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Fear of going home and
the dying out of domestic beer

Imagine that an aircraft carrier is passing right in front of your nose, ejecting those deafeningly loud things that explode in the air. Or that a bunch of right-wing radical chicks (who, by the way, put out for free) are lined up on the sidewalk in minis and fishnet stockings, agitating for the social rights of Afro-Asian immigrant prostitutes. Or that the Pope and Fidel Castro are dancing the rumba in your living room. And you don't even react, you don't even notice. Because all your capacities, all your nerve endings and little gray cells, every hair follicle is focused on something momentous. Really momentous. The finals of the soccer World Cup, for example, and your team is losing, but they've set up their line, they're squeezing the adversary, a goal is hanging in the air, it's a madhouse, and then your TV craps out. And you just sit there, gaping at that fucking box in disbelief.

Throw a bottle at it.

Throw it out the window.

Throw yourself out the window.

What to do?

This is what your brain is focused on; it's not interested in anything else.

Here's Baba's situation. He's sitting at the computer in the Agramer press office and staring at the monitor with that crapped-out TV look on his face. Just gaping at that empty Microsoft screen waiting for some miracle to happen. For the Holy Virgin of Software to appear and speak one sentence, one simple lousy sentence, and then he'd be okay. No problem. He just needs that first sentence.

Everything had seemed so simple that morning. So insanely simple. Driving to work, he'd had a story, the first sentence, a few great scenes, everything. Now all he had was an endless virtual roll of paper, and an empty screen with nothing behind it.

"Is everything okay?"

Baba, startled, turned and looked up. Those voices that all of a sudden echo out from somewhere. Like when God called out to Abraham about Isaac. Fortunately, God rarely called on Baba. And this time was no exception. A journalist from the City news section was standing next to Baba's desk. She'd only been working there a few weeks and still hadn't quite gotten the hang of it. Didn't have a clue what she had fallen into. Thought the section editor was screwing her out of love, and that all the gastritic, surly, bloated veterans with the bloodshot eyes, like Baba, were "colorful characters." Thought they were cool. Not realizing that a few years down the road, she'd be "colorful," too. And would definitely not be thinking of herself as cool.

"Can I help you?" Baba asked, pulling himself together.

"Piece of junk," she said. "My computer's frozen up, too."

"The computer's fine," said Baba.

"Maybe you should try to reboot it anyway."

"The problem is here," Baba said, tapping his finger against his temple.

“You can restart that, too,” she said.

“Maybe,” he answered. “How about it?”

“What?”

“How about a drink,” Baba suggested. “Reboot the system, whatever.”

“I’ve got to go write,” she said.

“Of course,” he said, “Why didn’t I think of that?”

The café terrace in front of the newsroom was swarming with journalists. They were loud-talking, laughing, drinking their drinks. Some called Baba over to join them. He waved them off and went on toward the parking lot. He was still plagued by that nebulous sentence. Shit, I should have stopped somewhere this morning on the side of the road and written it down. Now it’s too late. How many times had he lost something, thinking: I’ll do it later. Tomorrow. There’s plenty of time. But those kinds of things don’t wait for you forever. They’re always on the move. They take their twists and turns, only rarely crossing paths with you.

That woman you passed on the street the other day, you’ll probably never meet her again. She smiled at you as though she knew you, you could have greeted her, started a conversation, and who knows what would have come of it—but nothing. You hesitated too long, and when you turned back, she was already lost in the crowd. You’ve got to be quick when things like that are concerned. Grab them first and think about what you’re going to do with them later. Dinosaurs are extinct because they didn’t think fast enough. Just munching on their leaves and branches and telling themselves, there’s plenty of time. Only Eternity’s got plenty of time, you know?

Baba was driving along Slavenska Avenue, heading east, thinking about where to go. Home? No way, definitely not home. Home was depressing. He went by the Croatian Television complex and turned north and then down Miramarska Street to the city center. He drove around the city for a while trying to set some destination point. It was always the same scene—houses left and right, and between them, blinking traffic signals. It got boring driving around in circles. He couldn’t decide where to go. Couldn’t think of a single place that seemed tempting. What could that special place possibly be, anyhow, at four o’clock in the afternoon, in Zagreb, in the middle of summer? Waiting for the green light across from St. Vincent Church, he checked out the building facades facing Ilica Street, fantasizing about something happening. That a tram was traveling down the street. That the crane hovering above those roofs collapsed. That somebody burst out of a door with a Kalashnikov and opened fire on the passersby. Nothing happened. He turned into Dalmatinska Street and parked.

Baba wished he could go home. Take off his loafers, give Vera the obligatory kiss, open a cold beer, stretch out on the couch, and tell her about his day.

Tell her how a cat, lurking in the bushes by the student dormitories, caught a sparrow and ate it. And about the woman who fainted on the sidewalk near Gundulic Street, and then the passersby hopping over her or simply going around.

Or the old guy, watching the wind twirling a plastic bag around in the air, saying, “It’s all so fornicating simple!”

Meanwhile, Baba can’t go home and tell Vera about the cat, the woman, or the old man. Not just because these are old stories he told her long ago. That’s not the problem. The problem is that Vera’s waiting for him with that mute, rigid look that acts upon him like an electroshock.

Actually, Vera DOESN’T EVEN LOOK at Baba when he comes home. She EVALUATES him. Evaluates the elasticity of his footsteps. How bent his knees are. Whether he’s reaching for the wall. What angle his body is to the ground.

Vera also doesn't listen anymore to what Baba says, just whether he's speaking from the throat or from the diaphragm.

Baba enters the apartment more and more frequently stepping stiffly, knees barely bending, bombed to the gills. Bellows out a greeting from deep in the gut. Hand groping in panic for the wall.

"Jesus," he mumbles, "what a nightmare day I had."

Or, "Ever since this morning, my head's been killing me, like the top's going to blow off."

Or, "Something I ate in the cafeteria didn't agree with me."

Or something similar.

And Vera turns her head away from him. Doesn't say anything, just loses herself in her own thoughts.

And Baba drags himself over to the couch and starts expounding on some big plans he has. Jabbering about some novel he's going to write. Or how another department wants him and is offering him a big raise. Or how nowadays there isn't even...

Vera's not listening to him. Her ears are losing the capacity to pick up Baba's frequency. And he's losing himself in a labyrinth of unconnected thoughts. And then he falls asleep.

When he wakes up, he tries to bring up some inconsequential topic, just checking out the terrain.

Observes Vera, attempting to reconstruct what happened when he came home. Was he talking a bunch of shit? Did he go off on her verbally? Was she even home when he came in? He blathers on about something trivial, looking at Vera with the eyes of a boxer forced into the corner. And Vera's silent, and he can't read on her face what she's thinking. That's why Baba is so fucking afraid to go home. Fear of going home is an unresearched illness. For some inexplicable reason it's been neglected and, in contrast to other fears, has no medical status whatsoever. It doesn't even have a name. How do you cure yourself of an unnamed illness, ignored by the medical world? And that's why Baba is standing at the counter of the Komiža buffet in Masarykova Street, still in his loafers, silently drinking his lukewarm beer, and thinking about the things a guy who's afraid to go home always thinks about.

"Oh, heart of the city, what youth you've blessed me with." The words of an old hit song were crackling out of a wall speaker, and Baba, wiping foam from his lips with the palm of his hand, was thinking about how the old dive was still resisting the merciless blows of "innovation." What does that mean? Most of all, it means that in the Komiža buffet you could still get domestic beer. And that's not an insignificant thing if you give it a little thought. As an unenlightened anti-globalist—and because it was totally clear to him that the joke about the October Revolution and the vodka wasn't really a joke—Baba didn't really care about the avalanche of "advancements" that had bombarded Zagreb after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Ten years later, Baba concluded, when you added up all the pluses and minuses, the only thing worth mentioning was that there were fewer cafes where you could get domestic beer. It turned out that this legendary democracy everyone was talking about consisted of domestic beer getting fucked over.

So Baba was infinitely surprised, (and pleased), that the Komiža still existed in its present form, with its circular counter resembling a bunker, and its chrome surface kept shiny by the elbows of scores of notorious scam artists, the hanging shelf with the hard liquor above the counter, and the glass cabinet (baloney sandwiches embellished with mayonnaise and wilted lettuce leaves). The wooden stools and ceramic tiles on the walls, a hanging lamp of fake crystal. And a bathroom with a stench that would stun a rhino, toilet always plugged up, the cracked urinals, floors slick with piss—but WITHOUT those fascist signs showing a cigarette with a slash across it. And, finally, there was the pudgy barmaid in a white blouse and dark blue skirt, wearing on her swollen feet those faded, ergonomically correct shoes with the toes and ankles cut out. And did she know how to take orders! Coffee? OK. Tea? Indian or rosehip?

Ožujsko beer. Sure thing. Wine with mineral water. Grasevina or Riesling? Cognac. Coming right up. Pelinkovac, schnapps, bitters...a merciful simplicity, rare in a world bombarded with information and innovation.

Baba was surprised, (and pleased), that none of those war profiteers had cast an eye on the Komiža, hadn't turned it into something with a sign above the door reading, RISTORANTE DELL'ARTE GRANDIOSA, for example, where they served those complicated foods and drinks whose names got your tongue all tangled up, like you were hammered.

For some stupid reason, Baba thought as he signaled to the barmaid to pour him another one, people are convinced that when they enter a grandioso, whatever, that they themselves assume some kind of magical aura. That after eating some Wop or Kraut concoction with a complicated name, they're going to be automatically propelled into some parallel, and infinitely superior, world. As though the place were serving side dishes of peyote or magic mushrooms, hash brownies. What the fuck is that? Baba asked himself. Why are we so determined to be something we'll never be, even in our wildest dreams? Why are we continually screwing each other over? "True, my salary sucks and I'm up to my ears in debts I'll be paying off till I die, but I drive an A-class car and I hang out at the Grandioso. And you? What do you drive, where do you hang out?" If that's the way things are, he thought as he watched the foam spill over the edge of the mug and across the barmaid's beefy fingers, then the only thing left for me to do in this evolutionary struggle is to root for the cockroach. They're okay; they mind their own business and don't act like assholes.

The barmaid brought Baba a fresh mug of beer. He wondered whether the woman would now change into a cloud of butterflies, whether one would flutter down onto a rose, which Baba would pluck, and then all the doors would open up to him, the real doors, the ones everyone wants access to, because behind these doors, there are no disconnected phones, no overdrawn notices from the bank, no crowds in the tram, no chalk outlines of bodies on the sidewalk...

No way, Baba shook his head. The Komiža was a time warp in which nothing happened. Time had stopped in here a long time ago. Baba often thought of himself as an entity stuck in time. You can't start all over at the age of forty-six. All you can do is wait. And waiting's a lot more enjoyable with a beer to keep you company, right?

Baba chugged his beer, put his money on the counter, and went out into the street. Into a world where people are collapsing on the sidewalk, hanging on to life by the skin of their teeth, and rushing around, totally clueless that sooner or later they're going to be traveling along a street with no exit.