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A Sunday Trip

(A Slovene chronicle)

Vinko Möderndorfer

“I’ve been waiting for half an hour already,” Fredi said tetchily as Marjan, Slavko and Lojz came round the corner. Šeki was happily jumping around his feet. He was a cross between a German Shepherd and something much smaller.

“I have to say this: Šeki is wonderful, we get on as if we’d known each other for ever,” Fredi said enthusiastically. “So, Šeki, let me introduce my best friends...” Šeki enthusiastically jumped up at Marjan and then Lojz and Slavc. All three bent over to stroke him, Marjan even let the dog lick his face. The little mongrel kept going from one to the other, wagging his tail and squealing with delight.

“See how well Jakob’s collar fits him,” Fredi bent over, too, and ran his fingers over the red collar as if it was a prize.

“Yes, Jakob really was something special!” said Marjan.

“Of course he was,” said Fredi, “Jakob was a real person, a real doggy person.” He squatted in front of Šeki, embracing him with both arms, “Remember this, Šeki: I wouldn’t give Jakob’s collar to any other dog but you. Can you see now how much you mean to me?”

Šeki barked and licked Fredi’s face.

“Let’s go,” said Slavko, straightening up.

“I took care of the drink,” said Lojz, pulling a bottle of gin out of his black briefcase that he was squeezing under his arm as if it was very precious.

Lojz had used this briefcase for work every day, but now he only brought it when he and his friends, once a month, usually on a Sunday, went on a trip as they called it.

“We’ll drink afterwards,” Fredi said sternly, “we’ve got to be sober, this is no joke.”

“I agree,” said Slavko, trying to re-tie his tie. “Damn woman, she tied it so tightly on purpose.”

“Let me...” Marjan stepped closer to Slavko, pulled his hands away from the knot on the tie like you do with a child

to stop him spoiling things with his clumsy hands, undid the knot and slowly and meticulously retied it. Slavko lowered his arms and waited patiently.

All four were quietly occupied with themselves. They were all wearing their Sunday best. Even Fredi had taken his hunter's hat from the wardrobe. All the buttons on his clean hunter's jacket were fastened and his boots polished. Lojz was wearing a shirt and a wide colourful tie he had been given when he started drawing invalidity benefit in ninety-one. His trousers were ironed and he was carrying a briefcase, which was very shiny, as he had spent an hour rubbing it with *Corona polish, for deep polishing of leather and leather objects*. Marjan was dressed casually, but elegantly. Youthfully. With a silk scarf instead of a tie. And white linen trousers with a sharp crease... *Emma always ironed creases on trousers. I've never liked them, but she wouldn't be told. Then I gave up... The only thing I could do was to go to the toilet just before going to the office, take my trousers off and spend ten minutes scrunching them up... And even then I felt uncomfortable all day. I looked like somebody who'd escaped from the fifties. She would even iron a crease on my jeans. Razor sharp. She did it on purpose. On purpose.*

"There you go! Your tie is tied as it should be." Marjan leant back a little to check from a distance that the knot below Slavko's chin was not lopsided. Then he patted Slavko on the shoulder: "Admit it, I'm better at it than your wife."

"No kidding, you certainly are," said Slavko. "If you knew how to do anything else besides tying ties, I'd swap you straight away!"

Lojz gave a stupid laugh and pressed his briefcase closer to him.

"Come on, come on," Fredi said with a wave of his hand, "we're not going to a wedding!"

They slowly climbed into Fredi's *bunting jeep*. That is what Fredi called the military jeep that he had bought at a very good price in 1991 and which he now used only for Sunday trips with the boys. Fredi and Marjan climbed into the front, while Slavko and Lojz sat in the back. Fredi pushed Šeki into the luggage space and the dog seemed quite pleased.

"Have we got everything?" Fredi asked one last time.

The boys thought a bit, felt their pockets and then nodded.

The vehicle shook a few times, roared like a construction machine at a motorway building site, black smoke came out of its rear end, and then the beast moved along the tranquil suburban street.

Šeki barked loudly all the way to the first corner.

For quite a while nobody spoke. They basked in the Sunday sunlight, enjoying the empty roads.

“It’ll be really crowded in a couple of hours,” Fredi said knowingly, “everyone will be on the road, returning from their weekend houses.”

“That’s why it’s good we’re going at this time,” said Slavko, looking at the road.

“When are we coming back?” asked Lojz, licking his lips.

“The usual time,” said Fredi, turning onto an unpaved side road.

“I had a spot of trouble at home,” Lojz said timidly. “I had to escape.”

Marjan looked to the back of the car: “Your sister could leave you alone for once.”

“It’s just that she worries,” said Lojz, cracking his finger joints.

“What’s there to worry about?” Slavko said almost angrily. “You’re nearly fifty, you’re all grown up, you can hang out with whoever you want and go wherever you want.”

“Ah,” said Lojz with a wave of his hand, “you know how it is, she cooks for me, washes for me, looks after me...”

“That doesn’t give her a right to pester you, she’s not your wife after all,” said Marjan, turning back towards the front.

“If my woman treated me like that I’d kill her, I definitely would,” said Slavko, staring ahead. “Women are murderers. They kill us long-term. They think that they can stick their noses into everything just because once a month they wash a couple of pairs of our underpants.” Slavko turned to Lojz, put his hand on his knee and squeezed it: “Lojz, if I were you, I’d throw her out. The flat is yours. Let her go and find herself a man. And you too... I mean ... Start living your life the way you want to live.”

Lojz swallowed so loudly that it could be heard in spite of the noise of the rattling old jeep. Marjan again looked over his shoulder and Fredi’s curious eyes appeared in the rear view mirror.

“I would... Only I’m afraid...” Lojz said nearly stammering while his voice broke like a teenager’s... “I’m afraid of being alone...” he added and his eyes darted from Slavko via the rear view mirror to Marjan. No one said anything, just looked at each other, and then Lojz added after a while: “My bladder is playing up... Fredi, can you stop?”

Fredi immediately veered off the road as he had been expecting such a request for some time. Šeki, who had settled down, was thrown against the back seat and squealed with fear and then gave a short bark. Lojz opened the door silently and with his briefcase in his arms set off for the nearest bush.

“If she beats him once more, I’ll knock her dentures out,” hissed Slavko, looking after Lojz, who had disappeared behind the bush. Fredi and Marjan said nothing.

When Lojz came back, they drove on. Most of the time there was silence. They all just stared ahead.

They had to make a few more stops on account of Lojz’s bladder and each time he stumbled to the nearest bushes, clutching his briefcase. Then they turned towards the familiar hill. The late Sunday afternoon was turning into an early Sunday evening. They were thrown around as the stony cart track wound among increasingly dense tall pine trees. It was getting darker. The almost threatening gloominess among the trees darkened their thoughts and every one was looking in a different direction.

I’m on duty tonight... We’ll be back by ten... It’s not that bad working at night... There’s no one there... I can be alone. Sometimes I dream about how great it would be if I were the only person in the world... If everything was empty... Nobody anywhere... I could sleep in a different flat every day. Sometimes I would sleep in the parliament or a museum... I’d go from shop to shop and get anything I wanted... Ah, there’s no point... I’d really miss these Sunday outings ... The company of friends... But what if it was just the four of us in the world? Yeah, that would be something. It really would.

One of these days this old heap is going to conk out and we’ll get stuck on this hill... I can hear it rattling... It’s so old and decrepit... Twenty years is a lot for any car... And as the army were using it for some of that time, it’s even worse... When it finally dies, how will we get here... Marjan’s car isn’t suitable for going uphill, nor is Slavko’s... We’ll have to come up with some other kind of entertainment...

My woman raised her hand to me just once and she then had it in plaster for three months, she still has a screw in her wrist. Women need to be trained. Like animals. If you let them, they'll do with you as you please... Lojz is a good example. His sister treating him like that... When he gets drunk, she lets him lie in the hall, the last time she hit him with the broom handle... I'd beat her into oblivion. They even like it. They like being beaten. It's in their nature, in their biology. The man gives and the woman receives. A hole and a prick. One hits and the other gets hit. If that doesn't function as it should, everything's wrong. The world is based on this principle. The economy. Politics. Culture. Everything. That's it. They need to be fucked every day. Or beaten. Which is the same thing. It's love.

I'm not an alcoholic... I drink... As much as anyone else... It isn't right that Katarina keeps reproaching me... After all, it's my own money I spend. What else is there to do? Slave is right. I shouldn't let her. But she's my sister... I promised mother that I'd look after her... It's a sacrifice really. I'll never find a woman. How can Fredi have so many mistresses? Probably because he lives alone... I daren't bring one home... Katarina would listen all night... And women don't really interest me... And I'm not an alcoholic... I have to make that clear. Katarina and I need to sit down one day and have a chat... She'll understand... She's my sister...

"We've arrived ten minutes earlier than usual," Fredi said proudly as he drove up to a semi-derelict house leaning on a steep, wooded slope. They got out of the car. Slavko stretched, Marjan lit a cigarette, Lojz disappeared behind the corner with his briefcase. Fredi opened the car boot to let Šeki out. The dog wagged his tail, jumping from one man to another, and then started sniffing around the house, lifting his leg now and again...

"He can smell other dogs," said Fredi.

"Dogs have this all sorted out," nodded Slavko. "They mark their territory and leave a clear message: I was here, this is mine, all others unwelcome. Yeah, animals have it sorted," Slavko said more to himself than to the others.

"I'm on night shift," said Marjan.

"Well, we'll start then," said Fredi with a clap. Lojz came back and was greeted by Šeki's happy barking. Fredi opened the car boot and pulled out a hunting rifle, wrapped in old army blanket.

"You've got the ammo?" Slavko said, worried, "not like last time, when you forgot it..."

“And we went to a wedding leaving our pricks behind,” grinned Lojz, his eyes shining. Marjan and Slavko joined in, while Fredi just made a disdainful noise, as if to say you take the piss if you like, and set off along the path behind the house. Slavko, Marjan and Lojz followed. Lojz was still laughing, repeating to himself: “...to a wedding leaving our pricks behind, to a wedding ...” Šeki was barking, running around the men, who walked in line.

On the other side, an abandoned quarry ate into the slope. At the bottom, was a low, elongated building, the remains of some kind of gravel silo. It had no windows and the roof was covered with corrugated iron. Fredi, Slavko, Marjan and Lojz descended a narrow path to the building. Fredi took a key out of his pocket and unlocked a padlock on a thick chain. Marjan and Slavko open the big iron door.

“You go ahead,” said Lojz, “my bladder...” And he disappeared behind the wall with his briefcase. Šeki barked. Fredi, Marjan and Slavko went in.

The place was dark and empty, only here and there a narrow ray of dusty light found its way through the metal roof. Slavko felt for a switch behind the door. A single light bulb came on in the middle. The place looked much longer from inside, especially with the way the light fell. From the door to the back wall that leant against the steep slope it was about fifty paces, but it seemed as if it should be at least twice as many. The light bulb, which lit up the space fairly well, hung bare and pathetic from a roof beam in the middle, like a light someone had forgotten to turn off before going to sleep. The atmosphere was somewhat intimidating and, above all, dusty.

“Thank god they haven’t turned the power off yet,” said Slavko.

“I pay the bills,” said Fredi, “I extended the cable from my house with my own two hands.”

Šeki barked. All three looked back. The dog stood at a safe distance in front of the door, barking in.

“Šeki, Šeki!” Fredi shouted. “Good boy. Come here, come!”

But the dog refused to shift. He just bristled, standing in front of the door and looking into the dim room.

“He won’t” said Marjan. “You’ll have to bring him in.”

“Damn dog!” Fredi swore, giving the gun to Marjan and going back for Šeki. The dog cowered as Fredi grabbed him

by the collar. Meanwhile, Lojz came back. "I find it hard these days to control my bladder," he apologised, holding his briefcase.

"It's alright," Fredi said in a calming voice to the dog, trying to push him inside, but Šeki resisted, digging his paws into the sand. In the end, Fredi had to pull him in like a sack of cement. Lojz entered last. When they were all in, Slavko closed the door. The dimness became denser and Šeki's squealing suddenly resounded around the empty room.

"OK, let's start!" said Marjan.

"OK," says Fredi and started pulling Šeki towards the back wall. The dog resisted, pulling back, but Fredi was merciless. He was firmly holding Šeki's collar. Whitish dust rose from under the dog's paws as they were dragged along the floor. The particles of dust rose up in the thin strips of light that managed to penetrate the roof, twirling and disappearing into the darkness again.

"It's like in a cathedral or something!" Lojz said admiringly and his eyes glittered as he looked at the rays of light which suddenly, due to the glittering white dust, glowed deep inside and then faded away. Marjan and Slavko said nothing, just waited.

Fredi had by now dragged Šeki to the back wall, where a short pole was cemented into the floor, with an iron ring at the top from which hung a chain. Fredi chained the dog up and slowly walked back to his friends, who were all watching him silently.

"What about the collar?" Marjan said. "Are you just leaving the collar?"

"Oh, fuck!" Fredi slapped his forehead. "Jakob's collar." He went back and took the collar off the frightened dog, who was squatting down by now with his tail between his legs, trying to make himself much smaller than he was. Fredi put the collar in his pocket, wrapped the chain around the dog's neck and tightened it so that Šeki groaned. Then he walked back to his friends.

"Fifty steps," he said as he reached them, "I always count fifty."

"That's approximately twenty five metres," mumbled Marjan.

"It's quite a sporting distance," nodded Fredi. "Who wants to go first?"

“Let’s do it in alphabetic order, like last time,” said Slavko, “it’s fairest.”

“OK,” Fredi nodded, “I’ll go first!” He took the gun from Marjan, broke it open got a cartridge from his pocket and put it in the barrel.

“Just make sure there’s some left for us,” Marjan said putting his hand on Fredi’s shoulder.

Fredi just smiled and lifted the gun to his cheek. At the other end, the animal in front of the wall, wanting to be as small as possible, as invisible as possible, rolled into a ball. Šeki looked at the four men. He was all eyes. Big, dark, round eyes. His deathly fear made them even bigger. They glistened before the whiteness of the wall.

There was a bang and the dust lifted. The rays of reddish light from the setting sun piercing the room, glowing and twinkling. The light bulb swayed and an air surge returning from the opposite wall reached the men’s cheeks.

“Magnificent, like in a cathedral,” said Lojz, touched.

The bang was followed by a moment of silence. Only a moment, just enough for the pain and fear to squeeze out of the trembling animal. Šeki howled. The sound he released was a mixture of a bark, a squeal and that throaty noise that comes from being under threat of death.

“You took off his leg,” said Slavko.

“That’s what I was aiming for,” smiled Fredi. “So that there’s something left for you.”

The gun went to Lojz. “Your turn!”

“Already?” Lojz said with surprise. He held the gun in one hand while pushing the briefcase between his knees, then he clumsily opened the gun. Fredi put in a new cartridge. Opposite them, the animal stood on three legs, trembling. One of the back legs was shorter by a third. The red, mushrooming flesh glowed in the distance. The dust settled, the light bulb steadied again. Lojz lifted the gun, his hands shaking. He closed one eye. He grimaced. His mouth opened in a funny way, curling to the left.

There was a bang and the dust lifted again, swirling in the rays of evening light, standing still for a moment like in a picture. Then there was barking, snapping, rattling of the chain, jumping around the iron post.

“You missed,” said Fredi. “You just frightened him. Marjan will have a difficult job now.”

Marjan took the gun without saying anything and loaded it. The dog was trying to get free, struggling with the thick chain, trying to break it, bite through it. He was jumping on his remaining three legs, pushing, pulling. He did not stand still for a single moment, but was constantly turning, letting out gargling noises, barking, squealing. The white patches on his coat became red as the bleeding stump was dragged along the white dust. He was trying to get away. Away from death.

A bang. Dust. Light. A moment of silence.

“You got him in the stomach.”

“No, in the arse.”

The dog was trying to get up on his front paws. He lifted himself and tried to drag himself away. Not away from death, just away, to isolation, to a quiet corner. But the short chain would not allow it and all he could do was circle, centimetre after centimetre, around the pole. The back part of his body had changed into a pulsing mass of bleeding flesh that was dragging behind the rest. Šeki was no longer barking, not even squealing. From the distance of fifty human paces all that could be heard was his breathing and the rattling of the chain.

Slavko lifted the gun to his cheek. Slavko, the only soldier, the only veteran among them. *In ninety-one I lifted the Armbrust just like this, aimed it at the iron monster... When aiming a gun, you must aim at the life on the other side. When striking, you must strike through the body. Your whole self becomes that strike, that shot.* Slavko stood with legs wide apart, squeezed his elbow close to his side and for a moment his whole body became the weapon he was holding.

Šeki became still, as if he knew. He lifted his head towards Slavko. He was no longer resisting, just waiting. Then he lifted his ears (the last glimmer of curiosity?). His eyes. Large eyes and the ears, lifted in attention, as if waiting.

“Wonderful, like in a cathedral!”

The animal was bounced against the pole and cut in half. The back part flew toward the wall.

“Good shot. Here we go! Slovenia!”

“But it’s still moving.”

“It’s the nerves.”

“Let me do it again.”

“Like in a cathedral, just like in a cathedral.”

The mass of red and torn flesh finally remained still.

“That’s it.”

“My bladder, I won’t be a moment.”

They opened the door. Lojz disappeared round the corner. Outside, the air was cool as the sun had set. They smoked a cigarette without talking. They kept shuffling from one leg to another. There were no thoughts, just the kind of satisfied fulfilment felt when something has ended and life is free again for new adventures. Then, almost simultaneously, they put out the cigarettes in the rusty tin positioned next to the door for that very purpose. Fredi wrapped the gun in the blanket again, carried it to the car, put it in the boot and took out two shovels and a few black plastic rubbish bags. Still silent, they went back in and put the blood-covered remains of the dog into bags. Fredi covered the blood stains around the pole with white sand. Marjan and Slavko pushed the shovel into the gravel behind the building a couple of times. They threw the bags into the shallow hole and covered it again, but the black plastic was still sticking out in a few spots. A few more shovelfuls of gravel. Fredi turned on the light and closed the door, locking it. They all washed their hands under a tap sticking out of the wall. They brushed the dust off each other’s clothes and straightened their ties. Then they had another cigarette.

“Lojz isn’t back,” said Marjan.

“He always gets out of the clearing up,” Slavko said angrily. “I can’t remember him ever helping in the last two years.”

“I could do with a drink,” said Fredi, swallowing his saliva.

“Lojz!” Marjan called out, “Lojz!”

They shouted for a while, then set off behind the building, where they found Lojz sleeping in the bushes with an empty bottle in his lap and his briefcase open at his feet. They carried him to the car and placed him on the back seat. When they drove past the house, Fredi said: “The older you get, the keener you are to return to the house you were born in.” Marjan and Slavko became pensive, too.

On the main road they joined the queue of traffic. Fredi swore about the slow drivers, all faggots, riff-raff with no balls, all women instead of men, no, even women would drive more energetically. Marjan was just staring at the road, counting the power pylons and balconies on blocks of flats at junctions. Slavko was picking his nose and thinking about baldness and

miracle shampoos that strengthen the scalp, but can give you skin cancer. Lojz was snoring in a drunken stupor.

They stopped in their neighbourhood.

Marjan looked at his watch. *An hour until my shift... I'll just have a shower and then I'll be off..*

Slavko stretched. *I hope my dinner's waiting for me, otherwise I'll thump her so hard she'll never forget it.*

"Lojz, we're home." Freddie tried to wake Lojz, who was snoring deeper and deeper, even smiling in his happy slumber, not willing to be disturbed.

"Hell!" Fredi suddenly shouted.

"What? What's wrong?"

Fredi stood at the back door, looking at the seat where Lojz was lying, shaking his hand as if trying to get something very unpleasant off. "He's pissing. The bastard is pissing on my seat."

Marjan and Slavko came closer. All three watched helplessly as a dark mark between Lojz's legs got bigger and bigger.

"What do we do now?" Marjan asked after a while.

"Oh," Fredi said with a wave of his hand, "let him sleep in the car. If we take him home in this condition, his sister will beat him to a pulp," and he slammed the door.

They all walked off in separate directions.

It was a wonderful Sunday trip, thought Marjan, looking at his watch once more before disappearing into the entrance to his block of flats.

*Translated by David Limon
from the Slovene original Nedeljski izlet.*

Sirens

Andrej Morovič

The rules of the game are simple. They draw a line across the room that none of us is allowed to cross at any price. The smaller part is for me while the two of them have the larger section. They feel and tickle each other like two happy wrestlers. They pretend to be angry squirrels as they launch playfully at each other, frowning, giving each other firm kisses while giggling in a forced sort of way. I am smiling, too. I am certain they are not enjoying themselves, just pretending. I scratch the hairs on my balls indifferently. My penis is hanging down. I am masturbating gently, carefully following the steady gathering of the red plasma, while their garments are falling like leaves in the autumn. The soft tones of naked bodies glow in the semi-darkness. The fruits open, the room starts breathing in a reddish hue. With my skin I establish that the picture is beautiful. I take my hand for a walk along the swollen log. In a superior manner, I close my eyes and listen to the fluttering of the dozing wings of the love beetles.

I am awoken by silence. They have stopped. Something is wrong. They are engrossed in themselves. This is for real. Jovanka is completely gone. She has been overgrown by invisible fibrils through which she is sucking as if her life depended on it. My hand stops. I am looking with my eyes wide open. Farinas has a bunch of long hairs in the saddle of her breasts. My cheeks flop. My throat becomes dry. I can feel the weight of mighty antlers. I nod with them wearily - a bleeding moose in the middle of an icy tundra. I cannot blame them, but I certainly do not like it. How slow they are. And so gradual. Like the sea changing into the sky. Threatening to drown in it. Farinas is licking. She is masterfully holding her intimate membranes up in the air. All the difference lies in that, I become acutely aware of this. Farinas is licking greedily like a

polite she-wolf by the light of a Finnish moon. If only they would loosen my chain just a little, so that I could light them with the flame of the boreal illumination.

The lover's hand now conjures up a dildo, an artificial organ, made in the image of a man's. She wets it thoroughly with her saliva, then uses it. She is thrusting the shogun sword, which is a vagina at the same time, gently turning it around its axis so that the swollen false veins can be better felt.

I am upset through and through, offended. That is my job! But Farinas does not care. She deftly attaches the devil to her body, exactly where my own sword lies. Like a rainbow she positions herself over Jovanka and starts giving it to her.

Something inside me screams. Injustice! As loud as possible.

*Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon
from Slovene original Sirene.*

Telephone

Milan Kleč

If I had not been stopped by a red light, everything might have been alright now, but as it was I loitered a little longer on the streets of Sarajevo because a woman had taken my arm and I couldn't help taking her to my hotel. I'm not saying that it was that simple, but I don't want to go into the details of that kind of seduction. We had visited a few night clubs and then decided to jump between the sheets. There was something I could not put off - I had to telephone the woman I was living with to make arrangements for New Year's Eve. It is a well known fact that I am a trustworthy person who fulfils his promises punctually and does not miss such appointments, even if I have to crawl there on all fours. That is what I am like and what has stuck to me. But I have strayed, although the most important thing is that I did not stray with regard to the woman I don't want to name, may she forgive me, so let me correct this by announcing what a good lover she was. We rolled between the sheets and there arose a small detail I can describe and make use of here. For months before that night I had had a bad feeling, which could be called a kind of impotence, if that isn't too much detail again. I got a hard on only with my own woman, whilst with others I was somehow incapacitated, however hard I tried, and I shall never forget the terrible feeling when I tried it at least ten times with a particular woman, but always in vain. At that point I still thought that the whole problem was me, God forbid that I would put the blame on another person, meaning a woman. There followed a series of unsuccessful attempts and you can all imagine my bitterness. In the end I asked myself increasingly frequently why I stayed with my woman. I suspected that it was only because I could get it up with her, but to live with her for the rest of my life seemed rather pointless, nonetheless. I knew a couple of such marriages that persisted only because of this,

which to me seemed monstrous and I was afraid that I would get stuck in a similar situation, so I used every opportunity to try and see how things stood. That night I literally threw off my clothes in order to look like a passionate lover, which I probably once had been, although I knew I should have acted more slowly, as I was under so much pressure. But I preferred to think as little as possible rather than allowing foreplay to last a couple of hours or days. I also undressed my mistress and tried to approach her. Of course, she immediately saw how things were and wanted to help by taking me in her mouth. However, my wretched organ refused to respond. It hung there, flaccid and useless. I could've cried. The woman comforted me, whispering that there were other things in the world. I, too, would say something like that, but not at that particular moment. She said she loved and respected me as a person, but that filled me with very little pride. She promised that she didn't expect, let alone want or demand, anything from me, in short, she claimed that she would be happiest if she could see me now and again and there would be nothing wrong if she could just observe me from the other side of the street. That was how we met. I liked what she said very much and I would have proposed something else to her had I not remembered my woman and the promise that I would telephone her from a thousand kilometres away. It was a bit awkward as we were lying there naked, but I remembered my reliability and also that my woman, whose family didn't have a telephone, was waiting for my call at the neighbours'. You shouldn't be surprised, but we had an agreement that I would call at a particular time, so I, naked and with another woman, told the reception to ring the number and it took a while for the call to be put through. My member was still useless, but I had to make arrangements for New Year's Eve, when I was supposed to meet my beloved's parents. I didn't really feel like it, but I comforted myself with the thought that she at least gave me a hard on. The mistress, however, was still kissing me, naked and helpless. I was in despair and full of regret. I lifted the receiver. I heard the friendly voice of the receptionist who put me through. I was on time. My woman spoke. I kissed her over the telephone, and I also gave a kiss to my lover, who was breathing heavily beneath me and I had to gently close her mouth. She laughed even though she didn't

know who I was talking to. She could have started shouting into the receiver, but she didn't. She was a willing mistress, she writhed even more, passionately pressing herself even closer to me as I started exchanging endearments over the phone and that's when the change in me started happening, slowly but surely I began to get hard until I was firmly erect. I felt such satisfaction. I started kissing the telephone so that my passion could be heard in the little remote village in Primorska, and it made both the women eager. What a hard on I had. I wanted to tell the whole world. I felt completely liberated, I was so smooth and firm. Let all the women queue up, I was already planning how I would return to all of them and show them what I was really made of. What a hard on. It is very difficult for me to describe this, but I don't know how else to emphasise the point: once again, my prick was in a cunt that didn't belong to my woman. The telephone conversation was making me all excited and gave me new impetus and stamina. My woman in Primorska was meanwhile waiting for me. It seemed to me that we had been talking for a very long time, but I wanted to keep talking until I came, which wasn't very far off at all. My girl was telling me how impatiently she was expecting me, how her parents were looking forward to meeting me and that everybody was busy getting ready. I felt honoured when she enquired how I was, as she knew that I had gone to Sarajevo against my will and that I only wanted to finish something I had started. What that was isn't really important. She was so considerate to me and I was so considerate to her and to my lover, my voice was so soft and my body so beautiful. There was such harmony in that hotel room and over the telephone lines. Everything was trembling in tense expectation and the woman beneath me screamed when she came, and she pulled me even closer as I was overcome by a huge spasm. It was all agreed and clear. My girl and I said goodbye and I was still twitching slightly when I put the receiver down. I was so happy. I didn't have the feeling that I had been unfaithful to anybody at all. I was consistent and beautiful. That's how my Sarajevo adventure appeared to me and let me conclude that I didn't think anything bad would come of it, on the contrary, I was sure I had gained a great deal. And then early in the morning I travelled home. After a whole night of passionate love. The lover, to

whom I was so grateful, accompanied me to the station. The train started moving and we waved to each other. There were tears and as the train slid into the snow I was already toasting myself cheerfully and preparing for the next festivity. Only a few hours separated me from the New Year and I was hoping that I would manage to celebrate it properly at last. I could see no reason for things to go wrong in any way as it had done regularly in years gone by. Everything was exceptionally quiet and wonderful. Just what I expected from life. I arrived before the appointed time and there is nothing better than drinking a half litre of wine and daydreaming alone before embarking on a happy life. I ordered some red wine and slowly sipped it in the friendly little inn, as I waited to be collected. The customers were already pretty merry as the old year was very much at its end. I was invited to join a boisterous party and I did so only to hear their stories about the year just ending. Wine tends to encourage such things and the arrival of a pleasant young man, who announced with what difficulty he had slipped out of bed, where he had been fucking only minutes earlier, happened just at the right time. He seemed alright, the only thing wrong with him was that he had until very recently been able to come only once and then lost the will for it and everything was finished. It wasn't a physical problem, but a psychological one, he simply became empty. He was desperate and always certain that the problem was in him, however hard he tried, until he finally managed to fuck a woman not only two or three times in succession, but could have done it for the tenth time if he hadn't had to get out of bed. I was really interested as it seemed that real feats were being performed by other people, too. The dying year really was concluding with great victories, one could say. I have already described mine and I was listening intently as the guy told us: "I fucked and fucked. I'm usually not bad at fucking, although you'd better ask the women. And it was unbelievable. I was fucking my neighbour, who had come to wait for a call from her boyfriend on a distant trip. And as we fuck all the time, we saw no reason not to do it now. There were only a few more minutes until the call, I wanted to hold off coming until the very moment she lifted the receiver and started talking to her boyfriend, but the whole situation excited me so much that I couldn't wait. So I came and nearly flooded her

when the phone rang and it was him. How horny she was. They talked total nonsense and she lied to him how much she loved him. I'm not saying she doesn't, I'm sure she does, but she also likes to fuck and knows ways of doing it that I hadn't even heard of. I used to see her as the faithful type, but you never know what people have in them and what they have to do to be satisfied. I wouldn't go into that, but I don't feel guilty, why should I? I'm not forcing her into anything, I just feel sorry for her boyfriend. It'll be difficult for me to shake his hand and wish him a Happy New Year - we are all supposed to be celebrating it together. But I've wandered off the point. As she was chatting on the phone, sharing endearments with the boyfriend, I got another hard on. I was so firm that I had to get up to see if it was possible to have such a hard on. I felt like bending over and kissing it, but my lover did that instead, she took it in her mouth whilst her boyfriend was telling her about his business trip. How firm my prick stood and how horny she was. She was swallowing it and then I penetrated her again. I waited, working on her to make her speak slowly so that the conversation would last as long as possible. It was so delightful. I had never before experienced such enjoyment. I was literally thrown about with pleasure. I was like a panther. Smooth and beautiful and as they were kissing good-bye, I could hear his trembling, loving voice, and I came. I sprayed my sperm onto her and onto the phone and it could have gone all the way to Bosnia and into his mouth if she hadn't put the receiver down. What a triumph when I came for the second time, what a victory, I wanted to keep confirming it, and there was no problem with that. I fucked and fucked. My prick kept standing up and it would still be standing up if her boyfriend wasn't on his way here, soon to arrive on the train."

I had nothing to add. I wished a happy and successful New Year to everyone, especially the speaker, and then said good-bye. At the same time I already knew that I wouldn't be meeting my woman's parents and that my New Year's Eve celebration was ruined once more.

*Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon
from Slovene original Telefon.*



The Last Dreams and Thoughts of Tubercular L

Zlatko Zajc

Lay there, so very young, thin and with a finely chiselled face, an aquiline nose, clear nostrils, the lips that had spat out so much blood were bluish but had a nice shape to them. The dark hair with its long waves was nicely combed and there were visible traces of an aluminium comb with sharp teeth. Colours: in the yellowish pallor there was a slight hint of green, white, white, yellowish, greenish, no longer any red, and then a small arch of thick black eyelashes and above a larger dark arch of prematurely matured eyebrows. The flat, squashed and parchment-like ears were touching the skull as if still listening out for the sounds only they could hear, coming from an empty space. In spite of the nearly deathly peace, the whole face had a madly curious expression.

The window was open and through the bluish aperture the scent of jasmine was wafting in from the large bush growing in a corner of the garden. His dying, death and lying on the catafalque were suffused with it and it was merging in a peculiarly harmonious manner with the beautiful young dead man.

The previous morning, when L had almost reached the end and everyone knew it, including him, and beneath the closed eyelids, motionless, he had decided not to fight any more, he did not give up, only agreed.

When L awoke, he could feel his eyeballs sunken in their sockets; deep and heavy they lay, still connected with him. He did not dare, did not want, was not able to lift his eyelids. He was thinking that he would not open them ever again, he would not look around in that stuffy low-ceilinged room, when suddenly the sun shone on his face, incredibly warm and pleasant and the ball of intertwined threads began to turn in the opposite direction, backward, because forward no longer existed. L noticed this, but he somehow did not like noticing it, because

he knew from experience that perceptions took him away from the thread shining on his face in the sun. It was difficult enough to move before, thought L. Nothing. No thoughts. No eyes. No head. No heart. No prick. No nose. Still not a corpse.

He wanted to go back, along the last web of spidery sleep into the silky cocoon woven from the hair shed by old women, which even fire cannot destroy.

He regretted that the sun had woken him, he should have stayed in his dreams, where there would be no cockerel crowing from a landscape unknown to him, in which people die back into the soil. But L was aware that he knew all the dreams. At the entrance to the sleeping world stood a liveried robot with a clean shaven face, faultless in its action, who allowed to pass through an opening that was not a door, the most unbelievable deformations and combinations, which were all agreed in advance to a joint conspiracy against the helpless man. The conspirators already knew his courage, his perfected taste for bloodthirstiness, but still they did not stop. They had seen him push his thumbs with all his strength into eyes, with what ease he had strangled monsters around him, breaking their necks, had seen him smash skulls, banging them against concrete floors, had seen him hammer glowing nails into the middle of pupils, they had seen him pissing himself with fear as he was running away from old women hiding below and between dilapidated walls of huts, in decayed drawers littered with greenish crumbs of what had once been bread.

He was only a fraction away from magic. Was reality what was in front or behind the eyelids? His sex had burnt too strong an imprint of all his yearning. Only the mucous membrane of a strange sleep lay before him. The membrane of the bed with the dead body was a membrane of hallucinatory dreams, in which even dreams will not be a hallucination, and there was the membrane of a womb somewhere, while the membrane of life had lost all of its scent and flavour. The flavour of wine is in the memory. There is the flavour of wine in the dry mouth. Has the flavour of wine stayed in the dreams at all? Is the flavour of wine in them, the wicked old women, who never show up as they giggle, covered in the tailings and skins of infertile seeds.

There is a sour flavour and an intoxicating pleasantness and a comfort in it. It is not sour, it will not be sour when I am

not here, L thought, it is not sour when I am no longer, how I am rushing into the no longer.

Eyelids were that which divided, so he did not move them, lift them, nothing appeared on them suddenly, a stinging went through his head and down his body and he did not have a choice anymore. A point on an endless line, stretched into time, forward and backward and a terrifying emptiness on all sides, that dot still there, that little bit of fly excrement, full of fear and without strength to decide where, where it should disappear to when all the sides were so very empty and dull, when he felt how his heart was trembling like a wounded hairy animal, and again the eyelids came to life, somewhere inside he felt pith, in between here and there and somewhere even more in between there hid the softest, gentlest, moistest, warmest, nibbling, living opening, which would throw him, beheaded, out into the open, but he did not know whether the beheading was a punishment or an award.

His prick stood erect even before he knew how very sick he was.

He liked skirts and women in them, all of them, the ones he knew and saw occasionally, the skirts of women from newspapers, caricatures, he jerked off next to a smooth beech tree trunk, a grey one, only low down slightly stained with dark green patches of moss, into the grey and juicy bark of which he had gently carved with a knife a naked woman's body, the cuts were white at first, a few days later slightly orangey, then brown, until they were healed by a scab of beech sap, and his drawing merged into a tree and on the drawing all he could see were two round tits with huge circles around the nipples and the drawn cunt glowed in front of his eyes and in it pulsed a hot heart as he squirted a gush of sperm onto the tree and pressed his hot cheek to the understanding cool bark of the tall and unreachable beech.

And he shouted with delight from his lungs, already marred by disease.

An obsession with anything female had been present for a long time, not just as normal boyish curiosity, but as something prohibited and slightly depraved. L was discovering and realising that he was losing everything at once, even his childhood was disappearing and all that was left was the still hard

prick that never left him in peace, persecuting him day and night. He felt like doing it at any time, at lunch, in the toilet, in the stable, in the field, in the woods, by the stream, in short, anywhere and everywhere.

Along the slender threads of dreams and imagination he crawled into all the areas that his reason, some obscure part of which still believed in God, allowed him. Every visit to church gave him a great deal of material for wanking, as his feverish eyes darted around the nave, almost gluing themselves to every bit of female skin, peeping out from women's clothes.

Within a second, he felt tingling and a kind of itching across the chafed tip of his prick. He spent a long time in the toilet made from washed out planks of wood and in the knots, wavy lines, circles and darkness drawn by time he saw the gentle lines of a woman's hips and there was one particular knot in which in his enraptured moments he could see an understanding dark eye looking at him with complete trust. In the summer, ordinary green flies would buzz around and move straight from a semi-dried heap of shit below onto his burning cheeks, the sun and shit under special weather conditions created a stink which always made him spit in his hand and jerk himself off in a spasm. The reeking toilet with the pine seat, smoothed by the arses that sat on it, and with a wooden cover, with a little compartment for torn up newspaper or wide plant leaves, with the flies and the shit, would remain a mystery to L for ever.

He was only small when he started studying shit and was surprised to discover that everybody produced it.

When around that time his illness appeared, everyone in the house started treating him differently, they pretended that there was nothing wrong with him, they were too lenient with him, but he saw through them immediately, he saw them all changed, but did not show to them that he knew best just how bad his condition was.

He stayed in the room all day - now he had a room to himself - and spat red balls behind the bed. He made on his own a kind of a radio with earphones and then spent days and nights with them on his head, listening to foreign languages, foreign music, incomprehensible signals and explained it all in his own way as he was stuck in the dark room in a low peasant house.

How his lungs tickled and how he constantly coughed has been suitably described a number of times.

His face was strangely pale, his eyes glowed and beneath them there were dark circles; if it had not been for consumption everyone would have said that it was because of too much masturbation.

While listening to foreign radio stations, he felt nothing but yearning, bitter yearning, because he knew it was all in vain.

A strong, sad yearning with many thick roots that reached deep, around and through his heart, into his innards, sprung up and ended somewhere in his balls, where all trace of the by then very thin roots was lost. He did not have the feeling in his legs, but his hands were terribly restless and had to keep doing something all the time. It did not matter what: stroking his prick, bending wires, carving wood, etc., anything but stroking a woman, which is why they went berserk. In his head he did not feel it so much, and in the trunk that had begun to die, the pain was white. He was aware of everything, felt to the last fibre of his skin how he was living, but before him there stood a wall, wound from the threads of darkness, and he was approaching the wall with every day that passed. Quite early on, he had an impulse to tie a noose around his neck, but he always overcame his despair and did not push himself down. Instead, something incomprehensible was doing it to him, at the very beginning of his life, just after his barely finished childhood, slowly returning him back to dust.

From his eyes, buried deep in the soil, not even a sturdy nettle would grow. The warmth of decay for a while, then just a rotting corpse and increasingly white bones.

There was nowhere to escape from himself and his thoughts, as disappearance awaited him everywhere. Demise. Stretching out in death, that was it, which is why he slept in an ever tighter ball, like animals who do not know so precisely about their death.

His dark, glowing eyes burnt through the material covering every woman he met in what was a very isolated life. The houses on the long hill were located sparsely in largish islands between woods, they were erected in almost miserly way on infertile patches of land, each one protected by the trees at the back. But the sun shone on the houses for at least half the day.

A childhood in the chicken-shit covered yard. He hated chicken shit because it stuck to your shoes, the worst offenders being the thick, brown bits that squelched between the toes on bare feet and were so hard to remove, and the stench was unbelievable. His feet carried various messages in the scars that had healed a little whiter. His ankles remembered the cracked skin; from the small holes the blood that darkened into scabs smarted as if it was sour, and it all stung. Dew covered the grass, the cool dew and blades of grass, caressingly sliding along the foot, when he was able to feel every bit of difference in the ground with the soles of his feet, it was all written in his feet, like on a map, even the shards and the thorns.

The world was revealing itself to him in increasingly wide circles. From the reddish sand in which as a very small child he used to forget time, happy with imaginary toys. He got to know everything, the bed of the stream, all the roots and stones, the flavour of water from all the wells and in every season; like an animal he marked all the trees around him.

Pains in his memory received their little corners, where they diminished, some even disappearing without trace. Everything disappeared even better when his dick started stinging. It burnt so much he did not know where to put it. He felt revolted by animals and avoided their shit-stained vaginas.

He lay in wait all day long, sometimes more than just one day, in vain for his eyes to catch a glimpse of a colourful skirt. Flowers on skirts excited him even more. And then he stung and burnt, trying to get as close as possible and lost himself in individual parts of their bodies. But there were few of them and he had to be very cunning, like a fox, to get as much as possible out of the house encounters.

On that hot, scented June day, smelling of summer, just before midday, he was sitting in the sun by the house so that the grainy rough plaster prickled him through his shirt, he pressed himself deliberately close to the wall, so that it hurt and then he took away the pain with pleasure. The sun was very yellow, not exhaustingly hot like in the summer, but already strong enough for cherries to be disappearing with excessive ripeness, only a few semi-dry ones persevering on the branches. It was a day when the sun was still getting higher in the sky. He had his eyes closed, squeezing them together, quickly opening them again so that it was as if lightning had struck and then he looked straight at the sun for even longer

than before. Everything became gold, then red, ever redder and then a thick black, and as he was coming back there was green after the black, through brownish, white and, when he could see at least approximately clearly, he saw F, walking bare footed with a basket hanging over her arm.

F was a strange girl, of indeterminate age, slightly cross eyed and with a mild stutter. She lived on the neighbouring hill, their impoverished house stood on a large clearing, a brick house without plaster, the bricks damaged by dampness. She was thin, with a pointed face and two long arms, decorated with large hands with shapeless fingers as she had had to work hard from the very beginning. She wore a skirt that was too large and the shirt, too, just hung on her so that she resembled a scarecrow.

But L knew that F was generous with it.

After an imperceptible greeting he got up and caught up with her timidly. I'll ask her, he promised himself when the sun had thoroughly warmed his prick through. She was carrying seedlings in the basket. The journey through the first copse was pleasant, the air was full, the leaves still smelled nice, each in their own way, the still not hard leaves of the light green beeches, the trembling poplars smelled slightly bitter, on the edges of the path there grew virginal strawberries, everything was in harmony and the birds were silent. He decided to ask her in the next copse. Only a few words before, turning into hints. F refused to understand them, on purpose.

He asked her. He had to because whatever it was that was in him was growing frighteningly, it wanted to explode and then it just burst out of his mouth. Would she do it with him?

What, asked she, still pretending.

You know what, he said and tried to penetrate her cross-eyed look with his eyes.

And where, she asked.

They hid the basket in the bushes and went through the trees, away from the path, they could almost have held hands, although they did not, but they belonged together. They looked for a place to lie down, but it was L who had to decide and choose.

The sun was still shining almost vertically above them when F took off her knickers, yellowish brown on the inside, but it did not bother him in the slightest when they lay not far from his face so that all the time the sharp smell of cunt was assaulting his nose.

She pulled her skirt up to her waist. The dark forest above her cunt bewitched him and sucked him in. He dropped his trousers to his knees and stuck his prick into her hot flesh. It just slid in, he only had to move a little bit, the bells in the church on the hill struck noon, and his balls were pulled into her hole. He lay on top of her for a bit, just so that he could feel her underneath, then he supported himself on his hands and thrust with his hips, again and again and again, so that he would last forever.

When his insides and head exploded for the fourth time, he wanted to get a bit of air into his diseased lungs, but he was racked by a cough and his prick grew softer and softer.

They found the basket and separated.

In the evening, he was already wanking again, picturing F and her hole.

Whenever he searched for her, they did it. She did not look for him. They hardly ever spoke. They fucked everywhere. In the stable, on the hay, but most often in the woods. Never in bed.

When his illness tied him completely to his bed, all he had left were these dreams. He did not even know if she would go to his funeral.

Jasmine and box tree would decorate his grave; he knew that, the jasmine beneath his window. Box always smelt like death and he used to occasionally stick his nose into it when the heat made the smell particularly strong, and L's head would start spinning strangely from the smell of death. Jasmine had got under his skin recently, into his bed, and most of all into his nostrils which were on the day of his death as yellow as the pistil of a jasmine flower.

What bothered him most was that he had not even started anything and already had to die so young. All there was were fucks with F and the scent of death flowers.

The fucks and everything disappeared, he was only slightly L, the head could still smell, the eyes were closed, saw less and less, the pictures inside were no more, the dreams and the darkness were no more, and L was no more.

At the moment when L finally died, not a single leaf moved.

*Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon from Slovene original
Zadnje sanjarije in premišljevanje tuberkuloznega L.*

Pamela Von Stihl

Marijan Pušavec

It was actually a few days after a full moon. It was October and on the meadow above the stream the frost lingered all day, so that it could no longer be mowed. In any case the livestock would have to get used to dry feed, of which there was enough this year. I had already put away the beehives and corn in September, and the few grapes that my mother and I picked every year were already turning into wine. I was satisfied. In the early evenings I sat by the stove and read through papers and magazines which I hadn't had much time for during the year and watched television.

It was unusual for anyone to appear in my neck of the woods. From one autumn to another I stayed at home more often and stored away what was left by hungry deer and rabbits. The mornings were already chilly, the water in the puddles behind the house was freezing, the aspen beneath the window had lost its leaves and the cat was increasingly keen to come inside. Wherever I looked, everything was preparing for the coming winter.

Very gloomy days followed, when the fog never lifted, in spite of the fact that the house stood quite high in the hills. I had tired of the newspapers and magazines. They reminded me too much of something that had passed me by, a world to which I did not belong, which was self-sufficient and complete. One evening after another I fell asleep in front of the television, usually after downing a half a bottle of cherry brandy left over from the year before. And I found it increasingly difficult to fall asleep alone. Even worse was waking up in a cold room with a hard on and only one thought in my head: women. The sheet was already stained from too many masturbatory discharges. The thought of women accompanied

my every move. As I milked the cow I felt a woman's breast beneath my fingers. It got worse every evening and with every dram I drank I became more obsessed.

It was Friday. Pay day. Before the holidays. The bars, inns, cafés and restaurants in town were full of life. The streets were empty. Couples kept disappearing off together.

I began systematically. At one end of the town and from one place to another. There were few women and most of them were with someone. Otherwise, just men. Probably on the lookout, just as I was. I was getting increasingly drunk. I bumped into someone I knew, who took me to a new bar. With each glass I became more apathetic. I knew it would be as it always was. I would drink too much, get dizzy, somehow drag myself home and lie there in my cold bed jerking off to visions of all the women's legs I had seen that evening in town. My patience began to wear thin. I went up the steep steps to the car park. There was a strange tension in the air. The fog had thinned a little. But the moon could still not be seen.

As I drove around the suburbs my lights illuminated some lonely silhouettes that seemed to be women. Then the police stopped me. I only just managed to convince them that I was sober enough to drive. Home! Bed! You need to get up early in the morning!

There were some crazy saxophone players on the radio. I just let them play into the heedless night. I turned onto the ring road across the bridge and towards home. I don't know how, but the street lights were going out as I left them behind me.

Beneath one of them I thought I saw someone waving. In fact I did. I stopped and waited. There was a knock on the passenger-side window. I opened the door. It was a woman. Beneath her long dark coat I could see a red dress. She had long blonde hair.

-Can I have a lift?

-Of course, I invited her in. -Where are you going?

-Wherever. Home.

I felt something stirring in my trousers.

As I drove, I thought only of one thing: in the car or at home in bed. It didn't matter. Wherever.

-These saxophone players are great. I heard them at the concert in Ljubljana.

I muttered something in reply about village musicians, but she probably didn't hear me. She was tapping her finger on her knee in time with the music. Her coat had meantime come open. In the light of the cars going in the opposite direction I caught sight of softly rounded knees and thighs in stockings. Probably black ones. And silky soft. I was excited. When I changed gear I put my hand on her knee. She didn't move her leg. She said nothing.

-Do you want a drink before bedtime? I began.

-Why not? she said and carried on tapping.

The saxes carried on blowing. A young deer bounded across the road. I almost hit it. She burst out laughing.

-I like animals, you know? I go hunting sometimes.

My prick was getting harder all the time. The bitch likes blood, I thought.

-Where are we going? she asked suddenly.

-I know a place in the hills that's open till the early hours.

-Great, she replied. -A tourist farm. I like farmers. They lead such a healthy life.

-I'm a farmer, I told her. -So you must like me, too.

I shoved my hand right up her dress until I felt bare flesh. She didn't even move.

-Why would you be an exception? she replied.

I started to feel hot. Now you have her, I said to myself.

I could hardly restrain myself from stopping right there. I'll do her at home, I thought.

At home everything was in darkness. My mother went to bed early and never got up before eight.

-They're already closed, she cried, when she got out.

-We'll wake them up, I replied, tersely.

I unlocked the front door and turned on the light. I took her arm and led her into the house, warm from the stove. I poured her a cherry brandy and told her I'd be right back, that she should have a look around.

Then I went into the woodshed. I pulled from the chopping block an axe, with an old, slightly rotten handle. I carefully locked the door behind me.

Then I went into my mother's bedroom. I turned on the light. My mother woke up.

-What's wrong?

-Mother, I said. -I brought home a woman.

-Oh, son, she sighed.

I raised the axe and did it. I covered mother with a blanket and turned off the light. Then I put the axe in a corner and returned to the living room. All was silent.

She was sitting at the table staring at the crucifix, the work of an unknown folk carver. She was facing away from me. Her coat lay on the bench next to the stove. Her back was bare. Her hair fell on her seductive shoulders. My eyes burned.

-Sorry, I said. -There was something I had to do.

She turned to me. Through the tight fitting red dress I could make out the lace of her black bra. And through that the shape of her nipples. I swallowed. I watched her.

-I know what you mean. Everyone has something they have to do, she said with a smile.

We looked at each other. I poured her some more cherry brandy. And then myself. We clinked glasses and looked into each other's eyes. Provocatively.

-It's warm in here, with her left hand she flicked her hair over her shoulder.

Her arms were bare. I watched her.

-Don't you have any music?

I told her I had a player, in fact a stereo system in my room.

-Let's go there, then, she said.

She opened her swollen, lipstick red lips and breathed in deeply.

-Yes, please. This way.

She gave me her hand. She casually took her coat from the bench and we went upstairs to my attic room. I went ahead of her, listening to the sound of her heels on the oak steps. I turned on the light. We went in. I wanted to lock the door.

-I'm not going anywhere.

I turned the radio on. It was still the sax players. As if they were having an all-night concert.

She went into the corner between the window and the bare wall. I had a massive hard on. I dimmed the light and went towards her. She just watched me. I put my left hand between her legs. She had no panties on. With my right hand I pulled her face towards me.

-What's your name?

-Pamela von Stihl. But what's your hurry? I've never been so high in the hills before. I want to take it slowly. I want to enjoy your strength. I want to be your best ever. I want the absolute.

I went rigid. I trembled like a dog with the expectation of pleasure. She pushed me away.

-Wait and watch!

I lit a cigarette. Her coat lay on the floor. Welcomingly open. She stood with her legs wide apart. She turned her back to me. She slowly began to pull her dress up. She leaned forward a little. At the sight of her seductive cleft I shuddered slightly. Her stockings were fastened to a blue garter belt. It

clung to her soft belly. She hung her head back. Her hair reached almost to the gap between her legs. Beneath her dress she was wearing a black slip. Short and thin. With both hands she pulled it upwards. She stood before me almost naked. Across the centre of her back ran the wide strap of her tight bra. The slip got caught on the long metal earring in her left ear. She wriggled her way past this obstacle. Her head went through the slip. She lowered her hands and ran them down her body. In my hand I gripped my howitzer. Then she pulled her bra off. I smelt her scent. Cinnamon. Cloves. She stood there with her back to me. She climbed astride the armchair. She turned her head towards me. She opened her lips wide. Her face wore a feline expression. She wanted it.

-Do you like me?

I just nodded. I was still trembling.

-Come here! she commanded.

She rode the chair and looked at me. Very softly she sang *Some day you come along* and regarded me through lowered eyes.

I began to strip. When I was naked I paused. I had an enormous erection that threatened to explode at any moment. Through the window could be seen the crescent moon. I put off the light. I impaled her. The whole time she kept singing the same song. Something broke inside me. I could hear the fucked up saxophone players on the radio. I kept saying to her that I would dismember her to the sound of the sax.

-Ooh, do it! Do it! she asked. Demanded!

When I awoke she was lying beside me. Completely naked. Her voluptuous body was offered to me. I was still hard. Making up for all the months without. I bit her gently. She sighed. She did not wake up. I stroked her between the legs. Then I looked for her stockings. Carefully, so as not to wake her, I tied her hands to the bed frame. Then I covered her with her coat.

In the garage I poured in an oil and five percent mix. The way back to the attic was almost as long as my life right up until that moment.

She still lay there calmly. I put the chainsaw on the floor and lit a cigarette. I could barely restrain myself when I looked at her. But I did. The saxophones still played from the radio. I pulled the starter rope. Silence. Once more. There was a roar. The room filled with fumes. She woke up. She looked at me strangely. She opened her legs even wider.

-Don't be afraid. I'm going to dismember you to the sound of the saxophone.

-I'm ready. It's always like that. I've long been your most secret desire.

I came closer to the bed with the chainsaw. I put it on the edge. Pamela moved towards the wall. She could not go far. Her whole body was quivering. I knelt behind her between her spread legs. I leaned forward and blew in her left ear. Through the hole in her earring. She curled towards me. I ran my tongue down her spine and the cleft of her buttocks and squeezed her breasts. I shoved my nose into the thicket between her legs. She smelled good. I was slick with her juices. She was enjoying it. She was screaming with fear. I shoved my fist inside her and turned it.

-So you like blood? I'll give you blood!

She was completely aroused. I stroked the cheeks of her arse. She offered them to me.

Then I turned her on her side. I was gentle. I wanted her to enjoy it too. I licked her belly. I stuck my tongue in her navel. I sucked her breasts. I swam across her. Our lips met and we devoured each other. She was thrusting her hips and swallowing me. I escaped, back between her breasts. Her nipples were so taut they might explode. I licked the right one until it drove her mad. Then I bit down. There was a salty sweet taste in my mouth. Her breast bled slightly. She gasped in pleasure at the pain.

-Take me! Take me forever!

She lent on her elbow and raised herself slightly. I reached for the chainsaw and opened the fuel flow. It roared. The chain started to run. Pamela was covered with goose pimples. I slowed down the saw and placed it beneath her stomach. She lifted herself up so as not to be injured. Only I could wound her! My prick rose again in all its strength and glory. I thrust it into her and told her how I would dismember her to the sound of the sax. She had asked for it, demanded!

Then suddenly something broke inside her. She stretched onto her stomach. Onto the rushing chainsaw. I heard the grating of bones. There was a lot of blood. I didn't come. I felt a dead body beneath me. I lifted her. Actually, just her lower half. It was horrible. Extremely horrible. I moved the chainsaw back to the edge of the bed. I put Pamela back together again. I covered her with her coat and lay beside her. I listened to the saxophone players. Their music mixed with the pulsing of the chainsaw.

My wish was only half fulfilled. The fuel would soon run out.

*Translated by David Limon
from Slovene original Pamela von Stibl.*

The Chain

Marijan Pušavec

It was a Saturday. I was standing by the window of my attic room, listening to the darkness. This was the third day of rain. The electricity supply was interrupted by falling trees. My mother lit a candle. The whole afternoon my father and I were digging trenches and building dykes in the garden to prevent the water getting into the stables. The road into the hills, where our family had been living in isolation for centuries, remained passable.

If it continues to pour like this, I won't even have to go to church tomorrow, I thought.

The light on the wall started flickering. Father had turned on the generator. The yellowish light settled around the room. I turned on the radio. The local station was advising people to stay at home. Most of the roads were flooded. The villages in the hills were cut off. I opened the window and lit a cigarette. I blew the smoke into the thick mist. It seemed to me that through the dense veil of fog and rain clouds I could see a couple of twinkling stars. It won't be long, I thought. The news on the radio was followed by music. It invoked a few memories.

I lit another cigarette and emptied my glass. There was a dance in the valley that evening. In fact, there was one every Saturday. And in fact, I had not been for a long time. Ever since the woman I had been with for many years had left me. She started studying while working and told me I was not ambitious enough, that I had cut myself off in these hills and that she did not want a life like that, and so on. It was hard to believe how quickly I got over her. But in fact I did become slightly embittered. And I got drunk more often.

I took a shower. Then I shaved off the few days' growth of stubble and put on some cologne and clean underwear. When

I looked in the mirror, I liked what I saw.

If you go hunting for girls tonight, boys, don't forget to take a chain and condoms.

It was a voice from the radio. It shook me. At that moment I knew. I stashed a packet of Czech condoms into my shirt pocket, put a jumper on top and went downstairs. Father was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the paper. Mother was washing up.

I told them I was going to the dance and not to worry if I was late. Mother moaned a bit, saying that I should stay home in such weather. Father winked understandingly and added that I should be careful as the stream had probably flooded the road. I had a quick bite to eat and then went to get the car. On the way, I got the chain father and I use for pulling tree trunks from the shed. I put it on the front seat.

I drove to the valley without any problems. Just before the end of our village I picked up two guys I knew by sight. Their car had died on them. With their arrival came the smell of damp and sweat. They were going to the dance, too.

We were early, so we stopped at an inn by the road, the Golden Drop. They ordered a litre of white wine. Then I bought another. When we finally arrived at the hall where the dance was being held it was already ten o'clock. The local band was playing so loud it could be heard from far away. The rain had stopped. A few young guys were throwing up near the entrance. The strong men of the valley, strapping farmers in pointed leather boots, were leaning on the wall outside. They were emptying a crate of beer. I received a few angry looks and unfriendly comments. I thought of the chain in the car. Then we made our way into the hall.

We were met by a dense cloud of cigarette smoke. There were only a few couples dancing slowly on the dance floor. Two or three secondary school boys were throwing themselves around. Along the walls there was a row of chairs occupied by flirting girls. From higher grades of primary school pupils and drunken secondary school students to young workers at the wood processing plant. It was the latter that I fancied most. I knew a few of them. They were my generation. I exchanged smiles with some of them. Things were livelier at the bar. Young guys were leaning on the counter, drinking beer. They were talking very loudly. When I ordered a glass of white wine, they turned towards me and fell silent.

So beer isn't good enough for you, they said mockingly. I turned to face them.

Anybody want a drink? I said with a loud voice.

Their eyes lit up. Those nearest to me started patting me on the shoulder.

OK, you're one of us. Cheers! We toasted one another.

I paid for a crate of beer. They started shouting again, each louder than the next. I pushed my way past them back to the dance hall, found a chair and lit a cigarette. I had a strong dizzy spell. The room, the people and the music all merged together and danced with me an unfamiliar dance. I was drunk. I felt for the car keys. They were still there. I watched the couples embracing in the hall. I was searching for an angel's face. A woman's, of course. But there was nothing angelic on the faces of the healthy Gorenjska farm girls. The roundness of their faces was in harmony with their small tits and the width of their arses. I preferred not to think of the fat knees and strong legs. I was not far from sighing with sad helplessness. I lit another cigarette.

And then I sensed that someone was watching me.

She was sitting a few chairs away. Alone. She was fully turned towards me and was looking straight at me. So straight that I nearly blushed. I started looking at her, too. We stared into each other's eyes. After a while, I had a feeling we were getting closer to each other. The room, the people and the music had disappeared. All that was left was her.

Two drunken guys approached her. They tried forcing beer and cigarettes on her. It was obvious that she did not want them. One of them tried to put his arm around her. The other one was stroking her thighs. I got up and went over to them. Calmly I tried to tell them that the girl and I had come together and to stop pestering her. They refused to listen. I said it again, almost pleadingly, but they remained unperturbed. Meanwhile, the girl tried to shake them off, too. To no avail. I stamped on the foot of the one nearest to me. He grimaced in sudden pain. The other one tried to intervene. I was quicker. I grabbed his nose and squeezed it until he was completely red in the face. Then I let go.

Run along now! I said.

I sat next to the girl. I offered her a cigarette. We lit up. Then we smoked in silence for a while. She said:

Why does it always have to be like this? They never let me choose. The morons.

I smiled. This story was familiar to me in many variations. They were all basically the same. The one that night was perfectly clear to me, too. I could see that I would fulfil everything she expected of me. And that was not so little.

The most difficult thing is being a hero, I said.

She was thirsty. I pushed my way to the counter. When I came back to the hall, she was still sitting in more or less the same position. She had long, dark eyelashes. And a short skirt.

You're alright, she said suddenly as we were chatting and drinking our wine.

I laughed.

Because I'm not pestering you? I asked.

Not just that, she said. - Do you want to dance?

We went. At first, I did not really feel like it. I shuffled in an automatic rhythm. I pushed my hands in my pockets. She was moving, though. Quite neatly. She meant business. I watched her with lust. I almost started following her movements. But suddenly, the room went dark. Women's shrieks mingled with the drunken revelry of male voices. The girl clung to me. She was smaller than me. She pressed herself very close and leant her head on my chest. I put my arms around her shoulders.

All I want is some gentleness, she whispered in my ear.

I stroked her cheeks. Played with her hair. Slid my hand along her back. I felt the bra fastening. I felt the firmness of her legs and the roundness of her knees.

What's your name? I asked her.

Fani.

Her name gave me a warm feeling between my legs. I searched out her mouth. Her moist, willing lips were expecting me. The kiss was long. A French kiss. She reached under my jumper and shirt. Caressed my naked flanks. I made my way to her nipples. Warm. Perfectly dry. It lasted a long time. We were not able to exchange more in the midst of that noisy darkness.

Light came back to the hall. People looked around them with curiosity, smiling. The band in the corner was getting ready to start playing again. Fani and I sat down in the darkest corner. I went to the bar for a bottle and two glasses, then we

drank and talked.

She was two years younger than me; lived on a nearby hill farm that was falling apart because there was no one to work it; her father was a drunken pensioner, her mother a sickly housewife; the older brother had married a girl in the valley; she had finished business college and was now working as a bookkeeper in the wood processing plant; she did not like drunks; she was still young and did not really know what she wanted in life; she had saved up for an old car, so she did not have to take the bus to work; sometimes she got depressed because she was so fed up with her life. She thought men were bastards as all they ever wanted was to screw her; she needed gentleness. Then she told me once more that I was alright. In the summer, she went on holiday to the Island of Krk; to a campsite; with a friend and her boyfriend; she fell in love with an Italian who had a boat; he was pretty rich and horny; she had a good time; she felt important; now she cried a lot. On Sundays, she went to ten o'clock mass; then she cooked lunch for the three of them; during the week, there was no time for that. Sometimes she went to the cinema or a dance. When still at school, she used to go walking in the mountains. With her brother and her friends; to Ratitovec, Blegoš, Črna prst, Sedmera jezera, Triglav, Škrlatica; now she had no one to go with; she was lonely; most of her friends had a family. She told me which magazines she read and that when she had time, she also read love stories. She liked knitting and sewing. She did not know why she was still smoking as she no longer took any pleasure from it, but it was difficult to give up. She believed in horoscopes.

I listened to her and felt for the condoms. They were still there. And then it struck me that Fani and I were very similar. A similar despair. And a defiance of nonsense. She probably felt the same. Perhaps she had left home with the same thoughts. Perhaps there was a God after all. The closer we got to the bottom of the bottle, the more I believed this. Or in happy coincidences. Or in the alignment of stars. Whatever. We got up to dance again. The band was playing a song that was very popular in these parts. Girls were disappearing into the night.

Do you know this song? I asked her.

Yes, I've heard it before, she replied.

But do you know what it's really like? I said, looking in her eyes.

Come, I'll show you, I said invitingly.

There was a crowd at the exit. I noticed the drunken guys who had earlier bothered her. It seemed that they were waiting for us. And that they were even drunker now. I took her arm.

She didn't want to do it with me and you think she'll go with you? the one whose foot I had stamped on shouted to me. I pretended not to hear. All I wanted was to get outside as soon as possible. He grabbed my sleeve.

Are you deaf? I'm talking to you.

He was grinning inanely.

What's the matter? I asked calmly.

Leave her alone, she's ours! said the other guy.

I thought about the chain in the car.

OK, guys, I said. - Can we talk outside?

The others were beginning to give us curious looks. Mainly drunken young guys with inebriated eyes. They had expectations. Demanded that their custom be followed. I wanted to get out. To the car, to the chain.

Somehow, we shoved our way out. The sky had cleared completely by now. The stars were twinkling like the eyes of the drunken livestock in front of me. There'll be a frost in the morning, I thought.

I pushed Fani into the car and pulled out the chain. Then I stood with my feet spread wide in front of the tense crowd.

OK, boys, which one of you would like to get it? I said and looked around.

They moved away, muttering. The guys I had picked up on the way to the valley came closer. They knew the locals and tried to persuade them to lay off. They did. I sat in the car and slowly drove off. Someone kicked my door. I did not stop. I speeded up and soon we were out of the village.

Slowly we drove along the valley. The moon made it quite light. The meadows on the side of the road were flooded. We were silent. I turned right, uphill. I said we could not go to my place because there would be hell to pay in the morning. She said she understood. That it was the same at her place, which was perhaps the reason why she was still on her own. She leant against me understandingly. It was very pleasant.

Fani was full of feminine smells. We crawled up the hill in second gear.

At the top of the hill, there was a long village. It was wrapped in darkness. We drove through it and then continued to the junction for her village. There, I turned off onto a cart track. I spotted a large double hayrack in the moonlight and drove into it. When we got out of the car, I embraced and kissed her. She did not try to stop me. We found a ladder and climbed into roof space. It smelt of damp hay. A cold wind was blowing through the windows. The roof tiles let in the odd bit of moonlight.

As soon as my eyes got used to the darkness, there she stood almost naked in front of me. Her nipples were large and erect like two walnuts from our yard. She left her short, strong legs in her boots. I thought of the muddy timber slide down which my dad and I let the tree trunks roll. My penis wanted out of my trousers. Fani stumbled towards me. She managed to steady herself and kneel in front of me. She wanted to open my flies. I lifted her. She gave me a surprised look.

Don't you want me? She asked. I swallowed.

Of course I do. But I can't.

I said nothing for a few moments.

I can't without the chain, I said barely audibly.

It's in the car. What are you waiting for? Do you want me to freeze up here? she said firmly.

It only took me a minute or so. When I climbed back up, she was already ready for it.

Take off the shirt, I told her. - And don't turn around.

She obeyed in silence. I undid my flies and took out my shaft. When I approached her with the chain, my prick touched her back. She trembled.

Lift your arms, I said.

She lifted them. I threw one end of the chain across the beam. With the other end, I secured her raised arms and then linked one end of the chain to the other. I put my arm around her stomach from behind. It was swollen and full. She put her feet apart.

Do it to me! she tried to turn towards me.

I did not let her. I kept squeezing her large breasts, rubbing my prick against her back.

She was getting nervous. She said she would scream. I told her no one would hear her and put my forearm between her

legs. She mounted it. Within a second my whole arm was wet up to my elbow. Fani started swearing. She said I was a bastard. That I should finally screw her. That she was cold. I looked for the condoms. I could barely put one on. My prick does not conform to Czech measurements. When I had finished, I untied her. Sobbing, she dug herself into the hay.

Then I got dressed and lit a cigarette.

*Translated by David Limon
from Slovene original Veriga.*

Pizza

Mate Dolenc

I've always adored Italian pizzas, but since I've been here I've become completely obsessed with them. Madonna di Campiglio, one thousand five hundred metres above sea level, a cosmopolitan resort in the Brenta Dolomites. The Italo Motel, room thirty three; car registration N JR 536 - a dirty, boring old Volkswagen - skilfully parked on the metre-and-a-half wide space below the restaurant. My own bored self in the restaurant with a beer and a cognac, alone, while the other guests watching television in the extension. A glance at my watch tells me that it is eleven p.m. and through the big window I can see the stars. Just over an hour ago I ate my last pizza, a Marguerita, which is what I most often have. Now I'm hungry again, but SHE has the keys, so I'd have to walk into town and that would take ten minutes. To walk for ten minutes or not? In order to make the decision easier I'll have to drink another beer and another cognac. As they are bringing them, the door in the glass wall opens and SHE comes in. She moves towards the table with questions on her face - yes, she investigates, complicates, philosophises and asks more questions, while I eat pizzas; many, oh so many pizzas. I also smoke a lot of pipes, oh so many pipes, while she questions me.

Then we are silent. Silent, silent, silent. We sit, walk, eat, drink, sleep and remain silent. At those times I eat slightly fewer pizzas. But as soon as she begins again, pizza time reappears. They already know me in all the restaurants in the town. In the Taverna I always have a Marguerita: when they see me they bring one without asking. There, I don't drink cognac, but red Italian wine. I also like the night club Champagne à go-go, where I have Napolitana. I have Riviera in the restaurant of the Hotel Italia. In the Hotel Bona Pace they do a good pizza San Remo. Everywhere they have good red wine and Vecchio Romagna. In the last two weeks I've become a

real gourmet. Whenever SHE is around I have a full mouth and am probably putting weight on. It's getting hard to fasten my trousers and my neck has got fatter, so that I don't even try to fasten my shirt collar. But while there is pizza Marguerita and her girlfriends and HER, I don't really care about my physical appearance.

Now she comes towards me and stands at the table.

"Are you coming into town with me?" she asks in Bavarian English.

I shake my head.

She turns and leaves.

Okay, let her go. I am a calm and patient man, but I have my principles. Upstairs in the room, the matchstick that holds my glasses together broke. We were just getting ready to go down to the restaurant, in our usual silent state. I picked up a box of matches with one hand and my glasses with the other and I said "Shall we go?" She pulled a tormented face and said in a meandering voice:

"Can't you do that HERE?"

I looked and looked at her and said:

"What, because of people?"

"Yes, because of people," she said.

"Stay here, then, and I'll go down and have a cognac and fix my glasses in front of everyone." I left. I did not hide from myself the hope that she would come after me. And she was quite a long time - probably waiting for me to repair my glasses. Then she changed her plan and wanted to get me into town, probably to go dancing. I've said to her so many times that she can go on her own, but she doesn't because she is afraid of Italians. This time she really did go, because I heard the Volkswagen drive away from in front of the restaurant. I smiled at the thought that she probably wanted to show me that she, too, was independent. I'm sure she would like an adventure with someone else to show me how little she still cares about me. I've already told her an endless number of times to seek some company. But as soon as I show any benevolence towards her and not the slightest trace of jealousy, she is infuriated. Then I drag myself to the nearest restaurant and order pizza. It is a precious, magnificent, soothing thing to eat. It completely occupies your jaws and throat, so that there really is no opportunity to talk.

I finish my drink and wonder whether to order another, to go to bed or to go into town after all. As I'm wide awake I decide on the town and go in just my jacket, even though it's cold outside and the puddles on the road are frozen. I pass various hotels and restaurants and for each one I know what kind of pizzas they have. I decide to go right into the centre and smile at the thought of meeting her. I'm not denying that I feel sorry for her, but I've got to show myself a little consideration too. I look at cars on the way, as the Italians have good cars. Her car is nowhere to be seen, but I can't say I miss it. I go to the Taverna, as I'm most used to it and they bring me a Marguerita - thick, golden, taut, smooth, soft, succulent. I drink wine with it and get as doped up as a guinea pig in a laboratory. Then I leave and walk past the night spots. I choose the Scotch Night Club and go in. A happy and aristocratic club, without pizzas but with bar stools on which you can sit and watch the dancers. Modern dances are wonderful and you can interpret each female movement during the shake as sexual. These women are so graceful. Sometimes Elke and I used to dance like that. But each story has its ending - it's just that a woman always devours a man at the end. So now Elke is devouring me like I devour pizzas. The women are wearing the gold and silver dresses that are fashionable this year, whereas the men look degenerate to me. Lawyers, doctors and traders from Milan and other northern Italian towns spend their winter holidays in Madonna di Campiglio. Their sons and daughters make up the crowd that dances at the Scotch and other clubs.

As I leave I watch the happy company departing in flashy Ferraris and Alfa Romeos: happy, beautiful girls in sexy clothes and young men who lack for nothing. For a moment I get the feeling that I am poorer than them and that I am being kept by a German tourist. This isn't true, for there is a story behind us that reached its peak in true love, which even I will never forget. That is the vice that grips me; that is why women think they own men, just as a dog actually thinks it owns its master, which is why it guards and defends him.

I enter the room and I am afraid. There are no pizzas here, I have to cope on my own as well as I am able. I didn't think she'd returned yet, as I forgot to look whether the car was parked outside. But she is lying on the bed with her hair in

curlers. There have been precisely six occasions when I haven't slept with her because her hair was in curlers, and those were when I still had a reason to sleep with her. She wants to show me that she doesn't care much what I think. And I don't care much either. I say hello and she asks me where I've been. I say that I've been in town and that I had a pizza. She says that I'll turn into a pizza. Whenever she is witty I'm immediately good to her. Then I lie on the other half of the double bed and open a book. I tell her what I'm reading about, how Zola had sex with some woman in a graveyard and how Maupassant got syphilis. She says that where I come from they publish stupid books. She starts going on about how it must have been written by one of my compatriots who was interested only in the unnecessary details of Maupassant's life. I ask her if she knows what a biographical novel is. She mutters something. Then I tell her that the book was written by an Englishman and that it has been translated into twenty languages. She never admits to being wrong. I've never heard her say "You were right" when she's been wrong about something. And so on this occasion she simply turns off the light and acts unaffected. But a little later, when I too turn off, I feel her coming closer. I move to the extreme edge of the bed, until I'm almost falling off. Her arm and leg are already in my half. I jump up and rush to the bathroom. "It's hot. I must have a glass of water," I say. Oh, if only I had a pizza. When I come back she is still half on my side. "Are we going to visit your friend tomorrow?" I ask.

"Why are you asking?"

"I don't know, because. So I know what we're doing."

"Listen," she says and starts to speak. Why did you even come? Why don't you want to talk to me about us? Why can't you face the truth? Why won't you let us clear things up?

"I've said everything there is to say," I say. "I'm tired. It's simple. I was very fond of you and I want us to stay friends. I wanted us to spend this week as friends, not as a couple. I had three women at home before I came here and one of them is very dear to me and is waiting for me. It's very simple and I hoped that you'd be grown up about it. I thought you'd act like a grown up woman. Don't be grown up only in bed when some man is lying on top of you."

"You're being evasive again," says Elke. She always says that.

"I'm not being evasive. That's all I've got to say to you. Am I being evasive if I say that I had three women and that one of them is waiting for me?"

"You're sickeningly self-centred," she says. She always says that.

"I came here because you were expecting me to and I didn't want to disappoint you. I came so that you didn't think I was running away from you. I came because of you. Does that make me self-centred?"

"You'll never have any woman for more than a year," she says. This is the first time she's said this, so it's interesting.

"Probably not," I reply, "I'll be very cautious about getting involved with any woman again."

Oh, how much I said! When there was no pizza, I had to talk. We always fell asleep weary of talking, of endlessly repeating the same things. Gradually, I was able to predict which reproach was coming next and almost to respond to it before it was uttered. Our time together and our talking followed a specific order, day after day. I wanted to leave and I had already packed my bag several times to go and stand by the roadside with my thumb raised, for there were no buses or trains from here. But she would have to drive back alone in the worst possible state of mind to her home country, across numerous mountain passes and valleys. I still hoped that we might part as friends and each go our own way, calmly.

"I have given up sleeping with you," I say, "because I don't want to do it without love. I don't want to debase you in any way." I had to keep saying the same things every night. Every night these things offended and hurt her, and every night she made me repeat them. I repeat what I said about sleeping with her and she withdraws from my side of the bed. Disappointment hangs in the air and without looking at her I know that she is angry because she hasn't managed to conquer an inch of my territory. As she knows she is losing me, she at least wants to have my body, so she lies every night on my half and waits and waits. I, meanwhile, inhabit a world without her body: I drive it away and flee from it, because from its owner I have squeezed everything she has to give, so it no longer interests me.

Morning begins with the rattling of guests along the corridor in their ski boots. They are going to the ski slopes or to

the promenade. There are plenty of people who you can see at any time of the day in full skiing gear in cafes or on the street. They wander around in heavy boots and colourful clothes, with large ski caps, leather gloves, with sun protector on their faces, giving the impression they are top-class skiers and yet they never ski. In the mornings they strut past our room door shouting, because they are Italian. When they have gone the maids appear, opening and closing doors, vacuuming, shouting, getting organised and then they start knocking on the doors of those who haven't yet left, which always includes us, as we are always last to leave. Once I lose my temper, go into the corridor and shout at the maid in Italian, which is inconceivable for Elke, who never wants to stand out from the crowd even by a millimetre, because she has been brought up in an environment that allows no exceptions, no extravagant displays, no individual freedoms and no revolt. So she gets angry at my behaviour and drags me back into the room, knocking off my glasses in the process and the unfortunate matchstick holding them together breaks once more. At such moments I realise that I am the kind of person who is not easily thrown off course and that this gets to her more than anything else, including the fact that I am leaving her. I calmly pick up my glasses, give her a pitying look, sit at the table and start to repair them without uttering a word. She walks round the table and tells me that I don't have the right attitude towards people, that I always want to be something special and that I should do that when I am on my own, but when I am with her I should behave like a well brought-up young German.

"I'm not German and I'm happy I'm not. I don't need a sexual tonic before I can sleep with a woman and I don't need anyone telling me how to behave. I'm an individual, who behaves as he sees fit and you know for yourself that I have a lot of friends and no enemies. In addition to that I know how to be charming towards women and there are many I could win and many who would be flattered if they could have me," I tell her.

"Sometimes you are really disgusting," she says. She is bothered by my tone of voice that, even in the most difficult moments, never rises above a normal conversational level, whereas she has already screamed at me quite a number of times, a fact that she is then always secretly ashamed of.

“You and your pizzas! I’m never going anywhere with you again if you eat pizza,” she yells.

“Fine. Then we’ll meet after lunch in the hotel restaurant,” I reply, lighting a cigar. My glasses are repaired and I’m dressed; she is not dressed, which means that it is quite some time before she will be.

“We won’t meet in the restaurant. Please, wait for me.”

Now that’s different. Whenever she says please I feel all warm towards her. But that warmth soon cools when I have to wait for her.

“I’m not going anywhere, my hair’s all wrong.” “I can’t decide what to wear. My corduroy skirt is all creased. I can’t go out.” Those were the ways that she cooled my feelings. I’m expecting her to say something similar because she hasn’t appeared from the bathroom for some time. Eventually she appears and asks if her mascara is smudged from rubbing her eye. I say I can’t see anything. Then she comes close, stands on tip toes and offers her face to me. “Is there anything?” she asks. “There’s nothing,” I reply, sticking my cigar in my mouth. She drops down and stands there so small in front of me – small but rounded – and whenever she is close I remember the rich harvest I have taken from her body; but I know I’ve had my share and that there isn’t a crumb left that would interest me. Whenever she is like she is now, a normal, weak woman who is not trying to outwit a man, I feel really sorry for her and when she looks at me with her sad, helpless eyes, I also become sad and I understand her from top to bottom, but usually that feeling is demolished in a moment when she says that she is not going anywhere with me if I put on my ski cap (which is an ordinary ski cap, such as all the men here wear, but she is prejudiced against it from back home and it doesn’t help if I point out to her on the street men with exactly the same cap – she says that no-one has one the same and that she is not walking around with Pinocchio).

As she is also hungry she comes to terms with the fact that I will eat pizza. I throw myself on my pizza as if it’s the first I’ve ever had. Elke vanishes from my mind, even though she is saying something and I am replying. Later, when I have eaten it, I’m again left high and dry and have no-one to flee to. So I often lift my glass of wine to my mouth and have to keep ordering until I feel a pleasant tiredness that creeps into

my legs and renders me insensitive to my own pain. Then it is ME that is ready to talk but she doesn't want to. It's always the same: she judges me.

"You only talk when you're drunk," she says.

"I'm not drunk, Elke. The wine is excellent and if it loosens my tongue it does not mean I am drunk. The wine removes the lid under which I've been closed the last few days."

"Why are you closed? Why do you never talk unless you are drinking?"

"I don't talk because I don't want to keep saying the same things. You have stayed at the level of conversation that was necessary, but which we have long ago transcended. If I talk I want to talk about something new. In the new state in which we find ourselves there should be new, broader horizons. But you have stayed in your narrow corridor, just as in life you never want even for a moment to look beyond your own boundaries. There is a world on the other side, too, Elke."

Oh dear, whenever I talk about another world it finishes me off!

"What do you think your world is like? Do you think it is somehow broader than mine?"

"Even if it's not, I am at least trying to broaden it. I try every experience offered me because I want to know everything. That is why I have never offered to be faithful to you, because I know I will try out every woman who interests me and is available. And that applies to all the women I shall ever have."

"I feel sorry for the one who gets you," she says, feeling sorry for herself, for she is precisely the one it has happened to. I want to comfort her by condemning myself:

"Yes, Elke, it'll always be hard with me. I don't know how I'll get on in life if I'm like this. I know it'll be tough on me, but I'm ready for that. Maybe I'll die as a nobody whom everyone has abandoned; maybe women will see through me and I'll never get another. Will you think about me at all in ten years time?"

Unfortunately, Elke is bright and sees through me. And once again I hear that sentence: "Sometimes you are really disgusting." There is a jukebox near and I try to imagine what a song would be like sung by the Beatles with the title "Sometimes you are really disgusting". They'd probably have a vio-

lin or cello in the background; one would sing the lead and the other the refrain. Then a woman's voice would join in and give the title line, and then the guys would sing again and the lyrics would go something like: "Oh I'm so down, I really am disgusting, Give me some pizza, To help me forget."

Then I order a second pizza.

"I'd like to go and see my friend," says Elke.

"I sometimes have to wait for you," I reply.

"I could go on my own," she says.

"No, please don't." Meeting her friend is something I can hardly wait to do and it gives me the hope that something new will happen. And even if not, the third person with us will act as some kind of catalyst. I'd seen her friend on a small photograph and there she looked quite promising. She was staying a few houses away from the hotel and Elke had pointed out to me the window of her room, which we could see from our room. But in spite of her proximity I had never met her: Elke had visited her a few times, while I was eating pizza. She was working as a seasonal nanny for some doctor who was here on holiday. I immediately decided to invite her for a pizza.

I finished my second pizza and suggested we leave. But Elke had just lit a cigarette. It's always the same: when I'm ready to go, she lights a cigarette.

"Are the three of us going out together this evening?" I ask.

"If she's free," she replies.

"I'd like to invite her for a pizza," I say.

"Give me a break with these pizzas of yours," she replies.

"I'm crazy about them and why wouldn't I invite Elvira for a pizza? Maybe she likes them?"

"Elvira is Italian and doesn't care one way or the other about pizzas."

"She probably doesn't eat them every day, like I do."

"Ask her!"

"Is she beautiful?"

"She's my friend and that means she has special qualities," says Elke.

"That's the spirit! People have got to respect themselves," I say. With that she finishes her cigarette, I help her to put on her coat and we leave. There is only one wide road running through Madonna di Campiglio and along it are all the eating

and drinking places and the main shops. Elke stops in front of every shop window in which there is at least one shoe. I wait for her at a distance of two metres. Then something catches my eye and when I turn back Elke is no longer there. I have to walk fast to catch up with her and then I lurk a few metres behind her until she remembers me and looks to see where I am. We walk together or apart in this yo-yoing fashion until we get to Elvira's house. We go in and walk along a long hallway full of toys. At the end is a door with a buzzer: Elke rings and some man appears - thin and perversely friendly. This is Elvira's boss; he calls her. The two women embrace and kiss and immediately forget about me - Elke introduces me in a cursory kind of way - beginning to chat in French, the language they converse in. In the mean time, Elvira's boss offers me a drink and I have to negotiate his rambling Italian because he speaks no other language. I am the first (not Elke) to pluck up the courage and ask him if Elvira can have the evening off. I then invite Elvira for a pizza and wine at the Champagne à go-go. She is pleased. She is a good-looking girl with dark hair and eyes and beautiful coloured skin. She speaks in a certain way that attracts me enormously: as if she was concerned and personally affected the whole time. Her eyes are lively and friendly, and beneath her clothes I assume there is a richness I could immediately begin to benefit from. But Elvira still has work to do and Elke drags me away. I'm pleased we have a date for the evening; Elke falls into silence, which pleases me no end. I request an afternoon rest and we go to our room. Elke undresses and lies beneath the cover in her slip, while I lie down fully dressed and open my book on Maupassant. I read for half an hour and then suddenly feel a wild craving for a pizza, which nearly propels me to Taverna. Then I fall asleep and in my dream I am sitting at a table full of pizzas, which I eat one after the other, while Elke sits beside me talking and talking and talking; as she does so articles of clothing fall from her, then the powder from her face, then her false eyelashes, her lipstick drains away, and her wig and varnished nails fall to the floor.

"What's wrong?" I hear from somewhere in the stratosphere. I open my eyes and see Elke, how she usually is, above me. I realise that I have slept and dreamt.

"Nothing."

"You're hot," says Elke.

"It's nothing. I had a nightmare."

"Do you want a tablet?"

"No." I turn away and nastily think that maybe she wants to win me back through being obliging. This later turns out to have been just an unworthy thought, for when we get up, already in the dark, she is as silent as before and I know that the silent day is continuing.

In Champagne à go-go a friendly waiter leads us to a separate cubicle and then another waiter appears with a menu, a third waiter brings the drinks and a fourth one the pizzas. There are speakers on the wall that bring tunes from the juke-box - only modern pop songs, that we comment on for the first five minutes because we don't know what else to say. Later we comment on the pizzas and I deliver a whole lecture on pizzas to Elvira, who has never had one before. Elke looks darkly at the pizzas and does not want to eat hers, then she makes fun of my lecture and says that I am really going to turn into a pizza. "I hope I do," I say, "then I can eat myself." I see Elvira is enjoying herself and I begin to ask her what it is like where she is staying, whether it is possible to get into her room at night. On the surface I am joking, but Elke knows that the idea really appeals to me. But I don't quite know what to make of this Elvira.

So far, I have liked two things about Madonna di Campiglio: pizzas and Elvira. The hours of silence between Elke and me are endless and the odd words that have to be exchanged make the silence seem even more absolute, just as a single pedestrian on a street highlights its emptiness. What's funny is that Elvira thinks Elke and I are lovers, because Elke has always written to her about me as her boyfriend. I observe her to see if she has any inkling that we are not, but she acts so friendly that I can't work out what she thinks, even about other things. What about her and men? I don't manage to drag anything tangible out of her. I'm trying to charm her but I keep coming up against this extreme friendliness, past which I cannot get.

That night Elke and I get to our room a little drunk and again I catch her on my side of the bed. She says:

"Do you want to sleep with Elvira?"

"Of course," I say, pithily.

“Do you ever think about me at night when you can’t sleep and you know I’m lying here beside you?”

Once again she is as soft as honey, while I am drunk and not too hard. I do ask myself whether I think about her at all when I can’t sleep and I feel her there beside me. I reply loud and clear in the negative and that I do not want her at all. But tonight I feel strange and I’m afraid that she will be able to seduce me.

“We’ve already been sleeping together in this room for two weeks,” I say and suddenly feel her foot between mine.

“I know. Sometimes we made love six times a day, but now things have changed. I said that without love I would not have sex with you. I would with Elvira because she is new and because I have never felt anything towards her. You I loved and now I don’t want to humiliate you.”

“You know I’d like to make love to you one more time.”

I call upon pizzas for help. Oh to be sitting in Taverna downing pizzas until my stomach burst. Elke is getting closer and I know that now she will get me. She has seduced me, I say to myself. Now’s the right time to change into a pizza. It’s dark in the room and her body is becoming pliable beneath my hands which are, against my will, crawling all over her.

“You seduced me,” I say indignantly, before it has even really begun.

“Don’t you like it even a little?”

“I’ll just say that I’d like to have a pizza,” I say and I already feel like laughing.

“Eat me a little first,” she replies.

“What else can I do, as you’re forcing me? Be careful, I’m changing into a pizza!”

“Just one more time with a man who doesn’t need a sexual tonic,” she whispers and then the love that is happening down below takes her breath away up above and I hear the familiar subdued panting and it seems to be coming from far away and from another body that holds no interest for me and has no connection with me and my history. In front of my eyes that are tensely staring into the dark when they are not directed at the pillow there opens up a visual field with distinct boundaries upon which appears a kind of Disneyland, a melange of places I know, that represent my history and her history and our combined history: in the midst of it all stands the Eiffel

Tower and in the general confusion, right beside it, is the tucked-away hotel on the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, with the bistro in which on Saturdays they take bets on horses. Beside it is the Munich beer garden whose courtyard was once meant for horses and which is enclosed by the Berlin Wall, with two Russian border guards. Right behind it is a lake from my own little country and a small house beside a mountain torrent, a large beech tree in front of it and mountains all around. A girl lies on the grass singing 'The Green, Green Grass of Home', while I rush round her, taking photographs.

At a specific point Disneyland collapses and I am a witness to the ruins: a whole part of the world collapses before my eyes and returns to the dark at which I am staring while the body beside me pulses; I have no choice but to kiss her. But when I do I begin to be transformed into dough, my legs stick together and I can't tear them from each other. My mouth is invaded by the taste of melted cheese, my back is slicked with tomato; the dough starts to rise until some force starts to flatten it into a pancake shape and then unseen hands scatter me with herbs and sauces and chopped fish and strips of ham, and then a generous dose of parsley and, after a short pause, as if remembered at the last moment, a twist of pepper.

So I lie on the plate, ready for a waiter to carry me to the person who ordered me. By chance it is Elvira, who has been invited for a pizza by her employer, on the very night when he seduces her. In the mean time, the dirty, boring old Volkswagen N JR 536 crawls across the Brenner Pass.

*Translated by David Limon
from Slovene original Pizza.*



Rape

Tomaž Kosmač

I was leaning on the window sill, when someone braked so violently that his car slid ten metres along the gravel of the yard. Who's come to spread their shit around, I thought tetchily. If it's just some prick, I'll lock myself in the house and turn off my mobile. He'll get fed up. I hid behind the curtain so that the guy would not notice me. Beneath my window, Plundra opened both side windows so that loud pop music could be heard. It was a group I had once praised to him because the only music he had was two really lousy singers. When faced with a choice between the gallows or the guillotine, you have to decide on the least painful option - a shot in the head. Since then, he has been convinced that I shared his musical taste. Leaning on his horn, he shouted my name. I nervously pulled on my cigarette. Suddenly I realised I had not seen him for a long time. The last time was when I danced in that quarry to the group he was now playing. That is where he usually hid from his wife when he was drunk. Drunks disgusted his wife. She had a wrong impression about us. We are not all neglected, violent and constantly under the influence, as she had had drummed into her.

Plundra had never had a serious job. He had managed to produce two brats, simply because that is what you do if you want a proper family. His wife got him a job on the conveyor belt where she herself intended to spend her years until retirement. She dreamt about a plaque with her name on it, her workmates' signatures and a photograph in the factory gazette for her 40 years of loyal service. Plundra, however, did not last long. He soon found an excuse to stay away from work. He went for alcohol addiction treatment. When she got him another job, he came up with tooth extraction and waiting for false teeth. He got his fangs and the wife again forced him to go to work so that for once in their life they would be able to

have a seaside holiday. Under pressure, he became a caretaker at a primary school. But he soon whacked two kids in their gobs.

I went downstairs and feigned happiness:

“Where have you come from?”

“I stole a car!” he shouted as loud as he could. “Here’s a bottle of wine! Let’s go on a tour.”

“Hold your horses.” I tried to calm him down and invited him in.

He could barely breathe, he had so much to tell me. I had two beers in the corner of the room that I just had not felt like drinking. I had been putting them off for a few months. They were ideal for Plundra. He did not touch the wine that he had brought and that I needed all for myself. I had to get drunk quickly to get my head into a state of indifference. I knew I would not be able to get rid of Plundra just like that. And who knows, maybe he would prove useful. We had started primary school together. He repeated the first year, but he was pretty good with mechanical things. Whenever my bike got damaged or the tyres punctured, he fixed it perfectly so that I did not have to make excuses to my parents. He could even mend the broken staves on an umbrella. I, on the other hand, could not even change a light bulb without getting a shock.

“So you’ve nicked a car?” I asked when I reached the end of the bottle.

“The keys were in the ignition. So I started it. Let’s go!”

Before he drove off, although there was no point, I asked:

“Have you got a licence?”

“What fucking use would that be?”

When he was just fourteen, he already had his own Skoda. His uncle gave him a complete wreck, but Plundra with his ingenuity managed to get the Czech engine working again. We used to drive during the week mainly as that was when the police did not stop people. They used to focus on weekends, when there were parties everywhere.

One night we came across a line of cars. A guy had fallen off his moped. Behind us there was a bus, driving dead bones from their factory shift. We could not turn around, so escape was impossible. We were fifth in the line. After over an hour the police, blue lights flashing, managed to get through with an ambulance. They were overtaking the convoy and wanted

us to shine our lights at the guy that had fallen. Plundra did not get flustered. He sent me out to help him turn the car and the Skoda really did manage to wind its way out. I directed him until I fell into a drain. Plundra was shouting, the cops were demanding illumination. In the end, Plundra stepped on the accelerator and drove to safety. The moped guy croaked it, while I woke up in a drain and with broken bones limped home with great difficulty.

We stopped in a shop where I bought a couple of bottles and off we went. As far as possible from the Volkswagen's owner. Someone could recognise it. Perhaps we had not had a good enough look at it. Perhaps it had a recognisable mark somewhere. Like a line on the roof, a yellow bonnet or stickers on the windows. Plundra reached into the glove compartment and cassettes spilled on the floor:

"Find something you like, it'll stop your face looking so sour."

There were speakers in the back and rock and roll made my worries seem smaller. Plundra had no worries anyway. He was happy chirping away even to music he did not know. Then I had so much to drink that I started singing. Plundra could not accompany me, so we put on a band we both knew. The silly beggar went berserk. He was yodelling with delight, overtaking when there were cars coming in the opposite direction, speeding along with me howling at the top of my voice. Suddenly, he slowed down and whispered:

"There's something lying there."

"Where?" I could see nothing but darkness.

"In front of us," he got out of the car, returned after five minutes and said:

"It's some young bitch. Shall we rape her? She fell off her bike."

"Shouldn't we help her instead? Maybe she's like us."

"That's just it! Horny!" He hauled her onto the back seat.

I moved and we got her to come round. She was not bleeding. She was alright. She had just got tired of riding her bike and thrown herself on the ground, she said. Plundra had already taken off her t-shirt and unfastened her bra. I touched her tits. They were as soft as a dream. We pulled her knickers off together. She did not seem to object. I wanted to feel her

hole, but Plundra's finger was there already. He was in charge of lubrication. I left the vulva to him while I concentrated on her pear-shaped breasts. I sampled their fullness, caressed the areoles and sniffed the tips of the nipples. Then I went higher and found the warm lips. The fallen heroine rotated her tongue. Plundra got out of the car and lowered the backs of the front seats. The mystery young woman lifted her bum, stretched out her legs and made herself comfortable. I stroked her face. I couldn't see her very well because of the darkness, but she seemed beautiful to me. She had smooth, dark brown hair, I imagined. A narrow nose, inviting lips, deep eyes.

"Plundra, where are you?" I asked while kneading the two balloons.

"Down under," he said.

It seemed the girl was worn out. She showed no response. I got scared that she was dead, but she started snoring loudly. Completely out of it. Plundra and I swapped positions. He took over the snogging while I worked the furrow. She was asleep with her legs apart. Her vagina smelt wonderful. As if it had just come from the hairdresser's. It was soft, sweet smelling and willing. I played with it. Suddenly the heroine shouted:

"Don't do that!"

I quietly put my prick, which so wanted to visit the hayrack, back in its stable. Plundra chucked her out of the car. We drove quickly round the bends in the road. Only after a while did I ask:

"What happened?"

"I put my prick in her mouth. That's what happened."

I did not quite understand the tetchy response, so I questioned him. In the end he admitted he had not washed it for over a month.

We drove for a long time and ended up in Dolenjska. It was so late that the entrance to the village fair was free. There were long benches left and right, packed with people. We made our way to the stage, where recorded music was coming from the loudspeakers. The band had gone long ago. We found some friends who at dawn took us to a vineyard. All we had to do was follow their zigzag driving.

In the wine cellar, I put my arms around a barrel and for the first time in years felt pure love again. The wine producers

wanted to show us their vineyards. Plundra went, I did not feel like it. So they left me alone at the oak wood table and I got bored. I looked around the cellar, drinking wine and I could not wait for them to get back.

“It’s nice here. We’ll have to come again,” I summed up my tourist impressions.

Plundra was going to buy a bottle for the journey back. They filled a container for free and we said our goodbyes like old friends.

The wine loosened my tongue. I was directing Plundra even though I had never been anywhere near those parts. I led him by sensing the stars and suddenly he got all soppy:

“How did you know this is where I wanted to go? Ever since you sent me that card, I’ve been dreaming about this.”

I sent him a birthday card once when I found a hundred postcards of Otočec Castle in the rubbish bin. It would have been too hard telling him the truth, so I said:

“I have para-psychological powers.”

We parked and the knight at the reception told us that the campsite cost 15 euro. Hot water and shower were included.

“How long can we stay?” asked Plundra.

“Twenty four hours,” said the suit of armour.

We took a ticket and started snoring within a few short moments.

I woke up first and decided to use the opportunity to have a shower. Plundra was not very keen on personal hygiene. I carefully slipped out of the car and relaxed under the hot flow. I returned with a towel wrapped around me. A red Renault 4 stopped next to me. A guy, leaning on the window with his elbow, demanded:

“Tell me how to get to Jelovec!”

“I’m not from around here.”

They drove after me, crawling slowly alongside. Three drunken teenagers. Two in the front and one in the back. Then they stopped, blocking my path and quickly jumped out of the car.

“Sono Mexicano,” they surrounded me, screaming.

“Gipsies more like, not Mexican,” I said.

“No, no - Mexicano! And we’re going to fuck you! Give us your arse.” One of them grabbed me by the buttocks.

I got scared and ran uphill, into the woods. I had the constant feeling that they were right behind me. After a good four hundred metres of sprinting, I hid in the bushes. The thorns were prickling me, but not as much as those guys would have done. For half an hour I trembled there in the brambles. I remembered the girl Plundra and I had picked up. Was this how she had felt when she was conscious?

I did not get back until two hours later. Still shitting myself with fear. I wanted to leave the danger zone as soon as possible. I was worried that the gypsy blood would return with reinforcements. I said to Plundra:

“Let’s bugger off!”

Just like in American films, his car chose that precise moment not to work. Would not start. The battery was empty. Next to us there were some people from Switzerland who had watched Milka TV the night before. I went over to them. All they could help us with was a call to the nearest mechanic.

It was afternoon before a mechanic came with some cables, conjured up a spark and charged fifty euros for half a minute’s work. Plundra pulled out a stuffed wallet and settled the bill without any complaints. As soon as we drove off, he explained:

“I nicked my wife’s salary.” He saw a diner near the castle and said: “I’ve got to eat something, I’ve got gut ache.”

In front of the entrance, two gypsy girls were begging for cash. He gave them five euros each. Together, they sat down on the stairs. Plundra could not tear himself away from the older one, who was very attractive. Half gypsy, half ordinary. A mixture. She did not want to go in the diner with us alone. Whatever you give me, you have to give to my sister, too, she said. Her sister was nine years old and they had to beg for their father. But it was no use telling Plundra this. He had fallen in love with a fourteen-year old. Every ten minutes, he donated a coin for peanuts, for a dog collar, for a fruit juice, for bread, for the newly born brother. They kept taking it all somewhere and then coming back. Plundra’s wallet was getting noticeably thinner. I became scared that we would not get home and I wanted to intervene when Plundra made a breakthrough:

“Let’s go and fuck!” he said to the fourteen-year old.

"I'm hungry, give me some money, what's a bit of money to you!"

"I'll give you it if we go and fuck."

This is going to drag on, I thought and said to Plundra, who seemed to have forgotten about his hunger, that he could find me in the dining room. I knew he would come to settle the bill as he needed me as an alibi for his wife. I could have had anything. I ordered two portions of chips and a litre of wine. Just to keep me occupied.

After half an hour, Plundra realised that the gypsies were leading him on. Silently, he joined me in picking at the chips with a toothpick. The well of his dreams, from which he used to draw clear water, was getting murky. His family was limiting his freedom. After a few long minutes of silence, he shouted from the soles of his feet so that the toothpick flew straight out of my mouth:

"I'm not happy at all!" Then he started howling like a dog at the moon: "Auuuuuuu, auuuuuuu!"

The eatery was of the rougher kind and the rather robust customers turned towards us. Dusty lorries were waiting for them in the car park. They had stopped after a few thousand kilometres for a short break and a quiet bite to eat. Almost simultaneously they put down their cutlery. They were all hairy, with wide shoulders, overhanging bellies and strong arms. I dragged Plundra away. A fight was all we needed. I paid at the bar, while Plundra kept howling until I stuffed him behind the steering wheel and gave him some comfort with that band of his.

We turned onto the motorway and I soon nodded off. Monotonous driving always makes me sleepy. I woke up when we were near home. Plundra siphoned petrol into the canister which had earlier held wine. He splashed it on the bodywork, pulled me out and screamed:

"Get away! Get away! It's going to blow up!"

We were at that familiar junction from our school years, where a moped driver had died and I had tumbled into a drain. We rolled the Volkswagen into a ravine, threw a match after it and washed our hands over the fire.

"It's all clean now," we tried to alleviate each other's bad conscience.

We split up at the junction. Plundra returned to the bosom of his family, as innocent as a bridegroom in black, while I slowly went back to my four walls.

Time went by. I only left my house for a newspaper, food or a fuck. Pure harmony, until a police car pulled up under my balcony. I stepped out between the flower pots. A guy in uniform said:

“May we come in?”

“Please do,” I invited them for a cup of tea.

“You’ve got a nice place here,” said the first guy after he weighted my armchair down with a cup of tea.

The other one, who was younger, did not want to join our little tea party. He stood there, nervously sliding his hand over his truncheon. He was repulsed by any thought of being nice to me. I could guess what they had come for. To him, I was a typical rapist from the manual. Well-mannered on the outside, depraved on the inside. I knew I would not escape punishment, although I had quietly hoped all along that the cunt would hold her tongue as she herself had not been exactly faultless. God knows what she said at home when she returned with her trousers torn and her bike all bent. She probably tried to quietly sneak into her room, but hit on a mine laid by her parents because she had missed her *hora legalis*. She did not have enough time to make something up and the truth started coming out, drop by drop. Of course, she adapted it so that she came out as a victim. I had no illusions about that.

“Well,” the older policeman said, putting down his cup, “what happened with Maja then?”

That’s what she is called, I blushed. Although I had been preparing myself for this visit, when it came, it was completely different to how I had imagined it. I was not cool and collected. I could have denied it, but that was not my intention. With my ears red, I described what happened without any embellishments.

As soon as they had gone, Plundra turned up. Again, he drove like a maniac into the yard. This time in his wife’s car. He was foaming with anger:

“You fucked up everything! Why did you confess? Maja’s folks came to see me. 500 euros and they’ll forget the whole business.”

"I prefer going to court," I said.

"And what about me? Do you have any idea about the position I'm in? My wife won't let me fuck her for half a year."

"Sorry," I said.

We never faced the judge. Plundra had settled their emotional traumas himself. There was no interest in the burnt Volkswagen.

It was only a few years later that I dared write this story. I keep saying that I am not a writer, just someone who keeps a record of things, which was how I introduced myself at a literary evening not far from where Maja had fallen. After I finished, a woman with permed hair walked up to me and said:

"You should have raped me."

Before I realised what she had said, she took the arm of a man in a striped suit and disappeared. I ran after her. She was walking away. They were pushing a pushchair in front of them with a small child in it. I went back to the desk. The other visitors wanted my signature.

*Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon
from Slovene original Posilstvo.*



Coca Cola

Aleš Čar

I have seen torture as bright as starlight. I know that in such situations almost everyone feels something, but apart from myself I know of no-one who has actually seen it in this way. When someone controls another person to the extent that they start to disintegrate (psychologically or physically) then both are freed. And there is energy. A great deal of energy.

My torture always involved acts of love. I am such that I relish humiliation, teetering towards destruction, as much as those above me revel in their pleasure, domination and glory. Destruction involves both giving and receiving. To know how to be at the opposite extremes is giving and receiving to excess. No, this is not religion. Forget that shit. This is what I am.

I grew up in a proper, normally happy family in Trieste. My father had a men's clothes shop. My parents and brother still live there. The shop is now run by my brother. He is five years older than me, a serious, reserved, loyal and committed type. With his physical good looks and intellectual limitations he was always my complete opposite, so it is probably not strange that from the beginning he was more than my brother and that my torture and humiliation of my brother meant to me the destruction of all that was beyond my reach from my very birth.

As long as I can remember I have had a special attitude to pain. Since I was little, I have pinched the flesh on the inside of my thigh, for it somehow calmed me. Sometimes I pinched and kneaded it for so long that it went black. One summer afternoon my brother was repairing his bike in the garage next to the shop, while I was sitting watching birds on the road. My brother went somewhere and I picked up the pliers. I squeezed until the skin and the upper layer of flesh started to

come away from my thigh. That was the first time I drew blood. When I stopped, sweaty and excited, filled with an unknown energy, a small area was already swollen and black. Insensitive to pain.

Then I took from the back of my father's shop a stapler, sewing needles and tailor's scissors, and from my brother's workshop some pliers and a hammer. I slowly pushed a staple through the bruised flesh. I was surprised at the ease with which it went through and how fresh, exciting and different was the feeling of pain. Completely different from, say, falling off my bike. This gave me a feeling of satisfaction, as if I was torturing something that had little connection to me. At right angles to the staple I pushed a sewing needle. Then I went to the bathroom for iodine, gauze and a bandage, returned to my room, locked the door, took my father's scissors and below the cross of the staple and needle I cut off a disfigured piece of my thigh. The pain shot through me, it was terrible, but after it there remained a feeling of fulfilment, excitement and warmth. I disinfected and bandaged the wound, put the tools underneath the bottom drawer in the cupboard, then put the piece of thigh in my mouth and chewed. It hurt, of course, but the warmth and excitement was stronger. I hadn't experienced anything like it before. Nothing had lifted me to that level. It was probably then that I experienced my first orgasm. The whole procedure lasted about an hour and a half. When I came round, the piece of thigh was no longer in my mouth.

Of course, I did all this unreflectingly. I didn't think about any of it. I was fully aware only of the fever in my excited body that I cooled against a cold wall. It is hard to describe how I felt then. My body, which until then had always seemed to restrict me had somehow opened inwards. I was in raptures. I was shocked.

Now I am enthusiastic about my then naivety. I thought I had discovered something that others also desired but dare not reach for. Something dark and forbidden, like sex. Of course, I didn't understand why it was forbidden. In fact, I still don't know who is the victim if the crime is committed against myself, when I willingly surrender up my body to torture.

* * *

It was I that brought Mateja, my brother's wife, into the house. I first saw her at the birthday party of some boy from the neighbourhood. At such events I was pressed into a corner of longing for kindred spirits. At that time Mateja was new on the street and kept herself to herself a little. A beautiful girl with blond hair, tied back with a blue bow, although her beauty was not of the classical, Barbie type. Her sharp mouth and thin nose that was too small for her face gave her a strange, contemplative appearance. I was slightly in love with this contemplativeness (and later, I imagine, it was what led my brother to fall in love with her). I went up to her; she gave me a single strange look, but then we clicked. We spoke the whole evening and became friends. A week ago, after years, I once again heard her voice on the phone. My brother had called me when he saw my disfigured body on the television. He asked me if I needed anything, if I was okay. Tell me if you need any money, he said, tell me if you need anything at all. Then I heard Mateja's voice in the background. She said that Matic and I were sick, that I should be locked up or taken to an asylum, as I was not all there; I know that at that moment she was finally saying what she had been thinking since we were twelve, since we became friends.

We spent most of our time in my room. I don't know what we did exactly. In my head I have a picture of a teddy bear with both arms missing being turned in her hands, or a headless doll with no arms, while I attack a piece of wood, the edge of the bed or something similar with a pair of pliers. Once I took the teddy bear from her, tied a rope round its neck and hung it from the light fitting. She thought it was funny. A few days later I ripped the leg off the plastic doll and stabbed it through the stomach with a pair of scissors. Mateja said nothing. Then I took a step too far. I took the budgerigar's cage from the living room to my room. At first we just looked at it and talked to it, then we let it out of the cage and spent a long time chasing it round the room. When I finally caught it, I tied a string to its leg and the other end to the pliers. They were just heavy enough that it could lift them a few centimetres and then fall down again, rise and fall again. We both laughed. Now I know that she has something of that, something similar, buried deep inside her and that is why she hates me. I also know that she practises on my brother, safely within walls and alleviated by strong tablets, to the extent that it can

be called a normal marriage with a dominant wife. I know as well that I would now be able to bring her to the point where her reason clouded and she teetered on the brink, without knowing where the pleasure was coming from and where she was about to fall. But back then I was too young and too hasty. Things got out of control. I took hold of the budgerigar and pushed a sewing needle through its open beak. The point poked out the back of its head. I remember the silence. The silence of the bird, regarding me strangely, the heat rushing to my head. Mateja, staring with mouth open, unsure whether to believe her eyes. After a few seconds she ran from the room, screaming; I opened the window and threw the budgie onto the roof of the neighbouring house. After a time, the door opened and my mother came in.

“Mateja’s father rang me,” she said. “Mateja is terribly upset. She says that you stuck a needle through Piki’s head.”

“She’s lying,” I said. “He escaped through the window. It’s her fault. She opened the window.”

That night I cried, as I felt a great sense of loss. I think I somehow knew that from that time onwards I would always be alone. Although I was only thirteen, I had destroyed every link with normal erotic feeling and with the rest of the world. With fancying people, with falling in love, with getting intimate at parties - although none of this was really a problem as I was never invited to any. But I didn’t even expect it any more. I think I had already accepted my unbelievable physical ugliness as something special that life had offered me and thus set me on a special path.

Some months later Mateja got friendly with my brother and some years later married him.

For quite some time nothing out of the ordinary happened. The days passed. Sometimes in the evening I would climb out the window onto the balcony and down to the ground. I walked along the piers, hid in the shadows, observed the drunken down-and-outs, a woman who lay on the corner with her head among the rubbish. I think my parents soon found out about this, but they turned a blind eye. As they did with many other things. Always, when I returned, one of them would go to the toilet and pause in front of my door, that was all.

In the summer, one of the houses in the next street became empty. The two floors were immediately occupied by

down-and-outs, while I discovered a small way in to the cellar. I crawled through and there, amid the junk, cardboard boxes and cupboards, I found a black cat. Although animals had often broken my heart, people never, I began to practice torture on them. I tidied and swept the cellar, fixed stronger boards across the windows, put a table there and put some tools in a bedside cabinet. First of all I stroked, combed and petted the cat, for without its trust there was no excitement. I didn't know what I was looking for, but today I of course know that what was important was the extent of the feeling when with a flash an animal becomes aware of its fate, of life slipping away, of death. What was important was the depth of the shock when a nail was suddenly driven through a paw, the level of confusion and emptiness in its eyes that followed, and all the rest - fear, hope, fawning, entreaty, then the second nail, anger and panic, then the third and fourth nails, the cut of the knife, the grip of the pliers, the ripped out claws, the eye put out, the loss of consciousness and the final horror at returning to the same situation, to release them from the nails, treat their wounds and release them. Now I know that the sense of arousal wasn't the result of my domination, but my sense of identification with the cat. More important than the pain inflicted was how the cat, that suddenly found itself nailed to a board with a lump of plasticine in its mouth, saw me, as I tortured it.

I thought about what I was doing and continued to do it. I rarely killed. Death, instead of offering fulfilment produced indifference. In place of arousal, low spirits. Once I ripped open a cat's stomach, washed its internal organs in water, put them back in and stitched the cat up. I couldn't say why, other than that it was a kind of research, and of course that every impossible idea that a person dares to carry out sends that person in a particular direction. Death was something beautiful and still is, but as something towards which we are travelling, which we are approaching; in torture we even flirt with it, as it is never clear whether the other person in their bliss will know when to stop just before the physical or mental destruction of their victim. Death is beautiful as something distant, ubiquitous and random: for example, the beauty of the bodies crushed in car accidents that you happen to encounter on your way to work.

So I killed rarely. I tortured the cats, tended their wounds and then disfigured, limping, without one eye or completely blind, without claws, with broken paws, without ears or without a tail, returned them to the street. These were my little ghouls, wandering the streets of Trieste. As they dragged themselves along the pavements people stopped in horror, some even bent and tried to stroke them, but the animals fled in panic as much as they were able. Trieste was soon full of crippled cats, dogs, pigeons and sparrows. Various rumours started to circulate, while I remained hidden in my crippled shadow and devoured the compassion shown by the normal.

* * *

At the age of sixteen I knew that I needed a real person beside me. I came to this conclusion through reading about and researching my world. It did not matter to me what sex they were (so I'm probably bisexual). I needed only a clear structure of feelings, awareness, self-awareness, and combination of thoughts, desires and needs. And all this is precisely differentiated only in people.

The basic mechanism was also clear to me. My particular relation to physical pain crystallised as physical masochism, while the compensation was a strong desire for psychological sadism. For the complete realisation of these two poles of pleasure, as I said, I needed a person. A human being.

At the age of eighteen I moved to Ljubljana in order to study. I did extremely well. The first and only exam that I failed was in the second year - an oral exam in social anthropology. I was completely unnerved, as I had the knowledge and learnt easily and with pleasure. When I came for my second attempt I was last on the list. I went into the teacher's office feeling angry, but she simply took my record book and wrote a grade A into it without sitting down, without asking a single question, and then invited me for a coffee. This is how I met the most important woman in my life: a necrophiliac with a brilliant university career. She didn't waste words. My intelligence and physical disfigurement were a real draw for someone who experienced the erotic dimension of her life, her love, in a different way. I was enthusiastic and met her needs with pleasure. I undressed, put a sewing needle between

my teeth and limply lay on the floor like a corpse. Usually she would first drag me to the bath, full of cold water, and draw on my face a death mask, another time bruises, a third time cuts. Then she dragged me to the floor and carried out cunnilingus on my dead lips, into which she had first pushed an ice cube. I meanwhile started to pierce my tongue and the roof of my mouth with the needle. When she was close to orgasm she would press my chest and I would start to release blood from my mouth, just like it flows from a dead body when you press on its chest.

The second was a drug addict employed at a pharmacy. A lesbian and physically a rather unattractive woman (though in no way comparable to me). When we were together she always gave me large doses of morphine analgesics for the pain that came afterwards and which was no longer desired.

And then Matic came along, the only true love of my life. Now that he is dead and my disfigured and mutilated body in the papers, on the television and everywhere else, people ask me how I can talk about this as love. Like this: we met at the zoo, beside the monkey cage. I threw to them a ball of softened bread with a needle hidden in the centre. He saw what I was doing and started to grin. I asked him what was so funny, but he gave nothing away, just nodded and looked at me. After a couple of minutes I was convinced that he was mute, but then he spoke and it emerged that he had an unbelievable stammer. We went to a café, where with each shot of liquor he spoke more smoothly and relaxedly. We took an immediate liking to each other (which was a first for both of us). An hour later I knew that he loved me.

He was studying to be a vet. He had an excellent, almost photographic memory and was by nature a shy and gentle, subtly emotional creature. Too much so. The only medicine for his hypersensibility (and stammer) was drink. With each glass he improved and in a particular phase of intoxication he could even be entertaining. But he was worse at analytical and synthetical thought processes. It was, however, the right combination for me: mental limitation, exceptional emotional sensibility, impotence and an excellent knowledge of anatomy. He knew how to stab and hit me without damaging my internal organs, he knew how to read my body like an instrument for producing harmonies of pain, while at the same time he

had enough depth and dog-like devotion to take an unbelievable quantity of my verbal mistreatment and humiliation.

After we had known each other for six months he asked me to marry him. I didn't know what to do. I said that I would after some time, if that meant anything to him. He said it did. About a month later I moved in with him and as everything went okay I stayed. We both graduated. Matic became a bureaucrat at the Ministry of Agriculture, while I took on a master's degree with my female tutor. He didn't like this and I realised that I was living with an extremely jealous person. At first this scared me, but later it emerged as a very welcome means of pushing things towards the edge. Matic went to work, I was already writing my doctorate and looking after our home, but we always had the weekends for ourselves (neither of us had any contact with our families). On Saturdays we sometimes went on a trip, while Sundays were reserved for our games. He started on the beer in the morning and I soon became bad tempered. By lunchtime I was already banging on the table, turning over plates and yelling; in the afternoon, when he became glassy-eyed, I accused him of everything that came to hand. From stupidity, impracticality, asociality and wimpishness, to being frustrated, retarded, infantile, impotent, and all the way to having a humiliatingly small prick, which was actually to blame for everything. On the verge of explosion I went to my tutor's, which, jealous as he was, finally made him flip. There, I drank a couple of glasses of my own and in the evening I only needed to say one more thing for him to grab me by my hair and bang my head against the wall, set about me with his fists, knock me to the floor and kick me, pull me round the flat by my hair, shove my head down the toilet, drown me in the bath, stick needles in my thighs, stub out cigarettes on my stomach or molest me with pliers until I lost consciousness, only to be brought round by a stream of urine in my face or a vacuum cleaner hose sucking at one of my orifices.

For the first time in my life I loved someone. Really loved. On the second anniversary of moving in with him I finally agreed to marriage. A few weeks later it happened and immediately everything went down the drain.

I'm not deluding myself. Matic was broken by all this. I'm the only one to blame. This isn't grumbling, it's a fact. Now I

beat myself up about it, as it is obvious, logical - like everything in hindsight - but it is past. He interpreted our marriage in the most banal way, in the most everyday fashion. Of course, he saw it in the only way he could. I should have known.

It began with a jealousy that verged on the morbid. In any way conceivable he wanted to cut me off from both my female friends, sever any kind of contact with them. This was simply impossible, if for no other reason than that I was finishing my doctorate. And in fact I had no intention of severing contact with them, sexual or any other kind. The transformation was kind of synchronous: he drank more and more, but instead of it culminating in violence he started to crumble. More and more often he would simply fall on his knees in tears and start asking me if I loved him. "Do you really love me? Do you?" When that happened for the fourth or fifth time I realised what this meant and what was happening: he was falling apart before my very eyes.

He began to come home drunk from work and simply continued drinking, usually crying in the evening and asking me if I loved him. The whole thing became a real nightmare. I spent less and less time at home, more and more with my tutor; I also got a place of my own once more. Then because of his excessive drinking he was thrown out of work. So now he was at home all day, just drinking. In the autumn I finished my doctorate and applied for an assistant professor's post. I tried to reason with him, to convince him to get treatment, to go into rehab, that this was the only way for us to start again. But nothing. In mid-April, after six months of fruitless struggle, I packed my bag and moved out. A month later his decaying body was found in the living room. A neighbour had complained about the smell coming from the flat. He had simply drunk himself to death. He was buried during a terrible downpour.

About a week later two detectives turned up at my place. They said they wanted to check a few details and ask a few questions. Our former neighbours in the block of flats had reported that there had been strange goings on between us. Especially at weekends. From arguing and shouting to breaking things and violent fights. The police said that allegedly only my shouting had been heard. They said it was unlikely

that Matic, unassuming and gentle as he was, was capable of hitting anyone. They knew he drank, but he was not even capable of treading on a cockroach. They asked me if he hit me or I him and whether I could prove it. Even today I still don't know why I did it. I could have convinced them, I'm sure of that. I took off my blouse and let my wide trousers fall to the floor. They were simply speechless. Scars beside crushed flesh, cuts beside bruises. They looked at the floor and told me to get dressed. They asked no more questions. Soon after, activists from the support society for battered women turned up at my door. After them, journalists. My story, the tortured woman, exploded in the media like a bomb, shaking everyone. More journalists came, the radio, the television. I became a martyr and a symbol of persecuted womanhood. An apostle for the oppressed, the hungry and the sick. I became a TV ad, a picture on boardings around the town; I became coca cola.

*Translated by David Limon
from Slovene original Kokakola.*

The Pedlar

Edo Rodošek

*What poison are you offering
me from your cup?*

*Why is your consequence a
festering wound?*

Simon Jenko

Marcel looked at his wife over the edge of the newspaper. “Tara,” he said, “it says here that the Bodoni circus is in town. It seems they’re staying about a month.”

Tara turned away only for a moment from the vegetables she was chopping with short, urgent movements. “Bodoni? I’ve heard of it. They say they have an amazing trapeze act. Shall we go and see it?”

“You don’t care about the trapeze! I know you really want to visit the fortune teller.”

“What if I do? I like it if now and again someone reads my future from my palm. You know, when I was a teenager that gypsy caravan came to our village and the gypsy woman foresaw quite a lot, so there.”

“She foresaw mainly that from such a gullible female as you she could extract quite a bit of money in return for some hot air.”

She stopped chopping the vegetables and gave him a look.

“Okay, okay, we’ll go. But only in a few days, when the crowds have died down. Maybe they have a good hypnotist as well.”

“You’re not interested in the hypnotist, Marcel. I know only too well that you’ll be hanging around the animal cages again and if you get the chance you’ll try and bribe the tamer to let you help him bath the elephant.”

The bell rang at the entrance to their fenced courtyard. Marcel got up and looked out of the window. “It’s the postman. I’ll go, he’s probably brought the latest ‘Nature in Peril.’”

Tara saw him go down the path, say something to the postman and the two of them laugh. Then the postman went on and along the pavement, bent over, tottered old Reza. She

held out a dirty hand in supplication. Marcel felt in his pockets and gave her a banknote. On the way back he waved to Mr. Grosman, who was watering his geraniums on the other side of the hedge, while from among the flowerbeds came the muffled shouts of his children.

When he came back into the kitchen, magazine in hand, he said: "I should only have given Reza some change, she might have brought some bread with it. With a fiver she'll no doubt end up in the bar and waste it on gin. You know what she's like.

He shrugged. "But what the hell, everyone has the right to decide what they'll have for their elevenses."

He bent over and absently stroked Miaow, who had come to rub herself against his trouser leg. She arched her black and white back and purred gently, then she jumped onto a chair, and then the table, right alongside the plate of biscuits.

"Why do you keep giving Miaow biscuits? Just look how plump she is."

"If she's so keen on them. Anyway, when are we going to visit this wonder?"

* * *

Their faithful old Ford crawled through the high-spirited crowd at the fairground. Children, their cheeks red with excitement, were holding colourful balloons on strings and brandishing candy floss on sticks; they were shouting with pleasure and begging their parents for just one more ride on the roundabouts.

"This is hopeless," he said. "It's pointless looking for a parking space, they were all taken ages ago. Why on earth did I let you persuade me to come to this madhouse, when we could be -"

"Look, Marcel, on the left!"

He blew his horn, turned sharply and occupied the only remaining space just seconds before a competitor. They got out and as he was locking the car he slipped and almost fell.

"Damn it. There's no grass left, just a trampled swamp."

"I know," she said with a giggle. "I only just managed to extract my shoe from the mud. Give me your hand, handsome prince, so that you do not lose your Cinderella."

“There. We can fall together. Though I really can’t recall the priest at our wedding saying anything about ‘on dry land and in mud’.”

The queue at the ticket office was so long that Marcel preferred to buy a ticket from a tout.

“You’ll pay over the odds, you know.”

He shrugged. “So what? The real expenses come later – cleaning the car, the dry cleaners, the tranquillisers so that I can forget it all ...”

“Where are we sitting? It says ‘entrance B’. Where is entrance B?”

“Let’s go round the tent, we’ll come across it sooner or later.”

They came to an entrance, but unfortunately it had the sign ‘A’ in front of it. Tara tugged at the wide sleeve of the ticket collector in a clown’s outfit.

“Don’t worry about it, in you go. It doesn’t matter what it says on the tickets, the seat numbers are only for appearance’s sake. Sit wherever you want.”

They began to push their way through the teeming crowd, the band played deafeningly, the drums rumbled enthusiastically, someone blew a small saxophone right in front of their noses and the scattered sawdust stuck to the mud on their shoes. Again, it was Tara who found them a little space on one of the benches, so that they could sit down, squeezed between an overweight man and a mother with a baby in her lap.

“Don’t pull such a face. Maybe it won’t be that bad.”

“As long as you are happy, my darling.”

The opening speech of the ringmaster, dressed in gold and scarlet, was soon over and the large double curtains at the back of the ring opened. Now Marcel suddenly came to life. “Look, elephants! Four, six of them! “

“Oh yes! The first one is magnificent!”

She applauded, her eyes sparkling with delight. After the elephants came the horseback riders – three dark-haired men and an apathetic looking chimpanzee – while a woman in a sequined outfit cracked her whip and flashed her teeth in a wide smile. Then there appeared the human snake, then a dog trainer, then a tightrope walker. All as per usual, but none of them anything special. The long awaited trapeze act was a big letdown even for Tara. Marcel saw her expression and

when he whispered something into her ear, she nodded silently. They got up and went out through a group of latecomers, who were only just coming in. The racket behind them gradually became more bearable.

"Uf," she said, taking his arm, "have you ever heard anything like it?"

"Hardly. Those awful tunes they kept repeating, I probably won't be able to get them out of my head for the rest of the week. Where do you want to go now? The ghost train?"

She nodded and gently pulled him after her, past a number of stands lit by spotlights. "They look kind of mysterious, don't they?"

"Yes. That's why the performances are always in the evening, so that you can't see how tatty it all is."

"You're so bloody down-to-earth. You have no sense of magic. I feel like a ten-year-old kid again when I'm here."

"With plaits and freckles, like Pippy Longstocking?"

"I never had plaits, my hair was always short. I've still got a few freckles even now, but you ... Oh, Marcel!"

She stopped so suddenly that he almost knocked her over. He looked where she was pointing. "What have you seen - oh yes, of course. That's the real reason we're here. '*Farsighted Fatima, the past, the future, advice*'. What a ridiculous name. Are you really going in?"

"What a question! Give me a tenner, please."

He handed her a banknote and pulled a face. "I wouldn't mind a job like that - sixty euros an hour, tax free. That's nearly as much as a psychotherapist charges."

"Who also just talks nonsense. Are you going to wait for me here? I won't be more than ten minutes - maybe a quarter of an hour."

"I've got an idea. I'm going to look for the belly-dancing tent: they'll probably have some arrack and an opium pipe. You won't get me out before dawn. You can call a taxi to get you home, can't you darling?"

She frowned.

"Alright. I'll have a little look around the stands. I'll try shooting ducks and bring you a teddy bear if I win. I'll see you here in twenty minutes."

When Tara came out of the fortune teller's, perplexed, confused and deeply disappointed, Marcel still wasn't there. Of course, she had hardly been five minutes - and she had achieved nothing. Now she was starting to feel angry as well. She began to walk along the rows of stalls, to calm down a little. In any case, she would see her husband here sooner or later.

She had never even dreamt that such a thing was possible.

The silly cow must be mad. At first she had been all sweetness, offering her a choice of crystal ball, reading of coffee grounds, or palm reading. When Tara had held out her left hand, the gypsy had held it beneath a strong light, then fallen silent and her dark, tanned face had somehow frozen.

She let go of Tara's hand, stood up and pushed into it the banknote that she had already accepted as payment. She had not even listened to Tara's objections - she could read nothing from the lady's palm, she was really sorry, it happened sometimes, the kind lady should forgive her, no offence intended, she wished her a nice evening, goodbye - and politely pushed her out of the tent.

She's mad, that damn gypsy woman, there's no other explanation.

In any case - who needs her! It was stupid of her to drag Marcel to this dumb circus. She had expected too much of the fortune telling. And that was because of some faded memory from her youth. Best to forget all about it. Now she had to go back to where they'd agreed to meet; Marcel may already be waiting for her.

But she caught sight of him after a couple of paces. He was standing all alone on a patch of grass, with his back to the lively tide of people. She now realised that she had caught a glimpse of this solitary, unmoving figure when going in the other direction, but she had not recognised him.

"Marcel!"

He turned around slowly, absently. The emptiness of his eyes surprised her.

"Is everything alright?"

He silently nodded and slowly, somehow laggardly walked the short distance to where she stood. He didn't look at her at

all, but went through his pockets and pulled out the car keys to show that he wanted to go home.

As they walked towards the car park she looked at him out of the corner of her eye and it seemed to her that he was ... somehow different. He was not his usual self. The mouth strict, the chin thrust forward, the eyes constantly directed straight ahead - was Marcel always like that? Probably he was - of course, he must be. For God's sake, they had been married seven years, she surely knew what her own husband was like. But this silent walk was making her nervous.

"Find anything interesting?"

He impassively shrugged his shoulders, without looking at her.

"I see you didn't bring me a teddy bear," she continued, "so your shooting can't have been too good this evening."

"I didn't do any shooting," he said tersely.

"You didn't? Then you must have gone to see the lion cubs, there behind the arena. Or the hypnotist? Or the ghost train?"

His sequence of head shakes irritated her. "For God's sake, stop being so damn mysterious! Where were you?"

He hesitated for a moment. "At some pedlar's. His tent is there, at the southern end, standing on its own."

"A pedlar's? What was he selling? Didn't you find anything worth buying?"

Again he shook his head. "Not really. He didn't have anything special. Then we had a chat."

"You had a chat? Two complete strangers? What on earth about?"

"Oh, I don't know. This and that. Nothing in particular."

"I don't believe that. It must have been much more than nothing if you were so shaken up that you forgot all about me."

"I didn't forget." His voice became harsh. "I don't know what you want from me." He unlocked the car and drove off quickly before she had even had a chance to fasten her seatbelt. They did not speak all the way back to their house.

When they got home he put the Ford in the garage, while she went straight upstairs, got undressed and stretched out between the pleasantly cool sheets. There was no sign of Marcel following her up. She picked up a book, but did not

follow what she was reading, so she put it down again and turned off the light. But sleep would not come; she tossed and turned for a while, as no position seemed to suit her. Then she wandered into the bathroom, found a sleeping pill and washed it down with a mouthful of horribly tepid water.

Then she heard the sound of breaking glass. What on earth...? She went to the head of the stairs and looked down into the living room. Marcel was slumped on the couch, with a glass of whisky in his hand. He hadn't even put his dressing gown or slippers on, as usual. He was staring into space, like a statue. In front of him on the coffee table stood a half empty whisky bottle and close to his stretched out leg the tiled floor was covered with fragments of another glass.

She shook her head. He hadn't even tried to pick up the pieces ... oh, what the heck, she could clear it up in the morning. She felt the tablet beginning to work and returned to the bedroom. She just had to get some sleep. Everything would be alright in the morning, as the saying goes.

* * *

Tara did not know how long she slept before she was woken by a hand that roughly turned her onto her back. What ... who ...? A moment later through her murky brain swam the realisation - it was Marcel.

"What's the matter with you?" she complained. "It doesn't work like that, mate! Just because you decide out of the blue that you want sex doesn't mean that I ..."

His hand covered her mouth and before she could push him away he had spread her legs with his knees. She threw herself about but he was strong and heavy; he took her quickly and roughly. No foreplay, no gentle words, no kisses, like some prostitute. It didn't even bother him that there was no response from her; he didn't care that she felt only repulsion and shame.

Fortunately, he soon rolled off her onto his side of the bed. Now she shed tears of anger and despair - she started to hit his back, his arms, his legs, the pillow with which he protected his head; she was sobbing like a child and her strength faded. She wandered into the bathroom and rubbed herself all over with a soapy sponge, remaining for a long time under

the tepid shower, so long that she almost fell asleep again. Dizzy from the pill she had taken, she went back into the bedroom, grabbed a pillow and blanket and went to sleep on the living room couch.

* * *

She did not wake up until eleven, with a swollen tongue and a disgusting taste in her mouth. Only when she sat up did she remember last night's events and she was shaken by a mixture of feelings - anger, shock, disbelief.

It was a working day, so of course Marcel was not at home. He would return from work only around six in the evening, thank God. She had until then to decide what to say to him. What the hell could she say? She weighed up about ten possibilities in succession, rejecting them one at a time - no abuse, no reproaches, no recommendations that he visit a psychiatrist, no threats of divorce - none of them seemed expedient.

Pensively, she swept up the glass fragments and noticed that the whisky bottle was empty. She kept racking her brain, moved various things and then put them back again, then wandered aimlessly around the house, two or three times getting a snack from the fridge - she didn't want to bother preparing supper - until she suddenly heard her husband's car.

Could it be six already? Her heart started to beat faster, her mouth was dry, her palms clammy. She sat in an armchair, facing the door so that she could look him in the face as soon as he came in. He opened the door and entered.

"You're not Marcel, are you? Who the hell are you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." He needed only a second to get over the first surprise at her question. His face seemed to her impassive, strange, enigmatic - repulsive.

"You're not my husband." She stared hard into his impassive face. "I want my husband back! I want the real Marcel to return! To be with me again - just as he was before through all those years of marriage."

"Tara, you're either crazy or drunk. Are you suddenly incapable of having a normal, civilised conversation?" A controlled voice, a rational statement. If there was a third person in the room they would surely be on his side rather than hers.

"What happened at that pedlar's of yours? What the devil did he do to you? Did he implant some kind of... some kind

of demon? Did you sell him your soul?" She felt as if she was going to start crying and squeezed her fists together so hard that her nails dug into her palms. "Why are you smiling so scornfully? Answer me, you..."

"You - what? You're saying that I'm not even your husband, but someone else, strange, possessed by demons. So you have no right to ask me about my private affairs." He coolly went into the spare room and closed the door behind him.

At first she wanted to rush after him, to throw into his face that he had no right to treat her so badly, but she somehow couldn't. She couldn't. All her carefully prepared arguments had melted, all her imagination had evaporated.

When he came out of the spare room, wearing a pullover and working trousers, she was still sitting in the armchair. She was the one who felt an inexplicable awkwardness, he obviously felt nothing of the sort. He confidently went up to the bookcase, took from it an armful of books and magazines, put them on the coffee table and calmly started to look through them, as if he was alone in the room.

She got up and went into the kitchen. She couldn't bear being in the same room with such a changed Marcel. When she looked at the fridge she thought maybe that she could manage something warm to eat. She would make supper. Just for herself. Or - thinking about it - she would cook for two, for him as well. But she would not call him to eat with her. If he came of his own accord into the kitchen when the food was ready, then so be it.

Maybe ... maybe if they had supper together he would finally want to apologise, maybe he would somehow try to explain his changed behaviour. Maybe he would want to have a reasonable conversation with her, maybe he would recognise that he hadn't behaved properly.

As she was taking a dish from the wall cupboard, she caught a faint smell of smoke. She went to the window and in the twilight saw Marcel. In the middle of the courtyard he was burning dry branches and various packaging. Odd that he'd thought of doing this right now. Then he came back in, past the open kitchen door into the living room, went up to the table and grabbed three large books and a fair pile of magazines. He put them all under his arm and took them out to his bonfire. As he passed she noticed that there were three

complete sets of 'Nature in Peril' that for a number of years he had had neatly bound.

What was wrong with him? Until now he had liked leafing through them, sometimes showing her an interesting article.

She turned her attention to supper. Just as she was stirring the pan she heard a mournful, high pitched wowl and out of the corner of her eye caught sight of something flying past the window in a low arch. What ...? She rushed to the window, just in time to see a black and white cat flee in panic from the courtyard, watched by Marcel with a malicious expression on his face. He had kicked Miaow, their darling, that he had always before stroked and spoiled with treats.

Tara was seething. That was too much, he couldn't do that! She had somehow coped with his being rough to her - but she was not going to let him torture a poor animal. She threw down the spoon, which clattered on the floor, spun round and in a rage rushed out through the hall. But she was too late, for Marcel was already sitting in the Ford, which was parked on the roadway.

She furiously yelled after him, but he did not see her or did not want to see her. He put his foot down and did a U-turn, crunching over a child's bike that lay in the gutter on the other side of the road.

"What are you doing ... can't you see, you stupid bastard!" cried Tara in amazement. Then a moment later she realised that he had not done it unintentionally, as he immediately braked, looked back and reversed. She unwittingly covered her mouth with her hand when she saw how the car completely crushed the poor bike. Then Marcel accelerated so that the tyres squealed and sped off down the quiet street.

Tara felt a tightness across her chest when she went back into the house, her hands were trembling and she felt on the verge of tears. What could she do? Who could she turn to for help? She picked up the phone and dialled her mother's number, but there was no answer. Of course, it was Friday, the day when her widowed mother always played bingo at the Baptist home. What about one of her friends - Marta or Erika? Marta was at home, but when Tara heard her voice trying to break through the pandemonium of children playing, she changed her mind and told her nothing about her problem.

Who else was there who could give her some sound advice? A marriage guidance counsellor. There would be no-one there

in the evening. In any case, they would first advise her to have a serious discussion with her husband. She shook her head. How the hell could she? It wasn't possible to talk to this changed, strange new Marcel. Or at least she didn't know how to. Or wasn't persistent enough.

Well, okay. She shouldn't give up after one failed attempt. She must persist, she must try once more so that the two of them could get to the bottom of this. She must get him to listen to her, to answer her questions. She must try to be calm, reasonable, without too much emotion. That's probably how men would deal with it among themselves. If she tackled it like that, then Marcel wouldn't be able to wriggle his way out.

She watched various TV programmes without being aware of what she was watching and listening out all the time for the sound of the Ford's engine. But Marcel did not return. Some time after midnight she had had enough of waiting, and got up and went to the bedroom. She grabbed Marcel's pyjamas, two pillows and a blanket - holding them a little away from herself - and took them to the living room. This time she did not intend to shut herself out, but *she* would sleep in the bedroom. Behind a locked door.

Once again, sleep did not come to rescue her from fruitless deliberation and once again, after a while, she had to go to the bathroom for a sleeping pill. The living room was still empty and silent.

* * *

The low morning sunlight pricked her eyes. With an effort, she lifted her heavy, sticky eyelids and went to have a shower. She heard Marcel's footsteps in the living room, the opening and closing of doors - of course, it was Saturday, he was at home. She thoroughly revived herself and carefully brushed her hair, but did not put on any make-up, only a little powder to cover the dark circles under her eyes.

When she came downstairs the living room was empty. Her heart was beating a little faster, but she was not feeling nervous, which she was glad about. Marcel's bedding was folded where she had left it the night before. So either he hadn't gone to bed or had only just come home. In seven years of marriage he had never done this before.

A moment later he came into the room and this time he did not avoid her eyes, but nodded in greeting.

“Have you got a few minutes, Marcel?”

“Of course.” The words did not sound hostile, merely neutral.

“We should talk, openly. At least, I mean to be open with you and ask that you are open with me. Is that okay?”

He shrugged. “I’ve got nothing to hide, nor do I intend to lie if that’s what you think.”

“Everything is different since you were like this - since we came home from that bloody circus. I’ve no idea what you got up to at that pedlar’s - or what he did to you - but it must have been something terrible. Something evil.”

She stared impatiently into his calm, impassive eyes, but received no reply. “Listen to me ... Marcel ...” she uttered his name only with difficulty. “Look, ever since you were at the circus with the pedlar you have become a stranger to me. A complete stranger. And evidently I’m also a stranger to you. You like me no more than I like you. But surely you don’t want - you can’t want - to stay for years or even decades with someone who means nothing to you?”

He silently shrugged. She got up and went to stand just in front of him, her cheeks glowing, her hair dishevelled, her lips trembling.

“You’ve got to help me. That’s the least I deserve after seven years of marriage to ...” She could not finish the sentence, could not say ‘to you’. “I can’t take this any more.” She had to wipe the corners of her eyes and hated this emotional reaction in herself. “We can’t go on like this. You ... must give me back my Marrcel. I must try ... no, we must both try to do - something.”

“What do you recommend?” His voice was controlled, cold.

“Let’s go back there together, to where it all started.” The words poured out of her hastily, almost without a pause. “Take me to the circus again. We’ll go and see your pedlar and force him ... or we could offer him money, we’ve got enough. I’ve got twenty thousand in my savings account, I could take it out today, immediately. We’ll pay him whatever he wants, if only he ... if he lifts the spell. Let him make you once again what you were. Marcel?”

“Okay, if that’s what you want.” He spoke as if they were going to the newsagent’s to get a paper. “But leave your savings where they are, we won’t need them. He won’t ask for money. If by any chance he needs paying, I’ll take care of it.”

For a moment she looked at him with slight bewilderment, but then with gratitude.

No derision, no objections, no questions - was it really possible? Quickly, quickly, before he changed his mind! She slipped on her high heels and grabbed her handbag, her hands trembling so much that the house keys fell to the floor. He went to open the garage, drove the car out and then locked the garage.

This time there was no mud around the circus and the crowd, now in the morning, was far smaller than then, when . . . Some of the stands had their shutters down, including her fortune teller’s. The long strings of unlit naked light bulbs looked ugly, disturbing. Around the main tent filthy dogs and even filthier children were playing. They drove through the double rows of stands right to the end and just as Tara was gripped by the frightening thought that the pedlar had maybe already packed up and left, Marcel turned to the right.

The pedlar’s tent stood on its own and was completely different from all the others. Some kind of blackish, semi-transparent plastic sheeting, very tightly stretched over a thin, web-like framework gave it the appearance of an onion dome, like the bell tower of an Orthodox church. In front of the tent there was a level, smooth platform, almost transparent, on which lay only some rectangular containers, like very low, black shoeboxes. It seemed to Tara that this platform was suspended in the air, about a metre from the ground, as there were no supports visible beneath it.

Behind it stood the pedlar, unmoving.

A black cape reaching to the ground and a loose black hood, both shiny like the finest silk, enormous sunglasses, a moustache and beard, full, sensual lips, like a picture of Pan pursuing timid virgins. Obviously he was keen to conceal his real appearance.

Now they were here all of Tara’s ideas of what to do and her courage failed her. She hesitated in front of the pedlar’s tent, with no idea of what to say, or do, searching in vain for the right words.

She was rescued by Marcel, who calmly went up to the platform, lent forward and said to the pedlar: "I was here before, do you remember? The day before yesterday, towards evening."

"Ah, yes, of course." The pedlar's sensitive lips slowly stretched wide into a devilish smile. "You were the one who wanted to know ... Well, never mind. What can I do for you?"

"I have a complaint."

"Really? How unusual. That doesn't usually happen to me. But of course, I am at your service, completely. You will tell me what is wrong and I will do my best to put it right, whatever it is. But if I may ..." - Tara had a glimmer of a feeling that the pedlar's dark glasses were directed exclusively at her - "... it would be better if you came with me into the tent, where we shall have peace and quiet. In any case, I don't have any customers at the moment, as you can see.."

The pedlar turned, a part of the tent as big as a door slid aside and they followed his politely outstretched hand into the interior.

* * *

When driving home they were silent at first. It had obviously rained, for all the dips in the road had become puddles of varying size and the afternoon sun was peering timidly from behind ragged clouds. There were few houses at this end of the town and it was largely empty, just now and then there was someone walking along the pavement.

If next to the pavement there was any water, Marcel did not waste the opportunity to drive through it and splash a pedestrian with dirty rainwater. Each time, Tara laughed with a high, sharp laugh, especially if she heard the soaked person swearing.

"You just missed one," she commented.

"No I didn't," he replied, "the puddle was too small."

They drove on and Marcel said to her: "You'd better fasten your seatbelt."

Hardly had she done it when Marcel put his foot down and swung the car to the right; only then did Tara see the stray dog zigzagging in panic in front of the car. Tara leaned forward as far as her seatbelt would let her, licking her lips

and excitedly following the chase. Marcel twisted and turned like a rally driver, accelerating wildly and braking even more wildly, so that a number of times the dog barely escaped with its life, finally escaping with a leap through a gap in a fence.

“Bad luck,” observed Tara. “But you were wonderful, darling.”

Two or three blocks before their house there was a pedestrian crossing, across which old Reza was slowly hobbling; she had some paper bags from the grocery shop in her hands. Marcel put the car into neutral and drove the car silently towards her back.

Then he blew the horn.

The old woman screamed, her packets flew across the roadway - an orange one rolling right to the edge of the pavement - and when they comfortably drove past her, she pressed her hand to her chest and her eyes were open wide, white with shock.

When Marcel had locked the Ford in the garage Tara said: “We could pop and visit the Grosmans this evening, what do you think?”

“Mhm. Have a chat over a game of cards and a drink.”

“Yes. And you know what, darling - we could invite them to come to the circus with us. They’ve got three kids, so it shouldn’t be difficult to persuade them.”

“Good idea,” said Marcel.

*Translated by David Limon
from Slovene original Krošnjar.*



Wonderful New Age

Edo Rodošek

*There is no worshipper of
change who does not feel upon
his neck the vast weight of the
weariness of the universe. But
we who do the old things are fed
by nature with a perpetual
infancy... It is the old things
that startle and intoxicate.*

Gilbert k. Chesterton

“Code, please. “

The front door spoke with a correct, instructive female voice, the voice of a teacher kindly reminding her non-too-bright pupil to wash his hands before eating.

The old man furiously stared at the red eye of the sensor. “Why do you need a bloody code? I’m not a visitor, I live here - I just went for an evening stroll round the garden.”

“I’m sorry sir. Please say the code. If you have by any chance forgotten it, read it off your wrist band.”

“I don’t wear your bloody wrist band, I’m allergic to plastic. And even if I did, it would be no help without my reading glasses. Come on, open up for heaven’s sake, I can’t stand here all night.”

“What’s up Ralph? Having problems?” said a voice behind him.

The old man turned and saw Gregory’s broad red face.

“Oh, it’s you. Bloody door won’t let me in without the code.”

“Ralph, wait for me here. I’ll pop up and get your wrist band for you,” Gregory offered. “Where do you keep it?”

“I don’t know... hang on... aha, now I remember - it should be somewhere on the window sill. Thanks, Gregory.”

That was a true friend. Actually the only one the old man had in the ‘Perfect Home’. He knew Gregory a bit from before, but what had really bonded them was living together in the home, into which they had moved the same week.

The old man shuffled about for a few long minutes, chafing his hands together in the chill November evening.

“Ralph.”

“Gregory! Can’t you find it? I’m certain I left it –“

“No it’s not that. Your door won’t let me in as a visitor without a red token. Have you got one, I only have green change?”

* * *

The old man went towards the bathroom and automatically reached into his pocket for a token, then remembered that access to the bathroom was free unless you did something wrong.

For one green token he then got a spoonful of liquid soap from the dispenser on the wall and then ninety seconds of cold shower and for two extra tokens a warm one. Now he was experienced he always managed to wash the soap off as he undressed before. He also bought a few paper towels as soon as he entered, as it was cheaper than the hot air dryer. Of course, you also had to be careful what time it was: between eight in the morning and nine in the evening the bathing rates were double and only the stupid or very rich residents treated themselves to baths during the day.

The old man pulled a token out of the pocket of his bathrobe and pushed it into the slot of the chrome vending machine on the wall. It spat out a paper cup into which watery, almost odourless coffee was poured. Three colourful images were then illuminated: Honey sweetener, a thick milk substitute called Super and a plastic spoon-cum-toothpick in the shape of a seductive nymph.

He paid for sweetener and milk, pulled a face at the nymph, and stirred the coffee with his finger. He knew that the sweetener would after a while make him want to drink Cool, a fizzy drink, which was cold only after an additional payment for an ice cube.

The screech of synthetic music assailed the old man’s ears like a slap in the face.

“Don’t trust your usual cheap cleanser. Try new agent Ultra, which cleans extra deep. With five Ultra coupons you can take part in our prize draw.”

The suggestive male voice was quick, persuasive, generous, hammering ideas into his head and massaging his brain; it was in a hurry to finish what it had to say before it was switched off. The old man pushed a red token into the slot to ensure himself a whole half hour of peace and quiet. That would be enough, as he was then planning to go down to the lounge, where there were no intrusive voice ads, but you did have to have a whole pocket of tokens with you in order to buy minor services and things to pass the time.

* * *

In the lounge Mrs. Summers was playing bridge with three computer partners - typical of her lavish habits - and squealing with delight every time she got a good card.

The old man went as far away as possible from her and put a green token into the slot in the chair back. The cushioned chair dropped into a horizontal position with a thump. Another two tokens magically conjured up a raised foot stool and a plastic cushion for his head, which he needed today as he was intending to doze off. He had slept very badly for the past few nights; he'd been having nightmares and had been waking up covered in sweat with his heart pounding.

A few chairs to the right, Gregory's vacant gaze gave away the fact that he had used his precious blue token for a dose of Dreams, the drug for the lonely. Two old women, Gwen and Eliza - twin sisters, whose names he kept on mixing up - wearing gigantic earphones, were each following their own holo-vision serial.

He had only just made himself comfortable in the arm-chair when he felt a soft, chubby hand on his shoulder and he reluctantly turned round. The moon-like face with way too much make up on which was looking down at him from intrusively close belonged to Mrs. Summers. He could see the thick layer of powder was put on unevenly on her childish round cheeks and there was so much mascara on her eyelashes they were dripping.

"Mr. Morgan!" Even her voice was somehow overweight. "Sorry to bother you, but I've unexpectedly run out of tokens and we're in the middle of a game - could you lend me a few?"

The old man sighed, knowing that in her case the word lend meant give, as she had never in her life returned anything.

He couldn't ruthlessly say no, like Gregory - and she knew it. He rummaged through his pocket, pulled out three red tokens - enough for a substantial lunch - and placed them in her pink palm, making sure he didn't touch her. He turned away, so he wouldn't see her coquettish winking, which in her world meant thank you.

* * *

"Good evening, Mr. Morgan."

The old man absent-mindedly raised his eyes, which had been fixed on the path, and mechanically returned the greeting, before his creaking memory could place the man in the orange uniform. Of course, it was Theo, the Perfect Home's gardener, and the most informed gossip - at least among the men - that the old man knew. Absent-mindedly he listened to the latest events, which Theo told in a much more juicy way than the barking speakers that were placed everywhere. Plus he wasn't interrupted by ads. Lost in thought, he didn't even notice that Theo had stopped talking.

"Oh, of course, sorry." He reached into his pocket for two green tokens and handed them over.

The gardener politely touched the peak of his cap and moved on. Probably to find a new customer, thought Ralph to himself.

* * *

The token dispensing machine swallowed the old man's retirement card with a clonk, spewing out different coloured tokens. The card was then slowly ejected, revealing two new holes; there were now eight of them. The old man knew that after the tenth hole, the machine didn't return your card and it was only the sixteenth of the month. That meant that from now on he would have to shower with cold water, there would be no coffee and no visits to the lounge. But most of all no fines till the end of the month.

The old man had already got used to paying for everything - apart from air, nothing in the Perfect Home was free - but he couldn't get used to the fines. However careful he was, he was always caught out. For instance the last one, because

of his moustache. He wasn't vain, but he had had a moustache for fifty years and had only shaved it off half a year ago, when he was accepted into the Perfect Home. His only remaining relative, his nephew, had talked him into it, saying that a moustache, beard and long hair most definitely meant he wouldn't be accepted.

The old man always shaved with the old razor which he had kept from his first job as a field biologist. Probably the skin below his nose - which was the only pale part of his otherwise tanned face - was more sensitive than his cheeks, as he had spared it for so many years. Anyway, he soon got a stubborn inflammation and spent god knows how many tokens on various ointments before realising that the only cure was not to scratch his scars open every morning with a razor blade. So he again grew a moustache.

Three weeks later, when he had just trimmed it nicely for the first time, the speakers called him to the council room after breakfast.

The old man slowly made his way there, dragging his feet. Even though he did not know what he would hear, he knew a call like that could never mean anything good. He awkwardly sat on the chair - it was free, undoubtedly another ominous sign - and stared at the faultless symmetrical face of the woman director on the holovisor.

"Mr. Morgan!" She was quiet for a moment, to give the senile resident time to take things in. "Soon after you moved in here we had a long discussion about the principles of our home. Can you still remember?" She waited patiently, leaning forward slightly and smiling good-naturedly. Although he had at first decided to be equally motionless, he could not prolong the absurd silence so he nodded.

"Perfect." The old man got the feeling that she was somehow going to offer him a sweet out of the hologram for getting the right answer. "Back then we agreed that equal treatment was our first principle. All of our dear residents have the same opportunities, each can decide for himself what he wants or needs and pays only for that. No lump sum, no false solidarity, no decanting money from one person to another. Cash and carry." Again a meaningful silence. "The same goes for everything else. What we allow one, we must obviously allow all. The same rules for all. Do you agree with me?"

“But I never -“

“Mr. Morgan!” The voice became slightly reproachful, but still gentle and good-hearted. A forgiving mother, whose child had wounded her with its disobedience. “You know very well that hygiene can’t be fully carried out if your body is covered with that ... primitive growth.” Scorn and disgust were noticeable in her voice. Only now did he get the point of this conversation and helplessly raised his hands. “Ah, you mean my moustache? First of all, it’s no bloo - not primitive and second of all, I have kept it immaculately clean for fifty years - even the army had nothing against it.”

“My dear Mr. Morgan!” A patient voice, which had all the aces up its sleeve and which was about to put the poor creature in its place. “How can you claim to be clean when you got that terrible infection, which could threaten the other residents?”

“But that’s exactly what shaving caused...”

He gave up and fell silent. There was no point. No argument could shake her all-knowing expression. She had made up her mind before this conversation, quite possibly many years ago. He would have the same success in persuading the Rocky Mountain Bigfoot, although it was probably more humane.

She tilted her head so that even he, the stubborn senile one, who stood out of her impeccably tidy line, would understand her final argument. “Mr. Morgan. Do you think that we should allow all our residents to have beards and moustaches? Where would that lead?”

In a moment of humour the old man felt like saying that that would mean Mrs. Summers could stop shaving but he restrained himself.

The manageress now put on a face full of regret - the loving mother would have to punish her child, but it would hurt her more than him - and he leant back in her chair. “I have to give you a fine of two blue tokens, Mr. Morgan. And this fine will double next week if by then you haven’t got rid of that ...” The voice couldn’t bring itself to say the disgusting word. Then politeness and a sweet smile won again and appeared on the face of the manageress.

“I wish you a good day.”

The old man was sitting on the porch in a special section, which his nephew had hired. He had also bought two glasses of shockingly expensive Freshness lemonade, which now stood untouched on the table between them. Their section was in the corner and so quite separate from the buzzing, talkative crowd which was quite usual for a visiting day. His nephew was respectfully polite, but the old man noticed how he kept checking his watch.

“Is there anything you need, uncle?” They both saw the absurdity of this question. There wasn’t a thing that couldn’t be bought in the Perfect Home - the ads didn’t lie about that. “Maybe something to entertain you - a video or an audio disc, a micro walkman, the kind you can put in you ear?”

The old man shook his head and was quiet for a while. Then he raised his head and his eyes lit up. “Bring me my book about the Bald Eagle.”

The nephew looked desperately unhappy. “Uncle, you know that would be an offence. The home doesn’t tolerate anything unhygienic. Especially not paper in layers, which is impossible to disinfect properly.”

The old man’s face took on a stubborn expression. “My book isn’t dirty. I wrote it myself and it’s an author’s copy. I haven’t lent it to anyone.” As if anyone would want to borrow it ... “I can pay for the ultraviolet treatment myself!” he added triumphantly.

His nephew’s eyes bulged. “I can’t believe you’d spend half of your monthly pension to pay for the radiation - a few minutes for each page! And it has how many pages - two hundred?”

“Nearly three hundred including pictures.”

“You see. For that money you can pay for at least 5000 pages on micro film, including your book and you can enlarge the pages on the monitor. Why do you need your book? It’s in small print and you said yourself that reading with such strong glasses tires you out.”

The old man was quiet and looked at his nephew stubbornly. “I need it.”

How could he explain to him why he needed his book if he couldn’t even explain it to himself? How could he explain to

anyone his sudden inclination to get his hands on the erased records of his life's efforts? Efforts, which had remained unproductive, just like his marriage.

Twenty-two years of marriage to quiet, understanding Frieda, who had never complained that she was neglected. She was always there - late at night when he returned home, chilled through from his exposed observation points.

She listened quietly to his eager narrative on how, in spite of previous failures, he would find the last few specimens of the very rare and threatened Bald Eagle. She believed him when he contradicted statements made by very reputable scientists, who claimed that the Bald Eagle had finally died out and that it would not return. In her quiet way she shared his crazy enthusiasm when he returned one October morning, unwashed and unshaven for three weeks, gasping to tell her that he had traced a male and two females, one of which was nesting in a wild, inaccessible part of the northeast Rocky Mountains.

"What ... what did you say?" asked the old man as he felt his nephew shaking his knee.

"Uncle, the bell has rung. Visiting hours are over, they're closing in five minutes. If I miss the closing of the ramp I'll have to pay a fine before leaving. I don't want to pay, I'd rather pay for disinfecting your book - I'll send you it tomorrow."

They shook hands politely and smiled at each other in a friendly way, exchanging the usual farewell words, which meant nothing and which both of them forgot a minute later.

* * *

As the Ornithological Institute in those days they could not yet afford a helicopter, so the mountain rescue team had to lend them one. Ralph, dressed in a windcheater over layers of thick jumpers and with a number of days' food supplies, was dropped off on a ridge three hundred feet above the nest.

The old man smiled, remembering the hair-raising descent down ropes, with his scientist's drive replacing his lack of experience as a mountaineer. This was followed by many hours of patient waiting, which slowly changed into days. Finally, the female eagle decided that the nest was safe from such a motionless thing. She moved away from the nest a

number of times to pick up some captured rodent off the exposed ridge, where the male had left them.

Early on the third day, after the sleepy Ralph had finished his last chocolate and there was only a little tea sloshing around in his thermos flask, the female eagle finally decided to fly in a circle above the surrounding precipices. He stiffly crawled to the nest, trying to overcome the cramp in his legs and switched one of the two eggs with a fake one. He carefully put his prize in an insulated box and just as he had started the laborious climb down the rope, the female eagle returned and sat back on the eggs.

In his mind he relived his endless guarding of the incubator, monitoring the thermostat and the relative moisture and listening with a stethoscope. He remembered his quickened pulse, when the hatchling finally started to peck its way through the wall of its prison cell. When the wet, dishevelled head was finally pushing away the first triangular piece of eggshell he had held his breath, together with his assistant and the guard on duty. Twenty minutes later, when the young eagle was fully out and exhaustedly opening its beak from the ceaseless effort, they opened the first of the bottles of champagne.

He had christened him Jack and would not hear of any objections. Before the alcoholic fog took over, it struck him why he had picked that name. He and his wife had chosen it right after their wedding for the first male offspring that would be born.

* * *

It was a week before Christmas. Even though thick snowflakes were dancing around Ralph, he slowly continued down the main path in the park, to get some fresh air. After a while a movement above him caught his eye.

That bird high in the sky must be a buzzard.

From far away the old man - though through a veil of snowflakes - could see quite well and years of ornithological experience had made his identifications reliable, even after such a short sighting.

A buzzard...

The old man's heart started beating with an excitement such as he hadn't felt in years. A buzzard wasn't exactly a Bald

Eagle, but it was worth admiring. A cautious, cunning bird of prey with wide wings, which flapped only rarely and then gracefully glided in the uplift of the wind. So buzzards did still hunt, though their numbers were dwindling.

The usual story. Constant shrinkage and pollution of their natural habitat. Corn full of pesticides. The rodents who eat the corn somehow manage to cope with the pesticides. But birds of prey, which feed on rodents, crush their own eggs while nesting as the shell is too fragile.

And the sentimental old man, staring at the disappearing monarchs of the skies with tears in his eyes from old age, mourned the shadows of his youth.

* * *

Ralph was sitting in the lounge, distractedly leafing through his book about the Bald Eagle, when the sweet voice of the receptionist called him to the large holophone in the hall. Stepping into the cabin he saw the slightly embarrassed face of his nephew.

"I've spoken to the manageress, uncle. She says that there is a chance that they'll grant you Christmas leave from the home - with my pledge of course. She said, though, that you were near the limit with your penalties, but that they want to show generosity."

The old man said nothing, guessing his nephew's next words before they were uttered.

"In that case I'd come and pick you up on Christmas Eve and you could spend Christmas with us." The words came from his mouth with slight reluctance and when the old man politely yet decisively rejected his offer, the nephew visibly relaxed. They promised that they would definitely call one another before Christmas and then his nephew's image disappeared.

* * *

He saw *his* buzzard again today.

It was flying in a circle and sometimes even hovering above him, as if it were observing him, too. Now he regretted telling others about it at lunch. Mrs. Summers had said it was a

cruel bird of prey that killed harmless little rabbits and pigeons and that all buzzards should be killed.

He leant on the hard back of the bench and looked upwards until his neck hurt. When the bench gave a warning buzz he reached into his inside pocket and pushed an extra token into the slot. Was it possible that half an hour had passed? His eyes started to water from the constant strain of looking. When he reached into his pocket to wipe his eyes with the edge of his hanky, he saw that the buzzard had disappeared. The old man stood up and the bench automatically lifted and locked itself.

The bird reminded him of the old times and he felt gloomy. He didn't want to remember the events that followed Jack's hatching. He didn't want to probe the wound that had never really healed. He slowly slid towards the door of the home, unsuccessfully trying to block out the thoughts of the past. The stupid assistant, who read the decimal point on the computer in the incorrect place and, in his blind faith in the infallibility of machines, gave Jack ten times the correct dosage of an anti-moulting drug.

When Ralph buried the box with Jack's body under a rock heap on the hill, he also buried his unreasonable hopes of saving the Bald Eagle. Observations from a helicopter showed an abandoned nest with two eggs in it and a few months later scouts found the female eagle drowned in the rushes beside a river.

His crazy dreams went up in smoke and two deep creases appeared on Ralph's face.

A few months later his Frieda died, after a brief suffering and that was when he retreated utterly from any public life. His face got thinner and his Aquiline nose even more prominent. He once heard a remark that he was starting to look increasingly like a Bald Eagle himself and after studying his face in the mirror he realised it was true.

* * *

The decorating of the lounge, which had begun straight after lunch, was in full swing. They were hanging paper accordions everywhere and tried lighting up a series of colourful lamps. The hall was full of boxes from which they took

hundreds of decorations for the biggest and most beautiful Christmas tree there had ever been in the Perfect Home. Wrinkled women on ladders giggled, at the same time making sure their expensive implants didn't fall out of their mouths. The already jolly men held them so they wouldn't fall and passed around bottles.

Mrs. Summers squealed loudly every time Gregory patted her powerful behind. The twins Gwen and Eliza did not dare go on the ladder but rather passed the decorations from the boxes on the floor. The gardener Theo helped the housekeeper to install a confusion of cables for the festive loudspeakers.

Pushing all the chairs to the wall had created room for a dance floor. In the corner stood a table with an enormous bowl of punch which - imagine that - you didn't have to pay for with tokens. The speakers announced that it was a gift from the directors and the residents clapped enthusiastically with gratitude.

* * *

"Are you sure you want to go on the terrace?" the automatic receptionist's voice was extra sweet because of Christmas.

"I'm sure." the old man said.

"There's not much to do on the terrace at this time of year, you know. Quite a bit of snow has fallen and the caretaker hasn't even managed to..."

"I don't mind the snow. I'm dressed well enough and I wish to look at the view."

"Sir, it's my duty to ask you if you have with you at least one green token for the lift on your way back, because if not, the lift won't open."

"My pockets are full of tokens, including green ones. I've already put one in the slot, so please unlock it, before the light fades."

The lock creaked open and the old man entered the lift.

The snow fell quietly in sparse, fat snowflakes, which clung to his moustache, hair and coat. With difficulty, the old man dragged his feet through six inches of it all the way to the parapet, where there was a telescope. Carefully, he cleaned the lens with his handkerchief before inserting a token. It made

a clicking noise and then the number 180 appeared, decreasing every second.

In the fading light of the December afternoon, the old man casually scanned the horizon, which had sunken into a white haze. The telescope was strong and the lens collected so much light that the old man stepped back and looked up, thinking it had maybe brightened up. But no, it was still a grey day and a large snowflake immediately landed in his eye.

Again he put his eye to the eyepiece, directing the telescope lower at the immediate surroundings of the garden, without knowing what he was looking for or hoping that he would see anything at all. Moving the device too quickly at the largest magnification revealed only blurred lines, so he slowed down a little. On the far side of the garden there was a large model farm surrounded with concrete posts and a wire fence. He started counting the columns like a child ... five, six, seven, eight ... He thought he saw something black at the top of the last one and decided to slowly focus the telescope on it. At that moment his three minutes were up and the eyepiece closed.

With stiff hands the old man rummaged for a new token and when he found the right post let out a painful moan.

After a little while he finally found the strength to stagger with uncertain steps to the bench in the middle of the terrace and collapsed heavily onto it.

They had killed it...

They had shot his buzzard. It was in their way, as it was the only living thing remaining among all the machines. A creature that was close to him and that he understood. And they had hung it from that damned post as a warning and as a symbol of their victory. The victory of a new, better electronic age. An age in which human beings were actually superfluous.

In this age people were a throwback, they were in the way.

And he, Ralph Morgan, an eccentric birdwatcher, was as adapted to this new age as the dinosaurs were to the new climate they faced. Just as the Bald Eagle was ill adapted to the poisons scattered by people, machines, androids, robots, cyborgs, automatic devices, computers ...

A new age was coming, trampling on everything old that was in its way.

Ralph rubbed his damp eyes, clenched his jaw and carefully searched through his pockets. Then he limped over to the edge of the terrace with a fistful of coloured tokens and hurled them over the parapet. He stood there for some time, dully staring through the thick curtain of snowflakes, then with great difficulty returned to the concrete bench.

* * *

The Christmas party was in full swing. The booming noise of the music blended with the squealing and shouting of the residents of the Perfect Home in this wonderful new age of the wonderful world. They fired a rocket through an open window, which exploded in thousands of glowing sparks.

Its glow quivered over a lonely, heavily snowed-on figure which sat with hunched shoulders on a bench on the terrace. For a few moments in the darkness a furrowed face could be seen, with bushy eyebrows above peacefully closed eyes and a white moustache. A thousand white snowflakes were covering the old man's face and his large Aquiline nose.

He looked like a perching Bald Eagle.

*Translated by David Limon
from Slovene original Čudovita nova doba.*

Just In Case

Edo Rodošek

*I consider - how much people
exercise their bodies and how
little their mind.*

Seneca

A seemingly endless, completely flat, shining white plain. It stretches as far as the horizon, which shimmers in the powerful heat and somehow seems strangely close. The purple sun, half the size of our earthly one is now almost directly overhead. Its sharp rays are burning me, blinding me and pricking my forehead, although the visor of my helmet is lowered. Fortunately, the air here is quite alright, I only need ordinary filters in my nostrils.

I increase the shading level and look around. At first casually, when I see there can be no surprises here, and then with my binoculars I more carefully check what looks like the most promising direction. The only one, as everywhere else is an empty wasteland.

Over there, not too far to the right, the plain is scattered with piles of rocks, some larger than a house. They are irregularly shaped and the shadows between them are as dark as night, forming a stark contrast with the otherwise absolute whiteness. I quickly check my oxygen supply, blood pressure, temperature and a couple of other things. All the indicators are on green, everything is within normal parameters. I also check the weapons I received before my departure from the armoury: blaster, neuron stunner, microgrenades, canisters of poison gas. Quite a number of these deadly gadgets for any possible situation and every type of enemy.

Then I feel in my right boot and pull out my old knife.

It is of cold pressed steel and its shiny blade is laser strengthened. Its slightly curved point and the serrated top of the blade fill me with endless confidence. That is why I hid it in my boot before my departure, although you are not allowed to carry your own equipment, only that which you get from the armoury. But this knife of mine gives me a special feeling of

security. It was with me in the last war and it helped me get through endless difficulties.

I adjust the straps of my heavy knapsack and start walking towards the rock heaps. Now and then I raise my binoculars and look them over again. But I still can't make out anything in the shadows between the rocks. When I get there I will have to be extremely cautious. As soon as I get there I must -

A sudden sharp blow knocks me to the dusty ground so that I roll three or four metres.

Only the lengthy exercises on previous endless training sessions help me not to lose consciousness; ingrained reflexes enable me within a moment to be crouched, ready to pounce, my blaster pointing forward and upwards.

Not very high above me there flies an enormous creature, as hideous as a nightmare. Something like a pterodactyl from the Jurassic era on Earth, but this one as big as a training plane. The creature flies above me in irregular circles, eyeing me, a welcome lunch that has been kind enough to drop by. It suddenly narrows its enormous wings and dives, a dark growing shadow.

I point the barrel, the blaster spews out a burning jet, but the creature's silhouette keeps getting bigger and bigger, like a racing locomotive, and my trigger finger is completely paralysed ...

And then the creature crashes right beside me on the stony ground, which shudders from the impact, and the edge of a leathery wing smashes against my shoulder so that I am bowled over again. But I am up once more, the barrel of the blaster aiming at the horrible, dark mass in a cloud of gradually settling dust. The mass lies there, motionless, and a foul smell reaches my nose, in spite of the filters. I prod it with the toe of my boot, twice, three times. I can do without another surprise. But this is unnecessary.

The monster is dead, there is no doubt about it. I sit on the dusty ground as my legs still feel very unsteady. Only now do I notice a sweetish taste in my mouth; I spit out saliva, coloured by blood. My shoulder is burning where I can feel a long tear in my thermal suit. I must look in my knapsack for the silicon spray and plastic gauze and patch it up. As soon as I can, or I will burn up in this hellish heat.

About an hour later I go on. My suit is mended, but I had to take it off to patch it. Then I drink some energy tea from

my flask. I wait impatiently for the thermostat to fall again, as the sweat is streaming into my eyes so that I can hardly see. Among the rocks and on the surrounding plain there is nothing to see. Nor in the air. No movement, no danger anywhere. But I still don't trust myself. I had just succumbed to the same feeling. But never again. No, sir.

I slowly and systematically check an area the size of a football pitch. I take a few steps, stop, look in every direction, listen, sniff the air. White rocks, sharp and in places jagged. Dark depressions between them. Only close up do I see that they are scattered with gravel and sand. No tyre tracks, no footprints, no paw prints. Nothing.

On the edge of the area I have checked I place in the cracks between rocks four or five sensors. They will warn me of any vibration of the ground, however slight, any movement, any change of temperature; they will amplify any sound and transmit it to my earphones. The next half hour must be totally safe so that I can eat and rest a little.

While I am resting nothing happens. I get up, stretch a bit and move on. I have no idea where to go, what I might meet. All I know is that anything I meet is my mortal enemy. Each will try to kill me before I kill it. So I cannot waver, I cannot hesitate, not even for a fraction of a second. Any delay means the difference between life and death. *My* life and *my* death.

Then I notice a slight, almost imperceptible sound in my earphones.

I crouch down low, flashing glances all around. My body is a coiled spring; tough, wiry muscle. I am a wild animal, a predator, programmed to kill. Still crouching, I take a couple of cat-like steps in the narrow fissures between the rocks. Then by millimetres I raise myself above the low limestone rockpiles, the sparse grass and scruffy bushes.

And then I see them. Three nightmare creatures, like a cross between a hyena and a giant octopus. They have a fire; they are hung about with a whole collection of weapons and some are strewn on the ground.

Although I am completely still one of them turns to me and in a flash reaches for his belt. My ingrained reflexes immediately take over, I throw a microgrenade in a low arch and hurl myself behind a rock. The terrifying explosion almost deafens me. When the rock fragments stop falling I peer over the rocks.

Two creatures are lying motionless on the ground, but the third, although bloody, aims at me. His shot hits a boulder just above my head and a thin spurt of molten rock falls on my helmet. I finish him off with my blaster.

It's over. I can breathe again. I sit on the ground and wipe the cold sweat from my forehead. My hands are clammy and one of my eyelids is trembling. It's okay. My speed of reaction saved me once again. Otherwise it would be *me* lying on the dusty, rocky ground, while that space creature would be poking fun at my mangled corpse.

Eventually I get up and decide to go on. It doesn't matter where. Simply forward. The only thing that matters is that I stay alert, quick, flexible. That I remain a predator, that I don't become prey.

Suddenly, about thirty steps in front of me there appears a wall. Light, almost white.

How come I did not see it before? How did I manage to overlook it in spite of my constant, tense alertness. I reproach myself that my two successful skirmishes have somehow lulled me, softened me. That is dangerous. Such behaviour can mean death. I swear to myself that it won't happen again. From now on I must be even quicker, even more decisive, even more deadly. Otherwise I won't survive.

The wall is vertical, its surface flat, smooth, almost enamel. Undoubtedly it is of an artificial material. When I get closer I notice a rectangular form set into its surface, a barely discernible panel, slightly taller than me.

From somewhere behind the wall there comes a high, sharp sound. Three times, each for a few seconds. What can it be? No doubt a new trap for the gullible. I must be ready for anything. Especially for that which is most unexpected, most absurd. I grip my blaster in my right hand, in my left the stunner, and the microgrenades are hanging from my belt. I take a step forward -

At that moment, the panel in the wall slides to one side and a doorway appears in which stands a human figure in uniform.

The thought flashes through my mind that this is another disguise of my space enemy and at the same time my finger squeezes the trigger. But the blaster remains silent. The figure in the doorway grins. I thrust the stunner towards it, but

that also fails to work. I reach for the micro grenades in my belt, but before they reach the ground I know that it is pointless. They are unusable. All my weapons, all that hi-tech has gone to the devil and this grinning space creature knows that only too well. But it does not know everything.

It does not know that I also have my knife.

I need only a half second to pull it out and stick it in the guts of the grinning uniformed creature. I see how his superior smile freezes and how on his face there appears an expression of unbounded surprise. Limply, like a rag doll, he slumps at my feet. Someone violently strikes me in the face, two or three others jump on me, twist my arms behind me, push me to the ground, sit on me.

I know that I'm beaten. It's over. But I didn't give in just like that, the damned sons of bitches. I made it costly for them. Let the bastards understand what we Earthlings are made of. Let them think long and hard before launching an invasion of our planet.

When they drag me away I somehow manage to turn my head and then for a moment I notice the neon sign above the door through which I have just been shoved:

PSYCHOSIMULATOR

Authorised military personnel only

*Translated by David Limon
from Slovene original Za vsak primer.*



Michelle Pfeiffer

Lenart Zajc

The town is a total ruin.

Houses without roofs and windows, burnt facades and collapsed walls. The roads are cracked, pitted with holes as large as craters. Brambles grow from them, winding along the split asphalt, from one crack to another. And in each one, they establish roots so that they can keep growing further and further. To new cracks, to a new strip of soil, to a new fragment of life. Trees grow in houses. There are mighty trees growing in the middle of hallways. Their branches reach up, out of the ruins, towards the sun.

A dog is walking along the middle of the road. Its protruding ribs can be clearly seen through the thin skin on its flanks. Its eyes are bulging from starvation, its long tongue dragging just above the ground. Behind the dog, there's a boy. He's running after the emaciated dog and the dog is staggering onwards. The dog doesn't want the boy, who is around ten, to catch it. It's trying to get away from its pursuer with unsteady steps. The boy doesn't call or invite the dog. In his left hand he's carrying a small bow and arrow. The bow is approximately sixty centimetres long, with a strong, thick string. At the bottom of the arrow, which is roughly eighty centimetres long, there are no fletchings, instead a rope is attached to it, the end of which is tied to the boy's right wrist. At the tip of the arrow, there's an iron arrow-head.

The boy patiently pursues the dog until they are about ten paces apart. Now the boy speeds up to reduce the distance to five paces. The dog senses the danger and begins to run faster. The boy stops, stretches the bow and takes aim. He releases the bowstring with a twang. There is a plopping sound when the arrow pierces the dog's chest. A heart rending bark can be heard. A yelp. The boy is slowly dragging the dog towards him. The dog is squealing, trying to escape. But it can't es-

cape, as the rope is persistently pulling it towards the boy and the boy is slowly coming closer. He's now holding a large butcher's knife in his hand. The dog keels over onto its side, blood and saliva pour from its mouth. It is no longer squealing, but wheezing and staring at the clear sky. God knows if the dog is aware of the fact that it will never see the sky again? It probably is. It no longer even twitches as the boy drags it closer and finally kneels next to it. It closes its eyes and the blade cuts its throat. The boy waits for all the blood to drain from the dog's body. Then he pulls out the arrow. Slowly and carefully, so that it does not break off in the dog's chest. These days it's hard to get a good arrow. Even harder to get a live dog. The boy knows that he has just obtained enough food for a day or two. His mother will be pleased. He is proud. Like a great hunter, he throws the body over his shoulder and sets off home, whistling.

I am observing the scene from the covered veranda of a house that stands opposite the town hall. The former town hall. I'm sitting in a rocking chair in the luxury of shade offered by what is most probably the only covered veranda in town. I can proudly say that I built it myself. To the shell of a once luxurious town house, from which only an attractive facade with empty windows remained, I attached a few former roof beams and thus got this veranda which gives me sufficient shade to be able to sit in the old rocking chair.

There's something in this old house that's worth a lot more than the veranda. Within the collapsed walls I have a real vegetable garden. And behind the garden, there's an entrance to a perfectly dry and, most importantly, secure cellar. The emphasis on 'secure' is significant. Nowadays, you never know what might happen to you. Even during the day, as I sit on my veranda like this, it's absolutely crucial that in my lap lies my old Kalashnikov. Yes, it is old and battered. But I have plenty of ammunition for it, stored in that dry cellar. I know that and, what's more important, the young boy who killed the emaciated dog knows it too. I know that the boy is paying no attention to me and I also know that this is so because he's aware that if he did, I would send a bullet or two straight into his greedy gob. Just as he would shoot his arrow into mine if I didn't have this trusty old Kalashnikov.

That's how it is these days and that boy isn't the worst that can happen to a person. There are real beasts in this town

since it's no longer a town. There are packs of wild dogs and troops of wild cats. There are countless rats, of which you must be careful while asleep. And insects, poisonous insects. Snakes. There are also bears and wolves. But these are not the beings I truly fear.

They come at night. A few of them together and when they find you, they lay siege until they get to you. No, they don't kill you immediately. Or eat you. If they catch you, they kill you slowly. They put your eyes out, pierce your genitalia with needles, roll you in hot ashes, slowly take your skin off, break your limbs, tear your flesh from your bones. I've seen the bodies they leave behind and believe me, it's not a pretty sight. The doctor, who has a surgery just there opposite my house, in the cellar of the building that was once the town hall, says that they feed on other people's pain. He has developed a theory that a person who has had to endure horrendous pain clings to life and the more he clings to life, the more life drains from him. And that is what those creatures drink. That's what they feed on. They're not vampires, even though they mainly move around at night. They don't have the elegance of vampires. They are not zombies, even though their bodies are decaying and they smell like the plague. Nor have they been taken over by aliens or something from the world of micro organisms. All I know is that they used to be people, that they seem somehow dead to me, that they are clumsy and slow, but cunning. If you look in their eyes, you see hatred, slyness and malice. They don't talk and I have no idea if they communicate with each other. What I do know is that a shot from a Kalashnikov almost splits them in two and that they are dead afterwards. Completely dead. Well, for a while at least: I've never actually checked whether their deadness lasts only until the next night, when they perhaps get up again and hound you once more. I just don't know. But I do know it's not hard to escape from them while you still have somewhere to escape to.

And above all, I know I'm afraid of them. I'm afraid because I have to sleep. And when you're asleep, you can't run. That's when they catch you. That's why my cellar is so very precious. Just one way in, no windows. Solid, thick walls, a thick vaulted ceiling. A big, heavy iron door once used in a shelter. No side entrances. At night they can't get to me. And

if they did, my good old Kalashnikov is always at my side and I have thousands of bullets for it. One or two for every one that may venture down the stairs. Must be frugal with my ammo. During the day, they have to go somewhere protected from the sun and I can go into the garden or on the veranda and lead a fairly normal life - fairly being the operative word. The only thing is... I'm so fucking lonely. I miss my wife, even though I don't even remember what she looks like or her name. Too many things have happened since I last saw her. But I really, really bleeding miss some permanent company.

Once I suggested to the doctor, the one who has his surgery in the former town house opposite my veranda, to move in with me. We'd keep each other company, I said. He agreed, but wanted me to move to his place instead, saying that town hall was safer: strong bars on the windows, the entrance sealed by a heavy oak-tree door, framed with copper, and an additional wrought-iron gate. There's plenty of room in the town hall, he said. Many rooms. It has its own electricity supply. A fridge. A television, a video player and other stuff. There's nothing that it lacks, he tried to persuade me. Besides, the town hall has side entrances, hidden corners, and you can escape in an emergency. But at your place, he said, it's as if you were in a mouse trap, if they break down the door, they're in and that's it. He said they come in thousands when they find a victim. And my Kalashnikov would overheat before I got them all. And then they'd do God knows what to me.

But I didn't go. As I've already said, it seems to me that they can't break down a door like mine. And even if they did, they're slow and clumsy and there are so many stairs from the door to the cellar that I'd be able to kill them one by one until daylight came and they'd have to leave. And if it looked like they might succeed, I've still got that TT-33 and in it there is always one bullet ready for me. All in all, in my mouse hole I feel much safer at night than I would in the doctor's big former town hall.

I frequently visit the doctor during the day. After all, he's the only one who seems to have kept his senses. He's the only one who doesn't eat people, the only one who is capable of saying a word or two about some trivial things from the previous world. He is the only one of whom I don't have to be afraid. And so I usually cook something from my garden, I sometimes even manage to catch a pigeon and we have quite a delicious

lunch, which we wash down with a wonderful wine from the town hall cellar. Thank God people used to archive wine.

I get up and go to my garden to see what's happening to my delicious pigeon stew. It's bubbling nicely in a little cauldron over a small fire. Not much longer now. Not much longer before it's time for lunch. I walk over to the heavy cellar door, carefully close and lock it. I push the TT-33 into its holster on my belt, open the safety catch on my Kalashnikov and hang it over my right shoulder so that I can shoot using my right hand only, squeezing the butt under my arm. With my left hand I take the cauldron of stew and I slowly set off across the road. I look around all the time, left and right. I'm on my guard. I listen to every noise; I wouldn't want an arrow belonging to some fucking brat in my arse, even less offer myself as lunch to him.

Finally, I reach the stairs and climb up to the mighty stone pillars of the town hall. Weeds and brambles grow among the paving stones. Carefully, so as not to trip, I approach the door and knock. Three times, rapidly, knock-knock-knock, and then twice very loud and in a slow rhythm, knooock-knooock, and then another quick knock. Each day we agree the code for the next day. Needless to say, the doctor doesn't want some fucking hungry brat standing in the doorway when he opens it, releasing an arrow into his gut. These brats with their bows are a real menace.

So, I knock and wait for the shuffling steps made by the doctor's slippers along the stone floor. He comes to the door and waits a few moments.

- Yes, he says.

I tell him it's me. I hear the rattling of the keys and the copper framed door opens.

- Come in, he says and when I'm in he closes the heavy door. Then he locks it. I walk with him across the atrium of the town hall. It's as if the devastation has spared this place. Arcades all around, in the middle a paradise garden, a carefully tended lawn, a pond with water lilies, but no fish. We ate them on some other occasion. It was a proper holiday, a feast, and I still salivate when I think about it.

We're walking under the arcades. He's telling me he has another one. Hung herself in the morning. He says I know her. She lived in our neighbourhood. It's the mother of that brat who shoots stray dogs and cats. - Fuck it, in these harsh

times people just give up and hang themselves, it really isn't much fun living anymore, he says. That's what it's like these days.

I put the cauldron of stew and the Kalashnikov on the dining table in that large reception room of the former town hall and follow him to the cellar. It isn't like mine, nicely closed and secure. It has windows which are, admittedly, barred, but with some persistent effort the bars could be removed. A dangerous thing. In the middle of this dangerous, almost exposed cellar there is an operating table and on it the rather opulent naked body of the woman who has hung herself. Of course I know her. It really is the mother of the young hunter I saw in the morning catching the dog. Ugly to look at. Not just because of her corpulence, but also because of the bruised tongue sticking out of her mouth and the bulging eyes. Because of the short, fat fingers with sunken nails. Because of the short, swollen feet, unkempt cunt and hair in her armpits. She was ugly and sloppy when still alive, I never liked her or that bastard son of hers. Fuck it, you can't like someone who sees you as a tasty lunch. Fucking cannibals, I tell you, this mother and her cretin brat.

- This one is interesting because she's fresh, says the doctor as he's opening her mouth with the pliers. - I'd like to see this, he says. - I knew it, he says proudly after he has fully opened her mouth. The woman is from the previous world and has gold teeth. He says he knew that she had gold in her gob.

The doctor needs gold. He told me he needs it to make some kind of a machine with gold conductors. He intends to improve things with the machine, but I've no idea how it's supposed to work; he did mention something about lightning, but I wasn't really paying much attention. Too fucking technical for me to be interested. So, just as the doctor is proudly explaining to me how the assumption about the gold in her filthy gob was correct, the dead hand with short fingers and chewed nails reaches out and grabs him by the balls.

- Thave yourthelveth¹, says the mouth with the bruised tongue. The corpulent body lifts, her eyes stare at me and while her right hand squeezes the doctor's balls, her left hand is trying to reach for me. Thank God I'm standing at a suffi-

¹ Save yourselves!

cient distance so that there isn't even a theoretical possibility of her being able to get me. The doctor is trying to pry open the fingers of the woman's right hand. He's pinching them with his pliers, howling and stomping.

- Thave yourthelveh, says the mouth with the bruised tongue. I regret that I've left my faithful old Kalashnikov that has accompanied me since the last war in the dining room upstairs. I'm nervously pulling out the TT-33, which is stuck in its holster. Finally, I succeed. The doctor's face has turned blue.

- Kill the bitch! He shouts, no, wheezes. - Blow her dirty cunt into smithereens, he says. He really is in pain. And as if led by his voice, I aim at that untidy cunt and BOOM!, just as those disgusting fat fingers with chewed nails squeeze a bit harder. The whole of her fat body twitches. No blood. The dead don't bleed. Once more BOOM! this time between her breasts. And again BOOM! BOOM! Her neck, head, BOOM! That fucking gob of hers. I totally destroy her face. But I'm getting a bit worried as she's still squeezing the poor doctor's balls as if this whole thing wasn't working. Her neck BOOM! Again and again and again, until the cylinder is empty. I load it again and shoot all the bullets into her neck until her fucking head falls away from it.

- YES! I shout and jump over to help the doctor free his balls from the vice of those disgusting little fingers with chewed nails. A fucking mess, I tell you. The doctor takes off his trousers and underpants. His balls are completely purple and swollen as if he had two tennis balls between his legs.

- You'll have trouble sitting, I say. He doesn't reply, just mutters something from a face still full of pain. With his trousers and underpants around his ankles and with his left hand holding those richly swollen balls, he limps to a large freezer. He reaches inside and from among all the limbs, heads and other human body parts he keeps in there, he pulls a fistful of ice and presses it to his balls.

- It's helping, he wheezes as he is cooling his balls. Meanwhile, I lift the fat bitch's head. I grab it by the hair, lift it to my face and look at it. Her eyes are still looking almost as idiotic as when she was still alive. Idiotic, but there's a hint of malice in them, in spite of her being dead. Cunning malice. The doctor asks me if I noticed how she was getting stronger

and stronger. The harder she squeezed him, the stronger she got and the harder she was able to squeeze. - It's a fucking bugger, he says, because if the others have sensed her, they'll be here tonight. - Shit, he says, almost in tears.

He's right, it's going to be one bloody mess! I drop the head to the floor.

- Put it on ice, says the doctor in a slightly steadier voice.

- Put the head on ice, he repeats. In spite of his swollen and painful balls, he remains a scientist. I shrug, pick up the head and chuck it into the freezer from a distance.

- They'll come tonight, I mumble without knowing why. As if a spirit has whispered it to me. - They'll come and attack the house, I go on. - The fucking zombies will come and thrash the life out of you if you don't leave and come to my place or go somewhere else, I say on the inbreath. - It took too long before I finished her off and they know very well that she's here, I sagely conclude. The doctor gives me a weak smile, pulls his trousers on and, before doing up his flies, puts some ice in there. He says he can't leave, that his work and his life are there. If he figures out how the hell the undead, as he calls them, appear he will perhaps be able to work out a way of getting rid of them. Maybe he will be able to do something. Maybe they could even be re-socialised. This makes me angry. How the hell will he normalise them if even the bastard hunters can't be socialised? How will he do anything with the undead if they can't even talk?

- She said 'save yourselves', he says proudly. So they can talk. - They'd even like to save us, the doctor goes on. - Maybe they want us to join them, just as we would like them to become like us. Maybe we could help them. After all, if they want to save us, there must be some good in them left, but they misunderstand it.

- Spanish missionaries were also convinced they were doing good when they converted Indians to Christianity and a moment after they had adopted Christ, killed them so that they wouldn't be able to return to their old gods in a moment of weakness. Fuck it, from their point of view, they were doing their absofuckinglutely best by sending their fresh, pure Christian souls to the big chief. But you must ask yourself whether the Indians were happy with that. I personally don't think so, I conclude. I refill the empty cylinder of my TT-33

and put it back in its holster. One can never have enough loaded weapons to hand these days.

- All I know is that those fucking zombies will be all over the place, I warn him. - I know that they'll crawl into this hole of yours because it has too many windows and then they'll torment you. Yes, they'll do it even during the day in the rooms with no daylight. They'll torture you, day after day, until you die. Do you remember what they did to that girl in the cellar of the former printing house? I ask him.

A few days ago those pricks got a girl. I've no idea where she came from or where she was headed. All I know is that I heard her shrieking at night as she was running around and then for two days there were screams echoing from the printing house. They tortured her night and day until I'd had enough and I threw in there the whole stock of hand grenades I had left from the last war. Everything was destroyed. The cellar, the zombies and the floosie. And there was peace again, wonderful peace. It isn't easy to listen to somebody being beaten to a pulp so near you.

- Just so that you know, I say. - I have no more grenades to save you from the pain and if you think that I'll crawl around with my Kalashnikov to protect you from these pricks, you're wrong. I'm telling you again, fuck everything else and come to my cellar. We take as much wine as we can carry, we cocoon ourselves in there until things have settled down a bit and we can come out again. Hey, and when we get out, I'll go and hunt these fucks around the town and kill as many as I see. The undead, the little bastard hunters, the lot of them. Why not! I remember how in the last war we killed much lesser lice than this lot. We shut them in somewhere, say a church, chucked in a couple of those wonderful phosphorus bombs and if anyone wandered out, you just shot them. And I tell you those pricks were much less bothersome than this lot.

I get a bit carried away trying to persuade him, but to no avail. This guy is determined to find the truth. He wants to establish what we could do with them and how to normalise or at least neutralise them. He wants to find the evolutionary leap that must have occurred somewhere along the line that allows the dead to come back. I give up. I don't know what to do. The guy keeps going on about that contraption of his and how he needs just a little more gold and he'll be able to carry

out I don't know what kind of a fusion that will ensure a normal life. He says he can't just leave it all now. He tells me I should go to that mouse hole of mine, while he finishes one or two things, then he'll shut himself in the former town hall and wait. And if fate wants him to die, there's not much he can do anyway.

- Fuck fate! I shout. What fucking fate, if he stays here, he's condemning himself to death, I tell him. He replies that if that's how it is, then so be it, his destiny must be fulfilled and he's meant to finish his journey here. He has always called life a journey. I think for a moment. Obviously this fucking bastard here has decided that he'd rather croak in the worst possible way than say I'm right and shelter in my secure cellar.

- So, you think that if they kill you tonight, that's a part of your destiny? I ask him and he nods with satisfaction. - And you consider yourself dead to all intents and purposes?

- If your thinking is right, then I really am practically dead, he says. I nod. I salute him, a habit from the former world, smile and lift the Kalashnikov's barrel. He smiles again.

- It's better if I do it quickly than they slowly, I say after another pause.

His wise smile disappears. He goes pale, wants to say something, but why should I listen to him? The Kalashnikov explodes in a short burst. Three bullets, like in the good old days: two in the chest, one in the head. The last one misses by a fraction. Instead of his forehead, it hits just above his chin, knocks out his bottom teeth, tears off his tongue and explodes in his cerebellum. Fuck, even my hand is no longer as steady as it used to be. The doctor falls down and I roll him on his back with my foot. There is an expression of surprise in his eyes. Eh, my good old doctor, you weren't expecting it to finish like this, were you? Neither was I. Even just five minutes ago I wouldn't have believed it, and then this happens. But that's how it is these days.

It's already getting dark in the east, but it's still light in the west. I grab the satchel lying next to the doctor, I stuff as many bottles of wine as I can into it, take my cauldron of by now a completely cold stew and carefully set off across the square, back to my veranda, then the house and garden when... there's a fucking mess again.

The door to the cellar that I have so carefully closed, is open. I carefully put down the satchel with the bottles and the

cauldron. I lift my Kalashnikov and step towards the wide open door into my secure cellar. I crawl along the wall. Slowly, step by step. Finally there! I quickly jump around the corner and release a burst into the empty room. Fuck it, you never know what's lurking in the dark around a corner. If I had another grenade left, I'd throw that too, wait for it to go off and then go in after it and blast all the corners. That's how it worked in the former world. But, thank God, I don't have one. After all, I could have blown up my whole supply of ammo and my wonderful secure cellar. And I didn't want that. And something else would have gone to hell: when I went in with that Kalashnikov of mine, ready to shoot, I saw a figure down there on my sofa in the dim light of an oil lamp. A woman. I nearly blast her when I cotton on that in fact she is showing no signs of wanting to harm me. That she's just sitting there, staring. So, there she is looking at me and I at her, ready to shoot. The barrel is slowly drooping and my eyes are getting used to the dark.

Well, when my eyes finally do get used to the dark, I realise that this isn't just any woman. It's Michelle Pfeiffer.

- What the fuck! I mumble and collapse onto the stairs. I let the gun's butt rest on the stair below and I lean my forehead on the end of the barrel. How the hell did she get into the building? I ask her and she shows me the key. I'd like to know what she's doing here. She says she's my wife. And she adds that I must have been treated badly during all this time and must have forgotten. Well, from somewhere a thought springs up that in the former world I may really have married Michelle Pfeiffer... uh?!? It's getting dark outside. I say to her I'll be back in a moment. I go to the garden and pick up the satchel with the bottles. As I am bending over, I'm sure that something has stirred at the other side of the square. A shadow is creeping around the pillars in front of the town hall. And another and another. Then a whole group comes. For a moment I feel like running into the cellar, but I change my mind. They're already gathering and why shouldn't I play a little trick on them?

I carefully carry the bottles to the top of the stairs and go back to the house entrance. It's getting dark fast. Now there are quite a few figures in front of the town hall, all stumbling around, looking for something. They're bothered about me

having deprived them of their dinner by killing that poor doctor. I aim at the group and RATATATATAT! And again RATATATATAT! And again and again I blast them so that limbs fly in the air, figures roll around the floor, collapsing in on themselves. I shoot and shoot. - Here you are, you motherfuckers! I laugh. - No one is going to lurk around my property!

RATATATATAT! RATATATATAT! RATAT! I need to change the magazine. And I continue. The figures set off across the square towards me. They walk hesitantly, twitching as the bullets hit them. When their legs or arms are torn off, they try to pick themselves up, but I keep blasting them. The last magazine! RATATATAT! My wife is behind me, filling the magazines. She doesn't ask what's going on. She knows. And she goes on filling, this Michelle Pfeiffer... uh?!?... Whatever, it just doesn't fit. But there's no time for reflection. Now's the time for wasting these zombies and not for wondering what Michelle Pfeiffer is doing here.

So we keep shooting, then one of the pricks shows up right here, in front of me. Appears out of thin air. I send a blast into him and he's blown into fragments. Michelle is pulling me back, but I'm still carefully blasting the figures crowded at the entrance to my garden.

We slam the door behind us, bolting and locking it.

We're hermetically enclosed in the cellar. We have wine, we have food. And I have Michelle Pfeiffer... uh?!? Perhaps I could spend a moment thinking about it, but it wouldn't make sense. Things have to be taken as they are, without wondering why they are as they are. If it turns out that Michelle Pfeiffer is your wife, you don't wonder how she became your wife if you don't remember exactly how, instead you carry out your marital duties: I attach myself to her lips. I stroke her firm arse. I feel those divine breasts. I'm in fucking heaven. There's just one thing bothering me. But I don't know what. I don't even know what when I take her clothes off. I don't know when I lay her down on my bed. Or when my tongue slides from her nipples across her flat stomach, past the pubic hair to her carefully maintained cunt to explore in there. I've no idea what's bothering me until her fingers travel across my erect prick and her lips encircle it. I can feel every blood vessel in my dick protruding. I can feel my swollen prick as if it

would explode. I can feel how my hot blood is pulsing in there. I can feel her long tongue wrapping itself around my prick and then I know what's wrong: she's cold. My tongue, which is exploring the depths of her cunt, is licking vanilla ice cream, while her tongue is cooling a red hot sausage. Her tits, pressed against my stomach, are cold. The whole of her is cold.

Fuck it, if you're doing things like this with Michelle Pfeiffer, you shouldn't be complaining about her warmth or the lack of it, I suddenly think. On the other hand, the rhythmical banging on the door reminds me that you can never be too careful. Slowly, my brain cottons on that Michelle Pfeiffer, my wife, is dead. She's dead and walking around. I want to get away, grab my faithful Kalashnikov, when I have another thought: she may be dead, but she's not doing anything to hurt me. Her body isn't falling apart. She helped me kill those pricks. And she didn't let them into my cellar when she had a chance and is still not showing any signs of wanting to do it now. I relax again. I enjoy the feeling of my dick melting in her cool saliva, I'm enjoying her vanilla-ice cream flavoured cunt. I can feel my prick swell even more, I can feel it ejecting one, two, three bursts! Bang! WOO HOO! Fantastic! She's still licking it, sucking the last drop from it. My whole body is twitching, I'm trembling. And again. I haven't even settled down yet when I can feel myself disappearing in her mouth once more. My prick is up again, like a torpedo ready to destroy a fucking ship. Like a ground-to-air missile ready to erase that fucking plane off the sky. This fucking hard-on! Well, that's how it is when you have Michelle Pfeiffer in your bed... uh?!?

I pull my prick out of her mouth, turn her round somewhat forcefully, pull her towards me so that she is in front of me on all fours and I enter her from behind. The torpedo has been sent, the ship is writhing in spasms. YEEEEHA! I yell. I'm screwing my wife, who just happens to be Michelle Pfeiffer... uh?!? She's getting warm. Not warm, she's hot and tight and nice and moist and... This is so fucking good. I'm banging into her, piercing her, coming out again, going back in, and this cat woman of mine is moaning and purring.

Meanwhile, there's that rhythmical BANG, BANG, BANG, on the door. For a moment I look at the Kalashnikov lying on the floor next to the sofa. Within the reach of my hand. Fuck it, the door could give way and then I'd have to

shoot. Michelle senses that my attention has wandered off. She gets unhooked, turns around, puts her ankles around my neck, grabs my hips with her hands and pulls me inside. We're kissing with our eyes shut. I forget the BANG, BANG, BANG. And, of course, I come again after a while. And, of course, she puts my prick in her mouth again. I watch it disappear between those beautiful, full lips. I watch her gentle, clever blue eyes. She's looking me in the eyes all the time. She's sweaty and hot, is Michelle Pfeiffer. I truly love her and I've really missed her. I've missed her all the time since the former times. I don't ever want to be without her again. I gently take her hair, wrap it around my hand and pull her closer so that she swallows more or less the whole of my prick. - Yes, do this to me! I nearly shout. And, just as it's nearly standing up again beautifully, that BANG, BANG, BANG stops. And my prick immediately deflates as I hear a voice say:

- Co'e ou', 'er'ea't!², it says. 'er'ea't, co'e ou', 'a'e you'e'f!³ The voice belongs to the doctor, but he's talking so incomprehensibly because his teeth and his fucking tongue are missing. I can't believe it, I've blown his head up and, hey presto, he's already bothering me. As a zombie, of course. He went and joined those pricks. And he's communicating:

- 'o 'ive mea" 'o 'uffe'. 'a'e 'our'e'f! For'e' 'ou' bo'y, 'et you' 'o'u' 'ive!⁴ He won't fucking stop. I nervously pull my semi-hard prick out of Michelle's mouth and reach for my Kalashnikov. She grabs my hand. Her eyes meet mine. They're warm, but decisive. They don't ask, they order. She shakes her beautiful head. She kisses me, telling me not to do it. Dying is pointless, she says. Let me lose myself in her arms, in her body, she invites me. Let me wait for daylight, then it'll be time for killing. She'll help me, she says.

- 'he'h 'he 'evi'! 'a'e 'our'e'f f'om 'e'! 'ave you' 'oul! 'he'h 'oin' 'o 'ui' 'ou. "ere 'i'" 'e 'o pa'a'i'e a" 'o he" 'o' 'ou. Co'e 'o u'!⁵ my former friend is calling me. I carefully look at Michelle. She wants to press herself to me, but I reach with my hand,

² Come out, sergeant!

³ Sergeant, come out, save yourself!

⁴ To live means to suffer. Save yourself! Forget your body, let your soul live!

⁵ She's the devil! Save yourself from her! Save your soul! She's going to ruin you. There'll be no paradise and no hell for you. Come to us!

hold her away from me and look at her. Now that the fire of my passion is extinguished, her body is getting colder. It's becoming dead, just like it was when I found her here on my sofa in the light of the oil lamp.

- My poor husband, she says. Not only do you have a much older wife, but she's dead to boot, she says. Tears are running down her cheeks. She loves me so much, she says. She so much wanted to stay with me that she didn't want to die when it was time to die. From life's point of view, death is always something pointless. Especially when a world becomes the former world. When one absurdity destroys everything you have lived for. Once I watched a film, I can't remember the title, all that I remember from it is the idea that the spirits of the dead are driven forward by a strong emotion they never managed to resolve during their lifetime. Such a soul is wondering around, trying to fulfil that emotion, be it revenge, love or something else.

- I love you, says Michelle Pfeiffer...

Something breaks inside me. Those banging on my door feed on revenge. Not on life, as my former friend the doctor, now a zombie, thought. They feed on taking revenge on everyone who's doing better than them. They want us to give up our bodies and let our souls live. Let the soul suffer and wander around in the dark, like their souls are doing, trapped in their decaying bodies. I embrace Michelle, pulling her close to me. I kiss her on the neck and she gets warm again. I listen only absentmindedly to the doctor's talk of redemption. The bloody dead idiot even tells me that the saviour will take those who die in torment directly to him. That, for God's sake, I should give in, because they're on a mission from Jesus. Holy fuck! What does this dimwit, this cretin of all cretins, think? That the guy in the even more former world went on the cross so that semi-rotten monsters like this moron could wander around? I don't think so. I think he went on the cross because he wanted to help us live better and in my opinion the best way to worship someone who died in order to save others, is to worship life itself. And is not sex with someone you love the best form of worship? Of course it is.

I totally exclude the doctor from my consciousness. I play with my wife, for hours, all night and all day. The next night we don't even hear that they're banging on the door again, or

the ramblings of that fucking dead friend of mine. We're still in the middle of our game. Sleep, food, wine, sex, more sex, wine, food, sex and more sex, sleep and so on and so on and so on, again and again, not paying attention to the silence outside or the banging on the door or the doctor's sermons.

And we go on like that until towards the morning of the second or third night of the siege I'm disturbed by a completely new sound. There I am, lying on my back, Michelle Pfeiffer's head resting on my shoulder... uh?!? She's kissing my neck. My right hand is absentmindedly playing with her left nipple, my left hand is holding the last bottle of wine. There's still that BANG, BANG, BANG on the door. I bring the bottle to my lips. I'm drinking lying down so that the red wine spills down my unshaven cheek and neck towards Michelle's lips and she licks it up. At this very moment, I hear a quiet and remote TUP and immediately after a GHHHH. At first, I perceive the sound only subconsciously. And then I hear it again. The TUP, as if someone has struck flesh very hard with a stick. And this is followed by the GHHHH. Wheezing. I lift myself on my elbows and close my mouth in order to hear better. There it is again: TUP GHHHH. And once more. Rhythmically, every couple of seconds. The banging on the door stops. I look at my watch, it should still be night outside. A kind of excitement can be sensed outside, but it's not about us. TUP - GHHHH. TUP - GHHHH. Somebody is killing them, says Michelle Pfeiffer.

- Could be, I mumble.

But who would be killing them? At night? Michelle brings my attention back to her body with a kiss. For another few hours I forget that TUP - GHHHH. For a few hours, until my watch tells me it's light outside. Quietly, so as not to wake Michelle, I move her off me, pull my trousers up and put on a shirt. I put a bullet-proof vest over the shirt. I get the TT-33 ready and push it into the holster. There is already a bullet in the barrel. I insert a new magazine into the Kalashnikov and pack another four spares in my pocket. Quietly and carefully I move towards the door. Even more quietly and holding my breath, I open it. Ready to shoot, I blink at the new day. The house and the garden are full of zombies' bodies. Right in front of the door lies the body of that former friend of mine, the doctor. His eyes are bulging out, an arrow is sticking out

of his forehead. Opposite me, beside the wall, the hunting boy who caught the starved dog a few days ago, is squatting. He's holding his bow in his hand and has an arrow ready to shoot. He aims at me, straight at my chest. Thank God for these bullet-proof things. I, too, aim the barrel of my Kalashnikov at his small stomach.

- You killed my mum, he says.

- She became a zombie, I reply without wondering how he knew that it was me who killed her.

I can see he's thinking. He knows I'm right, he knows that his mum became a bothersome, harmful creature, but still, does that make her any different from how she had been before? After all, if you ask me, both he and his mother had always been pests. If I just think about that wretched dog! Not that it meant anything to me, but still, that boy pulled that rope on the end of the arrow with which he had shot the dog so sadistically. Actually, I don't know why I hadn't put them away earlier. Probably minding your own business isn't the most justifiable thing either. It's probably necessary to eliminate people you think are harmful at the very beginning. And there are lots of people who are harmful.

And as I'm just thinking about releasing a whole magazine into that brat's gut, irrespective of the fact that he has saved me from those besieging pricks, but really when you think about it, they're not bothersome during the day anyway and I and my wife Michelle Pfeiffer could leave whenever we wanted, and as I'm thinking like this I can feel something move behind my back.

- What are you two doing? asks Michelle Pfeiffer as she sees us, each with our weapon aimed at the other. Before I answer, that son of a bitch over there, that fucking bastard, releases his arrow straight at her. Michelle grabs her beautiful breasts, in the middle of which there is the arrow with the rope attached to it, which is tied to the boy's wrist. She moans very gently and falls to her knees. Then the little bastard pulls the rope and makes her collapse on her face.

- Fuck! I shout. And the little brat becomes aware of the danger. He says that she was a zombie. This fucking bastard would like to let me know that we're quits now.

- What zombie! I shout. I step on the rope with which he wants to pull my Michelle to him just as sadistically as he did

that dog. I press the trigger. RATATATATAT! RATA-TATATAT! I watch the blasts tearing bits of flesh from his body. Shredding that soft child's skin. Blood is spraying on the wall behind him. His small head explodes and his black messy hair ends up on the wall together with his brains. - What zombie! I'm still shouting. -She wasn't a zombie, zombies harm you. Michelle and I were a fucking symbiosis! Tears are pouring down my cheeks. The little body is totally ripped apart. I release four magazines into the little swine. That's one hundred and twenty dum dum bullets. Where there was earlier a boy, there is now minced meat.

I kneel next to Michelle. I take her dead head in my arms, rocking her. - Will she come back again? I wonder.

I don't know. But I do know something.

There is a reason for revenge. I'll kill all of them, the fucking zombies and the little hunters. And their cannibalistic mothers. And all those brats that are still normal, if there are any left. I'll kill everyone I meet on this fucking planet. Oh, yes, I know that they are tricky, that they are a murdering horde of fucking monsters, but I'm their equal. Even more than that - I'm worse than them!

Fucking motherfuckers.

*Translated by David Limon
from Slovene original Michelle Pfeifer.*

Love Is Energy

Mojca Kumerdej

In spite of his name, Lucky was not lucky. Every day, after the end of his shift in the heating appliances factory, he scuttled like a frightened rat along the streets where the plaster was flaking off houses like dry skin and crawled to his one-room basement flat assigned to him by his employer for a minimum monthly rent after fourteen years of service. He had moved there from a rented flat with his mother, who was now dead, to get away from his father, who two years after his mother's death was finished off by drink. There, in his basement, Lucky talked to himself, often posing the usual questions about fate, loneliness and the meaning of life.

It wasn't that he was a loner by nature with no desire for company. On the contrary, he regarded with envy his neighbour, a warehouseman in the same factory, whose lively flat was like a busy railway station. In the late afternoon, through his barred window, Lucky would watch as black, red or sometimes even green high-heeled shoes as well as white ones with especially tall stilettos – these were the ones he liked most as they minced past his basement flat – entered the building, stopped on the first floor and after a few hours click-clacked down again. With the exception of one or two owners of the shoes, spotted as he just happened to be taking a black plastic bag to the dustbin, he had never seen any of the women. Thus with each pair of high heels he employed his lively imagination, focusing on the women's legs and picturing various bodies, characters and faces, which most often resembled those of the women he met on his way to work. How did he manage, this depraved neighbour, to have intercourse with so many? One of them really wasn't much of a looker, but that wasn't the point. Lucky wasn't choosy, he would have been happy even with the worst of his neighbour's women, as there wasn't a worst one, they were all good, but too good for him,

Lucky Gril, a small man with modest muscles, small bones, eyes the colour of beans and an inexpressive skin tone that resembled the faded beige walls of the factory corridor. He racked his brain but couldn't find a way to approach them. He looked at the women and girls going by with fire in his eyes, trying to find a secret method which he could employ to make them notice the fact that he too existed. But it was as if Lucky was made of spider's web rather than the flesh and blood and spirit of other men who obviously possessed something he unfortunately did not. He watched his female colleagues and tried to make them like him in his inimitably shy way. He was always ready to help, be it covering for them during cigarette breaks or during suspicious sick leaves due to women's problems or difficulties with children. While conscientiously carrying out his work, he kept a surreptitious eye out to see whether one of them was showing any interest. As soon as the corpulent, butch woman and the little, spotty adolescent pulled from the pockets of their blue overalls cigarettes and a lighter, he looked at them protectively and quietly increased the speed of the movement of his hands, working for three, irrespective of whether the break lasted five or twenty minutes. The women didn't perceive his attentiveness as an expression of love. They didn't think about it at all and cheekily exploited this thirty-seven-year-old lad, as unmarried men were labelled, regardless of age, without feeling.

And just as he helped them by assembling water heaters with his skilful hands, when alone at home, so deeply desiring female company, he had no other option but to use those same hands. In spite of his uninteresting fate - or perhaps because of it - the man was, to put it discreetly, of a very lively nature. His body may have been small and weak, but despite his fragile appearance the energy within him flowed as in the greediest factory generator. He was thus left with one option only, a sordid and lonely option - Lucky was forced to masturbate profusely.

His narrow bed floated above heaps of stained and stuck together glossy magazines. There was very little text in them and a lot of colour photographs. Frequently he felt a desire to grab them all, shove them into black plastic bags and take them at night to the dustbin. But you never know, someone might be watching and after he had deposited the things and

quickly departed, they would come and rummage through the bags to see what was hiding in them that couldn't be thrown out during the day. And much could be found in Lucky's bags. The worst were rainy, dark evenings just before the moon waned, when he couldn't sleep and was restless, in that fragile state that most of his work mates, in line with local custom, alleviated with alcohol. But Lucky never drank. He owed this to his upbringing, for his mother used to point to his father and uncle, pressing him to her bosom and begging him, with tears running down her cheeks: never to become like those two drunken pigs. Lucky never even tried alcohol, however much his workmates teased him at celebrations. But the heap of magazines under the bed, that was driving him to despair. Countless times he had sworn never to buy another. For days he would avoid the newsagent's kiosk that waited in ambush for him on his route to and from work. He deliberately took a different, albeit longer route. But then, when he felt that the temptation had been overcome, that nothing in this world could persuade him, he returned to his former, shorter, but more dangerous path. With his hands in the pockets of his scruffy old brown polyester jacket and with a brownish grey beret on his head he walked quickly, repeating to himself in a quiet voice that it would be different this time. He would not stop, he would just walk past, straight home. That was the right thing to do, what he had been doing until then was unforgivable, totally wrong. When he saw it from afar, the tempting red kiosk, he took a deep breath and walked by without changing pace. But the end of the story was always the same. Just as he thought that the whole thing was over, a strange force turned him on the pavement, dragged him to the half-open window, energised his hand and pulled it out of the pocket, led it past his right hip and pushed it into the back pocket of his washed-out grey woollen trousers, from where he pulled creased banknotes, grabbed a magazine and ran home. Okay, just this once more, I'll quickly leaf through it and then throw it away, he told himself. But that wasn't a simple thing to do. It was impossible to look through those magazines just like that. He had to return to some of the photographs again and again. Five times, twenty-five times, six hundred and twenty-five times...

Thus he fought without success his conscience that quite clearly and unequivocally reproached him with being a real

swine. Yes, just like the ones his mother had hated so much and because of whom she had shed so many tears. And after all, it wasn't just the magazines, there were also real women, women at work, passers by and acquaintances he met every day on his way to and from work, then women on television, newsreaders, the compères of entertainment shows, journalists ... all these women, this was how he saw it, couldn't be stuffed into black plastic bags and distributed around the neighbourhood's dustbins.

All of these secrets, anxieties, fears and feelings of guilt remained quietly hidden away like shy companions in his small, tidy home. It was difficult, but he managed. Until one winter evening, when as usual he returned tired to his flat. While a two-day old goulash was heating on the stove, he warmed his hands, numb with cold, on the radiator. His hands were his weak point. They were very sensitive, with pale, sensitive skin that even in woollen gloves went red in the cold. Besides, he often washed them, before eating, after eating, during work, after work, after shaking someone's hand, in the morning, in the evening and countless times in between, whenever necessary. Sweat bothered him particularly. When he was embarrassed, which happened often, he felt warmth intermingled with cold spread from his hands and then sticky bodily fluid covering the delicate surface of his skin.

That cold winter evening, Lucky cut himself two slices of bread, switched on the television and with a plate of hot goulash sank into the greyish-brown armchair. While dipping the well baked crust into the thick, fatty sauce, he got up every now and again with his plate in his hand to go to the screen and change the channel. Nothing but boring programmes, strange films, silly ads, crazy music... but then suddenly he was glued to his seat. On the first programme of the national television station Dr Eva Tomič, the caption said, a middle-aged scientist with hair the colour of fire and a luscious body, was taking part in a discussion with other scientists. It was obvious that this energy expert knew her field very well. With her knowledge and, above all, her inner confidence, she managed to overcome, or so it seemed to Lucky, any opposition and sometimes very inappropriate comments from her male colleagues.

Lucky felt the pleasant buzzing of her electrified voice travelling along the overheated nerves in his body. When the

programme ended he was shaking with excitement. "Such intelligence in such a wonderful body!" he kept saying to himself out loud as he lay on the bed. He even forgot to wash his hands, so badly derailed was he by the television discussion. And instead of pulling from under the bed one of his magazines, as he usually did before going to sleep, he covered himself and looked at the damp patches on the ceiling. He just couldn't go to sleep. As soon as he closed his eyes, he saw Dr Eva Tomič and as soon as he opened them, the damp patches began to take on the shape of her bosom, which was saving the country from a power supply crisis while rising and falling. His hand slid down his thin stomach and he started thinking about her. Quite a few times that evening. And again and again...

He no longer thought of the women at work. The lower part of his body was now strengthened only by the thought of Eva Tomič. And the thought of her had penetrated the whole of Lucky's being. Even at work, his mind often crept sleazily away from the water heaters towards the toilets, waiting for him there until he followed it humbly and brought things to their conclusion. His habit became increasingly suspicious and disturbing to those he worked with. His workmates noticed that something was terribly wrong with him. Lucky was visibly fading away. He arrived particularly pale and creased for the morning shift, with bags under his eyes that looked like burnt chocolate cookies. The poor man made excuses about kidney and bladder problems, but the others didn't believe it. There was a rumour that Lucky had lost the difficult battle with alcohol, it happens to some, but he was hypocritically concealing this struggle. And it was because of this hypocrisy that they now disliked him even more. They saw him as an obdurate type, who always had a hidden agenda.

His already weak body was starting to fade away. His skin acquired the patina of the factory façade and his inexpressive eyes began to resemble colourless hot gelatine. Only his hands became stronger, more sinewy. But as his muscles couldn't stand the merciless demands of his body, within a few weeks they simply became inflamed.

"It's obviously overwork," they established at the clinic. "Some kind of work-related ailment," the doctors concluded, supporting and bandaging his hands, and advising him to stay

at home for a few days and relax. "Ha, relax?!" he thought with despair. "Ha, relax!" he repeated at home a few hours later and that same evening they had to take him to casualty with his head between his legs because two of his neck vertebrae had become stuck. He was in hospital for just under a week. The doctors justifiably suspected muscle dystrophy. A kind of spasm that distorted the whole body. It was nothing serious. His health soon returned, but he became even less talkative.

After he returned home from the hospital, he collapsed onto his bed and, in the position of an unwanted foetus, started sobbing. He had lost all his willpower. All his impetus and enthusiasm. Everything hurt. And he was very ashamed of himself. He grabbed a photograph from his bedside cabinet of Dr Eva Tomič, cut from a newspaper, and cried even more. "A sick person and a pig!" her eyes accused him. What hurt especially was the realisation that while she was trying to save every last kilowatt, he was wasting his energy on the basest of acts. He swore on his dead mother's grave that he would stop once and for all. But to no avail. The feelings of guilt and regret were racking his body and tearing at his soul. He felt terribly lonely, useless and dirty.

For the first time he seriously thought that he should end his worthless life. "No one will even notice," he concluded despondently. He knew he wouldn't be able to do it with a rope as he knew nothing about knots and the basement ceiling was too low. He had no gas, as everything in his block of flats ran on electricity and hot water supplied from the town's central heating plant. Then he remembered that his mother always used to say that everything comes in handy after seven years if not before. He thought about the packets and bottles of tablets that he had carefully tidied away. There were quite a few left from his mother's illness. Those were particularly potent, as his mother's disease had also been pretty potent. "If there's no other way, I'll choose mother's way," he decided. He was rummaging around the drawer, collecting the bottles and packets of poisonous capsules, when the light on the ceiling suddenly started flickering. The bulb is going to go, he thought and even before he put a full stop at the end of this thought, the light flickered for the last time and then died. He got up, went to the kitchen cupboard, took out a new bulb,

positioned a wooden kitchen stool under the light and stood on it. First, he had to unscrew the white ceiling light shade, then the tired old bulb in which the torn spring waved to and fro as he was unscrewing it, making a sad rattling noise. It seemed a bit strange as it wasn't long since he had replaced it. Either they had sold him a duff one or these new bulbs were really badly made. With his thoughts still engaged on suicide and medicinal poisons the thought that he should have taken the fuse out, just in case, had never occurred to him. And this carelessness nearly cost him dear. To put it more precisely, what he intended to do to himself, the perfectly ordinary light bulb almost accomplished for him. While he was screwing it in, he received such a shock that he fell off the chair, head first. He lay there prostrate for what must have been quite a few seconds and the first scene that met his eye after he had entered the primal darkness was the light yellow ceiling that was blinding him and seemed to be shifting above the brown and white lino on the kitchen floor. He wanted to get up, but couldn't move a muscle. He felt that the electricity he had intended to direct into the new bulb was now flowing through his body like water in a radiator. It was either the result of the fall or the shock, but something awoke a wonderful thought in his brain and he said out loud: My god, energy!

Lucky was in one special sense a talented man. With only seven years of formal education, there was nothing left to him but to dedicate his life to the assembly of water heaters. And even though he could not read or write well, he found it very easy to mend the neighbour's washing machine, assemble a moped, even television sets were no mystery to him. He knew very well that nothing appears out of nothing and that nothing disappears into nothing. The moments when he felt how everything is connected were not rare: rain falls on the earth and evaporates back into the atmosphere; wheat is harvested, kneaded into bread, then gives strength to man and eventually returns back to nature; and so on. With renewed strength he got up, went to the table and slammed shut the drawer containing the deadly pills. With a joyous face he exclaimed: "Of course, everything flows, everything is energy - in light bulbs, water heaters, television sets and in me - yes, in me there is a huge amount of energy!"

It wasn't just magazines that he stored under his bed. There was also an old wooden crate where he kept wires, screws and

tools, all very neatly arranged in small boxes and biscuit tins. He squatted down and with extra concentration shook the boxes and collected together some material. Then he quickly got up, put on his jacket and beret, grabbed his wallet and rushed out to catch the electrical supply shop before it closed. He bought a few electric cables, some copper wire and a couple of fuses. Before he went to bed that night, he looked in his wardrobe and pulled out an old red, moth-eaten ski suit that his mother had bought for him twenty-five years ago for a school skiing trip. He tried it on and, as he had expected, he had not developed much or changed physically since then. The sleeves were a bit short, the trouser legs could have done with being an inch longer, but this was no obstacle for the implementation of his plan.

The next day, feeling tense, he went to see the foreman at work and ask him very humbly if it would be possible to get a transformer, an accumulator and an oscillator from either a discontinued product line or a faulty product. The foreman - who was very surprised as this was not only the first time the man had asked him for something, but also the first time he had spoken to him at all - asked what he needed them for.

Lucky went as red as a lobster. He just needed it, he told him, needed it urgently.

"I get that, but what for?" said his supervisor.

"I just need it," Lucky said meekly, lowering his eyes with embarrassment. He felt like crying.

"Well, if you need it," the foreman softened at the request from a worker who had recently had health problems supposedly caused by his job at the factory, "we'll have to sort something out."

"How's your health?" The foreman tried to use this opportunity for a chat. "Everything okay?"

"It's better... yes, it's getting better," Lucky said modestly.

"Well, that's the main thing," said the foreman, who had never believed the gossip about Lucky's drink problem, and patted him on the shoulder. Lucky Gril was one of the very few workers who never took sick leave and the foreman barely knew that he worked there as there were never any problems with him. Until recently, but that could happen to anyone.

For a few days, Lucky's thoughts were concentrated on electrical and mechanical elements. When very excited, he

often talked to himself out loud. This time, due to the level of his exhilaration, he was so talkative that it seemed as if there were five people in the room: "... I just can't get out of the habit... that's no excuse... a little screw here... I put it in... pig... pig... sicko... screw this in..."

To the lining of his ski suit he sewed a copper wire mesh that matched his blood vessels. Where the wires met, he inserted small thermo-electric elements that were connected serially by the mesh into a kind of thermo-electric battery. The mesh narrowed at the top of the head and between the legs into well insulated cables, which Lucky linked to the other elements in a well thought out order. The energy from Lucky's body thus travelled to the accumulator via the two cables - one with a shortage of electrons and the other one with a surplus - and then from the accumulator into the oscillator, which served as a frequency modulator that converted a continuous current into an alternating one. From the oscillator the power went to the transformer, which regulated the existing voltage, and then from the transformer it could travel to the various electric sockets in his flat through an adaptor. Prior to charging the system, he spread the body parts that the copper thermo-electrical elements in his ski suit were supposed to touch with aftershave gel, which was a conductor. Then he climbed into the suit with its long zip, which below the stomach gently protected the sensitive energy source - always firm enough and ready to make the body send power to the interwoven wires in the ski suit.

The invention - seemingly so primitive - was in fact momentous. With his inner energy, Lucky could power everything - from the washing machine and cooker to the coffee grinder. Somehow, the poor man found peace. Whenever he had an attack, and he had those throughout the day, he put on his ski suit, connected the thermo elements in his patent and the thoughts dictated by his body were converted into usable energy. He developed a belief that he wasn't just wasting his time and life away. Understandably, he told no one about what he was doing or about his invention. He had no intention to, either, for after all, whom could he tell? Thus it would have remained hidden from the world if someone in the accounts office of the power company hadn't suddenly started wondering why the meter belonging to one Lucky Grill hadn't shown

any change for months and the bill was always zero. The meter reader even rang Lucky's door bell and said that the accounts office had told him to ask Lucky whether he was tinkering with the meter. Lucky opened the door a couple of inches and his face behind the safety chain glowed red as he sweated in fear.

"I can hear that your television is working and the lights are on," the meter man managed to say before Lucky, without a word, slowly closed the door in his face.

When the meter man told them what had happened, the women in accounts found it all very strange. They thought it was out of order that someone would not pay for the electricity they used. They contacted the head of the maintenance division, the head of the consumption division and the person in charge of meter reading and told them what was going on. They soon worked out that there were only two possibilities: either the meter was faulty or - and this was more plausible - the guy was simply cheating. We'll send the inspector, they decided. We can't let him pull a fast one on us!

One morning a few days later Lucky's door bell rang.

"Who is it?" Lucky quickly glanced through the peephole and it soon became clear to him that the three men, two in overalls and the third in a suit, were not a good omen.

"We're from the Electricity Board, there's something wrong with your meter," said the man in the suit.

"Wrong?" Lucky asked through the closed door, his voice shaking, "I don't think there's anything wrong."

"Oh, yes, there is, there must be a fault somewhere. Could you open the door, please?"

There was silence inside the flat for a while. All that could be heard was heavy breathing, as if the man in there had asthma or, perhaps, was feeling guilty.

"I'm very ill," said Lucky, "I can't open the door."

"Mr Gril," the guy in the suit tried the door handle a few times, "we'll just ask you a couple of quick questions and then we'll go."

"What questions?" Lucky asked with a lump in his throat, even though he had a pretty good idea as to what it was all about.

"Open the door," said the man, "and we'll tell you."

Meanwhile, one of the technicians was already concentrating on the meter, checking the mechanism.

Lucky kept going on about being ill and on sick leave.

The man, fed up by now, told him that that wasn't their problem, adding that he would check if Lucky really was on sick leave and, if all else failed, would return accompanied by the police.

Police?! Lucky trembled. He had never had any dealings with the police. He hadn't done anything that bad. He hadn't stolen anything. On the contrary, he was making all the electricity he was using himself. That surely wasn't a crime. Or was it? What if they had found out about the magazines and what had really happened to his hands? What if his energy was somehow leaking from his mechanism and was then converted somewhere, maybe at the police station, back into thoughts? Then they were sure to know about the images of Dr Tomič in his head and what he did when they appeared. Besides, it wasn't true at all that he was on sick leave, he had said that just to send them away. And if they now went and checked at the factory, would they tell them that he was no longer ill and that they were expecting him for the afternoon shift? And if they told that to the police, they'd put him in prison.

Carefully he undid the lock, removed the security chain and opened the door.

"You can't be all that ill, Mr Gril," said the suited man as he pushed the door wider and entered the flat, followed by his colleagues. "I can smell a stew, if I'm not mistaken. So, your cooker is obviously working. And you should turn off those lights, I know it's not very bright in the basement, but it doesn't look like you're trying to save electricity. Perhaps the reason is that you don't pay for it? Well, Mr Gril," the man stopped right in front of Lucky, "while your stew is happily bubbling away on the cooker, the meter outside looks as if it's dead - can you explain this magic to me?"

Lucky said nothing. He was holding onto the plastic kitchen table as if he would collapse at any moment.

"Check around the flat a bit," said the man. "You obviously don't intend to say anything, Mr Gril. I believe you work in the assembly plant, am I right?"

"Yes," Lucky said timidly, thinking that they must have already talked to the police. How else would they have known this? It wasn't exactly written on his forehead where he worked.

"This means that you're not totally ignorant when it comes to electricity?" said the man, although he thought Lucky looked and behaved as if he was not quite all there.

Lucky denied everything. He said he didn't know anything about electricity and meters, that all he knew was how to put together a good, reliable water heater.

"Mr Lovrič!" one of the other men called from the bathroom.

"What's up?" asked the boss. "Have you found something?" He went towards the bathroom.

"We nearly got tangled up in this nest of cables. There's an accumulator and a transformer..."

"Fuck me!" the boss said. "It's a proper power station!" He seemed delighted. "But what the hell powers it?"

"Mr Gril," Lovrič shouted through the open door while looking at the transformer in his hands, "have you got a licence for this?"

"What licence?" asked Lucky with a weak voice.

"What do you mean what licence? An official licence!"

"Who from? The police?" asked Lucky.

"Are you aware of the fact that you could blow up this whole block of flats?"

"It's put together in a way that makes that impossible," Srečko replied.

"What? What the hell is this, have you got a small hydro power station in your bath or what? You need to show us right now how this works."

"I don't want to!" said Lucky timidly but with determination.

"What do you mean you don't want to? Do you want me to call the police?"

"No, I don't want that."

"Then you shouldn't have to think very hard. Come on, Gril, what sort of hocus pocus is this?"

"I'm not showing you," said Lucky stubbornly.

"OK then," Lovrič said. "If you don't want to show us, you'll have to show someone else. Get dressed, you're coming with us. Help the boys take all this to the car and don't dilly dally because otherwise" Lovrič had realised that the word police had a desirable effect, "you'll have to deal with the police. This is going to cost you dearly. What if every idiot had his own power station in his bed-sit? Without an official licence!" he emphasised once more, although even he didn't really know what sort of licence he was referring to and who

should be issuing it. Nor did he really know where to take the whole thing, or Lucky for that matter. While Lucky was getting dressed, Lovrič called the Electricity Board, determined to speak to the Director.

“Rakun isn’t coming back today,” the secretary said, explaining that he was at a symposium at the National Institute for Energy Supply, but his adviser was there, if it was something urgent.

“What’s wrong, Lovrič?” said the second most important man in the national energy supply monopolist, whose greatest wish and firm intention was to become the most important man, using any means available.

“What appliance? Some kind of machine? A strange one? You don’t know how it works... and the guy hasn’t been paying for his electricity for months?” The adviser thought for a little and then immediately became aware of what a great opportunity this was. “Call me back in five minutes.”

Director Rigler shut himself in his office, took a pencil and drew electrical symbols on his grey desktop while thinking. He had exactly five minutes to work out how to further his career by deposing his boss. While he was doodling a set of wires, the telephone rang again. At the moment he grabbed the receiver, an idea occurred to him.

“Lovrič,” he said with a voice in which a careful listener – which, however, Lovrič was not – would recognise malicious intent. “I’ve spoken to the Director on his mobile. He told me to take the man and his contraption to the Institute straight away. They’re having a symposium there on the Energy Based Society. Go to the Director of the Institute, Dr Telban, and tell him that you have brought the contraption upon the orders of our Director, Dr Rakun. He’ll be very grateful,” he added, barely able to control his laughter. “As far as I understand, this case is more a matter of science – all we do really is send bills and collect the money.” He closed his eyes, firmly hoping that Lovrič would swallow the bait. And he did; he even thanked Rigler, who modestly replied that it was okay, that he was only carrying out his duties. Then he triumphantly slammed the receiver down, shrieked at his secretary like a starved hyena that he wouldn’t be back that day and then quickly set off for the Institute, to enjoy the party.

The symposium was dragging on for the third day and the Institute Director, Dr Viktor Telban, gave the impression of

a sick animal with foam around its mouth. The symposium was being held during the winter school holidays, which he had intended to spend with his family, skiing in the French Alps. But now that was all off and he'd had to send his wife - their marriage had for months been going through a crisis - and the children to the apartment on their own. A hostess carefully approached him and quietly told him that some people were waiting for him outside and that it was very urgent. Telban turned his wiry body, which at very first glance gave an impression of stubbornness, towards the door of the large lecture room, where someone was trying to tell him something by winking and grimacing. He swiftly left the room with the intention of dealing brusquely with whoever it was. In the corridor he was ambushed by some sort of contraption and a bureaucrat from the Electricity Board, who immediately started telling him about mysterious cables, electric ski suits and old batteries. Telban was certain that he had reached the threshold of his psychophysical abilities and was probably hallucinating. This was only confirmed by a terrified and weary looking male figure, supported by one of the technicians.

"We need a couple of strong lads to get the transformer and cables out of the van..." Lovrič said humbly.

"Who the hell are you?" Telban asked, very irritated, with his hands on his hips, in the superior role of top expert and executive. "How dare you bother me in the middle of an important scientific symposium?"

"Following the instructions of our Director, Dr Rakun, I've brought this," said Lovrič, pointing at the contraption sitting in the corner and Lucky Gril next to it.

"That idiot? He told you to do this? And what is this thing, a time machine? A device for the production of permanent revolution? Do you think this is a mental asylum? And anyway, who made him, a state informant, the Director?"

"We don't know," said Lovrič humbly. In spite of the fact that in certain situations he himself had authority, which he constantly tried to prove through his behaviour, his choice of words and the tone he used, in other contexts he deeply respected the authority of others.

"It's some kind of machine for generating electricity... I mean this man here... the machine powers everything in his home... a scientific invention I suppose..." Lovrič said

apologetically rather than in an explanatory fashion as he was beginning to have doubts that consulting the Director's adviser had been the right decision. How could he have forgotten the gossip about the conflicts between the Director and his adviser and the animosity between the Electricity Board's Director, Edward Rakun, and the Institute Director, Victor Telban?

Dr Telban's lungs whistled of their own accord with anger as he breathed. He found it hard to have anything to do with that lefty, Rakun, whom he had known as an informant when they were students. How Rakun had managed to get a doctorate he could never understand. And he would never forget that it was Rakun who in the steely 1960s received an American grant instead of him, whose father had during the Second World War fought and died on the side of those who were resisting communist control. He, Victor Telban, an internationally respected scientist, had had to struggle on his own. Everything he had was the result of nothing but his scientific work. He, too, had later studied abroad, but he only managed to get there through immense self-sacrifice and talent. However, like Rigler before him, after the first wave of anger, he saw an opportunity to take revenge on Telban.

"Your Director, you said," he observed with false friendliness. He stroked his grey, Quaker style beard and went on: "If your Director ordered it, then please, follow me." He was even more convinced now that this could be a unique opportunity to finally humiliate Rakun in front of government representatives and the expert public and once and for all take his revenge for all the unsettled business between them, which they had been known to conduct even in the media.

"Yes, come in," Telban continued, "bring everything you've got, and plug it in - as far as I'm concerned in your Director's or the devil's arse!"

"Prior to the afternoon session," said Telban after the break to the symposium participants, "let us offer you some entertainment. Our colleague, Dr Rakun, of the Electricity Board, has a special surprise for us. He wants to show us scientists a device, as far as I can make out," he said, lifting his eyebrows in a sneering wonderment, "a machine for the production of energy or a kind of perpetuum mobile."

The Institute Director, who was also the official host of the symposium, had Lucky called into the hall and asked him

politely in front of everyone to explain and demonstrate the functioning of his system. All the participants were convinced that it was one of those performance things that were so popular these days when the event organiser invites an artist to eccentrically link art and science. This belief was confirmed by Lucky's strange appearance in his bright red ski suit. Some participants, particularly those who had already read their papers, were very amused, while a few others, who were still waiting to appear, were terribly annoyed. The worst thing that can happen to a scientist at a symposium is a fall in the audience's level of concentration. In situations like that the speaker may get the impression that his paper, which may have taken months to write and was the result of many years of research, was being noticed only by the walls and the projection screen.

In front of around one hundred participants, Lucky experienced what were the most difficult moments of his life. Helpless and feeling he could sink no lower, he succumbed to his fate, convinced that these were his final minutes before he was locked away in mental hospital or prison for the rest of his life. Then among the whispering and giggling in the hall, he suddenly thought he could hear a familiar, sweet, so often desired voice. Apprehensively, he glanced at the faces of those present. In the middle of the second row, wearing a white ribbed woollen top, sat Dr Eva Tomič. He felt like crying. She was much more beautiful than on television and in the newspaper: her figure was statuesque, she was even larger and much taller than his mother, and her thick, red hair looked as if she had millions of curly copper wires on her head, which glowed with heat at every move. Her arms were strong and fleshy, the kind that even at first sight promise protection and complete care. Did she have any children? She wasn't married, he had read that in the paper. Her hips were as wide as the biggest generator in the factory. And the top part of her body, oh dear, it surpassed everything the magazines stashed under his bed had ever shown him. But all that, sadly, no longer mattered. He was finished. Completely finished. No joy left until the afterlife, and even there a hundred years of purgatory awaited him before he would again meet his mother, God willing, as there was a strong possibility he would be shoved straight into hell for ever.

Even in the most difficult times of his life he could not have imagined a worse humiliation. How cruel the world was. It had all started because of her and now his worthless and, as he had been told that day, even criminal life would end right there in front of her. He'd be sacked. In his haste he had even forgotten to let his foreman - who had let him have the battery, the oscillator and the transformer - know that he wouldn't be coming into work that afternoon because he was otherwise detained. His mother had always told him that sooner or later everything comes out. And now, in broad daylight, it would be revealed just what a pig he was. What a dirty, perverted louse, who performed the most depraved acts, much worse than drinking or the debauchery of his neighbour. But nothing could be done. If the mental hospital didn't get him, the police would. Because he didn't have an official licence. If he had to humiliate himself, let his punishment be such that he would be humiliated completely.

"Well... Tell me your name again?" Dr Telban said to him with contempt.

"Gril, Lucky Gril," the poor man answered in a whisper.

"Well, Mr Lucky Gril," the Institute Director said, concluding his introduction, "Dr Rakun had you brought here because you are supposed to have invented a system which is a direct continuation of the efforts of the other two famous scientists from this part of the world, Nikola Tesla and Jožef Štefan, and which makes use of the newest findings of modern physics, no less. If my understanding is correct, electricity users, including those of us here today, will from now on no longer pay such high bills. I believe," he looked at Lucky with such scorn that the PhDs and assembled experts smiled with satisfaction, "that you will demonstrate how, putting it in very simple terms, we can save as much energy and money as possible."

"Fuck it, I don't even know this person!" said Rakun, getting up. "I know damned well who planted this on me."

A murmur ran round the hall. Now no one really knew what all this was about.

"Be careful nothing explodes," said a timid male voice.

Dr Viktor Telban's head twitched and for the first time he became aware that this experiment could have fatal consequences for him. He waved to Lovrič to come nearer and with

a voice that expressed confidence, but in which he could not completely hide fear, asked him if he knew for sure that the machine was safe. Lovrič, too, thought for the first time that the country could within a second lose the cream of its technical intelligentsia.

“I think it is,” he said.

“You think? Does that mean you know?” said the Director in a high-pitched voice, feeling his stomach ulcer opening again.

Lovrič told him that actually he didn't really know and that was precisely why he had brought the man to the Institute, following the Director's orders. The scientists should assess the safety of the contraption. In Gril's flat, the cooker worked, the lights were on, but he did not really know how the gadget worked, his men had only unplugged the cables and carried it to the van.

“Lovrič, you're a complete idiot. You wait till now to tell me this! They'll put you in prison and then me, too, if we survive this mess, that is....”

Meanwhile, below the speaker's podium and the white screen Lucky arranged the elements of his system. He connected the wires, took off his brown trousers, beige jumper and underwear and then, covered in sweat, started putting on the ski suit. The hall was buzzing with noise. When he took hold of his penis through the open zip, all the women present - there were not many - gasped in surprise and shock, while the men began to say things like What the hell...?!, Just look at the idiot!, Psychopath!, Pervert!, Get rid of this exhibitionist!. Lucky also caught the expressions loony bin, police, handcuffs... remove him, shut him in a psychiatric ward..., he took one last look at Dr Eva Tomič, pulled out his erect member and, as his eyes drilled into hers, skilfully demonstrated his system to exclamations of agitation and loud laughter. Dr Telban stood in the background, petrified, Lovrič, too, had a feeling that he had suddenly grown roots down to the cellar and would never again be able to move from the spot, while the Electricity Board Director, Dr Rakun, held his head in both hands, wheezing like a wounded wild boar. After less than a minute and a half, which to those of a more generous disposition, who were bursting with laughter, seemed to pass in a flash, while the others, especially those mentioned earlier, felt

as if they were caught in a time loop, experiencing in the correct order all the geological periods in the development of the planet Earth, an enormous wave of excitement ran around the hall. All those present were in shock - a 100 Watt light bulb connected to the system began to shine brightly. Lucky stood there, his member flaccid and slimy, his eyes still glued to Dr Eva Tomič, tears running down his face, grimacing in humiliation or perhaps pleasure.

A huge cry of enthusiasm spread around the hall. A few younger participants, mainly assistant professors with an MBA, launched themselves towards the inventor. Stepping over the cables, they tried to buy his favour, stammering, touching the individual parts of the mechanism, commenting to each other and offering him various business deals that were greedily forming in their young, management brains, hungry for fame and money. Lucky stood among them, confused, with his zip undone, and with tears on his face and on his penis.

Then two huge engineers elbowed the masses aside, creating a safe corridor for Dr Tomič. With her right hand, she lifted Lucky's head, while her left hand slid down, stashed his penis inside his suit and pulled up the zip. With a long, red nail she intercepted a fat tear on his cheek which, like many before, wanted to spread around his distorted face.

"Don't worry, everything will be alright. I'll take good care of you. We both deserve it - you and I. Together, my dear, we will realise our dreams!"

Before anyone managed to as much as twitch, Lucky was already sliding after Dr Tomič and her advisers towards her car. Her ambitions went far beyond a career in science. Soon after getting her doctorate, she had made a firm decision not to dedicate her life to reproduction, but to the production of energy. After a few years she realised that the confines of her office were too constricting and she intended to reach her goals through politics. The functionaries of the left-of-centre party soon noticed the liberal tendencies of her charismatic personality and put her on the national election list. "Every good political recruitment officer knows that an ambitious, intelligent and sexually uninhibited middle-aged woman is an invaluable foundation stone of party strategy," is how her appearance in the media was commented on by a well known psychologist-analyst and added that all those qualities were

embodied in Dr Eva Tomič. She skilfully spoke in favour of the political interests of her party, supporting them with economic arguments, and in this she was as merciless as a Spartan mother. At the same time, she was, off her own bat, looking for that special something that would not show her only as a member of the party, but also as an individual, a scientist, an energy expert - as Eva Tomič PhD. With a logic that included invaluable intuition, she immediately saw at the symposium that the shy man was precisely the missing link in her career.

Of course, he would sign anything. He would do anything she wanted. He could even repeat the experiment, not just once, countless times, said Lucky Gril. At first he was frightened that now she would personally take him to the mental hospital or the police, but when he found himself in her office and saw that she wasn't planning on anything of the sort, he was baffled.

Dr Tomič included Lucky's patent in her political programme. Initially, expert circles expressed serious reservations and doubts, there were severe moral reproaches. Men, even her party colleagues, although they didn't do it publicly, of course, made loud comments about knowing very well what kind of plug-ins Tomič really needed. Women went bright red whenever she shamelessly explained the workings of Lucky's power plant, feminists attacked her mercilessly saying that she was merely inverting the patriarchal sexist pattern instead of doing away with it, the church threatened her openly with eternal damnation, humanists reproached her saying that her system represented the exploitation of man by man, etc.

But when her clever advisers calculated the percentages in the reduction in the pollution of the air, water and the environment, as well as in unemployment and economic misery, while social wellbeing would increase, the anti arguments collapsed one by one and her opponents - due to a skilful manoeuvre by her party, which perhaps was not quite in line with the constitution, but so what - had to give up.

The global social change thus began.

In villages, huge power stations were built. Tomič's party colleague, the minister of labour, the family and social affairs, optimistically announced at a press conference that there would be work for everyone who was willing to roll up their

sleeves. And this wasn't far from the truth, these promises weren't fabrications. Many formerly unemployed men were now earning enough for mothers to stay at home, dedicating themselves fully to their family, in the evening telling their spoilt kids to eat up their dinner, cooked literally on their father's heat. Ambitious male students were able to ease the financial burden of their education, while female students, who usually wrote their essays at the last minute, found it easier to get through the tiresome nights in the knowledge that their computers and table lamps were powered by the youthful energy of their fanciable colleagues. From the hostels for male immigrant contract workers - seminaries categorically refused to cooperate - power was supplied to hospitals and nurseries, while many young men during their military service preferred to get their hands on their members rather than their weapons.

The human and nature friendly universal system was thus powered by energy that made the world of those who were lonely warmer, healed the sick and made the rich even richer.

Lucky literally blossomed. All his ailments and pains were gone. No more self accusation or feelings of guilt. He often thought that even his own mother would now be proud of him, seeing how useful he was. And on the day when he received a high award from the country's president, the new minister of energy, Dr Eva Tomič, came to him, kissed his red hot cheek in front of everyone and said into the microphone: "Lucky, I'm very proud of you!"

His life had turned upside down. In addition to the award, he had a new job and home. He became a maintenance engineer at the state sanatorium for the treatment of drug and alcohol addiction. And the management - under the instruction of the minister of energy - gave him a freshly painted one room flat until his death in the sanatorium's attic.

Life was no longer difficult for him.

He performed his work with love.

*Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon
from Slovene original Ljubezen je energija.*

Love Is Energy

Mojca Kumerdej

In spite of his name, Lucky was not lucky. Every day, after the end of his shift in the heating appliances factory, he scuttled like a frightened rat along the streets where the plaster was flaking off houses like dry skin and crawled to his one-room basement flat assigned to him by his employer for a minimum monthly rent after fourteen years of service. He had moved there from a rented flat with his mother, who was now dead, to get away from his father, who two years after his mother's death was finished off by drink. There, in his basement, Lucky talked to himself, often posing the usual questions about fate, loneliness and the meaning of life.

It wasn't that he was a loner by nature with no desire for company. On the contrary, he regarded with envy his neighbour, a warehouseman in the same factory, whose lively flat was like a busy railway station. In the late afternoon, through his barred window, Lucky would watch as black, red or sometimes even green high-heeled shoes as well as white ones with especially tall stilettos – these were the ones he liked most as they minced past his basement flat – entered the building, stopped on the first floor and after a few hours click-clacked down again. With the exception of one or two owners of the shoes, spotted as he just happened to be taking a black plastic bag to the dustbin, he had never seen any of the women. Thus with each pair of high heels he employed his lively imagination, focusing on the women's legs and picturing various bodies, characters and faces, which most often resembled those of the women he met on his way to work. How did he manage, this depraved neighbour, to have intercourse with so many? One of them really wasn't much of a looker, but that wasn't the point. Lucky wasn't choosy, he would have been happy even with the worst of his neighbour's women, as there wasn't a worst one, they were all good, but too good for him,

Lucky Gril, a small man with modest muscles, small bones, eyes the colour of beans and an inexpressive skin tone that resembled the faded beige walls of the factory corridor. He racked his brain but couldn't find a way to approach them. He looked at the women and girls going by with fire in his eyes, trying to find a secret method which he could employ to make them notice the fact that he too existed. But it was as if Lucky was made of spider's web rather than the flesh and blood and spirit of other men who obviously possessed something he unfortunately did not. He watched his female colleagues and tried to make them like him in his inimitably shy way. He was always ready to help, be it covering for them during cigarette breaks or during suspicious sick leaves due to women's problems or difficulties with children. While conscientiously carrying out his work, he kept a surreptitious eye out to see whether one of them was showing any interest. As soon as the corpulent, butch woman and the little, spotty adolescent pulled from the pockets of their blue overalls cigarettes and a lighter, he looked at them protectively and quietly increased the speed of the movement of his hands, working for three, irrespective of whether the break lasted five or twenty minutes. The women didn't perceive his attentiveness as an expression of love. They didn't think about it at all and cheekily exploited this thirty-seven-year-old lad, as unmarried men were labelled, regardless of age, without feeling.

And just as he helped them by assembling water heaters with his skilful hands, when alone at home, so deeply desiring female company, he had no other option but to use those same hands. In spite of his uninteresting fate - or perhaps because of it - the man was, to put it discreetly, of a very lively nature. His body may have been small and weak, but despite his fragile appearance the energy within him flowed as in the greediest factory generator. He was thus left with one option only, a sordid and lonely option - Lucky was forced to masturbate profusely.

His narrow bed floated above heaps of stained and stuck together glossy magazines. There was very little text in them and a lot of colour photographs. Frequently he felt a desire to grab them all, shove them into black plastic bags and take them at night to the dustbin. But you never know, someone might be watching and after he had deposited the things and

quickly departed, they would come and rummage through the bags to see what was hiding in them that couldn't be thrown out during the day. And much could be found in Lucky's bags. The worst were rainy, dark evenings just before the moon waned, when he couldn't sleep and was restless, in that fragile state that most of his work mates, in line with local custom, alleviated with alcohol. But Lucky never drank. He owed this to his upbringing, for his mother used to point to his father and uncle, pressing him to her bosom and begging him, with tears running down her cheeks: never to become like those two drunken pigs. Lucky never even tried alcohol, however much his workmates teased him at celebrations. But the heap of magazines under the bed, that was driving him to despair. Countless times he had sworn never to buy another. For days he would avoid the newsagent's kiosk that waited in ambush for him on his route to and from work. He deliberately took a different, albeit longer route. But then, when he felt that the temptation had been overcome, that nothing in this world could persuade him, he returned to his former, shorter, but more dangerous path. With his hands in the pockets of his scruffy old brown polyester jacket and with a brownish grey beret on his head he walked quickly, repeating to himself in a quiet voice that it would be different this time. He would not stop, he would just walk past, straight home. That was the right thing to do, what he had been doing until then was unforgivable, totally wrong. When he saw it from afar, the tempting red kiosk, he took a deep breath and walked by without changing pace. But the end of the story was always the same. Just as he thought that the whole thing was over, a strange force turned him on the pavement, dragged him to the half-open window, energised his hand and pulled it out of the pocket, led it past his right hip and pushed it into the back pocket of his washed-out grey woollen trousers, from where he pulled creased banknotes, grabbed a magazine and ran home. Okay, just this once more, I'll quickly leaf through it and then throw it away, he told himself. But that wasn't a simple thing to do. It was impossible to look through those magazines just like that. He had to return to some of the photographs again and again. Five times, twenty-five times, six hundred and twenty-five times...

Thus he fought without success his conscience that quite clearly and unequivocally reproached him with being a real

swine. Yes, just like the ones his mother had hated so much and because of whom she had shed so many tears. And after all, it wasn't just the magazines, there were also real women, women at work, passers by and acquaintances he met every day on his way to and from work, then women on television, newsreaders, the compères of entertainment shows, journalists ... all these women, this was how he saw it, couldn't be stuffed into black plastic bags and distributed around the neighbourhood's dustbins.

All of these secrets, anxieties, fears and feelings of guilt remained quietly hidden away like shy companions in his small, tidy home. It was difficult, but he managed. Until one winter evening, when as usual he returned tired to his flat. While a two-day old goulash was heating on the stove, he warmed his hands, numb with cold, on the radiator. His hands were his weak point. They were very sensitive, with pale, sensitive skin that even in woollen gloves went red in the cold. Besides, he often washed them, before eating, after eating, during work, after work, after shaking someone's hand, in the morning, in the evening and countless times in between, whenever necessary. Sweat bothered him particularly. When he was embarrassed, which happened often, he felt warmth intermingled with cold spread from his hands and then sticky bodily fluid covering the delicate surface of his skin.

That cold winter evening, Lucky cut himself two slices of bread, switched on the television and with a plate of hot goulash sank into the greyish-brown armchair. While dipping the well baked crust into the thick, fatty sauce, he got up every now and again with his plate in his hand to go to the screen and change the channel. Nothing but boring programmes, strange films, silly ads, crazy music... but then suddenly he was glued to his seat. On the first programme of the national television station Dr Eva Tomič, the caption said, a middle-aged scientist with hair the colour of fire and a luscious body, was taking part in a discussion with other scientists. It was obvious that this energy expert knew her field very well. With her knowledge and, above all, her inner confidence, she managed to overcome, or so it seemed to Lucky, any opposition and sometimes very inappropriate comments from her male colleagues.

Lucky felt the pleasant buzzing of her electrified voice travelling along the overheated nerves in his body. When the

programme ended he was shaking with excitement. "Such intelligence in such a wonderful body!" he kept saying to himself out loud as he lay on the bed. He even forgot to wash his hands, so badly derailed was he by the television discussion. And instead of pulling from under the bed one of his magazines, as he usually did before going to sleep, he covered himself and looked at the damp patches on the ceiling. He just couldn't go to sleep. As soon as he closed his eyes, he saw Dr Eva Tomič and as soon as he opened them, the damp patches began to take on the shape of her bosom, which was saving the country from a power supply crisis while rising and falling. His hand slid down his thin stomach and he started thinking about her. Quite a few times that evening. And again and again...

He no longer thought of the women at work. The lower part of his body was now strengthened only by the thought of Eva Tomič. And the thought of her had penetrated the whole of Lucky's being. Even at work, his mind often crept sleazily away from the water heaters towards the toilets, waiting for him there until he followed it humbly and brought things to their conclusion. His habit became increasingly suspicious and disturbing to those he worked with. His workmates noticed that something was terribly wrong with him. Lucky was visibly fading away. He arrived particularly pale and creased for the morning shift, with bags under his eyes that looked like burnt chocolate cookies. The poor man made excuses about kidney and bladder problems, but the others didn't believe it. There was a rumour that Lucky had lost the difficult battle with alcohol, it happens to some, but he was hypocritically concealing this struggle. And it was because of this hypocrisy that they now disliked him even more. They saw him as an obdurate type, who always had a hidden agenda.

His already weak body was starting to fade away. His skin acquired the patina of the factory façade and his inexpressive eyes began to resemble colourless hot gelatine. Only his hands became stronger, more sinewy. But as his muscles couldn't stand the merciless demands of his body, within a few weeks they simply became inflamed.

"It's obviously overwork," they established at the clinic. "Some kind of work-related ailment," the doctors concluded, supporting and bandaging his hands, and advising him to stay

at home for a few days and relax. "Ha, relax?!" he thought with despair. "Ha, relax!" he repeated at home a few hours later and that same evening they had to take him to casualty with his head between his legs because two of his neck vertebrae had become stuck. He was in hospital for just under a week. The doctors justifiably suspected muscle dystrophy. A kind of spasm that distorted the whole body. It was nothing serious. His health soon returned, but he became even less talkative.

After he returned home from the hospital, he collapsed onto his bed and, in the position of an unwanted foetus, started sobbing. He had lost all his willpower. All his impetus and enthusiasm. Everything hurt. And he was very ashamed of himself. He grabbed a photograph from his bedside cabinet of Dr Eva Tomič, cut from a newspaper, and cried even more. "A sick person and a pig!" her eyes accused him. What hurt especially was the realisation that while she was trying to save every last kilowatt, he was wasting his energy on the basest of acts. He swore on his dead mother's grave that he would stop once and for all. But to no avail. The feelings of guilt and regret were racking his body and tearing at his soul. He felt terribly lonely, useless and dirty.

For the first time he seriously thought that he should end his worthless life. "No one will even notice," he concluded despondently. He knew he wouldn't be able to do it with a rope as he knew nothing about knots and the basement ceiling was too low. He had no gas, as everything in his block of flats ran on electricity and hot water supplied from the town's central heating plant. Then he remembered that his mother always used to say that everything comes in handy after seven years if not before. He thought about the packets and bottles of tablets that he had carefully tidied away. There were quite a few left from his mother's illness. Those were particularly potent, as his mother's disease had also been pretty potent. "If there's no other way, I'll choose mother's way," he decided. He was rummaging around the drawer, collecting the bottles and packets of poisonous capsules, when the light on the ceiling suddenly started flickering. The bulb is going to go, he thought and even before he put a full stop at the end of this thought, the light flickered for the last time and then died. He got up, went to the kitchen cupboard, took out a new bulb,

positioned a wooden kitchen stool under the light and stood on it. First, he had to unscrew the white ceiling light shade, then the tired old bulb in which the torn spring waved to and fro as he was unscrewing it, making a sad rattling noise. It seemed a bit strange as it wasn't long since he had replaced it. Either they had sold him a duff one or these new bulbs were really badly made. With his thoughts still engaged on suicide and medicinal poisons the thought that he should have taken the fuse out, just in case, had never occurred to him. And this carelessness nearly cost him dear. To put it more precisely, what he intended to do to himself, the perfectly ordinary light bulb almost accomplished for him. While he was screwing it in, he received such a shock that he fell off the chair, head first. He lay there prostrate for what must have been quite a few seconds and the first scene that met his eye after he had entered the primal darkness was the light yellow ceiling that was blinding him and seemed to be shifting above the brown and white lino on the kitchen floor. He wanted to get up, but couldn't move a muscle. He felt that the electricity he had intended to direct into the new bulb was now flowing through his body like water in a radiator. It was either the result of the fall or the shock, but something awoke a wonderful thought in his brain and he said out loud: My god, energy!

Lucky was in one special sense a talented man. With only seven years of formal education, there was nothing left to him but to dedicate his life to the assembly of water heaters. And even though he could not read or write well, he found it very easy to mend the neighbour's washing machine, assemble a moped, even television sets were no mystery to him. He knew very well that nothing appears out of nothing and that nothing disappears into nothing. The moments when he felt how everything is connected were not rare: rain falls on the earth and evaporates back into the atmosphere; wheat is harvested, kneaded into bread, then gives strength to man and eventually returns back to nature; and so on. With renewed strength he got up, went to the table and slammed shut the drawer containing the deadly pills. With a joyous face he exclaimed: "Of course, everything flows, everything is energy - in light bulbs, water heaters, television sets and in me - yes, in me there is a huge amount of energy!"

It wasn't just magazines that he stored under his bed. There was also an old wooden crate where he kept wires, screws and

tools, all very neatly arranged in small boxes and biscuit tins. He squatted down and with extra concentration shook the boxes and collected together some material. Then he quickly got up, put on his jacket and beret, grabbed his wallet and rushed out to catch the electrical supply shop before it closed. He bought a few electric cables, some copper wire and a couple of fuses. Before he went to bed that night, he looked in his wardrobe and pulled out an old red, moth-eaten ski suit that his mother had bought for him twenty-five years ago for a school skiing trip. He tried it on and, as he had expected, he had not developed much or changed physically since then. The sleeves were a bit short, the trouser legs could have done with being an inch longer, but this was no obstacle for the implementation of his plan.

The next day, feeling tense, he went to see the foreman at work and ask him very humbly if it would be possible to get a transformer, an accumulator and an oscillator from either a discontinued product line or a faulty product. The foreman - who was very surprised as this was not only the first time the man had asked him for something, but also the first time he had spoken to him at all - asked what he needed them for.

Lucky went as red as a lobster. He just needed it, he told him, needed it urgently.

"I get that, but what for?" said his supervisor.

"I just need it," Lucky said meekly, lowering his eyes with embarrassment. He felt like crying.

"Well, if you need it," the foreman softened at the request from a worker who had recently had health problems supposedly caused by his job at the factory, "we'll have to sort something out."

"How's your health?" The foreman tried to use this opportunity for a chat. "Everything okay?"

"It's better... yes, it's getting better," Lucky said modestly.

"Well, that's the main thing," said the foreman, who had never believed the gossip about Lucky's drink problem, and patted him on the shoulder. Lucky Gril was one of the very few workers who never took sick leave and the foreman barely knew that he worked there as there were never any problems with him. Until recently, but that could happen to anyone.

For a few days, Lucky's thoughts were concentrated on electrical and mechanical elements. When very excited, he

often talked to himself out loud. This time, due to the level of his exhilaration, he was so talkative that it seemed as if there were five people in the room: "... I just can't get out of the habit... that's no excuse... a little screw here... I put it in... pig... pig... sicko... screw this in..."

To the lining of his ski suit he sewed a copper wire mesh that matched his blood vessels. Where the wires met, he inserted small thermo-electric elements that were connected serially by the mesh into a kind of thermo-electric battery. The mesh narrowed at the top of the head and between the legs into well insulated cables, which Lucky linked to the other elements in a well thought out order. The energy from Lucky's body thus travelled to the accumulator via the two cables - one with a shortage of electrons and the other one with a surplus - and then from the accumulator into the oscillator, which served as a frequency modulator that converted a continuous current into an alternating one. From the oscillator the power went to the transformer, which regulated the existing voltage, and then from the transformer it could travel to the various electric sockets in his flat through an adaptor. Prior to charging the system, he spread the body parts that the copper thermo-electrical elements in his ski suit were supposed to touch with aftershave gel, which was a conductor. Then he climbed into the suit with its long zip, which below the stomach gently protected the sensitive energy source - always firm enough and ready to make the body send power to the interwoven wires in the ski suit.

The invention - seemingly so primitive - was in fact momentous. With his inner energy, Lucky could power everything - from the washing machine and cooker to the coffee grinder. Somehow, the poor man found peace. Whenever he had an attack, and he had those throughout the day, he put on his ski suit, connected the thermo elements in his patent and the thoughts dictated by his body were converted into usable energy. He developed a belief that he wasn't just wasting his time and life away. Understandably, he told no one about what he was doing or about his invention. He had no intention to, either, for after all, whom could he tell? Thus it would have remained hidden from the world if someone in the accounts office of the power company hadn't suddenly started wondering why the meter belonging to one Lucky Grill hadn't shown

any change for months and the bill was always zero. The meter reader even rang Lucky's door bell and said that the accounts office had told him to ask Lucky whether he was tinkering with the meter. Lucky opened the door a couple of inches and his face behind the safety chain glowed red as he sweated in fear.

"I can hear that your television is working and the lights are on," the meter man managed to say before Lucky, without a word, slowly closed the door in his face.

When the meter man told them what had happened, the women in accounts found it all very strange. They thought it was out of order that someone would not pay for the electricity they used. They contacted the head of the maintenance division, the head of the consumption division and the person in charge of meter reading and told them what was going on. They soon worked out that there were only two possibilities: either the meter was faulty or - and this was more plausible - the guy was simply cheating. We'll send the inspector, they decided. We can't let him pull a fast one on us!

One morning a few days later Lucky's door bell rang.

"Who is it?" Lucky quickly glanced through the peephole and it soon became clear to him that the three men, two in overalls and the third in a suit, were not a good omen.

"We're from the Electricity Board, there's something wrong with your meter," said the man in the suit.

"Wrong?" Lucky asked through the closed door, his voice shaking, "I don't think there's anything wrong."

"Oh, yes, there is, there must be a fault somewhere. Could you open the door, please?"

There was silence inside the flat for a while. All that could be heard was heavy breathing, as if the man in there had asthma or, perhaps, was feeling guilty.

"I'm very ill," said Lucky, "I can't open the door."

"Mr Gril," the guy in the suit tried the door handle a few times, "we'll just ask you a couple of quick questions and then we'll go."

"What questions?" Lucky asked with a lump in his throat, even though he had a pretty good idea as to what it was all about.

"Open the door," said the man, "and we'll tell you."

Meanwhile, one of the technicians was already concentrating on the meter, checking the mechanism.

Lucky kept going on about being ill and on sick leave.

The man, fed up by now, told him that that wasn't their problem, adding that he would check if Lucky really was on sick leave and, if all else failed, would return accompanied by the police.

Police?! Lucky trembled. He had never had any dealings with the police. He hadn't done anything that bad. He hadn't stolen anything. On the contrary, he was making all the electricity he was using himself. That surely wasn't a crime. Or was it? What if they had found out about the magazines and what had really happened to his hands? What if his energy was somehow leaking from his mechanism and was then converted somewhere, maybe at the police station, back into thoughts? Then they were sure to know about the images of Dr Tomič in his head and what he did when they appeared. Besides, it wasn't true at all that he was on sick leave, he had said that just to send them away. And if they now went and checked at the factory, would they tell them that he was no longer ill and that they were expecting him for the afternoon shift? And if they told that to the police, they'd put him in prison.

Carefully he undid the lock, removed the security chain and opened the door.

"You can't be all that ill, Mr Gril," said the suited man as he pushed the door wider and entered the flat, followed by his colleagues. "I can smell a stew, if I'm not mistaken. So, your cooker is obviously working. And you should turn off those lights, I know it's not very bright in the basement, but it doesn't look like you're trying to save electricity. Perhaps the reason is that you don't pay for it? Well, Mr Gril," the man stopped right in front of Lucky, "while your stew is happily bubbling away on the cooker, the meter outside looks as if it's dead - can you explain this magic to me?"

Lucky said nothing. He was holding onto the plastic kitchen table as if he would collapse at any moment.

"Check around the flat a bit," said the man. "You obviously don't intend to say anything, Mr Gril. I believe you work in the assembly plant, am I right?"

"Yes," Lucky said timidly, thinking that they must have already talked to the police. How else would they have known this? It wasn't exactly written on his forehead where he worked.

"This means that you're not totally ignorant when it comes to electricity?" said the man, although he thought Lucky looked and behaved as if he was not quite all there.

Lucky denied everything. He said he didn't know anything about electricity and meters, that all he knew was how to put together a good, reliable water heater.

"Mr Lovrič!" one of the other men called from the bathroom.

"What's up?" asked the boss. "Have you found something?" He went towards the bathroom.

"We nearly got tangled up in this nest of cables. There's an accumulator and a transformer..."

"Fuck me!" the boss said. "It's a proper power station!" He seemed delighted. "But what the hell powers it?"

"Mr Gril," Lovrič shouted through the open door while looking at the transformer in his hands, "have you got a licence for this?"

"What licence?" asked Lucky with a weak voice.

"What do you mean what licence? An official licence!"

"Who from? The police?" asked Lucky.

"Are you aware of the fact that you could blow up this whole block of flats?"

"It's put together in a way that makes that impossible," Srečko replied.

"What? What the hell is this, have you got a small hydro power station in your bath or what? You need to show us right now how this works."

"I don't want to!" said Lucky timidly but with determination.

"What do you mean you don't want to? Do you want me to call the police?"

"No, I don't want that."

"Then you shouldn't have to think very hard. Come on, Gril, what sort of hocus pocus is this?"

"I'm not showing you," said Lucky stubbornly.

"OK then," Lovrič said. "If you don't want to show us, you'll have to show someone else. Get dressed, you're coming with us. Help the boys take all this to the car and don't dilly dally because otherwise" Lovrič had realised that the word police had a desirable effect, "you'll have to deal with the police. This is going to cost you dearly. What if every idiot had his own power station in his bed-sit? Without an official licence!" he emphasised once more, although even he didn't really know what sort of licence he was referring to and who

should be issuing it. Nor did he really know where to take the whole thing, or Lucky for that matter. While Lucky was getting dressed, Lovrič called the Electricity Board, determined to speak to the Director.

“Rakun isn’t coming back today,” the secretary said, explaining that he was at a symposium at the National Institute for Energy Supply, but his adviser was there, if it was something urgent.

“What’s wrong, Lovrič?” said the second most important man in the national energy supply monopolist, whose greatest wish and firm intention was to become the most important man, using any means available.

“What appliance? Some kind of machine? A strange one? You don’t know how it works... and the guy hasn’t been paying for his electricity for months?” The adviser thought for a little and then immediately became aware of what a great opportunity this was. “Call me back in five minutes.”

Director Rigler shut himself in his office, took a pencil and drew electrical symbols on his grey desktop while thinking. He had exactly five minutes to work out how to further his career by deposing his boss. While he was doodling a set of wires, the telephone rang again. At the moment he grabbed the receiver, an idea occurred to him.

“Lovrič,” he said with a voice in which a careful listener – which, however, Lovrič was not – would recognise malicious intent. “I’ve spoken to the Director on his mobile. He told me to take the man and his contraption to the Institute straight away. They’re having a symposium there on the Energy Based Society. Go to the Director of the Institute, Dr Telban, and tell him that you have brought the contraption upon the orders of our Director, Dr Rakun. He’ll be very grateful,” he added, barely able to control his laughter. “As far as I understand, this case is more a matter of science – all we do really is send bills and collect the money.” He closed his eyes, firmly hoping that Lovrič would swallow the bait. And he did; he even thanked Rigler, who modestly replied that it was okay, that he was only carrying out his duties. Then he triumphantly slammed the receiver down, shrieked at his secretary like a starved hyena that he wouldn’t be back that day and then quickly set off for the Institute, to enjoy the party.

The symposium was dragging on for the third day and the Institute Director, Dr Viktor Telban, gave the impression of

a sick animal with foam around its mouth. The symposium was being held during the winter school holidays, which he had intended to spend with his family, skiing in the French Alps. But now that was all off and he'd had to send his wife - their marriage had for months been going through a crisis - and the children to the apartment on their own. A hostess carefully approached him and quietly told him that some people were waiting for him outside and that it was very urgent. Telban turned his wiry body, which at very first glance gave an impression of stubbornness, towards the door of the large lecture room, where someone was trying to tell him something by winking and grimacing. He swiftly left the room with the intention of dealing brusquely with whoever it was. In the corridor he was ambushed by some sort of contraption and a bureaucrat from the Electricity Board, who immediately started telling him about mysterious cables, electric ski suits and old batteries. Telban was certain that he had reached the threshold of his psychophysical abilities and was probably hallucinating. This was only confirmed by a terrified and weary looking male figure, supported by one of the technicians.

"We need a couple of strong lads to get the transformer and cables out of the van..." Lovrič said humbly.

"Who the hell are you?" Telban asked, very irritated, with his hands on his hips, in the superior role of top expert and executive. "How dare you bother me in the middle of an important scientific symposium?"

"Following the instructions of our Director, Dr Rakun, I've brought this," said Lovrič, pointing at the contraption sitting in the corner and Lucky Gril next to it.

"That idiot? He told you to do this? And what is this thing, a time machine? A device for the production of permanent revolution? Do you think this is a mental asylum? And anyway, who made him, a state informant, the Director?"

"We don't know," said Lovrič humbly. In spite of the fact that in certain situations he himself had authority, which he constantly tried to prove through his behaviour, his choice of words and the tone he used, in other contexts he deeply respected the authority of others.

"It's some kind of machine for generating electricity... I mean this man here... the machine powers everything in his home... a scientific invention I suppose..." Lovrič said

apologetically rather than in an explanatory fashion as he was beginning to have doubts that consulting the Director's adviser had been the right decision. How could he have forgotten the gossip about the conflicts between the Director and his adviser and the animosity between the Electricity Board's Director, Edward Rakun, and the Institute Director, Victor Telban?

Dr Telban's lungs whistled of their own accord with anger as he breathed. He found it hard to have anything to do with that lefty, Rakun, whom he had known as an informant when they were students. How Rakun had managed to get a doctorate he could never understand. And he would never forget that it was Rakun who in the steely 1960s received an American grant instead of him, whose father had during the Second World War fought and died on the side of those who were resisting communist control. He, Victor Telban, an internationally respected scientist, had had to struggle on his own. Everything he had was the result of nothing but his scientific work. He, too, had later studied abroad, but he only managed to get there through immense self-sacrifice and talent. However, like Rigler before him, after the first wave of anger, he saw an opportunity to take revenge on Telban.

"Your Director, you said," he observed with false friendliness. He stroked his grey, Quaker style beard and went on: "If your Director ordered it, then please, follow me." He was even more convinced now that this could be a unique opportunity to finally humiliate Rakun in front of government representatives and the expert public and once and for all take his revenge for all the unsettled business between them, which they had been known to conduct even in the media.

"Yes, come in," Telban continued, "bring everything you've got, and plug it in - as far as I'm concerned in your Director's or the devil's arse!"

"Prior to the afternoon session," said Telban after the break to the symposium participants, "let us offer you some entertainment. Our colleague, Dr Rakun, of the Electricity Board, has a special surprise for us. He wants to show us scientists a device, as far as I can make out," he said, lifting his eyebrows in a sneering wonderment, "a machine for the production of energy or a kind of perpetuum mobile."

The Institute Director, who was also the official host of the symposium, had Lucky called into the hall and asked him

politely in front of everyone to explain and demonstrate the functioning of his system. All the participants were convinced that it was one of those performance things that were so popular these days when the event organiser invites an artist to eccentrically link art and science. This belief was confirmed by Lucky's strange appearance in his bright red ski suit. Some participants, particularly those who had already read their papers, were very amused, while a few others, who were still waiting to appear, were terribly annoyed. The worst thing that can happen to a scientist at a symposium is a fall in the audience's level of concentration. In situations like that the speaker may get the impression that his paper, which may have taken months to write and was the result of many years of research, was being noticed only by the walls and the projection screen.

In front of around one hundred participants, Lucky experienced what were the most difficult moments of his life. Helpless and feeling he could sink no lower, he succumbed to his fate, convinced that these were his final minutes before he was locked away in mental hospital or prison for the rest of his life. Then among the whispering and giggling in the hall, he suddenly thought he could hear a familiar, sweet, so often desired voice. Apprehensively, he glanced at the faces of those present. In the middle of the second row, wearing a white ribbed woollen top, sat Dr Eva Tomič. He felt like crying. She was much more beautiful than on television and in the newspaper: her figure was statuesque, she was even larger and much taller than his mother, and her thick, red hair looked as if she had millions of curly copper wires on her head, which glowed with heat at every move. Her arms were strong and fleshy, the kind that even at first sight promise protection and complete care. Did she have any children? She wasn't married, he had read that in the paper. Her hips were as wide as the biggest generator in the factory. And the top part of her body, oh dear, it surpassed everything the magazines stashed under his bed had ever shown him. But all that, sadly, no longer mattered. He was finished. Completely finished. No joy left until the afterlife, and even there a hundred years of purgatory awaited him before he would again meet his mother, God willing, as there was a strong possibility he would be shoved straight into hell for ever.

Even in the most difficult times of his life he could not have imagined a worse humiliation. How cruel the world was. It had all started because of her and now his worthless and, as he had been told that day, even criminal life would end right there in front of her. He'd be sacked. In his haste he had even forgotten to let his foreman - who had let him have the battery, the oscillator and the transformer - know that he wouldn't be coming into work that afternoon because he was otherwise detained. His mother had always told him that sooner or later everything comes out. And now, in broad daylight, it would be revealed just what a pig he was. What a dirty, perverted louse, who performed the most depraved acts, much worse than drinking or the debauchery of his neighbour. But nothing could be done. If the mental hospital didn't get him, the police would. Because he didn't have an official licence. If he had to humiliate himself, let his punishment be such that he would be humiliated completely.

"Well... Tell me your name again?" Dr Telban said to him with contempt.

"Gril, Lucky Gril," the poor man answered in a whisper.

"Well, Mr Lucky Gril," the Institute Director said, concluding his introduction, "Dr Rakun had you brought here because you are supposed to have invented a system which is a direct continuation of the efforts of the other two famous scientists from this part of the world, Nikola Tesla and Jožef Štefan, and which makes use of the newest findings of modern physics, no less. If my understanding is correct, electricity users, including those of us here today, will from now on no longer pay such high bills. I believe," he looked at Lucky with such scorn that the PhDs and assembled experts smiled with satisfaction, "that you will demonstrate how, putting it in very simple terms, we can save as much energy and money as possible."

"Fuck it, I don't even know this person!" said Rakun, getting up. "I know damned well who planted this on me."

A murmur ran round the hall. Now no one really knew what all this was about.

"Be careful nothing explodes," said a timid male voice.

Dr Viktor Telban's head twitched and for the first time he became aware that this experiment could have fatal consequences for him. He waved to Lovrič to come nearer and with

a voice that expressed confidence, but in which he could not completely hide fear, asked him if he knew for sure that the machine was safe. Lovrič, too, thought for the first time that the country could within a second lose the cream of its technical intelligentsia.

“I think it is,” he said.

“You think? Does that mean you know?” said the Director in a high-pitched voice, feeling his stomach ulcer opening again.

Lovrič told him that actually he didn't really know and that was precisely why he had brought the man to the Institute, following the Director's orders. The scientists should assess the safety of the contraption. In Gril's flat, the cooker worked, the lights were on, but he did not really know how the gadget worked, his men had only unplugged the cables and carried it to the van.

“Lovrič, you're a complete idiot. You wait till now to tell me this! They'll put you in prison and then me, too, if we survive this mess, that is....”

Meanwhile, below the speaker's podium and the white screen Lucky arranged the elements of his system. He connected the wires, took off his brown trousers, beige jumper and underwear and then, covered in sweat, started putting on the ski suit. The hall was buzzing with noise. When he took hold of his penis through the open zip, all the women present - there were not many - gasped in surprise and shock, while the men began to say things like What the hell...?!, Just look at the idiot!, Psychopath!, Pervert!, Get rid of this exhibitionist!. Lucky also caught the expressions loony bin, police, handcuffs... remove him, shut him in a psychiatric ward..., he took one last look at Dr Eva Tomič, pulled out his erect member and, as his eyes drilled into hers, skilfully demonstrated his system to exclamations of agitation and loud laughter. Dr Telban stood in the background, petrified, Lovrič, too, had a feeling that he had suddenly grown roots down to the cellar and would never again be able to move from the spot, while the Electricity Board Director, Dr Rakun, held his head in both hands, wheezing like a wounded wild boar. After less than a minute and a half, which to those of a more generous disposition, who were bursting with laughter, seemed to pass in a flash, while the others, especially those mentioned earlier, felt

as if they were caught in a time loop, experiencing in the correct order all the geological periods in the development of the planet Earth, an enormous wave of excitement ran around the hall. All those present were in shock - a 100 Watt light bulb connected to the system began to shine brightly. Lucky stood there, his member flaccid and slimy, his eyes still glued to Dr Eva Tomič, tears running down his face, grimacing in humiliation or perhaps pleasure.

A huge cry of enthusiasm spread around the hall. A few younger participants, mainly assistant professors with an MBA, launched themselves towards the inventor. Stepping over the cables, they tried to buy his favour, stammering, touching the individual parts of the mechanism, commenting to each other and offering him various business deals that were greedily forming in their young, management brains, hungry for fame and money. Lucky stood among them, confused, with his zip undone, and with tears on his face and on his penis.

Then two huge engineers elbowed the masses aside, creating a safe corridor for Dr Tomič. With her right hand, she lifted Lucky's head, while her left hand slid down, stashed his penis inside his suit and pulled up the zip. With a long, red nail she intercepted a fat tear on his cheek which, like many before, wanted to spread around his distorted face.

"Don't worry, everything will be alright. I'll take good care of you. We both deserve it - you and I. Together, my dear, we will realise our dreams!"

Before anyone managed to as much as twitch, Lucky was already sliding after Dr Tomič and her advisers towards her car. Her ambitions went far beyond a career in science. Soon after getting her doctorate, she had made a firm decision not to dedicate her life to reproduction, but to the production of energy. After a few years she realised that the confines of her office were too constricting and she intended to reach her goals through politics. The functionaries of the left-of-centre party soon noticed the liberal tendencies of her charismatic personality and put her on the national election list. "Every good political recruitment officer knows that an ambitious, intelligent and sexually uninhibited middle-aged woman is an invaluable foundation stone of party strategy," is how her appearance in the media was commented on by a well known psychologist-analyst and added that all those qualities were

embodied in Dr Eva Tomič. She skilfully spoke in favour of the political interests of her party, supporting them with economic arguments, and in this she was as merciless as a Spartan mother. At the same time, she was, off her own bat, looking for that special something that would not show her only as a member of the party, but also as an individual, a scientist, an energy expert - as Eva Tomič PhD. With a logic that included invaluable intuition, she immediately saw at the symposium that the shy man was precisely the missing link in her career.

Of course, he would sign anything. He would do anything she wanted. He could even repeat the experiment, not just once, countless times, said Lucky Gril. At first he was frightened that now she would personally take him to the mental hospital or the police, but when he found himself in her office and saw that she wasn't planning on anything of the sort, he was baffled.

Dr Tomič included Lucky's patent in her political programme. Initially, expert circles expressed serious reservations and doubts, there were severe moral reproaches. Men, even her party colleagues, although they didn't do it publicly, of course, made loud comments about knowing very well what kind of plug-ins Tomič really needed. Women went bright red whenever she shamelessly explained the workings of Lucky's power plant, feminists attacked her mercilessly saying that she was merely inverting the patriarchal sexist pattern instead of doing away with it, the church threatened her openly with eternal damnation, humanists reproached her saying that her system represented the exploitation of man by man, etc.

But when her clever advisers calculated the percentages in the reduction in the pollution of the air, water and the environment, as well as in unemployment and economic misery, while social wellbeing would increase, the anti arguments collapsed one by one and her opponents - due to a skilful manoeuvre by her party, which perhaps was not quite in line with the constitution, but so what - had to give up.

The global social change thus began.

In villages, huge power stations were built. Tomič's party colleague, the minister of labour, the family and social affairs, optimistically announced at a press conference that there would be work for everyone who was willing to roll up their

sleeves. And this wasn't far from the truth, these promises weren't fabrications. Many formerly unemployed men were now earning enough for mothers to stay at home, dedicating themselves fully to their family, in the evening telling their spoilt kids to eat up their dinner, cooked literally on their father's heat. Ambitious male students were able to ease the financial burden of their education, while female students, who usually wrote their essays at the last minute, found it easier to get through the tiresome nights in the knowledge that their computers and table lamps were powered by the youthful energy of their fanciable colleagues. From the hostels for male immigrant contract workers - seminaries categorically refused to cooperate - power was supplied to hospitals and nurseries, while many young men during their military service preferred to get their hands on their members rather than their weapons.

The human and nature friendly universal system was thus powered by energy that made the world of those who were lonely warmer, healed the sick and made the rich even richer.

Lucky literally blossomed. All his ailments and pains were gone. No more self accusation or feelings of guilt. He often thought that even his own mother would now be proud of him, seeing how useful he was. And on the day when he received a high award from the country's president, the new minister of energy, Dr Eva Tomič, came to him, kissed his red hot cheek in front of everyone and said into the microphone: "Lucky, I'm very proud of you!"

His life had turned upside down. In addition to the award, he had a new job and home. He became a maintenance engineer at the state sanatorium for the treatment of drug and alcohol addiction. And the management - under the instruction of the minister of energy - gave him a freshly painted one room flat until his death in the sanatorium's attic.

Life was no longer difficult for him.

He performed his work with love.

*Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon
from Slovene original Ljubezen je energija.*