

Published by
SLOVENE WRITERS'
ASSOCIATION,
SLOVENE P.E.N. and
ASSOCIATION OF
THE SLOVENE LITERARY
TRANSLATORS

From 1962 published
under the title of
LE LIVRE SLOVÈNE

Editorial address:
Ljubljana, Tomšičeva 12,
Slovenia, Yugoslavia
Telephone: 061 / 214 144
Editor-in-chief: Jani VIRK
Graphic design: Rajko VIDRIH
Graphic production:
FORUM LABACENSE
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WRITERS' ASSOCIATION,
1991
YU ISSN 0459-6242

prose

Contemporary Slovene Short Stories	5
Drago JANČAR	7
<i>Death of Mary-of-the-Snows</i>	11
<i>The Jump off the Liburnia</i>	25
<i>An Incident in a Meadow</i>	33
<i>The look of an Angel</i>	41
<i>Aethiopica, Repetition</i>	50
<i>Ultima Creatura</i>	62
Branko GRADIŠNIK	77
<i>Oeopath</i>	81
<i>Mouseday</i>	92
Uroš KALČIČ	103
<i>Spirits</i>	107
Jani VIRK	129
<i>The Door</i>	133
<i>Rošlin in Verjanko</i>	140
<i>Regatta</i>	147
Andrej BLATNIK	159
<i>Billie Holiday</i>	163
<i>Kyoto</i>	172

essays

Aleksander ZORN	
<i>The Heady Times of Boundless Literature</i>	187
Tomo VIRK	
<i>From Literature to Literature</i>	202
Drago BAJT	
<i>Slovene Short Prose of the Last Twenty Years</i>	211

dean telephoned and explained to him that everything had gone too far, that he knew his past but it could not justify the incident. That he should change universities, his job or himself, if he could.

Shevchenko changed everything. He handed in his resignation. He moved. He found a job as a revisor with an insurance company. He worked exclusively at night. The job was badly paid and uninteresting. But it was solitary and quiet. That was all he wanted: solitude and peace. The following years he revised insurance materials at night, and in the day he went to a park, where he spent long hours sitting by a stream where weeping willows grew. He pulled out the hollow incisor himself, third from the left at the top. His gums became inflamed, but his wife cured them with camomile tea her relatives sent from the homeland.

On Saturdays and Sundays, when there were no revisions to be done, he tried to sleep, since the split afternoon sleeps were not worthy of the name. His wife, who every night senselessly switched channels on TV, often had to get up and with energetic jolts put a stop to his moaning, sometimes even screaming. Michail Shevchenko did not moan because of the pain in his tooth, cheek bone, eye or brain. His dreams were always the same. The prison quack from his distant homeland kept leaning over him. When he moved, Shevchenko could see a red poster with bold black letters on the opposite wall. The features on the quack's face became more and more similar to those on the face of a black-haired boy with a scarf round his neck.

*Translated by
Lili Potpara*

THE LOOK OF AN ANGEL

ABOVE the tops of the Pohorje pines the wind is howling like an unhappy and lonely wolf. At unequal intervals it moves away, and somewhere in the valley it roars as if its invisible mass is hitting an invisible barrier. Then it comes back and whirls the clouds of snow among the trees, so that the trunks around the clearing screech and whine. The look of an angel rapidly moves down, pauses on the bent tops of the pines, like a blade it cuts through the air, and a moment later through the dark crown, among the branches, down the crusted trunk. Below, there is less snow, more darkness and silence, interrupted by whining wood, its taut tissue and roots fixed in the ground-like claws. Now it runs above the ground, briskly avoiding the black bodies of the trees, it rises above the snow-covered bushes at the edge of the clearing. The wind is dragging behind a snowy mist over the sloping open space. Above it the field of vision extends, at the other side it is limited by the slope of a high hill disappearing into the cloudy zone on top. A wooden house is pressed against the foot of the ridge, window-deep in snow, to the left is another building, no path anywhere. Under the projecting roof two people are standing, wrapped in sheep skins. The smaller one is a woman, the stout one a man; they are standing immobile under

the roof, looking into the pathlessness before the house. Behind, the wind howls like a wolf on the ridgy slope, wails into the valley where it roars, and the roaring echo comes back. The woman looks up, following the bellowing of the snow storm. The man stirs, waves his hand, leans down, looks at her questioningly, glued with white eyeballs and tiny pupils to her white face, the woman shakes her head. The stout man draws himself up, again they stand motionless. In this immobility she once again moves her head, shakes it. The eye at the edge of the forest quietly watches them. Then it moves, silently it approaches across the inclined clearing, in a sharp straight line through the blizzard directly towards them; a few steps away it stops, listens to the beating of their hearts, the warm flowing of their blood, fast breathing. Then it rises and moves up, past the man's tanned, wide face, his small, incessantly winking eyes with crusted brows and lids, towards her; it observes the blotches on her young white face, lips turned blue, with its look it touches the thin blue vein pulsating on her temple. Through the gap of the half-open door it slides into the dark hall and further in. Into a low chamber, where a glimmering candle is palpating the murky corners. Where an old man is lying on a bed. Bony hands on the blanket reaching up to his neck, wrinkled pale face, beads of perspiration on his forehead. His eyes are closed, he is breathing feebly, he whines in a low voice. The flame of the candle twinkles, shadows dance across his face, he quickly opens his eyes. Anica, he says quietly, Anica. With a shaky hand he reaches for a cup on the chair by the bed, he tries to pull himself up on the elbow, overturns the cup, the liquid pours over the rim and starts slowly dripping onto the uneven wooden floor. He falls back on the bed, and calls her name with all his might, the name of Anica, who cannot hear, who is standing with a stout man under the roof, listening to the wailing

of the wind. The eye lurks motionless in the dark corner, under the crucifix. The old man is moving his lips, silently forming words. He slowly turns onto his hip, breathes heavily, and sees the candlelight flicker quickly around the room, by the door somebody is shaking snow off shoes. The woman walks in with the fur in her hand. She stops by the bed and looks at him. She stands for a long time, letting the time pass. The old man moves his body, and again he is lying on his back with his eyes fixed on the ceiling. Who were you with? he asks. Who was I supposed to be with? she asks. With Cretin, says the old man. Cretin is in the stable, says Anica. Good, says the old man, he can't come into the house. Anica steps to the bed, arranges his pillow, offers him her warm elbow, and his cold fingers close around it. He is looking at her face, his eyes are tired, they are looking at her face with hope. Her face looks weary, her eyes vacantly gaze ahead, just as they watched the whirling of the snow on the clearing in front of the house. The thin blue vein on her temple is not pulsating any more. The eye moves from under the crucifix to the bed, it lowers itself between their faces, between both looks, between the tired and the vacant. Somebody is here, the old man says. Who could it be, says Anica, no one's here. The look slides through the narrow slit of his eyelids, into the tiny pupils and red bulbs around them. The eye is now looking out of the old man, with his eyes, it takes over his sight. Jesus, the old man says, it hurts behind my forehead. Through the red mist the eye can see a woman's hand moving closer, it is blue with cold, her cold and rough skin touches the forehead, presses, stops. It rests there for a long time, the eyes close, weakness in the body, feeble heart beats peck at the dome of the skull. Her cold hand, warm elbow above it, her young body, from which vital juices are flowing into him, invisible juices, which have been flowing out of his body, merci-

lessly and invisibly all these days since he lay down. The hand moves away, he opens his eyes again, the room still looks misty red, the flame of the candle is quietly flickering. Her back, leaning towards the bed, cleaning the spilt liquid. Then her invisible movements around the room, some objects she is bringing to the bed and placing on the chair beside it. A rattle by the stove, she is putting wood on the fire, metal sounds. Then she sits for a long time, looking ahead of her, at the floor. Now he can discern familiar movements, the sound of the hair being undone, and then the slow, patient combing. I know who you are combing your hair for, the old man suddenly says and pulls himself up on his elbows, so that the room in front of him sways in every direction. For him, for Cretin. The heart beats are faster, although still weak. She does not answer, again she slowly fastens her hair. She turns her head towards him, he cannot see her eyes, her face is wrapped in a red mist. The wind shakes the house a few times, wails, howls, blows up the slope of the hill, disappears. I'll take your blood, she says quietly, gets up, his eyes close, he listens to her steps moving away, to the hall, then back to the bed. He opens his eyes and follows the cracked vessel she places on the chair. She is undoing his buttons, her hand opens the shirt on his chest, the other is taking little animals from the vessel and pressing them onto his skin. The leeches wiggle between her fingers, changing into cold, slimy, slightly rough touches. You will sleep now, she says. I don't want to sleep, says the old man. When I sleep, nightmares come. Nightmares, he says, nightmares are souls, which leave sleeping people and go scaring others in their sleep. The look runs out from the narrow slit of the old man's half-open lids, out into the misty red light, which immediately dissolves. It rises slowly to the ceiling, and from there watches the work with the leeches. You always say that before you fall asleep. The

eye is looking at her from the ceiling, she stands by the bed for a long time, waiting for him to sink into sleep. Feeble strength is flowing out of his body, his eyelids are closing, every now and then they open and reveal the white of the eyeballs. The bad blood will come out, Anica says. She is still standing by his side, until his lids close and only a sunken, tight wrinkle remains instead of eyes. She pours some water into a vessel, puts it on the stove to heat and slowly undresses in the meantime. With lips pressed tightly together she looks at her body, slightly drooping breasts, red streaks on the skin impressed by the rough clothes and ribbons. She puts the vessel on the floor, before she squats over it she looks towards the window a few times. Her lips are moving in an unknown dialogue, she is looking towards the window and around the room. The old man whimpers in his sleep, moans like the trees down by the roots, bent in the wind. Her hands reach for the hot water, scoop it, take it to her pubic region. She washes herself slowly and composedly, her lips still moving. Her look drifts to the crucifix in the corner, rests on it for a few moments, God sees everything, God knows everything. In the church, down in Sveti Lovrenc, a big, shiny God's eye is painted on the wall above the altar. Now it is in the darkness of the cold church, all the paths leading to it are covered in deep snow. She knows it, yet she shivers and, frightened, looks towards the small windows. She stands up quickly, with skilful movements dries herself, pulls up her underwear and sits on the bed. She kills the candle with her fingers. She listens to the wailing of the wind which does not cease, to the now feeble and even breathing of the old man. The eye is resting on her, it has moved into her, the look gazes from inside her into the darkness, together with her it is waiting for something that must happen. She can hear roaring, outside it is roaring like the sea she has never seen. A frail light sparks behind the win-

dow. Anica stands up and quickly throws the fur over her shoulders. She quietly opens the door and tiptoes through the hall. The stout man is standing under the projecting roof, with an oil lamp in his hand. Behind his back the singing wind is blowing dancing snow flakes in the glimmer of the trembling light. He's asleep, Anica says. The man turns round, and walks through the wind and snow back towards the stable. After a few steps he turns round, she is still standing on the threshold. So? he says, she looks back into the dark hall, then moves away from the door and quickly walks after him. The look steps out of her and follows them through the sea of the roaring wind. They sit on the straw bed by the wall, covered with a hairy blanket and sheep skins. The eye is now inside him, his gaze is sharp, objects look clear in the light of the oil lamp, but they are rounded at the corners. Even her face is slightly elongated in the middle and shortened at the sides in the eyes of the stout man. Through this look she is a warm young animal on the straw, in the smell of sheep skins, animal shit, sheep, silently pressing against each other, and slowly moving behind the low fence. A heavy hand reaches for her hair, but her head shakes, not now, she says. Heavy blood is crashing against the walls of his head, his ears are ringing with effort, restraint. Why does he call me Cretin? he says. Anica turns her head towards him. Oh, she says, that's how they registered it, for the soldiers. You should be happy, she says. He is silent for a long time, he can smell her skin, which he can distinctly discern in the stable. He reaches for his forehead with his hand, and thinks with effort for a long time. Nobody will come up here for at least twenty days, he suddenly says. Anica lowers her head, so what, it's like this every winter. He raises the oil lamp to her face, which looks up with its vacant eyes. Now, now suddenly something moves on it. Her face becomes even more elongated, an instant deci-

sion emerges in him, the look shakes, the animals behind the fence start pacing restlessly. How much longer? he says. How long? Anica moves to the wall, he turns round and pulls her towards him with a strong grip, reaches under her skirt, clawingly gathers soft matter in his fat fingers. He'll wake up one day, he says. He won't, says Anica. I put leeches on his skin. Now he gets up and rushes around the room so that his field of vision totters in every direction, he walks among the sheep which quietly step aside in terror, he grinds his teeth, goes back to the bed, leans close to her face. Put on more, he breathes into her. She shakes her head. Put on more leeches, more. He is breathing heavily, as after a great effort. He lies on the bed and gathers a pile of straw under his head. The wind roars along the steady slope over the ridge of the hill. The eye wants to see differently; it shifts away, rapidly moves around the room, viewing angles changing. Anica slowly gets up and puts on her fur. She takes the oil lamp and with difficulty pushes open the door, pressed back by the windy mass of the air outside. Her legs sink knee-deep into the snow, she is walking slowly, holding the lamp under the fur. The restless eye follows her, in its view the nearby landscape becomes concave at the edges, it follows her to the door and into the hall. The wind sweeps a cloud of snow inside. With a steady hand Anica takes from the shelf the black vessel with swarming little animals. The house is dark, the old man is breathing feebly, gently groaning in his dreams, his strength is flowing away, his blood is flowing away. Anica places the lamp on the chair by the bed, then she thinks of something, turns towards the room and overturns the pot with water she left on the floor. The old man shifts in his sleep, the soul of a sleeping man, the soul of a sleeping man. Anica takes the crucifix off the wall and takes it into another room, she covers it with her fur. She quickly returns and slips on the wet floor,

stumbles towards the bed, for a moment looks at the wrinkle where the old man's eyes should be, the eyes of her aged husband, the eyes which met her, when she was fifteen years old, in front of her home and took her to this mountainous solitude; for a brief moment she looks at the sunken, tightly pressed wrinkle, then with rapid, precise movements starts placing black animals all over his body; she waits until they are stuck to his chest, bony arms, forehead and lips. The lost look of the dark angel is wildly rushing around the room, sees everything, knows everything, feels everything, all the three looks it has assumed, all the three souls, all the three bodies, the entire space for which he was bound, where he was summoned from afar. It can see and feel the old man's troubled breathing, his eyes open and look with surprise into the passing time through a blood-red veil and then blink in the coming sleep, deeper and deeper; her feverish body, the painful emptiness in her head and flesh, and the heavy, swollen male body, tossing and turning in the stable, bumping into the walls, walking among the confused and warm animals, getting up, lying down, looking with surprise at the objects around him, which are no longer only elongated in the middle and rounded at the edges, but twisted, wrapped into the spinning circle. Anica stretches herself, her arms collapse down her body. She is standing, looking at the wall and in the dying light listening to the fading breathing. The wind, roaring far down in the valley. The man in the stable lies down and pulls the fur over his head. The eye moves to the corner, to the place where the crucifix used to be. It is still for some time, watching the motionless space around it. Then its look slowly moves to the door and out, into the stormy winter night. Through the white veil of the whirling snow it is moving towards the edge of the forest. There it stops and once more looks at the house at the end of the clearing, covered in snow,

pressed against the slope of the large hill. Among the tree-trunks, where it is almost quiet and only a little wind is slowly sinking into the forest, it swiftly moves up one of the trees, through the dark crown and it looks over the tops of the pines bending in the wind. It roars like the sea, its roaring descends in waves down the slope of the hill into the valley. The invisible wave blares, as if crashing against an invisible barrier. The look rests for another moment in the dark above the Pohorje forest, above Sveti Lovrenc, where the glittering eye of God is locked in the cold and empty church. The moaning of wood tissue, claw-like clutching of the roots, whirling cloud of snow being carried high up. Another look at both wooden buildings far below. Then it quickly descends with the wave, along the ridge, down into the valley.

*Translated by
Lili Potpara*

BILLIE HOLIDAY

WHAT if, she says, we played that old Billie Holiday record? Would you kiss me then?

You don't have it any more, he says. You don't have that record any more.

How do you know? she asks. There are some things one never loses.

But not that record, he says. Do you remember how we searched for it last year? That time we went to the cinema and were both very sad afterwards, and we got drunk and looked for that record and it wasn't anywhere, and we just danced, without music. Don't you remember?

Yes, I remember, she says. But we got drunk that time and we didn't look everywhere. The record could have still been some place, it's just that we didn't find it that time.

And you found it afterwards? he asks. You?

I do the cleaning in this apartment, in case you've already forgotten, she says quietly. I'm the one who goes rummaging through the closets.

And now you have it? Do you have it? he asks, a trifle impatiently.

It doesn't matter, she says quietly. I don't think it matters.

No? he says. You don't?

You didn't answer my question, she says. You didn't tell me.

What? he says.

Well, she says, if you'd kiss me.

If we had the record?

If I had the record.

What does that mean – if I had?

It's mine, isn't it? You bought it for me, for my birthday. Don't you remember?

He remains silent.

Yes, I remember, he says slowly. Yes, that's right.

It's also written on it, she says. It says: to you, the one and only. And your name is on it. And the date.

Is it? he says.

Yes. Don't you remember?

I remember, he says, quite slowly, not sounding very convinced.

You've forgotten, she says, you've forgotten. To you, the one and only. You forgot everything. And you wouldn't even kiss me any more. Not even if I played that record. Because you think it's too late. Don't you?

What? he says.

Don't be evasive, she says. You know what I'm talking about. That's what you think, isn't it?

He says nothing. When he finally breaks the silence, his voice is hoarse and it breaks against the walls of the room.

Wouldn't it be better, he says, if people solved things like this in some other way? Differently?

In what way? she asks. How differently?

With less... pain. More easily.

And how do you imagine that? she says slowly.

Let's say: write about it to the papers. And then people would respond. Give advice. They would say: it happened to me too, and then...

Dear Abby?

Dear Abby.

And how would this help? Advice? We've had more than enough advice, everybody told us their story, everyone has one. And it was no use.

Even if it was no use, he says. It would be there. It's easier if you know you're not the only one who it's happened to.

You mean like you said the other day: that it's necessary to distribute the pain equally? she asks. That everyone gets an equal share of it? And that this way it's easier for everyone?

Yes, he nods seriously. That's it.

Interesting, she says. Interesting.

What, he asks. What's interesting?

She opens her mouth, and he, against his will, notices how this mouth is smaller than the one he remembers. Something is missing, he thinks. No, not missing – it has grown smaller.

The telephone rings.

The phone's ringing, she says.

I can hear it, he says, it's ringing. And now what?

Answer it. Pick it up. It's for you, I'm sure.

What if it isn't? Maybe it's for you.

It's never for me, she says. Nobody ever calls me. It is for you.

He picks up the receiver. Hello? he says. Oh, it's you, he says then. How are you?

While the voice at the other end of the line is answering, he covers the receiver with his palm and whispers: you were right. It really is for me.

It's her, isn't it? she says.

It's her, he nods seriously, and then immediately says into the receiver: oh, yeah? Is that so? Really?

She turns and leaves the room. He keeps glancing at her, while speaking smoothly into the telephone: Mhm. Yes. You don't say!

Music is heard from the adjoining room. He frowns and says into the telephone: what?

She returns, leans against the wall and looks at him. The corners of her mouth curve, and then drop again. And a few more times like that.

He says into the telephone: this? Billie Holiday.

She nods. Yes, Billie Holiday, she says quietly.

He says: old, of course it's old.

She steps close to him and puts her arms around his waist.

He says: I like it.

She leans her head against his belly.

He says: what? No, I'm not alone.

She gives him a strong hug.

He says: she's here. Near me.

She draws his shirt out of his trousers. He says: what do you mean, how near? Yes, she's in this room. Yes, close enough to touch.

She draws her palm across his skin.

He says, somewhat reluctantly: I don't know. He covers the receiver and mouths a question.

She says, loudly, as if they were alone: what?

He keeps covering the receiver, and whispers: she's asking if you mind my talking to her.

I do mind, she says calmly. And continues to caress his skin.

He removes his hand from the receiver and wipes the sweat from his forehead. She doesn't mind, he says unconvincingly into the telephone.

Did she fall for it? she asks.

He nervously covers the receiver with his hand.

What? he says. No, that's music. Billie Holiday.

She rises, steps close to him and kisses him on the mouth.

He takes hold of her chin and turns her face away, but not with much conviction.

Of course I love you, he says into the receiver.

Tell her you're lying, she says quietly. Tell her.

Really, he says. I do.

You know you love me, she says with determination. Me. Although you don't show it. Although you think you shouldn't show it.

He lets the hand holding the receiver dangle at his hip. How do you know? he says.

Your skin tells me, she says calmly. At night, when we're lying together, in the same bed, your skin tells me: I love you.

How's that? he says. My skin?

Skin talks, she says with conviction. Didn't you know?

No, I didn't, he admits.

There's a lot more you don't know, it seems to me, she says, somehow compassionately.

He looks at her for a while, then drops his eyes and notices the receiver in his hand. What did you say? he says. And waits.

Then he hangs up.

She's no longer there, he says.

That's the way it should be, she says. She hung up. She knew you were lying. Like I know.

No, he objects, I'm not lying.

The skin, she says. Your skin gives you away.

My skin? he says and draws his palm across his cheek. What's all this about skin?

Yeah, what about it? she asks. Why don't you listen to it any more? Why don't you follow it? Why do you want to get out of it?

Listen? Follow? Out? he asks. Hey, listen, what's your game? What are you trying to tell me?

That you don't know how to listen, she says calmly. And that's why you think that all things come to an end. That they pass away and are gone. That they disappear without a trace. While in reality they're still there, only

different. If you listened, you'd know.

I don't understand, he says.

You don't understand because you don't listen, she says. Everything lasts. It's true that it sometimes isn't the way it used to be, it's true that it sometimes looks old and out of style. But it lasts. Just a sort of film covers it. And everything is the same as it used to be. The same beautiful things. Just a little...older. And that's why they look strange to you.

Like Billie Holiday? he says. Beautiful, but old. And that's why it crackles.

That's right. Like Billie Holiday.

But we lost it, he says to himself.

And found it again, she says.

You found it, he says. You. I...I'm just listening. From a distance.

Once you said, she says, that everything looked beautiful that way. From a distance. Because you could imagine it your way.

Once, he says, once I had all the answers. I knew everything. What. Why. How.

And know it's over, she says. You don't have any answers any more. But you still have something. Something more.

What? he asks.

Me, she says. You've got me.

I can't, he says. You know it doesn't work that way.

What way? she asks.

You're not enough. I have to eat. I have to sleep, I have to...

What? she says. What else? Tell me.

What else am I supposed to say? he says.

Her, she says. You haven't mentioned her.

Why does it always end with her? he says, bad-tempered. Why does everything lead to her in the end?

Yes, why? she says thoughtfully. Why, when in reality...

The music stops.

What is it? he starts. Is it the end of the record?

Wait, she says. There's more.

And really, in the next room Billie Holiday starts singing again.

The sky was blue

And high above

The moon was new

And so was love...

That's what you sang to me when we were at the seaside, he grows tender.

No, no, she says.

Yes, he continues. Quite a while ago. When we walked along the beach in the evening, and you told me which star was which. I was absolutely enchanted; I don't know anything about stars.

No, no, she persists.

Yes, nothing. And then we sat down somewhere by the sea. It looked like the middle of nowhere, remember? And we drank all the fruit-brandy we could get into that little flask you gave me when you were selling them at the Christmas fair. And you held my hand a little longer every time I handed you the drink.

That wasn't me, she says with determination.

No? he says incredulously.

No.

That's right, he grows pensive. Her skin was cooler than yours.

Was it?

Yes. Cool and smooth.

And mine isn't?

I know every pore on your skin.

Pore? she says.

Crease and scratch, he says, somewhat impatiently.

And that's why you don't want it any more, she says calmly. Are there many?

I don't know, he says. But I know them all.

They do no harm, she says. It's like Billie Holiday's records. Scratches belong there. Without them it would be something different.

That's just it, he says.

It – what?

It – something different.

So that's what it's all about, she says. You're fed up. And you think it'll take your mind off it, if it's something different. And that you won't notice that it's sometimes the same as it was before. Because you're the same. It's the same, except for the scratches that come after a long time.

No, he says. What are you talking about? That's nonsense.

Nonsense, she nods. As always. The same, I tell you.

The telephone rings again.

Let it ring, she says. It'll stop.

Aren't you interested in who it is? he asks. It might be for you.

I know who it is, she says. It's not for me.

If it isn't for you, he says, then it's for me. And if it's for me, I really don't see why I shouldn't answer it.

Because you don't have time, she says.

I don't have time? What am I doing that is so important that I don't have time?

You're listening to Billie Holiday.

I think I can listen to Billie Holiday and talk on the phone. Both at the same time. I think I can manage that.

No, you can't. Not if you listen to Billie Holiday and kiss me at the same time. Then you can't talk on the phone.

Listen to Billie Holiday and kiss you? Like in the old times?

That's right. Only with more scratches. With the coating. With everything that came along. And so, differently.

But look, the phone won't stop ringing. It just keeps ringing. I can't listen to Billie Holiday with the phone ringing all the time. I can't kiss you if it's ringing, and it's for me, and I know who it is.

Well, then answer and tell her, she says. Tell her what you're doing. And it'll stop ringing. And it'll be easier.

He looks at her. He looks at the telephone. He looks at his hand hovering over the receiver.

I should tell her? Really? And if I do tell her – what'll happen then? Will it be any different? Changed in any way?

Tell her. There are things that don't seem to exist unless you say them. Maybe this one isn't that kind... But then, maybe it is. Tell her, and we'll see what happens next.

He picks up the receiver. He looks at her again, and she nods. He also lifts his head and bends it upon his chest in a slow arc. Singing is still heard from the background. The record is crackling slightly.

I can't, he says into the receiver held in his outstretched arm, far away from his mouth. I can't. I'm listening to Billie Holiday. Still. In the same way. But differently. Do you hear? Do you understand?

*Translated by
Tamara M. Soban*