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The Patient in Room 19

Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić

A centimetre per person

On my thirty-eighth birthday I wetted the bed. I don't remember ever doing it before, not even when I was a child. It just leaked out of me. I realized what I'd done when I woke up in a puddle of pee. That was the first time. Since then, I started to piss myself very often. But the first time it happened was on my birthday. My thirty-eighth birthday. Nineteen years after my nineteenth birthday.

My nineteenth birthday found me in a village. It was their village then, now it is ours. It has never been mine, neither then nor now. Nobody knew it was my birthday. Somehow I didn't think it was important to mention it, although I considered the nineteenth birthday to be special. The eighteenth was supposed to be the pivotal one, but nothing spectacular happened. My father said to me: „Now that you're of age, it's your ass, not mine, that will end up behind bars if you do something foolish.“ Up until then, the most foolish thing I'd done was belting out after a beer too many. The nineteenth birthday was supposed to confirm my adulthood. The eighteenth is overrated. At eighteen, you feel like a man who has just been born, but at nineteen you already have some experience.

The only experience with which I stepped into my nineteenth birthday was... fear. If only I had come earlier, if I had the time to get accustomed to the people around me, my surroundings and the atmosphere. But the uniform was put on me the day before and taken off of me the day after. Yes, bizarre. I stayed there only 24 hours, the 24 hours of the day I turned nineteen. Not long enough to know how to deal with the intense emotions I experienced there for the first time in my life.

The first thing I remember was smoke. I had seen something similar at the Sisters of Mercy concert in Ljubljana. An artificial fog was released from the stage, a fog so dense that the band and the first rows of the audience, where I was jostling for a better view, became invisible. I only heard the unbearable noise. Not at all a comfortable feeling, and it was a concert. I was there because I wanted to be there, not because I had to.

I enjoyed the music and felt uneasy at the same time. Imagine then what I felt in that village on my nineteenth birthday. I was there against my will, and instead of with music, I was surrounded with screams and cries, and I could barely see my hand in front of my face.

It's interesting how one deals with stressful situations. I brought into my mind my eighteenth birthday party. I saw myself in a pub, ordering rounds. The drinks arrived, I paid the bill and my mates raised their glasses in toast. I climbed on the massive marble table, turned my palms towards the sky

and sang „Dominion“ with the Sisters of Mercy blasting from the speakers. But then a wail took me to a totally different place. And I suddenly saw myself covered with that marble table in which the same dates but different years were engraved. The fear withdrew, making room for anger. If you think that fear blocks one's reason, you should see what anger does to it. Especially if the power is in your hands. The combination makes you superhuman and inhuman at the same time. All the while the numbers engraved in the marble remained in front of my mind's eye: 19.11.1972 – 19.11.1991. Only ones and nines, with a seven and a two. And if you add up one, nine, seven and two, you get nineteen again. It was already early evening when I counted them all.

Nineteen people for nineteen birthdays. Nineteen death notices on nineteen walls, fences, doors and posts in the towns I'll never visit. Nineteen obituaries I'll never read. Nineteen holes dug inside me, which I've been trying to fill in ever since.

I put the people out like candles. Then I undressed them as if unwrapping gifts. Forcefully and mercilessly. Easily... more easily than belting it out after a few beers.

I didn't get off lightly either. A bullet found me. Not enough. Nineteen to one in my favour, but I don't feel like a winner. Maybe because it all happened too fast. I'm telling you, it's bizarre, I came there the day before and left the day after.

Since then, every year on my birthday I relive the nineteenth one. My palms tingle and my hands shake, as if I were trying to keep a firing submachine gun firmly in my grip.

And now you ask why I've done what I've done after so many years? And on my birthday of all days? Okay. I understand, you are paid to ask such questions.

Once we got drunk after class. Someone produced a ruler and suggested we measure who had the biggest one. I measured nineteen centimetres. All kinds of things cross your mind as you lie in a puddle of warm pee in your bed and you know it's not normal and are aware you can't control even the basic bodily functions.

So I remembered my nineteenth birthday, the nineteen people I had put out like the candles on a birthday cake and the nineteen centimetres I had measured with a ruler for technical drawing behind the School of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture... and I concluded I'd make it easier on myself if I somehow... cut it all away in one go.

At first it seemed appropriate to cut off a centimetre for each person I had killed. I entertained the idea to arrange the cut parts into a geometrical pattern, stick a birthday candle into each one of

them and conveniently bleed to death. Or, separated from my manhood and being reborn as a woman, to join the Sisters of Mercy and commit my life to serving those in need. To celebrate my new birthday from that moment on. Funny, but it didn't occur to me that you can wet the bed even though your private parts have been mutilated. In the end, I abandoned that idea. Not only can I not control other people's decisions, like the one to send me into the war as a child, but I can't control the decisions I make of my own will as a grown-up man. That's why I've chosen the easier way out and solved it all with one cut.

What would you, Doc, call such a person? You don't know? I'll tell you. Now at least, when I look at myself in the mirror once a year, I have every reason to say: „Happy birthday... pussy!“

That's What I'm Talking About

They say that when you don't know where to start, it's best to start from the beginning. But several beginning have led to where we are now. You've asked me why I've done it. If that were a simple question, the answer would be simple too. But let me explain one thing. Although something else formative happened to me on the day of my nineteen birthday, I can't separate myself from everything that followed no matter how much I want to. I've thought about it a lot and each time I've come to the conclusion that it was a different me. But whether there are ten or a hundred different *me's*, in the end it was still me. I'm not mentioning the things that happened afterwards for no reason. After the birthday, I returned. The bullet wound was painful, but not too serious. The bullet came from afar, having already lost its full force. It just pierced the skin and remained lodged in the hole by my nose. I plucked it out myself. With two fingers, easily, as if pulling out a milk tooth. I saw it as a life on loan, and that's why two days later I was back in my unit. I thought it fair to repay my debt to fate.

There's something else I have to explain, just to avoid misunderstanding. There's a huge difference between me and the men I came with to that village that day. I say it because I saw the end of the war with many of them. I went to the war to defend my country, they went to kill. I came there as a defender, they came as criminals. The problem is that they also call themselves defenders these days, and the people now think we are the same. But we're not the same and we can never be. That's why I flee head over heels whenever I hear about them. Before the war, I had peace within myself, and they carried war in them in peacetime. They carried it and fed it. This sounds almost poetic, but I can't explain it any other way. Trust me, I was there and I saw it... they could hardly wait for the mayhem to break out.

To me, the war happened; they wished it. They ran towards it more excitedly than I ran to the store for the new Sister of Mercy album.

Yes, when you watch us from the sidelines, it's hard to tell the difference. We are equally deformed and slimy. Our souls stink of festering wounds and scorched meat. Nothing can remove the soot of burned villages from under our fingernails. The war has made me what I am now, but they were like that even before the war. That's what I'm talking about. That's why it was easy for them to kill. But even today, after everything that has happened, after so much time, we don't see things the same way; they are proud of themselves for what they've done, and I'm disgusted with myself. It's always like that;

the ones who should be ashamed of themselves don't understand why you feel ashamed because of them.

Yes, I killed. I was thrown into the fire and I had to take action. And I did. It felt the right thing to do. Imagine you were brought to a busy motorway and kicked out of the car. The vehicles dash around you, and you have nowhere to hide. It's not something that happens every day, is it? But screw it, it doesn't mean you'll just lie down on the road and wait to be run over. What would you do? You would take action, that's what. You would stop, look around and react. You would avoid the first car. Wait for the first onslaught to pass. Then you'd take a step forward. And wait again. Then two slow steps and several quick ones. You would react! Fuck, I was nineteen, and I was brought to hell and left there! I didn't even know how to take my dick out of the military pants they'd put on me, so tell me, what else was I supposed to do? Drop my gun and run towards the minefield? Shout: „Any Sisters of Mercy fans on your side!?“

It started spontaneously. When you find yourself in the open sea and a lifebelt is at hand, what do you do? You use it. A children's lifebelt would do, the one with a dinosaur head on it.

Maybe it doesn't have to be a real lifebelt, but an inflatable swim float in the shape of a dolphin. It's irrelevant. It's there and it's at hand. You certainly wouldn't think: „God, I look so stupid with this swimming aid for little children.“ You're drowning, man, you have no choice. I didn't think if I looked stupid with a gun in my hands. I reacted. I shot. They fell. I killed. I had to.

That other thing... it came later. The moment when I drew a clear line after which I stopped being a human and became what they had always been.

Sorry, but up to that point I didn't sing hymns to slaughter. Never! Inside myself I sang the songs of the Sisters of Mercy. I sang them to reassure myself, to chase away the fear. And later, later I sang them as a private mantra. For luck, to survive. It was the only thing I believed in. If I wanted to save my life, I had to exchange it for as many lives of those on the other side as possible. Once I realized that, I was on a roll. It wasn't my choice, like it wasn't my choice to come to the battlefield. It was chosen for me. The same way most things in my life were chosen for me. My mother chose my name, Vanja, although my father preferred Goran. She chose Sunday school for me, although I wanted to be in the Scouts. She chose a painting kit, although I wanted a guitar. She bought a tennis racket, though I wanted a football ball. I didn't choose my surname either. It is Kovačević, after my old man. He chose Italian lessons for me, although I always wanted to go to music school. He chose technical drawing equipment for me, though I wanted a record player. He enrolled me into the School of Mechanical

Engineering and Naval Architecture, although I wanted to go to the School of Civil Engineering. All Sisters of Mercy fans went to the School of Civil Engineering...

Ever since I was born, things have been chosen for me and imposed upon me, turning me into the sum of other people's expectations. But what about my expectations?

At the end of the day, the only thing I've chosen for myself was to survive. That was my nineteenth birthday wish and I finally began to believe it was possible. Up till then, the only thing I ever believed in were people. But when I realized I'd stopped being human, I had nothing to believe in any longer.

Do you believe in anything, Doc? Your reason? Your doctor's degree? Do you believe you'll be able to understand why a man like me has done something like this after so many years? You're sitting here watching me... with that look in your eyes. What's wrong? Is my story making you sick? Are you on the verge of losing it, of puking your guts out all over me, but you hold it in? With a trained calmness. Curiosity is stronger than sincerity, isn't it? Good for you, but let's wait and see. In the end, you may find yourself despising me. But mark my words... nobody has the right to despise me. The only person allowed to judge me is me. You have no idea what I based my decisions upon. Nobody knows it. I no longer know it myself.

Like a Dream Before a Bugle Wake-Up Call

My generation was the last one to undergo the mandatory military service in the Yugoslav People's Army. I was drafted in December 1990. Into a motor transport unit in a fucking backwoods somewhere in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which I came to loathe so much that I don't even want to utter its name. As a Croat in the Yugoslav Army uniform I was an enemy of Croatia and a war prisoner of the Yugoslav Army at the same time. We were subjected to brainwashing on a daily basis; to tirades about the Croatian police publicly beheading Serbs in Croatia, about its cadets having to pierce a Serbian child with a bayonet as their final police exam and a bunch of similar bullshit. Our barracks were at twenty-five kilometres from the nearest houses, but the guards were on high alert 24/7 with the order to shoot without warning. A situation in which every thought of escape dissolved like a dream before a bugle wake-up call. I had no other choice but to try and blend in. In the evening, as we watched Croatian demonstrations against the Yugoslav Army on the news, I felt their dirty looks. They were waiting for my reaction. Looking for an excuse to fuck me up. But no can do, my friend. I resorted to swearing and said that riots like that should be put down with force. It worked, because after a while they stopped paying attention to me.

They soon looked for volunteers for a military operation in Slovenia. The skirmishes there had been going on for days and I saw it as a great opportunity for escape. If nothing else, Slovenia was closer to home, and once I got there, I'd think out what to do next. Nineteen soldiers and an officer volunteered for the operation. Speaking of the number nineteen, which shows up so often in my life, here is a fact from the war in Slovenia. Everyone knows that the conflict between Slovenes and the Yugoslav Army lasted for ten days, but nobody remembers the number of Slovenes who got killed. Believe it or not, it was nineteen. The nineteen of us lined up with our commanding officer on the runway, where we were given a pep-talk about the preservation of state borders.

Then they divided us into two helicopters and we set off to Pivka. Only fifty kilometres from home, can you imagine my excitement? Our mission? To safeguard the medical cargo which was to be transported from the barracks in Pivka to those in Banja Luka. Several days later, the convoy headed for Banja Luka. I remember the unbearable cold in the truck.

There were nineteen trucks in the convoy and I drove the penultimate one. At a crossroads in Ilirska Bistrica, I veered from the main road and gunned the engine. When they realized I was running

away, the truck with the commanding officer turned around and started after me. They even shot at me. But I had already gained enough distance for nothing to catch me or stop me.

I would have never managed to escape if it weren't for Svetozar from Belgrade. We met the first day of my military service. When I arrived in the barracks, I came up with a cool tactic for recognizing the normal guys. I would approach my fellow recruits and ask them if they had heard of The Sisters of Mercy. And they would just gape at me and shake their heads. Then I'd ask if they had heard of The Cult. Nothing again. Killing Joke, Joy Division, Bauhaus... Zero. Svetozar was the only one who knew what I was talking about. In civilian life he played the bass guitar in a band in Belgrade which tried to sound like The Cure, and he was the only shining light among the simpletons who listened to the folk music. He spent summers with his father in Paris and returned to Belgrade with a travel bag full of Gauloises cigarettes. Svetozar drove the last truck in the convoy and knew I was planning to escape. The things had been boiling up all over Croatia for the last three months. When I confided in him, he just said: „Run, I'll have your back.“ When I turned off the main road, Svetozar just drove on until the driver of the truck which had been in front me raised the alarm. Half an hour later, I surrendered myself to the Territorial Defence of Slovenia, who confiscated the cargo and almost arrested me and sent me back to the Yugoslav Army. They had just signed the truce that day and didn't want to rock the boat. The escape from the Yugoslav Army turned out to be a piece of cake in comparison with the escape from the Slovenes. They interrogated me as if I were an enemy, which in a way I was, considering my uniform. A moment alone in the interrogation room was all I needed. I jumped out the window and managed to get to the woods. I walked up and down the hills and valleys for three days until I finally arrived home, starved and chilled to the bone.

The first month military police knocked on my door once a week. They dropped by several more times during the summer and then finally gave up.

All the while I just loitered around the city streets and slept at the houses of my friends and relatives. My father was terrified of the police; his nerves cracked and he almost snitched on me. He said I should've finished my military service regardless of what was going on. I don't know what his father would have said about it. He died from beating in 1951, when his neighbours reported him to the police because he had the Independent State of Croatia's citizenship certificate at home. My old man was the reason why I seriously considered leaving Croatia for a while. All my friends had someone abroad; grandmothers in Italy, aunts in Germany, uncles in Canada or Australia. Only my family never left its native soil. But the real war of nerves began as winter approached. When you heard the bell ring, you had no idea who was at the door; the military police coming to send you back to the Yugoslav Army or

the postman bringing the Croatian National Guard enlistment letter. In the end, the latter came first. A day before my nineteenth birthday they put me on a bus with another fifty men and sent me to the war.

Five years later, on my twenty-fourth birthday, I was sitting in my parents' kitchen, sipping coffee and rocking the year-old Andrej in my lap. Of course, the war came up. It was an unavoidable theme of conversation whenever we visited my parents. I don't know how, but we found ourselves talking about the anonymous threatening phone calls at the beginning of the war. Croats called Serbs and threatened them with bloodshed if they didn't leave. Serbs called Croats and threatened them with Greater Serbia and public massacre. Then my mother mentioned a harassing phone call to our family. Since it was the first time I heard about it, I was curious.

„We had a call one evening from someone who introduced himself as your friend“, she said. „Madam, I'm Vanja's *comrade* from the army. He didn't say *friend*, he said *comrade*. With a distinct Serbian accent. He said he was calling from... I can't remember now, I think it was Paris. But I saw it was just a prank call and I told him not to call again.

But he was persistent. Madam, he said, I know you must be thinking I'm a spy or something, the world has gone crazy, but please write down my address and tell Vanja to come here, to save his own neck. He said he was calling from a phone booth with the last of his money, that he had deserted from the army, that he had a room and a bed, and that he'd sleep on the floor and let you use his bed, just to get you away from here. Then I told him to fuck off and stop bothering our family. A Serb who deserted from the Yugoslav Army? Fat chance!“

I listened to my mother. I watched my wife who popped her eyes out. My father smoked and did a crossword puzzle, as usual. „When was that?“ I asked and my mother replied: „Two, maybe three days before you went to the battlefield.“ She was preparing a pitcher of juice as she talked, but then she put it down, came up to me, looked closely at my face and said: „You're not going to tell me it was really a friend of yours, are you?“

I gave Andrej to my wife and drank up my coffee. A hundred howitzers banged in my head, grenades exploded, tanks thundered, people screamed, the wounded cried for help, air raid sirens bent the sky like an umbrella, and all I could think of was that our mothers should celebrate our birthdays with us, because it is they whose lives radically changed the day we were born.

„Vanja, was that really a friend of yours?“ she asked again, and I looked at her and said: „He was just an asshole trying to provoke you. You were right telling him to fuck off.“

Washing the Black Out

In 1985, The Sisters of Mercy released the album entitled „First And Last And Always“. When I first heard them and soon afterwards saw their photograph in a music magazine, I started dressing in black. I thought it was going to be the first and the last time, and that it would last forever. Today's kids call that style *gothic*, we called it *darkside*. The next ten years I was always in black, and if it hadn't been for the war, I would probably still be. Unfortunately, my black was lost in the black of those who wore that colour for ideological reasons, and since I didn't want to be identified with them, I simply donated all my clothes to the Red Cross. I bought plain jeans and several T-shirts, and became someone else overnight. It was still me, but another me who appeared out of the blue, from the bygone, more carefree days. Although it was not easy for me to part with the black clothes, I suddenly felt it was a good opportunity for a new beginning. Ridding myself of the clothes was easy. But ridding myself of the blackness inside, that was something I managed to do only yesterday, when I finally cut it all away. After all, that blackness is the reason you and I are talking now. You have to admit that it sounds good!

Interesting, but the same year I started wearing black clothes, the Black Rose cult appeared. It soon became the talk of the town because several its members committed suicide very shortly one after another. It was rumoured in the neighbourhood that I was their member, which drove my parents crazy.

Soon after the war, when one of my commanding officers was arrested for a war crime, a delegation of my unit came to my door and asked me to sign the petition for his release. „If he's guilty, he should serve his time in prison“, I said. That pissed them off.

They said he had saved several of our men in military actions. „Then give him a medal in prison.“ Afterwards I found the red star and the word *Commie* written on my car. I don't know what you think about it, but try to look at it like this. You're a doctor. Imagine a surgeon guilty of the death of a patient.

Not by mistake, but out of sheer arrogance. The police bring him in for questioning, and your colleagues start collecting signatures for his release. Don't tell me what you think about it; I know it is wrong in my book. And then when I voted against the entrance of Croatia in the EU, my acquaintances told me I was backward. The European Union? The Killing Union, if you ask me! And trust me when I say that it is a bumpy ride being the object of other people's fears.

On the other hand, some of those who recognized the potential of black clothes have turned their battlefield days into a career. Honestly, I don't mind non-heroes presenting themselves as heroes. I don't care if some have turned it into business. One has to live on something. But I resent the fact that such people have become idols to the young.

They are the reason why I've abandoned the black clothes; I don't want to be identified with them. Don't get me wrong, but I don't want to be anybody's idol. Today's kids don't even know who the Ustasas were, but they nevertheless shout For the Homeland Ready salute. I may be dickless, but fuck such democracy. The history repeats itself. I wish to God they would sell us to the Italians again. For our children to have normal lives, since we don't know how to live normally.

Children. A winter morning. We walked around the ashes of a village we shelled all night. Charred beams protruded from the snow in odd angles, like toothpicks scattered haphazardly on the grass and looked at from a close distance. And from afar, if anyone saw me, they must have thought I was an ant crawling on the plate of semolina pudding with grated chocolate on top. Strange, and in a bizarre way maybe even funny, but of all the houses and buildings in that village only a wall remained standing. Everything else had collapsed, crumbled; the roof tiles crunched underfoot, and on that one wall a photograph of a boy was hanging on the nail. I watched it hanging there at the right angle, the only thing left intact in all that mayhem, without a single crack in the glass. Not even too dusty. The boy on the photograph was dressed in cycling shorts and held a certificate of merit in his hands. His face beamed with joy. I watched someone else's photograph in someone else's house, I saw someone else's happiness and I felt closeness with them.

How far and how unattainable that joy seemed among those cracked walls. How far was that certificate of merit over which the boy's face had stretched into a smile like a gaping roof voraciously yawning at the moon a moment before it was devoured by the fire. I looked around the charred remnants of the village and thought about the whereabouts of that boy. I didn't see him in the ruins. I wanted to believe he was safe and with a different, more important certificate of merit which had made him happier than the one in the photograph. I hoped he had the chance to outgrow the broken bicycle which protruded from the ruins. I remembered what my girlfriend had told me before I left. „If you see a child, smile at them to show them the world is good.“ Her words still resound in my head. Even if I had seen a child and smiled at them, would it have convinced them that we had the right to rob them of their childhood? We, who were big and strong and the cleverest, but just a few years older than them. Should I have lied to them with a smile, like the one who betrayed with a kiss? Later I found that boy

and his family. I turned my head away. There is no gaze as penetrating as the gaze of the dead. Fires blaze in their eyes, the military boots glitter, a thousand un-lived moments glow alive.

In a frozen moment, there is more hope and expectation in them than in a thousand lives. The body is dead and motionless, only the eyes haven't realized it yet. But I have, I have realized that the demolished world is not the worst thing we are leaving to our children; the worst is that they will not live long enough to fix it after us.

The same way I turned away from my fellow-fighters, two members of The Sisters of Mercy left the band and founded The Mission. Do you know the title of their best album? You won't believe it... It's called „Children“. And one of my favourite songs on that album is called „Child's Play“. It is crucial to preserve the child within and keep it alive. When I was a kid, I adored the smell of gasoline. Every few days I would walk to the nearby gas station to get a lungful of petrol fumes. I loved the smell of car exhaust fumes too. I loved them so much that I used to run after the cars to inhale them as long as possible. The first time I set a village on fire, that irresistible smell was the first thing that came to my mind.

I watched other people's homes in flames and thought about the fates they had witnessed. About the children who were born in them and the joyous occasions celebrated in them. About the old people who died in them and the bereft relatives mourning their loss. About the husbands who chopped wood and skinned animals with their strong hands, and the wives who preserved food for winter and hang up the laundry to dry. About the love that was born there and died there, about the lives tested with jealousy and adultery. Then all those images suddenly quivered in the flames and danced in the smell of gasoline, and I was back in my neighbourhood, running after Citroens 2CV, Zastavas, Škodas and Moskvitches... The beauty of the ugly. The aesthetics of the plain. Even if it doesn't happen by itself, I would recommend to everyone to try and think that way. In time one becomes an old hand at it and does it spontaneously. I used to set a house on fire just to return to the safety of the childhood. A simple and effective way to stay normal. Healing, like the infusion I received this morning, that blocks the feeling of pain. Okay, I believe you don't consider it normal, but we are living in a society in which common sense is not of much use anyway.