

Zoran Malkoč

When I Was Nana Pila; Dead, But in My Prime

Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

Demining squad was just leaving the village, when I entered. I, the tsar, the king, the victor, the door-to-door salesman for Boban Books who left no illiterate, no blind nor unemployed person's house without making at least a thousand kunas profit. When they listened to my presentation on a health book, they thought not that they were buying a book, but an elixir of health and youth and they stood in wonder thinking how they had managed to survive without it until now. The nostrils of the customers who bought my cookbooks filled with seductive aromas and their mouths watered so much they impatiently ripped the book out of my hands and ran in the kitchen as if a lush dinner was about to jump out of the book.

I was hungry for challenge and I cruised war-devastated villages, infested with mine fields and overgrown with bushes, scum and weeds. That day I found myself in a village in the heart of the Prašnik rainforest. Out of twenty or so houses, ten were still more or less whole, or at least partially renewed. But in the most of them no one lived; I sold a copy of "How to Succeed in Life" to some grandpa for a couple hundred kunas, but that was it. One presentation was not concluded with a sale, and in other houses that were still whole I found no one. Some might say that even one sold book in such a god-forsaken place is a success, but luckily I'm not one of them. On my way out of the village, I noticed smoke coming out of a chimney of a sorry little house, a miniature hut split in half by a grenade, which when I passed by it the first time, I hadn't considered worthy of my visit. The smoke was the only sign of life in it.

I passed through a narrow stretch of the yard, kicking black snakes with whitish bellies that sunbathed on the path. I knocked the door. A weak voice answered and invited me inside.

There was a skinny old man sitting at the table, leaning against a checkered plastic tablecloth. Although it was warm, the worms cracked in the dry wood, faintly exploding in the stove next to which there was a bed in which someone was sleeping.

"Ah, it's you, Doctor, finally! Mara reached you on the phone, huh?" said the old man.

"Yes, grandpa, yes," I answered. It wasn't the first time that people in the villages called me a doctor because I sold health books. "And what's the problem? You're not feeling well?"

"I'm fine, my dear Doctor, but my Pila's not feeling well. She went to sleep yesterday and still hasn't gotten up, so I told our Mara to call you, she's the only one in the village with the telephone."

I placed the books on the table and approached the bed. Nana Pila was lying there frozen like a soldier, strict, dignified, as if in a review formation. Stiff. Dead. No less dead than Tutankhamen."

"Doctor, how about a shot of brandy?" offered the old man.

"Sure, grandpa, sure. Let me just take care of your Pila here."

The old man went to get the brandy and I sat at the edge of the bed pretending to be checking the 'patient'. Her body was white and rigid; she must have died yesterday. But her eyes were still full of life

and the longer I watched them the more it seemed those eyes wanted something from me. Soon the gaze became unbearable; I turned the old woman on her side, her face against the wall, and now it looked as if she was really sleeping.

“How bad is it?” asked the old man when he returned with the bottle.

“Don’t you worry, grandpa, she’ll even dance with you tonight. But if I hadn’t come...” I answered without thinking.

“Uh, my dear Doctor! If only you were right! Back in the day she used to twirl around like a fairy, and, by God, she knew how to turn me around, but our dancing days are over. Now we’re just waiting for Him to call on us. Here you are, cheers!”

“Cheers, grandpa! And you’re not having any?”

“I mustn’t. Ah, but I love it,” he said longingly.

“Eh, who’s the doctor here, have a glass, it won’t hurt,” I said because before my eyes suddenly there was an image of the old man when he finally realized he’d been left alone, without his Nana Pila, in the middle of this mine-infested jungle.

The old man drank one glass, then another. Perhaps he shouldn’t have, but he surely could, so soon we stroke a good rhythm, the brandy ran down smoothly, we knocked our glasses, downed our drinks, knocked our glasses again. The bottle was gone in a second; the old man went to get another. And then, just for the sake of it, I sold him a health book. When he asked me how much he owed me for the visit, I told him nothing; but this handbook, meant for the people without easy access to medical institutions, unfortunately, was not as free as my services, and if I could, I would never sell it to him, but the rules of my trade forced me to do it and the book was so useful to a man in need to help either himself or someone else. I filled out the bill, he gave me a hundred kunas, and I explained to him that the remaining four payment slips would arrive by mail. Actually he wanted to pay the full price immediately, but he told me that the money was in Pila’s apron, and neither he nor I wanted to wake Pila up.

My job was done and, as far as that was concerned, I could leave. But I didn’t feel like it. Both the old man and I were pretty drunk by that point; for the last hour he was mostly nodding off and on, occasionally mumbling something important that wasn’t meant for me. Obviously he thought he was talking to Pila. I left him sleep in peace and went to the next room. It was a bedroom dominated by a huge wooden wardrobe with a large mirror and two old-fashioned beds, loaded like river barges ready to set sail. On the first bed there were large down pillows, quilts and blankets, piled up almost to the ceiling. I wasn’t particularly interested in that one. I approached the bed with the clothes on it. I took my time, choose slowly, first a dark blue skirt sprinkled with barely visible stars, then a black blouse with red flowers, a dark red vest and a green headscarf woven with threads of gold and silver. Nana was tall and the clothes fitted me perfectly, and the colors were arranged in such a way that I literally glowed. Then I realized I needed to take a piss. I ran out of the house, picked up the front part of the skirt and with manly mercilessness watered the dusty dirt below me. I barely managed to shake it off, when some woman greeted me from the road: “God bless you, nana! You feel any better?”

“God bless you, my child! You can see it yourself, never better!” I replied in a voice that wasn’t mine and that had to be Pila’s. Then I went back to the house, covered the deceased, and then found the right music on the radio. A moment later I moved magically through the small kitchen and teased the sleeping old man every time I passed by him. It didn’t take long and the old man woke up, rubbed his

eyes and started giggling with his toothless mouth: “And I didn’t trust the doctor when he told me you were going to dance tonight. And there you are spinning around like a girl in her prime!”

“You just come here, grandpa!” I said, took him by the hand and lead him into my magic circle. He kept on laughing like crazy.

“How long has it been since we span like this, huh Pila?”

“Ah, I don’t know, but I know that now we’re going to spin all the time, till we die, and even later, in the other world.”

“Aren’t we happy together, huh Pila?”

“We are, we truly are,” I confirmed and planted a kiss onto the old man’s lips. He started losing his breath. I wasn’t letting him go. I held him tightly and span him around, faster and faster, until I realized he was no longer standing on his feet but I actually carried him in my arms all limp and strangely light. Then I put the old man down on the bed, turned Pila toward him, and threw his arm over her hip. And it seemed just right.

I returned Pila’s clothes back to their place and then sat down at the table where the two of us not long ago had sat and drunk, poured myself another glass of brandy and drank it slowly watching the old lovers lucky enough to die together only a couple of hours apart and neither of them knew about the other one passing. Even Pila’s face seemed somehow less strict. Then I corrected the bill, crossed over ‘installments’ and added that the full amount was paid in cash, which with fifteen per cent discount came to 481.00 kunas. I took the exact amount from Pila’s apron and left the house. Right at the gate a black fat snake stopped in my way, but I kicked it into the bushes and came out onto the sunny road. I, the tsar, I, the king, I, the champion.

Zoran Malkoč

Ćelentano's Bestiary

Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

Back then I was still friends with Ćelentano. He wasn't sending his boys after me. Nor was he threatening me. But there's no doubt that even then he was completely crazy. He claimed he was a scumbag, and his opinion about the rest of the species was even worse. On top of that, he had money and he liked to spend it on proving his claim right. But for some reason he loved drinking with me. That day he called me up on the phone just after noon. I stared at the cell phone thinking whether to pick it up when my indecision was broken by his SUV stopping in front of my bookstore.

"Where are you?"

"Working."

"Ah! Working your ass off, huh?! Listen, you remember that idea I had about a cage?"

"I remember."

"Well, the thing's on the roll. I got myself the first beast."

"A tiger?"

"Well, not exactly a tiger. It's more like a bear type. But good! Tough! Hey teddy, let my partner hear that mean roar of yours!" yelled Ćelentano, and then I heard a deep mumble, not exactly the way a bear sounds. "You heard it? Good, huh? A real grizzly! You should see it take charge of the bars! Listen, get your ass over here, we'll have ourselves a couple of drinks and play with our teddy, what do you say?"

"I don't know. I'm working. And I don't have..."

"What? A car? Isn't Ćorkaš there yet? C'mon, don't fuck with me! Adriano!"

I put on an "Out of Office!" sign on the door, closed the store and entered the SUV. As usual Ćorkaš said nothing, he just turned the engine on and off we went. Driving with him was an experience of horrible silence. You looked straight in front of you and saw nothing; all you could hear was relentless silence and you had to ask yourself: "Why doesn't this goddamn piece of shit want to talk to me?" And when you knew he'd killed someone, twice, and not in the war, the question kept on popping up in your mind and soon it was the only thing you thought about.

Before he started working for Ćelentano, Ćorkaš had tried working as a taxi driver for a couple of years, but the only thing he managed to do was to become the worst taxi driver ever because no one on Earth wanted to get in his car. No one except for Ćelentano. And he hated driving anything but his beloved Mustang. And that thing didn't run on roads. Mustang was, just so you know, his flying car. And that's where I found Ćelentano when Ćorkaš finally freed me of his silence.

Mountainsides around us echoed with the thunder of Mustang's engine. That was called "nature, peace and quite Ćelentano's way." Among all those meadows and forests, on a steel pole three meters tall, Mustang was mounted, everything running, powerful, its wheels in the air. Ćelentano waved his bottle of whiskey at me from above.

"Wanna go for a ride?" he yelled.

“I’d rather not. This thing with Ćorkaš was just enough.”

“Nothing beats driving and chatting with Ćorkaš, huh? Money can’t buy that. I’ll tell you once why the grim face keeps silent, but now we have better things to do. Let’s go see our teddy. Got your swimming shorts? No? Take mine,” he said and threw them directly at my head. A moment later he was standing next to me, naked, then he ran into the house and came back in a blink of an eye, in a different pair of shorts, then went back in again, came out again with a thirty-two pack in his hands and a third pair of swimming shorts, boxers, gave me the pack, climbed up to his flying car, took his flip-flops, which he, however, didn’t put on his feet, but once he came down, threw back up in the car. That was Ćelentano. A little man fifty or so years of age and livelier than the liveliest kid.

“There! Let’s go! We have a couple of inflatables waiting for us in the pond, so we’ll swim a little, have ourselves a drink or two, and watch our teddy. He has full six more hours to go before the end of his shift. He’s been working since noon, which means he’s here until eight. Did you know he’s a philosopher? Has a degree in philosophy and everything! Imagine, a graduated bear-philosopher!” he said and, holding his nose with his thumb and index finger, jumped in the pond. “C’mon, what are you waiting for?”

After Ćorkaš’s stern silence, Ćelentano’s hyperactivity and constant chatter seemed as if someone was hitting me over the face with wet newspapers. I jumped in the water, went down to the bottom and lay there on my stomach assuming the position of an old catfish. I didn’t feel like coming back to the surface. I went up only after I ran out of air. Above surface, nothing had changed. Ćelentano kept on babbling.

“And he’s not only a philosopher. He’s also a librarian. Senior librarian, to be more precise. Married, one child, a son, already in college,” Ćelentano spoke as if reading from a file. “In his marriage he plays the role of a wife, she’s the one who’s got the balls. During the war he left his family and ran away to live with his parents in Istria, where he also had a lover. And then, taking a side road, several to be exact, he started his slow return to the town he’d escaped from. For a while he worked in Zagreb. Then in Požega. And then, finally, with the help of some connections of his wife’s, he got himself a job in the library. But he’s not satisfied. He thinks he deserves more. Wants to release the bear inside, that’s what he told me. He hopes this experience will make that happen. At work, he’s surrounded by women, they are the ones holding him back the most, they keep on whispering, which is, truth be told, expected in a library, but that whisper is dangerous and poisoned with political games and schemes. Of course, the whole story about his bear-like nature is a bunch of bull, he’s here because of the dough. Listen, four hundred for eight hours, a librarian can’t make that much a day no matter how senior he is.”

Half way through Ćelentano’s speech I knew whom he was talking about. True, I couldn’t see him because he retreated to the darkest corner of the cage that hung over the pond and the only part of him I could see was his fat ass and the balls sticking out between his buttocks. But I had no doubt that the hairless ass belonged to Parožić.

“Hey, teddy! Bear! No time for sleeping, hey, you gotta earn your day’s pay! C’mon, show my partner how dangerous you are! Where’s that bear’s nature of yours! C’mon!” yelled Ćelentano, but the bear didn’t move.

“Let him be, c’mon, there’s time. Or, even better, send him home. It’s not funny,” I said sullenly.

“Eh!” said Ćelentano surprised. “Am I keeping him here? The cage’s not locked, he can leave if he wants to. But if he intends to stay, then I want to see the bear’s nature! Understood! I want to see a wild bear!”

Having heard this, the bear got up and on all fours ran towards us. But he did it clumsily so he slipped and knocked his forehead against the bars. His body burned, skin hanging from it in rags, his face red from sun and strain, now he lay down again and watched us as if he was about to cry. Shaking his head in disappointment, Čelentano threw a beer cap at his forehead. That seemed unnecessarily rough to me, but my partner obviously knew his way around bears because now the bear got really angry. He stood up, roared from the top of his lungs, slapped his chest, and then threatened to take a swing at us; he shook his head pretending to be biting, wildly snapping his jaws as if ripping pieces of raw flesh. Čelentano winked at me importantly and said: “Good! Good!” This made the bear jump at the bars his belly first and make completely unbearable noise.

“But he doesn’t have to keep howling! Not even the real ones do it all the time.”

“Well, I’m not saying he has to do it all the time. But sometimes he has to. Right, he overdid it now, but how can you tell a bear to stop? How about we throw him a fish or two, they eat fish, right? Maybe that’ll calm him down a bit. Gimme that fishing net!” he shouted at Čorkaš who was just collecting cigarette buds and beer caps we’d been throwing in the pond with the said fishing net. Čelentano soon caught a huge, lazy carp, but when he tried to take it out, he ended up in water together with it. He came out without the fish, with a broken cigarette in his mouth, beer in his hand and a new suggestion. “How about a ride?” he said, and at that moment the noise of Mustang’s engine seemed more attractive than anything. But that wasn’t much help either. While Čelentano, who otherwise never slept, dozed on the passenger’s seat and shook because I was squeezing the soul out of his Mustang, I could still hear the damn bear. Čelentano proved to me that this wasn’t just a hallucination: without opening his eyes, he mumbled “Good! Good!” from time to time.

When we got down, Parožić was waiting for us, dressed in a light suit and a blue t-shirt with crocodile’s sign on the chest. Čelentano glanced at his watch, a huge Franck Muller, which looked as if it weighed at least a pound, and then—with unattainable smile of self-satisfaction—pulled his hand in his pants, fondled his balls, and took out a heavy, wet bundle of money. Indifferently, he unglued a couple of bills and shoved them into Parožić’s paw.

“You did good, my philosopher! See you tomorrow?” he asked and Parožić only nodded in confusion, then mumbled something and got lost in the bushes.

“Listen, I gonna go too. I’ve seen the bear and I’m tired.”

“Ah, no, you can’t go! My wife’s coming.”

“What do I have to do with it?”

“Well, who’s gonna fuck her? You don’t expect me to do it? I’ll pay you four hundred, the same I paid the bear, and for what! What’s that, an hour’s work, even less? You’ll do it and that’s that. You didn’t think I called you here just to watch the bear?” he said almost angrily. And it was difficult to tell when he was being serious or when he was just teasing, especially when there was Čorkaš standing on the side, watching me like I was guilty of every crap that had ever happened in his life.

“Fuck you, partner. That’s out of the question.”

“Well, then...” he said and winked at Čorkaš. “You’ll have to go with our grim face again. Fuck it, partner, I have to do everything myself! Adriano!”

Ćorkaš dropped me off in front of the bookstore. I didn't even bother getting in, but I immediately went to Liputin's bar to wash off the bad taste of Ćelentano's beer. The man-bear jumped at me from the alley.

"Listen, I know we're not close or anything, but I beg you, don't tell this to anyone! I beg you! I'm in really deep shit, loans and all, if I keep this for a month or two, I'll get in the clear, you understand! Just don't tell anyone!"

"Parožić, I won't tell anyone, there's no one to tell. But I may write about it!"

"Write?" he said in horror.

"Write, Parožić, write! But not yet. And you just hang in. Good luck!"

But Parožić didn't last long. Already the next day Ćelentano got himself a tiger. The tiger beat the shit out of the bear and earned the right to stay in the cage, and Parožić begged Ćelentano not to sack him and find him a different position for a smaller pay so for the next couple of days he worked as the tiger's prey. But the tiger didn't last long either. Every day new, meaner and meaner beasts appeared, and as Ćelentano didn't want to increase the number of cages the candidates had to fight for their place in this one cage. Not even a week had passed since our little get-together with the bear when he called me up again.

"Listen to this! You wouldn't believe it! They're gonna kill each other! What a bestiary, I've got everything you could possibly imagine: tigers of all kinds, lions, hyenas, caimans, anacondas, pitons, scorpions, black widows, praying mantises, even a Rex is here. Hey, partner, can you believe it! And they're going at each other, a real bloodbath!" he was yelling and then his voice got lost in the deafening roar of hundreds of beasts. I hung up the phone and went down to Liputin's. For a while I sat there on the deserted terrace waiting for a waiter. Somehow I had a feeling he wouldn't show up. Most likely he too was up there at Ćelentano's.

Zoran Malkoč

How Little Sleepy Death Dumped Me

Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

I met her after I'd gotten out of the army, it was the worst winter I remember: packs of hungry dogs coming down from destroyed villages nearby, cruising deserted streets at night, attacking anything they could get their teeth into. But those damned animals were not much different from us. We cruised the dives and bars, without a dime in our pockets, and sold our asses to all those UNPROFOR and EUMM soldiers and officers (we called them Ice Creamers because of their white SUV's and tanks) and all other sophisticated marauders who'd hurried down to Slavonija to get their piece of a corpse. I myself handled about a dozen of them. The last one was called Bill, a colonel from Ireland. Perfumed, cultivated and round, a faggot like all the ones before him: the French, the Nepalese, the Hungarians, the Argentineans. Having just come out of the bloody slaughterhouse, we couldn't get it into our heads that those people were some kind of soldiers. For us, they were just kids, even those Pakistanis who ate live chickens in front of cameras. But we let them fuck us anyhow. They shoved their fine penises, educated at all kinds of military and police academies from Karachi to Dublin, up our asses. We didn't care much. We were beautiful, we were wild, and we were mean; at least three times worse than they thought we were.

Half an hour after we'd met, after three bottles of Staro Češko beer, I told Bill: "Listen, Bill, I'm your guide for the night! That'll cost you a hundred bucks. The package includes a good time and a tour of all legal and illegal bars and similar sites as well as a warranty that you'll get out of this alive. How does that sound?"

"And do you play a tamburica?" he asked.

"Not even if you give me a billion dollars. Why?"

"I'd like to learn how."

"If that's the thing, then there's no problem. That'll raise the price of the package for a measly fifty bucks. Bill, let's get going."

We went to The Mill whose wheel drove on despair that spilled over from the dive and where tamburica almost never stopped playing because whenever the musicians wanted to get off the stage, the guests took out their guns and shot above their heads. They let no one interrupt their dreams even though those dreams, in the best-case scenario, were barely tolerable nightmares. I took Bill right to the stage.

"Look here, Bill, this is Praxo, the Pill's brother, the best tamburica player in the universe," I said introducing him to the only guy among the musicians whom you didn't have to shoot at to get him to play. He was never getting off the stage anyhow. I left the Irishman at his tamburica school and went to the bar to drink up his dollars. And then I saw her. She was dancing on a large oak table, bending like grass in the wind, which, according to the laws of physics, should've broken in half a long time ago. Tiny, little, skinny and bony, her eyes closed, her face drawn into a smile and a painful grimace that revealed a serious lack of front teeth. Nevertheless, I thought that she was pretty, that she was gorgeous, enchanting. I had never seen her before, but her name jumped on my lips on its own.

Little Sleepy Death

I stationed myself next to the table where several more drunks were sitting at together with two war widows just like herself and four sleazebags who helped them spend their late husband's retirement money and patiently waited for the gravity to take effect. When she started falling, I caught her in my arms and carried her between the tables. She couldn't have had more than thirty-five kilos. I wetted her lips with brandy, she opened her eyes for a second, offered me a spasm of a smile, and then engulfed me in the black abyss of her jaws. We danced and drank from a bottle that never left my hand. Suddenly she started talking, addressed me with sir, claimed I'd been her son's teacher, and said that I had stood up for him on one occasion.

"Teacher of what, my beautiful poor friend, interpreter of what cosmic wisdom? And even if it were so, I don't remember it, by God, I don't know when this could've been. And maybe you've mixed something up, maybe that's yet about to happen!" I told her with a strange feeling that that moment of present was swelling and puffing, like some carcinogen seed whose cells grow at galloping speeds, unraveling into the past and the future at the same time. Then I felt someone's hand on my shoulder.

Tamburica Bill.

"Why are you waking me, you poor Patrick? You're done with your lessons?" I screamed, and he, in his sweet, lustful voice that tickled the ear, begged me to let him have the widow, promised me piles of money if I set her up for him tonight. The damn Irish bloodhound, he had sniffed her out in a second!

"And I thought you were a faggot, Bill! Or such beautiful, destroyed ruins really turn you on, huh, you fine colonel? Listen, if I set you up with her, you'll have to pay me big bucks. After all, she's a toothless pussy of a fallen Croatian hero, with wrinkles on her face like furrows on the Moon, both feet in the grave. And the grave is where she fucks best, did you know that, Bill? This woman has seen more troops and destruction than Lipik, Pakrac, Škarbnja, Vukovar and all other Croatian towns and villages together! I'm not sure, my dear Bill, you have that kind of money... But until you get it, gimme everything you've got on you, quick, quick, before I change my mind..."

We walked out into the snow-covered eerie town. The snow was as hard as concrete; you couldn't break it with a pickaxe. She and I pressed into each other, trying to hide from the cold and the wind that slammed into us and through us, while the fat UNPROFOR colonel looked as if this cold of ours did not get to him, he just happily hopped licking his lips with his dark red tongue. He pressed the button on his remote, opened the door and let us into his huge SUV. Despite his protests, I took to passenger's seat, having before that placed her on the back seat where she looked even tinier and lonelier, so much like a beautiful, old doll forgotten on an attic.

We were just entering her part of the town and I was still thinking how to screw Bill over, when a dog ran out right in front of us. Bill hit the brakes, but couldn't avoid the dog and the SUV skidded and slid from the icy road. I didn't hesitate. Taking advantage of his confusion, I picked Little Sleepy Death up and with her on my shoulder ran toward the buildings. Laughing like crazy, she gave me directions. A pack of some thirty dogs galloped toward us. They surrounded us in a second. This might seem like a tricky situation to someone, but it wasn't anything that an inspired drunk couldn't solve with a short, inspired speech. "I admit it, I'm the one of those who have killed your owners and kicked them on the other side of the Sava, but that was not my fault. That was their own doing, and someone else's. There he is, look," I yelled into the frozen night and pointed at Bill, "That's the real culprit! Get him!"

Understanding me perfectly, the pack ran toward the SUV, and the two of us finally reached her apartment. The moment I let go of her, she dropped to the ground and, turning into a ball, rolled on into her bedroom, prosecuted by a harsh northern gale that blew through the open door. I closed the

door and went after her, following the bloody trail because as she rolled she bumped a couple of times against the walls and the furniture.

When I entered the room, she was already lying wide open on the bed. Right above her head there was a square niche in the wall and in it there was a photo of her late husband in a camouflage uniform and a rosary around his neck. The member of the 3rd Brigade looked at me austerely, with a frozen smile in the corner of his mouth. In front of the photo, a bunch of burned-out candles. And below it, her head against the wall, her legs wide open, there was she: naked, skinny, with some kind of a ball growing out of her stomach, swollen from alcohol. She resembled those stuffed plush animals with long, slender limbs growing out of a roundish body. She had a candle ready and she took it, long and fat, and with both hands placed it between her sagging breasts. It looked as if she was praying.

“Let me first fuck him, she how handsome he is, look,” she said and stuck the candle between her legs. She stabbed herself angrily, moaning and mumbling, as if fighting with someone. But soon she doubled up and screamed; then she lit the candle and put it in front of the photo.

“Come on, it’s your turn now, give it to me, stick it into me, the whore, kill me, the miserable animal...”

Gently rejecting her invitation, I got in the bed and lay next to her. I told her I would look after her and that she should go to sleep, I caressed her brow and greasy hair; my voice was so tired and monotonous that I managed to put myself to sleep; in my dream I heard a piercing sound of her or me snoring: a moment of sublime peace for the two of us, two exhausted animals. But in the morning the winter sun set the apartment on fire: every detail of our ugliness was now visible and exaggerated, not a trace of the beauty I’d seen last night; next to me there was a stinky, rolled up spider, its skinny, hairy legs sticking out from under the blanket; above my head a candle was slowly burning its last and I could feel a disgusting smell of wax; all this made me jump out of the dirty bed and ran away as fast as I could.

After that it was some time before I went out again, and the first time I did—it was at Jadranka’s bar—Bill’s frowning face was the first thing I saw.

“Why such a sullen face, Bill? Problems at school?” I asked him meaning no harm.

“No, school is fine. I’m already playing like I was born with it, on Saturday I play with the guys down at The Mill.”

“Well done, Bill.”

“But you owe me something. I gave you the money. A deal is a deal, so...”

“You’re right, a deal is a deal, and I’ll get you what I owe you. But I can’t do it sober. Get me drunk first, Bill, and then we’ll talk business.”

As we drank, I told him about my adventure with Little Sleepy Death. I thought that would cool him off, but my story had a completely opposite effect; the colonel got even hornier. He kept pressing me to go get her. After five or six rounds of drinks, the idea no longer seemed bad to me either.

While Bill was waiting in the car, I pressed on her doorbell. She didn’t answer, but after a while I noticed that the door was slightly ajar; I pushed it open with my foot and entered. She was sitting on a couch, drinking brandy. She didn’t even notice I’d walked in. I sat next to her and started touching her. She didn’t respond to that either. She opened her eyes only after I put my hand in her pants. She looked at me in surprise and then started wiggling and getting away from me.

“Don’t, don’t, I’m with someone now. I have someone!” As she said this, a guy staggered into the room. I barely recognized him. It was Cactus, a fellow I used to play soccer with in the school’s team; he looked as if he were sixty and was completely blind from the hooch.

“Is that him? Is that your man?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s him. That’s my man!” she said and leaned against him. A moment later both of them dropped on the couch in front of me. They sat like that for a while, immobile, in each other’s arms. Then she took a glass from that niche in the wall—there was no photo or candles in it anymore—dipped her finger in the brandy and ran it across his lips. Without opening his eyes, he started kissing her fingers while she ran her other hand through his hair and on the forehead.

I watched them, shocked, touched, ashamed. I couldn’t remember when was the last time I witnessed a scene of such honest gentleness, which those living dead, those heavenly drunks, had for each other. Even if they were standing on the very line separating the two worlds, the two of them were there for each other. I got up, covered them with thick covers and blankets, tucked them in like babies, and left the apartment.

A long and winding path led to the parking lot through the park and that’s where suddenly horrible things started happening. Of course I was drunk and in a state of shock, but the fact is that women started falling from the trees. Beautiful women, my women, all the women I had ever had. Even the future ones, the ones I somehow felt were to become my future women. And, to my horror, all of them were dying a terrible death. I walked over them, heavy, indescribably heavy, I squashed their pretty faces and arms, turning them into a pile of crushed meat, bones, veins and tendons.

I walked out of the park in tears, not wanting to look back and make sure I was just hallucinating. The sight of Bill’s enormous SUV, reliable and rational, its antennas communicating with the dark side of the Moon, offered me relief. After all, Bill was a lesser evil from what had happened in the park. And even his question, which he threw at me like an axe, didn’t hurt too much.

“Where’s the widow?”

“Drive, Bill. She’s no longer a widow.”

“You know you owe me a widow,” he kept insisting.

“Bill, how about a widower instead of a widow? It’s all the same to you. And you know what kind of a widower I am, huh, Bill? I’m a serial widower! All of my women have died tonight; they’ve died a horrible death! Drive, poor Patrick, when I tell you. Drive!”

And then Bill started driving.