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## Andrej Rozman-Roza

*I was scared fearless, or: no admittance  
except with strong nerves*

### The Song of the Lazies

Being lazy isn't easily done,  
it's not just for anyone,  
as you must remain awake  
whether tired or on a break.  
For if it ever gets away  
laziness can, in a day  
gobble up into its maw  
half the world, completely raw.  
It then goes stark raving mad  
threatening, howling, screaming bad  
so that the half that's left behind  
doesn't have a piece of mind  
until with one last final chew  
the rest of the world gets swallowed too.

Respect us now you know and, pray  
help lazies keep the flies at bay.  
The heavy burden that we bear  
is real, so please don't point and stare  
but rather show appreciation:  
it's really quite an obligation.

## Fear

A hollow wicked sound  
is echoing around  
then something rumbles near  
the monsters must be here.

“I smell a troubling scent,”  
the nose is quick to vent.  
“Things are looking bad,”  
the eyes are sure to add.  
The nails are really smitten:  
“We don’t want to be bitten.”  
While all the mouth can utter  
is just a garbled stutter.

“We’d fall over in a breeze,”  
say the rather wobbly knees.  
“And we’re not very firm,”  
the fingers squeal and squirm  
each in its own palm socket  
with hands into a pocket.

“If I was out, I’d hit them silly,”  
the stomach boasts inside the belly.  
“Let’s get away before I’m kicked,”  
the ass is scared of being licked.  
“We’re standing at attention,”  
the hairs then promptly mention.

Then suddenly inside the brain  
a saving thought appears: “It’s plain  
to see: it’s all a dream.”  
“And day is breaking it would seem,”  
With that the eyes awake the lot  
so that it runs straight into mom’s cot.

*Translated by Jure Novak*

## Milk

Poured in a pan from its carton container,  
milk overhears a voice which is saying,  
“Well, our Mikey’ll be up and about,  
I’d better get ready some cocoa right now.”

Milk almost turns into curds in its fright:  
“Blimey and blazes, this cannot be right!  
That I should lose colour, be robbed of my taste -  
Damned if that isn’t a crime and disgrace!”

But the madder it gets at the thought of its fate,  
The hotter the gas burns under the plate.

“That I should be Cocoa? When pigs can fly!  
I won’t stand for this - I do have my pride -”  
It burst out, and, rising high over the side,  
Flowed forth in the wide world, spotlessly white.

“I’m Milk and not Cocoa, for ever and more!”  
it yelled even as it was mopped from the floor.

*from Rime za predgospodiče / Rhymes for Pre-gentlemen*

*Translated by Nada Grošelj*

## Last Year's Disgust Prizewinner

Instructions for use:

Press one nostril with one finger and utter the word "snot",  
And when you come to the letter "n",  
You blow out snot through the other nostril.  
The word can be uttered in a dirty way  
Only by those with running noses.

*Translated by Janko Lozar*

## Scaraby

The bed has already been made  
but there's a rat under the plaid.

If you kick it tucking in  
it is sure to bite you in your shin.

Screaming now with horrid fright  
you awake the sleeping wight  
of the snake wound like a cat  
sleeping underneath the bed.

But don't worry - it won't bite you,  
it's not an adder, just a python.

And as it slithers up in fear  
it curls up next to you so near  
that if it hugged you any tighter  
you would soon be one breath lighter.

So you run outside real scared  
and luckily your feet are bared  
as - not finding a good rock -  
a scorpion's inside your sock.

We now come to the worst part.  
The fear that something with a start  
may pounce on you from inside the dark  
and you can almost hear the bark  
of werewolves waiting there for you,  
and yes, perhaps a vampire, too.

You're all alone this evil night,  
and everything just brings more fright.  
Even just a larger flower  
makes you quickly run for cover,  
for looking sweet and smelling sweeter  
it could still be a man eater.

Once you finally meet someone  
they're sure to set you on the run  
they look like robbers head to foot  
and they're dividing up the loot.

From the way they're eyeing you  
you can tell that you are through.  
Yell all you want - no help in sight!  
GO TO BED NOW AND GOOD NIGHT!

*from Črvive pesmi / Maggoty poems*

*Translated by Jure Novak*

## The Dog and His Master

A dog leads down the road his master,  
Growling, straining at the leash,  
Because he's late and needs to hurry,  
Whereas the master barely creeps.

He yaps under his breath, frustrated,  
"Damn if that's not a dog's own luck  
That out of all the breeds of humans  
I should have got this lazy louse!

Here I've a heap of friends to call on,  
A hundred corners to be sniffed,  
All cats and pigeons to run after,  
And he walks like he was asleep!"

On their way they reach a tavern  
- and there the master simply flops.  
The dog has had it! Without comment  
He snaps the lead and dashes off.

He first explores the streetlife pleasures,  
Then goes a-hunting for a snack,  
And only when the dusk is falling  
Does he consider strolling back.

And look - his master's sitting outside,  
Waiting, thoroughly ashamed,  
That he may finally let him inside  
And heap some food onto his plate.

*Translated by Nada Grošelj*



## Milk Food

Little greenhorn Claire  
For milk and butter she wouldn't care,  
Yoghurt is a terrible disgust,  
Cheese is all but a must.

Mom says: "Milk food  
Is a way to adulthood!  
And without any cheese, curd, butter  
You'll grow up in the gutter!"

And Claire comforts her mom:  
"But I like milk food.  
You keep forgetting some:  
Milk chocolate is really good."

*from Mali rimski cirkus / The Small Roman Circus*

*Translated by Janko Lozar*

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# The Expedition of the Green Dragon

*Slavko Pregl*

*How to organise an adventurous seaside holiday – without parents? Pip, Miha and Andrej are resourceful youngsters: they find themselves a driver in the person of an older youngster named Bob, buy an ancient car (OLD GIRL, aka the tin can) for a song, and before you could say Jack Robinson, they hatch up a plan for a trip to the Adriatic. But the plot starts thickening at the very start in front of their apartment building, and the comedy only gets better.*

## Chapter 1.

*The story begins to heat up when Miha and Pip count the money. But what happens next when a terrible squeaking sound is heard and Miha shoves his arms up to his elbows down his pants?*

Miha and Pip sat in front of the door of the newspaper-recycling center and counted the money. The corners of their mouths crept up toward their ears and Miha said:

“So sweethearts: the money is all here.”

There were no sweethearts anywhere around but that’s how Miha talked. In other words: “Everything is taken care of,” Pip answered and he put the money into the pocket of his shorts.

The boys stood up and tried to walk with their legs in the shape of a perfect “o” as all men do when things are going well for them. School was over. But just before it ended, Miha and Pip had passed a note around the classroom:

“Give all notebooks, newspapers and such stuff to your Comrade Miha. Urgent. We must win. – The Board!”

If you’re wondering who Comrade Miha is: that was the Miha from the eighth grade, who wore blue jeans.

If you’re wondering who the Board is: that was the same Miha who now sat next to Pip, also from the eighth grade, who usually wore short pants and was a little bit smaller. He was small because he was like a trick that you’re not supposed to show ahead of time, and that means that he had to be smaller so he couldn’t be easily seen.

They had written the phrase “The Board” on the note so it would look very, very serious. They would only win if the boys collected a lot of paper, and with it a lot of money, and then they would be able to go on summer vacation.

Their schoolmates brought piles of paper because they also wanted to win, though they had no idea what they were winning. Or for whom. But at the end of school, that wouldn't matter anymore. All of them greatly respected the undersigned "Board", even though it was nowhere written that their parents would have to report to the headmaster if too little paper was collected.

The accounting in front of the recycling center proved that the paper drive had succeeded.

After Miha and Pip let out a cheer and put their legs in the shape of an "o", there came an enormous pop and a great rattle and hum from somewhere in the middle of the street and soon afterwards everything was covered by a veil of smoke. Then they heard a terrible squeaking and everything was quiet.

When the dust settled, what they saw was a four-headed tin can.

Maybe it wasn't exactly a tin can, but the confusion on the sidewalk was so devastating that to call it box would be a compliment, rather like calling a stinging thistle a tulip or saying - "Hello babe!" - to the mathematics teacher. That's why you needed to look the thing straight into its eyes and say "tin can". In any case, something tiny and gray crawled out of the tin can on wheels and said to the boys:

"I came here just in case you were interested in buying some old scrap metal."

He was a pleasant enough little old man who had probably received the car from his grandpa on his birthday, the same car that his great-grandpa had given his grandpa on his birthday, the same car that his great-great-grandpa had given his great-grandpa on his birthday and so on and so forth.

Pip and Miha answered that he ought to go into the house and ask inside, that they were just passing by.

The old man said that the tin can, that is to say the car, ran beautifully. Only the brakes didn't always work, and the engine always overheated, and it guzzled a lot of gas and oil, and the doors sometimes fell off, and the tires lost control on corners, and the roof fell on the driver's head while driving, and the steering wheel liked to come off, the headlights to blink, the trunk to squish all the luggage put in there, the motor to die in the middle of intersections, the driver's seat to tip over. Other than that, he said, it drove like a dream. Strange that no

one wanted to buy it. I'll ask at the recycling center, he murmured, and headed inside.

"Miha, I was thinking, I would..." began Pip.

"I was thinking, I would too..." answered Miha as he spat and reached into his pocket. When you say that Miha reached into his pocket, what it means is that he shoved his arms all the way up to his elbows all the way down his pants.

## Chapter 2.

*Why the cops rubbed their hands together, why forty families jumped to their feet when the janitor scowled, and a little instruction on how to ride wild mustangs.*

It was as clear as a clear blue day can be. Miha and Pip once again arranged their money in a pile and bought the tin can on four wheels from the gray-haired old grandpa.

All the cops in town rubbed their palms together. They would be able to stop the boys at every turn, because they were too young to be behind the wheel of a car. Ha! That might be true enough, but they were old enough to get an idea or two. Pip got an idea about Bob.

That was much better than Bob getting an idea or two about Pip. Because Bob weighed 180 pounds and was 18 years old. Old enough to have a driver's license, which he had in addition to many other things.

Well, it wasn't long before Bob was behind the wheel, Miha and Pip in the backseat and all three heading toward the driveway of the apartment building where they lived.

Frightened birds fluttered away on all sides. Little kids, who had been playing in the sand, rushed in all directions looking for their moms, so they could hide in between their legs. Eighteen fathers adjusted their radio sets because they thought there must be some kind of interference.

When he approached the driveway, Bob turned the steering wheel of the tin can but it continued straight ahead and crashed into the wall of the apartment building. The doors fell off, the roof slid down onto the passengers, the two rear tires spun around the driveway for another minute or two, and finally came to rest near the garbage cans.

Forty families jumped to their feet, thinking that there had been an earthquake.

The tin can stood for a while popping and hissing and smoking in the driveway.

Every window in the apartment building was filled with a horrified face.

Bob, Miha and Pip climbed out of the rumbling mess and stood before a whole universe of staring eyes. Befuddled, the boys looked at each other. Before they could even say anything, a janitor with a broom came out of the building, coiled himself up and roared:

“Ha! Do you want to break down the whole house? Do you want to break some heads? Do you want to mess up the whole yard?”

It’s never a good idea to argue with a janitor, so Pip stut-tered:

“In fact, Bob drove us over here so we could help you straighten out the yard.”

It was such a big fat lie that another door immediately fell off the car in protest. The janitor was standing just at the spot where it was about to hit the ground. Despite his advanced years, he nimbly jumped away and all the nosy parkers in the window exploded into a burst of applause.

Before the janitor could say anything else, Miha made a rather hypocritical speech.

“But you, master of the house, you know everything, and we also thought that if we cleaned up the yard, you, master of the house, who knows everything, would take a tiny peek at our car, since you know everything...”

The faces of most janitors fall into a scowl when young kids talk about automobiles. But, then again, the hearts of most janitors leap and bound when young kids say something nice.

And so the janitor stepped from one foot to another and back to the other on which he stood before, and finally said:

“Ha! So that’s the way it is, is it?”

“Yes, it is,” answered Pip sweetly and he batted his eye-lashes the way usually only his younger sister did. “Yes, it is,” said Miha very sweetly, the way he did only when he was really in a tight spot.

“Yippee-ya-yeah!” said Bob the way all cowboys do when someone asks them if they know how to ride wild mustangs.

“Ha! So that’s the way it is,” the janitor said. “But let me tell you: I swear by three-hundred smashed garbage cans and

thirteen broken keyholes that kids like you usually have something up your sleeves. And that's a fact."

And the fact was that Bob, Miha and Pip did have a couple of aces up their sleeves.

### Chapter 3.

*And then the mothers think twice and Bob says something about lifting anchor and a flock of sparrows do something that a well-raised flock of sparrows would almost never do.*

The janitor was a truly amazing janitor and he spent the next million years scratching and banging away at the tin can. And that is how it eventually came to resemble the shape of a box. Sort of. Then Bob took gorgeous red paint and wrote two words on the door: OLD GIRL.

Pip and Miha cleaned up the front yard until it was so spick and span that all the mothers began to think, hmmm, what if on Sunday I just roll out the dough for apple pie right here on the ground in front of the apartment building. But mothers always think twice about things like that and all too often decide to just roll out the dough on the kitchen counter as usual.

And so it was that the OLD GIRL was fixed and the front yard was cleaned up. Bob said: hmmm, hmmm, hmmm. Miha said: hee-hee-hee. Pip just nodded, agreeing that they were both right.

"And so the story begins," murmured Miha.

"The story began a long time now ago; only now the plot thickens," Pip said.

Bob needed to be smarter than three hundred and seventeen Pips and two hundred and ninety-three Mihas because, after all, he was the eldest. So he wrinkled up his forehead the way smart people do. And then he wisely said:

"Tomorrow we lift anchor!"

No really smart person would say that it was necessary to lift anchor to drive around the streets in OLD GIRL which, despite everything, was still a car. But if Bob said that, he must know that tomorrow morning Bob and Miha would put Bob and Miha and a couple pieces of luggage into the OLD GIRL, step on the gas and burn rubber all the way to the seaside. It was, after all, summer vacation and, if a kid has gotten pretty

good grades during the year, summer vacation was made expressly for wasting time.

But Pip was not going to stay at home crying until the end of his days. Running in his veins was the blood of the best campers. He would get his old backpack, and before it had even crossed the sun's mind to get out of bed, Pip would be standing on the side of the road, sticking out his thumb. Where are you going, my friend, people would ask. To the sea, he would answer, to the sea.

Before, when the janitor had said that the boys must have something up their sleeves, the boys really did have something up their sleeves. They had, in fact, made a bet. Bob, the best driver that there ever was, that ever could or would or should be, had said that the tin can, that is to say the OLD GIRL, could make it all the way down the coast to Dubrovnik in a wink and a flash. Even if he were driving her at midnight, in only his underpants, with one hand on the wheel. Pip responded that he hadn't heard a joke as good as that in the last million years or so. That he could get to Dubrovnik before the tin can if he rode on the back of a snail.

Then the boys spoke words one after another, one interrupting another, the kind of words that kids say without really meaning them, the kind of words that cause fathers to start spanking the seat of a pair of pants when the boy's bottom is still inside the pants.

But they reached out their hands and shook and the bet was made.

Bob and Miha said that they would get to Dubrovnik first with the OLD GIRL. Pip said that he would hitchhike to Dubrovnik faster and that moreover he would probably have time to go to the barber one-thousand and thirteen times to shave the beard that would grow to the ground and then some before a heap like OLD GIRL would come coughing and wheezing into the city walls.

"Tomorrow we lift anchor!" responded Bob.

That evening three city mothers watched with heavy hearts three city boys looking long and hard at their traveling bags before going to sleep.

That evening a flock of sparrows mistook the OLD GIRL for a garbage bin and left inside of her much of what they had consumed the previous day.

## Chapter 4.

*There's always trouble with women and suddenly with Miha's eyes as well, and finally it becomes clear who is going to the bubble gum exhibit.*

The birds had been singing at the top of their lungs for quite some time when our three old friends finally climbed out of bed. Bob, Miha and Pip had been unable to fall asleep for much of the night because the wings of competition had ruffled their imagination. And so only when the sun was very high in the sky did it throw them out of their beds.

They gathered in the courtyard from which their departure was planned in order to shake hands one more time. Actually what gathered in the courtyard were three piles of suitcases and backpacks, each pile having been contributed by one of the boys.

"To battle!" they cried with one voice and pumped their fists into the air. At which point the courtyard filled with little kids who clapped and yelled simply because they sensed that something big was about to happen.

Pip hotfooted it out of the courtyard and headed in the direction of the main road that ran toward the sea. He muttered between his teeth:

"Ha-ha! We'll meet again in Dubrovnik, though I'll already be on my way home by then!"

Bob and Miha said nothing, but leapt into the OLD GIRL.

But as is usually the case with women, there were troubles. The OLD GIRL didn't want to start up. Bob put all of his cunning to work, but it was no use. Everyone began to hoot and laugh. Miha went to find the janitor.

The janitor said that he hadn't yet finished reading the newspaper. Miha said that he hadn't either, but that all the same he was in a terrible hurry.

"Ha!" responded the concierge, "If you were in such a hurry, you would have left yesterday."

Miha wanted to say something but all of a sudden it felt like a bone was stuck in his throat so instead he said nothing at all. His eyes turned red. His face transformed into a tearful grimace.

"Hm, this looks serious," said the janitor and folded his newspaper.



Then he got up and looked at the OLD GIRL from the back, from the front, from the left and the right, from the top and from the bottom. Then he unscrewed about a hundred screws and screwed them back in again. Finally he yawned and said:

“My dear boys, did you eat something for breakfast this morning?”

Bob and Miha nodded nervously.

“Okay. Well, you might also think about putting a little gas into this tin can from time to time too.”

The janitor turned around and went back into the building. The boys wanted more than anything else to throw themselves into a miserable heap on the ground. But it was hard to get to Dubrovnik from the ground, so they decided not to. They asked the group of kids who were smirking like a bunch of tomcats to help push the OLD GIRL to the gas station.

“Are you thinking about donating this thing to a museum?” the gas station attendant asked them.

“No,” said Bob and he shoved his hands deep into his pockets so no one would notice that he was clenching his fists. “We were thinking of taking it to a bubble gum exhibit.”

The man looked at him strangely, but said nothing. When the boys had paid, they jumped into the OLD GIRL. She started right up, gave a little pop, and off they went.

The kids, who had pushed them to the gas station, waved goodbye with their handkerchiefs. What did they know? Maybe they would never come back again.

All this time, Pip had been standing on the sunny side of the road with his thumb lifted high in the air. Slime from the road ran down his cheeks, his back, his hands, his legs and really down any part of his body that was even slightly exposed.

“Oh please: just one little lonely sweet golden darling ramshackle old heap,” he prayed.

But no one wanted to stop for him. Cars whizzed by one after another, shamelessly heading toward the seaside. Only one little puppy thought Pip was a telephone pole and left his mark on him.

“Actually,” Pip thought, “that OLD GIRL wasn’t such a good-for-nothing tin can after all. At least she was going somewhere.”

Right at that moment, he was staring straight ahead into the haze. He heard a dreadful noise that was coming toward

him through the smoke. You might say that Pip had summoned the OLD GIRL with his thoughts alone.

“Where to, young man?” Bob called out from behind the wheel but by the time Pip could answer, the GIRL had already driven past.

“To a bubble gum exhibit,” Pip yelled back pathetically.

## Chapter 14.

*Where we discover the reason that Miha dashes and splashes. Where we discover the reason why suddenly something rattles and squeak. How the three old friends meet again in a cloud of sand.*

Miha looked and looked but he could not see the OLD GIRL. It seemed to him that where the OLD GIRL once stood, there now stood something different. His luggage. He shot to the spot like lightning and found this note on his bag:

“Before you were worried about what happened to Pip. Now I think you should wait for him and arrive together in Dubrovnik. I’ll wait for you there and take care of the OLD GIRL. Bye - Bob!”

It took Miha a moment to catch his breath. Then he walked up and down the beach. Slowly, his face began to brighten.

“Well,” he said at last, “fine. He’ll be sorry. And I don’t care about anything in the world anymore anyway. I’m just going to swim and swim and swim.”

He dashed into the water, splashed around until everyone was staring at him, and then lay down on the hot sand.

“Only where could Pip be?” the question flitted through his brain.

At this particular moment, the question of where Miha and Bob were was no longer flitting through Pip’s brain. He had kissed that question goodbye, because he was convinced that he would never see them again. Why?

Well, just outside of the port of Rijeka, the police had let him go with a hearty squeeze of his hand, and a bus had taken him as far as the Kraljevica school camp. Then for the next hundred kilometers, Pip had crawled along in a French Deux Chevaux and, gesturing with his two hands, he had a conversation with two French students who spoke no Slovenian. When they let him out, he had to wait on the road in the most unbearable heat. It seemed that no one was kind-hearted

enough to pick up the boy whose enormous backpack leaned against him on the burning road. Actually, it was a little less enormous if you consider that all the food that had once been in it was already eaten.

All of a sudden, something began to rattle and squeak. A sports car had stopped next to Pip, the kind of car that boys dream about but almost never actually see in real life.

Behind the wheel sat a bearded man with dark glasses.

“Dubrovnik?” Pip asked.

The bearded man did not answer. He just nodded and gestured that Pip should get in.

Pip hadn’t even sat down properly when the car shot forward. And then it took the corners and wiggled in and out of traffic in such a way that, oh, Pip almost fainted even though he considered himself a pretty cool operator for such a small boy.

The drive seemed to last forever, when at last Pip got up the courage to tell the driver that he hadn’t eaten for three days and he would like to get out of the car.

The bearded man just nodded, stopped the car, let Pip out, and hurtled on, leaving only a faint echo of a rattle and a squeak behind.

More dead than alive, Pip dragged himself along the road. Through the trees along the side of the road, he spied the sea and headed for it in hopes that the water might freshen him up.

He had hardly stepped on to the beach when a wild cry sliced through the air:

“Piiiiip! Is it really you?”

“Yes,” Pip murmured, wondering who had recognized him. A cloud of sand approached him from the left side. In a short time, the cloud transformed into Miha.

“How’s it going, old pal!” Miha yelled and he was so happy to see his friend that he forgot that the two were actually competing against one other.

“It’s going, it’s going,” Pip mumbled and then asked the question: “What about Bob? What about the OLD GIRL?”

Tears came to Miha’s eyes.

“You won’t believe it,” he said, “You simply won’t believe it.”

Then he told the whole story from the beginning to the point when that irritating Sonya appeared and Bob disappeared with the OLD GIRL.

“But,” Miha concluded, “Bob has no idea what it means to mess with Miha. Listen to what I have in mind for him!”

## Chapter 17.

*Finally at their goal. Peaceful promenaders suddenly scatter. No cake or ice cream. A mysterious bottle on the horizon.*

The OLD GIRL made its tortuous way up the hill. It seemed to Bob that the tollbooth they just passed must be the last one before Dubrovnik. The car barely rumbled to the top of the incline and was beginning to rattle down the other side when Sonya and Bob spotted not far in front of them two young kids each wearing a backpack. They were running toward the city as fast as they could.

“It’s Miha and Pip!” screamed Bob and he pressed his foot down on the gas pedal.

“It’s the OLD GIRL and Bob!” screamed Miha and Pip in the distance.

“Grrghrrrgh!” said the OLD GIRL just before her engine died. But the OLD GIRL still had some momentum and she flew ever faster down the hill. The lead that Miha and Pip had enjoyed only seconds before was fast shrinking. They pushed themselves forward with their last ounce of strength.

“Victory!” shouted Miha and Pip as they raced past the road sign that had the word Dubrovnik printed on it.

“Victory!” shouted Bob as he whizzed past the sign at exactly the same time.

A slow motion reenactment of the finish line would have shown that there was no single winner. Even though Miha and Pip had literally projected themselves past the finish line and into the arms of a fat roadside saleswomen who was hawking hand-made rugs of a very high quality. Even though the tires of OLD GIRL gave their all and even kept spinning after she crashed into a centuries old plane tree.

People enjoying a peaceful summer promenade scattered in all directions, but soon came back to look at what happened. Actually probably just to check out which of the boys would be lucky enough to take the pretty blond girl standing angrily on the side of road for an ice cream.

Of course, we already know that Miha, Pip and Bob hugged each other happily, thrilled to be back together again. All the

fierce competition and hoaxes were behind them now and their guilty consciences were soothed.

“So what about your bet? Nobody won?” asked Sonya.

“Nobody!” the boys answered as one. “And we’re not sorry at all.”

The four travelers pushed the OLD GIRL to a parking lot and headed for the nearest ice cream parlor. They so eagerly threw themselves into the task at hand that the shop almost ran out of cake, lemonade and ice cream.

“Though really,” Pip said, “if you look at the thing objectively, I should win the bet. After all, that American millionaire in Rijeka practically hung around my neck for a whole week, making me show him all the museums and tourist sites.”

“Yeah,” answered Miha, “I bet you had some troubles alright. But, all the same, I think victory would have to be mine. After all, the OLD GIRL had to drag a bus filled with English tourists all the way from Ljubljana to Split. And, of course, we had to stop all the time so they could photograph every stone we passed along the way.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Sonja, “I guess you all think you’re really something special.”

“Yup,” said Bob, “what can I say? We really are something special. Hmm.”

It seemed that Sonya understood exactly what Bob wanted to say with that “hmm”. It seemed that Miha and Pip also understood that they should probably go wandering around the town a little bit. Bob and Sonya, well, hmm, whatever they wanted, hmm, it really was something special.

Bob blushed as only boys can blush, because everyone knows that when a boy says “hmm” to a girl, that means he’s in love.

“What do you say we go swimming?” said Sonya, acting as if nothing had happened.

“Yeah let’s,” they all answered, “let’s go swimming!”

They were splashing in the water for some time when Pip suddenly yelled:

“Look! A bottle!”

It was sticking out of the water like a torpedo.

“I’ll bet it has something to do with a shipwreck,” said Bob.

“Or with sunken treasure,” said Miha.

“What if it’s just an empty bottle of lemonade?” suggested Sonya, but nobody listened to her.

Pip swam out to the bottle. It was closed. It would be really stupid to think it was anything other than a secret message.

*from Odprava zelenega zmaja / The Expedition of the Green Dragon*

*Translated by Erica Johnson-Debeljak*

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# Seriously Stoned

*Desa Muck*

*The author's peaceful family life is shattered by the intrusion of the teenage rebel Žuža. She tells lies, smokes pot, is on the run from the police, empties the family refrigerator like a termite, and in some way or other manages to bring about the craziest twists, even in critical situations like the outbreak of a chronic alcoholic (Žuža's father) or heroin crisis, undergone by Žuža's friend Lena at the author's house. (Nothing is so terrible that it could not be funny.)*

## Hey, We're Here

The doorbell rang at seven the next morning. I was dressing my little girls for nursery. As it was so early, I assumed there must be something wrong. There was certainly something very wrong with what I saw outside my door. There stood Žuža and, leaning against the door frame, the spectral figure of a young man, overgrown and even dirtier than she was, staring at me with bloodshot eyes.

"Hey!" said Žuža cheerfully. "Here we are. Let's get down to work. Although a bite to eat might be a good idea first, get my strength up, and this friend of mine here needs a bit of a lie down. He's done in from Valium and vodka."

"I thought we'd agreed that we'd arrange something over the phone" I replied icily, through clenched teeth.

"The phone is the kiss of death to interpersonal relations. It was only invented so we'd have more time for shopping," she burred in response.

Slogans again. She'd been full of them the day before. 'Rules are made to be broken' or 'You can't trust everything you see' and so on. Where did she get them from?

She went into the living room and ran straight into the two girls, who stared at her as if she'd just landed from Mars.

"Hey, you've got kids!" she screeched. "And I thought you were the type of woman who'd refuse to use her womb."

She bent over my daughters and I immediately thought of all the contagious diseases that spread among drug addicts - lice, if nothing else. I pulled the girls away. She straightened up: "Get up, Dolfi, we're off. They're afraid they'll catch something."

I was ashamed. At the end of the day, I'd have to take some risks if I was to enlighten Slovene youth.

"No, no, please," I said quickly. "My husband will take the girls to nursery, and we'll sit and have a coffee."

After all, I could make them a coffee and maybe extract some useful information. I forced a hospitable smile onto my face and gestured towards the table, all the while thinking: At least they could have a wash, the slob. There's no water shortage. And sew one or two buttons on. And the way they talk! Healthy young people should be doing something useful with their lives. But then again, whatever they did they'd probably end up stealing or causing damage - perhaps it's better that they do nothing.

Those were my thoughts, but for the sake of Slovene youth I gritted my teeth, although a glance at Dolfi, rolling in his dirt on my couch, caused me deep pain. Not to mention the bad vibes emitted by his socks, when he kicked off his shoes and immediately started to snore.

"We didn't get much sleep," explained Žuža. "We dossed down on a ping-pong table in somebody's cellar. So are you going to give me something to eat?"

I led her into the kitchen and, with the calculating eyes of a book-keeper, watched how she gulped down a kilo of bread and butter and a jug of white coffee. Then she belched in satisfaction and slouched across the table.

"That was great! I'm absolutely stuffed. Have you got a fag?"

"We don't smoke in this household."

"Hey, that's not fair. Though I had a feeling you'd be one of the 'die healthy' persuasion."

Where do they get these slogans, I thought and asked tetchily:

"Are you condemning me for not smoking?"

"I don't give a toss!" She gave a dismissive wave of the hand. "You're the one who's losing out. I'm just bothered you haven't got a smoke. Maybe your old man's got one somewhere in his pockets?"

That was impossible, as my husband strongly disapproved of smoking. If we go to a pub in the winter he starts opening the windows and snatching cigarettes from the regulars' lips. Žuža speculated:

"I suppose you're not too interested in drinking, either?"



“Exactly.”

“Jesus. What pleasure do you get out of life?”

“Many things.”

“Such as?”

“Well...”

I racked my brain. Actually... Anyway, there are lots of things we enjoy, I just couldn't happen to think of them at that precise moment.

“At least we have a decent breakfast, if nothing else!” I bleated. And immediately regretted it, boasting in front of someone who has nothing.

“Big thing, breakfast,” she replied happily. “But I've just had breakfast, without having to try too hard.”

“So you're saying that a person has to smoke to be able to enjoy life? I used to smoke, but I can't remember my life being any richer or more exciting for it. I preferred to kick the habit, so as not to endanger my children's health. They shouldn't have to suffer because their mother walks around all day with a cig hanging out of her mouth.”

“I knew it! Those who've given up are the worst.”

“I didn't struggle to give up so that every badly brought up young fool can blow smoke in my face!”

“Yeh, yeh, I know. You deserve a medal for your heroic struggle against tobacco.”



## With an Alcoholic Here, an Alcoholic There...

The last thing I felt like doing that lazy afternoon was visiting some hysterical, stubborn young fool in a half-way house, who was threatening to commit suicide. When I stepped outside, I saw autumn was already with us. The wind was twirling the first fallen leaves. It was getting dark. I decided I needed to fortify myself for my demanding visit and went into the delicatessen for twenty sandwiches, a kilo of hazelnut chocolates and a large pack of custard creams. Because I was still feeling well-inclined towards the human race, I intended to give Žuža what I didn't manage to eat on the way. At the corner of our street I ran into a tall male figure, whose scent and tracksuit seemed somehow familiar.

“Hello, Desa. I was just on my way to your place,” said Žuža’s father, Miro, with a voice like a roast chestnut in a cold hand. “I finished exercising early so as to catch you.”

His forget-me-not blue eyes stared emotionally into mine, which hid modestly behind the lenses of my glasses. For the first time since my marriage I really minded that I’m no beauty. And why the hell do I have to eat all the time? From this moment forth - and I want the whole world to know - I’m DIETING!

“Have you got time for a drink? I hope you’re not heading for some important appointment?” he ventured, like some timid young lad.

“Of course not. I’m not going anywhere in particular, just a little walk...”

I sat at a table in a smoky cafe. He went to order us a litre of mineral water. While I waited for him, I overheard a conversation at the bar:

“If I was President, I’d soon sort things out. Women in the kitchen, nowhere else, and kids given a good hiding now and then to toughen them up a bit. They can hardly get across the road now without falling over, they’re so spoiled. And then when you run them over it’s your fault for driving under the influence!”

I looked round and saw a red-faced man with his flies open and an interesting arrangement of the few hairs on his bald head. On one side, his long red hair hung past his shoulders, on the other he had none. The glassy-eyed flock around him nodded their heads which, as they were having trouble staying upright, almost threw them off balance. Then I looked at Žuža’s relaxed, handsome father, who was looking at me warmly from the bar and thought: What a little liar Žuža is - he can’t be an alcoholic!

“I’m an alcoholic,” said Žuža’s father when he returned with the mineral water. “You’ve probably heard already from someone else.”

What now? Perhaps it really was possible that he was the one to blame for Žuža’s problems!

“Now you’re probably thinking that I’m to blame for Žuža’s problems,” he said humbly.

“Of course not! It’s not a matter of... it’s no-one’s... I don’t... I’d never condemn someone without knowing the reasons for his actions.”

“I knew it!” he exclaimed, triumphantly raising his arm and downing his fifth glass of mineral water. “I knew you’d understand. Finally, someone who doesn’t think that I’m to blame for everything. Whereas my wife... well, never mind. You’ve met, haven’t you? Wonderful, isn’t she? So patient. I’m not worthy of her.”

“Your wife threw me out!” I said, feeling he would appreciate what I was saying.

“So, maybe you understand me better now. My wife really is a wonderful woman, as I said, but she does have her little quirks...”

Over the next bottle of mineral water I found out what these quirks were. How calculating she was, never satisfied, interested in only two things: money and what other people would say. Yes, I quickly affirmed, I’d got exactly the same impression. I understood so well what he meant when he said that he sometimes wished that he had beside him a warm, feeling, understanding woman. Perhaps a little more rounded (only temporarily!), with glasses?

Over our third bottle he revealed that he would never have started to drink if he had not been forced to do so by circumstances. He had problems with stomach acid, which were greatly helped, he soon established, by alcohol. In any case, who’d ever seen a grown man drinking juice! And as a travelling salesman he often found himself in situations where it was impossible to say no to a drink – otherwise he’d risk losing his job. Then there were parties at work, and quarrels at home from which he needed to wind-down somehow...

“But I’ve never fallen as low as that,” he gestured towards the group at the bar. Their leader was just explaining that, as President, he would introduce a law allowing each man to have a number of wives, all of which would go out to work while the man would stay at home resting, so that he was always in a good mood and ready to lend a sympathetic ear to their problems.

“People obviously say all sorts of things,” continued Žuža’s father. “That I would beat my wife and daughter! There’s no bigger softy than I am – I cry at almost every film I watch. Not that they wouldn’t benefit from a clip round the ear now and then. My wife can be very provoking, and our Žuža’s tongue is so sharp I’m surprised she doesn’t cut herself on it.”

“I know what you mean,” I said warmly. “People are such shameless liars. But I know you wouldn’t smash up the flat, or chase them with a knife, or set fire to the parquet and toys and so on, as Žuža tried to imply.”

Then we laughed heartily together at mankind’s vices and stupidity. How nice that we were above all that! Over our fourth bottle I confided in him my own dissatisfaction over the man I had at home in front of the television. Then we swore that would not allow this newly-born and beautiful friendship to die, and parted with a feeling that we were born for each other.

At home, Television Man was waiting for me in the hall, which was quite unusual for around news time. He was almost beside himself:

“Where have you been? They called from the halfway house! Žuža waited for you all afternoon, then she locked herself in the toilet. When they finally broke in, she’d gone, climbed through the window.”

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## Things Get Complicated

The serial with the title *How I helped to destroy some young lives* had entered a new, dramatic episode. So I was in the bathroom, having a serious talk with my reflection: You traitor! You abused Žuža’s trust. Now you can hang your halo in the budgie’s cage and let him swing on it. And then I laughed so much, the whole bathroom was sprayed with toothpaste. Žuža’s flight from the halfway house had put me in a good mood, because it gave me a good excuse to call Miro at work the next day and tell him how worried I was.

I barricaded myself in the bedroom with Radko the cat and some books on alcoholism. And just a small packet of coconut biscuits, as I was slimming. I must tell you that books on alcoholism really get hold of you. The best are those which movingly and dramatically describe cases from real life, while those in which alcoholics describe their own experiences are hard to put down - you have to keep reading till you get to the end. While Radko purred in my ear, I feverishly looked for cases like Žuža’s father. But the books were obviously lacking,

as I found no descriptions of a young, sensitive, beautiful, noble character, driven by the mean tricks of his nagging and demanding wife, his jealous colleagues and his disrespectful children to reach for alcohol against his better judgement. I simply couldn't find Miro in these books, but I did come across heart-rending stories of women rolling in ditches while their children went hungry for food and love, and many examples of men whose wives had to pull their vomit and urine-stained clothes from their bodies as they lay in a drunken stupor. At the end of all these stories were moving descriptions of their rescue from the hell of alcoholism, with the help of their doctors, of course.

Truly heart-rending and gripping reading. I recommend them to younger readers, too.

And then, around one in the morning, the doorbell. The doorbell makes me nervous at any time, but in the quiet of the night it was like an electric shock.

Maks hissed from in front of the television:

"What now?"

"I don't know. We don't have to answer."

"What if it's the police?"

Yes. What if it was the police with news of Žuža? Perhaps they'd just pulled her shoes out of the river or scraped her off the railway line. I put my dressing gown on and hurried to the door.

Žuža was alive, but only just. She was swaying between Dolfi and one other representative of the unshaven, untrimmed and unkempt human sub-species. She had a stupid grin on her face and stared through me with enormous dark eyes. You're right, at the start of the book they were light blue, now they were like two enormous prunes.

"Listen, we're in a terrible fix. The police are after us and we've nowhere to leave Žuža. You've always been too good to her," said Dolfi.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked, worried.

"She's tripping," replied Dolfi. "We got them almost for nothing from some guy who's going to his guru in India and has laid off the drugs. We wanted to take one each to celebrate Žuža's big return, but then the police turned up. Žuža had already swallowed hers, there was nothing we could do. We only just got away."

So that explained the dark staring eyes. She watched me with interest.

“And what’s going to happen to her now? Is she going to jump out of the window? What do I do if she passes out?”

“Nothing much’ll happen. She’ll be stoned all night, maybe she’ll act a bit weird and talk nonsense. Just have a look at her from time to time. We’ve got to be off now. Here’s her stuff if you need it...”

Bye, and the darkness swallowed them up.

I stood in the middle of the hall. Maks on one side, hands on hips, Žuža on the other with an angelic smile and enormous, vacant eyes. In my hand I held three small tablets, like artificial sweeteners.

“I’m calling the police!” said Maks.

“Oh, no you’re not! Or I’ll soak the remote control in hydrochloric acid. Get back in there. Your programme hasn’t finished yet. I’ll deal with this.”

I was fortunate. He’d probably have called the police if there hadn’t been some discussion programme on. Muttering that this was his house, he went and reinstalled himself in front of the television.

I took Žuža down to the cellar, because I was afraid she’d be taken with a desire to start breaking things. I put an old mattress on the floor. She lay down obediently and stared at the ceiling. I don’t think for a moment she knew who I was or where she was. Then I put the three pills in a coffee cup at the top of the kitchen cupboard, so that the girls wouldn’t get their hands on them.

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## Willpower Is Best

“So, you see!” cried out Žuža triumphantly when I finished my story of the mystical experiences of the saints. “I’m a bit more practical. Instead of going on a one-month fast, I’d rather knock back some vodka and blow a joint, and a god shows up, whichever one I want”

“But when the alcohol and drugs wear off, no god is going to help your hangover, or convince the police to keep away from you, or give you a penny. You’ll be left as you are – a kid with no school, no home and no future.”

“My god has looked after me pretty well up to now,” she said, with a wily look. “He sent you.”

Then we finally said our goodbyes, a little too warmly for my taste.

As the train took me towards Ljubljana I felt terrible, worse than I'd ever felt in my life. My safe little world of gleaming kitchen tiles, vases of flowers and a well-stocked pantry had started to crumble, and through the cracks ever more painful apparitions appeared.

FIRST APPARITION:

I'm sitting on the freshly hoovered carpet in the living room, playing with the girls. It's about time, as recently I've been paying more attention to other children than my own. Maks is slumped in front of the TV. Everything is as it should be. Suddenly, there is a muted pounding on the door and:

“Police, open up!”

Four uniformed police armed with machine guns and two plainclothes officers charge in. Close behind them stumbles Rezka, screeching:

“They've probably got her hidden in the cellar. She had me locked up there when she tortured me with poison gas. Be careful, she's probably armed!”

They stampede across the hoovered carpet, crushing Barbies and Lego bricks beneath their heavy boots. They tear the house apart, but they don't find Žuža. They handcuff me and take me away. Behind me, children's small hands reach out beseechingly. During all this rumpus, Maks doesn't take his eyes off the screen. At the police station I am beaten and tortured for hours, but I give in only when they threaten to raid my fridge and set fire to the pantry. Žuža is locked away at the Višnja Gora remand home, where she lives to a ripe old age. Thanks to her, whole generations of warders go mad.

SECOND APPARITION:

I'm sitting on the freshly hoovered carpet in the living room, playing with the girls, etc. The phone rings. It is Miro, who tells in a shaken voice the following story:

Night. Two escaped criminals fleeing through the woods of Dolenjska come upon our weekend cottage. They look through the lighted window and see a young girl, alone and

vulnerable, reading the Bible by the light of a spirit lamp. They break in and... rivers of blood...

Miro finishes his story:

“You’ve ruined our life. I never want to see you again. Now I’m going to drink myself to death.”

Through the long days when I sit on the hoovered carpet and weep, Maks doesn’t take his eyes off the screen.

The train was full of youngsters en route to Ljubljana for afternoon classes. The noisy buzz around me only increased my sense of isolation in a world full of catastrophes. This would happen right now, when I’ve started to diet! My thoughts are already way ahead of me, coming out of the railway station, where lurk malicious kiosks full of the most delicious junk. My saliva starts to drip onto the floor and to spread across the carriage until we are ankle-deep in it.

When I get off the train I almost trip over a drunk rolling in his own vomit. In disgust, I stagger past him and almost into the hamburger kiosk. I stand uncertainly in front of its window. Miro’s smiling eyes seem to appear in the glass. I clench my teeth and determinedly drag myself away, as far as the *burek* kiosk. I stand there for a minute or two, walk away as far as the corner and then come back. Beneath the suspicious gaze of those in the queue, I shamefacedly go to the front and buy one meat *burek* and one cheese one. Then, like a criminal, I rush to the nearest litter bin and throw them in. (What a pig I am, some people are starving. I know, I know, I know!) I dash past the chip kiosk quite decisively, but at the one with ice-cream and cakes my tears finally start to flow. Curse this life! With the last of my strength, I drag myself to the bus station. But then I am gripped by an unknown force that carries me back to the kiosk. Before I know what’s happening, I find myself in the park opposite the station, sitting between two drunks who are knocking back a bottle of plonk, and in the space of a few minutes I wolf down four cold, greasy, burnt pieces of chicken, one meat and one cheese *burek*, two walnut slices, two hotdogs with mustard and two slices of chocolate cake that smell of old ashtrays.

It doesn’t matter, I say to myself, as I greedily swallow the food. Tomorrow I’ll start for real, word of honour. Tomorrow I’ll become a new person and from then on everything will be different. I’ll begin a total fast, I’ll start jogging and



join the gym. In a few months I'll be a slim, decisive, active and attractive woman. A new Desa. In fact, I might even change my name. I'll finally complete my university studies and get rich. I'll be so popular that I'm a bit worried I'll be asked to run for President. I'll breeze through life, slim, elegant, attractive and self-confident. The Prime Minister will send me a red rose every morning and every Slovene writer will have a small shrine at home with my picture. These thoughts were disturbed by someone muttering. An drunk old lady approached, with a purple face, worn-out slippers on her feet and dressed in smelly rags of unrecognisable colour. Slurring her words, she asked me for some change. With a mouth full of hot dog, and dripping mustard, mayonnaise and fat, I drove her away, telling her she should join some rehabilitation programme for alcoholics.

To let herself go like that, I thought, haughtily. Some people simply have no willpower.

Then I set off for home. Maks was due back from work at any moment.

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## Where Have All the Children Gone? Long Time Ago...

I felt as if I had irrevocably closed the door of hell behind me and said farewell with the words: "Hang on in there, girl. It'll be alright. They'll fry you in boiling oil a bit, maybe put an eye out and stick you on a fork just for fun, but that's nothing."

In reality, I had no idea what cold turkey was actually like. I'd read a bit, but thought they probably exaggerated the withdrawal symptoms in order to have a more educational effect. When I thought about what was happening in my cellar, I almost choked with anguish, but then I said to myself: it doesn't matter, my life is in any case such a disaster area that one more act of stupidity (it might even be a good work, as history will no doubt show) is neither here nor there. When it all comes out I'll most likely have the police at my door, I'll be condemned by the public, my relatives will disown me and the neighbours will demand that I move out. One half-dead dread drug addict in the cellar or not. On top of which, my

carefully constructed list of those guilty for the drug addiction of the young had collapsed like a rotten staircase. Where could I find new ones? Which came first, the chicken or the egg? If it was the chicken, who should get their ears boxed first? The parents? School? Society? The system? And what if it was the egg? Who's to blame?

When I returned to the kitchen I came across Žuža blowing a hearty raspberry at the window.

"That ridiculous neighbour of yours is always gawping in this direction through a telescope!"

Of course, why didn't I think of that before? Rezka! It was all Rezka's fault. So if anyone asks you who's to blame for the growing number of drug addicts in Slovenia, tell them it's Rezka.

We were in the middle of lunch when Žuža's mother came buzzing along. I went to get her a plate.

"There's no need. I don't want to disturb you," she chirped. She seemed to be in an excellent mood, as if all the bruises on her face were the result of being showered with diamonds. When I ladled out some warmed-up soup for her, I deliberately lent closer. No, she didn't smell of alcohol.

"I was at the doctor's, you know, and he gave me a written confirmation of my injuries that I'll use for the divorce. So that's it, I'm starting a new life! The doctor was great. It's wonderful to find someone who's willing to listen to your troubles and show compassion."

"Instead of him giving you one on the nose!" muttered Žuža at the heap of mashed potato in front of her. Maks and I tried to tell her off, but her mother simply waved her hand.

"Leave her be. She's not having any effect, I'm on tranquillisers."

She said 'I'm on tranquillisers' as if she was saying 'I'm honorary head of the UN'.

"Yeh, of course. You dope yourself with tranquillisers and then watch dumbly while my father hits you, cheats and drinks away your money, instead of fighting back!" said Žuža angrily to the mashed potato.

My heart jumped with joy. They were finally talking to each other!

Cvetka responded benevolently: "You know what, you've got no right to poke your nose into my affairs and criticise me, because you've no idea what I'm going through!"

“Of course, I’m only your daughter, I’ve got no right to interfere ‘cos I haven’t been through it all with you! The doctor and all the others you show your bruises to have, I suppose. And so has everyone who says what a poor little thing you are and what a bastard dad is! The only ones who haven’t are those who say some of the blame’s yours and that you should do something to change things, and that tranquillisers aren’t the answer.”

Maks discreetly took the girls, who were listening open-mouthed, into the garden. Silence reigned. Then Žuža got up and ran after them. In spite of the tranquillisers, Cvetka’s lower lip was trembling.

“Now you see what it’s like! My own daughter doesn’t understand and is turned against me! After everything that I’ve gone through because of her! I sacrificed myself for her! It’s only because of her that I went on living through hell with Miro. And this is all the thanks I get! She’s heartless, deceitful and stubborn, just like her father!”

“I’m sorry, but Žuža isn’t like that,” I heard myself say, with surprise. “There are lots of good things about her.”

“Oh, really? Such as?”

I was even more surprised at what I came out with:

“She knows how to be a true friend. She risked a lot to help Lena. She’s honest. She could’ve stolen from us long ago if she’d wanted. She’s observant, and she knows how to use her head. She likes children and she knows how to behave with them. She’s got a vivid imagination, it’s true, but she’s no liar! And she’s a lot more open than most of the people I know.”

I must be under hypnosis, I thought. If anyone had said a month ago that I’d be talking about Žuža like that I’d have spat at them!

To cover up my senile sentimentality I went into the garden to tell Maks to come and drink his coffee. He was rummaging around his boat materials and patiently giving instructions to Žuža and the girls, who were enthusiastically bringing planks of wood and piling them in a heap. I suddenly felt tears forming in my eyes. For heavens sake! Enough’s enough. I don’t even let them help me do the washing up in case they break something, and Žuža’s mum doesn’t let her do anything in case she screws up. Maybe Maks - unwittingly, of course, as

his knowledge could not possibly compare with mine - had discovered the direction in which every family should go if its children are to be more balanced and free from addiction. How wholeheartedly the girls were taking part in the work, how important they must feel to be contributing to something that would change our lives for the better. In their opinion, of course. Yes, my nose told me this was the way to go, and I would have joined them if I had not heard a wild howling from the cellar.

In the corner of the cellar slumped suffering personified. It was as if Lena had no skin and her eyes were without eyelashes. Pain, pared down to its core. She fell silent when she saw me, only the chattering of her teeth echoed round the cellar like the sound of castanets. And worst of all - this creature shaking, scratching its legs till they bled and sweating horribly - was a child. Barely fifteen years old. A child I wanted to bathe, dress in warm flannel pyjamas, heat up caramel milk with sage for her, and hold her in my arms until she calmed down and fell asleep. And why the hell wasn't her own mother here to do all that and where had she been all this time?! I dashed off to buy some heroin, I couldn't let any child suffer as much as this.

[...]

There was vomit everywhere and... I'd rather not say what. But no sign of Lena. I rushed upstairs, where I came across Žuža's mother standing confused in the middle of the hall.

"Žuža just dragged something into your bathroom. It threw up on your stairs. What was it?"

Lena lay limply in a bath full of hot water. Her eyes were closed and she was panting like a young dog. On the floor lay a heap of her black rags, giving off a powerful smell. A trail of vomit led from the cellar to the bathroom. I silently got down to wiping it up and ruminated on how much of this dumb love I had inside me. Enough to clean up for a fortnight after someone else's child? If she was mine, then maybe... And what then? Didn't the young chap say that I'd have to stand beside her later? But I don't even have enough time for my own children! Do I have the strength and the nerves to spend years breaking through the labyrinth of distrust, excuses and hos-

tile thought patterns with which this child's heart was long ago smothered and teach it everything afresh? Is there anyone on earth who would have enough love for that?

I said to Žuža, who was wiping Lena's face and neck with a sponge:

"I'm sorry, but I can't do this! I can't take the responsibility. I've got two children, who can't live in such... I mean, I think it'd be better for everyone if I called an ambulance for Lena. I'll make sure she's admitted to the best rehab clinic and in really good hands."

"God, you always know what's best for everyone else, don't you?" said Žuža, hurling the sponge at the wall, so that the whole bathroom was splashed. "Do what you want, but if you do call an ambulance it'll be worse than a mad house in here. The police'll be here in a flash, and I don't know if you're bright enough to answer all their questions. In your wonderful institution she'll be locked up with other junkies and they'll spend the whole time talking about nothing else other than how they can score. The first day she came out she'd be shooting up again."

"What about that religious commune? Run by those Italian priests? I've heard they're very successful."

"Before you can get in there you've got to be clean for a year."

"I'm really sorry, but I just can't..."

"I'll do it, I'll look after her! I've got tons of time and nothing else to do. I'll make sure your kids are not walking in shit and puke, they'll have no idea what's going in. It'll only be this bad for a couple of days. Then I'll take her to that weekend place of yours. Go on, please! Don't be a bastard! She's finally showing some guts and if you screw up now no-one'll ever convince her again that grown-ups are anything other than a load of hypocrites. This'll be the first time any adult has done anything for her who hasn't been paid by the government."

"I really don't know. It's such a risk..."

"You know, when she gets it into her head again to shoot up and says it's all the same if she snuffs it from dope as life's a load of shit and the world's just one big mistake, then I'll be able to say to her: Hang on a minute, it's not all shit. They're not all sell outs. What about old Desa. She helped you, even

though she didn't have to. You've no idea how much she risked, just because she believed in you. You're not going to screw up old Desa now, are you? You get what I mean?"

I got it. I said okay and went downstairs, to find Žuža's mother in the middle of a heart-to-heart with Dolfi.

"Hi there, I missed Žuža so much I just had to come," he said to me. "I'll only stay a couple of nights until I find somewhere better to crash. Hey, have you still got any of that great whisky?"

*from Blazno resno zadeti / Seriously Stoned*

*Translated by David Limon*