

Milko Valent

Jazz for Aisha

Translated from Croatian by Tamara Budimir

Artificial Tears

In the evenings you can find us at the Nes-café at Nes Street 33. The place is a harmonious combination of a bar and a coffee shop. As of late, we are regulars at this place, as Luka got us interested in Nes. Mostly it's people from the neighbourhood and old billiards fanatics who organise tournaments every Thursday and Sunday, those who like soft drugs and excellent beer, old and young rockers, the odd hippie, the odd exacting tourist, and as of late those of us working at the construction site. It's not a fancy place, but I like it.

Almost everybody was at Nes tonight. Skinny with his friend Marijke, who was becoming friendlier by the minute, or so it seemed; the ex-seafarer Luka, who was crazy about old rock music, especially the Stones, and about Samson tobacco and billiards and who played it three times a week at Nes, and who also competed in one of the teams; Ivica who was a fan of Cohen's ballads and mayonnaise; Peđa, a "positive deserter" as he liked to call himself, who liked heavy metal music; Jean Drummer and his girl Eefje, who enjoyed classical music and jazz and Crazy Lola who liked rap and hip-hop, and whose face was now extravagantly done up. Lola laughed as she explained to the rest of the people there that she "overdid it with the make-up" because she was going through an early-thirties crisis. Almost everyone was there, except for Kiki as she was angry at me because I had criticised her slight addition to cocaine the day before.

I sat at the bar, drinking Heineken, a good worker's beer, and smoking. Jim the barman was selling someone a ready joint, whilst cutting a gram of hashish for another customer. The other night when I asked him a journalist question concerning the complete and utter truth about the unification of Europe, Jim had answered and then boasted that earlier he had come to the Nes for a drink and Rembrandt, but that the place had then had a different name.

A girl was sitting next to me. A pretty girl. She was adjusting a turquoise blue scarf but uncertainly. I estimated that she was about my age, maybe slightly younger. I started up a conversation with her. Marko. Aisha. Where are you from? From Bosnia, said Aisha quietly. So why are we talking English? The girl and I continued our conversation in Bosnian-Croatian. Aisha was drinking a Bacardi Breezer with lime. She was quiet, serious, in fact, too serious, almost frowning; a wrinkle played on her forehead. (The Bacardi Breezer reminded me of a summer trip with Tina, the night we feasted on rum, ordering a bottle of White Bacardi Rum, some call it "colourless", and so that the colours would match I ordered two portions of black olives coated in olive oil.) To me it seemed that the serious Aisha was too old for a Breezer; after all, it was something teenagers drank. I suggested we go for a walk, it was stuffy with smoke inside, and outside was a beautiful spring evening. OK, said Aisha somewhat in a better mood. I bought three Bacardi Breezers with lime for her and three Heinekens for me. I told Jim I'd return the bottles by midnight. Jim just smiled and Skinny winked at me whilst hugging Marijke who was thumping him happily on the shoulder for something whilst laughing loudly.

Aisha and I walked to the Royal Palace on Dam Square, and then on to the stone WWII Memorial. It seemed weird, this high stone grey-white round building, that narrowed off towards the top, and the top was also rounded. Whenever I see a monument I'm always reminded of the Hiroshima-like scenes of Vukovar, which I watched daily on TV during the war.

We sat upon a raised stone, part of the monument. Across the way was the Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky. We sat there. I swung my legs to and fro, I felt good with this pretty stranger in jeans and a turquoise-blue scarf around her neck. I had no inkling of what was about to happen.

We lit up and smoked as we gazed at the Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky. I opened up the bottles and we sipped our drinks, Aisha her Bacardi Breezer, I my Heineken. We talked about the Nes-café, about how the atmosphere was cool, mostly because of the fanatic billiards players, good hashish and weed and the excellent beer, and the postcard of the place was also interesting as it said "Nes to meet you!". I told Aisha I'd taken a liking to her the moment I saw her at the bar. I hugged her jestingly. She screamed as if she'd been scalded and pushed my arm away hostilely. I was, of course, taken aback. Sorry, she said. I fell silent, I didn't know what to say, I wasn't used to such violent outbursts. I can't say that this had ever happened to me. Perhaps the once in secondary school with mad Nikolina from class 2b.

I'd already started taking out my dictaphone (I'm always on assignment, even when I'm relaxing!), but suddenly it came gushing out of her. She didn't know me, she said, but she liked me. A long time ago she'd been in love with a Croat, Boris, and all she wanted now was to cry a bit on a sympathetic shoulder, she had carried the burden inside her for too long. Alright, go ahead, I told her. I found myself in an unbelievable situation! The Dam was alive with people and laughter, while Aisha talked quietly staring bluntly into empty space. As I listened to the story of her life I froze, forgetting the dictaphone (which had never happened to me before!), I forgot about everything. Aisha was viciously raped at the beginning of the war in Bosnia, by many. Eleven years had gone by in the meantime, but she still couldn't sleep normally at nights, because she was afraid she'd dream about everything she'd been through. It happened, she said. She really did dream about the horror, she had nightmares, but even during the day. She noticed that I had sobered up, that I was shaken, saddened.

- Can you bear to hear it, Marko? Do you want me to continue? - Aisha asked.

- Just a minute, Aisha - I said overwhelmed by what I'd just heard, aside from which this was the first time I had encountered a person who'd been raped so I felt slightly uneasy. I lit a second cigarette. One for myself and one for her. I placed the box and lighter on the wall next to me. I knew I wouldn't be able to do without them tonight. I checked, in my rucksack there were another two boxes. Listening to Aisha I felt chastened. I, a radio fanatic from Zagreb, thought I knew something about the war on the Balkans just because I'd hurried down into the cellar with my father during the frequent air raids, and because my father, angered by the fall of Vukovar and the attacks on Dubrovnik, had joined up and gone to war, returning wounded in the thigh after having spent twenty-seven days on the front. Even Tina's war journal from 1991 and 1992 was but a flickering reflection of the war in comparison to what Aisha had been through. I gathered my thoughts quickly and remembered the dictaphone. I also remembered that a couple of days earlier my editor-in-chief Pjer had praised my news stories in an email saying that I had truly become a radio reporter, a true professional in the field of journalism.

- I'd like you to continue, but first I have to tell you something personal about me and something, let's say, professional about me. I'll be completely honest with you. First of all, don't be angry at me for hugging you, I meant nothing bad by it. I have a girlfriend here in Amsterdam, she's called Kiki. She got angry at me today, so she didn't come to the Nes. I really love Kiki and I couldn't imagine being with another girl. Secondly, two-and-a-half months ago I hit my wife Tina, not just a slap, I punched her, and left her after seven years of marriage because I couldn't take her messy habits and the chaos in the house. That was the first time I ever hit my wife, a woman in general, with my hands and fists, until she bled, and I still feel sick about it. It also hurt her professionally. Namely, Tina's a journalist, she mostly interviews people and writes for the radio, so she had to take a week's sick leave because of the bruises

on her face. No, I shouldn't have hit her despite the intolerable situation, I should have simply left. Ever since then I've felt ashamed, especially as I come from a family of hippies, from a family in which violence was considered inadmissible. Thirdly, what I have to say is in fact a proposal. I'm a radio reporter from Zagreb. I used to be a copywriter for the radio, I wrote copy for advertising and recorded jingles. Now I'm working for the radio programme Europe in the palm of your hand. At the moment I'm employed at the construction site at which, aside from two Dutchmen, there are a number of workers from ex-Yugoslavia, in order to write a couple of stories for radio. In short, I travel through Europe and ask people the one question, what is it, according to them, that can truly unite Europe. I know the name of the programme may sound silly, perhaps even funny, but Pjer the editor-in-chief has called it that, but it's really a good quality and serious programme. What comes to mind is that you could perhaps tell your story for Europe in the palm of your hand and give your answer to the question about Europe. You needn't mention names or places, all you need to say is that you're from Bosnia. We can even change your name if you like. What do you say?

Aisha looked at me quizzically and deliberated. The wrinkle on her forehead twitched. She extinguished one cigarette and immediately lit up another. I knew it: if she agreed, I'd have the best story from Amsterdam. I couldn't help myself, I'd reverted to being the damned selfish professional; I was so set on getting a good news story and a major story at that that I was losing my compassion for the affliction of others. Not completely, but still! I was consoling myself that it was my duty, both as far as sound and text were concerned, to give a true and veracious account of various people's lives and their fates, but I couldn't deny that I hadn't changed. I had changed, that was obvious. I no longer had illusions. Research journalism, even if the worker type that Pjer had introduced, was just another excuse for private inquisitiveness, for curiosity which is difficult to resist... Aisha was obviously deliberating seriously, it seemed an eternity.

- Alright. I agree – she said quietly. I shuddered with joy, even though the whole thing was more than sad. – But only under one condition! – she added resolutely.

- Tell me.

- I'll tell you what happened to me and answer your question for your radio programme if you promise that the next time you and Kiki are kissing, that before that, before the sex, that you'll dedicate that beautiful and wild sex to Aisha and enjoy it for Aisha. For a raped woman who cannot stand the touch of a man in the past eleven years because of everything she's gone through, even though she would like to. Is that alright? You can let Kiki hear my story if you want to. Is that alright?

I looked at Aisha, looked at her serious face and her sad dark eyes. I was overwhelmed by feelings to which I could not even give a name. It seemed that I wasn't a lost case after all, it seemed I was still capable of feeling compassion...

- More than fine. I promise it'll be the way you want it, Aisha. I'm not exactly a paragon of virtue as a man, but I try to keep my promises. Of that you can be certain – I said.

- Well, then. Get your dictaphone out then, Marko – she said and smiled for the first time since we'd met at the Nes. A weak smile, but still a smile. – and yes, in your programme I want to be referred to as Azra * – said Aisha.

- No problem – I said and took the Dictaphone out my rucksack with shaking hands, turned it on, took a deep breathe and dictated the first introductory words of a reporter. I tried to make it casual, even though I was deeply touched and excited, even more excited than when I'd done my first report on Ban Josip Jelačić Square in Zagreb.

- This is Marko Globan reporting. Once again I'm reporting from Amsterdam, this time from Dam

Square. It's now 10.07 p.m. I'm sitting here with an exceptional person on the wall of the stone WWII Memorial. Across the way is the discretely lit world famous Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky. A beautiful night, warm and balmy. Azra, a girl from Bosnia, has something to say for our programme Europe in the palm of your hand. Azra has accepted to answer our usual question concerning Europe, but before she does she's going to tell us something about her experiences – I said with a quavering hand which I directed at Aisha. (For the first time since becoming a radio reporter my hands were shaking.)

Aisha sat up on the wall, sipped on her Breezer, exhaled cigarette smoke and said as follows in a quiet but firm voice.

"My name is Azra. I was in the second class of secondary school when the war broke out in Bosnia. At the time I was in love with Boris. We held hands, walked by the river and kissed, but nothing more, we never managed anything more. I was sixteen at the time and I was a virgin. I have remained a virgin in the true sense of the word, even though eleven years have passed since then. The Serbs attacked the city in April and they had conquered it by July. Chetniks went from house to house and dragged people out. They separated the men, women, children and elderly. When they came to our part of the city they entered our house. My father and my younger brother, and the other men from the neighbourhood, they took off to the river and shot them before our eyes. (At this point Aisha's voice quavered slightly – Marko Globan's comment.) Their only fault was that they were Muslim Bosniaks. Let it be said, that during WWII the Chetniks killed several thousand Muslim Bosniaks in our city. My mother fainted when she saw my dead father and brother. She was totally overtaken by grief, she couldn't even cry. In short, the ethnic cleansing had started, and what followed was systematic raping of women as a systemic tactic, which was also part of ethnic cleansing, perhaps its worst part, as between sixty to seventy thousand women were raped in Bosnia, according to post-war statistics. They took my mother, me and the other women into a big sports hall. The hall began to fill with girls, young women, women and elderly women and men and children. They didn't manage to rape my mother because she died of sorrow for my father and brother two days after we went to the hall. She died of a heart attack, or infarct, as they say, her heart broke. I couldn't even bury her. They threw her into a pit by the river as they did to all the other men killed, our fathers and brothers. The Chetniks raped all the women, even eleven-year-old girls, and even an old woman of seventy-nine. This usually occurred in the evenings and at night. They'd come in drunk, many of them carrying weapons, as well as a bottle of Rakia. Around forty of them beat and raped me for six months, to be exact, one-hundred-and eighty-six days. They all went for me because I was the prettiest in the hall, a joyous, healthy-looking girl, and I was a virgin as I was only sixteen years old. One night I was raped by twelve of them, perhaps more, only I can't recall how many because I fainted after the twelfth. The Chetniks called this a gang bang, and all the other things they called me I don't even want to mention, as they're not meant to be heard by those listening to the radio. One night a drunk, fat and extremely bearded Chetnik, Dragan, engraved his name on my forearm with a knife whilst raping me, and then he smeared my blood across my entire body, yes, even down below, and then he licked up my blood hollering: "You Turk, you'll bear me a Serbian son." Then he entered me again and poured Rakia over me. I was lucky not to have bled out. The women covered me in clothes in the morning. Maybe the Rakia had also helped for the wounds to heal more quickly. Still I had the marks on my forearms which remain to this day, and the letter D is quite clearly visible as the initial D, as in the name Dragan, the animal who alongside all the other smelly and unkempt beasts killed my family, halted my youth and prevented me from having a normal adolescence as a girl, the kind of life all adolescents all over Europe lead at my age. To cut it short, after six months one of ours caught a Chetnik, and among those on our side was the father of my good Boris

whom the Chetniks had murdered in the meanwhile. He knew that Boris and I had had a soft spot for one another, as Boris had told him all about me. Boris's father traded me for the Chetnik and so saved my life. He then sent me to his sister and with the help of a friend she managed to send me off to the Netherlands, to Amsterdam, shortly afterwards. This is the short version. Sorry for giving you the shortened, administrative version, but if I were to go into details, I'm sure I wouldn't be able to take it, I'd flip out. During the past eleven years not a day has gone by without my reliving the disgusting spectacle of the bloody raping and all the other disgraceful acts enacted upon my body and soul that went on for six months in my thoughts and my dreams. In time, I learnt to and managed to have relationships with young men, who had no idea what I'd been through and who were not to blame, but I still couldn't imagine having an intimate relationship with a man, and the question remains when and if I will be able to. What is there to say, I've spent every day in the last eleven years on heavy sedatives, and still have nightmares and those during waking. As far as your question concerning the best road to a united Europe, I believe that this kind of Europe that calmly watched genocide happening before its doors, that is, in its very courtyard, can never truly and honestly be a united Europe. The irony of my fate is that this country, a country that has accepted me and provided me with a living, sent out UNPROFOR units which did not prevent, although they could have, the massacre in Srebrenica. You've probably heard of Srebrenica, and the name of my village I cannot reveal for obvious reasons. So much from me."

We agreed to meet at 9 p.m., but Kiki was already at Nieuwemeerdijk at 8.30 p.m. She had a crazy plan, of course, which had nothing to do with our previous agreement that we go to Leidseplein for a drink at the Three Sisters or at Dan Murphy's Irish Bar, or that we go for a beer at our favourite Café Schuim, and then on to a concert, perhaps at the Paradiso if the tickets weren't already sold out.

Kiki was unbelievably sportingly attired this evening: a jacket and blue jeans, white socks, white Adidas tennis shoes and a white cap, similar to those worn by golfers. A rare sight. I had just had a bath and was preparing dinner with Skinny in our small kitchen next to the music studio in the basement.

- Sorry, Skinny, this can't wait. I'm taking my dearest somewhere - shouted Kiki as she grabbed me by the hand and began dragging me to the door. I looked at Skinny helplessly and shrugged my shoulders. He knew all too well that Kiki was unpredictable. I picked up my wallet, mobile, my cigarettes and lighter. Resigned, despite my drying hair, I got into Kiki's Mini Cooper.

Kiki is a fast driver and we were in front of the construction site in Dijkgravenlaan within ten minutes. It was already dark, but the full moon shone down on the quiet street; even the streetlights seemed dimmer than the moonlight. The plan was quite simple. Kiki was running the show. She took a picnic basket, a CD-player and a blanket out of the boot. We checked to see if there was anyone around. OK, nobody. We climbed over the fence as Luka, who was the last to leave the construction site, locked all the doors behind him, and so we entered the courtyard and the backyard of the house. Kiki spread out the blanket on the grass by the small concrete fountain from the first half of the previous century which Skinny and I were going to pull down in the following couple of days. Then she took out paper serviettes and large pieces of something wrapped in alufoil. She unwrapped the pieces. My favourite sandwiches, man, I couldn't believe it! Tuna with ketchup and chilli. Kiki laughed at my surprised face, whilst she took out a bottle of rosé, a bottle opener, two glasses and two candles. In the basket I saw a further two bottles of the same wine. It seemed to be a trend. Everyone in Amsterdam seemed to have gone wild about rosés, especially "sophisticated girls" (Kiki).

- This is a worker's dinner at the construction site during a full Moon - she said ceremoniously as she lit the candles. Then she slotted in a cassette and turned on the CD player. - I love it when there's a full

Moon. What goes best with this kind of moonlight is jazz, let's say something by Sarah Vaughan – said Kiki and started to eat. - I also like your favourite sandwiches, Marko. Pour us some wine, would you – she said with her mouth full. The piercing on her lower lip shone in the moonlight and candlelight. We ate, drank, listened to music that had no generational code and gazed at each other. The candle flames outglowed the moonlight. Kiki said that they outshone the beauty of the moonlight and extinguished them.

After our meal we lay on the blanket, listened to jazz, smoking, drinking rosé and gazing at the full Moon which was still reddish at the edges. We lay there in silence. At one point Kiki started caressing me. I remembered the promise I'd made to Aisha and stopped her. She looked at me confused and upset.

- It's alright, Kiki, but before we continue I have to tell you something. Yesterday at the Nes I met Aisha and...

- Who the fuck is...

- Hush and be patient. It won't take long. I'll tell you all about it. I told Aisha that we loved each other so please calm down. No jealous outbursts, please! Aisha is a girl from Bosnia, a raped woman. You're a historian and sociologist, and you know a lot about evil and the wars on the Balkans. Yesterday Aisha told me that at the beginning of the war the Chetniks had killed her father and brother, her mother died of a heart attack because of it, and Aisha, who was still an innocent sixteen year-old, they raped repeatedly for six months, around forty of them. I suggested she tell her story under a different name for my radio programme. She agreed, but under one condition, that next time we kissed, before we kissed and before our beautiful wild sex, we mention her, we dedicate the act to her, Aisha, a girl raped during the war who has been traumatised for the past eleven years because of what she lived through and cannot stand to be touched by a man even though she would like to be – I said to Kiki and hugged her. She looked at me with that look in her eyes, our look. I knew she'd understood Aisha's condition, Aisha's wish.

- Are you up for some wild sex, Marko? – Kiki asked me quietly and cuddled up against me. – Do you want to dedicate it to Aisha tonight? – she asked even more quietly. – I do – I whispered dumbfounded. I was left speechless. We went wild almost immediately. It's always like that with Kiki. I'm hot-blooded and at moments like that I go crazy, and once the storm has past I wax poetic. The jazz played on. Sarah Vaughan and Summertime. Sometimes in the middle of a song a blue note of the blues lights up the jazz like a firefly and intensifies the serene night. "This is jazz for Aisha", I thought to myself as I lost myself in Kiki's embrace.

The moonlight continued to shine down upon us at the construction site in the quiet Dijkgravenlaan.