

Dino Pešut

**Bruised Knees**  
(Poderana koljena)

Novel

Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović



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DINO PEŠUT was born in Sisak in 1990. He graduated Dramaturgy in Screenwriting and Playwrighting from Academy of Drama Art in Zagreb. He works as a dramaturge in various theatre in Croatia and abroad. As a dramatist, he debuted 2012 with the play *The pressures of my generation*, which was selected for the FORUM OF YOUNG EUROPEAN PLAYWRIGHTS within Theaterbiennale Wiesbaden *New plays from Europe*. His play *(Pret)posljednja panda ili statika ((Pen)ultimate Panda or Static)* won the national prize Marin Držić by the Ministry of Culture and was premiered in ZKM Zagreb, 2015. The same play was invited to participate in program Stueckemarkt within the framework of the Festival Theatertreffen in Berlinu in 2016. He won the national prize Marin Držić for the plays *Veliki hotel Bezdán (Big Hotel Bezdán)* and *Stela, poplava (Stela, Flood)*.



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Dane Draženović is a genuine modern millennial antihero of 2018. For an actor who decided to try his luck in Berlin and a homosexual without a single stable relationship, anything can happen. But can it, really? In spite of the world being his oyster, even when successfully involved with numerous projects, it doesn't reflect on Dane's bank account.

In the time when everything is instant - moments, experiences, feelings - analytical fragile inner self of young Dane Draženović is never at rest. It seems that the internal gap in his personality, rooted in his family relations, cannot be fulfilled with his fairly excessive consumption of alcohol and promiscuous episodes after all. And despite innumerable possibilities within his reach, Dane's real internal needs are love and safety. When he becomes a five-minute hero on an international level after surviving a terrorist attack and saving a little girl, he struggles with the question - how to live as a survivor?

Depicting problems and experiences of a contemporary actor, *Bruised Knees* is the novel about the millennial generation and their place in the world. Raising questions about the most important issues of today, this complex, intelligent and universal novel speaks to the widest possible audience.

“Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* just got its successor.”

– Davor Špišić, *Jutarnji list daily*

“What [Dino Pešut] has to say perhaps isn’t what everybody would like to hear, which is why *Bruised Knees* isn’t an easy read, but Pešut definitely is one of those naturally gifted writers who have their way with words.”

## Bruised Knees

1

Today is a day for adventure, Dane thinks and walks out onto the long Torstrasse in Berlin. He leaves behind an empty page of a drawing pad, the unfinished picture book from the *Naughty Children* series. It isn't exactly a series because so far he's made only two. One of them turned out to be scandalous. But he translated both books, one ambitious organization promoted the books online and some money came through the crowdfunding campaign. It wasn't much of a profit, but Dane ambitiously calculated all he had to do was produce one picture book every two months and imagined a huge brand. Of course, it turned out to be somewhat more difficult to realize, and the agents who'd once shown interest never called back. Then he put everything off for a while, he became somewhat suspicious of the whole thing. But that's something he doesn't want to think about now. Because today isn't the day when one should think he abandoned a promising acting career on account of some hipster picture book that brought him trouble instead of that special feeling of accomplishment. But he knows, he won't be able to postpone the work for a long time because he'll soon run out of money, the days of freedom and luxury of confusion will melt down and he'll have to make up for each of these days of existential crisis by sitting at his desk, using his hand and his imagination. Because his parents think this is a folly, and his colleagues see it as yet another outburst of idiocy and auto destruction Dane Draženović has been so lavish at displaying ever since he enrolled in the Art School. He should not be pushing his luck because very soon he could end up washing glasses in a bar. But not today, today Dane would want to see the limits of this city. He would want to expose himself to this world and to three and a half million people registered in this city. He would want to see all those souls, in love and in tears, busy and lost, that live their lives between the workweek and the weekend. Dane Draženović would want to see a miracle happen to him.

One of those moments in life that look like a perfume or watch commercial in some fashion magazine. Yes, the summer has already slowly melted into a memory and made itself comfortable in *the good ole days*. And those new friends have moved on too, in life, in structures. And only Dane has been left behind with the terrible notion. He moved to Berlin. It's not just to see what it's like, to wait until shit at home calms down a bit, to organize his thoughts. He now lives here. And his bank account warns him there isn't much time left.

Dane Draženović would want to experience an adventure because for a moment he got scared that his twenties were going to turn out to be a complete waste of time. He's been around, mostly he was drunk and didn't know what to do with the unexpected success. Perhaps all he needed was a short break, but impulsive Dane convinced himself it was a sign he needed to change his life. As if the anxiety disorder was some kind of a phoneline direct to God. Dane Draženović's mother always told him curiosity would kill him, but in all actuality, it was her anxiety that almost got to him. Still, it was true he was impulsive and the only constant in his life was the wish to escape. Once, he'd fallen madly in love with some blond young man he'd spent one drunken night with after which that French tourist travelled on. After two months of letters, Dane Draženović borrowed three hundred euros and, completely drunk, sat on the plane - to take him to Dortmund. He woke up in this German town with a couple of euros in his pocket and all he wanted was to go to Paris, into love, into what he considered would be his life. Back then he was just twenty-two years old and he didn't know it was a peak of an illusion he'd imagined when he'd been a kid in a ruined industrial town. Yes, this future actor and the author of two relatively popular picture books once travelled half of Europe in a train on account of a pair of blue eyes and a couple of blonde locks only to spend a weekend in someone's arms. When he finally arrived in Paris, it was dawn. Paris was pink, sensuous. The sun just came out and Dane stood at the train station and was many unhappy, enamored men in one, one history of European literature and filmography in one. At that point, Dane Draženović thought that this was life and that he'd chosen the best life possible.

But, back then he was just a twenty-two. Back then he could think with his dick. Back then the fatal consequences of the global economic crisis could not be felt, the defeat of the ambition that grew on the wings of market expansion, the union of the European family. Not even five years later, the days are already filling up with much more practical thoughts. Banal questions, what's for lunch today, do you have enough money to pay the rent, how long do you have to work, is your cavity filled. After you turn twenty-five, you no longer choose your partner because of their blonde locks and dreamy eyes, but by concrete criteria, by

suitability. Dane Draženović lives in a very confusing world, in the collapsing economy, in the world that, on the verge of forgetting the gifts of Hitler and Stalin, creates polarizations and divergences which, according to the Balkan experience, only portend war. Dane Draženović is part of a lost generation, brought up by the parents whose hopes were crushed by the false promises offered by the cocktail of nationalism and capitalism. He is a representative of a generation that uses the free market only to be exploited by it, left unemployed, on the verge of a minimum wage, thankful it has a chance to work – without pay. The generation, like any other before and after it, accused of being spoiled, but with the prolonged puberty, more on account of global economy than its own choice. And now, that group of people born in the period of great transits, rushes into its thirties, mostly living the lives of free radicals, making just enough money a month not to feel comfortable, seeing that their whole generation is lost. Some are getting married in a panic before they reach thirty in the hope that they will gain control over something, over some stable image of the future, when they can't control the economy. It's a unique case of the whole gamut of young people who are trying to save themselves when the system is only trying to save banks and corporations. The generation left only with the internet, the childhood toy they grew up with, to which they all were a test group, the space of yearning and desire. They have slowly filled the space of the virtual and parallelly developed the fetish of *the real*, *the realistic* that is now exploited by right-wing populists. That's one fragile generation that, in order to protect itself from life, managed to make everything complicated. They do not fuck, they do not discover the sensual passion of group sex, the divorce is no longer a triumph, but a necessity, safe sex is as obligatory as food free of salmonella, the partners have to be free-range just like chickens, suffering is simply unacceptable. That's why the relationships are so sterile, one step away from arranged marriages. Because suffering is now out of the question. But Dane is a poet, somewhere deep inside he knows that without suffering love becomes a short reckoning with long friends made. Or as Slavoj Žižek would put it: *To fall in love without a fall*. Dane's head is full of quotes, incessant, often hangover stream of thoughts, interminable narration of life. But he likes more to pretend to be a jerk, a drunk, and a dumb actor. That's a bit more comfortable.

At that same time, just as Dane Draženović developed yet another of his tirades about the lost generation that came of age at the moment when it saw the two WTC towers collapse, another young man, who would celebrate his thirtieth birthday the next day, thought that today was the day when his life would change. Lucas Fischer, a relatively well-known Berlin actor, the member of the incredibly popular Berlin theatre, his ego crushed, was riding the U8 line of the Berlin

Subway. Today the cast was finally made public and he was going to his home theatre convinced that today was the day when all of his dreams would come true, the day when, on the eve of his thirtieth birthday, he'd finally get the opportunity that had been promised to him ever since he'd enrolled in the prestigious Berlin Drama Academy. He stepped in front of the notice board, the whole morning he'd been rehearsing the stoicism with which he would accept the role of Hamlet. Yes, such were the dreams of Lucas Fischer. That's what he'd been promised, more or less, he knew the director, he made a great effort with him, they drank many beers together, and Lucas selflessly offered this egomaniac a shoulder to cry on. But when he stepped in front of the notice board, an abyss yawned under him, as if the whole building collapsed around him, as if the whole of Berlin became just stage scenery and in the whole universe there were only he and the notice board, and on the notice board a casual piece of white A4 paper on which his name was not to be found. Even worse, next to the word "Hamlet" there stood a name and, in the parentheses, the line: "as guest." Yes, Lucas Fischer, no longer a young man, did not only have to make peace with the fact that he was not cast for the role and that this wasn't the great breakthrough he'd been hoping for and that it would perhaps never come (or had already passed), but also with the fact that someone younger, just as blonde, more skillful, more handsome, more buff, came from some academy and had enough charisma to make his debut as Hamlet. This realization broke Lucas Fischer in half like some sculpture of ancient deity and the shards of him scattered all over the marble floor of the official entrance into the theatre.

And so, Lucas Fischer decided to change his life. He picked up the shards and put them in his backpack in which he'd hidden a bottle of wine hoping to celebrate the key moment of his career and walked out into the street. The sky smeared up into white noise like when the TV loses signal. As he sat on the train, he didn't look out through the window, he didn't look at the people, he didn't keep track of the stops. He thought what the following thirty odd years of his life would look like. Would he ever make peace with smaller and less frequent roles? He should invest his savings into something that would give him the sense of importance and accomplishment, perhaps a small restaurant or an apartment he could rent, and why not, perhaps some socially-responsible startup that would be listed on the market. Maybe he could fall in love with some civil servant and start a family, adopt two dogs. Or give up on everything and go back to his parents to a place that's neither a village nor a town in Germany's northwest. There were many decisions in front of the devastated Lucas Fischer, and all came out of a simple premise that he could not admit to himself that nothing out of the ordinary had actually happened, that all of this was just part of the game and the career and

that what he was going through was just one in the line of tiny narcissistic breakdowns he should've gotten used to during the past ten years of his career. This time, like, besides, any other time, he was convincing himself he finally understood everything and made peace with it. It's the naivety of those who make themselves believe they have hit rock bottom, but they are in fact so far from the bottom that they wouldn't recognize it even if they bruised their knees on it.

How surprising a day can turn out to be. Lucas Fischer feels he's losing his breath. It occurs to him he'll have a panic attack. He needs to get out at the next stop. Right away. For, it would be horrible if he collapsed to the ground and began suffocating. It's highly likely someone on the train would recognize him, maybe it would end up in the papers. Lucas needs some air. He glances around. People are unusually indifferent on subways. Some are reading, typing their messages, but most seem as if meditating. There's nothing you can do in a steel can speeding through underground halls of great cities. True, those inclined to paranoia will check who is getting on and off the train, perhaps some control or terrorist cell. The rest will just wait for their stop, their job, clinic, or apartment. Oh, what tricks life has played on Lucas Fischer. In just a couple of hours, he truly, firsthand, sees the true meaning of the myth of Daedalus and Icarus.

But the day had a different plan for Lucas Fischer and Dane Draženović. First of all, their two shoulders met. Both of them driven by the desire to escape, the first one from the world and the second one into this very world's arms, in the multitude of their decisions, they bumped their shoulders. Yes, maybe they weren't careful, but maybe that's the way it should have been. Dane Draženović's right shoulder bumped into Lucas Fischer's right shoulder with such force that Lucas landed on the floor, down the hard steps, among the trampling feet that had no time to stop, but whose upbringing was such that they just could not ignore the situation. The feet stopped, the shoulder would turn blue, and the tiny stream of blood would trickle through the blonde locks and press itself into the concrete.

2

God, I hope I haven't killed the Kraut! a thought runs through Dane Draženović's mind. I don't have a place of residence. I'm an illegal alien. Does this even count as murder? the anxious stream of thought develops. What's the procedure? Can you end up in jail if you bump into someone? No, I can't kill anyone today. Today, just when I stopped self-pitying myself.

Naturally, this isn't a murder. This is just an awful day in the life of Lucas Fischer, a relatively successful actor who appeared in three episodes of *Tatort*, the ensemble member of the probably most popular European theatre in which he would never, never ever, play Hamlet. It's just a horrible day, a thought runs through Lucas Fischer's mind. It will pass, it will pass. That's, it seems, that German upbringing. He gets up slowly, assures the passers-by everything is all right, it isn't a concussion, he's already had one. He rubs some blood with his fingers. All right, he's seen worse. And then his eyes lock up on our Dane Draženović, still somewhat shocked, at the top of the steps. Lucas Fischer feels his knees buckle. Bearded, his hair black and thick, most likely a foreigner. This is what takes Lucas' breath away, makes his throat shrink, punches him in the stomach and makes his knees buckle again. Lucas Fischer thinks: Oh, I could fall in love today. Perhaps that's the miracle he needs, the film story about a man from the very bottom who finds what he truly needs – love. Or it's just a concussion after all.

Dane Draženović rushes towards him. He apologizes in the bad German, in slightly better English, even in Croatian, when he's got nothing more to say. He asks if he should take him to hospital, "Do you need anything?" The only thing Dane Draženović knows should be done now is have a shot of brandy. Yes, a tiny shot of brandy sobers a man up, brings him back to order. In Croatia, the brandy serves to bring everything into order, the dust from the TV set, the fever, the marriage.

"Yes, you should have a shot of brandy and have your wound washed. That's what we'll do. There's a place nearby. That's what we'll do. Come."

Before he knows what's happening, Lucas Fischer is already at the restroom of the nearby bar, leaning over the wash-bowl while Dane Draženović rinses his wound. It's a very intimate image in diagonal perspective. As warm as an oil on canvas in some national gallery. Lucas watched Dane Draženović who mutters something warm, completely unintelligible to him, in Croatian. Lucas Fischer can't even guess what language this is. It's not Russian, but it's close. Maybe today is the luckiest day of his life after all because something like this does not happen every day. You do not fall down the stairs on a daily basis. The wounds are not washed by large hands every day. This is a very special day for both of them. Or so it seems. His hair wet, Lucas glances at their reflection in the mirror. They don't look like a pair yet. On the contrary, they look like everything is clear and like they haven't met not even ten minutes ago. Lucas smiles. What a beautiful rendering of completely acceptable hope in this otherwise horrible day.

"Come, let's have a shot of brandy to calm you down," Dane Draženović tells him, this time in English.

The bar is filled with hipsters hard at work. Every table is covered with gray

laptops with the bitten apple on them. An incredible number of wool hats on immaculately tanned heads. Many websites edited on computers, many illegally installed Photoshop packets open. There's a lot of underpaid workforce whose products are almost never going to get out on the market, but they keep alive the hope that one day capitalism will have a human face, social inclusion and ecological mission. Dane Draženović and Lucas Fischer order two shots of brandy at the bar. One apathetic face pours the drinks for them, the face that feels it has too much talent for service industry. Lucas just keeps watching. He doesn't know how to start a conversation with the foreigner. A shy erection emerges somewhere under his middle-waist skinny black jeans. So, in place of words, awkward smiles.

"Well, cheers," Dane Draženović says and lifts his shot glass up into the air. Lucas does the same and takes a sip, only to see Dane has finished his brandy in one go. It must be one of those cultural differences, Lucas Fischer thinks seeing he is threading on the outskirts of a field of sexual fantasies. How else would two strangers meet at this neoliberal era but by asking that simple question: *what is it you do?* Interestingly, not so long ago, the first question would have been: where do you come from, what kind of a last name is that? Today, what unites people is their *job*. And the whole world can be divided into two and a half categories. The ones who have a job, the ones who do not, and the ones who are just about to get one. But, there's something comforting in the question *what is it you do?* In the democratized world, where everyone should engage in their passion and mission, *what is it you do?* belongs to everyone. And the richer the country is, the bigger the possibility that one will hear *nothing at all* or *I'm thinking about what to do* or *I think I'll start writing*. Something Dane would never hear in Serbia, Bosnia, or Croatia. In poorer countries the answer is more likely to be *this and that*, *I do what/where I can*, or *I've been looking for a job for the past two years, but you need a connection, fuck this country and everyone in it*. In the big cities of the developed countries, the job has to be as interesting as one's hobby, because, economically speaking, now this is, supposedly, possible. A couple of days ago, a dark-skinned chubby man complained to Dane Draženović that he was embarrassed to say where he worked because people judged him on account of the corporative nature of his workplace. Lucky him, Dane Draženović thought at that moment, he most certainly doesn't wonder if there's a coin or two left in his pocket for another small beer.

Dane Draženović and Lucas Fischer share a profession. Both of them are actors. One has given up on it, the other is convinced he'd give up on it tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow. Dane Draženović no longer says he's an actor. More out of politeness than embarrassment. But he feels sorry over Lucas' tragic story, he feels for him, and tells him that every creative occupation has to come to an end. Lucas Fischer listens to him and smiles. In his head he is forging a lovable image

of some provincial theatre. He imagines some cheap naturalistic scenography and *naïve* overplaying of this incredibly tense Balkan man, his beard and all. Lucas smiles and thinks how sweet it is that Dane compares himself to him, that their careers have any resemblance at all. Why, he is the member of the ensemble of the best known European theatre. Dane smiles too, almost pitying his German colleague. Dane understands Lucas cannot know that he won an award at Cannes and that he made two more films that premiered at A-category festivals. He can't know this. He was too busy being the B-lineup of a successful theatre. The fact that he had three appearances in *Tatort* means little to Dane because he could never understand the fascination with this big-budget TV drama that often esthetically slipped into B category. No, Lucas Fischer has no way of knowing this, and, as far Dane is concerned, maybe it's for the better. One too many times he had to explain his decision to his family, his friends, and especially his ex-lovers. Why would anyone abandon something like this because of picture books? At least this was what Dane used as his excuse, picture books, and not a paranoid wish to run away from success. The fear that he will destroy what he's got, narcissistic breakdowns, choking before auditions, and the inkling of a chance that he actually might become successful.

Sweet, Lucas Fischer thinks, but brave too. It must be easy to be a star in Croatia and abandon it all in order to live in Berlin.

He listens as Dane explains he's got little money left, but he'll think of something. He always does. Dane just doesn't want to tell him about the picture book because it always ends up looking like a pathetic homage to Wes Anderson's movies. Dane Draženović is not that type. It's a pity he isn't, it would be easier to drag those lonely Berlin creative homosexuals into bed. But, supposedly, Dane Draženović sticks to his principles.

Another round of brandies arrives.

When did he get to order it? Lucas Fischer asks. This man must be a magician, he concludes.

Maybe this is my chance, Dane Draženović thinks and invites Lucas Fischer to lunch. He's just bought pumpkins, he can make soup. It's definitely the best soup he's even had. Lucas Fischer accepts the invitation, more on account of his erection than the soup. Dane Draženović pays for the drinks. He decides to show all of his attributes. He knows what he's got. They leave the bar. One apathetic face follows them with his eyes in the hope that this is just a temporary job before his dancing career, long dreamed of but probably just as apathetic, kicks off.

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Dane Draženović walks out into the day. He feels like a doe that has to know how to run the moment it is born. Maybe this is his last day in Berlin, ever. Tomorrow he might get on a plane and never come back. The world has turned out to be too big, and Dane hasn't managed to find his place in it. He could leave all this behind, at the airport, a bottle of water and a tube of toothpaste larger than 50 ml in his hands. He could bring this attempt, this failure, down to an anecdote, one of the well-known stories that begin with, "Once I lived in Berlin too." He really doesn't know. He's been hiding between his four walls for a long time, in the warm womb he had to pay for. Maybe he'll still stay in the pleasant warmth of the dull routine and maybe this adventure wasn't what he needed. He could've lived his life, made a film or two and worked on his picture books. He could've wrapped himself into the familiarity of Zagreb, accepted conservatism, provincialism as something normal, and slowly given up on his desires and aspirations and marked them as the surplus of ambitiousness and immaturity. Zagreb would've given him the status with the bitter taste of frustration and maybe, with time, he would've made peace with the fact that that's the way *we* are. Still, maybe he wanted too much and that bullet he never fired was that classical, mythological burning of the wings. Should he be punished because he wanted just a little bit more for himself, something more than what was offered by the geographic lottery of birth? I don't know, Dane Draženović sighs. And at that very moment one of those fabulous suit stores opens right next to him. Two tiny salesmen, their suits too tight, are smoking in front of the store. Dane looks at the price, then at his reflection. Fuck it, fuck it all, I'm walking in and I'm gonna buy myself a suit. I'll get rid of this pathetic sweatshirt and these jeans that always seem to be hanging. And I'll walk out in this suit. And I'll spend the last penny I've got. Yes, our Dane Draženović has never been a consumerist. Swiping his credit card has never filled

his heart. Maybe it's because his mother used to buy bread and milk on her Diners card. And the uncertainty of the card being accepted and the machine spitting out the receipt is still fresh. As is that silent guilt because he pleaded for a candy. But today he will. Today Dane Draženović will see that a piece of clothing sewed by the Italian single mother of two, who ended up making a product costing more than her monthly pay, is going to fill his heart. And the two formally dressed shop assistants get into a tizzy. Then one of them gets inside and makes a call. The other one greets him and shows him their new models. The first one hangs up and proudly approaches Dane Draženović.

"Mr. Dragzenotsh, sir, please pick a suit. Our owner wishes to express his thanks."

Dane smiles. The other one, most likely some Latino, throws himself into his arms. Dane feels his muscles are getting sore already. And the two fellows give him an afternoon to remember. They lock up the store, draw the curtains, and let him try everything on. They put on some music. Oh, the Spaniard also has a bottle of wine, he's hidden it for a later date with his boyfriend, his lover, it's complicated. Dane dances, laughs. He tries on a jacket, then another one, then another one, and all of them are avoiding the topic. And the jackets are all over the floor. And the wine is getting much too close to those expensive items of clothing. And Dane Draženović is happy, how long has it been since he's been this happy? Genuinely happy. He laughs. He doesn't give a fuck about the free suit, he truly and genuinely doesn't give a fuck. A bottle of wine and twelve Rihanna hits later, Michel and Mario have found a suit for Dane. Navy blue, tight, emphasizing his shoulders, hiding his stomach, creating an optical illusion of a large penis. And finally Dane feels attractive. They exchange phone numbers, they hug. Dane is a new man. He's got a suit. He looks like Pete Doherty, Kate Moss' ex-boyfriend and one of the handsomest heroin addicts ever. That's how Michel explains it to him. And he walks down the street, the new Dane Draženović, light, unburdened, without thoughts, a tremor in his shoulders, Dane that's smiling at the passers-by. The new Dane! He walks along the river, the tired, filthy Spree, and the mighty Reichstag reveals itself in front of him.

The green river and the green glass outline one of the peaks of the world and power. Dane Draženović suddenly feels incredibly small, irrelevant, here at the crossroads of history and many possible futures. He walks in, shows his ID, passes through the metal frame whose silence guarantees Dane has no hidden pistol, bomb or some intimate piercing. The cleanly shaven face of the intern gives a warm smile, he offers him his right hand. His name is Karim. He's here as part of his internship. He hopes to stay. It's very nice. There are three restaurants in

the building. Karim offers him lunch, Dane refuses. He's tipsy. Karim, the intern, doesn't seem to mind. He loves this house, he's thrilled by the fact that in Germany everything has an explanation. "This tunnel, let's say, all the politicians go through there. And see, they left it raw because it is a tunnel and it goes under the river. Crazy, right? But they left it such so that the politicians remain humble, so that they know they're in the tunnel. And see this, just glass and concrete. That's because glass represents transparency, and concrete stability and sovereignty. See how they arrange everything for themselves. See this, nothing is straight. That's where different boards sit, and can you see how wavy it all is. That's so that it looks like a living organism. These are not blocks, it has to be fluid. Here are the boxes that belong to all the representatives, here is Angela Merkel, and this black one here is for," he pauses, unpleasant silence settled for a moment, "that's for black days," Karim shrugs and goes on. They go up the stairs and walk into a spacious salon with leather armchairs lined up in front of a large print.

"Have a seat," Karim says, and Dane obeys. "This is a work by a Swedish artist," Karim says and points at a huge painting hanging on the wall. "See, this is the spine, and all this around it is a cancer eating the spine. See how colorful the cancer is. Well, this is the room where politicians come to make the toughest decisions. And then they sit here and can ask themselves and wonder if they are the spine or the cancer. There, you can think about it too," Karim says, offers him a wide smile and walks backward out of the room.

And so Dane sits and stares at the existentialist question: are you the spine or the cancer? And the answer shows itself clearly in the colorful waves fluttering around the spine.

Drunk in the middle of the day, he makes a little inventory of his life. He sees cancers left and right, in his biography, his character, his memories. The cancer is the cynicism with which he accepted the award at Cannes. The cancer is the fact that for the past ten years he's been living in a state of hangover. His relationships, lovers, family, friends, are cancers, mostly benign, but with a tendency of malignity. And then he thinks: how to become the spine? What kind of Dane could be the spine, Dane after the bullet? He'd love to see that potential.

And he imagines himself grandiosely walking into a press conference and saying: "I watched *Love, Actually* today. And I've been thinking. I cried a little. To be honest, I cried a lot. And let me tell you, the only thing I'm certain of is that I don't know anything more than that film knows. Dear people die on us, they fall in love unhappily, they cheat, they lie, and they can't help themselves. The world is full of catastrophes, political, war, ecological, economical, and more than anything, or after everything, intimate catastrophes. These intimate tragedies

are part of a larger world we are unable to see. And while a couple of weeks ago ten families bereaved their dearly departed ones, some other people cried for completely different reasons. Some were cheated on or abandoned, some were starving, some had to leave their homes, some were crying over mass graves. This world is united in hardship, in catastrophe, in sadness, in mourning. This world is untied in being fucked up because this is what makes us recognize each other as people, as one race, whose main characteristic is not the fact that it can build skyscrapers, use thumbs and develop complex economic systems, but that it can be truly fucked up, miserable, desperate. Because all of the gods are tirelessly silent. So people find comfort, at least some kind of comfort, in very tangible things. This person, dear to me, found comfort in a gun, his girlfriend in a bomb, and I find it in bottles of wine. Someone else, just around the corner, finds it in MDMA. Someone else in a bottle of whiskey. Someone else disconnects himself completely and it's as if he doesn't exist anymore. Someone else will eat a mayo sandwich at three in the morning. Someone else will take therapy. Someone else will beat up a couple of homos. And so every one of them will be looking for comfort or for hope, for an answer or postponement. Because we lack love. That's all. Love. And maybe that's my message. It's pathetic. Not at all glamorous. It won't start a revolution. But I survived because one lady, Mrs. Ulrike, told me: I love you. She said it a hundred times over until she brought me back. So, I'm going to say I love you. Like some fucking hippy, like some privileged little scum. But what else can I say? What message can I send?

Actually. Sometimes it seems we should send it all to hell. Eat a shawarma in the middle of a bioshop, all greasy, let the hummus and the fries drip all over the organically-grown tomatoes. That's what sometimes I think we should do. And then again, it's easy to provoke, we should love each other too, you cannibals."

Karim puts an end to his fantasizing, he invites him to come along and, before he knows what's happening, he's standing next to Angela Merkel and some other politicians and aides he doesn't recognize. There's been a word about unity. They've showed some plaque into Dane's hands. It's time for Dane to say something, after the generic, genuinely sad, yet motivating political speeches about the *tomorrow*. Dane doesn't care about the tomorrow. He hasn't prepared a speech. He hasn't even thought about it. So he walks in front of the journalists. He steps onto a small platform and manages only something like thank you, umm, danke? Angela gives a warm smile.

The journalists will take from it what they need, they'll cut it into a message of hope and soon everything will be forgotten. And the world seems as if it has already forgotten. And the trains will get going, and hashtags will disappear, and the labels of profile pictures will be removed and replaced by other images. New

attacks will come, new wars, new conflicts and diplomatic incidents. Ecological catastrophes will happen, cries of various experts for various topics. And religious sects will announce the new end of the world. And then this will be forgotten too. Once one wise woman told Dane that every era was convinced it stood at the end of the world. She told him this early enough, a long Marlboro clenched in her teeth, before she died, when he was still a snotty kid, so that today, at twenty-seven years old, he could understand it fully.

Angela Merkel keeps smiling, what else can she do. She doesn't know what to do in a situation such as this one. Surely she has better things to do. That's Berlin, the city at whose heart she lives. And now this fellow whose last name she can't even pronounce is the image of this city and the country she runs. It's no longer the warrior, it's no longer Hitler, it's not the Wall, it's not punk-rock, left terrorism, it's not the face of a jubilant man smashing the Wall, it's not the second generation of Turkish immigrants, it's not a refugee, and it's not a right-wing populist. No, it's one Dane Draženović from Croatia, a homosexual, a white man who watches cheap romantic comedies and who doesn't visit the gym. Angela Merkel realizes that the country she runs is changing rapidly. And that time relentlessly passes. She gives some thought on how to go on, about politics, but also about her husband who, oh, is certainly waiting for her to come home. And why wouldn't he? He sits relaxed on his couch, reading a book, waiting for Angela to come home. Like every evening, she plops on the couch and exhales deeply. It always seems to him as if with this stream of air she blows out the burden of this whole world, of Europe and especially Germany. Then he sits next to her, strokes her head, and covers her with a little blanket.

Dane Draženović has nowhere to go, has nothing to do, has no country to run, and has no husband who would stroke his head when some fame-hungry neo-fascists wear him out. That's why he agrees to go look at the dome, he pushes his way through the tourists and Berlin skyline opens up in front of him. He remains standing at the top and fixes his eyes on Alex Tower cutting itself into the center of the panorama. The tower has seen worse. It's still standing here and tomorrow in front of it there will be another long line of curious tourists with mild fear of heights. He'll stop by Adonis to have a drink or two, he's sobered up already. What a day, Dane Draženović thinks. He walks, the streets are still empty, cautious, it's too early to go out. The bar is empty, there's only Florian in it, staring dully in front of himself. Dane tries to get in, but it's locked. He goes back to the basement window and knocks. Florian doesn't even look at him, he just waves his hand. Dane tries once again, it must be a mistake. Florian looks at him, he keeps looking, comes near the window. He stands there. Something's not right, Dane Draženović thinks. Florian opens the door. Dane asks for a drink, just one, he

really needs it. His suit has already become tight. Florian lets him in. He sits back at the same spot and says, "Help yourself."

"Is everything all right?"

"He's dead!"

"Who?"

Florian stares at his wedding ring. Yes, Florian's husband, that wonderful man and a doctor loved by everyone was one of the four unlucky ones who found themselves at Alexanderplatz at the moment when a confused teenage girl was still thinking whether to make history or not. At least that's what she thought. And she took away with her the only man in this city, and in the whole world, Florian is convinced, who saw in Florian something more than just six feet of reticent flesh. Yes, it seems to Florian his life has reached its end. He owns only a half of this bar. He only owns a half of his life. Dane watches him. Yes, according to some sick logic, typical only of humans, Dane is alive because Florian's husband is dead. And now both of them are at some black bar, at the end of the night.

Dane takes a bottle of vodka, opens it, and pours it mercilessly for both himself and Florian. Both of them have lost something. They drink up without a word. And again. They drink up without a word. It burns, it sings the palate, it scalds the tongue and it goes down, down. And it washes everything away. Instead of taking the third shot, Dane puts his arms around Florian. He tries to wiggle out, but Dane holds him, tightens his grip, they are at the edge of the night, at the end of the world, in the middle of a black hole with no return. And the Florian screams, he falls down, he falls on Dane, they fall down together. That's how, in some ancient times, gods used to fall. That's how their totems and statues toppled. This is how one god falls, with a scream. Of hopelessness. And both of them collapse to the ground. Florian cries, he can't help it, he howls. Dane holds him, he holds him and won't let go, and he holds him so that he doesn't fall through, he holds him so that he doesn't fall apart. He holds him so tightly as if his life depends on it. And around them violas and cembalos, and the sky that's falling apart, and the world that's quivering. The two of them are no more, neither are the walls around them. Nothing. Just the two of them in one embrace before the end of the world, before apocalypse, two despairs freed of bodies. He cries, finally Dane Draženović cries. Florian in his lap. Water, so much wonderful water, salty water pours out of Florian's eyes and with them, in those drops, everything he's ever had and imagined he had. Nothing can be mourned like love, neither mothers nor fathers, nor homelands. Nothing is as devastating as the collapse of those hopes and fantasies and the years that haven't come. Nothing is as painful. In each of those drops there is a memory and a fantasy, diluted in salt, they disappear, down the chin, into a black suit, somewhere out of us all. Because the two of

them are no more and this world is no more. Just vodka in their stomachs, and salty cheeks. And the life that's spreading in front of them freed from everything before and everything after and the two of them in that blackness, now. Tomorrow does not exist, the sky has fallen apart, the tower has split in two, the Wall has collapsed, as has the life between them and everything else. And one silence. And suddenly, both of them fall apart, they are gone. Just that embrace, nothingness.

And one I love you, then yet another I love you, and I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. And those words somehow echo against the black walls, against heated glasses, and against the soap suds. And bounce across the sidewalk, towards the tower at Alexanderplatz, and then radially in all directions, into the night, into beds and mattresses. Because tomorrow already everything will be as it was, and the life will go on, for the living, for the children the new day of school, for the adults something much more complicated.

And if someone, someone bigger than themselves, spread of the map of Berlin, he'd see among all those souls quivering in the mundane the ones who survived the end of the world: a child without parents, an old woman smoking at the window, a boy wanting to get married, two men embracing at the floor of a bar, and a mother whose eyes are red from tears, and others in a much less dramatic turmoil. Yes, they are becoming a family that rose from tragedy. And each of them is going to try to survive in this limbo, in the world that is left behind, in the suit that is getting tighter with every breath one takes.

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Dane Draženović has a sudden fit of laughter. Or crying. It's hard to say. The wet streets await the snow. A storm might hit the city tonight. He needs the day. Finally, loneliness. Finally, the empty apartment. He needs to bend down over the ruins and turn the rocks over. Dane feels like there's an archeological dig in front of him. So many possible lives, and there's only one he. How many times can a man convince himself he's turning a new page?

He goes to a small Turkish store. He is in search of the cabbage leaves for his sarma. He looks at the recipe, he looks at the shelves. It takes too much time. He just looks. He misses Florian while he should be thinking about fame. And maybe it's better he's just a little sad than panicking. He loads his shopping basket. Rice, pork, beef. Where can he find tomato paste? He misses his nana Vera.

She must be beating egg whites now. Turning the colorless mixture into snow, cream, a sensitive texture. She always saw the process as magic because one sharp, repetitive motion produced something so beautiful. Out of nothing. That's how she would look at many things, love in particular. Persistence that will turn everything into comfort, into sweet relief for the whole family. For her, Dane is still a six-year-old child running around on hardwood floors with a slice of bread in his hand, talking to itself and just running out of the apartment, among the pines lazily swaying in front of the building. Well, before they cut down the trees to make a dog park. But Vera saw bigger changes in her life to let this get to her. In her head everything remains fixed. Both back then and then. And as far as she's concerned, her husband is still alive. There, she's just talking to his picture in the corner of her kitchen. That handsome blonde-haired neurotic's character spilled into Dane Draženović and left him a thick head of hair, a smoke in his mouths, and some particular kind of prick-like attitude.

"Eh, Jakov, my love, haven't I outlived you. You know, go fuck yourself! You

could've lived a bit longer. I've beaten cancer, see! But you didn't feel like it. And why would you? The whole world's gone nuts. And the kid's off to Berlin. Just packed up his suitcase and left. He's gonna find work there. Where, that I don't know. I watched those films of his, you know. I'm happy when I see him on the screen, but I don't understand a thing. He doesn't say a word. Just stands there. Then walks. Then says something. And he takes his clothes off. Yes, and in the last one, he's naked almost every ten minutes. I don't know. And now he says he won't act anymore. Why did we send him to all those school then? It won't turn out well, Jakov, you know. It all lost its head. He's twenty-seven, and all he's got to show for it are some girls, just friends. Nothing. But, I know what it is. You remember Stevo? And where's Stevo now? Yes, but I think he's like Stevo. Just, it's different now. They can get married and all. Times have changed, Jakov, my dear. And look at me, I just bake. What else is there for me? I don't understand any of this. Fuck it all if it wasn't simpler before. I mean, after the war. You've got nothing, and you know you've got nothing. Ah, my dear Jakov, haven't you tortured me enough?!" those are the words of this spry old woman who wears her heart on her sleeve just as proudly as she carries a tray of her mille-feuille.

Dane is in the kitchen. He's mixing meat, turning it over in his fingers, kneading it in his fists. As if doing his own autopsy. He takes a sip of wine. And goes on. He'd love it if his life had such nice consistency. But somewhere between the rice, the meat and the eggs, he tries to read his destiny. A year and a half ago, Dane Draženović won an award at Cannes for a film he'd made with one ambitious French director who he'd met at *Talent Campus* at Berlinale. They flirted but didn't fuck. And they made a beautiful, delicate film by the sea. And Dane was convinced he was at the top of the world. Back then he was convinced he'd soon move away anyhow. He wasn't giving too much thought to where. He barely managed to graduate. Mostly on account of several professors' effort who wrote one request after another until the senate gave him yet another chance. He mostly drank, spat cynical comments, a thick layer of self-defense. After the award, the world went quiet. The school dragged on a bit longer, a theatre role here or there, not particularly interesting. The critics didn't like him. In Zagreb he had the reputation of being a bigheaded, arrogant, lazy, indolent hipster who'd won the award even though he hadn't deserved it. He had a small circle of friends and an oversized rectangle of acquaintances. He hugged with all of them. And then Dane fell into a trap. At the same time, he wanted much more and much less than what he had. So, he decided to leave. All he needed was a little bit of time and even less space to think about what he actually wanted. Throw himself headfirst into the market or run away from it completely. Berlin was a distant hope one short flight away. He wanted to leave all of his frustrations behind, he wanted to see the imagination

develop, he wanted to see if the idea of a life was possible. After he graduated, he was offered a two-year contract, but he had a feeling he wouldn't last two more years in Croatia. The small, conservative country was rapidly plunging into fascism, into fine arts. And this new fascism left a slimy trail behind an endless line of snails that swarmed the streets, theatres, and city administrations in Croatia and abroad, across its borders, it spilled over the whole of Europe, across the ocean and all the way to America. Everyday life turned into protests, interviews and fear. Croatia, that small, beautiful country, didn't leave much space for its youth. And that's why every night one crowded bus after another glides into the night and towards Germany, leaving a few tears on the faces of mothers, fathers, ex-boyfriends, and those few remaining friends.

Conservative groups were successful in their campaigns, and the left, standing across the way, was too worried about its own positions. Intimately, he decided to leave when, after a successful referendum, the Constitution was changed. It said that the marriage was the union of a man and a woman. And so Dane decided it's time for exile. Not necessarily because he was eager to marry, but because he knew of freer worlds. He drew and wrote those two picture books out of whim and boredom. Because there was no work. And they went well. They sold well. And they reached Germany because of a scandal. One of the books had several gay characters and conservative groups reacted to it, without even reading the book. Dane suddenly became a controversial personality. People finally saw that French movie and realized it was filled with gay sex and violence. Ideal for an award at Cannes. Just enough for rage and disgust in Zagreb. The movie, naturally, got some small funds from the Croatian Audiovisual Center. They asked the movie to be banned, even though it played for barely a couple of weeks at the Europa Independent Theatres. His inboxes filled up with messages of support and calls to murder the filthy faggot. He wanted neither of the two. He thought Berlin was a good option. He rejected the contract offering him a job at the theatre. The picture books didn't make him rich. He had enough money to get him through very lean six months.

When he told them he was moving, they told him he was overreacting, that everything would pass and that he should ignore the morons. Dane Draženović spent his whole life trying to ignore the morons. Especially when they tried very hard not to ignore him. Of course, Dane never admitted he was scared, really scared. He preferred to explain it in floods of words, criticizing the province. Only people who are prepared to move are capable of so much hatred for their biography and for geography given to them by their birth. For some countries, this is a bit more difficult, while for some other countries, completely lost, like Croatia, it's

much easier. Contempt for the Balkan countries can easily become a new national anthem.

He arrived in Berlin on the first of August. It wasn't particularly hot. During that first month, he learned German and partied. He frequented clubs like some ancient hero frequented temples. They he got bored, and he ran out of money. Only rich parents can naively continue financing serious clubbing. And then he saw that the world was big and that he should try much harder. And what he had scared him, so he hid in his shell. For a second he got convinced he hadn't deserved any of it. His anxious brains even made the calculation. There's a cloud for every silver lining. He was waiting for his cloud, for his defeat. He had to fail. As time went by, only Matija kept calling him on the phone, here and there. As time went by, he was left alone with the big question. Success deceives a young person so that they never ask who they actually are. And success, together with greed, boredom, spite, its old friends, always takes a vacation.

Dane Draženović stares at the sarma simmering in the pot as if he's trying to find his own reflection in it. All that to ask a question: who am I? The question that is so simple, yet so painfully pretentious. The question that like a crown sits on the heads of millions of people of all color, gender, age, and credit capacity. The same question bothers Heike as she flies across the continents. The same question torments Florian who is sipping his coffee and riding in a taxi as he leaves Sri Lanka behind his back.

I don't know, Dane offers an answer for himself. I do not know who I am. And he knows he's not the only one, but he's had the privilege to realize and admit this. And he's actually angered by the fact that his whole life he was forced to make himself believe he knew, because only good-for-nothings don't know who and what they are. Everyone must know what they're made for, even though it should be a mystery. And how could he know? His biography was written by the choices some other people made. Some other people assessed his talent, his effort and determination. Teachers, professors, and later on producers and directors. He was almost always broke, like he is now, which stood in the way of his freedom of choice. To say no. Always on the fringe. And they keep scaring little children their whole lives by saying they have to know what they want. Mostly this is what the parents want. That's why by the age of ten, if you ask the parents or Instagram, the world is full of little Ronaldos and Beethovens, Serenas Williamses and Marias Callases. And then, along with semen and periods, reality kicks in.

Dane phones his nana. She answers out of breath. For a couple of seconds, she's not sure who's calling and when she realizes it's Dane, tears run down her cheeks. Then he calms her down. Then her worry if he's eaten. I'm just cooking

sarma, he says. This makes her laugh. For her, growing up in the time of hunger, it's most important that Dane eats. Everything else, she knows it's too complicated. The call is short. They mostly express love to each other.

He goes to the bathroom. Removes his clothes. Observes himself in the mirror that is too small. His hair needs cutting, he's put on some weight too. He looks dirty. This is the old Dane Draženović, it crosses his mind. He gets in the shower. In the steam, anxiety leaves a mark on the mirror. Dane Draženović knows what awaits him, one fear, one quivering body, one short breath. Those boyish voices on the verge of mutation, saying, Pussy! Faggot! Then a couple of internal voices telling him over and over again that he can't do it, that he's not good enough, and that he doesn't deserve it. Insecurity so fatal and unreal. This is the voice that replaced parental support. Growing up is a bitch, Dane Draženović thinks, because growing up means making peace, patience, and humbleness. The three things that the childish want rejects, that it carries around like a baby rattle, discards when it gets bored with it. And nothing is as frustrating as waiting, waiting for an answer, waiting for potential. Nothing is as painful as waiting in poverty. Because money buys speed. Poverty slows down seconds, time, it halts, wraps up in frustration. They don't say for nothing in all those movies that time is money. Dane Draženović is wrapped in fear, he's paralyzed, and it goes on and on, all the time, in circles. Dane and his anxiety, in an eternal dance like the Earth around the Sun and around its axis.

Water glides down his head, his chest, his penis, his knees, and goes down the drain, through the pipes, through the building, into the sewers, and it travels, travels, to some river, and from there towards the world, towards the ocean. Yes, these dregs of the old Dane now belong to the world and oblivion, to Twitter and the bullet that was never fired.

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