

Zoran Pilić

**When Giants Walked the Earth**  
(Kad su Divovi hodali zemljom)

Stories

Translated by Ivana Ostojčić



ZORAN PILIĆ was born 1966 in Zagreb. He worked in the Center for autism in Zagreb, and besides writing of short stories, he works with film as well: he writes film reviews, is editor of catalogues, participates in film festivals in region. He has published: *Doggiestyle* (short stories, 2007), *Krimskrams* (novel, 2009), *Đavli od papira* (*Paper Devils*, novel, 2011), *Dendermonde* (poetry, 2013.), *Nema slonova u Meh-siku* (*There are no Elephants in Mexico*, short stories, 2014), *Kad su Divovi hodali zemljom* (*When the Giants Walked the Earth*, short stories, 2017).



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176 pages

Hardcover

ISBN 978-953266922-0

Date of publication: 2018

For the middle-aged *Giants* life already happened. All of the big things and all the drama has already passed. All of the characters – bold writers, editors, lovers in their forties – lost any illusions about life long ago. They were damaged by down-fallen life projects, relationships, marriages, plans and countries. But although life goes on, it still might bring some surprises. Pilić's antiheroes will find themselves in very wondrous situations, from falling in love with a rubber doll, playing Star Wars with Toshiro Mifune or becoming a passionate baseball fan in forties. However, while taking life as it is, main characters accept all the things without any astonishment. The odd episodes in their lives are just like waves, they come and go. As the volume turns down, their life stays the same.

Somewhere between humor and nostalgia, *When Giants Walked the Earth* is a ripe short story collection full of masterfully written dialogues, bizarre situations, read as a unique literary work of coming to terms with life.

PRAISE

“Never banal, but neither pretentious. That is a skill of the best short story writers, to which Zoran Pilić, even on a world scale, definitely belongs.”

- Jagna Pogačnik, *24express*

“[The fact that you won’t skip a single page] points to the self-esteem of the author, visible in the skillfully written short, concise and excellent dialogues (rarely seen in contemporary Croatian literature), as well as in the way of keeping the readers on their toes.”

- Luca Kozina, *Booksa*

## When Giants Walked the Earth

2010

Baseball is more than a game. I wasn't hooked on it immediately. Like many other things, baseball took time. It took me years to drag myself from the East Coast, from Boston, to California. That was as far as I could. Pacifica in San Mateo County, a town of about 35 or 40 thousand citizens, is definitely one such outermost point on the globe which I, a weary Bosnian at the brink of 40, could reach.

I met Jessica Morales at Sánchez Art Centre, where the participants of a photography course tutored by her had an exhibition of their finest works. Without expecting much we started seeing each other, we took long walks along Rockaway Beach watching surfers, sometimes we went to a small Italian restaurant and told each other stories about fragments of our lives, not revealing much, but just enough to realise that time, one way of the other, always does the trick. We had left behind an impressive amount of ruins, first and second loves, serious and casual relationships, periods of solitude which, we both agreed, were not nearly as scary as they seemed.

Five or six weeks later we threw in the towel.

"Gingo, on Sunday we're going to my brother's place for a barbecue. Have no other plans," she said.

"I don't know if this is a good idea, I'm not very good at these big family reunions."

"And when was it, pray, that you last had a family reunion? Besides, this is nothing grand - Opening Day, the baseball season begins. I already told them I'd be coming with someone. Well?"

"Okay, I'll say yes to the barbecue, but I can't promise anything about baseball."

No problem, the Morales family are Venezuelan - one of maybe ten countries in the world that know everything about baseball, so if I wish, she'll explain the basic stuff on the way to San Francisco. Naturally, I understood nothing or almost

nothing. In order to understand and consequently love baseball, one needs to embark on the mission on one's own. You sit before the TV and watch, other people's explanations are both a blessing and a curse. The same goes for picking a team. No one can drive you into rooting for the Giants, Red Sox or Angels. One team gets under your skin for reasons beyond reasonable explanation. In the spring of 2010 I became a fan of the SF Giants, which wasn't particularly hard. Apart from the fact that this was our team, the home team, and that Jessica was a supporter, the Giants had the thing. They were a bunch of weirdoes tough to imagine in one place: Barry Zito, Madison Bumgarner, Jonathan Sanchez, Juan Uribe and the great Pablo 'Kung-Fu Panda' Sandoval from Puerto Cabello in Venezuela.

"Okay, folks," I blurted out, encouraged by beer, before Jessica, her brother Alejandro, their friends and relatives gathered around a huge barbecue in the yard at Alejandro's place, "are we winning the title this year?"

All of a sudden, there was silence.

"You mean the Division or the World Series?" Alejandro asked in wonder. "The World Series, hombre, although - the Division's not so bad either."

In a mere moment a discussion came about whether this statement of mine had wrecked yet another season. When it comes to baseball, I learned, seemingly normal people turn into a group of superstitious nutters. Mentioning a championship victory at the very beginning of the season is considered bad luck in the first degree and everybody should beware of that. It was even stickier with the Giants, as they last won the World Series back in the fifties, when they moved from New York to San Francisco - another reason why it was so easy to love them. Just like me, they had to cross the continent and finally settle in California.

Finally the verdict was that my reckless remark couldn't be taken seriously because, as Jessica explained, this gringo has never seen a baseball match in his life. I was therefore only publicly admonished, but from that moment on I was regarded as though I suffered from a very rare disease.

"See, Carlito," Alejandro crouched by his five-year-old son and pointed at me, "this gringo is Aunt Jessi's boyfriend and knows nothing about baseball."

Carlito first opened his eyes widely and then ran off to tell the other children the big news.

By the end of that season, this year of 2010, the Giants first won NL West with 92 wins and 70 defeats, then beat Atlanta with 3:1, won the Phillies in the Division finals with 4:2, and beat the Texas Rangers 4:1 in the World Series and won their first title since 1954. These seven months made me an avid fan. And while Jessica, Alejandro and the rest of the crew waited their entire lives for this title, I got it in my first season.

2011

During those long five months every baseball fan in the USA has to suffer till the next season, Jessica and I grew even closer. Somewhere between Christmas and post-New Year's depression our feelings overcame the caution in us. It was only a matter of days when we'd start living together. One option was to move to San Francisco. Although for a while it was convenient to live in a smaller town, I didn't get attached to places and my data administrator job was mostly home-based. In exceptional cases, usually when a new client came, I had to go away for a few days or weeks, but I wasn't the problem here.

Not so long ago, Jessica quit San Francisco. She didn't want to go into details, and I didn't insist – for both her and my sake. Quite certainly it wasn't a pleasant story, so I let it go.

“I need more time,” she finally admitted.

Early in February we rented a larger place in the centre of Pacifica. San Francisco can wait.

2012

A new season traditionally opens with a barbecue at Alejandro's place. Five beers down, I triumphantly forecasted the continuation of the Giants' golden era and another title. A disgruntled murmur let me know that I was again calling for trouble. Aka – talking shit. The only one to stand up for me was Jessica, reminding everyone of my prophecy two years ago. Unfortunately, she was also tipsy. It's our new favourite pastime.

Since last autumn, my baby started to hit the bottle rather often. In the beginning I kept my mouth shut, then I dropped an occasional comment and, finally, realising that this booze thing is not going to go away – I started nagging persistently, which led to serious fights. Fighting with Latino girls is not a good idea – there is no backseat, the thing just keeps bubbling and bubbling – they'll tell you what's on their mind, and this can take a while.

I felt that there was a dark dissatisfaction behind the whole thing.

“No, gringo, it's all fine. I just drink, that's all,” she tried to persuade me.

There really are people who just drink – because they feel like it, but she wasn't one of them. Certain that I would lose her and somewhat resolved with such an outcome, I too began chasing the spirits out of the bottle. As representatives of two excessively emotional nationalities, we soon became a couple of interesting drunks, splashed on the shores of America by a series of circumstances. At one

point I realised – Jessica is much more important to me than I thought or would be willing to admit. In fact, I couldn't even fathom losing her, let alone come to terms with it. Bad days kept on rolling, with me stumbling in the dark, trying to find a way out.

“I love you,” I said in the middle of a silent treatment, already at the brink of exhaustion, “do you know that?”

“I know, I love you too, come here...”

I tried to remember the last time I said I love you to someone and what happened next. I couldn't, the only thing that came to my mind was that this mythical 'I love you' should be said in good times, not in anguish, not in fear.

In mid-August, after negotiating for two almost sober weeks, we picked up our stuff and moved to San Francisco. Our apartment in Langton Street was a stone-throw away from Willie Mays Plaza and AT&T Park. The Giants, enhanced with a few peculiar characters like Brian Wilson, the leggy Hunter Pence or Angelo 'El Caballo Loco' Pagan, seemed a pretty gung-ho bunch.

Jessi and I appeared to be getting back to normal. Her emotional states inevitably reflected on my own. From unease to a seeming, deceitful peace, I followed her around like a faithful puppy. San Francisco was a novelty to me, but not to her – she grew up in this city, went through thick and thin there. From my personal experience I knew it's not a good idea to look back and I stuck to that. Over twenty years I didn't look back. Every city, every place you spent time in are populated by ghosts of the past. My town was burned to the ground, others I burned myself. However, I never thought other people, including Jessica, should live like that. I believed she knew best why she went away and now, after years of voluntary exile, she returned to San Francisco.

The Giants welcomed the end of the season in the lead of the NL West Division with a score of 94 wins and 68 defeats. And then, like autumn leaves, fell the Reds, the Cardinals and the Detroit Tigers in the grand finale. The latter were smashed 4:0 and Kung-Fu Panda fired three home runs in the first game and led the parade of the champions along the streets of San Francisco. The two of us were also somewhere in that orange crowd. And right there, in the middle of the big celebration, I caught a glimpse of Jessica's eyes. Realising that her sorrow was caught red-handed, she just looked down and said:

“We need to talk.”

I didn't want to talk, we don't need to do anything – we'll just keep silent. Whatever it may be, it will pass.

2013

“Gringo, I’m telling you, the guy’s a punk. Not your usual, ordinary punk, but the mother of all punks. A punk like Lester Diamond from *Casino*, and my sister is a fool. I told her - if you go back to this guy after all this, you’re a fool, girl. And I did, she said, just like that. You know what it’s like, she’s a grown woman, I can’t help her with these things.”

Alejandro and I sometimes saw each other at the stadium. The Giants didn’t look well that season. I looked even worse. A grey year in every respect.

2014

Baseball is, I’m telling you, more than a game. A big American story. This 2014 the Giants became a dynasty. They were the last to leave the field for the third time in five seasons. Jessica Morales went far north, all the way to Seattle. We got our time and we spent it, somehow too quickly. At 18 or 19 this would be a huge tragedy for my weak heart. At 40-something, as I firmly believed, you remain standing no matter what. Not because you’re strong, but because you don’t have much choice. Well, it didn’t turn out like that - in your forties it gets worse.

Finally I stayed in San Francisco. Counting the days till the next season. Pablo Sandoval abandoned us and went to Boston for a large sum, but doesn’t matter - he’ll keep the happy memories of the times when the Giants walked the Earth.

pp. 27-35

# Ladybird

The first heat wave began early in May. In June all hell broke loose, for ten days the afternoon temperature rose above 33 degrees centigrade and the nights were no cooler.

He downloaded the first season of *Orange Is the New Black*. The screen was big enough, they could easily sit on the balcony and watch it from there, so that is what they did.

“There’s some breeze after all,” said Chipsa.

“Better than inside.”

Fifteen full minutes they followed the plot as if they were at a small open-air summer cinema, and then she went to the kitchen and came back with a bag of candied sour snakes in different colours. She couldn’t just sit and watch a movie or a TV show. She had her rituals of picking up something to crunch, nibble, munch and the like. The period of chips, salty sticks and popcorn was the worst. The first time it happened he said nothing – he just watched her taking one orange chip after another and listened to loud crunching sounds.

“What?”

“Nothing, when do you plan to stop this?”

“What, eating chips?”

“Yes...”

“Why? Don’t you like chips?”

“I don’t like crunching and not only do I not like it – it drives me crazy.”

She looked at him with great wonder and then took out another chip and started nibbling it quietly.

“Now it’s even worse,” he admitted.

They had a bad fight. He called her Chipsa and she called him Psycho. She also called him a ‘maniac’ or an ‘operetta madman’, and he responded by calling her a ‘cruncher in the rye’ or ‘la cucaracha’, which made no sense.

Jellies in the form of candied sour snakes were a blessing.

“Look,” he wiped his forehead, “I keep sweating, and you’re dry.”

“Yes, but it’s worse for me – your psycho body is producing all this sweat to cool you down.”

“The mosquitos also ignore you.”

“Your blood must be sweeter.”

A colder spell, of sorts, nevertheless came the next day. Psycho stood on the balcony in the rain.

“Get inside, a lightning will strike you.”

“The rain is warm, give it a try.”

Chipsa didn’t like storms.

\* \* \*

On the penultimate day of June, before seven o’clock, a dreadful noise woke them up. In fact, Chipsa woke up, and Psycho was, as usual, on his feet since daybreak. In the yard across the road workmen came with two big dredges and one small. They were to tear down the carwash, a big old house with some kind of offices, a warehouse and a café with a small outdoor terrace. Across the carwash there stood two smaller buildings that used to be part of an army surplus factory. They were tearing them down too – someone bought the entire plot and sent the heavy machinery to flatten the whole thing to the ground.

Psycho sat on the balcony and watched, mesmerised, a dredge with its huge steel claws pulling pieces of rippled blue tin off the roof of the carwash, turning them and piling them behind on a stack.

Chipsa came with coffee. She couldn’t believe what was going on.

“I’m already having a nervous breakdown and this will take days, weeks, and when they’re done – they’ll start building something. Which will also take a year, maybe two.”

“Maybe two...”

The dredge grabbed a piece of wall and crushed it into pieces. One of the workmen came with a huge hose and watered the place of demolition. If it weren’t for the hosing down, they would have all disappeared in clouds of dust. Around noon the machinery went quiet. Most workmen went for lunch or a drink. Two or three remained, they were wearing yellow helmets and work suits or overalls. The youngest took out a cell phone, moved aside and called someone. Chipsa and Psycho could hear every word.

“Am I an idiot? No... I’m an idiot, you’re right I am... you’re a smart girl and you know it all and I’m a frickin’ idiot...”

He walked nervously up and down, probably fighting with his girlfriend or wife and kept repeating how he was an idiot and she wasn't.

"See, you try to work and then she calls you and drives you crazy," said Psycho.

Chipsa, of course, claimed the opposite – he called her and started or, more probably, continued a fight that's been going on since last night, perhaps even days.

\* \* \*

The construction works continued, every day the racket began at seven and lasted – with short breaks – until four or half past in the afternoon. Psycho was finishing a collection of stories, he was writing from five in the morning to eight. He didn't mind the noise – not this kind of noise, he liked watching the dredges patiently crushing whatever came in their way.

Chipsa, who went to sleep late after midnight and loved to lounge about until at least half past nine in the morning, now woke up at seven. She got up at eight, the two of them went out on the balcony and watched the dredges. It was his second coffee, but he never drank more than half the cup.

"I'm telling you, if I was now fifteen, I'd train to be a dredger and today I'd be demolishing buildings, or whatever I could get my hands on."

Chipsa smirked: "You'd be a dredge operator?"

"Yeah, why not? It's like PlayStation, you have your joystick and off you go."

"Don't make me laugh, man, it might seem simple, but it definitely isn't..."

"I have a steady hand..."

"Not for this job you don't, you can kill someone and that's exactly what you'd do – on your first day you'd drop a concrete block on someone's head."

Psycho knew he wouldn't, but he didn't feel like arguing. Nor could he – the sun was unrelentingly scorching the earth. In the afternoon, all went quiet again. The machines remained on the site overnight, unguarded. Around eight in the evening people came to dig the ruins. An elderly couple, probably husband and wife, collected cables. Nothing else interested them – only cables. They dragged them out, dusted them and put them into garbage bags. When they get home, they'll peel off the insulating layer and separate copper wires.

"Copper is expensive," said Chipsa pensively, "only, it's not easy to collect a larger amount."

Psycho wiped the sweat off his forehead with a towel every now and then. Why won't it cool down, he wondered, it's night after all.

"I think I know what's going on," he said, "the sun is dying, hundreds of

nuclear explosions, big and small, are destroying it and when the core is wrecked – boom, it all goes to hell.”

“Maybe, but it’s not like it’s going down tomorrow or the day after.”

“How do you know? Nobody knows.”

“NASA knows, people keep track of this – if something was going on, they’d pick that up already.”

“No, they wouldn’t tell us, they tell you nothing, and you know why? Because God only knows what kind of panic streak such news would cause in public. Solid evidence of extra-terrestrial visits exist for seventy years. The internet exists since the mid-sixties and it was only in the early nineties that it was put to wider use.”

Chipsa believed in what she saw, in things and phenomena backed by scientific evidence – she had no interest in speculations. She never believed in Santa Claus, since she was five she knew that it was in fact her Mum, masked behind this white-bearded character. On the other hand, Psycho believed a lot of things, UFO stories fascinated him since he was a boy and he longed for the day when all the official media would admit – yes, they’re here, for years, for decades.

\* \* \*

One night dozens of flying ants rushed into the apartment. Chipsa grabbed Biokill and annihilated them all. By the sweat of the brow Psycho watched the weather forecast. The worst is yet to come, a heat wave is coming from Africa and the temperatures will go wild. Stay indoors!

“I can’t do this anymore,” he said, lay in the tub with his clothes on and let the water flow over his body.

\* \* \*

The dredges shaped the ruins into a hillside that grew every day beside a big concrete chimney.

“You know what this pile is for? They’re making a base for the chimney – when they’re demolishing it, the pile will cushion the blow.”

“You’re right,” Psycho agreed.

Chipsa wiped off a tear.

“Why are you crying?”

“I feel sorry for the chimney... and Mister Crow Leader.”

Psycho realised what it was all about. Come summer or winter, Chipsa liked

to observe the behaviour of neighbourhood crows. In the sunset, every day, Mr Crow Leader would settle on top of the long obsolete chimney and croak to summon other crows. They would then fly across the street and further away to the western part. Mr Crow Leader would glance in their direction, sit for a while alone on the chimney and join the murder.

“Don’t cry, he’ll find another position, he can come to our roof if he likes.”

“I know, but it’s not the same thing...”

That night Chipsa was working on the translation of a Hungarian novel. Psycho was reading Godard’s biography and learned that Jean Seberg, in his view one of the most beautiful actresses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was born in Marshalltown, Iowa. Under suspicious circumstances Jean died in Paris on 30 August 1979, three months before her 41<sup>st</sup> birthday. Most probably she committed suicide to forestall old age which, bit by bit, like a dredge, crushes and destroys all memories of beauty.

The album *Iowa* by the Slipknot band from Des Moines, Iowa, was released in late August 2001. In Psycho’s rich record collection, *Iowa* has always had a prominent spot, right next to *Lateralus* by the Tool, also from 2001, and the first two Black Sabbath albums. The question of all questions – what connects Jean Seberg and *Iowa*? Apart from the fact that both her and the Slipknot are from Iowa, Psycho couldn’t imagine anything as irreconcilable as that. Then again, he thought, there must be a connection. He wanted to ask Chipsa, but at that point she was still mourning after the chimney and Mr Crow Leader.

Better not to disturb her.

\* \* \*

They honestly wanted to invite Ana and Pavle over for dinner, but by the afternoon the temperature rose again to an unthinkable degree, so they agreed to drop all socialising ideas. The chimney fell more easily than expected. They brought the smallest, remote-operated dredge – with a joystick, like PlayStation. The little fellow drilled a few holes at approximately a meter and a half, big dredges tugged the cable attached to the chimney crown and that was it. Mr Crow’s old control tower collapsed on a pile of debris and the ground shook.

Chipsa was silent. The silence grew in the apartment inch by inch and when it pressed on him, Psycho heard only the buzz of the AC.

“Can we watch old *Twin Peaks*?”

She shook her head. They spent a good part of the night on the balcony, silently watching the stars and passing each other the military binoculars, given to

Psycho by Lee, a guy from Birmingham, a fellow soldier who fought with him in Slavonia and Bosnia.

Around half past one in the morning Chipsa stood up, lit a cigarette and said: “Shall we?”

“Where to?”

She bent down toward him, lifted his head grabbing him by the hair and looked him in the eyes: “Let’s go...”

Psycho now knew. This was non-negotiable, but playing was not forbidden.

“Fine,” he said, “if you take your clothes off.”

Without saying a word, Chipsa took off her tank top, pyjama trousers and underwear, turned her back on him and put her hands on the balcony railing. Casually, barely noticeably she swung her hips like far away, somewhere far away she heard music. Psycho slowly rose from the darkness and moved his body close to hers.

\* \* \*

He put his backpack on the back seat, glanced in the rear-view mirror and took out his black Granada in the empty road.

“No second thoughts?”

“Just drive,” she said.

He told her in a nutshell about Jean Seberg and the 2001 Slipknot album, hoping that Chipsa might apply her outsider perspective to shed light on what kept eluding him.

“They’re from Iowa? To me it sounds like one of those backwoods everyone runs away from.”

“John Wayne is from Iowa, Ashton Kutcher, the one who played Frodo...”

“Elijah Wood, John Wayne, Ashton Kutcher – all assholes.”

“Oh yeah, and Michonne from *Walking Dead*.”

“Okay, Michonne rocks.”

“Agreed – Seberg, Slipknot and Michonne rock. The other three are whack.”

“All whack.”

He switched to the right lane, passed Špansko and parked by the greenmarket in their old neighbourhood – Malešnica. Back in the day Psycho bought a garage there for peanuts. They walked to it, without meeting a soul. He turned on the light and lowered the door. There was everything inside. At the very end, covered in dust, stood a vintage closet. It looked like something which could be sold at an antique market. In it, Chipsa and Psycho kept their little arsenal.

\* \* \*

It was ten past four in the morning when they climbed up the second floor of the dilapidated, overgrown distillery. Lying next to each other on a tarpaulin, Chipsa adjusted the optics on Steyr's Black Heart, set the tripod level, lowered her head, took a deep breath, lifted her head again and looked through the optical scope. The park and all the surrounding buildings on the other side of the railway tracks opened up to the east - the sun had almost risen. Possible targets will appear at a distance of 300 to 350 metres. She saw every detail on the open stage.

Psycho promised - this time he wouldn't say a word. But still he couldn't control himself, he lowered his binoculars and said: "Everything okay?"

"Sir, yes, sir... the first bench by the big birch tree, you see?"

Psycho took the binoculars: "Fine..."

"In the building behind, the second floor balcony, the guy in his undershirt?"

"Fine, I see him, wait..."

They watched the guy - sitting on a plastic chair, a blank look on his face, nothing. Just sitting there, smoking, observing the park. Is he alone, or does he have a family sleeping somewhere behind him?

"What's he doing with his hand?"

"There's something on his finger, a ladybird... whatever it is, it flew off."

"You saw a ladybird?"

"I think I did... listen."

"I'm listening."

"The thing with Jean Seberg and Slipknot, apart from Iowa, the only other thing connecting them is that these days they live inside your psycho-head. Rent-free."

The city has not awoken yet, the only thing was that at that moment it already seemed real enough. It was too late for anything.

\* \* \*

Day in and day out the trucks drove out the debris, crossbeams, tin and other stuff. The horizon opened. Chipsa and Psycho could see the entire crossroads, cars, cyclists, people with dogs and people sitting in local buses. Who could now see them, as well. In the palm of their hand.

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## Amusement Park

The picture of the town he grew up in, still shrouded in dreamy dew, is slowly fading. Disappearing before the reality which used to be only an illusion and so on and so forth. The landscape has changed and time is mercilessly gorging everything that crosses its path – the landscape, the events – and the only thing remaining is this torn sack of dreams. Arizona is yet another small hell on earth populated by coyotes, lizards, scorpions and rattlesnakes.

On the first day of spring, by noon, Gilbert in Maricopa County already sizzles at 33 degrees centigrade. Leo has got no choice – after three years he has to take a vacation. Alejandro, the owner of Paradiso canteen, came early in February to the counter, put a notebook on the table and said: “Amigo, enough is enough, this year you’re taking a six-week vacation, you have three weeks left from the previous year and you can take it in March or in April.”

He chose March and Alejandro wrote it down meticulously. Leo is caught off guard, the very thought of such an amount of free time disturbs him. His self-imposed routine is perturbed and he doesn’t know what to do with himself. One thing’s for sure – he can’t stay in town, he will go away and time will fly. Yes, exactly, he’ll spend this sudden and unwanted vacation somewhere outside Arizona. He immediately felt relieved, he bought some clothes and several books at Desert Book. The same day, with all these things, he sat on the terrace in a small bar. He ordered coffee and browsed one of the books – a biography of Henry Miller. Two older women in white baseball caps occupied a table on the other end and the larger one stretched out her hands to her friend. The skin on her fists is completely white. Leo observed them unobtrusively from the shade. He couldn’t imagine himself an old man of seventy, but equally so when he was eighteen he couldn’t imagine that one day he’d live to be forty-three, like his father then.

It is the first day of spring 2010 and Leo is already going on 46. It seems to him that it was only yesterday that he came to this fucked up Disneyland of a country, and it has been already a decade. In Boston in 1992 he met Elvis and these several

months they hung out just like they did before the war. One day Elvis moved to Colorado, married and less than two years later divorced. They saw each other two more times, in Denver in 1994 and a year later in Phoenix. Before the '96 Olympics his old schoolmate moved to Atlanta, where he met a girl ten years younger, of Macedonian origin. All things considered, he should still be there. The last time they talked was a year and a half ago, maybe two, they talked about a lot of things, but never about the war – they didn't have to. The war remained deeply entrenched in their consciousness, it lived and pulsed like a second heart with a rhythm of its own – a rhythm unadjusted to the beatings of the real heart. Leo has survived through concentration camps, the news of a prisoner exchange came too late – he had already said goodbye to life and embraced death as a good friend. They set him free and he – dead and annulled as he was – barely understood what was going on. Elvis saw his parents killed, his property taken and finally his house set on fire, his first, followed by other houses in the street. They burned down somehow too quickly, leaving him alone in the night. Tomorrow they found him in the exact same spot. Neither alive nor dead – just like Leo and many others who would soon scatter across the world like a discharged legion.

Tomorrow at Sky Harbour in Phoenix Leo bought a ticket to Atlanta. He was going to visit Elvis, and later he'd travel to Cancun – that's as far as he planned. All options are open, and if fate will have it – he'll return to Arizona and live as before. He has never been to Mexico, but it's like people say – once you're there, the chances of going back home are always 50-50.

"I'm visiting my daughter," said an old black woman. "I haven't seen or heard from her in ten years."

"Nice," replied Leo.

"Time flies... You been to Georgia before?"

"No, my friend lives in Atlanta."

To the question where he's from, he replied only briefly – from Europe. Like it's only a small meaningless space far across the Atlantic. A space outlined by its own lead-coloured sorrow.

\* \* \*

Leo doesn't have a cell phone, and he never had one, just like he never had an iPad or one of those sleek, thin laptops. He has a couple of books and a notebook with Elvis's address written down.

"807 Dixie Avenue," he said to the taxi driver, who gave him a brief look in the rear-view mirror and then joined the traffic.

It's six o'clock and Leo remembered the closing shot of one of the first episodes

of *The Walking Dead* in which Rick Grimes rode his horse towards Atlanta. The road was empty and the distant city seemed abandoned. In reality, however, the traffic is dense and it took them a good half hour from Hartsfield-Jackson to Elvis's place. Everything was green in front of these big colourful American houses, and occasionally he saw children playing and old people frozen in motion, and somewhere around here – perhaps not far away – Flannery O'Connor used to live. Standing in Elvis's driveway, he wondered how stupid or rude of him it was not to call and announce his visit. He should have done that, but he didn't, and now he would just barge in like a forest bear.

A woman in her thirties opened the door, she had long black hair, jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. "Hello, may I help you?"

"Hello, my name is Leo, I'm a friend of Elvis's..."

He wanted to add something about just passing through which would at least to some degree justify his sudden visit, but she already picked up on him and recognised the man from this old, distant, Balkan story.

"Yeeees..." she replied and gave him a warm hug, "Leo, Elvis's friend from Boston, come in, come in... my name is Irena."

Before he knew it, Irena took her cell phone and waiting for him, Elvis, to pick up, she opened the fridge and signalled to him to take a beer or something. Leo took out two bottles of Heineken, opened them and gave her one.

"Listen, where are you now?... OK, there's someone here you'd like to see... stay there, we're coming in 15-20 minutes... no, everything is fine, just stay where you are and wait for us... not a chance, you'll see..."

Irena was born in America, she visited Macedonia only once, as a child – English was the language in which she expressed herself best. Macedonian was the means of communication between her and her old man, and then she started school and the same year he died, up in Minnesota. She doesn't go into detail. As they're driving, daylight is fading and all the colours vanish with it. In places, darkness turned into an electrical storm of neon, but they seemed to be heading to the outskirts which look the same wherever you go – somewhat frightening.

\* \* \*

He wakes up at the crack of dawn and the same moment – before he even opens his eyes, he knows exactly where he is. Thirty or forty kilometres off Cancun, in a small town on the coast. He is walking along Quinta Avenida and apart from small carts delivering bottled water – there's no one around. Across the ghostlike terrace of Blue Parrot he finds his way down to the beach. He sits on the sand near a rotting boat out on the shore, with a Mexican flag flying on the high mast,

the ocean is silent, shrouded in its ancient wrinkled skin mirroring the sky. Two distant characters in black T-shirts are walking along the beach picking up algae, thrown out by the sea onto the sand during the night. They're pushing a big cart before them and slowly approaching the pier and further away - all the way to Mamita's Beach. There you can see thick shrubs wounded by the last hurricane.

Elvis was waiting in a restaurant, across the building of an organisation or association focusing on the issues of refugees, emigrants, all those who came in day after day from all four corners of the world. They gave them legal assistance and temporary lodging, and Elvis worked for them.

"America is not what it was for a long time now," he said, "but people still keep coming."

Irena added: "The American dream was alive only a decade - from the fifties to the sixties, and everything after that was just a lie, an illusion."

When time came to leave, Elvis insisted on driving him to the airport. He was drunk and tired after a sleepless night, but they couldn't talk him out of it. As they were saying goodbye, he said: "You know, I'm never going back, all until recently I believed - one day I'll go, for a week or two. But no, I'm telling you - not a chance."

A moment before the sun set the ocean on fire, Leo got up, shook the sand off his trousers and it became clear to him - he's not going back either, to the arms of that old, enervated whore called Europe. The further he got from the coast, the uglier, poorer and more faded the facades and houses got. Voices, if any, were muffled, or it might be too early. He was approaching the heart of the town; occasional tourists - mostly tall, pale Dutch people - stop before packed gift shops or catch the shade on café terraces.

He returns to his little room, stretches on the rickety bed which echoes even the smallest movement with horrific screeching, reads about Miller's life - in 1930 he went to Paris, then in 1939, at Lawrence Durrell's invitation he retreated to Greece, but the war found him nevertheless. War is a tumour spreading relentlessly to all sides, killing on and on, even years after everything is quiet. That summer, before he took off in silence, he paid a visit to Filip - they sat on a bench beneath a vine, his old man barbecued meat, peppers and onions. The basketball rim was eaten by rust, but it still stood on the façade as a reminder of a time when dreams were enough to keep you alive. War crept up on them as well, poisoned them and turned them into living dead - Leo moved to America and Filip committed suicide towards the end of the same summer. Like all his heroes, his life ended on time - before the years took their toll.

Everything was so ordinary and normal in this small Mexican town by the coast - so normal that it made Leo feel uneasy. Late in the afternoon he had lunch

on the large covered outdoor terrace of La Brocherie restaurant. Near his table a skinny Mexican with tattooed arms played pool with an American in a short-sleeved shirt. They played for money and the Mexican lost one game after another, spreading his arms, cursing his bad luck and as the American cleaned up ball after ball – the Mexican shook his head in disbelief and threw banknotes on the pool table. Leo had nothing to do, so he observed the sequence of events at the pool table. It was clear to him what was going on, he saw this ancient performance a million times, always the same thing – an incomparably better player, in this case the Mexican, is playing a naïve and letting his opponent win three or four times and then, when the opponent is convinced he cannot lose anymore even if he wanted to – a turning point comes.

“OK, gringo,” said the skinny Mexican, “the devil himself is on your side today, all in now!”

He took out one bundle after another from his pocket and threw them dramatically on the pool table. The American smiled, he didn’t want to take all he had – he’d buy him a drink and they’d call it a day.

“Fine, I get it, you’re obviously not good enough under pressure, fear’s a good thing.”

The American was already hooked, without even knowing it, still having second thoughts, but after some jabbing – he agreed. The Mexican can clean all the balls in a single move, but he plays cunningly and the American still has the impression of having a good chance. On his third move the Mexican cleaned up the remaining balls – praising luck for finally smiling on him. Naturally, luck has nothing to do with it. The American doesn’t understand what happened and now he is the one wanting to get even. He’ll ascribe the defeat to a lack of concentration or, as his opponent said himself – the whore called luck. He loses two other games in a row and leaves the scene with a bitter smile on his face – the Mexican greets him warmly and then stops by Leo’s table and asks him:

“Hombre, are you in for a game?”

“No, thanks.”

The Mexican nods approvingly, knowing that Leo saw him through.

“Julio,” he says and stretches out his tattooed right hand.

They each had a Dos Equis – Julio is from the capital, he moved here with his brother five years ago. They opened a tattoo parlour and no longer consider returning to Ciudad de México. This pool thing is just for fun.

“And you, where are you from?”

“Gilbert, Arizona.”

“But you’re not born in the States?”

“No.”

In a couple of sentences and without going into too much detail Leo told him where he was from and how he came to the States. Julio once visited his father in California and after a few days wasn't too impressed by what he saw.

"Before you go, do come to our tattoo parlour, two blocks ahead. There's a small coffee shop below, we're on the first floor, you can't miss it," said Julio as they were saying goodbye.

On the beach, behind the big pier, people were lounging on canopied beds, smearing sunscreen all over their bodies and sizzling in the sun, children were running in the low water, two girls were trying to make something out of fine white sand. At the very end is Mamita's Beach - where mostly the locals go. No sunbeds, no bars serving refreshing drinks, but there was the greenery he saw at dawn. From up close he realised it was real wilderness - a last remaining piece of jungle. It was hard to tell how far it spread and what secrets it concealed inside.

\* \* \*

At half past ten in the evening the streets were packed, Americans and Dutch people occupied the terraces, mariachi bands and their guitars patrolled Quinta Avenida wearing colourful clothes, two security guards stood before a shining jewellery shop, armed with machine guns, and wearing bulletproof vests and helmets. A young couple pass them by casually and enter the jewellery shop. Leo sits at the edge of the counter in a bar and orders tequila - on the other side of the terrace, deep down in the yard, four older men are playing *Hotel California*. The guitarist routinely turns the last notes into *Blue Jean Blues*. A woman in her forties, sitting on a high barstool, smiles and raises a glass of red drink towards Leo:

"Welcome to the seventies."

He smiles back and drinks up.

"Waiting for someone?"

"No," says Leo and glances across the terrace, "as far as I can see, everyone's here."

She stretches her hand: "Lynn, San Diego, California."

"Leo, Gilbert, Arizona."

Until the age of eighteen she lived in Waterloo, Iowa, and then, knowing she'd never come back, she set out westwards. First to LA and then, slowly relinquishing her dreams, she spent years slowly moving towards the south, until she found herself in San Diego. She married a man fifteen years her senior, of Croatian origin, and wasted the best years of her life on him. Now she's single again and seems happy, at least to some degree. In a short while this was the third time

that Leo heard the same promise spoken out loud – I’m never going back. He wanted to go back to this and clarify why he was never going back to Iowa, but Lynn wanted to show him something. They finished their drinks and joined the river of people slowly rolling down the pulsating vein of the town.

About a hundred metres ahead she turned into one of those alleys that all had ‘North’ in their names, this could be 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup>, walked a bit more and found themselves in front of La Calaca. Right by the shop entrance there stood two skeletons in lifelike sizes. The first was in fact sitting on a tree stump, had pointy moustache and a top hat on his head, and behind him – with a hand on his shoulder – was a bride with a veil over her skull. They went into the shop; skeletons were all around and in all sizes – dressed as pirates, ladies and gentlemen from the olden days, with umbrellas and colourful hats, with guns and swords, death masks with American baseball and NFL symbols, hundreds of tiny skulls separated from the rest of the skeleton, each grinning and joyful in death.

“Fantastic, right?”

“Yes...” said Leo, although he wasn’t sure if he agreed with Lynn.

Death is not as scary if reduced to the right measure. They bought each other a figurine. Leo put his in his pocket – they went out and she had to go find her friends.

“After midnight, make sure you come to Blue Parrot, will you?”

“It’s a deal,” Leo smiled, crossed the road and headed out in the direction of the restaurant where he had lunch.

He couldn’t see the terrace with the pool table, but then someone’s weak hand touched him: “This way, señor, accommodate yourself.”

It was a girl, a young girl, to be more precise – standing in front of the restaurant and inviting people, attracting their attention to the menu written in chalk on a board. He sat at the exact same table – alone like a castaway in a country where no one was alone. He ordered a Dos Equis and a dinner, a man and a woman, Americans, his age, played pools, she was wearing a long skirt made of some sort of wrinkled material and a purple tank top. Every now and then she removed the hair from her face and this movement reminded him of something that happened many years ago, he couldn’t call the exact scene to his memory, but he could relive the feeling – when you feel like crying and laughing at the same time.

\* \* \*

The day lasted too long and at an utterly insignificant moment it withered, wore out and resurrected, but it was by no means the same day, although it seems that here, in Mexico, an entire life can fit between two sunrises. Following the subdued

thunder of double basses, Leo headed to Blue Parrot along the same street as this morning. The MC's voice is introducing three DJs whose positions are strategically located from an outdoor bar, to the beach, to the ocean. At the huge counter, dominating the space like a NASCAR track, dozens of gringos are stretching out their hands trying to attract the attention of a waitress – young girls all of them, commanded by a few older guys. Almost no one orders two or three drinks, they take ten to fifteen tequilas, margaritas, cocktails with umbrellas or beers, and in this jungle of hands Leo notices the one calling him on from the part of the counter closer to the DJ from New Delhi and an improvised dance floor. It's Julio, he's in a good mood, and Leo makes his way to the other part of the track.

“This is Rodrigo, my younger brother.”

Leo and Rodrigo shake hands. The left half of his face – from his forehead to the peak of his chin – is scarred. There's a tattoo of Jesus in a poncho, holding a Kalashnikov rifle in his hand on his right arm. At that point five scantily clad girls in cowboy hats, hot pants and matching black vests climb on the counter and, moving with the rhythm, passing new types of Dos Equis beer.

“Two years ago,” says Julio, “before the hurricane season, all this was in flames which reached the sky, one small part burned down here – just off the sea.”

Rodrigo kept looking straight ahead and drinking. There was something in this frozen look or perhaps in the way he stood next to his brother as if he wasn't present at all that made Leo think that he – Rodrigo – was in a way connected to the death of a little boy. In the meantime Lynn changed into a light, green dress – with the same red drink she was standing some thirty metres away. Leo nods to Julio, takes his beer and walks to her. The woman from Iowa twitches at the light touch on her shoulder, and realising it is him and not some kind of demon – places the palm of her other hand on her chest with relief.

They sit on the sand, leaning against that boat. They are not alone, shadows roam around the beach and their movements are indistinct in the darkness, only occasionally interrupted by laser beams of silver light.

“I can't believe how years pass, as if I wasn't even paying attention,” says Lynn, “one day you wake up and realise – half of your life is gone..”

The music behind their backs is suddenly quiet, and then the rumble continues and an avalanche rolls towards the ocean – first the Chemical Brothers and then other items from the playlist.

\* \* \*

The picture of the city is slowly fading – this could be any of the living or dead and long forgotten cities, but the moment before he opens his eyes Leo once again

turns around and distinguishes details. It is the city he grew up in, or what is left of it, the cracked streets are empty, soon everything will be overgrown by weeds. He opens his eyes and at first point doesn't realise where he is - everything is covered in greenery, plants growing over one another, lianas intertwining in tree tops, the light doesn't reach him and only where the green awning is scratched sunrise appears. He can feel the heady smell of earth, beneath whose skin all secrets are buried, the bones of ancient warriors meticulously cleaned of everything, civilisations perished in terrible slaughters - everything that happened ended up in the belly and everything that is and will be will live the same destiny.

Trying to fathom how he got here, Leo randomly made his way through the jungle - it used to stretch hundreds of miles along the coast and nothing much is left of it today for sure. Nevertheless - the remnants of the jungle were squeezing him in and if he soon didn't find his way out he could die in this sepulchral silence. He is taken aback, somewhat ashamed with the realisation that he still cared - he wanted to see a few more daybreaks, he wanted to live, whatever this life may be like. The green curtain is ajar in one place and since he doesn't have much choice, he goes there, still ruminating over the images from the previous night: the woman from Iowa is sitting on the beach with him and saying something about the years going by.

This is the last record - the tape here seems corroded, destroyed. The most interesting or the most important scenes seem as though cut out in the editing room.

He stops at the edge of a clearing and he is now the man in the shadow. The one whose eyes lurk in the darkness. Six stone pillars, like the ones before the Temple of Warriors in Chichén Itza, are arranged on the outer edge of the circle. The remains of a building are in the central part, four dilapidated stone walls without a roof or a board, simply walls opening up to the sky, visible, but dead. No clouds, stars or traces of the sun - only a grey motionless awning, a dawn frozen in time. From where he's standing he cannot see anything but these walls, slowly degraded by time. He doesn't know what could happen if he's out in the clearing - will he disturb this process that has been going on unhindered perhaps hundreds of years? And as he is debating, he hears a metal noise, followed by another, and two beams of red light make their way through the gloom, continuing to dance across the sky as though they are seeking any sign of life.

He will have to go there, behind the ruins, and this realisation is reassuring. Without a hint of fear, trepidation or bad thoughts, Leo steps foot into the clearing. He stops only before the walls and puts the palm of his hand on the white stone. It's cold and he feels the chill gnawing his skin - the feeling is almost real, of

course, if he kept his hand there long enough, the chill would penetrate to the very core of his heart. Therefore, he moves on, past the ruins and stops with bated breath before a known scene.

An amusement park, the same one from thirty years before, stood on the clearing. The red light from two rotating spotlights on the roof is still canvassing the sky, there is a jukebox in the front row with large speakers, two foosball tables on the left and on the right, and behind, on the opposite side – six flippers, on the right hand side videogames – Phoenix, Scramble and Formula 1 – on the left there is a trailer with a semi-circular opening and a sign ‘cashier’. This is where they bought chips and yes, it was raining often and instead of the jungle, on both sides of the river a city used to sprawl.

They used to spend hours on end playing Haunted House, Gorgar and Spectrum. There was never too much money, so they had to play well to earn prize games. One day, Leo thought then, I could work in an amusement park and travel from one city to the other. Not own one – being just an employee would be good enough and the world would immediately fit in his pocket. A decade later he was no longer addicted to flippers, he and his first girlfriend stood by a jukebox. They’d play a couple of songs and he couldn’t imagine a life without her, the same moment everything would simply collapse and that’s why he believed they would stay together. Man, the fucking’ future of the entire world depended on them. But somehow it passed, the world tumbled down, but not because of them or not only because of them. One year the amusement park didn’t come to the fair, nor did it come the next year, nor ever again. It was a clear warning, but no one seemed to care – or perhaps they didn’t understand.

Every time the amusement park left the city, it would be a sad scene, and this last year, after which it never returned – no one gave a damn.

They never said a word and went on with their lives believing that a city without an amusement park could survive. What a mistake.

Leo takes a coin, flips it in the opening and types A27. Joan Jett & The Blackhearts:

*I love rock n’ roll  
So put another dime in the jukebox, baby  
I love rock n’ roll  
So come an’ take your time an’ dance with me*

\* \* \*

The picture of the city is slowly fading, he opens his eyes - his head is in the lap of the woman from Iowa. Her palm is covering his face. He fell asleep, she says, maybe for a minute or two and smiled in his sleep.

He stood up, shook the sand off his trousers, stretched out his hand and said: "Let's go."

"Where to?"

He had no idea. The ocean already spat out its black algae, soon the day will break. Before this happens, they should get off the stage. They might stick around for a day or two here, in time-worn Mexico, then off to Gilbert, Arizona, and San Diego, pick up their stuff and move on, to the north. Find something new, a city they've never been, it's hard to tell, they might even stay there, in this yet unnamed place.

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