Robert Perišić
Our Man in Iraq
Translated from Croatian by Will Firth

Saddam is a young villager from the outskirts of Basra, he was named after the President, what can he do, he spreads his hands, spreads his hands wide like a scarecrow, and I spread mine too, spread mine wide, and we chat like two scarecrows in the field, except there are no crops, no plants, no grass and no birds for us to scare away, only sand and scrap iron, and his village, said Saddam, is in a bad place, he spreads his hands, a very bad place, there's fire there, he says, a lot of fire, so he stuck all his goats in a crazy film pick-up truck and took to the road like Kerouac, except there's no literature, no Neal Cassady, no poetry, no shade under the vine, as they say here, and his tyre burst, and Saddam the goatherd was out on the Basra-Baghdad highway, his tyre burst and there was no spare, gaaawd, so Saddam is patching his tyre, the goats are bleating in the pick-up, an idyllic scene, Abrams tanks pass by, all looking ahead, amassed forces around Saddam's goats, I crouch beside him, looking at the tyre, you know, as if I'm going to help, but I don't.

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I read this as if I was monitoring him like they monitor malingerers in the army; I could hardly reach him but, damn, he sure got under my skin. I kept thinking of his folksy phrases; it was like when you hear a cheap but catchy song and the melody sticks in your head… No shade under the vine, imagine!
I felt he was doing this to me on purpose. I saw straight away how he looked at me when we met a month ago in Zagreb after the nice, long years of not seeing each other.
The layout guy Zlatko had had a baby daughter that day and treated us to a round of drinks; afterwards I went and sat in the bar close to the firm to wait for Boris. Cuz was over half an hour late. I expected he'd got lost. But then I saw him coming along the street, glancing around cautiously.
I waved.
I watched him as he came up: his gait took me back to when we were teenagers and greeted each other loudly with a clap on the shoulder and a yell of Hey, old chum. We learned a rakish swagger: walking broad-legged with our hands in our pockets as it if was cold. We put on a show of enthusiasm when we met in bars and clubs because we were relying on each other in the event of a fight, I guess.
As I watched him now I saw he still walked that way.
I got up: "Hey, old chum, how are things?" and patted him on the shoulder.
"Is it you?" he offered me a flabby hand.
He sat down.
He was wearing orange-tinted shades and smiled like a mafioso pretending to be a Buddhist; De Niro wore that 'mask' in several films and since then streetwise guys have taken to using it.
Sinewy, with a longish face. We'd always been similar. He's even got a streak of colour in his hair, a yellowish stripe behind his ear. He looked quite urbane, as they say. You could tell he didn't live in our village, which incidentally has expanded quite a bit but still isn't a city, so we called it a 'town'… Could there be any notion more non-committal than 'town'? A multi-purpose whatever, an amalgam of dilapidated houses and holiday flats strung out along the road…
But Boris lived in Split – cuz was urbane, a city boy, good on him. I wouldn't need to feel embarrassed if

anyone I knew passed by.

He sat down at the table so sluggishly that I thought he was smacked out. But he said he'd been clean for a long time. Now he told me he'd come to the big smoke cos, like, there's no perspective back 'ome and grinned as if he wanted to make fun of that hackneyed word perspective.
He wore his underdoggery in a slightly high-handed way like victims of the system do. Soon he took out some sheets of paper and handed them to me: 'So ya can see 'ow I write.'
The pages were densely typed from top to bottom with a worn ribbon – you could hardly see the words, but I tried... and read a little longer than I wanted. He just stared straight ahead, smiling at the fruit juice he'd ordered, smoking Ronhill and blithely blowing rings.
What he'd given me were poems in prose on some intangible topic. Never mind, I thought, he's bound to be unrecognised in his neighbourhood. I could see he was literate, and that was something. His filmstar smile which put me on edge was simply a defensive stance in case I told him his writing was crud.

"You need to take this to a literary magazine and let them have a look," I said
"It doesn't matter. I can do any kind of writing." He started tapping with his leg. His smile faded.
"Look, this is literature of sorts, it's special in its own right," I stated cautiously. "For newspapers you need to write concisely and..."
"That's even easier," he interrupted.
I ought to have seen straight away that this wasn't a promising debut. Well, actually, I did see.
"I really don't know just now," I told him. "If there's an opening, I'll let you know..."

"Fine," he said in a descending tone as if I was abandoning a little puppy.
I felt those pangs of conscience again. Why? Was it guilt for me having become estranged? Fear of having become conceited? When he asked me what my girlfriend did and I told him she was an actress, I felt like I was boasting. But what should I have said – that she's a toll-booth cashier?!
Whatever I said looked like bragging to a provincial audience, a milieu dominated by rough-and-ready Gastarbeiter types. So I spoke in a blasé voice as if none of it mattered, which probably sounded like I was weary of my own importance.

It's strange when someone like that comes to see you, someone allegedly close who can't understand you and looks at you like a commercial on TV. I saw that Boris couldn't conceive of my life in any real terms. I knew where he was coming from and could imagine his life, but he couldn't imagine mine; that's why he looked at me like an apparition which had been magically beamed from the summertime shallows where we played 'keepy-uppy' in our swimming trunks, into the actors' jet set, and from there had skydived down into a newspaper office overflowing with cash that was occupied with things arcane.

Once, long ago, we listened to the same records and were so alike in dress and behaviour that old grandmother Lucija could hardly tell us apart; and now look at us... If I hadn't gone away I would've got stuck in a rut like him, I thought. I recognised myself in him like a parallel reality, but he sized me up as if asking himself what made me better. It seemed I reminded him of some form of injustice.
"I could write what no one else will," Boris said and laughed for no reason. "It's no sweat for me."
"Hmm. Shall we have another drink?" I asked, not knowing what else to say.

“I’ve only got twenty kunas,” he warned me.
“It’s OK, it’s on me,” I said so it wouldn’t be awkward for him.
“All right,” he sighed, as if he’d needed persuading.

I ordered another beer and he – I couldn’t believe it – another juice, and I realised that the conversation wasn’t going to get more fluid. I began to feel time pressure.
“Don’t you drink?” I asked.
“Now and then,” he said and fell silent.
Then I launched into a spiel about when, how and how much I drink – an inane, incoherent story that soon got on my nerves, but I had to say something so we wouldn’t sit there like two logs; he obviously hadn’t developed a talent for small talk.
We sat there for a little longer and finally he mentioned his degree, which he hadn’t been able to finish. I could tell he’d planned to mention it and had thought about how to present the topic.
He obviously thought I knew what he’d studied.
We were supposed to behave like we were really close, so I nodded.
Still, after things ground to a halt again I said: “Sorry, what was it that you studied again? I just remember it was pretty exotic.”
“Arabic,” he laughed and slapped his hands on his knees. It seemed he was laughing at himself. Probably because he had studied Arabic instead of a more pedestrian subject.
Bingo! It suddenly dawned on me. I was probably a bit sloshed already, and I pointed a finger like Uncle Sam and uttered: “Iraq!”
Rabar, the only true go-getter on the staff, had defected to GEP a month earlier, and there he was now reporting for the competitors in Kuwait, so… Unbelievable but true: here was a job in the offing!
Boris smiled sadly and said: “Morocco.”
“What about Morocco?”
“We were in Morocco, not Iraq.”
“Uh-huh –,” I made the connection. “I know.”
“Six years… You know how it was: dad was chief engineer; we had servants and a pool. Then – wham! – the old man had a heart attack. Right there by the pool.”
“Yes. I know.”
Now he’d finally found his topic. He’d gone to the international school, but they also learnt Arabic. Later, when they returned, he had ‘the language in his head’. Every time he thought of something in Arabic he’d remember his old man. But he had no one to converse with and started to forget the language. He mentioned that once he’d overheard two Arabs talking in the street; he followed them to a café, sat at the next table and listened to them. “They noticed I was following them, and I had them guessing whether I was a spook or a poof. I understood everything they said,” he grinned. Afterwards he enrolled in Arabic in Sarajevo but couldn’t finish uni because the war began.

“OK, and now have a think about this –,” I said, “Would you go to Iraq? The Yanks are going to attack any day.”
“Sure!” came the answer as quick as a shot.
I’d thought he’d be interested in finding out more about the proposal.
I continued, watching his reaction: “Now, our guy who went to war zones had his ways of doing things. I don’t know how, but he always coped. He sent things by mail – the photos and the texts. There are also

these satellite phones…"
"No probs, I'll get the hang of it."
"Have a good think. It's war."
"No sweat."
"Sure?"
"Peace has become a problem for me."
Hmm, right at the start I'd caught a whiff of Vietnam syndrome. It was in vogue after the war among demobbed soldiers. That typical defensive shell: taciturn, phlegmatic face, the occasional long look in the eyes.
I didn't know where to stand on that. Back at uni me and Markatović had perfected that veteran habitus – here around Zagreb I could have stood in for Rambo if needed, but Boris knew that my experience of war amounted to hanging around up on a hill with an anti-aircraft battery. Nothing ever came anywhere near us, and after a month and a half my old man got me out.
Maybe that was why Boris behaved as if I owed him a favour: because he didn't have a dad to get him out but followed Arabs down the street.

"All right then. If peace is a problem for you you'll have a great time in Iraq," I said.
He glanced furtively at me. "I think it'll be great," he answered.
Everything should have been clear to me then. But I felt I had to help him in order to return some kind of irrational debt.
When he started to send me his psychedelics, I called him by satellite phone. He acted as if he didn't hear me well. A bad connection, and pigs can fly… Since then he hasn't been in touch by phone. He wrote that it's dangerous, they can be located, but he continued to send mails every day – he didn't care that we were a weekly. Then I wrote him a mail telling him to come back, afterwards I warned him politely that we expected him to return, and in the end I thoroughly insulted him. No result.
Now he'd been there for a month already, was probably having a great time, and didn't reply to any of my mails.
I say all of this to an imaginary listener.
Sometimes that helps me plan what I'm going to say, like a lawyer about to defend himself.

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I tried to occupy my thoughts with something else. I was holding Jimi Hendrix's biography and trying to read when Sanja entered the flat.
I probably looked dejected.
"Are you angry? Listen, I really couldn't go and see the flat," she said straight away. "I ran into a journalist – from The Daily News."
"You're joking, from GEP? How long did you talk for?"
"An hour maybe. Plus the photo-shoot."
"Hang on," I looked at her. "That's more than a little statement. Was it a proper interview?"
"We'll see, we'll see," she said, as if she didn't believe it could be. That'd be the first interview of her life.
I felt all this was happening to me. I wanted to be involved too.
I paused. "Did they also ask you about, like, personal things?"
"Don't worry, I was careful not to let any cats out of the bag," she smiled.

She saw the remnants of the pizza on the table.
“I’ve already eaten, I couldn’t wait,” I said.
“No trouble, I’ve eaten too. We ordered a whole pile of kebabs.”
She came up to me.
“Do I stink?” she asked and assailed me with a heavy onion breath.
“Ugh, get off me!” I said.
“I don’t caaare!” She imitated a naughty child. She was obviously trying to cheer me up. I put on some theatrical revulsion: “Jeez, what a disgrace! Bloody hell, I mean: she plays the fancy actress, but here at home she stinks like a skunk!”
“Your problem. I don’t caaare!” She giggled and fumigated me with her onion breath, trying to kiss me while I kept trying to evade her.
In the end I let her kiss me, but then it wasn’t fun for her any more.
I wondered whether I should tell her about Charly and Ela…

“Have Jerman and Doc been cramming their lines?” I asked to change the topic.
She rolled her eyes: “Ingo has moved the dress rehearsal to eleven in the evening! He has to work with them before that. But the craziest thing is: he gives me more shit than he does to any of the others. I mean, they disrupt me too, of course. But then he comes down on me to assert his authority.”
“Well well, he’s supposed to be progressive but he vents his fury on the girls?!”
“All he tells me is that I have to act like a punk. His spiel is, like, I have to rebel against how others see that role,” she said, imitating the director’s speech and his way of smoking while constantly looking up at the ceiling.
“Hmm, perhaps…”
Now she got edgy: “OK, I have to be rebellious, but he shouts at me all day.”
I didn’t know what to say: “Who’d have thought.”
Then I added, cautiously: “He’s obviously panicking. I mean, you all are.”
I thought she knew what I meant. She knew she was the one panicking. But she wanted to let out her frustration: “I know. But today I was about to tell him where he could stick it. Like: if punk’s what you want, punk’s what you’ll get!”
Sanja liked to be brave and to make a stand. If she were male it’d all be different, but I adored it like this: her pugnacity, her independence, her attitude… You’re my hero, I whispered to her sometimes. But now she sighed, looked away sulkily, took a cigarette… She blew out a drag, and another, and glanced at me furtively to see if I’d noticed that sense of crisis.
“Well, tell him where he can shove it!” I said.
“What?”
“He should think twice, it’s too late to throw you out now!”
I wanted her to feel my support. She had to act with conviction and show she was prepared to defend herself. She wasn’t going to swear at the director, but she should at least feel that she could. That’d put her back on her feet and get her over the feeling that everyone was taking it out on her.
She looked deep into my eyes, as if she saw a beautiful sight there, and kissed me.
“Ugh, you really do stink,” I said.
“Then I’ll go and brush my teeth!” she yelled cheerily.
When she came back we sat on the couch, she stroked my head, neck and tummy as if she had hidden

intentions, but I probably seemed too wooden to her, so she asked me if it was because of her. She reassured me that I needn't worry, that she'd see us through it all.
I took a deep breath. This time it was my turn.

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Sanja was against Boris going to Iraq, against the war, against anyone writing about such a spectacle, against infotainment, against various things, and I had an inkling she wasn't exactly enthusiastic about my relatives either. OK, neither am I, but I always defended them whenever she said anything, the devil knows why, probably so it wouldn't look like she was genetically superior.

I remember how she rolled her eyes when I told her Boris was going, and I assured her that it wasn't because he was a relative of mine but because he was the right person for the job – he knew Arabic, he was literate, and war wasn't a problem for him. So now I didn't mention the problems to her, but I had to share them with someone, dammit.
I just gave her a quick run-down and, of course, it all sounded like a confirmation that she was right.
"Recommending him was a terrible mistake," I concluded.
"You wanted to help him," Sanja said, and added, almost maternally. 'You're too sentimental. Your relatives are just using you."
I didn't want to talk about that again.
"Can we skip the topic?" I said.
"I had a kind of premonition," she continued, as if she herself was in the mess. "But you were so enthusiastic about him."
"Who me? Enthusiastic?!"
"Don't you remember? Your cousin knows Arabic. You said I had to meet him."
"I don't remember."
I had no intention of talking about that. It'd even look as if I was losing my memory.
"OK, don't get angry," she placated. "You're just a bit naive, you misjudge people."
Come off it, I wanted to say to her – I saw straight away what was going on. Then I realised this wasn't exactly the right time. I felt the gap between those two poles.
She waited for me to say something.
I waited too.
Then I waved dismissively.
Sanja continued in a gentle tone of voice: "I just wanted to say something about your relatives: you let them walk all over you... They're not interested in you, but they keep dragging you down."
"Yeah, Sanja, yours aren't avant-garde either," I said.

The wall and the garage

We'd been putting it off for a long time and living in a fiction, as it were. Not until our third summer together did we set off on an official tour to meet the in-laws: several days with hers, several days with mine.
It looked a bit like an actor's workshop: we watched each other fine-tune our performance, took care that the other didn't put their foot in their mouth, sat at the table stiffly and respectably and exchanged

trite phrases in that regional slang. I didn't exactly know my lines… But I talked about the high price of living, various ailments and car accidents, basically from memory, a bit stilted I suppose, like an amateur actor.
They asked us about our life in Zagreb in a well-intentioned, worried tone and suspected we were living the wrong way; we tried to stick to factual matters and somehow extricate ourselves because we couldn't openly admit that we aimed to live a life diametrically opposed to theirs.
It was interesting that we weren't able to tell them anything about our life as it really happened. When you looked at it, there was hardly anything to say. Our life barely existed, as if it had been left behind in some secret argot, where I had also left my real being, while this imposter sat at the table, enumerated bland facts, nattered about the car and introduced himself to her parents as me… His gaze wandered around the flat. At Sanja's parents' there was nowhere to look – there was no empty space. Her mother had a morbid fear of open spaces and the flat was so crammed full of 'practical' little tables that there was hardly any air to breathe.

Then, just on our second morning there, Sanja suggested to her mother that they knock down the wall between the kitchen and the living room to gain more space, and I made the mistake of seconding the idea. Her mother glanced at me in consternation and I realised that she was used to her daughter having strange ideas but was disappointed that Sanja had found the same sort of guy. She immediately ridiculed the idea with her Mediterranean temperament; she spoke exclusively to Sanja – you could tell that she couldn't discuss such intimate topics as knocking down the wall with me. Probably Sanja wanted to appear a mature adult in front of me, so she kept contradicting her mother all the time we there – and not just about the wall. You couldn't really call it an argument, more a mutual show of disrespect which seemed to keep them cheerful and create a special closeness… In fact, I felt their taunting and teasing actually showed how much they were at home.
I couldn't talk with her mother like that – I respected her – so I was condemned to silence. Also, my future mother-in-law kept her jabs and wise-talk exclusively for Sanja, not me – because she respected me.
Having fallen silent about the wall, I found it hard to talk at all… Our people are like that, I meditated: they'd always prefer to build a wall than knock one down. They always liked having two rooms rather than one. They loved to count rooms. Now why wasn't I sensible like them?
I spoke very cautiously with Sanja's dad, of course. He had disappointment written on his brow. Politics was his particular chagrin, all the parties were a let-down. He watched the news avidly, read the newspaper and was disappointed time and time again. That seemed to be his main occupation. He wanted to know if we journalists were disappointed too. "Oh yes!' I exclaimed and mentioned a few practical examples. I felt a kind of need to join him in disappointment, but maybe he thought I even wanted to outdo him in that because I was a journalist of sorts in Zagreb and had the opportunity to get disappointed first-hand, so in a way he didn't want to listen; whenever I opened my mouth he'd start explaining how much Zagreb was out of step with the situation on the ground, which was one of the things which disappointed him most.
I sipped beer, relaxed and watched the news. The mass of empty beer cans grew, all rattling in the rubbish bin until they were crushed down into a smaller pile.

We frenetically waved goodbye from the car. I thought of telling Sanja that one actually didn't look so lost among all the 'practical' little tables at my parent's place, after a drink or two. "My folks have got a

nice courtyard and a garden, you'll see," I said cheerfully.
Then we arrived and I saw the garage.
They'd told me about the new garage and were pleased with themselves for fitting it perfectly into the courtyard. But I saw straight away that the courtyard was gone. A small amount of space remained but you could see it was unused space.
They proudly opened up the garage for us by remote control as if they were officially opening a new production line, and I parked inside.
"Oh my God," I said to Sanja.

Yep, my folks had become bourgeois, so to speak, and we sat there like we had at Sanja's folks'. The new edifice in the courtyard stuck out like a sore thumb. And you couldn't say anything against it. I was about to say a word and they came down on me like a ton of bricks: How dare I cruise in from Zagreb and lecture them – from Zagreb, mind you! Zagreb with its holier-than-thouness was like a red rag to a bull. They needed that new addition: Our garage is our castle.
My mum whispered to Sanja on that occasion, forging a female alliance, that she didn't need to listen to me all the time because men were stupid: let them have their whims. My father generally followed her remarks with a smile, and here and there heckled his old lady just for fun, which Sanja was supposed to find amusing. I tried to mediate these conversations as far as possible by drawing attention to myself, but my parents only had eyes for their daughter-in-law because, seeing as I'd brought her, it was clear to them that we were going to get married.

Then there we were again, back in our rented flat. Things had stopped developing just by themselves and I didn't know exactly what we'd think up, what lifestyle, we just had to avoid repeating the same old patterns, I told Sanja. We had to break through in a new direction, bore a tunnel, build a bold viaduct, whatever.

But then Boris had popped up, and now he was a feature in the landscape like my parents' garage.
I simply couldn't explain her the whole depth of the problem, so I turned the laptop towards her: "Read some of his stuff and tell me what you think."
She looked at me quizzically.
"Open one of his mails, any one," I said.

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I forgot to tell you the state of the war, cannons roar, turn heroes to gore, flash of steel in hand, crimson stains the sand, the dusky Arab is cast down, resistance is removed like a wart with a laser based on plans and scenarios, I guess all this looks like a film when you see it on TV, the desert is just the right backdrop, as if you were colonising Mars, you have no idea if there's any life there, you search for it, move on, there has to be something, at least bacteria or remains, fossils, fossil fuels, who knows what, you never know if the aliens have weapons of mass destruction, what level of technology they're at, here's an embedded journalist, a Bush, Tudjman or Milošević man, someone's fan, please circle the correct answer, and he asked me what I thought about weapons of mass destruction, if were there any, and would they be used in the Battle for Baghdad, and he provoked me cos everyone realises somehow that I'm an amateur, no idea how those pros tick, but of course Saddam's boys don't have weapons of

mass destruction cos you definitely wouldn't attack them if they did, so never fear, we can be calm, I said optimistically, and we toasted with alcohol-free beer, the people love me, what more can I say, and I feel accepted, but then the storm begins, a wind from the south brings eddies of dust and fine, fine sand, it fills your mouth, nose and eyes, so we fled to the cars and sat in those closed cars all day, sweating, you can't see a thing, you don't dare to open a window, not in your wildest dreams, not in your wildest fuckin' dreams, cos the sand will make its way in, into your brain, inside it's unbearably hot, brain waves, frequencies, bro, I wanted to call you just now to see what the weather's like there, but they told us to be careful with the Thuraya numbers cos they could be located, rocketed, and there's no point me getting charcoaled here just cos of the weather.

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Sanja smiled and shook her head as she read.
"You didn't tell me," she said. "He's just having fun."
Hmm, I scratched my head: "I'm not sure if that's intentional. It's a real pot-pourri. I don't know if he's gone crazy or not!"
"I think it's tongue-in-cheek," she said.
"But why hasn't he come back like I told him?!"
"I don't know. He's probably just playing the fool."
"He's messing me around, the dickhead!" I said. "If anyone's the object of that humour, it's me."

She tapped a fingernail on her teeth, contemplating.
Then she had a liberating thought: "Maybe he doesn't know how to write like a normal journalist."
"Everyone does, more or less," I contradicted.
She reflected: "I don't find it all that weird, you know. He has no training, kind of, in your language. I think if someone sent me to tag along behind the Yanks as if I was reporting on a sports event... I think I'd kind of want to muck up too."
"OK, I know you're against the war," I said, but I wanted to let her know that that wasn't the point.
She looked at me hard: "And why shouldn't I be? At least this guy is saying something; your paper doesn't have any position on the war."
I looked at her. What did she think: that I could change the world? A man would never expect that from a woman; sometimes she treated me as if I was Superman.
I thought I should tell her that I'd already lost all my illusions during the wars here. But that's not the kind of thing you tell a girl who's planning the future with you.

"So basically you mean he's kinda being subversive?"
"Consciously or not."

I didn't want to show the fury that was raging inside me. So they were the subversive ones, and I represented the system; they were on the side of freedom, and I – of repression. Hang on, Sanja was laughing: so he's witty, and I have no sense of humour? And I have to rack away at the crud he's written to patch it up. I did that like a domestic secret, tormenting myself and making myself paranoid, while the young'uns could let it all hang out...

I got up: “What sort of stupid game does he think this is? I have to rewrite everything…”
“Hey, don’t yell!” she interrupted. “Have I done anything wrong?!”
I sat down again.
She cast another glance at the text.
“I’d publish it like that!” she said.
Who am I talking to, I groaned inside. What pubescent crap.
“I can’t publish that! We’re a normal newspaper! Not a fanzine for nutters!”
“Yes, you lay down what’s considered ‘normal’,” she said punkishly, just like Ingo demanded of her, and added: “You’re yelling again.”
What is going on? Is she practising her role on me?!
“Tell that to Ingo,” I said. “I get the impression you’re a bigger punk at home than on the stage…”
Sanja snorted, offended.
“That was below the belt,” she said.
She was right. But it got on my nerves that I had to defend the system against her and Boris, two brave anti-globalists. How did I get into this mess?
I spewed irony: “Oh yes, newspapers dictate standards and the media standardise people! They lay down the language and the ‘issues’ to be served to the masses – bland and boring stuff, not psychedelics like this. They determine what people are to get worked up about and where they’re to have an opinion. Every day a pre-processed opinion…”
“Hey, why am I getting the flak?” she interrupted.
“C’mon, c’mon,” I stammered, “you’re lecturing me as if I’d just started thinking about all this today! I know all that stuff! But that’s where I get paid, and I’m having to take out that fucking loan! I know what’s possible and what’s not!”
“I’m lecturing you?! You keep talking… That is: yelling,” she said and glanced furtively at me.

She sat on the couch, offended. And I opposite, in the armchair.
Each breathing in our own rhythm.
The soundtrack of Buena Vista Social Club was spinning in the CD player.
I’d seen the film and realised something was wrong with the Cubans. They were so much better than us.

“What an absolute fucking mess!” I spoke through clenched teeth, mostly to myself.

“OK, that’s nothing new,” she said.
“What do you mean?”
“Nothing. Just what I said,” she grouched.
She looked at the smoke coming out of her mouth.
“What does just what I said mean?”
“Nothing.”
She really was fuming and smoking like an environmental catastrophe. “Just what I said…”
She didn’t say what.
So she didn’t say I was an incompetent? Or an idiot, good-for-nothing, misfit, flathead, bonehead or no-brainer?
I felt she was saying some of those things to me, or rather she wasn’t.
Boris, of course, wasn’t the only one. I’d recommended people in the past, too. Unlike Boris, the

problem with them was that they'd risen faster than me. They were amazingly capable, those people.

Young talents

I had a nose for talents and starlets, relatively gifted individuals with their hearts set on recognition and even fame. Maybe the point was that for years I'd spent too much time in bars and knew every idiot. In a nutshell, I volunteered as the corporation's human resources agent because whenever they needed someone young and enthusiastic they'd ask me: "Do you know anyone?"
"I do, there's this guy working as a waiter in Limited..."
"A waiter?"
"Yes, but he's been to uni and has a way with words."
"OK, you can send him."
That's how fresh blood arrived in journalism, including even Pero the Chief himself. It may sound strange, but I picked him up too, straight from a bar, back in the dawn of the democratic changes, and led him by the hand to the paper. The rest is history. Poetically put, his success was faster than the wind. Because our country has great social mobility. We don't have a stable elite. Socialism destroyed the old elites – what little bourgeoisie and provincial aristocracy we had; war and nationalism in the nineties destroyed the socialist elite; and then democracy happened and the nationalist elite had to be done away with.
Defeated elites can survive in nooks and crannies. Oh yes, they can conduct their businesses and pull the strings from the shadows; but out in the light of day, in representative media like our Objective, which always had to be a mirror of the new age – no, the new moment – we constantly needed new people! New columnists and opinion-makers, new faces, new photos. So, in the ten years of feverish change we'd gone through three media paradigms: socialist, wartime and democratic; several generations of smart alecs had been expended in the process, so now our media elite was extremely young.

Uncompromised people were in short supply. If until recently you'd listened to Lou Reed, worked as a waiter or studied viticulture, you now had the opportunity to put forth those new values. Democracy, pop culture, slow food... Without questioning capitalism, of course – we're not Reds! – so there was nothing you could do about the privatisation which was pushed through in the nineties by the shock-troops of happiness and the nation's leader. The dough was safely stashed away and young media cadres came along to portray an idyll of Europeanisation and normalisation. After all, what else is there to do after the revolution has been carried out and the dough tucked away? What we needed now was harmony, security, consumers and free individuals who paid off their loans; we could promote a little hedonism too, let people enjoy themselves, but within limits, of course, so as not to displease the Church.
There was something for everyone. It was dynamic, without a doubt. We were a new society, a society with constantly changing backdrops and new illusions. We were all new at the game... There was no House of Lords, landed gentry or old bourgeoisie, only the former socialist working people who'd spruced themselves up and now crowded forwards in a carnivalesque exertion, grasping for the stars. Everyone jostled to be the one to be launched: some fell on their faces, but the Eastern European post-communist version of the American dream did exist. Success depended on chance amidst the general turmoil and rapid repositioning. It was all reminiscent of Big Brother. One of the ordinaries would be shot into orbit, but who? The sky was the limit. We all felt it couldn't last long. The sky would close.

Society would stabilise, the ‘transition’ phase would pass, and then we’d know who made it and who didn’t. One day we too would have a House of Lords – a sham one, of course – but never mind. For now you had to jump on the train. Pero the Chief had outdone me, there was no doubt about that. He became the great editor, while I was still collecting losers by the roadside. And Pero, as we know, was no longer the same person. I wanted to stay the same the whole time, as if it was an achievement to remain a rebel and avoid all that junk.
Was this simply the ‘not wanting to grow up’ syndrome? Or was it all because of Sanja? She was still young enough to think it natural that I didn’t wear a tie like Pero; those were her values, and she fell in love with that sort of guy. But she too was progressing. God, she was progressing damn fast.

I’ll never forget when Pero began to progress; for a time he shunned my gaze, greeted me hurriedly, avoided sitting at the same table as me. Had he forgotten who it was who brought him to the office in the first place?
I always made the same mistake: I inadvertently reminded people of what they used to be.
Later I accepted him as a new person who had nothing to do with the waiter from Limited. Then he, in turn, accepted me again.
Logically thinking, I must have changed in some way too, despite my best efforts. If Pero became my boss nothing could stay the same.
I sort of kept all this secret from Sanja. I mentioned these things, I think, but always with a laugh and a joke, as if I was wafting in a higher universe safe from so-called social values. Stuff from the world of careers didn’t interest her anyway. She only saw love. Our love and love in the wider world. Ecology. Genuineness. Originality and romantic defiance from the fringe. She loved me just the way I was. It was only recently that she’d begun to follow the Career column of the horoscope.
And now, through nervous conversations, we’d begun to arrive at it, at the context – like in Alien, when the crew, after initial arrogance, begins to grasp the magnitude of the problems lurking in the cave in that distant galaxy.