman who bought them, but he gave up since her job was at stake. The waitress moved away from the table with the same walk, and nestled in the doorframe, ready to get him his coffee or serve another customer, if some arrived in the meantime. A linden tree was hovering above him. The tree had just finished forming leaves and directed all its energy to the creation of blossoms, to justify its noble name because linden, along with the thick shade, are supposed to have fragrant flowers from which the exhausted bees would fall on the tavern table occasionally, sharing their bee world with us humans for a moment. If the bee accidentally fell into a drink, some would be disgusted, while others would be reminded of its sacrifice for a teaspoon of honey.

He got his coffee, said thanks and started solving the silver enigma with niello engravings. He was irritated by stupidity, this time mostly by the fact that the alarm covered only the front door, and not the back door. When he realized that the alarm’s only role was to give the jitters to the first employee entering the museum, because it wasn’t easy to enter the right code so early in the morning or hear the unpleasant sound of the siren, he felt such a nausea that he just had to laugh. Camera could be analyzed only as an exhibit in the modern art display. He never really cared about previous actions of the damaged party, because those weren’t crimes. What he cared about were the previous actions of the thief, with the tendency to predict the future ones. This particular thief seemed like a crude one, manipulated by someone who knew exactly what he wanted. The thief himself didn’t bother him, because he’d definitely leave some trace behind. The one who ordered this bothered him. Hiring someone to pull this off must have cost a lot in some form, which meant that the value of the ring was much higher than the thief’s cut. Or the ring was very important to the one who hired him, but he didn’t want to risk. Sending someone else had its own risk - the thief might have been caught and turn in the one who hired him, but it was a lesser risk than being caught personally. However, the risk is minimal if the thief is a hard nut. He concluded that the possibility of the thief being a hard nut to crack was very high, and decided to leave the search for motive of stealing that particular ring for later, because the technician called him to say that there was a match between the prints on the lock and the ones on the duct tape from the glass.

* * * * *

When Majstorovic saw the name Ekrem Ljatifi's on the screen, he just touched his dry lips and picked up the handset. He had a sudden urge to moisten his lips, but there was no time, as he already called for action. All that was left to do was to obtain a warrant from the investigative judge for searching the flat, which was just a formality, because no judge has ever objected to his request. It was Majstorovic's estimate that Ekrem wasn't a dangerous man, so he was accompanied only by two inspectors. The arrest was supposed to be made quietly to avoid the cardboard box settlement buzzing about some people's arrival. He sent there a woman inspector, who pretended to be a social worker, while the two of them waited outside the settlement. However, she just managed to locate Ekrem's house, not the man himself. The neighbors told her that he was collecting secondary raw materials and that he usually comes home in the afternoon. No one had suspected anything, since the woman inspector was very persuasive. She even asked about his children by their names. All they had left to do was make a partisan like ambush on the worn road, without a trace of stone, which led to the settlement. That's what they did.

As they knew that they'd be waiting for quite a while, they decided to do something for themselves, to make them look more natural and less striking. The inspector was pretending to be an urban shepherdess without sheep, so she sat by the bulwark with a weekend love story novel in her hands, and Majstorovic and his colleague were standing by the road, acting like taxi drivers without taxi signs and placed a large chessboard on the car hood.

Ekrem appeared at the turn which led to the settlement in late afternoon hours, riding his three-wheeler which consisted of the rear of a bike attached to a two-wheel shopping cart. As always, he was diligent, but today he was out of luck, so the cart was half-empty. He got off the bike and started pushing it to avoid hitting holes on the road and breaking the vehicle in half under the weight of his body and the cardboard. Inspectors followed him for a few steps, and the moment Ekrem turned around to see who was following him, Majstorovic spoke:

"Good day."

"Good day to you too."

"Are you Ekrem Ljatifi?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

Majstorovic pulled out his badge, looked Ekrem in the eyes, just to realize that the man wasn't much excited at all. The same second it flashed through his mind that he would never find the ring in his house.

"I am inspector Majstorovic. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"I did my time; I got nothing to talk about with you."

"Alright, all right... c'mon, just listen to me, will you?"

"Alright..."

"Where were you last night after nine o'clock?"

"In my house. Why do you ask?"

"Who can confirm that?"

"My children. What the hell do you want?"

"Easy, easy... is it possible that you were in the museum in Pancevo by any chance?"

Ekrem pulled out a cardboard from the pile, put it on the edge of the cart and sat on it peacefully and in even more peaceful tone of voice, he said:

"I've never been in a museum."

"Ekrem, if I saw you on TV I'd believe you, but don't fool around with me."

"I've never been to Pancevo. Say, what the hell you want?"

"I want the ring you stole and the name of the one who ordered you to steal it. Nothing more."

Ekrem leaned his elbows against his thighs, carelessly nestled his head and started his story in a confessing tone:

"There's an old man here in the neighborhood, a very smart man. He gave me good advice, but I didn't listen. He said, Ekrem, my brother, you are a marked man now. Whenever someone breaks a lock within thirty kilometers, they'll catch you. He told me to move somewhere far away, but I didn't listen... I got what I've deserved... arrest me now... here, grab my hands and tie me..."

The inspectors were shocked by the sudden transformation of calm, confession-like into a neurotic tone. His face started sweating; he clenched his fists and started licking the thick lips. One could expect Ekrem to snap and become violent, so Majstorovic came closer to him and crouched so that Ekrem was about a head taller. Inspector could hear his crunching breath, as if the rage itself spoke from his mouth. Ragged collar on his shirt couldn't hide the wavy pulse on his neck.

"Slow down Ekrem, we don't want to tie you down or arrest you."

"What do you want then?"

"Just take it easy, I'll explain. Someone broke into the museum last night and stole a ring. We found your fingerprints on the lock and showcase. I give you my word in the presence of these people that you won't spend a single day in jail if you just give us the ring and say who hired you to steal it."

"It wasn't me, I swear on my wife's grave and on the lives of my children... it wasn't me..."

For just a moment, Majstorovic was stunned by this listing of the alive and the dead, but it didn't take him long to remember numerous oaths and calculated lies of proven thieves, so he started acting mechanically:

"If you don't want to cooperate, then we'll go and search your house."

"Do whatever you want."

"Where are your children?"

"What do you care about my children? Want to arrest them too?"

"No, Ekrem, I won't arrest them... I won't even ask them where you were last night. I want you to put them away while we search your apartment. Don't make them the victims of your own foolishness."

"They're somewhere around here, in the settlement... no, no...let them watch police arrest me. Let them remember the police well... c'mon, take me away, what're you waiting for?"

Once again Ekrem was in a phase of complete peace, with arms stretched in front. Majstorovic took his colleagues aside, far enough from Ekrem, so that he couldn't hear his unusual proposal, which his two colleagues accepted just because of his authority.

"Ekrem, you go home now and explain the children that you'll be gone for a while. We'll be waiting here."

"Is that so..."

"That's right... make sure that they're safe and explain them nicely that you have some business to take care of."

“No need for that. My boys can do well without me. I taught them everything, especially if they hear that I was hit by a car or killed by those bald headed guys. Neighbors love them, I’m not worried,” he moved his bike from the road and raised his voice: “Take me away, what are you waiting for?”

Majstorovic fulfilled his wish, without using the handcuffs. He knew that Ekrem would just stare through the car window and the colleague would be sitting next to him in the back. He never humiliated his suspects by unnecessary handcuffing.

They went across the Danube, but his eyes still didn’t react to the trees and nearby objects. He was still looking at some invisible landscapes. Soon, there wouldn’t be time for relaxed conversation, so Majstorovic decided to try once again. He called him by his name, but Ekrem was still looking through the cars and buildings. He tried again:

“Ekrem, man, listen to me carefully. Once we get into this building, things will change. My deal is no longer valid. If you’re afraid of a revenge for being a snitch, tell me, my man, I’m not made of stone, we won’t rush anything.”

“I didn’t steal a thing and I fear no one.”

“Alright Ekrem ... do you have a lawyer?”

“No.”

“This is the last thing I’m about to say to you. They’ll give you a lawyer who will do a half-assed job, because he knows that you can’t afford hiring him for the trial. You’ll be in police custody for two days, after which the investigative judge will put you in custody for a month without even blinking. If there’s no progress with the investigation, that month can easily turn into two months. Did you change your mind?”

“Take me!”

IIII IIII

I spent the day in anticipation of his departure, because I’ve planned to give Olja her present in the evening. I bought a small chest and covered its inside with soft purple cloth and I put the ring in it, of course. I wanted to deceive her senses somehow, so that she wouldn’t immediately recognize what kind of ring it is, so I resorted to a little trick. Ever since we were kids, we had the image of flashing light coming out of the treasure chest and making the one who opens it very happy. To make such an effect, I tore down a key ring pendant which served as a lamp, put the LED diode underneath the cloth, and micro switch on the inner side of the lid. It was all connected by a watch battery which also quietly laid under the cloth. I tried it out a couple of times, just to see if it functioned, before I locked it with a small padlock, because I didn’t want a badly placed micro switch to ruin my plan.

It wasn’t the first time that I surprised her with spaghetti for dinner. I like watching her modestly dipping her spoon into the sauce, not letting it fill it, and then skillfully rolling up the spaghetti with a fork, using spoon as a support.

People usually leave the last crust of bread or some food in their plate after a meal, but she liked to finish it with a salad. This time she bit off a meaty piece of an olive and put the pit on the saucer. I was getting ready to cut the silence, but she beaten me:

“We’re getting closer to Europe.”

“For the past ten years the highest peak of the Alps has been growing by one centimeter each year, which riddles the scientists.”

“Listen to you... can you stop making jokes every time I mention Europe?”

“Hardly ... Ok, so how are we closer?”

“I’ll tell you, but I doubt you’ll make jokes this time. Starting next month we’re getting three times faster Internet for the same money.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously, I read it in the papers.”

“Come on, Olja... Serbs got high on downloading high resolution movies and the state calculated: is it cheaper to enable three times faster Internet or to keep an entire block of thermal power plant working all night just for movie downloading? You come back from work, and while you have lunch and take a nap the movie is on your hard disk, instead of leaving your PC on all night to have a movie downloaded and ready by tomorrow. Think about it, come on...”

“Oh my God, you really are restless...”

As always, she just pretended to have a problem with such stories about Europe, but I knew that in general, she approved of my view. She doesn’t believe in European promises too much, but she belongs to the category of people who hope, which also involved some kind of faith to support that hope. It didn’t take her long to change the expression on her face and gently put her palm on top of my hand. I turned my hand and used my fingers to fondle her palm. She did the same and I guess we were both led by the same impulses. I got up and raised our joined hands, inviting her to the room. She made a quiet comment, something about the dishes on the table, but I ignored it, not saying a word. The city lights were breaking through the thin curtain, and I used a forward half box waltz step to turn her around, just to position her face opposite the light source. I asked her to close her eyes, and when I was sure that she did, I opened the laundry drawer, took a wooden box wrapped in gift paper and put it in her hand. She smiled before she opened her eyes, and then pulled one end of the ribbon. I couldn’t see anything in her eyes since they melted in with the ambience, but I was watching her long fingers playing with the golden wire; I used it to hang a small key for padlock on the lock. She was just like a magician; in three moves the key was released from restraint and entrapped again, by her fingers, ready to reveal something of a greater value. There is no lock in this world that cannot be opened by force, so the key is usually worth only as much as we care about the act of elegant release of the treasure.

A small chest took a form of a cheerfully opened mouth which emitted star light of a freshly born star from its depth, illuminating silver of undetermined purity. I took the chest and put it on the bed, while her ring finger was making love to the precious metal, tending to blend with her white skin.

We both felt the precious metal. I felt it on my face and she felt it on her finger, until the metal became hot from the heat of our bodies, illuminated by the lamps from the old cassette decks.

* * * * *

Police gave just a brief press release about the museum theft, as publishing the names and details could endanger the investigation that Majstorovic was conducting. He was deeply convinced that the phrase “for investigation purposes” might make the one who ordered the job panic and make the wrong

step in that dizziness. All he had left to do was to wait for the reactions which might lead to some new clues.

* * * * *

It was in Ranka's job description to read police statements twice a day and filter traffic accidents from other news which, under circumstances, were convenient for her. She noted everything neatly and then asked Borivoje, her police source, for additional information. She met Borivoje once a week in his office where she looked at the offered material on the spot, sometimes in the form of planted, and got further instructions as to limitations of her reporting, in order to avoid jeopardizing the investigation.

She was very interested in the museum theft report, and it even made her happy in a way, because until now all she was showing to the public were armed robberies and larcenies, to which the people became indurate. Or at least, she had such an impression. She wanted to pursue a specific story from its beginning to the end. She didn't have the habit of calling Borivoje before the arranged meetings, but this time she had to.

"Hello Borivoje, Ranka speaking."

"I'm in a hurry."

"It'll just take a minute."

"Go ahead."

"I need additional info on the museum robbery."

"I can't give you anything other than the information in the statement."

"Come on, Borivoje, just an introduction. I want to have exclusive info for the next show."

"I mustn't, you might endanger the investigation."

"Alright. Will anything change till Wednesday evening? It's not a problem for me to make it a headline right before the show."

"No way."

"Borivoje, you keep promising me exclusive information all the time, and I'm a week behind the other media. Stop screwing around with me, man."

"Sorry, those are the boss's orders."

"C'mon Borivoje, the ratings of my show are dropping and if I don't get exclusive news, I'll get sacked."

"You'll get them, I promise. See you as usual..."

Cell phone has many advantages over the landline with the biggest one being able to avoid hearing that stupid sound of the headset being slammed, since the cell phone line is disconnected automatically. Borivoje was acting as cool as sunstone more and more often, which began to irritate Ranka.

She was angry with herself for turning a show rife with investigative journalism its beginning into a police report show that it is now.

She contacted the author of the exhibition, but he refused to comment. Scared lady director of the museum in Pancevo only shared information that the stolen item was a medieval male ring. Ranka was enthusiastic enough to call the author again, pointing out that she knew everything about the stolen exhibit, and asked him to state the value of the ring. However, he decisively repeated that he didn't want to make any statements. The author didn't know that journalists have special methods to get their statements. Words of journalists in certain daily newspapers became so cheap, that they weren't even worth an apology, if they eventually turned out to be nonsense. The magical phrase "from an anonymous source" became so common that one day people

would come to think that they're reading newspapers which were as anonymous as their owners. Ranka had a close female colleague in such a newspaper.

* * * * *

When it comes to choosing gifts, I think that Branko's had a fancy removal surgery on the gift-picking center in the brain, so the stitches didn't show. But, this gift has completely changed my perspective. I have no idea where he's bought such a perfect copy, but the size is just right, as if he's measured my rings. Just when I started to think that he cooled off a bit, he reminded me of our first date and definitely proved that I was still in his mind. He confessed that he still remembered our first date and my thoughtful expression while I was staring at the ring showcase. He didn't even have to tell me that, because that was the only time he saw me staring at the showcase and the ring told me everything.

Oh how I hate this break! A decent cafe is so far away that I'd need a whole break to get there and come back, drinking my coffee walking on the way back. When I came into the teachers' room I saw all the jerks and a newspaper, which was probably circulating among them all morning. All men, only football and politics. I'll just smile at them, take the newspaper and sit far enough not to hear them. Where is the cleaning lady to make me a cup of coffee? I hope she'll come later; she's a nice lady, good to talk to. I know that there is nothing special in this paper and that I'll only get my hands dirty, but I have no choice.

RING STOLEN FROM THE MUSEUM. What's this? Page nine...

On the night between Monday and Tuesday a medieval ring which was a part of jewelry collection of the City of Belgrade Museum was stolen. Namely, the City of Belgrade Museum borrowed its collection to the museum in Pancevo, but unfortunately only a few days after the exhibition opening, the ring was borrowed by the thieves. Perpetrators used poorly protected rear exit of the museum which was not covered by security cameras to commit the robbery. The police are intensively searching for the perpetrators, but during the course of the investigation police will not reveal any of the names which could be connected to the suspects. While the police are searching for the perpetrators intensively, our field reporters are searching for answers. Why did they steal only one ring and what kind of ring is that? These questions were answered by a passionate collector and expert in medieval jewelry, who wanted to remain anonymous, for obvious reasons. Our source said that the illegal jewelry market blossomed and that he wasn't surprised that they aimed at just one particular ring. Namely, the collector circles had been speculating for a long time that the Belgrade City Museum owned a ring which was connected to Serbian Zupan⁽⁹⁻⁷⁾ Nikola Altomanovic, who ruled the western parts of Serbia in the second half of fourteenth century. That was the reason of ring's high value on the black market, our source emphasized. For the time being, we cannot give the answer referring the alarm system which secured the ring, since the representatives of the company in charge of museum's surveillance refused to give any statements.

I mechanically look away from the newspaper photo to yesterday's gift. The photo is blurred, leaded, completely unlike the shining lead on my finger.

Invisible lice start from my head and continue crawling all over my body, like conquering army. The ring finger immediately starts itching. I take it off and put it in the small bag pocket. A red strip, just like a burn, replaces the ring and encircles my finger. My hands get paler and my jaw starts to freeze. I walk out from the stuffy room without a word, trying to catch a breath of fresh air while I still have the strength. Hallway draft feels so refreshing, but only for a moment. I walk out of the building, take a lungful of air and head to the nearby tree. I close my eyes in the colorful shade of pine, breathe deeply and try to think about something nice. Suddenly, Branko's face appears in relief just like a rose flower. My lips would like to move and touch his, my hands would like to hug him. But I clench my teeth and my fists. You damn male creature, it's your fault that I feel this way.

While I was standing under the pine tree, I wondered how I was going to survive the next two classes, but the kids occupied me with their silliness and made me forget my own newly created worries. I persuaded myself that this partial coincidence of events was something to worry about, which was not so praiseworthy, but I couldn't go against my own nature.

The evening almost came to an end, but Branko didn't mention the ring. I knew that he read the papers at work, but there was a possibility that not all the papers published the news. I'll first put the ring on and then I'm going to ask him. He probably hasn't even noticed that I took the ring off. It's not small, though. I'll put it back on anyway; it's stupid to make a fuss over my scared self.

"Did you hear that a medieval ring was stolen from the museum in Pancevo?"

"No, when?" He looked at me in amazement.

"The night before last."

"Thieves never sleep..."

"Yes, yes ... I wanted to ask you who you bought this copy from? I was shocked when I read that news in the paper today."

"I don't have a clue; I bought it from a guy through a classified advertisement. Two days before the robbery. The man makes copies; I don't know why you are so scared..."

"Well, I don't know either, but this is such a true copy that I've been petrified the moment I saw it in the papers and I've had that same feeling all day long."

He saw that I became nervous again, came to me, putting my hair over my shoulder. He squeezes my hand, the one with the ring on, and started kissing me on the cheek.

"Come on, stop worrying... what did they say in the paper, was it a male or female ring?"

"Oh, let me remember... a male one, they say it belonged to some Nikola guy."

"And you have a female ring on your finger. See, one more reason to stop worrying."

"Whenever you kiss me, I stop worrying. I want to thank you for the ring once again."

"Just kiss me."

We always used kisses as means of overcoming the occasional misunderstandings, anxieties and fears, and now even this unexplainable feeling which was just a product of my imagination.

"Does that man have more jewelry?"

"He has only rings."

"Great. Give me his number, I'd like to buy some more."

"I didn't write down his number, you'll see it in the ads, under antiquities ... is it urgent?"

"No, no, it's not urgent ... stupid me, I searched everywhere and it hasn't crossed my mind to take a look at the ads."

"We'll visit that guy together. You are not stupid, you're my..."

"What am I?"

I knew that he wouldn't tell me. Instead, he offered me his warm lips.

* * * * *

It's Thursday and this stupid break again. I can hardly wait to plod through three more classes and go to the theatre with Branko. We became lazy. We need some action. Oh, the cleaning lady is here, just to help me kill boredom.

I've always been drawn by her directness and openness in conversation. When she complained about her alcoholic husband, I understood that she differed from the others.

"Olja, you have a wonderful ring there."

"Oh, thank you, my boyfriend gave it to me."

"I knew that he was a great guy. By the way it matched better with that green suit."

"Yeah, you're right. I was thinking about what to wear that day, so I decided to put on the sunstone necklace and this ring. I'm very fond of it, so I wear it all the time."

"Speaking of the ring... I was watching Rotation yesterday..."

"What's that?"

"You don't know about that show?"

"No, it's the first time I hear about it."

"Ooooh, it's very good. You can see all sorts of crimes, robberies and frauds, but they record it so professionally... it's just like watching a short detective movie."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it began airing recently. The chick is pretty unscrupulous, she sticks her nose everywhere. She even exposed that gravel mafia. She's something else."

"Yeah, yeah, I read something about it in the papers, but I didn't watch it...I hardly ever watch TV."

"You've got to see that ... oh, yeah, last night it was nothing special, but at the end she talked about a ring missing from the museum. Oh, my dear Olja, we're living in a horrible world..."

"Wait, are you talking about that incident in Pancevo?"

"Yeah, yeah. She went to Pancevo first, filmed the door where the thief came in. After that she was in the company which installed the alarm. Some guy was babbling how they set up the perfect alarm, but they didn't know how the thief managed to fool it. Yeah, right, it's just like when someone stole our record books and computer, and then you had to remember all the marks and write them in again..."

"May it never happen again. What happened next?"

"Ooooh, that's nothing. After that she went to Belgrade. She visited some PhD - M. Sci. - who the fuck knows what - guy, who was in charge of the exhibition. She devastated him, that's for sure. Can you imagine, she asked that guy if the

ring belonged to Nikola Altomanovic. He started beating around the bush, but it turned out that it wasn't his after all. At the end of the interview she asked him how he could claim that it wasn't his, when the ring came from the unknown collection. Imagine that! The guy couldn't say if the ring was a male or female ring. Hey woman... he said that the ring had diameter of seventeen millimeters, but he wasn't sure if it was a male or female one. Come on, tell me, what kind of a man wears a seventeen millimeter ring?"

"I... don't know, really... I haven't thought about it..."

"I'll tell you. No man wears such a ring! I measured it last night. My ring has a diameter of eighteen millimeters. That chick is right, something is really fishy there. She even asked some experts and they said that Nikola had prepared that ring for his fiancée, but did not give it to her as Tsar Lazar made him blind. You see, this Lazar was good-for-nothing! He made the Great Zupan blind, and we still respect him... this chick will expose them all, they're all connected..."

"Oh, making people blind was normal at that time. By the way, when is the replay of the show?"

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What the fuck does this shitty school cop want now?

"No parking on the sidewalk!"

"I'm not parking. I just want to stop for a quick moment."

"That's not allowed either."

"Just five minutes. I'm waiting for my wife to come out of the school. She is a teacher here..."

"Whatever. You have to move away from here. Make a circle around this block of flats, you'll find a place to park somewhere."

Yeah right, boss. If I didn't have smarter things to do, I'd try to figure out what you and the guys from the station are on. It's probably something strong, since it made you all so zealous. Maybe I'm some kind of a kidnapper lurking for my victim, dwelling on the sidewalk, but the school cop is here to thwart my action. Oh, here's a spot, but it's a paid parking. Never mind, I have ten minutes time to pay once I'm registered. What the heck, I'm won't go back there, I can't stand that jerk in the uniform. She can come here. Come on, pick up the phone...ah, women, all they care about is for the phone to have a nice skin and it doesn't matter if she'll hear it ringing or not. I have to go back after all.

I come to the crossroad and see her in front of the school yard. Just when I'm about to wave, I notice that she is standing with a man and staring at the concrete. Since yelling is not so popular these days, I decide to wait for the traffic light to turn green. I can't see the man's face, but he is obviously trying to explain something since he's waving his hands a lot. Traffic lights turn to green, the cars start moving and blocking my view. In a moment of a clear view I see that man's hand on her shoulder, which she quickly pushed away. An unidentified sense leads me to the newsstand corner. Balkan syndrome is bursting inside of me. Who is that man who just tried to put his hand on her shoulder? He keeps explaining something and she keeps staring at the sidewalk. The traffic light has changed the situation in the street several times already. The situation across the street is also changing. Now she started lecturing him, looking him straight in the eyes. I couldn't see the expression on her face but her right hand on her hip told me that she was very angry. I have to find out who that man is. I come closer to the traffic light and wait for the

green light. I'm not hiding anymore, which doesn't change anything, since they are carried away with their conversation. I cross the street and head directly towards them. They saw me. I finally see the man's face. Not only is he familiar, I know exactly who he is. They immediately stop talking, Olja starts smiling and says:

"Where've you been?"

"I'm a little late..."

"This is my ex-neighbor Goran, and this is my boyfriend Branko."

I don't want to wait for his reaction; I avoid hand shaking and quickly add:

"We met a long time ago."

"Yes, yes, it was a long time ago..."

"The world is such a small place. Hey Goran, we've got to go, we're in a hurry... it was nice to see you. If you pass this way during the mid-morning recess, we might continue the conversation..."

"Hah, I doubt it. I don't come to the center so often. See you around, people."

He turns around quickly and walks down the street. We turn around as well; take each other's hands and head to the traffic light. The invitation for catching up on a mid-morning recess seems like a courtesy which really means - I don't ever want to see you again! We're completely silent until we reach the traffic light.

"You look angry."

"I am angry, because those damn kids are jumping on my head all day. It's good I'm still in one piece."

Yeah, the kids are to blame. I start smiling and put my hand in the pocket of her jeans. My fingers are petting her ass, because the smell of sex always changes mood for the better.

Ten meters away from the car I notice a long white piece of paper stuck to the windshield wiper. I guess the ten minute of free parking insensibly drifted into a couple of minutes more. Ass petting had a short term effect.

"What's this? Why didn't you pay for the parking? You're crazy..."

"The easiest thing is to say that I'm crazy. That walking monkey wrote the fine, and he should've waited for at least ten minutes. So, who's crazy then?"

"You are crazy to trust him."

"Have you ever thought about changing your profession?"

"Come on, Branko, let's leave all this nonsense behind. We are going to the theatre, right?"

"Yes, you're right. Get out of the car."

"What's the matter with you?"

"The play starts in an hour and we have a parking ticket for the whole day. The weather is nice, so it would be stupid not to..."

"You're so right, my boy..."

Buzzing of the street replaced the engine humming and slowly melted with the sound our lips produced.

Our steps were nervous, but our palms were glued. Soon enough, the steps became so joyful that we didn't notice the parked cars and traffic signs that we walked by. From time to time, when stepping from the sidewalk to the street, we would both feel the ring on her finger.

* * * * *

Could this really be Goran? Yes, it's him. I hope he hasn't seen me. I'll turn around and use the back door. Is it possible that he hasn't figured out that

yesterday we have finished it, once and for all? I'll turn around slowly... it's good, he's not following me. I've escaped this time, but what if he keeps on following me every day? I'll tell Branko and let them settle that as men. But then, he'll figure out that we're not friends, which is not good, because it'll turn out that I've been doing something with my ex behind his back. Problems keep haunting me every day... I can't have a normal life with all the crap.

"Hi."

He's as quick as a thief. Not "as" - he is officially a thief. I'll just walk by him. Oh, look at him...

"Move away from the door."

"No."

O my God, some kids are coming; just what I needed.

"Let's have a drink and talk like adults."

"Yes... yes, a good idea. What did you have in mind?"

"There's a cafe at the beginning of the street."

We're walking in silence; I'm trying to avoid his look by looking at my steps. From time to time I see his old dusty sneakers. I just don't know what to avoid - looking at his face or looking at his sneakers. I turn around looking how many pupils are there around us. No one's going in this direction, so now is the chance:

"What do you want?"

"Aren't we going to the cafe? I want to talk to you."

"Well, I don't want to talk. Don't you understand that we finished all the talking yesterday?"

"No, we didn't ... I didn't have the time to tell you that I still love you."

"Come on, Goran, go to the first newsstand, get a bottle of cold water and pour some over your head, will you?"

"Will you give me three minutes to talk to you?"

"You have them..."

"I know that you're angry with me because of my past, but I'm ready to start over. I paid my debt to society, now I'm a free man. I see in your eyes that you still have feelings for me..."

"Listen to me, you fool... what I feel for you is nullified with the fact that you're a thief. Once a thief - always a thief. If I were polite enough to talk to you yesterday, it didn't mean that I have any feelings for you. I was kind of sorry for you, since I knew where you'd spent the previous sixteen months. Besides, I'm in a serious relationship and have no intention of fooling around. I've got nothing more to tell you. What about you?"

"You're having an affair with a professional thief now."

"Jesus, Goran, your jealousy has no limits... let's say good bye nicely... maybe we'll meet accidentally one day and start whining about our kids having smallpox or mumps... that is all for people. But, what you're doing right now is really too much..."

"Ask him what he was doing in Germany and how do we know each other?"

"The end, curtain's falling, no more acts! Get it?"

"I see you have a nice ring; it suits the description of the one stolen from the museum."

"You jealous piece of shit. If you keep on following me, I'll call the police..."

"Think about where you got the ring from and who could have fooled a professional alarm."

I went down the street, with a desperate desire to run away from him as soon as possible, but I had to slow down since I was very close to the school. I can't say how fast I'm going, but I see my breasts shaking as I walk. The farther I am from school, the faster I go. I'm not aware of the expression on my face, but I'm aware that I have turned around manically, three times, just to check if he was following me. I go past the cross streets very fast, but before every crossroad my breath stops from the thought that he might appear around the corner.

I finally reach a busy street and somehow manage to stop a cab.

We spent the evening and night without a single touch, as I pretended to have some sort of female problems. I frowned at each move and acted languid in bed, but when I got up in the morning, I realized that my real condition was not very far from the one I had acted last night. I didn't even have to act my condition; I just lied about the cause of it. I woke up at night and his face was peaceful, illuminated by the moonlight and the lanterns that blended in the thin curtain and, melted like that, fell on his face. I saw a similar expression on Goran's face a couple of times too. How could such a thief have slept so peacefully with a peaceful expression? That thief now claims that my boyfriend is a thief as well. A thief's word means nothing whatsoever, but sleeping like a baby is not an indicator of innocence, that's obvious. I understand that Goran shows those worst feelings which are often mixed with the feeling of love, but what I don't get is: how come that my boyfriend knows this thief? Stupid me, I'm the only one who knows that he's a thief, because I discovered it in a very cruel way. Maybe Branko, like many other people, doesn't have a clue that he's a thief. Goran was arrested relatively recently, and that day when we met in the street, they've said they'd met a long time ago. But if he knew about his practice in Germany, then they have to be more than just superficial acquaintances. Maybe they have even met there. Branko was in Germany at that time having his practice, while I was living with Goran. It's impossible that they have met back then. How the hell did he know what Branko was doing in Germany, when he had absolutely nothing in common with the faculty of electronic engineering? They've met at the party and, as there were no chicks, they have started talking. It was just part of the questions and answers which came to me in the morning, along with the eye bags, but that was enough for me to search for the phone number in the advertisements while he was doing his morning routine in the bathroom.

Mobile subscriber was unavailable from noon to the early evening. It's very strange for someone who wants to sell something.

I phoned him today as well, but the situation was the same. I don't know why that guy doesn't answer the phone, but it's obvious that the ad was published before the ring was stolen, which excludes any possible connection between the museum and my ring. Or, maybe he planned the theft and published the ad just for that purpose, to plant the ring to someone before the police started digging, and Branko was scared to admit that he bought the stolen ring for me. That sounds too so naive, and besides, where would Branko find the money for such an expensive ring? I don't want to bother thinking about it, because it's simply impossible. The guy probably got scared of all this mess and does not answer the phone. Poor guy, he had to stop his business because of some churl. I hope all this heat will cool off and that the guy will start advertizing again. I know that Branko has nothing to do with the ring theft and I no longer care about this newspapers charade, but I don't understand what Goran's got

to do with it, and I am very much interested in that. If it wasn't for this ring, I'd think they didn't know each other well, which he also probably thought about the two of us when we met. Trying to make any connections between him and Goran would be counterproductive, and I sincerely hope that this fool will give me a break. It's the end of the school year and he doesn't have my number and he does not know where I live. I hope that he'll cool off that crazy head of his until September.

IIII IIII

The holiday season has begun. This summer, everyone is on holiday, including the actors, because the Serbs have avoided Theatre City of Budva in Montenegro this year and, like in the old days, occupied the Bulgarian coast, this time not because of the lack of visas, but because of their lapsing purchasing power. Hosts of various contact shows were taking a break from the folk and pop stars, which spend their honestly earned money on the beaches all over the world, stress free because they don't have to run to the studio straight from the airport. Ranka, being one of the hosts, temporarily disbanded her show, promising that she'd return in the fall and expose many other unsolved mysteries, including the ring theft. Of course, she would never promise that if she wasn't aware of the fact that there were people who never rest.

Majstorovic got the info from a snitch in Central prison that Ekrem found a way to make a phone call from his prison cell. But, since the info was very thin, he only found out that Ekrem phoned to Austria, and nothing more. However, this information was enough for Majstorovic to support his theory of ordered theft and gave him a glimpse of hope that Ekrem still hadn't managed to deliver the ring to the one who ordered it. He again resorted to the well known police method - bargain between the damaged party and the party who did the damage, all for the purpose of reducing the potential damage. Majstorovic was a member of the old inspector school and whenever one of the younger colleagues, who got their badges in the period of democracy, would complain, he would answer "it would break the same way it was made".

He met with Ekrem in the room where the suspects met their lawyers, without the lawyer of course, since they quite often can be an obstacle in negotiations.

"Have a cigarette Ekrem."

"I don't smoke."

"Come on Ekrem, don't fool around with me..."

"I take nothing from the cop's pocket."

"Alright Ekrem..."

"What do you want from me?"

"Slow down... it's almost a month since you've been here. You can walk out of here tomorrow, or you can stay for another month. It's up to you to decide. I want the ring and the name of the guy who hired you to steal it."

"I told you I stole nothing. I know my rights. You hold me here and you don't have any evidence."

"Don't say that, Ekrem. We all saw your fingerprints."

“You set me up because I am a Gipsy and an Albanian. You set me up double. I want to write to the president, I know my rights.”

Majstorovic slowly shook the ashes off the cigarette, leaned it on the inner side of the sliced meat can and put his hand in his jacket pocket. Looking at his jacket, just like he didn't know what was inside, he slowly took out his pen, then a small notebook which he folded, so that the white paper has appeared in front of Ekrem.

“Here you go, write it down.” Ekrem's breathing and occasional creaking coming from his lungs started interrupting the ghostly silence. “You don't know the president's name? It doesn't matter, there's only one president. Start with: dear president...”

“It's not that. I don't know how to write.”

“Yeah, yeah ... that's why you sign with your fingers. Listen to me very carefully Ekrem... this conversation is not allowed, as well as some other little things, but I never plant evidence. You can think whatever you want about the police, but we don't do that. I just want to get this over with as soon as possible and get your kids away from the street.”

“Don't you worry about my kids.”

“Alright Ekrem... just tell me one more thing. Were you married before this last marriage, since it's not logical that you first married at the age of thirty?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know, you tell me.”

“Inspector, I'm illiterate, but I have a good memory. I'll tell you what my lawyer advised me to tell you, when you start sticking your nose where it doesn't belong: I'll use my legal right not to answer such a question. We Gypsies also have our rights. You want to ask me something else?”

Majstorovic nodded and put out his hand to shake hands with him. Ekrem didn't move his hands from the table. While Majstorovic was gathering requisites from the desk, he sighed and then said:

“You're a very stubborn man.”

* * * * *

Ever since the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a permanent ID to Stana, she thought that she'd never have to set her foot there again, since she had forgotten that she might come to this place by her own will. She tried to keep away from that building like from the evil eyes, but trouble made her come to this building for the second time this month.

“Good day my son, I'd like to report a theft.”

“All right, granny. Sit down on a bench and when the lady walks out of this office, you may come in.”

Stana thanked him, sat down and waited patiently.

When she walked in, the duty inspector breathed in and rolled his eyes, but Stana pretended not to see that.

“What can I do for you grandma?”

“I'd like to report that theft again.”

“We're working on it, grandma.”

“As far as I see, only the thieves are working, they've dug up even those before Christ.”

“Don't worry grandma, we'll catch them all.”

“While you make up your mind, they'll reach Biograd.”⁽¹⁰⁻⁸⁾

“You mean Biograd na Moru,⁽¹⁰⁻⁹⁾ grandma?”

“Son, do you have some kind of boss around here? You don’t take me serious, I see.”

The duty inspector told granny that he was going to get his boss. Instead to his boss, he went to his subordinate and ordered him to get the granny off his back one way or the other. Subordinate knew what this was about since the entire police station in Kraljevo was talking about Stana’s first visit.

He came into the office and looked at Stana angrily.

“What’s the problem, grandma?”

“They don’t believe me that the mobsters are robbing the Greek tombs.”

“I don’t believe you either. Describe me what you’ve seen.”

“All right. Uphill from Ranko’s grave there is a Greek cemetery. A few years ago, people from the museum came and dug all summer. Nice kids they were, I made them mushroom soup every day. Then the other day, some people arrived and started digging. I came to them to say hello, and they told me to go away like I was an itchy puppy. The next day I sneaked up on them, hid in the chaparral and saw what they were doing...”

“I suppose they were taking the gifts and jewelry out of the tombs.”

“Yes, they did, but you don’t seem to believe me either...”

“I believe you, grandma...”

Stana shook her head and opened her string bag. She took a small package wrapped in newspapers and gave it to the inspector without hesitation. The next second, she got up and headed towards the door.

“My son, this is for you, not to catch cold when you go up to the mountain.”

Inspector was speechless, but he got up from his chair to walk Stana out, not because it was a polite thing to do, not because of her age, but to make sure she wouldn’t come back again.

* * * * *

When one mentions the word “communism” the human heads immediately revive an image of stalking and snitching, Barren Island and freedom limitations. However, they rarely remember the image of collective consciousness and care about people. Leaving the keys to your apartment to your neighbor, to plant your flowers while you’re on vacation was a normal and usual thing to do. Today, only the cactuses and mayflowers survive, left to the mercy of the people who visit the common rooms in the building. If you met a drunk who pissed himself lying in front of your building front door, at least you’d try to wake him up, tell him to move away somewhere safe until he sobered up. Today, you’d just jump over him thinking that intercom and automatic lock investments have already paid off, since otherwise he’d piss in the hallway. The disappearance of communism initiated the atrophy of collective consciousness and sense for common good, but spying and snitching survived and received great support of the society. During the period of communism, there were people who were paid for snitching, or free lancers who knew exactly what their sphere of interest was. Today, people become snitches in accordance with their own interests, inevitably volunteering and wishing to remain anonymous to the future generations. The communists have been justifying the snitching system by guarding the system from imperialists. Time will show what the modern society is afraid of and what does it protect. The only thing known is that such a system is today justified by personal views which are supported by the laws, copied from some supposedly advanced society whose advancement is unproven though.

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The summer went by like a ride on a huge merry-go-round. During that ride, Branko came behind my back and pushed me in the right moment, so I caught a rose instead of a duck. That rose was a ticket to a free love ride, which is still on.

Someone's at the door. I turn the TV on and turn to the channel connected to the camera in the peephole. I prefer the traditional peepholes; I don't care if he sees me watching him, but Branko set this up before I moved in. The postman nervously waves with a letter, trying to cool himself.

"It's for Branko, sign here please."

"My name or his?"

"Your name, and please don't forget to give this to him, it's from the Court."

"Court? Then I can't take it."

"That's smart. Take this report and tell him that he can pick up the letter in your local nearest post office after 4 o'clock. Have a nice day."

I nearly fainted by the door, but the next moment it came to mind that there were traffic violations too. He's driving like a maniac, I know that. I used to reproach him for it and scream like crazy until recently, but it all used to end with a somewhat cynical smile. Since that smile irritated me, I stopped complaining. I became more and more nervous as the day went by. I wasn't nervous because of the potential traffic violation, but because he didn't tell me that he did something wrong.

He was a bit upset when he came from the post office. He took a can of beer from the fridge, without a glass, sat back in the armchair and started changing the TV channels. Suddenly, an article from some women's magazine appears in my mind, entitled „Is he a hidden Balkan man?“ This is not the first time I've seen this expression on his face, but it's the first time he's treated me like this.

"Branko, do you have a problem?"

"Well, I have to go to minor offences judge. I got a speeding ticket and didn't want to pay for it and sign the police report."

"That's not a reason to hide your problem from me."

"I didn't want to upset you."

"I'm upset because you are nervous. We live together and we have to talk about problems."

"Go make some coffee, to calm me down."

I go to the kitchen without saying a word, put the coffee pot on and sit at the table. I want to leave him alone for a short while, to let him gather his thoughts. Our thoughts gather independently. Where the hell was he going so fast to get a speeding ticket? It's impossible that he was driving like a maniac around town. He never tells me where he's going. He went to Novi Beograd to set up the alarm and some chick hitched a ride and asked if he was going to Novi Sad. He probably nodded his head and said that he was actually going right there. I wouldn't be surprised, my tits are not in the shape like when I was twenty. I go back to the room and put the coffee table between the armchair and bed. I go back to get the coffee, which I serve with a smile. Now I regret not putting my red lipstick on, just to intensify my smile.

"On which road did they catch you?"

"On my way to Pancevo."

"I don't remember that you set an alarm there," he lightened up a bit.

"I didn't, I was just arranging the installation. You remember that company for which I designed the warehouse alarm?"

"I remember, but you've never told me that you have been arranging business in Pancevo."

"Well, I forgot to tell you that we went to a fish restaurant."

He changed his mood again and fixed his eyes on the cup while talking about the restaurant. I see an article from the women's magazine in my mind again, but this time it says "How to deal with him when he's hiding something?" I've never read such an article, but even if I had, I'd still act the same.

"Let me see that court invitation?"

"I threw it away. I'm not going to appear. Screw them; let them bring me in, so what."

No, this is not happening to me. He's transformed into another man. I feel that all this is a lie, and his aggressiveness is an instrument of covering up for lies. I put down my coffee and head to the hall and start rummaging through his jacket. I find a crumpled blue envelope, take it out from the inner pocket and slowly approach the bed. He's trying to avoid looking at me and starts scratching his chin. I unfold the white paper and start reading. The First Basic Court... criminal charges for animal molestation... animal welfare organization MORCA...

"What the hell did you do, Branko?"

"Take it easy, slow down, don't get upset, I'll explain everything."

"You'll explain? By serving me lies again?"

"No, no more lies. I admit that I tried to lie to you, but no more..."

"Tell me what happened, and I'll decide if it's a lie or not!"

"Don't yell... come on Olja, calm down..."

"All right, I'll stop yelling ... Sit where you are and don't even try to touch me ... now, talk..."

"As I told you, I was with those people in a restaurant down town. When we wanted to park our cars, they somehow squeezed theirs in the street where the restaurant was, but I had to go around the entire block... When I was walking back to the restaurant, going through that block, a pack of dogs attacked me in the passage. I was shocked, so I started kicking them. One of the dogs was braver than the others and started to tear my trousers. I couldn't run away, so I kicked it with my left as hard as I could. He somehow let me go but he kept on growling angrily... I didn't have the courage to turn and run away... I simply kicked the dog a couple more times until it ran away from me. As far as I remember, some kids were on the street, they probably recorded that, and now MORCA is on my back."

"You're talking just like a kid was running along the pedestrian zone and hit you in the stomach. Just an ordinary event, right?"

"Look at all the mongrels on the streets! Why would this be so important?"

"Why? You think I haven't seen that those black trousers of yours are missing for laundry, for quite a while? Where are they? Did you throw them away?"

"I threw them away..."

"Branko, I am asking you nicely - what the hell are you hiding from me?"

"Nothing."

"All right... I'm going for a walk now to cool down, and you - be a man and admit what you've been hiding from me when I get back."

As I tie my shoes, I see him drinking his beer and staring motionless at the TV. The only thing moving is the wrist on his hand turning a beer can. I take the wallet with my ID out of the purse and put it in the sport bag. I have no intention of turning around and seeing his reaction when I walk out. I don't give a damn about the look he gave me or his rapid breathing, when he didn't even try to stop me from going out. What a wimp. Thank God that this all happened now, otherwise, I'd be sinking in the quicksand.

I go for an aimless walk, tying my hair in a ponytail, because I got the feeling that it bristled like a cat's, from the sickness I feel. I try to breathe normally to relieve the tension, but that doesn't help. All that I see in my mind is him somewhere in Pancevo, kicking the poor dogs. Why would he hide that? Maybe he wasn't alone. Come on, Branko... maybe your business partners or lady partners can be seen on the video clip. It must have appeared somewhere on the Internet so the MORCA people saw it. They couldn't have sued him just like that. And maybe the kids sent the clip directly to MORCA, but how the hell did they identify him then? No, no, it must be somewhere on the Net, and some conscientious neighbor identified him.

The local Net & Games cafe is filled with hot-headed kids. The good thing is that it's far away from my school; otherwise I would surely meet some of my pupils. If I could choose, I'd hide in the corner, but since I can't - I have to sit next to these two whippersnappers who are fighting all the time. Thank God that there wasn't a third one, who had to go and leave me sitting between them. Browser window appears on the screen, enabling me to surf, and the sudden adrenalin, which is proportionate to anticipation, makes the stupid thoughts go away. I go to YouTube and type "kicking a dog". All I get are two links which obviously have nothing to do with Branko. Should I type "mongrel"? No, they are polite people who use literary language when publishing such things. Of course, they make basic grammar mistakes in everyday speech. I'll type "hitting a dog". Nothing again. He didn't kill it, I hope? Let me try "killing a dog". Nope. Wait, wait... I know the right word. I start typing "molesting a dog". Here it is "man molesting a dog in Pancevo". Something is starting to erupt from my stomach and I feel that it's going to reach my throat. I'll click before my own gastric acid chokes me, because maybe there's nothing in the video clip and I'm going to choke for no reason whatsoever. Look at him kicking that dog...Branko, you're really out of line... and look at the mongrel attacking and barking, like he didn't have enough. He's walking out of the passage, but the mongrel bastard doesn't give up... you're right to come back. I'm not sorry you kicked his ass properly at the end. But you just didn't have to kick him under the lanterns where your face is so visible. Fuck! But when you have to defend yourself, you can't really choose time and place. Anyway, he was alone, so that was not the reason for not telling me about it. Shit - more than seven hundred comments... "an idiot full of complexes"... "I'd tie that retard to a tree and kick his ass"... "a monster, kicking a poor puppy"... "there are more and more eclipsed-minded people in Serbia and they're allowed to walk the streets freely. People, watch out...the guy is probably doing this to his wife and kids too"... "People, this is self defense, don't you see that the dog is attacking him? Look at the other mongrels getting ready to attack! Are you crazy?"... "Are you defending him? Another monster walking our streets. How would you feel if someone kicked you like this?"... I can't read anymore. All these comments make me sick. I don't even have the strength to look at the screen. Fuck you, all

of you hypocrites! I'll write that one day, but now I have more important things to do. I watch the clip again, hoping to hear a voice or see something which would help me reconstruct the event. It's all the same, there are no other voices but Branko's cursing. I am watching patiently till the last sequence. The mongrel is tottering and walking away and the others are following. The clip doesn't end there, but the one who took the video clip leaves the camera on and makes a full circle around the area. The brat probably continued recording the other brat, so they had to cut the clip there. Wait, this shop seems familiar. Well, the museum is just across the street. I was walking along that street, looking for the museum. I didn't know which side the entrance was at, so I got lost. I went through that stinky passage, just from the opposite direction. Just like it knew, the ring started itching and becoming tighter on my finger. Punctured memories are starting to come to me. The night he had a business meeting the ring was stolen from the museum. Now I find out not only he was in Pancevo that night, but he was ten meters away from the museum building. I close all browser windows and walk to the counter to pay. As I take out my wallet my ring gets stuck on the bag zipper. The boy gives me the change and I hear "Now you're in a relationship with a professional thief". I walk slowly to the exit and realize that he wasn't hiding some tart - he was hiding the location.

I come into the flat, and he's still sitting and staring at the TV. He probably saw that I was still angry, so he didn't even bother to say hello. I won't say it either. Sipping his beer again. I see the same beer can, but I don't know how many cans are there in the garbage already. I sit on the bed, take off the ring theatrically and put it on the table. He followed my moves, so I decided to clear this mess up. This time - patiently.

"I found a clip on the Internet. I don't care if you kicked that dog... them suing you is better than you suing the city for getting scars from the dog teeth."

"Thank you for understanding."

"Talking about understanding - I can't understand the coincidence of you being in front of the museum at the night of the theft."

"I kicked the dog somewhere near the museum?"

"Yes. I've been in that museum a couple of times and I recognized the surroundings."

"Well, it happened so by chance, and I didn't even know about it..."

"World is full of coincidences. Everything would be ok if such a copy could be bought at a store. I called the number from the ad in the papers and nobody answered. I can bet that you placed an ad to convince me that you've bought the ring from someone. It's not a big deal to buy a SIM card and send an ad..."

"Come on, Olja... what's the matter with you?"

"I've had no peace ever since you gave me this fucking ring."

"Stop being melodramatic. Throw it away if you want to."

"I don't want to throw it away; I'm giving it back to you."

"If that's what you want..."

"I'm asking you once more, politely - why have you been hiding the trip to Pancevo from me?"

"I told you everything, and all these things you mentioned were just coincidences."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't believe that Goran is your ex neighbor either, but I'm not making a drama out of it."

“Is that so? Excuse me, how do you actually know him?”

I can't believe that he's so calm. It's the thief's calmness which they keep until the last glimmer of hope that they'd proved innocent. I just don't know what I am trying to prove to both of us. How did he figure out that Goran wasn't just a neighbor? Is it possible that men have intuition?

“I met him once, when I brought him some cash from Germany. At that time, the landlord asked me to bring some money to him, and that was it... I had to meet your ex boyfriend.”

“Was that by any chance the money for some stolen things and jewelry?”

I knew I would shake that calmness of his. He started scratching his chin again, avoiding looking at me.

“How the hell would I know what the money was for? What's wrong with you?”

“You have guts to ask me that? That ex boyfriend of mine is a thief. He did his time for theft, and you pretend not knowing who you carried the money to. Be a man and admit at least that.”

“Olja, I'm sorry you got involved with a thief. I saw him once before we met, how was I supposed to know that the man was a thief? You used a copy of some ring to make up a story that I bought it from some thief. This was not enough, so you switched to the theory that I stole the ring myself. Would you like a drink, to clear up your head?”

What a wimp... he's attacking me to defend himself now. His confidence must be sky high again when he's opposing me like this. Yeah, I'm definitely tripping! Thanks, but no thanks. And don't feel sorry for me, feel sorry for yourself, you crook. How I wish I'd caught a duck at merry-go-round, and not a rose.

* * * * *

“Olja.”

“Tanja dear...”

“Calm down, stop crying, everything will be all right...”

“I'm damned... this one is a thief too... I can't stand it anymore...”

IIII IIII I

That night, she packed a bag with necessary things and flew out in a speed of thought. Before she flew out, she just said that she'd call me to get the rest of her stuff. After two days, I was ready to admit everything to her, but Ljubisa talked me out of it. He said that it wouldn't change anything, but would only increase the possibility of her making the wrong move. I wrapped the ring in a plastic bag, then rolled it in modeling clay and hid it between a rafter and the roof of an abandoned house in Kraljevica Marka Street. That was a temporary solution, until this ring drama comes to an end. Ljubisa returned a device for engraving metal, which he used for casting the print rubber, back to its initial form and sold it to some DJ for making records. Only then did I realize that the man had the same philosophy as the professor. The most dim-witted thing is to believe that a thing could be used only for the purpose that it was designed for. I expected a reprimand for leaving the cue ball to the opponent, but it didn't happen. I learned my lesson from the episode which could cost me even more,

and Ljubisa had the feeling that I knew the story about the cue ball by heart, just like I knew multiplication table, so he didn't want to give me any extra lectures. Aside from waiting for this ring nonsense to be solved, I was waiting for Olja to come and pick up her stuff, seeing this as an opportunity for a more humane communication, as she refused to talk to me on the phone. Ten days after what was an unforgettable night for me, she texted me to pack all of her things in boxes and wait for further instructions. I knew that she wouldn't appear. A colleague of hers came and drove her stuff off to an unknown location. I thought about putting a confession letter in her favorite sweater, but I concluded that I'd only make a fool of myself by doing so. Instead, I put one Sansui deck in one of the boxes, hoping that it'll revive her emotions once she sees it. I wanted so many things, I started even more, but now's the time to pay for what I started. Each day spent in anticipation of some kind of contact with her was like some sort of installment for what I started.

* * * * *

The ring case was starting to get out of Majstorovic's control. If someone else analyzed the case, he may have come to the conclusion that it was never even under control. However, since Majstorovic was the only one interested in this case, he was forced to declare that the case was out of control. Ekrem refused to admit the ring theft, and Majstorovic refused to admit to himself, as it would also mean admitting to the others, that no one actually has ordered the theft. He was pressed by the journalists who blew the story out of proportion and by the district attorney who wanted to get over with it and put a check mark on it. Everyone wanted the case to be solved, except the judges who were his old friends and didn't have anything against prolonging the custody within the law, because Majstorovic would always justify such a long custody in the end. Majstorovic decided to put his prestige and reputation at stake to try to solve the case, which the public started calling "the affair". He had to play around with some people who were not exactly on friendly terms with him.

It started raining heavily that September, so the marshes near the Danube flooded earlier than usual. Those who lacked the land, now lacked it even more, as they could no longer graze their cattle at the state's expense, and the long-legged birds waded through the marshes in vain, because even they figured out that it was the work of the Danube, not the rain. Only Majstorovic could take advantage of such a phenomenon. The only thing he had never tried in his police career was filmmaking. Yes, he was present during filming of numerous arrests, but he had never been in charge of one. His job was to neutralize and incapacitate the suspects safely, so that the crew could continue filming undisturbed. This time, he had to organize everything by himself, because the fewer people knew about such an arrest, the better. He gathered his usual team for arresting dangerous criminals. The only difference was that two guys were wearing diving suits.

"Are you planning to drag me through this mud forever? Even the Krauts didn't torture Gypsies the way you're torturing me. If you want to execute me, do it now. No one will see it here."

"Majstorovic, allow me to teach this butthead a lesson. I'm working on Saturday without being paid plus I have to listen to this Gandhist."

"After the filming, Petrovic. Not now!"

"We brought the entire make up set, don't worry, no one will be able to tell."

"I said no, and that's it. I want Ekrem to look as natural as possible."

The cameraman was a professional and no one was allowed to complain about the mud marathon. He was looking for a clear ground ending in the marsh, with some reed and some shrubs. At first glance, it could have been done without it, but Majstorovic had a special scenario.

After half an hour of trudging, the whole filming crew stopped. The cameraman addressed the actors:

“You will run across this field. Ekrem runs first, and you follow him. Keep at about a three meter distance so that you can all be in frame. When Ekrem starts running through the shrubs, you come close to him and catch him in the middle of the marsh, with a strong commotion. Ekrem, feel free to resist the arrest. This has to be the arrest spot, because of the next scene. Ekrem, turn around once in a while, but do not fall, since we’ll have to film again if you do. Is that clear?”

The cameraman wasn’t surprised when he saw that Ekrem was going to say something, since his practice proved that borrowed actors were the ones who usually made problems.

“Me going into this cold water? I’m not going to do that.”

“Come on Ekrem, stop fooling around and start running,” Majstorovic addressed him in a serious tone.

“Oh, no, not me. The Holy Transfiguration has passed and I’m not getting into the water no more.”

“Majstorovic, please let me make him black and blue, I’m sick and tired of these Gandhists...”

“After the shooting, Petrovic. Ekrem, you would like to wait for the warmth, say until St. Kyriaki’s Day?”⁽¹¹⁻¹⁰⁾

“I don’t bathe before St. George’s Day.”

Everyone laughed, except for Petrovic who was clenching his porcelain teeth and iron fists.

“Ekrem, you illiterate fool. You didn’t sign your confession, so I can keep you in prison almost until St. George’s Day. You want to film this after St. George’s, or now?”

Ekrem just shook his head and started running. However, the cameraman stopped him.

“Where the hell are you goin’, I’m giving the “go” sign here. Take this pebble and hold it in one hand and keep the other one open. Get it?”

“You fucking cops, my lawyer will write all about this to the president...”

“Majstorovic, is this guy threatening us?” Petrovic was the only one bothered by Ekrem’s complaints.

“No, no, he was just speaking metaphorically, to let you know that he’s not so good with paper and pen. He doesn’t have a lawyer, don’t you worry. Come on, get ready.”

Cameraman gave the sign. Ekrem started sprinting as if he was chased by the bear, and not by a cop actor. After some ten seconds, Majstorovic stopped the filming.

“It’s not good. You, Petrovic, wear a diving suit, and Jankovic is to wear a camouflage suit.”

“But ...”

“Don’t ask questions, change clothes, we don’t have much time.”

Majstorovic remembered that Petrovic had a nasty temper, and as he didn’t want to see fists flying in front of the camera, he found an elegant method to

avoid such a scene. Ekrem immediately took the bottle of water to quench his thirst, as he had never sprinted like this before. Special Forces often practiced changing clothes, so it didn't take them a minute to do it this time.

They started filming the first scene for the second time, third time for Ekrem, since he had one false start. They all nervously observed the scene in which the Serbian Special Forces were chasing a heavyweight man for more than thirty meters and then finally caught him in a marsh, where they managed to overcome him with a lot of water squeezed out, commotion, and dispersed water droplets just like those in a waterfall. The cameraman didn't want to get closer, to avoid water droplets sprinkling the camera. No, he wasn't trying to spare the police camera; he just wanted to show to the potential viewer that it was risky to get closer to the suspect. The cameraman didn't hide his satisfaction that the scene was filmed just like Majstorovic and he wanted it to be. He even complemented Ekrem on his performance, but he didn't hear it as he was sitting on a stump, trying to grab some air.

The cast changed. Two divers, who carefully listened to the cameraman's instructions, approached him and Majstorovic, while the others were putting the yellow crime scene tape around the marsh.

"One of you will stand up and take the mask off on my signal, and the other one will dive deep enough so that only his snorkel can be seen. It won't last longer than thirty seconds. That would be all."

"How am I supposed to dive in this mud? I'll get my suit so dirty that even dear Lord won't be able to clean it."

"Come on, stop dramatizing. The Danube is near; you can wash it in the river... Let's go to the marsh and finish this quickly. C'mon guys, let's get to work..."

The divers took their positions and waited for the sign, and Majstorovic headed towards the Danube. No one knew why he headed upstream along the river, but they knew it wasn't just for stretching his legs. That man never did anything without a plan.

When he returned, everything was packed and ready to go. The cameraman and the divers packed their equipment, while Ekrem was sitting on a stump, holding his stomach. The guys told him that Ekrem started feeling sick from all that running and that he even vomited a little, but there was no one to hold his head, so he suddenly fell and failed to land on his hands. That was the entire explanation for him pressing his stomach and having a big red bump on his forehead. It was nothing new for Majstorovic because guest actors always used to behave self-harming at shootings.

* * * * *

Heads of parliamentary groups, as well as the majority of population in Serbia, do not work on Saturdays. However, this Saturday, they gathered together with Rodoljub, a trusted expert, to work out the ways of collecting money from legalization of buildings, the action which didn't have the desired results. For two whole hours Rodoljub was listening to ruling party's and opposition's proposals, which, as always, ended up in mutual accusations. Whenever a head of some parliamentary group would start with the accusations, Rodoljub would stop listening and concentrate on solving his mathematical calculations. Even after three hours, the disputes haven't stopped. Ruling party demanded that buildings which were not legalized should be demolished, thus showing the firm hand, while the opposition had doubts

that only the ruling party opponents' buildings would be demolished. During their dispute, Rodoljub developed a model which would be satisfactory for both sides. He was a decent man, so he waited for them to stop and then start talking.

Rodoljub's satellite telephone started ringing. The headquarters informed him of a problem, solution of which required his physical presence. He had no choice; he had to interrupt the politicians' speech.

"Dear members of Parliament, another problem arose, which requires my presence. Before I leave you, I would like to present you my own model for solving this problem. I will try to be as precise and short as possible. Object legalization fee should be reduced by half. This way, we will motivate the citizens to apply for the procedure of legalization." This started the loud and rude commenting by all the heads of parliamentary groups. Rodoljub just raised his hand in a healing position and continued his speech. There was silence again, like in the outer space. "In this way, house numbers in almost each street in every town will be changed. As you know, by the end of this year, old IDs will no longer be valid, so all the citizens will have to get the new ones. In order to get them, they'll have to change the place of residence, which of course implies paying the Republic tax. Again, in order to do that, they'll have to obtain a certificate of the house number, which requires paying both municipal and Republic taxes. As all citizens are equal by the law, the reduction of the legalization prices will be applied retroactively, and the change of the place of residence will also apply to the citizens who got the new ID before the house number change. By my rough estimate, if you accept this model, our budget will obtain additional income of one third of the total legalization revenue. Gentlemen, thank you very much for your attention, I shall see you again when needed. Pardon me, gentlemen, I have forgotten to advise you to adopt a by-law which will prevent the use of house numbers like 13/1 or 13/A... I know that this will be the smallest problem, since you are united now."

A thunderous applause sounded in the hall. Rodoljub solved yet another, seemingly unsolvable problem, and for the umpteenth time managed to unite ruling party and opposition. Unfortunately, this deed, like many others, will be covered by the veil of secrecy, just like his existence. Such is Rodoljub Stojanovic's life, the life he accepted unreservedly.

Rodoljub rarely put rotation light on the top of his car, but this time he simply had to. This case was of national importance and was threatening to jeopardize his long years of service.

When he found out what it was about, he immediately called his assistant Borivoje and they headed by helicopter to the wilderness of Durmitor, to the source of the Tara River. He agreed to abuse his powers for the benefit of the entire community and he tracked down a cell phone number, as well as its owner, without a warrant.

They tanked the fuel at the Ladjevci airport nearby Kraljevo and continued their journey to Durmitor. It didn't take them long to reach the point where the cell number was last located.

"Boss, should we land and enquire if the subject has been seen?"

"No way... The less people know who we are looking for, the better. Subject is probably on a raft or a boat. We should hurry up down the Tara."

Due to the presence of pilot staff, they were forced to call that person "subject". They continued along the Tara canyon, flying high, but whenever they would see a boat, they'd go down very low hoping that Borivoje would recognize the subject. The birds were communicating the oncoming iron danger to each other. Soon enough the screams of wild animals and other inhabitants, which might seem tamed, but were also wild, would fill almost entire canyon. Croaking birds were persistent in their warnings and even the singing birds changed their melody into the special one, signaling danger. This was not the first time the animals had announced the arrival of the iron birds. So the inhabitants of the surrounding villages, who were not used to the violent engine sound, were informed of the intruder.

After few unsuccessful landings, Borivoje confirmed the presence of the subject in one boat. Rodoljub came closer to the chopper microphone. His deep voice prevailed over the grumbling sound of the engine and whistling of the propeller:

"This is the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia talking. Dock on the right river bank, slowly and without panic."

"Boss, I don't see a beach anywhere on the right, let them dock on the left bank."

"Borivoje, Bosnia is on the left, we mustn't violate the regulations... look, they're docking; they got some experienced trainers here."

"Yes... yes, but we can't land here."

"Well, Borivoje, we have ladders."

Rodoljub gave pilot a sign to keep the helicopter still above the boat. Then Borivoje threw the ladders down and started descending. Rodoljub saw the petrified faces of the passengers and had to address them:

"Dear citizens, don't panic! You are not in danger. This is a routine exercise of Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs."

Rodoljub saw the subject hesitating to climb up the ladders, but he was relieved soon because he figured out that, among other things, he realized that Borivoje learned exquisite persuasion skills from him. He offered his hand to help the subject climb in, and then to Borivoje too. There were still some agitated passengers in the boat, so he felt the need to address them for the last time:

"Dear citizens, your travelling companion will be waiting for you in your camp. Continue your carefree field trip and enjoy the beauty of Tara River. Please remember, this is only a tactical exercise of the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs."

Rodoljub gave a sign to the pilot to turn the helicopter around and land on a clearing to the right from the Tara. While the chopper was flying up the canyon, everyone's eyes were glued to the suicidal jumps of panic stricken chamoises.

The engine became silent, and the blades of grass which didn't get broken by the propeller's hurricane, returned to their original position and continued bending under the wind of a variable direction. Rodoljub, Borivoje and the subject were moving away from the helicopter, making sure that no one but them could hear what they were talking and the way they addressed the subject by first name. When they walked far enough, they sat on the wide flat stones. The subject's cell phone dully rang from a waterproof bag. Borivoje looked at the display and signaled to the subject to switch to the loudspeaker mode.

"Good day Ranka, are you still rafting?"

“Good day, director, sir. Yes, I am, we are making a small break.”

“Excellent. Listen to me very carefully... I have just received the information that they are catching Ratko Mladic at Tara canyon...” While the director was recovering from happiness, Borivoje whispered to Ranka how she should act.

“Is that possible?”

“Yes, it is possible, this time it is verified information. Listen, let’s not waste time! They say that the place is packed with helicopters! Record everything you can with your cell phone, we need any kind of footage as an exclusive.”

“I understand, director, sir. I will do my best. We will be in contact.”

Ranka started shaking her head, laughing and at the same time asked a very short question:

“What is this circus all about, Borivoje?”

“We were forced to do it. Allow me to introduce my boss Rodoljub.”

During their handshake, a sound of a chopper sounded, becoming louder and louder each second. Everyone stared at the chopper, which started circling above the clearing, making a landing maneuver. Thus, Ranka and Rodoljub experienced a prolonged handshake. Ranka broke up the confusion.

“It’s that bitch from the Fist Independent Television; she even got the chopper.”

“Borivoje, go and take care of this! Tell her that we are on a business trip, but had to make a forced landing on this clearing because the pilot had to urinate. Tell her that, while she is here, she can make a report on the chamois.”

“Mister Rodoljub, would you please explaining what is all this confusion about?”

“It’s about that stolen ring.”

“Ohhhh, thaaat...”

“Yes, yes, listen to me. We were having some problems with one inspector, and I flew here in order to prevent the problematic inspector from making large scale problems. Namely, he was subsequently recording the arrest of the man who had stolen the ring and we have the information that he is going to offer such material to you...”

“Wait a minute, what’s wrong with that, it’s been done for years,” interrupted Ranka.

“It has been done for years, but not anymore. We respect the Criminal Proceedings Law. Arrests are filmed, but are published only after the verdict is reached. I hope you haven’t overlooked that fact.”

Ranka looked at the chopper flying away and added:

“Yeah, right... but I have always wondered how come I get arrests which occurred only two months ago.”

“Ranka, our country got the independent and efficient judiciary, so that’s why you have had the material in your hands so quickly. You see, if you published the material the inspector is about to give you, you would jeopardize all the work we have done so far. Do you understand that?”

“Yeah...yeah...and you are here just because you respect the Criminal Proceeding Law?”

“Exactly. I took the responsibility to...”

“Just a moment, my cell phone is ringing.”

“Ranka, turn it to loudspeaker mode. If the inspector offers you the material, you mustn’t accept. After all, I’ll be right here beside you.”

“No problem... here. Hello...”

“Good day, inspector Majstorovic speaking. Am I talking to Ranka?”

“Yes, how can I help you?”

“Be so kind to put inspector Rodoljub on the line, he should be standing somewhere close to you.”

Rodoljub was shocked. He first looked at Ranka, then at the phone. He swiftly turned off the loudspeaker mode and started moving away from Ranka quickly. He answered the phone call as he walked.

“Yes.”

“Listen to me very carefully, mister invisible and untouchable. There’s no use in having a space phone, when your pilot has a regular one. I got rid of the cameraman who ratted out on me, but you’ll have to get rid of half of the police force to keep yourself invisible. Get it?”

“Inspector Majstorovic, what is this behavior?”

“Cut the crap, kid, I’m not going to tell you this twice. If that girl doesn’t publish the arrest, it’ll be on the news the following night.”

“It won’t work for you. The Ministry will send a memo to all TV stations, just to remind them of the Criminal Proceedings Law.”

“Kiddo, I didn’t realize you are such a bonehead! Because of your fucking chopper, some slut is babbling live about the arrest of Ratko Mladic. A man said that he had to stop a game of chess against Ratko because of your chase, the other one said that he’d seen him in the woods just moments ago and gave him a sheepskin hat. You bonehead, every village cooperative will start selling those hats because of you. Turn that space TV of yours on and you’ll figure out that journalists don’t give a shit about what they publish. And they especially don’t give a fuck about a Gipsy who has admitted stealing the ring. Over and out now, I don’t want to waste the public money, like some of you do. Think of an excuse for me asking to speak to you. I don’t want the girl to think that I’m tapping her phone. I don’t do that, unless it’s really necessary.”

Rodoljub was instantly petrified. If he hadn’t had a black leather jacket, he would’ve merged with nature instantly. He turned his satellite pocket TV on and switched to the Independent Television channel. A highlander was explaining how he saw Ratko Mladic hanging on the ladder of a helicopter which disappeared in the direction of Serbia. He wished that he petrified for real and that a chamois could rub against him in passing, to mark its territory.

IIII IIII II

I’ve been having fever, accompanied by herpes on my lip, for a few days now. It suddenly got cold and my body didn’t have the time to get used to it. I can’t recognize September; I can’t even recognize myself for the past month. I wish I could tuck myself in my life just like I tucked my body into this blanket. I really tried, but I realized that it was my destiny to meet the wrong men all my life. Each night, feelings keep changing like in a ritual. The ritual starts around the evening news, when I feel cursed, it continues with the feeling of being rejected, and ends in asking myself if I am any good at all. During that ritual, Branko’s face is always hovering in the air. I wanted to answer to some of his text messages and face the danger I ran away from, but I didn’t have the strength. Whenever I would think about him, I’d see a hand in a fine fabric glove carrying

a small but pervasively sparkling diamond. I'd come closer to feel its light, but the hand was so big that it could capture me with the diamond forever, with just one sudden move. There were no windows in the folded hand cell, and the diamond couldn't replace the light of the Sun. Maybe the fear caused the feeling of being cursed and now they are acting jointly, but I don't have the courage to cut into fear. I keep running away from reality and spend my time reading love stories and watching TV. Ah, Rotation is on, this Ranka is a hell of a journalist...

Dear viewers, welcome to another Rotation. Before summer break, I have promised to solve the mystery of the stolen ring, and now I shall fulfill my promise with exclusive news concerning the arrest of the man who has stolen the ring. His name is Ekrem Ljatifi, with the place of residence in cardboard box settlement by the Danube. The arrest took place this morning on the left bank of the Danube, two hundred meters upstream from the sign showing one thousand one hundred and sixty eighth kilometer of the Danube. Special units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs made the arrest. The following footage is exclusive and due to the lack of time - it's unedited. Let's have a look.

Dear Lord, they can hardly catch him. I can see it in his face that he's a criminal. Look at him resisting, yet knowing that he is in a dead-end situation. What did you think bro? That you can swim in the Danube and get away?! Try swimming in this mud...

Ekrem admitted to the crime he was charged for, and let me just remind the viewers - he was charged of stealing a very valuable medieval ring from the Museum of Pancevo. Unfortunately, during the arrest, the ring fell into the marsh. As you can see, the whole area is now marked and the special diving teams of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia have been searching the marsh all day. Until the end of this documentary or better yet until 6 o'clock this afternoon we haven't received the information that the ring has been found. We assume that the search shall be continued in the morning. The next thing we are about to see is a tactical exercise of helicopter units of Serbia and Montenegro police forces in the canyon of the river Tara...

Is it possible that Branko has bought the ring from that Gipsy??? I can't even think about it, the guy admitted everything and they could arrest Branko. Now they can't publish that the Gipsy has already sold the ring... Oh my God, I don't know what to think...I have to call him, I have to...

"Hello Branko..."

"Hey, hi ... I'm so glad to hear from you..."

"Are you all right?"

"Not so bad, I have a cold, but I'll pull through... what about you? You sound like you're speaking through the nose as well?"

"Yes, yes... we'll talk some other time... this is not what it may look like, I just had a very bad dream and you were in it, so I just wanted to check if you were OK. Bye now."

I instantly turned the TV off and the radio on. I turned on the deck and started the camouflage. Lying in a fetal position, I observe the scales' movements. The backlight of VU meters disturbs me while I'm focusing on the scales. My eyes should have got used to the light and then I'd see the scales better. However, it all becomes even more and more blurred. Something starts tickling me on the top of my nose. I mechanically wipe my nose with a finger and I realize it's wet. I am such a coward, I can't even admit to myself that I am

crying, let alone that I'm crying for Branko. I am trying to find the reasons why he has bought the ring from that Gipsy just to justify my crazy ideas, but the guy is clearer than my tear. You can fool yourself, but not Branko. The whole Serbia is watching Rotation, why shouldn't he? He, like, doesn't have a clue that you wanted to tell him you've made a big mistake? You hung up the phone, like the greatest coward. Do you girl really think that he'll call you and say "I forgive you everything... all your foolishness"? Even if he calls, then something's wrong with him and he's definitely not the guy for you. The phone is on the bed, and you just keep on crying... crying... I hate you, Olja... I hate you....

* * * * *

No one has yet invented the name for the mafia which was digging the cultivated fields, searching for the long forgotten cultural heritage, so Majstorovic got the chance of inventing a name for the criminals who rushed to search for the ring where Ekrem had lost it. Of course, he didn't check the marsh's distance from the first Danube mileage sign for nothing. He had the special units deployed in surrounding natural shelters, hoping that the Austrian connection would take the bait. Unfortunately, the only ones who bought it were hi-tech diggers of the ancient treasures. He wouldn't even have the grounds to put them in custody, because the judge wouldn't sign the detention order for the man caught in the marked zone with a shovel in his hands, if the diggers hadn't brought their full research equipment. Sometimes the Earth itself gives birth to a diamond, in the presence of the one who knows a difference between a diamond and an ordinary stone that it most often resembles very much. While searching the suspects' flats, Majstorovic found the bunch of excavated national heritage and decided to keep one ring. No one had any doubts that he would use the ring for the right purpose, so nobody mentioned the ring in the report on temporarily seized items.

"Good day, mister curator!"

"Good day, inspector! I'm very glad to see you. Would you like some coffee or a glass of homemade brandy?"

"Both."

"Yes, I'll order the coffee right away."

"Your secretary could make us some coffee while we are talking."

The curator smiled so softly at the secretary that she immediately got up and headed to the door, pulling her skirt up, as she had obviously forgotten the reason of her getting up. When Majstorovic measured her from head to foot, she, like any refined woman, started pulling her skirt down.

"Inspector, allow me to congratulate you personally on solving this case. Too bad you could not find the ring. But, what can we do, sometimes luck..."

"Who said we couldn't find the ring?" He took a transparent bag out from his pocket and put it on the desk. "We found it, but not everything is for the public."

"Yes... I understand," the curator nodded his head affirmatively while he was trying to unwrap the ring: "but, this is not the ring."

"Take a closer look."

"No, no... this is not the one."

"All right... all right... it's not. And would it be enough if your museum would get a present containing around fifty rings, bracelets and those... they start with a "d...d" oh, help me Sir... you put those on your head..."

“Diadems.”

“That’s right. There are some other things that I can’t even name. Huh, would that be enough for you to accept this ring as the right one?”

“I... I don’t understand a word you’re saying,” the curator was very frightened, as well as Majstorovic who thought that he could be left in the lurch.

“We caught some treasure diggers, so I thought that, once we confiscate the treasure it could belong to your museum. I’ll make some small interventions, that won’t be a problem. Of course, in return, you will confirm that this is the stolen ring and put it back to the collection. There are so many rings in that seized treasure, that you can put some other ring in its place.”

Curator hesitated opening his mouth, but it wouldn’t take the inspector to figure out that he started considering it. That’s why Majstorovic intervened in this matter, like in so many others before.

“I hope that you are aware of the fact that I can pull my strings and let the treasure be given to another museum. If you accept my proposal, you will be in the spotlight and this news will help the public forget all about that babbling if it’s a female or male ring, and who has made mistakes in the exhibits presentation... Tell me what is bothering you?”

“You see, this museum has collections and legacy from the territory surrounding Belgrade. It would not be nice to claim something to be from this location when the truth is - we do not have a clue where it comes from. It would not be fair to the people visiting the museum.”

“No personal restrains on your behalf?”

“No, this is not so personal.”

“Then tell me - which location I should present to the public?”

“I do not understand...”

“Come on, show me the spot on this map and we’ll publish that the lost treasure has been found there...”

* * * * *

When I was a freshman, I had to visit the doctor once, because I had a tightening sensation in my chest. The doctor, just days from retirement, carefully listened to me asked questions about my exams and love life and then told me that the only cure for my situation was facing my problems. I asked him if I had really snapped. He just smiled at me and said: “Girl, if you really snapped you wouldn’t know it, and therefore you couldn’t ask. Take a break and then face the problem, and the pain will disappear, you’ll see”. I remember him being on first name basis when he was telling me that. He wanted me to remember those words. Maybe in time I would have forgotten if he hadn’t cured me with them. People rarely forget such folk medicine.

After so many years, I’ve been having a tightening feeling in my chest again. I know the cure to my illness; I just have to apply it.

I am looking at the dewlap and eye bags of my boss, who keeps babbling about the collection of stories which has become a success. I am nodding my head, hoping that he’ll understand how much I am really interested in his story. Does he really think that I am here just to take a copy of the book? He finally stops talking.

“Why don’t the covers say ‘second edition?’”

“What do you mean Olja? This is only the first edition?”

“I’m not asking you about this collection, I’m asking about my novel. Why?”

“Well, that designer has overlooked that and gave it to the print without correcting it. Eh, there are dumbbells all over the place. I’ll correct the mistake next time, I promise!”

“Listen to me carefully, you fat pig! You printed the third edition a long time ago, and tried to screw me up by saying that the sales were low. But this ends right now!”

I got up and started walking to the door. Very slowly, but shaking my hips heavily. I knew that he was about to say something:

“Are you talking to me?”

I turned around, leant my hand against my hip and started grinning.

“No, I’ m talking to the fucking secretary of 'EvilBook' publishing House. I just came here to tell you that I printed a thousand copies of my novel under your label with the exact same covers. I want to tell you that I have pirated you and gave the copies to the street sellers. Oh yes... I’ll put that collection of stories on the Internet.”

I continued towards the door. I went out quietly and gently closed the door. I could have slammed them but I was afraid that they would bounce off and stay open. Bastards like this deserve to be left behind the closed doors.

* * * * *

Ljubisa told me not to save money on an attorney, but I didn’t even hire one. I didn’t kick a man, but a mongrel. When I thought about it, I could have hired one to protect my rights, since the footage had clearly shown the mongrel tearing my pants.

I come to the courtroom, the number of which is on the court order, and see some twenty people waiting patiently. What the hell is this? Non-Aligned Movement Summit and the summit of the Independent going on at the same time? I step aside and wait to see what happens. I try to take as decent position as possible, since among them there must be some journalist who will do his best to make a mountain out of a molehill. I have never dreamed that I will have to explain to anybody, other than the judge, how I hit a mongrel. If something does not surprise you around the corner, it does not mean that something else won’t surprise you somewhere in the clearing. Some people have crossed their hands, so I have done the same.

The hour of the trial is getting closer. I move slightly to the right to take my cell phone out of the bag and turn it off. I stop my movement and my breath. Olja is walking boldly down the hall, looking at the numbers above the courtrooms. No need to wave, since she noticed me the moment she has taken her eyes off the wall. I feel a hurricane in my stomach and a slight cramp on my face. Some tickling in my nose, but I keep myself from crying. Even if I do cry, at least I’d know the reason. She doesn’t take a smile off her face. I have never seen her so elegant. A tight olive suit with terra-cotta patterns and buttons spray the field of elegance with droplets of sex appeal. She comes close enough for a hug, but she only shakes hands. I accept her hello.

“Branko, I came here to support you...”

“Thanks, you don’t know how much this means to me,” I know that this is not the right time for sentiment, so I change the subject, “how did you remember the time?”

“I just remembered the date and I asked your worker about the exact court and time. I hope you won’t fire him.”

“No, no way...”

A woman comes out of the courtroom, carrying papers, announcing the case of MORCA against me. She asks the involved parties to approach and others to be patient for a few more seconds. I look Olja straight in the eyes, touch her sleeve with my fingers and go to the door. The recording clerk sends me to the Judge. Another man comes in after me, and the recording clerk follows him. She wants to see my ID. As she is writing down the information, the man addresses me; I guess he's the Judge.

"Where is your legal representative?"

"I haven't hired one. I think I can defend myself in this case."

"You have the legal right to defense, and you know best if you can defend yourself." The Judge approaches me and continues quietly: "You have surely seen the video recording, based on which you have been charged..."

"Yes, yes I have seen it."

"Since you do not have a lawyer, I would like to ask you not to deny the criminal act. Your remorse would help me in reaching the final verdict."

"I did that and I wouldn't like to avoid my responsibility."

"Thank you very much. Please, take your ID so that you do not forget it later. Let us get going."

I turn to the bench and see all those people who were out there, now sitting all over the hall. Olja is alone, physically farthest from me. The Judge starts addressing us, and I mechanically get up.

"Feel free to sit down. Branko, you are in charge of attacking a dog in Pancevo on the night of the fourth of June, causing it serious injuries, thus violating Article two hundred sixty nine of the Criminal Law of the Republic of Serbia. This crime is punishable by a monetary fine or imprisonment up to a year. Let us all have a look at the video and then both parties shall have their saying."

The recording clerk turns the display toward us and plays the footage of my misdeed. Barking of the mongrel disturbs the dead silence, then the unidentified sounds coming from his presence around my legs and his whining in the end.

"I kindly ask MORCA representative to make his statement."

"Honorable Judge, this is a typical example of a loathsome attack on an animal who could not defend itself because of the shock. The footage clearly shows that the accused was molesting the animal. The man who cold bloodedly molests an animal is also capable of molesting another human being. I demand that the accused gets a severe penalty. Thank you."

"Thank you. Branko, do you have anything to say?"

"Honorable Judge, I think that you defined the relation between the mongrel and me wrongly in your introductory speech. I didn't attack the mongrel first, it attacked me and I was just defending myself. I'm not denying that I injured it, but I deny being the one who attacked it first. The clip shows more mongrels who were snarling at me. I had to defend myself."

"Branko, what do you mean by saying I have defined the relation wrongly? The footage clearly shows that you have attacked the dog first. I cannot conclude that the other dogs would attack you based just on their snarling."

"Honorable Judge, you are looking at the incomplete video recording. Namely, the beginning of this event, when the mongrel attacked me, wasn't recorded or it was cut off and the rest was uploaded on the Internet as such. I think that you cannot decide who attacked who first based on the incomplete recording."

"I am dealing with the evidence only. I cannot judge about what has happened before. MORCA, you have your saying."

"Honorable Judge, the use of word 'mongrel' speaks for itself enough for you to understand the attitude of the accused towards animals. If he could answer us - why did he keep going through the passage if he saw potential danger in those dogs? A dog does not bite without a warning. If he got his warning, why didn't he turn around and walked away through the passage on the opposite side?"

"Mister Judge, the word 'mongrel' is very much used in our folk poetry and literature in general; therefore I think that the qualification of my attitude towards animals based on my vocabulary is highly inappropriate. While we are at it, the word 'dog' is not even suitable for our language. If you were attacked by a big mongrel, you'd probably say 'huge mongrel' and everyone would understand - which I could not say is so simple if you use the word 'dog'. Anyway, let me answer the question. It is true that we share living space with animals, but we have to make priorities. No abandoned mongrels can define where I should walk by some warnings. I assessed that I could walk by them, lying in the passage, so I went there. They attacked me instantly and you can see the rest on the video recording. Why doesn't this gentleman explain what these mongrels are doing in the streets? Don't they belong in the house yards or those dog asylums?"

"Is this all you have to say Branko?"

"This is the answer to the question and I would kindly ask the audience to stop shouting that I am a monster."

"I cannot hear anyone shouting that, but should I hear, I will react. If you think that the stray dogs have jeopardized you, you should file a complaint; this is not the issue here. Tell me, Branko..."

My fucking cell phone is ringing! I immediately put my hand in my bag and press any button just to make it stop. I take it out and press the off button.

"Please, Branko, this is the Court after all, show some respect."

"I apologize..."

"Tell me... after you walked out of the passage, why have you returned and kicked the dog several times again?"

"Because he was snarling and I wasn't sure that he wouldn't jump on me once I turned my back. My pants had already been torn... that was enough for me to distrust a mad mongrel. Once he started running away from me, I stopped chasing it. If I were an animal molester, as it is attributed to me, I would continue kicking it until it died."

"Yes, yes... that dog started running away limping, because you had obviously broken some of its bones."

"Honorable Judge, I would not like to belittle your conclusions, but a football player walks with a limp after a tackle, even though he has no bones broken."

"Do you have anything else to say in your defense?"

"I am truly sorry if I have injured that animal, but I just had to defend myself. I hope that you will respect my right to self defense."

"All right... I have analyzed all the evidence and your statements and I can conclude that you have not been in such danger to have to kick that dog so much. Proper self defense includes, in some cases, avoiding conflicts, which has not happened in this case, but has resulted in you attacking the dog. I find you guilty, and having in mind that you have no prior criminal convictions I

sentence you to a month of alternative imprisonment which you shall be informed about later. You have the right to appeal...”

“Shame on you, Judge!” I recognize Olja’s voice and instinctively turn around, raising my hand which should calm and stop her, “you corrupted creature, you reach verdicts without evidence.” No, she just had to stand up and say what she had to say. Typical of her.

“This is obstruction of justice. I shall pretend I have not heard this, but if I hear one more word, I shall act accordingly to protect the dignity of this Court... You have the right to appeal against this verdict...”

“Judge, you disgrace... you judge based on the video clip which has been cut on purpose. Anyone can plant the evidence.”

“Security, would you be so kind as to throw this rude lady out and write down her ID number.”

She realized what she had done. She just clenched her fists, hit something invisible in the air and started walking to the door, where two uniformed musclemen, once popularly called bouncers, were waiting for her.

IIII IIII III

As soon as Ekrem’s foot stepped over the sliding door of the Central Prison, Majstorovic opened the door of his car and headed toward him. Ekrem put his hands into his pockets, trying to protect himself from the cold. This action did not reduce the coldness of the look which he gave to Majstorovic.

“Hello Ekrem.”

“Hello enemy.”

“Suit yourself. Take this jacket, to keep you from freezing. It’s nothing special, but at least it’s new.”

“I told you I don’t take anything from copper’s hands.”

“Alright. I’m not going to beg you to take the jacket, but I am begging you to take these papers.”

“What do they say?”

“What I promised you. The verdict. You’re convicted to as much as you have already served. If you ever sign your name, make sure it looks like this signature on the paper.”

“Give them to me.”

“Now that it’s all over, no one will ask you about the ring anymore. Can you please tell me who do you have in Austria?”

“Are you also spying on my kids?”

“No. I have a snitch in jail who told me that you phoned someone in Austria.”

Ekrem started walking along the sidewalk. He didn’t know where exactly he was going, he just wanted to walk as far away from the inspector and the prison as possible. When in Belgrade, he’d always try to find a familiar landmark - Belgrade Palace. Once he’d find it, crossing the Danube would be easy. He heard inspector’s footsteps, but he didn’t turn around. He didn’t have to, since the inspector was already standing in his way.

“What do you want?”

“It’s all over now; just tell me who did you call in Austria?”

“I called my son from my first marriage to tell him to take care of his brothers. Once I leave this country, everything will be over. I just want to go somewhere where enemies like you don’t exist. I guess there’s some country left where people don’t hate Gypsies and Albanians.”

Majstorovic saw that Ekrem started losing patience, so he moved to the side a bit. Ekrem made a few steps and then heard a well known voice:

“You’re wrong.”

“I was born wrong.”

Ekrem continued walking without turning around. He didn’t know where he was going, but he knew what to look for. Ever since he was a child, they taught him to believe in luck more than in God, so he was an optimist in his belief that he’d find what he was looking for once again.

* * * * *

I’d never watch Rotation if didn’t bring Olja back into my arms. I am watching it now out of respect... and because of Olja’s wish for us to watch it together. We are waiting for the episode which will finally close down an important chapter of our life together. I also know that she’s really looking forward to the moment when they’ll announce that the ring has been found, so that the eye of the camera would say more than our own eyes. I just wanted her to forgive me, because I knew I was guilty. I never wondered, though, if I would forgive her such an attack if I had been innocent. What would have brought us together if I by any chance I had bought the copy and been with a business partner that very night, and the Gypsy who stole it was never found? Probably nothing. Then I’d have to lie about the reason for going to Pancevo. If I had lied to her that I was with another woman, that would’ve been most convincing, since women find it easiest to believe in such stories... but maybe I would’ve screwed myself for good. All other lies wouldn’t have been punished so harshly, but wouldn’t have been convincing enough to remove her suspicion about the ring. In that case, I would have risked everything just to keep her. Now, I am just a bad guy who accidentally became the good guy and is now in position to forgive someone. On the other hand, she yelled at the judge because she wanted to be forgiven. When we love each other, it doesn’t matter who’ll forgive whom.

Dear viewers, you are watching the third October edition of Rotation. Finally, we have the chance to see the epilogue of the medieval ring affair. Yesterday, the divers of the Special Forces of Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs have found the ring. You are watching the exclusive footage recorded by our crew.

Perpetrator of this criminal offence, Ekrem Ljatici, living in cardboard box settlement near Borca was charged for this crime and he was released pending trial.

“The man made such a mess, and they released him pending trial. Our judiciary is really amazing!”

I prepared myself for such comments, so I just nod my head and silently indicate that I want to hear the rest of the show.

Authenticity of the ring was also confirmed by the curator of the City of Belgrade Museum, as the ring disappeared from this museum’s collection. You’re watching the interview.

“Are you the author of this exhibition?”

“That is right.”

“Can you verify the authenticity of this ring?”

“Of course. Thanks to the efforts of the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs, especially to inspector Majstorovic and the diving team, a very valuable ring was returned to our museum. I hope that the citizens of Serbia shall appreciate the efforts of the Ministry of Internal Affairs because thanks to them, future generations will have the honor of enjoying our cultural heritage too.”

We hereby end the ring affair. Serbia has just got another mafia. Namely...

“Branko, did you see that curator slime ball?”

* * * * *

The Indian summer ended in just a day, but Stana didn't mind, because she harvested those few potatoes she had planted, and she dragged all the logs she needed from the woods a long time ago. Heavy rain and cold couldn't ever ruin any of her plans. She fed the sheep earlier today and started walking down the trails and paths that she knew well. During the day she used the shortcuts near other people's yards, and during the night she carried her lantern which illuminated the forgotten cemetery paths and rare country roads.

“Hey Stana!!!”

“Hey Milenija!!!”

“Come 'round to talk for a while.”

“Some other time. I mustn't be late; they won't accept bets after eight.”

“Oh, Lord... that gambling is going to kill you...”

“Mind your own business Milenija...”

“Yeah, you're right... but, come in woman, just for a short while, until the rain stops.”

“Don't you worry, I have a raincoat. Cheers!”

The only three modern civilization inventions Stana accepted were curdling milk vinegar, rubber boots and plastic raincoat.

As soon as Stana came into the tavern, witty comments could be heard, as all the regulars adored her. She just smiled, raised her hand and continued to the counter. She took out a small package wrapped in paper from her bosom and put it on the counter.

“Here's three pairs of socks and put them on that ticket of mine.”

“C'mon Stana, you owe me twenty six pairs. I can't tolerate this anymore.”

“My son, listen, the day got shorter... that's all I could knit... this granny won't owe you anything, don't you worry...”

“I'll take this just to reduce your debt, but I take no more bets...”

Stana just looked at him angrily and glanced at the tavern. She saw her peer sitting at the corner table, with his arms crossed, taking a nap. She came slowly. Knowing that he's a bit hard of hearing, she shook him slowly. Her peer Radivoje just raised his eyebrows, his head and arms remaining in the same position.

“Speak, Stana!”

“Radivoje, would you borrow me 300 dinars? That pest took away all the socks I brought.”

“You're really torturing me, Stana...”

“I know these are the hard times, Radivoje, but if you could...”

“It's not that Stana, I've just sat in my favorite position... and now I have to move my hands...”

Radivoje browsed a bit through his fat wallet that was full of receipts, and counted three hundred dinars. Stana quickly took the bills and came to the counter. When her silent eye communication with the bartender ended, she

took a small stool and went in Radivoje's direction. She immediately started complaining about an eagle taking a hen right from her yard. The boss stopped her mourning.

"Folks, the bets are over. No more bets. Total sum paid up in this round is eight thousand six hundred dinars. When the tavern takes its half, there is four thousand and three hundred dinars left for players. Previous rounds transfer is twenty four thousand seven hundred, which makes a total of twenty nine thousand dinars. Please, be quiet, we are about to start."

People in the tavern started stirring, and Stana approached Radivoje and started talking.

"Radivoje, would you drop by one day and kill that bloody eagle for me?"

"Shut up Stana, the game is about to start."

"No, no, not yet... there are some reports first."

"I am too old for those things."

"Why? Come on Radivoje, if you're old you're not disabled. All you have to do is aim and the rifle will do its part..."

"All right Stana, the game is starting."

Graveyard silence came across the river, sneaked through the cracks in the wall and shaky windows and soon filled the tavern. Everyone was looking at the big TV with the convex screen in front of them.

This is the end of the ring affair. Serbia has got another mafia. Namely, in a village called Ritopek near Belgrade, precisely on Plavinacki Potok location, a six member gang, which was only a branch of the museum mafia, was arrested. This highly equipped and particularly well organized criminal group used state of the art technology to locate the underground treasures. Perpetrators of this criminal act had in time become so courageous, that they have even carried out excavations in broad daylight. However we have the information that the group was followed for quite a while by the special department of the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs in charge of highly transparent crime combat. It is suspected that this group has close relations with the foreign groups which followed the entire action via Internet. Here is the footage of catching the criminal group by the Serbian special units.

Different swears started filling the tavern: For fuck's sake, when the hell will they get to talk about the healthcare mafia? Fuck, I have to change the judicial mafia; they arrest the petty thieves only. Oh, the next one will be the food mafia. When will they finally talk about the anti-hail mafia? Grandma Stana went to the counter shouting:

"All drinks are on me! To remember when Stana won the lottery."

Stana came to the bar and spoke quietly to the boss:

"Give me my money."

The boss was just standing there quietly, counting the bills under the counter. When he put the bills on the counter, Stana started counting them out loud.

"A thousand, two thousand, one, two, three hundred. There you go - for those twenty three pairs of socks. Stana won't knit any more this year, and if I die next year... I'll have the sweetest of rests before that."

"But Stana, you owe me my home-made socks..."

"Get out of here! I know how much you've been charging the dealers for my socks. Bring me and Radivoje a kilo of lamb and quarter of soft brandy."

The boss wanted to say something, but he gave up when Stana raised her eyebrows and her bent finger that looked like a hook. She still kept the money in her hand when she addressed to the tavern guests:

“Listen to me carefully. This grandma is starting to forget. If any one of you wants to steal from me, the money is in the cayenne pepper box in the cupboard. Don’t break my bones and cut my throat for nothing. The drinks are about to come...”

Stana got the applause, but she just smiled and raised her hand up to her bent head. Radivoje was smiling too. While Stana was hanging around the bar he swiftly switched his armchair with Stana’s stool. He was an old school man.

“I knew they’d get as far as Biograd,” murmured Stana, “Oh, Radivoje, my friend, we waved goodbye to the King, to Tito, to those after Tito... but nothing has changed.”

“You can’t change the people.”

“You’re so damn right. You still can’t do anything unless you bribe someone with some treat.”

“Oh, it goes from generation to generation. Who did you bribe, Stana?”

“Well, you don’t have to know everything...”

* * * * *

It was the usual atmosphere in home of Milosavljevic family. Ranka’s parents sitting at the table with a plate full of peeled apple skins. Apples are a kind of a specialty used to complement their enjoyment during their daughter’s show. After the show ended, the husband took his wife’s hand and excitedly added:

“Thank you for insisting on saving for her schooling. She is our greatest investment.”

“I hope you won’t ask questions about our life achievements any more. I told you that we have great children and that’s enough.”

“I have just realized what a wonderful child we’ve raised.”

* * * * *

Another season spent in jail did not make any formal change in Ekrem’s life. He carried on with his life where he left off, since collecting paper did not depend much on the season. During the time spent in prison the only comforting thing was that this year all of his kids would be together longer than usual.

He parked his vehicle in front of the windowless half of the house and headed to the cranky wooden shelf on which a bucket and small pot stood. He put his jacket and sweater on the shelf and started rolling up the sooty sleeves of his shirt.

“Miki my son, bring a towel and soap.”

As always, the kid ran out delighted to see his old man and immediately took the pot and started helping him wash up.

“Where’s your brother?”

“On the meadow, playing football.”

“Alright. When you help me, go and get him, I don’t want to chase him in the dark. How was at the school today? Did the teacher ask you anything?”

“No, nothing. Daddy, a man in white suit is coming this way.”

Ekrem took the towel and saw the man in a white coat approaching. When he went past the neighbor’s house, Ekrem figured out that he probably wanted to talk to him. He didn’t like the stranger, so he signalized the kid to go and find

his brother. Ekrem was wiping his hands and waiting for the stranger to address him, as he was approaching very self-confidently.

“Good day Ekrem.”

“Good day to you, too. Who are you?”

“My name is Zarko Radic, agent for...”

“An agent again! Well, I just got out of the joint. Did someone rob the Parliament?”

Ekrem raised his voice and started clenching his fists. Zarko quickly introduced himself again, in order to avoid the misunderstanding as soon as possible.

“My name is Zarko Radic. I’m a commercial agent of Belje jewelry from Slovenia.”

“Oh good, I thought you were one of those agents.”

“No, no.”

“What the hell do you want?”

“I’d like to come in and have a word with you...”

“I don’t have time for long talk, I must prepare the dinner to my kids. Tell me, what do you need?”

“It’s a bit awkward, I need to show you some papers and...”

“Agent, say what you want or get the hell out of my yard.”

“Our company manufactures jewelry and we wanted you to be in our advertisement. We saw your arrest on TV and wanted to offer you a contract for the shooting.”

“Are you fooling around with me?” Ekrem raised his eyebrows, making his lips look slightly larger, as he kept them wide open.

“Do I look like someone who fools around?”

“Only popinjays and clowns wear such suits. How much?”

“Well ... we didn’t have money in mind, but some kind of compensation...”

“My kids can’t eat compensation. How much?”

“We were thinking about building you a prefabricated house.”

“Are you fucking with me? I have one, I don’t need two.”

“No, no, Ekrem, this is a real prefabricated one, made of solid material.”

“I don’t want anything that can be dismantled! I want a real house. I know how much I’m worth. Four million people saw my arrest. The lady said that yesterday. I am illiterate, but I can hear well. You are free to go if you don’t like it.”

“Slow down Ekrem... We do not have enough money to buy or build you a real house. There’s a company which owes us money and the only thing they can give us in return is a prefab house. We can deliver it and install it in two days instead of this one. There won’t be any leaks from the rain, no draft...”

“Ok then, but install it somewhere in Slovenia. Any Gipsy settlement will do, I don’t care as long as it’s in Slovenia.”

“Ekrem, you are not a citizen of Slovenia, you can’t live there.”

“Why can’t I? Find me a wife, a husband, anything, just to go there. All she has to be is healthy and not too old. Some old timer like me would also do.”

“Take it easy Ekrem, I am not a marriage agent, I’m an advertising one.”

“So advertise me, say that I have a house, that I make movies, every one of them will want to marry me. My kids are quiet and obedient... I can do everything around the house...”

“But Ekrem, can you understand... I am not authorized to do this.”

“Agent, no Slovenia - no film. I know how much I’m worth. Four million watching me...”

“Alright, I have to call my boss. You want to let me in now?”

“Yeah bro, of course, do come in,” Ekrem walked in front of the agent to open the door for him, but he suddenly turned around, “Tell your boss that I’m not bathing before St. George’s Day.”

“Get the f... you scared the shit out of me. It’ll be recorded in the studio, there’s no water involved...”

* * * * *

Rodoljub received the agency report with ratings for all shows which were broadcasted at the same time as Rotation. As soon as he thoroughly analyzed it, he called Borivoje and asked him to do the same and give him his opinion. After a few moments, Borivoje did so.

“Boss, this is rigged. It turned out that the whole Serbia was watching Grand Show Stars and Rotation. When I do the math, it seems like there are more people watching TV then officially registered in Serbia.”

“No Borivoje, this is absolutely possible. Half of the Serbian population has two TVs. They are listening to Grand Show Stars on one and watching the Rotation on the other TV at the same time. Watching the arrest while enjoying the music. That’s the definition of real pleasure.”

“Boss, are you joking?”

“No. When did I make such jokes?”

“It seems like that to me.”

“Yes, but it only seems so. You see, Borivoje, I have tried everything to sober people out and help them break away from inappropriate entertainment, but it was in vain. I even arrange for Serbia to get faster Internet, so that people could download and watch more movies, and less of this media broadcasts... again in vain. Did you watch the Rotation?”

“Yes boss, I’ll cut her to bits, she’ll be as quiet as a lamb.”

“Eh, Borivoje, she is not the problem, the nation is a problem. People don’t find cases with court epilogues interesting. They want to know everything before the trial has even started, so they could be the judges. In this particular case, people would like to tear apart that Gypsy for stealing the ring, thus diminishing their responsibility for failed exams, poverty or broken marriages. They are watching TV and measuring the hardest punishment possible for him in order to reduce their own. When such people start judging, decapitation cannot be avoided. They didn’t invent guillotine during the French Revolution by chance. They had to decapitate enormous number of people in a short time...”

“Boss, are you crying?”

“No Borivoje, I became allergic to something in this room, but I can’t find out to what. Borivoje, beware of the bad habit. If you develop one, it takes a long time to recognize it, and even longer time to get rid of it. Majstorovic has recognized his bad habit, but he is so close to pension that he doesn’t want to get rid of it. Now people are yet to recognize it, but I am afraid that they’ll retire before they do that... Borivoje, I am moving to another room tomorrow, where I won’t have the allergy for sure, and therefore the cause will become irrelevant. I am tired of analyzing the causes Borivoje. You may go back to your regular duties...”

* * * * *

Ljubisa must have watched the Rotation, since he called me the next day to celebrate a happy ending of the ring affair. Even though he didn't call me often, I knew that he was worried, just like a real parent would be. If I had screwed things up by his mistake, he wouldn't have been as worried as he was now. In case of a real mess, a real parent's worry is never lessened by knowing that some force majeure or someone else's mistake has caused it.

It was raining the whole day, disrupting the very thought of walking, let alone the walk itself, so I had to appear in his flat. He poured me a brandy and passed the menu from the nearby pizzeria. I pointed to the pizza richest in toppings; he didn't even take a look at the menu, but instantly reached for the phone. Based on the conversation, I figured out that he was their regular customer. He's not the type who swears he likes cooking, but would secretly use restaurant's services if he had enough money. Since most people are aware of where they live, they keep telling others and themselves that they adore cooking, because they know that the state supports their oaths, and the chances of being ashamed are thus minimized. Our glasses were half empty, since we'd already made an informal toast, and Ljubisa started the official toast:

"Branko, my son, I wish you all the best... watch out where you leave the cue ball next time. This time, the state covered it, but be aware that..."

Someone was at the door, probably the pizza guy, since the pizzeria was just across the street. He walks to the door. I hear him saying thanks, and then I see him carrying two paper bags into the kitchen. He just couldn't resist objecting about the cue ball. Come to think of it, he got the moment right.

He comes back carrying a big metal tray, where they used to put roast pork. Today it's only crackers and pizza. He goes back to get some beers. From a liter plastic bottle which the bricklayers nowadays call "a small beer", he pours the foamy liquid in two large mugs. We both reached for our slices, but we gave up the moment our fingers got closer to them, because they were smoking hot.

"Could you make me a device for remote transferring of the video signal?"

"Not a problem, and where would the surveillance take place?"

"In hotel rooms."

"You haven't told me about buying a hotel?" I'm trying to laugh, unsuccessfully. Even if he bought the hotel, what would be the use of room surveillance?

"No, no, I want to film politicians in hotel rooms."

"Come on, stop fucking around; take a look at the Criminal Proceedings Law under the 'punishment for blackmail' chapter."

"I don't want to film them for blackmail. They were all blackmailed a long time ago. What is left for me is pure pornography, since they are always in bed with the best chicks."

Hazy steam above the tray is mixing with the smoke from his cigarette. I can now see his ghostly face again, but not as mystical as it seemed before. I bite my pizza and nod my head as a sign of approval. I really don't want to ask him if such a thought is a consequence of a need or of a pure habit.

Dear viewers, we shall start with the breaking news: Serbian coefficient rapidly jumped from one to one point four unit. Namely, starting today, the average Serbian family will lack one point four salary a month in order to

survive. Due to many opposing opinions as to what is the cause of this shock, we shall devote special attention to this issue during the news.

(3-1) Part of the city.

(3-2) Suburban area of Belgrade.

(5-3) Part of the city.

(6-4) Same.

(7-5) Homemade cheese pie.

(7-6) Industrial cheese or meat pie, sold at the bakeries (typical Serbian breakfast).

(9-7) A historical Slavic title, equivalent of Prince and Duke.

(10-8) Old people incorrectly call Belgrade - Biograd.

(10-9) Irony to grandma's mistake - Biograd na Moru is a completely different city.

(11-10) Irony - St. Kyriaki's Day is in October.