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Of Gold, Dogs and Men

(O zlatu, ljudima i psima)

Novel

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FIRST PART

Of Gold, Dogs and Men

1.

A sea of dense darkness lay on the other side of the window. It was not a normal night, one of those deep, dull nights that extend into one other, like the days long gone or the silent, dreamy prayers of the rosary, but a swollen, impassable night, a night that stretches out and stokes anxiety, the kind of night where hopes die and every thought of light fades away. The idiot asked for some water in his primitive tongue, in what sounded like an inarticulate two-syllable shriek, and the old man, who had briefly closed his eyes, stood tiredly and turned up the wick of the lamp. The darkness retreated, hiding in the corners of the room like cobwebs, and for a moment a slight smell of oil spread in the air. Then the old man waddled off to the metal water tank in the corner, took the enamel cup hanging above the tank from a nail jutting from the wall by a few centimetres, scooped up some water, took the cup to the idiot and gave it to him. The boy held it out with both hands, then slowly sat up and leaned his head in towards the cup. The old man stood beside him and watched. The idiot was his son. His name was Tomo, but the old man rarely called him by his name, because somehow names didn't suit creatures like him. Water dripped down the idiot's chin and spilled over his dirty, grease-stained pyjamas. When he'd finished, the old man carefully wiped his face and chin with a cloth, hung the cup back on the wall, from where the rest of the water dripped onto the dirt floor, then took his glasses and a leaflet from the table, one of those that recently they had been giving out at church every Sunday. He had two: one he had taken from the church, during the service, and another he had collected while leaving, from the small table against the wall to the right of the entrance.

The old man sat under the lamp, put on his glasses and lifted the leaflet to his eyes, careful not to cast his own shadow on it. He had already read it who knew how many times. In it, three cases of healing were described. It was the third that interested him most. It read, "Marko, a deaf-mute boy who had never walked, started walking for the first time thanks to the intercession of the Colonel. Now

Marko can also hear, and he is learning to say his first words. The first word he learnt was “God”. The second one, “Colonel”.” Alongside the text were two photographs, one next to the other: the first a blurry, grainy photograph of the boy standing beside his bed and smiling confusedly at the camera, the second an older photograph of the boy lying helplessly on a bed, as if on his deathbed. The old man looked at the boy’s face for a long time. He wondered if he would have recognised the boy had he bumped into him somewhere. He also thought it would be nice to meet the boy, speak to him or, even better, to his parents, if they were alive. He knew the chances of that happening were low, as their address was not written anywhere on the leaflet, but it was nice just to think about it, about a chance encounter that would never happen. That was when he made up his mind.

The night then turned into an endless-seeming day, another autumn day greyer and shorter than the last. The old man sat on the bench near the door and rested, in a state that wasn’t quite sleep, dazed by the thin sunlight filtering through the window. From outside came the sound of the church bells striking noon. The old man woke with a start, stood up, crossed himself and froze in place, remaining still until the chiming stopped. He need not have: there was no one in the house to see him and report him to the authorities. But he did it nevertheless, just as he always did whenever he heard the church bells, no matter where he was; in the woods, in the field, outside the house, in the village or, like now, in his sleep, because the old man had a strong, firm faith. There was little he did have beside his steadfast, persistent faith; only his son, that son, and an old dog who was losing his teeth and spent his days sleeping on the wooden pallets behind the house.

“I’m going out,” the old man said, pulling a rosary over his head with a ten-centimetre cross hanging from it. It had cost fifty kunas. “I’ll be back soon.”

The idiot mumbled something and propped himself up, first on the right elbow, then on both. He went on mumbling even when the old man had left, with the leaflet and his glasses in his hands.

The old man peered briefly through the window from outside; the idiot was still propped up on his elbows, looking at the door, all the while mumbling in a quieter and quieter voice.

The old man walked downhill through the village, avoiding the cow pats scattered on the road and the puddles of mud that had formed on the cracked ground. The dog followed him for a time, and then stopped, watching him for a while with his tongue sticking out of his mouth, before turning back, laying tiredly on the pallet and immediately falling into a deep, canine sleep. From somewhere came the sound of cow bells, rattling and muffled. The old man stopped. The bells reminded him of the cries of a wretched man, trying to stay

afloat with the last of his strength. Then he walked off, heading towards the old woman's house. She was a sad, languid woman, her frail bones filled up with damp. Her name was Ružica and the old man had known her his whole life. Sometimes in the winter she would come to their house and devotedly pick lice from the idiot's hair, carefully pull the nits from his greasy locks or running a thick, wooden comb across his scalp. The idiot would lie with pillows under his back and his head tilted backwards, and the old woman would spread a once white, now yellowed handkerchief beneath his head and run the comb towards it. The lice would fall onto the handkerchief, crawling on it like black, almost invisible spiders, while clumps of nits and dandruff would fall on them like snow. Once the woman had finished, taken off her glasses and thrown the comb into boiling water, the old man would take the handkerchief by the corners, carry it to the stove and shake it onto a hotplate, then watch the lice and nits turn into ashes. First they would blacken, and the smell of burnt hair would spread into the air, then they would turn grey and disappear from the plate, as if they had never existed. The heat would scatter tiny, weightless particles of ash into the air, while new bugs would cling to the idiot's hair. One day they would be ashes too.

The old woman was sitting on the wooden bench outside her house, counting her rosary. The old man showed her the leaflet and handed her his glasses. The woman interrupted her prayers and put the glasses on. She hung the rosary around her neck. It dangled there like a trophy, and the cross nestled in the ruins of her withered breasts.

"You have to read this," the old man said. "The third case, a young boy named Marko."

The woman adjusted the glasses, until the letters on the page came into focus. When she had finished, she looked at the old man and returned his glasses together with the leaflet.

"I'm going to Stolnik," he said.

"You think it will help?"

"I think it should," he replied. "Marko was born like that, and he was deaf and dumb. It's all written here. My son wasn't. He was a normal child until the age of two. Then things went to hell. First his head swelled up. I'm telling you, Marko's case was more serious than my son's. And he was healed."

"When are you going?"

"I was thinking tomorrow morning. If you can look after him while I'm away."

"I will," said the old woman.

"Come 'round today, I'll show you where I keep the food."

"As soon as I've finished my prayers and fed the chickens."

"Don't come straight away. Come in an hour or two. I have to go to the blacksmith to have my machete sharpened. And I have to go and see the priest too, to ask him to take a picture of Tomo and give me a recommendation. Come tonight. That'd be best."

"I'll bring some eggs."

"That'd be good. He loves eggs."

"How does he like them?"

"Hard boiled, but you can't give them to him whole; he'd choke. It's better to cut them into four. Or you can give him the yolk first, and then the white cut into halves."

The old woman nodded.

"How long will you be there for?"

"I don't know. It'll take at least ten days to get there, and the same to get back."

The woman nodded again, took the rosary in her hand and started moving through the beads, while the old man went back home. This time he took the shorter route, reaching the house via a slope where nettles, blackberries and thorns grew. From force of habit he kept an eye on the sunlit parts of the hedgerows where snakes could be seen in the summer, even though it was autumn now, the season when the snakes, sluggish and lethargic, retreated into their holes.

The old man rested his ear against the door, listening. The house was quiet. He preferred not to go in, worried the idiot would be disturbed and start mumbling again. Mumbling was the closest thing to crying that came from his mouth.

The old man decided to go first to the blacksmith, and then to the priest. He went to the shed and found his machete. It was an army machete that he had taken from the hands of a dead comrade and kept. He felt the blade with his fingers. It was blunt and indented. Then he lifted it to his eyes and looked along the blade. It was twisted and kinked.

When the old man arrived, the blacksmith was hammering the handle of an axe. He was old too. The two of them had grown up and been at war together. The old man showed the blacksmith the machete. The blacksmith put down his hammer, picked up the machete and looked at it for a long time. Then, like the old man a minute earlier, he lifted it to eye level, to check if it was bent.

"It's blunt," the old man said.

"And twisted," the blacksmith added. "This is a good machete. They don't make them like this anymore."

The blacksmith added a handful of charcoal to the hot embers in the hearth, turning them purple. Then he took the wooden handle from the machete and placed the iron on the glowing coals, kindling them further with air from

a battered pair of bellows that hissed sharply. He waited for about ten minutes, monitoring the change in colour of the steel, then pulled the machete out with a pair of tongs, placed it on the anvil and began hammering with quick, measured blows, first on one side and then on the other. Then he threw it back into the embers, kept it there for some time, then took it out with the tongs and carried it outside to let it cool off in the air. The old man followed him.

"Anyone else would cool this down in water, but I don't do it that way," said the blacksmith.

"Is it not good for the machete?"

"No. The iron gets fragile, cracks like glass. You've seen the dents in the blade, that's what that's from. Someone must've cooled the machete down in water."

They returned to the workshop.

"Are you going to sharpen it?"

"I will. When it's cooled down."

The old man showed him the leaflet.

"You have to read this," he said. "I'm going to Stolnik."

"For your son?"

"Yes."

The old man handed him the leaflet and his glasses. The blacksmith took them, read the leaflet and returned it without a word, together with the glasses. Then he picked up the axe and the hammer and resumed striking the handle of the axe, before plunging it in a tank of dirty water with rainbow-coloured oil stains floating on its surface. Then he grabbed a pair of thick, leather gloves and walked outside. He came back carrying the machete. First, he cleaned it with some sandpaper, then sharpened it with three different files, one thick, one fine and one even finer, then soaked it in clean water and finally passed a fine grinding stone along both sides of the blade.

"How much do I owe you?" the old man asked.

"Nothing," replied the blacksmith.

The old man's eyes welled up with tears.

"Is it true they're going to put down all sick children? You should know that," said the blacksmith.

The old man shrugged.

"I doubt it," he said. "I heard something similar too. I think it's just enemy propaganda. If sick people can heal with the Colonel's intercession, why would they kill them? And anyway, if it did turned out to be true, they'd have to kill me first. And that'd be a bit harder, even though I am an old man."

"How old is your son?"

"Thirty-something."

"People say there'll be another civil war."

The old man shrugged, thinking about the wars he had taken part in, together with the blacksmith. There had been quite a few, even though some had barely lasted, one of them only ten days. The Second War, the bloodiest of all, was only a hazy memory. He had been around ten when it ended and the Third Republic was founded. A few years later, an electric, barbed-wire fence began to appear along the borders between the three newly established states. He was too old for another war. He said so to the blacksmith.

"We're too old. We've done our part," he said.

"You bet we have," the blacksmith replied.

The blacksmith hammered the handle back onto the machete and immersed it into water. He kept it there for a little while, as if holding a dog on a leash while it peed or ate some grass, then took it out and handed it to the old man.

"Don't use it today. Let the metal settle," he said.

"May the Lord be with you," the old man said.

The blacksmith nodded and the old man left. He set off to the church. He hid the machete in one of the bushes adorning the churchyard and headed towards the parish house located close to the church, to its left. He stopped for a moment opposite the church front door, turned towards it, towards the invisible altar behind it, and knelt down, touching his right knee to the ground. Then he crossed himself solemnly, expansively. He rose slowly, hampered by his creaking joints, then he approached the door of the parish house and rang the bell.

The housekeeper, a plump, twenty-year-old girl, opened the door.

"What do you need?"

"The priest. I need to talk to him."

The girl scowled at his shoes, covered in fresh mud, and motioned towards the doormat.

"Clean your shoes," she said as she gestured.

The old man rubbed his shoes on the doormat for a long time, then he went inside. With a dustpan and broom, the girl collected the lumps of mud the old man had carried in on his shoes, then left the broom and dustpan at the door and let the old man into the hall. She pointed at a plain wooden chair and told him to wait there, then disappeared into the house. The old man sat down. Opposite him, under a giant crucifix, was a shelf full of books. He looked at it for a while; he had never seen so many books in one place.

The grey-haired priest appeared shortly after. He carried a pencil, a mobile phone, a piece of paper, and a envelope with the symbol of the parish stamped on it. He sat down at the table.

"Do you often come to the service? Do I need to check?"

"Yes. I keep all the certificates. I can bring them to show you."

"There's no need. Your face looks familiar."

The old man, nodded silently, shaken.

"What's his name?" the priest asked.

"Tomo."

"How old is he?"

"Thirty-three or thirty-four. I'm not sure."

The priest stopped writing. He lifted his head and looked sternly at the old man. He had a lifeless gaze and eyes filled with mistrust.

"Thirty-three or thirty-four? I can't write both. I have to be precise."

The old man paused to think. It was 2084, and Tomo had been born in 2051, a few days after the Seventh War had ended, the one that had been fought only in Stolnik, when the Third Republic finally pushed the enemy back to the other side of the river. After that, the church bells in town had rung for three days in a row.

"Thirty-three," he said. "He's been ill since he was three. He was a healthy child until the age of two, then he got sick. His head started to swell."

"Out of the blue?"

"Yes."

"Did you ask yourself why that happened?".

"No. I didn't think about it. It happened... It just happened. I didn't think about it."

"You should have. It was God's punishment."

The old man nodded. Sometimes he thought that too. Then he thought about his wife. Maybe the boy would have recovered if she'd stayed with them. If she hadn't done what she did. He preferred not to mention it to the priest, even though he felt uncomfortable about it. Maybe he would have refused him the intercession. Is an unspoken truth a lie?

"However, God is merciful," the priest said. "You should know that. You should always remember that."

The old man nodded again.

"Always," the priest repeated. "Wherever you are and whatever happens."

"That's why I came here", the old man said. "Because He's merciful."

"Does the boy understand anything at all?"

"Yes. He can ask for water, he gets angry..."

"Nothing else?"

"No."

"Can he eat by himself?"

"No, I feed him. I've been doing that for thirty years."

The priest went on writing on his piece of paper for a while, then stopped.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Yes," the old man replied.

The priest folded the paper, placed it in the envelope and stood up.

"Let's go," he said, taking the phone from the table. "I have to take a picture of him. That's fifty kunas."

The old man took a fifty-kuna note he had prepared in advance from his pocket and placed it on the table in front of the priest.

When the two of them entered the room, the idiot was sleeping and whining as he slept. The priest stood next to his bed. The mobile phone in his right hand flashed a few times. The idiot woke up, propped himself up on his elbow and smiled dully, blinking as if waiting for another flash.

They left and returned to the parish house. The priest printed the photo, placed it in the envelope together with the sheet with the intercession, then glued the envelope shut and, on the outside, to the left of the stamp, wrote the old man's name and surname.

"You mustn't open the envelope. Just throw it in the chest on the Colonel's square and that's all. When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"May the Lord be with you."

"He always has been," the old man replied.

He left the priest's office with the envelope in his hand, collected the machete from the bush where he had left it on his way there and went home.

In the evening, the old woman arrived carrying the eggs in a basket. The old man showed her the potato sack, ten kilos of wheat flour and two kilos of buckwheat flour, a half-dozen packets of powdered milk, and a basket full of dried mushrooms he had collected in the woods that summer, brushed clean of earth, cut into strips and dried in the sun. There was also a bag of salt, a barrel of sauerkraut and ten or so eggs.

"I don't know if the greens have gone off," he said.

The sauerkraut had been in the warm the whole summer. A thick layer of foul-smelling, grey scum lay on its surface.

"I'll check," the old woman said. "What does he love best?"

"He's not picky. He eats everything. He used to eat offal when I still had pigs."

Then he showed her where he kept the nappies. From under the idiot's bed he took out a box where he'd stored them, neatly arranged. He had acquired the box a long time ago. It was one of those boxes the shops had once used to keep bananas

in. That was back when you could still buy bananas, even though they were extremely expensive. The old man couldn't remember when he had last seen them, and could only vaguely recall their flavour. The memory was indistinct and unreal, like a ghostly outline looming through thick fog.

2.

They left early in the morning, before sunrise, the old man and his dog, as soon as the old woman arrived and took over looking after the idiot. Before dawn, the old man had dreamed of his wife, who had left them when the boy was three. She said something to him in his sleep. She was trying to justify herself. He could tell from the look in her eyes.

“I couldn’t bear it any longer,” she seemed to say.

In the dream, the old man was aged and decrepit. He had forgiven her a long time ago, when he was still young, like she was, and he had cried. Her head was immersed in astonishingly clear water. She was looking at him from below, her eyes wide open, while tiny air bubbles floated from her mouth to the surface.

They walked for hours, without stopping, at a relentless pace dictated by the old man. Over his right shoulder he carried a hessian bag with some food, powdered milk, small chunks of dry bread, and ten or so potatoes; and other knick-knacks, like a pot without a handle he had resolved to throw away long ago only to change his mind, a torn, worn-out blanket the idiot used to sleep on, with urine stains he’d been unable to remove, and a blunt, rusty, small knife to peel the potatoes.

They left the village and passed an abandoned restaurant on the riverside. Next to it, the remains of an old, large barbecue brazier, big enough for roasting ten lambs at a time, was going rusty. Back when the restaurant was still open, the spits had been operated by water falling over slow-moving paddles connected to the main shaft through gears. It was covered by a lush arbour that in some places descended to the ground and here and there had grown around the rust-flaked metal. Next, they climbed some slopes covered in sparse vegetation, reached a plateau overgrown with low, silver grass and ivy, and then headed north, toward the mountains. They stopped briefly near a dried-up stream that lay deep below them, descended towards it slantwise, crossed it stepping over

large, polished stones, then climbed diagonally up the opposite bank. There, tall, bottle-green grasses grew, and rare lichens surrounded the tree trunks.

They stopped for the night in an abandoned village on the edge of the forest, in a house with no windows where the wind howled the whole night. The old man lay on a pile of straw that smelled of mould, while the dog settled on the porch. Behind him, a dark wavy landscape expanded; above it hung a piece of sky, grey and indifferent. The old man was tired and fell asleep quickly. He slept for an hour or two. He was woken by the dog barking. The dog was hungry. The old man fed him. He then lay awake for some time. The smell of rotted straw suffocated him. He found a mattress in the house, dragged it out, placed it in the lopsided conservatory and lay on it. From there he could see the wall of conifers a little further on. He looked in their direction for a while, then fell asleep. When he woke, he noticed some birds gathering not far from there, at the edge of the wood. For a while they rested motionless on the ground, out of sight, then they took off and disappeared in the direction of the wood, flying over the dark treetops surrounded by the rising fog.

In the morning they set off again, walking through the corn stubble left from the harvest and the stalks that had been cut with machetes and left there to rot. The old man remembered how during the war he had walked through a corn field. The stalks had been taller than him. He had been afraid; he had felt unable to breathe, as if he might have drowned in that endless, green sea.

They reached a river and kept walking on the overgrown bank, bypassing the dense thickets, and then crossed over to the other side, as the bank they had walked on until then rose and turned into an impassable scree slope. Then they walked past an abandoned junkyard where tons of iron were quietly rusting away, settled now by snakes. The old man paused. The remains of car bonnets, roofs, plastic bumpers, wheels, discarded tyres and doors, removed from the cars and lined up side by side like books on the priest's bookshelf, peeked lazily through the tall grass. Across the sleepy, rocky landscape some old chrome decorations that had lost their sparkle shined mutely: eagles with their wings spread, stars, pentagrams, trims or symbols of car manufacturers. The old man had owned a car, a long time ago, a car with an inbuilt steering wheel shaped like a skull. He had bought it for a small sum, in a junkyard similar to this one. It was the time when junkyards had begun appearing everywhere, with more and more cars ending up in them and fewer and fewer on the roads. The new cars had silent, electric engines and the petrol stations were closing. One day his car had ended up in one of these places too. Even then, endless weed-covered car graveyards like this one could be seen along the roads. Before his car had fallen apart, he had wanted to buy a chrome decoration in the shape of bull's horns, to attach to the

bonnet with double-sided tape. Above the tape, near the tip, the horns were joined together by a flexible spring that swung when the car went over a bump or a pothole. But the seller had wanted too much for it. Once, a few months later, he had bumped into the seller in the street. He had recognised him and offered him the ornament for a much lower price, but by then he had lost interest.

For the whole of the second day they walked through a sun-scorched landscape, then reached a sparse pine wood where poisonous mushrooms grew. There they stopped. There was no living soul around, except for the dog, panting nearby with his tongue hanging out, but still the old man hid behind a giant pine to piss. The piss came out in short, painful spurts. He saw the dog lift his head and prick up his ears, then lower his head and briefly closed his eyes. A bird flew out of a bush and the dog barked briefly. The old man, his hands wet with the warm urine he had accidentally spilled, fastened his fly, returned to his possessions, found the rosary among them and placed it around his neck, just in case. The piss, which had splashed onto his thighs, was cold now, uncomfortable and damp. For a moment, he thought of the warmth of a fire, the thought he would use most often to rinse away the bitter sediment of time, and then of his stove back home. He thought of the idiot and the old woman. He pictured her feeding him, how she would push spoonfuls of light buckwheat porridge that looked like mud into his mouth. The old man listened. Everything was quiet; it had been a false alarm. He removed the rosary and put it in his coat pocket to keep it handy. Worried a bead might catch somewhere and break, he thought it best not to wear it all the time.

In the late afternoon, they met two young boys. The dog had stopped and pricked up his ears and the old man raised his index finger to signal him to remain quiet. Shortly afterwards, he had heard voices and the sound of twigs snapping underfoot. The boys were singing a shameless, smutty song about a priest and his young housekeeper. The old man took the rosary from his pocket and hung it around his neck. He soon spotted them, walking side by side on the wide path emerging from the woods into the open and descending on the other side of the slope into a dense patch of hawthorn and dogwood: a burly, blonde giant and a chubby, young boy with a drooping lower lip and rotten teeth peering out from behind it. They were drunk and reeked of sour wine. The old man felt the machete with his fingers. The giant motioned towards the dog.

"Is it dangerous?" he asked.

"No," replied the old man. "He's old. But he wasn't dangerous when he was young either. He's a good dog."

"They're all the same to me," said the chubby boy, with a dull smile. "For me,

all dogs are dangerous. When I see one coming towards me, I make sure I cross over to the other side of the road."

The giant took out a half-empty bottle of wine and sipped from it. Then he offered it to the old man.

"Do you want some?" he asked.

The old man shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm going to Stolnik, on a pilgrimage. My son's ill. I made a vow not to drink until I've put the envelope with the intercession in the chest on the Colonel's square."

"You won't report us, will you?" asked the chubby boy. "You heard when we were singing, didn't you? And we're not wearing rosaries."

"I won't," the old man replied. "I don't even know your names. How could I report you, if I don't know who you are? And I can't even remember what you were singing. Now, you tell me how I could report you."

"Are you sure you don't want some?" the giant asked, offering him the bottle.

The old man shook his head and the giant passed the bottle to his friend.

"Where are you going?" the old man asked.

"We're looking for work. Any kind of work," the giant replied. "Do you want to eat with us? We've got a few cans of beans and some goulash."

"Well, why not?" the old man said. "If it's no trouble."

"It's no trouble. There's enough for all three of us. And for the dog."

The chubby boy started a fire, waited for it to blaze up, then placed a thin, flat stone on it that he had found nearby, chosen from the many stones lying next to the boulders flaking off like sunburnt skin. The giant opened two cans of beans and one of goulash and arranged them on the stone to heat them up. The dog whined, and the chubby boy dipped a chunk of bread in the goulash bubbling around the edges of the tin and threw it to the dog. The dog grabbed it with his toothless jaws and swallowed it greedily.

"What kind of work do you do?" the old man asked.

"Any," the giant replied. "We slaughter pigs on the farms, harvest fruit, strawberries, raspberries and so on. We fell trees, chop wood… Anything. Whatever job we're asked to do, we'll do it by the book."

"Do you have your own knives? Or axes?"

"No. We get the knives on the farm. Same for the axes."

"Are they sharp?"

"They are."

The old man showed them his machete. The giant took it in his hand and

carefully felt the blade, then cut a stalk of chicory right next to where he was sitting.

"I've never seen a machete this sharp," he said, returning it to the old man.

"Can I try it?" the other boy asked.

The old man handed him his machete. He took a few steps and, holding it with both hands, cut the tip from a small spruce growing nearby.

"Boy, it sure is sharp," he said, giving it back to the old man.

"They say there'll be another war," the old man said. Do you know anything about that?"

"No", the giant replied. "They always say that."

"You're right," the old man said. "Probably doesn't mean anything."

The chubby boy threw another piece of bread dipped in goulash to the dog. Whining, the dog sniffed it, waited for it to cool down, then swallowed it voraciously.

After the meal, the old man parted from the boys. They headed in the opposite direction, towards the plantations in the south, where at this time of the year large numbers of fruit pickers were employed to harvest the late varieties of apples, while he and the dog covered another kilometre or two. They walked until dark and then found a place to spend the night. It was a cave where someone must have stayed the night not long before; in front of it were the remains of a campfire, a small island of ash with two large, flat stones beside it. The embers still glowed in the firepit.

Outside, the rain continued to fall all night, loud and heavy. They dreamed of it in the dry, dark womb of the earth, in the cave sunk deep into the mountain, where their voices, the dog's barking or whining when thunder struck somewhere nearby, and the old man's hacking cough or the clucking sounds he made to soothe the dog, multiplied before disappearing as if in a well. The darkness behind them, in the depth of the cave, was dense, thick and unfathomable, like the memories of years gone by, or the primordial darkness from the time before God created light. The old man dreamed of the rain, and a raging river where silver fish swam upstream, against the strong current carrying the uprooted trunks of oaks and alders. And he knew that from below the surface, from beneath the muddy waters that concealed her, he was being watched by his wife's ageless, tormented face.

3.

The next morning, they waited for the rain to stop and then left. From behind the thick haze on the horizon came the sound of a church bell. It was the noon bell. The old man stopped and stood still, while the dog looked around, confused, pricking up one ear in the direction of the sound. Then the ringing stopped, and they set off again. The rain had revived the dried-out streams, and rivulets of muddy, yellowy water slithered everywhere around them. After a few hours, they reached what seemed at first to be an abandoned village. But it wasn't. Two policemen with large, white crosses on the front and back of their uniforms appeared suddenly from behind a house and stood in front of them. The building was abandoned. It had been a shop once. The dusty windows had been marked in limestone with a large X. Through them, empty metal shelves could be seen, and among them dense cobwebs where the mummified remains of captured flies darkened with time. The dog barked at the policemen; the old man tried to calm him.

Where are you going?" one of them asked. He had a large, ugly, almost purple birthmark the size of an apple on his left cheek.

"On a pilgrimage," the old man replied. "To Stolnik. My son is ill."

"Your son ails," said the policeman, using the authorised language of the Republic. "That's what you should say. You should watch which words you use."

"My son ails," the old man repeated. He showed them the envelope. The policeman took it from him and looked at the parish stamp.

"You're not allowed to open it," the old man said.

"We know that," said the other policeman, who until then had remained quiet. "Don't you worry."

The policeman with the birthmark on his face took a radio from the case hanging from his leather belt and called someone. He spelled the old man's name and the name of the parish, then waited with the device next to his ear, not saying a word.

“Nice dog,” the other policeman said. He approached the dog, let him sniff the palm of his hand, then knelt down and stroked him on the head. The dog whined happily in reply.

“All right,” the policeman said into the radio, before putting it back into the case. He returned the envelope to the old man.

“It’s all good,” he said.

“May the Lord be with you,”

“He always has been,” the old man replied.

They left the village and headed for the remains of a town, beyond which lay a tall, dense forest. A bare, dry gorge extended to the right of the town and a swollen river flowed through it. The clouds scattered and the sun broke through. They climbed up through the ruins of the town and trudged until nightfall through the hornbeam forest stretching from the left bank of the river. Then, in the dark, they crossed a large meadow covered in heather and barberry plants, and climbed up a hill with a huge, blackening tree stump at the top. They would have to spend the night there; it was too dark now to see anything. The night around the old man seemed infinitely dark and deep, a dark prelude, if such thing exists, to the nights with no dawn that he had sometimes encountered in his dreams. Once, a long time ago, on a night like this, he had heard an unintelligible whisper, followed by a shriek. He had never found out exactly what had happened. Another time, on one of those days that, seen from today, looked very much identical, just like peas in a pod, he had looked into the night, a night just like this one, and as a lighting flashed he had glimpsed the faces of a woman and her children. He he’d been a soldier back then. Frightened, he had pointed his rifle into the dark abyss and fired all of his bullets.

The hill was covered in lush ferns and the old man had to hack his way through them with the machete all the way to the top. There, he sat on the tree stump, while the dog stretched out at his feet, on a fern he had cut that was still warm from the sun. He took off his worn-out shoes, then removed his socks, squeezed them and wrang them out. Somewhere in the forest below them, a light shone, then slowly faded. Then he heard the sound of a handsaw.

“Illegal loggers,” he thought.

The dog raised his head and listened.

A little later, after he had recovered, the old man cut a bunch of ferns with his machete and lay on them, covering himself with his blanket. But the cold kept waking him during the night. When it did, he curled up like a baby, until sleep overwhelmed him once more.

4.

The days flowed monotonously, one into the other, like years that are all alike, or long lines of bullets in a belt, all equally grey and hazy. As the days passed, the old man and the dog walked dutifully through a centenarian forest; descended in the rain or fog across a moor where a sharp, grey boulder peered up through the ground; crossed a meadow thick with flowering gladioli; skirted a forest with none, and passed identical, abandoned cottages, all exactly alike, their shingles removed and taken away, the remains of brick barbecues beside them and overgrown with grape arbours in front of which tables with metal legs once lay; or abandoned graveyards where the shy, marble headstones peered out from the tall grasses and through the thick spruces, graveyards where no one had been buried for years, where no one had even set foot, graveyards whose expiry dates had long passed. They lay there quietly, hidden from view, awaiting an inexorable end that had in fact already passed, the moment when no one walked through them any longer, when their dead had no one remaining who cared about them. Ferns, gladioli and spruces grew indulgently alongside. They waded through stubble fields where rye or barley had been harvested; crossed a clearing and a thicket where they had to make their way through the ferns wet with the morning dew or the rain that constantly followed them; and entered a grove where the dog stopped beside the first tree trunk, raised his leg and peed. And once, from the edge of a cliff, they followed the ominous circling of an eagle in the sky; while the bird waited for the moment to plunge into the forest, aiming for its victim, the dog let out a few barks from his toothless mouth. On another day, at twilight, a few frightened birds emerged from the fog ahead of them, and as they drew close, as if finding themselves in front of a wall, flew up and disappeared in the blueish haze that faded into darkness a little further away.

Once, before dawn, the old man dreamed he had lost the envelope with the intercession. In his dream, he stood before the cross, under the benign gaze of the Colonel, and looked everywhere in his pockets, searching for the envelope in

a panic. He woke and sat up against a tree trunk. The dog raised his head, pricked his ear but then, reassured, lowered his head and closed his eyes. The old man put his hand in the inner pocket of his coat to feel if the envelope was there. Relieved, he soon fell asleep again, a deep, thick, empty sleep, free of demons, nightmares or the ghosts from the long-gone years that had once made promises and awakened hopes.

On the seventh or eighth day, the sky cleared and they felt the warmth of the sun. The road ahead of them led to a sparse forest where they could make out a row of blackened stumps whose north sides were covered in damp moss. When they entered the forest and passed the first stump, the dog barked at it briefly, then approached it hesitantly, sniffed it for a while, then peed on it. Next, they reached a sleepy lake whose waters had turned green from a waste substance floating motionless on its surface. The dog headed towards the lake, but the old man stopped him. They took a wide loop around the lake, then stopped a few kilometres further on, at the edge of a gorge filled with swirling fog, and stared into the distance, beyond which nothing could be seen. The old man found a nearby stone as big as a human hand and threw it into the blind gorge, listening out for the sound of it hitting the bottom. He heard nothing. They retraced their steps for a few kilometres, then turned left, bypassing the gorge on whose edge they had stood reverently an hour earlier, filled with silent awe.

In the late afternoon, on the ninth day of travel, they spotted Stolnik in the distance, far below them, a few clusters of grey buildings and the river that separated the city into two, while the horizontal arms of forgotten construction cranes watched protectively over the dark roofs. As they walked through a run-down village, a slow-witted girl ran into the street towards them. Giggling madly, she lifted her shirt to show her heavy, swollen breasts, their nipples dripping with milk. The old man stared at them for a moment, then, ashamed, lowered his head and quickened his step. The girl went on giggling and grunting, her shirt still lifted. A child cried from inside one of the houses. The dog pricked up his ears and let out a whine.

They left the village and spent the night in the ruins of a factory, a section of which had burnt down long ago. The wind and rain had washed the soot from the enormous concrete ramparts and the roof, which in one spot had collapsed inside the concrete structure. The old man decided to leave the dog there. He was worried about taking him with him. There were rumours of hundreds of aggressive stray dogs hiding in the ruins near the river, and he was unsure if he could even take a dog into the town. He left his machete there too, hiding it under the collapsed floor in a corner of the building, next to a pile of garbage where shy rats

rummaged tirelessly. He hung his hessian bag high on the concrete wall, reckoning the rats would not be able to climb up to it. At one point, a full moon shone through the gap in the caved-in roof; the dog shook, raised his head and softly growled at it, as if at a suspicious intruder.

That night, he dreamed of his wife again. This time too, her face was underwater. Her lips opened and closed, silent and fish-like, while small air bubbles, rather than words, floated up to the surface and disappeared. He had forgotten her face; he was no longer sure if the face he had been seeing in his dreams for years was really hers, or merely debris from the unreliable flooding of his memory.

5.

He reached the town early in the morning, via a narrow path that descended from the mountainsides, overgrown with wild pomegranates and figs, towards the poor settlements on the edge of town, with drones buzzing constantly above them, before heading towards the river that marked the border. A long time ago, up until the Second War, the two banks of the river had been in the same country. Since then, it had been patrolled by gunboats. The old man could see one now, but not which side it belonged to: it had no flag on the bow. The soil the old man was standing on belonged to the Third Republic. On the other bank lay the "jo-jo republic", or so they had called the Islamic Republic of J&J when he was young, when they fought the wild hoards that came from there. The engine of the police boat cut silently through the muddy water that had once been emerald green. The old man remembered those days as if through a haze. He stood and followed the boat until it disappeared behind a bend, where the river split into two. He headed towards the square, crossing several bridges closed off by concrete walls and barbed wire on both sides. From above the tall stacks of sandbags, the machine-gun posts watched over the bridge; the hollow gun barrels peeked out like fingers pointing to the centre of the bridge, while from the opposite side similar barrels stared back at them.

The police stopped him a few streets from the square. The street leading there was blocked by a checkpoint, a heavy, metal fence guarded by a policeman with an automatic rifle. The old man showed his veteran card.

"Why are you here?" the tall policeman asked. He glanced at him, then at the photo on the card, then back again.

The policeman wore a helmet with a white cross spanning its entire length and width. It looked as if the cross was clinging, convulsive and spider-like, to the smooth surface of the helmet. The old man took the envelope from his pocket.

"I'm going to the Colonel's square," he said. "My son ails."

“That can wait,” replied the policeman, motioning towards the large avenue to their left that led towards the stadium. “Go to the stadium first. You can go to the square after that. May the Lord be with you.”

He could see a crowd in the direction the policeman had pointed; people were coming from all directions and disappearing into the stadium as if into a giant, hungry gorge.

The stands were filled with silent, indifferent people. Visibly bored, they watched the three lines of convicts queueing outside the confessionals placed halfway along the pitch. The loudspeakers played hymns to the Almighty, while over the giant screens above the stands the flag of the Third Republic waved. The convicts moved painfully slowly towards the confessionals, and from there to the opposite side of the pitch where they stood neatly in a line, like a human wall in front of the goals whose nets had been removed. The stands behind them were empty, and a two-meter-tall barrier made of stacked sandbags spanning the whole width of the pitch had been built in front of them. The convicts had been handcuffed and shackled, and walked liked ducks in tiny, even steps. Once the lines outside the confessionals had been exhausted, three priests emerged from them and disappeared into the passage between the stands leading to the changing rooms, while the convicts, eighteen of them, stood in a line. A priest approached with a chalice holding the hosts covered with a golden platter. He was followed by an altar boy, whose white robe, with a black cross on the front and back, reached the floor. They stopped in front of the first convict. The priest handed the platter to the boy, who placed it under the convict’s chin, a short, bald man whose jaw shook with fear. As they received the host, the faces of the convicts appeared in large squares on the screens with their name and the crime they had been sentenced to death for. The bald man had been sentenced for breaking the “fifth commandment”: he had raped a fifteen-year-old girl and then strangled her. Occasionally, as the camera moved from one face to another, the pious face of the Leader of the Third Republic, the Servant of God Dominic II, appeared on the screen. A military vehicle appeared from the wide passage and headed onto the pitch; a heavy machine gun was mounted on it and a soldier stood behind the gun holding it with both hands. A cartridge belt hung from the gun all the way to the ground. The vehicle moved onto the grass, then towards the convicts, then stopped about twenty meters from them. The old man was seated close by; he could see the fear in the eyes of the convicts nearest to him. A siren blared and the soldier began shooting. Somewhere from under the roof of the stands, a flock of pigeons took off, flew up and soon disappeared into the grey sky, high above the dome of the stadium. The soldier kept shooting even after all the convicts

had fallen to the floor, until the siren sounded again. The pitch was splashed with blood, and sand poured from the sandbags in small streams, like resin, creating a fine, ever-growing cascade in front of the barrier.

A doctor with a stethoscope in his hands approached the executed convicts, accompanied by a soldier holding a gun.

The doctor placed the ends of the stethoscope into his ears, and rested the other end on the men's necks. The soldier stood behind him throughout. At one point, the doctor stopped and turned to the soldier, pointing at the convict he had last examined. The soldier moved in front of him, put a round into the chamber of his gun, and fired a bullet into the convict's head. The doctor examined him again and nodded, confirming he was dead.

6.

The square was full of pilgrims heading towards the cross and circling it like water swirling into a drain. Night was falling. Lamps were being lit on the square. Their yellowish light shone brighter and brighter as the darkness grew. The old man felt slightly faint, having eaten nothing all day, so headed straight for the crucifix at the centre of a huge circular platform covered in smooth, stone slabs shaped like crosses. He made his way through the people crowded around the crucifix while holding the envelope in his hands, then stopped beneath it, threw the envelope into the narrow opening of the chest at the base of the crucifix and crossed himself. Then, his heart racing, he knelt down and recited a few prayers for the healing of the sick. The Colonel looked into the distance beyond the old man's head, at the thirty-three-metre concrete cross at the top of the hill above the town. He wore a giant rosary with beads made of shrapnel. The old man then stood up and crossed a line of people who were softly humming. He stopped at the souvenir stall at the edge of the square; it sold relics made of the colourful wool from the Colonel's uniform, miniature crucifixes, copies of the cross on the square in different sizes, booklets of selected prayers for health, success at work, and happiness, holy water in small, clear plastic bottles shaped like hand grenades, or salt, also holy, in brass cartridge cases.

The old man carefully stroked the rosaries on display, similar to the one the Colonel was wearing, with shrapnel instead of beads, that would cut his fingers during the prayer. As he did, the crucified Colonel belched for the first time. The crowd in the square stirred, and then the Colonel belched again. Everyone fell silent, their faces filled with disbelief. Unsure why, the old man felt a vague sense of fear. An old, forgotten instinct awoke in him suddenly and, without thinking, he rushed out of the brightly-lit square. He crossed the boundary at the very last moment, as barriers rose from the ground. Soon the square was closed in by a high, metal barrier, above which only the Colonel's head and the horizontal arm of the cross could be seen. Drones appeared in the sky and began scanning the

square inch by inch. They buzzed softly. Then they started shooting at the agitated, frightened crowd. Terrified, the old man fled into the darkness. He heard once more the people screaming and crying in the square. He ran for his life, and when he could run no more, he hid, panting, in a dark passage that smelled of dog urine. He heard his heart pounding and the blood flowing in his ears. Nothing more. Drones were still flying above the square; every now and then, he saw one of them flash with light.

7.

He found the dog outside the abandoned factory that lurked ominously and intently in the dark a hundred yards away. The dog had been torn apart. It was dark and the old man saw him at the last moment, almost stepping on him. He paused and looked at him. He had been a good dog. From somewhere in the darkness came the sound of dogs barking, perhaps the same ones that had attacked his. In the distance, in the sky above Stolnik, he saw a few red dots flying towards the hills. He hid in the factory. He heard the rats scurrying feverishly in the dark. Soon the drones flew over the building, then took a wide turn a few kilometres further along and flew back towards the city. The old man found the machete, picked up his bag, left the factory and headed for the hills, dark walls in the distance.

Early next morning, at the first signs of dawn on the horizon, the old man crept into an abandoned shepherd's hut. He fell almost instantly into a nightmare, hungry and exhausted from the long walk. In his dream, he was chased by dogs. Then he dreamed of a fire, of the warmth he could not feel there. The flames were milky white. The old man held his blue palms above the fire for a long time to warm them up, but the flame was cold.

When he woke late that afternoon, he felt that something around him had changed, that the silence held something new and undefined. He put this down to the dog, and still not being used to not having him there. Then he looked outside, through the opening where the door had once stood and where sharp, cold air now rushed in from, and saw that the mountain was covered in snow. The snow was still falling, sparse and fluttering. In the right-hand corner of the hut, next to a stone wall, was a fireplace with logs stacked next to it. The old man lit a fire and placed bricks, which he had also found by the hearth, at both ends, then took his pot from his bag, went outside, and filled it to the top with snow. Back in the hut he arranged the pot over the bricks, above the crackling fire. He

went back outside and walked all the way around the hut, watching the remains of the daylight being swallowed up in the distance.

He went back into the hut, found the powdered milk in his bag and poured some into the pot, then sat down next to it and watched as a thin, almost invisible froth, which then turned yellow, formed on the surface. He removed the milk from the fire and carried it outside, into the snow, to cool. He returned to the hut, took the blanket from his bag, threw a few logs on the fire that crackled animatedly, then put the blanket around him and sat down by the hearth. The heat made him sleepy. He wished he could have stayed there forever, wrapped in a blanket with a lively fire crackling beside him.

When in the morning he left the hut and headed into the endless white desert, the snow was still falling from the blind sky coated in a layer of grey. His clothes were dirty and smelled of sweat, urine and dog hair. But it was his shoes he worried about most. After a few hours of walking, his feet had gone numb; all around him the cold air was turning to ice, into a blueish, frozen, sparkling wasteland. The mountain was silent. There was nothing around, not a single sound, only a silence that froze the blood in his veins, and the feeble whispering of the wind that he heard when he paused to listen.

8.

At one point, the old man slipped and fell. His bag fell from his shoulder and rolled down the edge of the gorge. He heard the sound of the pot hitting the rocks a few times, then nothing but the distant murmuring of the river flowing deep below, wild and unrestrained. He stopped at the edge of the gorge, a few steps away from the spot where he could see the track left by his bag sliding down the side. Night was falling and the snow had stopped. The old man stood, then walked ten metres in the direction he had come from and looked around. He scanned the landscape for a place where he could spend the night. He saw nothing, just an endless stretch of white that turned grey in the distance.

He walked for a few hours, following the edge of the gorge that had swallowed his bag from a distance. He knew he had to cross it. He walked across an old railway bridge, cautiously treading on the forgotten train tracks. A long time ago he might have heard the cargo trains rumbling across it, carrying iron ore from a nearby mine towards the now abandoned foundry whose empty chimneys, where cobwebs now flourished, rose in the distance towards the grey sky, above the ancient, humpbacked willows growing along the river bed a little further on. Then he descended towards the river, cautiously, step by step, and crossed the line where the snow stopped and the mud began. He reached the water, and kept walking upstream towards an area where the canyon widened. Reeds grew along the banks, in places where during heavy rains the river would overflow, submerging the black mud that would be left behind when the water receded, in stinking, rotten, mosquito-filled puddles. Just as he was losing hope of finding any kind of shelter to spend the night, he came across the deep wheel tracks of heavy construction machinery. Then, in front of him, a few hundred meters away, he saw a metal container with smoke rising from it into the air. He headed towards it.

He rested his ear on the container door and listened. Noise came from inside, perhaps the creaking of a chair. He knocked.

“Who’s there?” came a voice.

“A passer-by. An old man. I need a place to stay.”

He heard the sound of keys in the lock, then the door opened a crack. A narrow strip of light escaped from it and spread on the muddy puddles. The old man moved two steps to the side to stand in the light. Then the thin, suspicious man with a rosary around his neck open the door wider. He wore a camouflaged vest.

“Clean your shoes,” he said.

There was small patch of grey grass nearby. The old man went to it and rubbed his shoes against the grass for a while, then returned to the container.

“Will this do?” he asked.

The man looked at his shoes, nodded and let him in.

“You’ll have to sleep on the floor”, he said. “I’ve only got one bed.”

The old man nodded. In a corner of the container a stove made from a metal barrel rumbled. The old man stared at it as if hypnotized. He felt the rush of hot air on his face; the heat that had run away from him for so long in his dreams was real this time.

“Made it myself,” the man said.

“Are you the guardian?”

“Yes. I’m guarding the construction site. Work starts again in the spring.”

“I’m hungry. I’ve been on a pilgrimage to Stolnik. I lost my bag of food in the mountains.” the old man said. “My son ails.”

The man pointed at the table, at a piece of bread and an open can.

“This is all I have,” he said. “Help yourself!”

The old man sat in the chair, crossed himself, and began to eat.

“How long have you been travelling?” the man asked.

“I don’t know. Fifteen days. I had a dog, too.”

“Where’s it now?”

“He was attacked by other dogs. You were in the war?” the old man asked, pointing to the man’s vest.

“I was. And you?”

The old man pulled a veteran’s card from his pocket and handed it to the man. He looked at it carefully.

“Well, you’ve done your share,” he said, and handed it back to him.

“It’s snowing up on the mountain. And it’s cold,” said the old man.

The man nodded, went to the stove, opened the door, and added two logs to its glowing belly.

“What should I do with this?” the old man asked, showing the empty can.

“Leave it on the table. I’ll throw it away tomorrow morning. I keep the trash away from the container, because of the animals.”

"Do you get them here?"

"Yes. Saw a bear once. Rummaging in the trash."

"What are they building here?" the old man asked. "A factory?"

"No. A church."

"Here in the woods?!"

"Yes. There was a decisive battle for the Third Republic in the Second War here. Many people died. Do you remember the Second War?"

"Yes. I was ten when it ended."

"I can show you the foundations of the church if you want."

"Won't that get you into trouble?"

"No. No one will know."

"Okay, then I'd love to see it," the old man said.

The man took his torch and they went outside. They walked under the ramp, then waded through the mud, leaving deep footprints in it. They followed the yellow circle of light from the man's lamp.

"The Colonel led our men in that battle," the man said at one point.

They arrived and stopped a few feet from the foundations. The light from the man's lamp danced on the massive concrete shell.

"Have you seen?" the man asked.

"I have," said the old man, and then, following their own footprints in the mud, they returned to the container.

"When are you leaving?" the man asked. "What time?"

"Early in the morning, at dawn."

"I have a watch; I can wind it up if you want"

"No need. I wake up early. I'll be awake at that time anyway," the old man said.

The man went outside and soon returned carrying two pieces of polystyrene in his hands.

"Sleep on this," he said, putting them on the ground. "It's softer than the floor."

The old man placed the pieces of polystyrene side by side, and lay down on them. The man went to the lamp and blew it out. Then he reached his bed in the dark and lay on it.

The old man sank into a deep sleep. For the briefest moment he heard the wind howling through the treetops, then everything disappeared, and soon the wind moved from reality into his dreams.

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