

Ivan Vidak

Deus Ex Anima & Nothing Beautiful

Translated from Croatian by Vesna Marić

DEUS EX ANIMA

Jožika the Hunter walked into the Čatalinac courtyard cautiously, one hand holding up the gun sling that hung on his shoulder, and shutting the wooden gate with the other. He peeked into the courtyard that edged the house, making sure that the dog wouldn't attack, and shouted:

- Aunt Eva!

A small old woman, head tied in a scarf, peered from behind the heavy front door.

- Joži, is it ye?

- Yeh, yeh. The wife told me ye'd travelled by.

Livening up, Eva hurried from the house, shutting the door behind her.

- Oh, it's good ye'd travelled by, I don't know what to do anymore. It woofs all night and day, like. I can't stand it anymore. Even the neighbours have started to moan about it.

- Where's the hound?

- At the back, in the yard. Come, I'll show ye.

Eva hobbled towards the back yard, lamenting and putting her palms against her chest dramatically, as if in prayer. Jožika walked nonchalantly behind her, the shotgun now in his right hand, the barrel pointing to the ground.

- Such a nice hound, and so much vexin' I've 'ad with it. Jesus Lord, I don't know what to do with it anymore. I don't know 'ow I ended up with it - I never even wanted a hound.

A wire cage stood at the bottom corner of the yard. Inside was a scruffy German shepherd, barking madly and jumping, and its skin, in places completely bare and covered in crusts, made it look horrific. The entire yard echoed with its barking.

- Oh dear... Poor hound... 'Ow long's ye 'ad it shut up like this? - asked Jožika.

- Well, since our Stevica...

- All these years? No wonder it's this mad.

- What can I do? I can't 'andle it by meself.

The dog was, aside from everything else, emaciated. It appeared so grotesque that the features of its breed were becoming untraceable.

- D'you feed it? - asked Jožika with sadness.
- Well, I give it what I 'as. I's on me own, so I don't do much cookin'. Why me, like? Ye can view that everyone's travelled and left me on me own.
- No news from Tuna and Anuška?
- One card in all these three years. Can ye believe it?
- Where be they?
- They's not even tellin' me that!
- They'll be in touch, don't ye worry. - Jožika tried to calm her and turned his back to her, focusing on the dog.

Jožika never liked killing dogs. It wasn't rare for people in the village to neglect a dog - they'd shut it somewhere or tie it up - and when things got too bad they'd call a hunter, an official terminator, to rid them of their bother. It was easy with wild boar, deer, pheasants and rabbits. But dogs! 'Hounds is summat else' - thought Jožika and remembered his two hunting dogs, his loyal friends. He chased away the thoughts as if they were a swarm of flies and raised the gun.

- Move to the side if you's not wantin' to view. - he said.
- Oh. Better travel then. - she said, moved away a bit and turned her back.

The hunter approached the dog, raised the gun and took aim - and the dog suddenly stopped barking. What's more, it sat and calmed down, looked him in the eyes and softly whimpered. 'As if it knows' - thought Jožika and paused.

- It ain't such a bad hound... - he said and lowered the gun barrel - ye could call a vet and give it a bit o' gobble and... - he was startled by a bark that was louder than before - Jesus! - he jumped.

It was as if the dog was angered by Jožika's hesitation. There was such rage in the barking that Eva got frightened too.

- Our Father in Heaven... - she stepped back and crossed herself.

Jožika approached again and aimed at the dog, which stood against the wire fence and barked, baring its teeth. His earlier hesitation made him unsteady and he looked the dog in the eyes nervously; the dog, feeling the hunter's insecurity, turned its back to him, barking relentlessly. Away from the dog's gaze, Jožika found his feet again and completed his task by firing into the back of the animal's head.

- There ye go! - he turned quickly, lifted the gun and walked towards Eva - Done.
- Poor hound... 'E's suffered too. - she said.

Jožika said nothing and walked towards the gate.

- Joži, will ye guzzle summat? - she asked, hobbling after him.
- No, thanks. Next time, like. - he answered.
- 'Ear, what do I do with this?
- Nowt, I'll send Đuro the Gypsy over tomorrow, 'e'll sort it.
- Thanks very much.
- Not to worry, Aunt Eva. - said Jožika, closing the gate behind him.
- Greetings to yer lot!
- Thanks! - he shouted, not turning back.

Somewhere down the street, close to the centre of the village, he came across Daša the butcher who, out of his mind with brandy, knelt in front of a group of children, lifting his fists to the sky and glaring at them with bloodshot eyes.

- I is mad! I is mad! Kill me! - he hollered hysterically as if repenting for his sins and toting up the bill of his entire life.

Jožika frowned, turned his head and carried on down the street, firmly gripping the sling of his gun.

NOTHING BEAUTIFUL

When Joška the Ferryman was eighteen years old, he hurt his leg felling wood for the Forestry Department. A tree trunk crushed the bones of his knee, so that it was impossible to put them back together again, and Joška limped for the rest of his life. The Forestry Department helped him out and gave him the job of the ferryboat driver across the Danube-Tisa-Danube canal. On the other side of the canal, opposite the village, stood a crumbling house that had been a home to every 'ferryman' so far, and so Joška inherited it along with the job title which turns into more than a nickname; it becomes a surname. Thus Joška became the Ferryman of this epoch and found his place in the world through what had initially appeared to be unfortunate circumstances.

He settled into a pleasant routine over the next few years. The ferry crossed whenever there was demand, regardless of the season. There were no nighttime crossings except for emergencies; but Joška was helpful to all and as such, much appreciated.

It was not rare for a group of workers to stay at Joška's all day: a few drinks too many and they'd start the fire for cooking, go to get more drinks and check on the fishing nets that Joška always kept plunged in the water. Aside from the pleasant forest ambience, Joška's personality played a big part in these social activities. Transformed by twenty years in the forest, restrictive civilisational manners had been replaced by the loud stream of the free human form. Aside from cursing often and loudly, Joška was fond of spitting, spontaneous farting and belching, but he was also honest and direct, generous and morally without corruption. Akin to some holy fool, the peasants were fond of Joška and viewed him as a stable and unthreatening figure on the margins of their community.

Except for the people who crossed the canal for work, there were also groups of day trippers who came to visit the forest or go to their weekend homes on the banks of the Danube, most of which sat some miles from the ferry point. And it so happened that one Sunday, twenty years since beginning his career as a ferryman, Joška met the young teacher Maria, newly employed at the local primary school which she had herself once attended. She was twenty-five years old. It being a Sunday, there was little traffic across the river, and what there had been was finished by late morning. Maria arrived alone at the riverbank after lunch and put down her bicycle, sat on a bench and watched the water and the forest. Joška saw her and, since she hadn't said anything, shouted:

- Ye need to travel across?
- Yeh, if it's no bother.
- Travellin' right away...

Interested in women, but unattractive to all in the village due to his social position, Joška was still a virgin despite being in his late thirties. Thus the image of a young solitary woman on a sunny Sunday morning unsettled him to such an extent that he didn't know if he should go to pick her up or run heedlessly away.

She boarded the ferry and he drove, unable to take his eyes off her. Maria's beauty was not her strongest asset, but there was something about her that flared Joška's nostrils and made his blood run wild. She walked along the ferry with confidence and studied the boat, and then noticed Joška's eyes on her. And very soon, like every bright young woman might, she understood that Joška was at her disposal.

- So? What's it like, bein' a ferryman? - she startled him with a question, calmly looking him in the eyes.
- Well... ye view... it goes. - answered Joška with some confusion, hiding his gaze along the cracks of the wooden platform on which they stood.
- Ye been doin' it for a long time, like? - a wide, kind smile now accompanied her relentless gaze.
- Well... it's been twenty years, like. - Joška was drowning in her eyes.

They arrived to the other side and Maria disembarked nonchalantly and leaned her bicycle onto Joška's hut. Joška was tying up the boat and, when he finally dared turn, he realised that Maria was waiting for him on the bench by his house, never taking her eyes off him. He walked towards her trying to think up chores, or anything that would help him not have to face her.

- Ye live 'ere? - she pointed at the hut.
- Well, yeh... I's mainly 'ere.
- Ye always start yer sentences with 'well'?

Joška looked at her, confused, not knowing what to say, while his body trembled slightly.

- Go on, show me what's it like inside. - Maria said and stepped towards the door.
- Leave be goin' in! It's filthy! - he yelped with a tight throat.

He watched her in the miserly light of his solitary window, examining the erotic posters that wallpapered his room, covering the worn out paint.

- I say, that's quite nice... Ye've done a good job 'ere. - she said, smiling with satisfaction while Joška drowned in shame.
- I said leave be goin' in... - he tried to justify himself.
- Why? Ye think I don't like nudies? I's made of flesh and blood too.

His mouth dried, he became dizzy, his knees trembled and he leaned against the door frame while he watched Maria looking at the posters one by one, showing great interest.

- I can only see that ye luv's bigger ladies. Looks like I wouldn't stand much of a chance with ye.

She uttered the words striking a pose before him, putting one hand on her hip, which made her lean to one side, and the other hand she put behind her head. Joška didn't dare speak because he was afraid that the wasteland in his mouth would give him away: the only thing he could think of in this frenzied state was of the need to swallow the saliva that had pooled near his throat. He watched her and was by now visibly shaking and, at times, twitching. Maria, soft and gentle, enjoyed the moment immensely.

- Well... I don't know... - he squealed, horrified at the sound of his trembling voice.
- Ye don't know?! - she answered, watching the way Joška was trying to swallow something, his Adam's apple moving up and down.
- And me tits too... - she carried on, placing her palms on her breasts. - I view ye likes big tits. Mine aren't that big. Eh? What do ye narrate?

She caressed her breasts for a moment and looked him in the eyes with a smile. And then something cracked inside Joška, a darkness fell, something broke through! He grabbed her by the waist and turned her around, lifting up her skirt. She closed her eyes and sighed once, with a smile, as if wanting to say: 'That's it...' Joška penetrated her from behind standing up, grabbing her breasts roughly. He moaned, cross-eyed and grimacing, a stream of spit flowing from the corner of his mouth, as if he were having an epileptic fit.

- Get it out on time! Spill it on the floor! - Maria said when she felt he was about to finish.

Since Joška didn't react, she moved away at the right moment, leaving Joška to bend over, salivate and pour his semen on the floor like some agonised animal. She lifted up her underwear, fixed her skirt and hair with a smile, and left.

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They spent the rest of the afternoon outside, sitting at a shaded wooden table by the water. They talked about many things, but one part of the conversation left a particularly strong impression on Joška.

Maria was talking about her great desire to leave the village and see the world. Because, she concluded:

- What beautiful thing can ye narrate in this tongue of ours? It sounds 'orrible when you say to some one that you luv 'em. 'Luv'; it sounds like a bark. 'As ye ever thought of that, like?
- I must say I 'aven't... - said Joška, somewhat confused, because he didn't understand what exactly Maria was trying to say.
- Ye can curse well - she carried on - ye can insult, make jokes, take t'piss, but ye can't narrate nothin' beautiful or sophisticated.
- 'Ang on a minute. - Joška felt as if this was aimed at him, too - I ain't been to many big schools, but I don't see why anyone should rubbish our tongue, like. Narratin' like anyone else, we do! People 'ave got to talk some'ow. No big philosophy behind it, like.
- If ye'd been to 'big schools' ye might understand what I is narratin' about.
- What, is we gettin' personal now? - Joška became serious.
- No, we's not gettin' personal. But I is narratin' to ye that we don't narrate beautiful things. Maybe we thinks them, but our tongue doesn't 'ave the words with which to narrate them. 'Ere, listen to this poem and ye'll get it.

She struck a dignified pose and started reciting:

Oh ye lonesome heart of mine,
 Who brought ye to my shrine?
 Oh ye tireless weaver,
 a thin yarn ye are weaving,
 between reality and dreaming.
 Oh my heart, my crazy heart,
 what are ye doing with that yarn?
 Like that old weaver,
 who by day weaves, undoes by night,
 between the darkness and the light.
 Oh my heart, my angry heart,
 Be you struck by lightning!
 For I cannot undo this yarn,
 between day and night.

- There, can ye 'ear it now? How might ye narrate this in our tongue?
- No problem. The same, just slightly different.
- It'd sound ugly. When ye add all those accents we 'ave. 'Orrible...
- I don't know much about this kind of thing, but I'll narrate it again that it's no good goin' against yer mother tongue. I don't care how it sounds. What does that make me? Some wild man because I can't recite poems from a school book, like? Ye can fuck off, ye know!

Joška would have lost his patience with her long ago, but this was a very special day for him, and she was, above all, a special person. He was torn between regret of what he had just said and his hurt local pride.

- Oh dear Joška. - Maria looked around pensively - Ye 'ave a pretty spot 'ere, no?
- I can't complain... - he responded, still sulking a little.

Two cars full of people pulled up. They honked at Joška and started getting out, shattering the thick evening calm. Maria got up with a start, recognising some of her students. She smiled kindly and said that Joška and her were just waiting for people to turn up so that the boat wouldn't have to cross just on her account.

Joška let them all on and took them across without once daring to look at Maria, hoping she'd say something to him as she left. But Maria, like the rest of the passengers, cordially thanked him and vanished along the road that lead to the gypsy neighbourhood.

Joška never dared ask anyone about her, let alone look for her. He desperately hoped he'd see her again tomorrow, or next week, or on a festive day, or on a beautiful day, in the autumn, when winter was over... It was only a year later that he found out that she had left her job at the school and moved away soon after their encounter. Some women had heard that she was working in a primary school in Svrljig, where she had married a railway worker.

For years after that, on special occasions, when the men got together and there had been plenty to drink until late into the night, Joška recited his verses. These had become a thing of delight and fun among the villagers: "As you 'eard that our Joška 'as wrote a poem? Ye's gotta 'ear it. It's a wonder!"

The men made sure their sneers were not visible and that the atmosphere was dignified; Joška would stand up, ablaze with brandy, and announce:

I went out t'other night
To see what the hens was cacklin' about,
I couldn't know
That in yer bed I'd find old Jo.

I jumped over the fence, ruined me cabbage,
Like a bull, I was...
I viewed the stars:
me pain was bigger than big luggage.

I travelled in, sat on me bed,
I was thinkin':
Oh me god, what's she doin' with old Jo,
doesn't she know his whole family's on the dole?

I tossed and turned the 'ole night long,
I just couldn't sleep.
And just at that moment
The hound started howlin'.

I wish ye was mine,

Only with ye I felt fine,
I'd do anythin' for ye, for real,
Because ye're, ye're... ('ere goes any name ye want)

Again t'other night I was feelin' sad,
I felt quite bad!
But luckily there was good guzzle,
So I got over that.

Me life is not worth livin'
Since ye left with 'im,
If only I'd slept that night
Then survive I might...