

Zoran Pilić

**The World Before You**  
(Svijet prije tebe)

Novel

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Zoran Pilić  
**SVIJET PRIJE TEBE**



**FRAKTURA**

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# Book One



## MY STORY

It would best and fairest if I had made a note every single day, at least two or three pointless words, but unfortunately this was not possible. Maybe someone managed to do this, I don't know, but even if they did - I've never heard of it, saw it or read anything the like. So even if I had a lifelong scribe by my side, again I wouldn't be able to tackle the demands of time, as things always fall through and, fear not, something would have already twisted and turned to disturb my plans.

It turns out that living and writing about life isn't possible at the same time. Only after a good solid part of the road is behind you and you stop for a moment to take a look back, unbelieving how many long years have passed, only when you slow down and time frenziedly speeds up just to spite you, can you resort to unreliable and deceptive memory to chew things over and prepare for the final showdown.

It's pointless, I'm afraid, but then again, I can't be a reliable judge of that.

## THE LAST SUNDAY, THE LAST DAY IN AUGUST 1975

I don't know if Marion said *It is what it is, it happens* or *shit happens*, but she says that inside while angel Daniel listens to her thoughts and yes - it's not always as he'd want it to be. Another thing, I grew up in the rural area, in a country living the last of its years. The country was dying, and we were too young to understand what was going on.

The last Sunday, the last day in August 1975 I was playing mini-football with the Vlašić brothers. Trust me - those weren't some friendly, casual and carefree

matches. We played to 12, obeying strict rules and the score was definitely important. Not important, the score was everything. As the youngest, I played with Petar – the oldest of the Vlašić boys. Ten-year-old Dario and a year younger Saša didn't stand a chance. Sunday after Sunday they resisted me more and more, but nevertheless they couldn't come nearer than three goals less. The entire summer they suffered painful defeats and Petar's brutal mockery after each game.

This is what it's all about: Petar was unbeatable. Not only at football, you couldn't beat him at anything. Something always made him terribly motivated and he turned every game into a bloodthirsty war. The madness consequently infected me too. You have to do your best, he'd tell me before each game, if you're not ready tell me straight away – I'm not ready, I don't feel like playing and that's it.

"I'm ready," I used to say.

"One hundred per cent?"

"One hundred per cent."

"Okay then, and now we break them into pieces."

Such statements sounded both terrible and attractive at the same time. The people standing on the other side of the field were his brothers – they were the ones to *broken into pieces*. Nevertheless, I played giving it my best, convinced I had to keep my promise. Otherwise – Petar would make fun of me the way he made fun of Dario and Saša. And everyone else who deserved it one way or the other.

The summer before, in 1974, the World Cup took place in Germany. Yugoslavia had the honour of playing the first game at the championship, against Brazil, no less – the reigning world champions. The game scored 0-0 and everyone logically celebrated this as a huge success, even portending Yugoslavia might reach the big finals this year. Petar was the only disappointed one. They didn't try hard enough, he explained, you're playing against the best – you need to play the best you can, not score zero. He wasn't even impressed by the 9-0 against Zaire, and after three defeats in stage two and the sorry fallout, he just said: "I knew it."

My old man, Matjaž Nachbar – called by the locals from a small village in Slavonia comrade Mata or professor, called me from our yard, but the last game of the summer of '75 was reaching its peak. At a 10-8 score the two younger Vlašić brothers were dominating the field. They charged like wasps to reduce the difference, maybe even to settle it at 10-10.

"Off you go now," said Petar and I ran as fast as I could.

I only managed to stop and turn around and the ball was falling towards me from the sky like a falling star. In a trained movement I stood on it to calm it down and sent it off into the unkept goal: 11-8!

"Edi, my son!" my old man was standing by the railing, "come at once, please."

“I’m playing, I’ll be there in a minute.”

Dario and Saša lost hope and stopped burning for it. As soon as with the next charge, Petar calmly passed them by and scored for victory.

He gave me hug and said: “We broke them mentally!”

“We sure did,” I laughed, although I didn’t have the vaguest idea what it meant to break someone mentally.

Walking to my father who would grab me and carry me over the railing, I felt a strange mixture of joy and sorrow. Something is over and it is never coming back. That ‘something’ wasn’t just the game and summer, an entire period of my life is over, tomorrow I start school and everything will change.

Panting and with a sweaty forehead I followed my old man to the workshop, supposing it could have been a time machine which he, Matjaž – a high school math and physics teacher, was trying to perfect for years, spending almost every moment of his free time on this project.

## ŽO THE CAT AND THE TIME MACHINE

The previous summer, while normal people followed the World Cup in Germany, the third version of NACHBAR 73 or *The Shame of the Century*, as my mother heartlessly called it, was done. The machine, as I remember, looked like a two-piece steel closet installed in a spacious bathtub on wheels lying on a complicated roller system. NACHBAR 73-03 remained immortalised as the first that managed to take a living being on an amazing journey through time. So-called instruments illustrated with great precision that the *time traveller*, Žo the cat, went six minutes back. My old man was beside himself.

Histrionically raising his arms and visibly enthused, passing this enthusiasm on me, he exclaimed: “Please allow me to introduce the first time traveller in known history...” and with one brief motion he drew the curtain dividing the long room into two – the ordinary first part, similar to any other workshop, and the other, secret part, with NACHBAR 73 and everything related to the time travel project.

Žo the fat cat was lying on a pile of sketches by the dashboard, licking his paw and then devotedly rubbing it against his ears and nose. My old man claimed that Žo had just travelled six minutes to the past and, as we can see – returned unharmed to the present. Mom was standing with her arms crossed and blankly staring at my father and Žo.

“Six minutes?”

“Oh yes, Vjeročka – six minutes!”

“Even if it were so, by some stretch of imagination, six minutes is nothing...”

“How could it be nothing,” my old man wailed, “don’t say that, this is a historic day, the first leg of a journey that can take us hundreds, maybe even thousands of years to the past or far to the future!”

“Matjaž, your head’s in the clouds, you’re living in a fantasy. No one can travel through time, nor ever will. It’s nonsense, but let’s assume Žo did...”

“Oh he did indeed. Facts!”

“The cat doesn’t have a clue that he went six minutes to the past, just like I wouldn’t. It was... just a while ago, man.”

Mom shook her head, turned and went inside the house, and my father just gazed at her sadly. He sighed quietly, then he asked me if I believed. I came close to the cat, caressed him and said – yes, I believe you. I had no proof whatsoever, nor did I understand where Žo exactly went, what he saw and how he came back. I believed, because it was important to my old man and because he believed so madly or wanted to believe. Soon, in one of the upcoming experiments, my old man decided to send Žo to the future and this turned into a total mess. From this journey the cat never returned.

“Here kitty, kitty, kitty,” I called him and looked everywhere.

In vain. Finally, I sat on the stairs and cried bitter tears imagining Žo wandering around the cruel landscapes of the future in which, as I saw it, mice were twice as big as cats, and the entire world was in ruins.

“See the trouble you’re making? Where’s Žo, you wretched man? Don’t cry, little mouse, don’t cry,” my Mom kept scratching me gently on the head, eyeing my father like bolts of lightning.

“Don’t call me ‘little mouse’...” I whispered through tears, trying to keep away a mental image of gigantic rats.

My old man kept walking to and fro, running his fingers through his hair: “I don’t understand I simply don’t understand...,” he kept repeating.

“Edi, my boy, Žo is alive, he’s just not in our temporal equilibrium. We’ll get another cat, won’t we?”

“No,” I blurted.

I couldn’t even imagine another animal replacing our black and white cat Žo. The fat, moody predator was more than a pet, he was a good friend and his bizarre disappearance deeply saddened me. From that day forward I didn’t want to hear a thing about the time machine. I visited the workshop on rare occasions only.



## THE BOMB

So, my old man performed that crazy ‘experiment’ with the cat and probably scared the poor animal to death. We looked for him and waited, but somewhere deep down my sensitive and compassionate child’s soul I knew we wouldn’t see Žo again. I cried rivers, thinking this feeling would never pass, I pined and pines, but finally I came to terms with the loss.

A year later, on the last day of August ’75, the day before I would start school and a few minutes before yet another victory, my old man took me to the workshop and sat me down on a bench.

School starts tomorrow, he commenced and continued gravely, and Mom was standing aside like she wanted no part of it, holding a cardboard box. However, the moment my old man said ‘you are no longer a child’, she had to react. You can’t say ‘you are no longer a child’ to a child. Then he came to the point.

“Edi, my boy, there’s no reason why we should keep matters secret from you. You have a right to know the truth. See, your mother and I love you, but we are not your real, biological parents.”

He could have just as well dropped a bomb in the yard. The impact would be the same. I was sitting on the bench with my mouth open, and even if something came to my mind, I was lost for words. I think I couldn’t even grasp what was going on. What my old man was saying simply didn’t fit in the reality. He also added that they didn’t know who my real parents were.

“In fact, we are the only mother and father you have, we take care of you and we love you as if you were our biological son, do you accept that?”

Instead of answering, I glanced over his shoulder. Mom came near me, kissed me on the head and placed the cardboard box in my lap.

“This is your new friend,” she said in a squeaking voice and quickly left the garage.

I was looking at this woman who was not my mother, but *in fact* was, until she crossed the yard and disappeared inside the house. My *in fact* Dad got up in the meantime and lit a pipe.

“Women are very sensitive creature, go ahead, open the box.”

I did as he told me. In the box there was a blue-haired kitten with unusually large ears, looking at me curiously. He was actually grey, but this grey always seemed blue.

## HE WILL LIVE FOREVER IN OUR HEARTS

The seventies were coming to an end and all until they lasted we took them for granted.

It was Labour Day, 1 May 1980, the Vlašićs were roasting a pig in their yard. The adults were standing in a semi-circle, drinking beer from bottles and talking. Saša, Dario and I did penalty shots. Seventeen-year-old Petar was sitting on a bench beneath the lumpy plum tree flipping through *Džuboks* magazine. He no longer played football with us and this was a normal thing. Like all other high schoolers, he was a world of his own, with no room for kids.

Other neighbours dropped by. Conversation heightened, they were discussing whether the pig was done or not. One group said 'it is done, take it off', the other 'no way, at least one more hour'. Beer crates were lined by the house wall. Petar was circling around them slowly and when the right moment came, stole two bottles, hid them in big pockets inside his denim jacket (he probably wore it for the occasion), and moved away like nothing happened. With hands in our pockets we followed him behind an old house with moss-covered roof tiles.

Petar lit a cigarette, opened the bottles, left one for himself and gave the other to us: "Share it fair."

We sipped and frowned. We didn't like the bitter taste of it. Saša gave it up soon. Dario and I pushed ahead, but he squealed something about feeling sick and vomited. Petar told him: "It's nothing, go to the water fountain, splash some water on your face. Just one word to the folks - I'll break your neck."

Cawing loudly as if they were arguing, a flock of crows flew over us. A bit intoxicated from the beer, my eyes followed them, trying to picture the world from their bird's eye, celestial point of view.

Three days later, on Sunday, after lunch, my father was washing the dishes. I was standing next to him, ready to take every washed piece, dry it and put it on the counter. Mom was lying in the darkened living room struggling with migraine, so we tried to make as little noise as possible. The headache periods came in mid-spring and in late summer, every year, like clockwork. She popped pills and lied in a darkened room. Father and I had to leave her be, take care of ourselves and be quiet. We were done with the dishes, we sneaked out and went to the workshop to listen to football match broadcasts on a small radio. As always in the workshop, uninvited, I relived the feeling of the moment when my old man told me - *we're not your real parents*. Since that day I felt like I was living in an invisible bubble. Nothing terrible or nothing that terrible; the world was still here and I was in it, but there was a small inner world I entered whenever I wanted some distance from everything - a reality inside the reality.

Comrade Tito died that Sunday. Tomorrow in school they gathered us in the hall and said: Tito will live forever in our hearts, we'll never stray from his path and the like. In a nice way they spoke about him like any other deceased - we'll always remember him, cherish the memory of him, but we can't bring him back.

This story was over, and with it the last carefree decade in a small town in Slavonia, in all other cities and villages, in the land of peasants in the mountainous Balkans. The next ten years were one big farewell party.

To us, people and nations of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito always represented a guarantee of coexistence. He was the essence of what we called *brotherhood & unity*. All things considered - a very interesting phenomenon. A phenomenon interesting because until this day we cannot agree if this *brotherhood & unity* was something real or we were just pretending for almost fifty years.

#### DINA, A CREATURE FROM ANOTHER GALAXY

We can live and survive all kinds of things, time passes and there's a lot we forget. But her and the day I first saw her I remember as if it were yesterday, and not ages ago.

Dina... she came from some other, bigger town, from the colourful outside world I could only imagine. From day one in eighth grade, when I saw her in front of the school, I couldn't get her out my head. She settled there like a superior creature from another galaxy - her pale face framed with black, straight Indian hair I saw at school and later carried home with me, fantasising about different versions of one and the same incredible scenario in which the two of us stay together until death do us part, because otherwise would be impossible - apart, we would die of sorrow. I lived for days and weeks on daydreaming alone. How could I even approach her? No way. What could I possibly say to her to make her not pass me by like I wasn't there? Nothing. The story I was weaving day after day in the imaginary world couldn't survive in reality, I supposed, so why not try to make it happen? Truth be told, from time to time, I had a suicidal idea - I'll stop her in the hall, right now - during the break and tell her something. So I sat and counted minutes, give me a moment and I'll do it, I braced myself, let the bell ring first - she'll be out her classroom at the end of the hall, I'll hurry from the other side, we'll meet somewhere by the stairwell and it will all be settled in a matter of minutes.

At the first strike of the terrible bell, as if it were Judgment Day, I became weak in the knees and my heart leapt from too much excitement, I lowered my head and dragged myself in the yard without even looking at her. There isn't

a thing I can do, I comforted myself, it's better this way, so much better. I survived.

Another year was over, winter holidays began and somehow it dawned on me - surviving is no longer enough.

## RAGING BULL

It's hard to be in love, it's hard for a grown-up, let alone for an adolescent, a child whose heart yet needs to take the first blows. Speaking of being in love, a state which, in all honesty, conflicts the mind as well, consequences can be drastic and it's hard not to remember Daniel who, flown on the wings of the feeling, for Marion, plunged to mortality.

No more snow, he says, only winters. And back then winters were still winters. Temperature stayed deep below zero for days, the layers of pure white snow covered the ground, rooftops and trees, frozen water masses turned into skating rinks and the world, thus angelically cloaked, reminded of Russian fairy tales and old Christmas and New Year's cards. Did we even have Christmas cards back then? We had New Year's, I know that, but about Christmas cards I'm not exactly sure.

One such winter evening I was hurrying to the movies. There was only one cinema in town and for days all screenings were *Raging Bull* - a film about the life of Jake LaMotta, the legendary Bronx boxer who even beat Sugar Ray Robinson. From afar I realised there was no one in front of the cinema and I assumed I'd have to turn and walk away. And so it was - on the small box office window a sign said: SOLD OUT. Five minutes before the screening everyone was settled in the warm auditorium. Even the ticket resellers were nowhere in sight. They too already sold out their twice as expensive tickets.

More disappointed than angry, I jolted the doors a bit more energetically and together with them dragged her - Dina - to the lobby. She was standing there wrapped in a black coat, not even a step away from me, like a chimera appearing at the end of the story, saving yet another day from oblivion.

"No tickets?"

"No..."

"Fuck," cursed the prettiest girl of all times and the steam from her mouth mixed with mine. "Now what?"

For the first time in my life the stars in the endless universe aligned to make everything look possible. I felt like I possessed supernatural powers, for a moment

I regained my speech which, under normal circumstances, if I was just my usual confused self, would be simply unthinkable.

“We can go get some tea,” I suggested.

“With rum?”

“Tea with rum, yeah,” I added automatically like rum went without saying.

## JOHN BOHNAM AND WHAT I’M THINKING OF

A few months or a year later at least a dozen bars would spring across town, but on this cold January night near the Slavija cinema there were only two places that served tea with rum – Hari’s chevap restaurant and Pandora, a small café which served cream pies and lemonade since last summer, and it was not called Pandora but Dubrovnik Pastry Shop. Why would someone in the middle of Slavonia call a pastry shop, or anything else, for that matter, Dubrovnik is still beyond me. As it happens, no one called Pandora by the new name – everyone still said: let’s go to Dubrovnik, or I’ll see you in Dubrovnik.

Without much thinking, Dina and I set out across the empty square towards the red lights of Dubrovnik and when, somewhere halfway there, she took my arm, my heart stopped beating. There was silence in my chest and it took a while for the machine to restart: ti-dum, ti-dum... like John Bohnam’s double bass drum. Instead of one, two hearts were beating there.

We made our way to the counter, took teas with rum, slid between the faces under dim red light and sat at a table in the corner. I remembered her face, her long fingers whose shadows on the wall turned into birds.

She was the only child of a high rank captain, a Sarajevo native, her mother left and she didn’t want to talk about her. They lived in Novi Sad for five years, before that in Pula and that was why she found it hard to make friends. When her old man finally settles in some other town, she’ll be all grown up, she says, and start a life of her own. She finds my last name funny.

“How do you spell that?” she asked.

“N-A-C-H-B-A-R, neighbour in German.”

“Neighbour!”

“That’s right.”

My grandfather, my father’s father I was named after, I explain, is Slovenian, from somewhere near Maribor. After the war he moved to Zagreb. Retelling my family history details, I was entirely aware that I was only an adjunct, accidental member of the Nachbar family. I kept quiet about that, ashamed that my real

parents left me in the lobby of St Peter's Church in Zagreb like a bag of old worn out clothes.

She took out her cigarettes, an orange pack of Lara with a girl of a dreamy gaze. She offered me one, I took it and lit, without inhaling – this was my first cigarette ever. People came, more and more of them, said hello kissing on the cheeks, laughter and loud talk came from all over the place. A man from the crowd, a skinny bearded guy in an unbuttoned shirt, closed his eyes, opened his arms and started turning. All of a sudden she asks me what I'm thinking of.

"I can't say."

"Well, fucking say it."

"I really can't, that is – I'm able to."

"Is it that bad?"

"It's not bad."

"Is it at least good, what you're thinking of?"

"Yes..."

"Okay then, then I know generally."

The guy who was turning like a merry-go-round lost his balance and fell on one of the crews gathering on the edge of his imaginary circle and they pushed him away. Disappointed and drunk, he staggered over to us. He squinted in the dim room and peered in our faces: "You guy couldn't care less, right?"

I nodded like I agreed with him completely and the guy, satisfied again, charged away.

## WORST CASE SCENARIO

I thought, or naively hoped, our chance encounter by way of some logic or justice might soon turn into something – because if we met once, we could do it again, and then, over time, a strong connection will arise. Not gonna happen.

Early on in the summer Dina disappeared, just like that, without a word. After that chance tea with rum in January, our relationship hasn't made much progress. We went to the movies two or three times, we met sometimes during breaks, had a Lara smoke and that was it pretty much. I guess I didn't get under her skin. Before long I started seeing her in the company of high schoolers led by a skinny, long-haired guy with a bunch of tiny badges on his jacket. The guy dangled while walking and wore a bright red bandana – soon everyone from his crowd started copycatting him, including Dina, so they all dangled like this entire piece of Slavonia was their principality.

I didn't know what to think. All of a sudden she had a bunch of friends and

I was killing time with Matija, who had a theory for every situation, for everything happening to us.

“See,” he explained, “you’re in the friend zone with this girl.”

He explained it all to the wretched little me, point by point. First, I didn’t even realise what actually happened, but he had it all clear and, he says, he was warning me – I shouldn’t have let her drag me into the friend zone. It was actually worse than that. I managed to become something like a brother she doesn’t even have to hang out with, and that’s the worst possible scenario. Am I aware of that? Well, it’s kind of dawning on me. You’re left with only one thing – ignore her and when autumn comes, when everyone returns, start all over again.

He never actually said so, but between the lines Matija made it clear that he believed that the *ignore method*, later spread, used and abused and all over the place – was invented by none other than him in the early eighties.

“Ignore her? Whatever for?”

He patiently explained that I would that way camouflage the fact that I was in love; this should never be so obvious – which was not the case with me. Otherwise I’d be a done deal for Dina. In the best case scenario she’ll put me on the backup list and screw around.

Matija, as wise as himself, didn’t even try to approach girls. That way he eliminated any chance of failure. I only play safe, he said, whatever that meant. It was hard that summer and to refocus something had to be done.

## THE BEST THEORETICAL HEAVY METAL BAND IN TOWN’S HISTORY

Out of the blue, early that summer Matija suggested we make a band and immediately appointed roles. To himself he selflessly assigned the most demanding part – vocal and guitar solo, to me the bass guitar and for the drums we’ll get his old friend Ce, also the son of Slavija cinema’s manager.

Ce said yeas and immediately warned us: “Fine, but only the toughest metal and no light stuff, fuck the ballads, I’ve no interest in that in life.”

Matija and I, also righteous metal fans, agreed on the direction we’re supposed to take, however, not on the complete lack of ballads in our repertoire.

“Man, we need to have one or two light pieces per album, for the ladies,” explained Matija.

“Yes, we need,” I backed him up, “no doubt about that, without love songs it doesn’t work.”

However, Ce didn’t want to hear it, referring to Motörhead as an example of a three-member band we should look up to. As big fans of Lenny Kilmister, we

had to budge. We didn't have instruments, nor any of us could play, but we had a band and a clear developmental direction.

Again I'll put the cart before the horse and say – The Taras Buljba Trio remained eternalised as the best theoretical heavy metal band in the town history. We lasted four years, until the end of high school days when we, on someone else's instruments, had our first and last performance. The most bizarre or the most beautiful thing of all was the fact that our peers, fellow musicians, even older people, respected us. No one asked seemingly logical questions like – what kind of a band are you if you're not even playing? Or – hello, where are your instruments?

The Taras Buljba Trio definitely existed and this was an irrefutable fact. The fact that we didn't play or possessed instruments of any description wasn't taken against us.

## WRITING LYRICS

It wasn't hard keeping alive the common dream of a career in music. At length we discussed details, designed our image, album covers, song titles. Ce designed a simple but memorable logo – TBT, we discussed the band's future and the like. That famous and humid summer of 1982, or was it already 1984 – don't hold me to it – I made a name for myself as a lyrics author. Instead of tedious and futile fantasies of Dina which just made me passive, dissatisfied and pointlessly wistful anyway – what sense does it make to mourn a relationship that never happened – I wrote the song *They're Coming*.

*They* were spirits of the terrible Cossacks. They rose from their graves and in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century went on a rampage turning all the European peoples into one and only heavy metal nation. The song had 12 stanzas and all by itself it would take the entire A side of the record. Matija and Ce read this epic on zombie Cossacks in solemn silence.

Matija said: "This is the best heavy metal song in history, right, man?"

"Awesome, man, just awesome," confirmed Ce and it was really a good song.

They encouraged me and convinced me to go on in that style and in ten days' time I wrote five more songs and as far as I remember – they all spoke in one way or the other about the terrible Cossacks. The first conceptual album of The Taras Buljba Trio was thus completed. Too bad we never recorded it.



## ALL BLACK

Just as suddenly as she disappeared, Dina came back. On the first day of the new academic year she was standing in front of the old high school building, surrounded by tall, silent pine trees. Even before I turned and spotted her in the crowd, I sensed her presence just like an experienced Jedi senses the slightest changes in the field of *Force*.

At that age we changed rapidly. Only three months have passed and she grew up to become a real beauty: there was one purple wisp in her black hair, her features were somehow softer, her movements more feminine, she smiled more and talked to others. I don't know if others saw it too, but I was sure of one thing - it'll be very hard to ignore her.

Of course, I changed too. I stretched like the magical bean stem, I grew my hair and started wearing black. The clothes thing was at first an expression of belonging to the heavy metal tribe, but it will accompany me in the future - a time with no tribe I'd wish to belong to.

There is a saying, a belief, whatever: if you keep wearing black - the angels won't see you. Not true, if they want to see you - no black can hide it.

## SONJA

Around the same time we formed and started to develop TBT, events on the local music scene got heated like never before. Someone up there, in the system's control towers, seemed to have unscrewed all the valves and creative energy exploded all over the place. In the newly built recreation centre concerts started to take place and immediately after New Year Azra came. We were all there - Matija, Ce and me, the girls we were in love with with their entire crews, the girls we weren't in love with but we liked with their entire crews, the whole town gathered.

At that concert Sonja happened. If we had to make a list of ten most important events and people in my current life - Matija's two years older cousin would probably be on both lists.

It is well known how this happens, in a small town not only that a history of every love or affair is known, but also there are usually several versions of that history. However, no gossip circulated about Sonja and me, especially in the first months of this strange and to me unexpected relationship. We weren't exactly dating - even when we showed up at a party at her friend's a few months later,

we didn't seem like we were in a relationship - we never talked about this or explained it at length. I don't know why, but when I look back at the period, I think we acted more like lovers.

Such mysteriousness was nothing out of the ordinary. Quite the contrary - as soon as someone's relationship came out, customs had it, probably still today, that the couple share their story with friends and not superficially, but in detail. When did you meet? Where? Who came to whom? There was an entire list of questions and the two of us acted like movie stars strictly protecting our privacy. Nevertheless, with a small delay the news spread across the high schools at a speed of light and soon in the entire town. In all honesty, Matija and Ce were probably the point zero of the rumours.

One day Dina bumped into me in town and said hello like we only saw each other yesterday.

"How are you, what's up?"

"Nothing much, how about you?"

"Nothing special."

"You weren't in town for the summer."

"I was at my family's place in Sarajevo. My old man came alter, then he and my grandma, as per usual, fell out over his booze. You have a girlfriend, I hear?"

"Oh well..."

"Two years older?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Nothing, I just didn't know you like older women. But listen, we should meet up, okay?"

"Fine."

She pecked me on the cheek and left. I found that odd, given that she wasn't showing any interest in me at all for months.

## RUST-COLOURED WORLD

Sonja was living in the renovated attic of Matija's parents' house. She had a separate entrance and much more freedom than Matija, who was at constant war with his folks over going out and other stuff. Her parents worked in Germany and left her with her cousins for the school.

I frequented her *chambers*, as we called her attic, always making sure I wasn't seen by Matija's parents, which wasn't particularly hard. They had a life of their own and no one kept watch protecting her from intruders. Sonja was an outgoing, fun girl. On the one hand I was still thinking about Dina, I wouldn't call it being

in love, it was being in love mixed with bitterness. Something like having feelings for an imaginary girl. On the other hand there was Sonja, a real person, a girl whose existence was undoubted. With her everything was different, pure fantasies quickly grew into a stunningly realistic experience. In such a relationship I was equally important, which was a definite improvement in relation to my situation with Dina where I had to accept the role of a charity case fan. At first glance, no dilemma at all. With one of them I had it all, with the other - very little, almost nothing.

When Dina stopped me and suggested we meet out of the blue, I wondered - where did this come from? I found it hard to understand the lavish, coded language women sometimes use and I think I've never been able to fully grasp it. Somehow I had a feeling all this, her sudden interest in talking to me, was related to the fact that I was in a relationship.

I was thinking whether I should mention to Sonja that I am supposed to meet with Dina and finally came to a conclusion that this was not the smartest of ideas. I'll do it, I decided, and went to Kutija - one of the recently opened bars in town. I waited half an hour, took a walk, came back, played two pools matches with three older guys I knew by sight, but she didn't show up. Feeling stood up, I slowly walked home and thought whether I should call her or wait for her to call me and explain her no-show.

The town was already sinking into dusk. Somewhere around the high school building, whose windows look dead after yet another academic year, before taking a turn in my alley, I felt a sudden chill which, I knew, had nothing to do with Dina. For a moment the world around me was coloured rust and then it came back to normal - kids were playing football by the road, someone kicked the ball so forcefully it rolled to the road beside me. I kicked it ball impulsively and walked on. From afar I saw my mother in front of the house. She started walking slowly towards me and this was definitely unusual, I didn't get this kind of welcome wagon since I started school. I stood and waited.

She unfurled her crossed arms and removed the hair from my face.

"Petar got killed..."

## ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE

That sundown when the world for a moment cloaked itself in rust is something I remember as vividly as the funeral which, it appeared, hosted anything that walked. It's always like that when young people die, those who have their whole lives in front of them, as they say. This was the first death I had to face. Petar

died under the wheels of a night tram in Sarajevo where he lived and studied for five or six years now. The tragic accident took place at the early hours – that was the official version, but no one who knew Petar believed this story. There was something missing. What exactly happened, it was never found out. Finally, whatever happened – it’s done, overgrown by the weeds of time and he is not coming back. I felt like I lost an older brother, I grew up with him and somehow it was hard to believe we wouldn’t see him again.

Death is, I later realised, the most natural and normal occurrence, because anything that lives, that lived or will ever live is destined to die. A real unexplainable miracle is life.

The same day I was supposed to meet Dina, but her old man was brought home as drunk as a skunk and laid on the bed. The apartment door was wide open, the keys weren’t in the lock and inside – in the apartment – it reeked like hell. She had never seen him like that before. He was lying in a wrinkled uniform, she took off his jacket and shoes and turned him on the side. Otherwise he was a sad, dejected weekend drinker, but now he apparently delved into something else, something she couldn’t cope with. At some point she heard him in the kitchen, but all she wanted to say to him vanished. In the morning they were silent for that half an hour, upon leaving he said – it’ll all be alright. No, she realised, it’ll be the way it is, a bit worse by the day.

A few days after the funeral she called me over. Her old man was on call during the weekend, so we spent the entire day alone, ate, she told me everything about the situation she was in, then we listened to *An American Prayer*, kissed since *Angels and Sailors* to the end of the record and suddenly it all went quiet. After a while I put my hand on her shoulder and asked her if she was alright.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Do you want me to go?”

This was another hard question. She couldn’t say yes or no to anything. I waited a little longer then said: “Well, I’m off then.”

I wanted her to say – no, stay, I can’t be left alone, it’ll make me feel bad. Finally, she got to me by the door and gave me *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. You don’t have to return it, she said, talk to you tomorrow.

## KARMA IS AN OLD BITCH

I remember it well, I left Márquez’s novel on a bookshelf. The title immediately etched in my memory. I read it the first time a month later, in a desolate town when, one after the other, both Dina and Sonja went far away. Sonja moved to

Augsburg with her family and this happened all of a sudden, out of the blue, without even being asked for an opinion. Dina had to go with her father when he was reassigned – to Karlovac. He could have just as well be sent to Siberia; there was nothing to be done. Before leaving, Dina threw a farewell party.

Unfortunately, that evening too remained etched in my memory. We were in town, and the two of them, Matija and Ce, wanted to get to the party as soon as possible, but I kept postponing it. I didn't want us to be the first to arrive and so we definitely the last to arrive. It was already packed, Dina's friends and her friends' friends mostly – a psychedelic hippie crowd with long hair, with their Dylans and Floyds and other Woodstock shit. Things got out of hand, people came and went like this was a train station. We made our way in, the windows were wide open, but the smoke was still so thick you couldn't breathe. We scattered forward, in desert and wilderness, as though we were sailing the Mekong delta to colonel Kurtz and his painted-face slaughterers. We entered another, smaller room, and there in the corner was an old skinny hairy guy with Dina on his lap. I looked at them, turned and walked out. Not that I didn't deserve this, but karma is an old bitch.

For a while I had a nice time, I was with Sonja, had the same thing going on with Dina, and now I'm again at point zero.

## EMBERS BENEATH THE ASHES

Like I couldn't know that Márquez's novel will be the only thing I'll have by my side all until I reach the end of the world alone, I didn't think about solitude, nor was I aware of it back then. Solitude, later I realised, is not a curse, but a matter of choice. I built the walls between me and the world on my own and on my own I charged through them.

In 1969 my parents, the people who adopted me from the nun's orphanage, moved to Slavonia from Zagreb, replacing a small and derelict apartment with a spacious house with a yard, a garage and a small garden. I think they never told me the whole truth about the real reasons why they moved from the big city to the province. It was a good opportunity – that was the official version. My mother Vjeročka, a history teacher, surrendered to the tedious but comfortable small town daily life. My father finally got a space to work unhindered on his time travel project and I, the associate member, grew up in the world which was, since I knew of none other, more mine than theirs.

My mother, at least at the beginning, launched actions. She turned the living room into a library and the books which in Zagreb, at least most of them, had to

be kept in the attic, could now be arranged on shelves. With her colleagues from work she had good contacts, which didn't require much effort and trouble - they were mostly normal, kind and sociable people ready to leave you alone if you insisted. We the children were raised and taken care of by everyone and this was something I particularly liked - every adult person in the neighbourhood kept an eye on the kids who found themselves at a certain point under their jurisdiction. The neighbours' kids were treated like your own and this worked perfectly. Even when the adults argued over something and practiced mutual ignoring - this didn't refer to children. That first year, approximately until the end of the seventies, were the best time of my mother's life. Suddenly, without no particular reason, she started to sink into something grey - an unpopulated land where light hardly ever penetrates.

My first two to two and a half years in high school Mom was more at home than in school. she learned to live with headaches, they occurred at regular intervals, in spring and autumn, and she bore them patiently, welcomed and bid farewell to, just like people in some parts of the world wait and send off every new hurricane season.

Dejection was something new, some kind of general sorrow she couldn't overcome. She faded away - not quite, she went quiet and flickered like embers in the ashes, and then this spread onto the entire house. I was suddenly in the middle of that silence, between two totems who, each on their own side, await the final collapse. Ma father simply drifted into a cul-de-sac of his long obsession and, I realised, he would stay there and this was not debatable. It was different with Mom, in her new state I recognised something familiar, something close. At times when she lingered around the house like a ghost I was her only connection with the world. In my treatment of her she could never see or sense any judgment, wonder or impatience.

You grew up over night, she once told me and, the saddest thing of all - you grew with no one's help. Or at least that was how it seemed to her. Something she came out of the shell and talk to me. She felt a need to tell me important things - unembellished truths no one else could tell me because they are usually unspoken about.

One day you will leave this town, she said, and when this happens - don't come back, just keep on. The saddest thing of all is to quit, to anchor in a single spot and wait for your last days. She spoke about growing old - the time of regret and bitterness, love and everything it gives and takes away, family which in its nature falls apart because children leave. She talked quietly, but without stopping and very convincingly accentuating one thing - the futility of life, the life she

lived. Don't compromise, she said in the end, move away from anything that shackles you, move, movement is life.

I remembered every word.

Some time early in 1986 she came back to work and after a long isolation she could again function among people. However, she distanced herself from me, as if my very nearness reminded her of this ugly period and the things she told me and which in normal circumstances would never cross her lips.

## TBT AND NOISE PRODUCTION

So it turned out - instead of studying, Sonja went to her folks in Germany. Only a week later Dina's father was reassigned. I survived and, expectedly, it made an impact, but by that point I could already handle blows. I did learn something - everything what happens forms a sediment on the heart, turning it into an almost indestructible coral reef composed of a million small limpets, the shit life brings.

I think the real problem was the fact that everything seemed bigger and more complicated. You overtire yourself emotionally and mentally and you can't openly show it, instead you repress things, you keep it all inside and hope it will somehow pass. In the meantime you do other things, something creative - I wrote three new songs which, had our ambitions ever taken that direction, would undoubtedly find their place on TBT's second album.

Matija got a second hand guitar from somewhere and learned a few chords. Ce and I didn't have instruments of our own, but at that time - some five months before the end of high school, there was quite a number of young bands in town and some were already doing serious rehearsing. There were The Šušumige - a rockabilly quartet headlined by Ce's cousin. They lent us instruments and a room where we rehearsed every single day. After extensive planning, talking, fantasising and imagining, we were finally there. In a claustrophobic basement with egg boxes on walls, filled with instruments, mute, real and somewhat horrific. Ce took the drums, caressed the cymbals, then took the sticks and waited for Matija and me to take our spots.

We rehearsed for three or four hours every day, we tried to get the hang of it, catch the rhythm. Even after two weeks things were simply not right - Matija proved to be the weakest link. Observing the two of us making fairly decent noise, our frontman sank more and more into resentment, failing to keep up with us.

"Try without singing," Ce suggested.

"What sense does this make, I have to sing."

I also encouraged him: “Fuck the singing, play.”

Focusing only on the guitar, at moments he was able to join our already heated rhythm section. Slowly, bit by bit, he found a space of his own, forgetting about the microphone. In theory, i.e. in our heads, The Taras Buljba Trio grew up in a powerful heavy metal band. In reality, all this seemed significantly poorer, but there was progress and if we persisted, hell knows, one day maybe we might dare to perform in front of people.

That was how we felt and it was good.

## LA MANO DE DIOS

I didn't give up football, here and there I played a match or two, but only not to lose the feeling. In June 1986 the football world moved to Mexico. Nothing could stop the big show, not even the devastating earthquake before the championship. I remembered the 13<sup>th</sup> World Cup, like many others, by Maradona who took Argentina to the finals and victory over Germans. The crucial event took place on 22 June at the Azteca stadium before 115,000 people. In the quarter finals Argentina got the opponent it wanted - Lineker's England. The match began at noon in torrid heat and after a real struggle in the first half and the Englishmen's rough approach, in only five minutes two most famous goals in the history of World Cup were scored. But orchestrated by Diego Armando Maradona - the first was scored by hand and Maradona himself later described this event as *God's hand* or *La Mano de Dios* and the second, the most beautiful one, when he dribbled the entire Albion team like he was just screwing around and sent the ball to the goal passing by the helpless Shilton.

From a tedious Slavonian province, Mexico seemed unrealistically far away that summer.

## CRACKS

In a void between the summer of 1986 and early in 1987, with the first rehearsals in the young rockabillicies' basement, sleep deprivation reared its head again. I was sleeping normally and around that time it started slowly to dissipate. In less than half a year I lost three hours of sleep. Instead of weakness and fatigue, I felt rested. I got a few extra hours and in the beginning I didn't know what to do with all this time.



I took books from my mother's library and read. After *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the town library I looked out for other Latin American writers. Somewhere around that time two editions of five novels were published: Sabato, Cortázar, Roa Bastos, Llosa, Onetti, Puig, Donoso, Carpentier and finally Fuentes. *Terra Nostra* seemed like twelve hundred pages of serious hallucination.

With sharpened senses I observed the world around me, noting all those tiny details I would otherwise miss. In every single fragment I detected beauty, but when I formed a puzzle, I could see cracks and the grinning death mask – the world is falling apart, it rots, crumbles beneath my feet and disappears. As long as this process lasts – it's irrelevant, because this star is slowly and relentlessly fading, the loves of the ones I know or will ever know are as meaningless as my own. It is quite irrelevant how I – a speck of dust – will spend my last days. Is it possible that I always somehow knew or at least senses it – did the other then know it too? In some form, visible or invisible, this information is encoded in the essence of every living speck of dust. Perhaps we were told this, but limited and blinded by our lives and ourselves as we are, we cannot hear what they are saying.

This is a one-way trip – whisper the Easter Island heads, José Arcadio Buendía and Ursula Iguarán, whisper Jack Torrance, Travis Bickle and the giant from Nazco, but we cannot hear them. There are good reasons for that – we are too low, we float on the lower levels, very rarely lifting up high to the spheres populated by superheroes and gods.

At dawn, while the world still sleeps, I'm trying to read *Black Spring*, finish at least the first page, but I can't focus. Images whirl in my mind, in the chaos I discern sequences from my early childhood – and almost each and every one of those images might just as well be sticker, each for an album of its own, categorised by season, drenched in summer. For the autumn or winter scenes I'd have to delve deeper into my memory. I made myself stop and I crushed this entire summer hurricane, I closed my eyes and took a step into that inner circle. True, bad guys hinder me – Joker and Green Goblin mostly – so I need to take unbeaten off paths. I will come down to the bottom of the canyon and then take a narrow, steep trail all the way to the top on the other side. I stop at the very edge of the cliff – the road to darkness would take forever and that's why I give up. In the real, outside world, the night evolves into dawn, it is always dusky inside, and there on the edge of two worlds, in brief flashes I can see the town. It is the same town, only in another time – the streets are empty, the windows are broken and a bit further, instead of familiar houses, scattered fire scenes.

I opened my eyes and sat at the edge of the bed. Once, in distant future, when I'll be long gone, the shell of the world I know will crack and this same spot will

breed chaos. The same might happen on the streets of Paris, Rio de Janeiro or Prague, devastations are possible everywhere, but I saw only a small part of it – the burned down town I grew up in.

## WENDERS'S ANGELS

It would be for the best, I gathered, to stay awake as long as possible. I'll impose a new routine on myself and thus sleep over the sunrises I started to shun away from. I stayed out late, alone or with others, most often with Matija. Ce in the meantime found a girlfriend and spent most of his time with her. We saw him at school and in rehearsals, but he no longer went out with us and Matija found this terribly annoying.

“She is making a fool out of him,” he said, “he has changed, grown softer.”

“He hasn't changed, what you see – that's being in love, nothing terrible.”

“I'm not blind, he is a different man. He is not living his life, he is living hers. Marina is changing him the way she feels like. He listens to Depeche Mode, what the hell is that, electronics?”

I don't know if it's still that way, but in the eighties the metal fans were the most stubborn and the most faithful of all. We could listen to Haustor and EKV, attend a few concerts, but Duran Duran and the like – that was out of the question.

“I don't know about Depeche Mode,” I admitted, “but he mentioned Sisters of Mercy to me.”

“There, you see, he got it from her. Sisters of Mercy, what is that?”

“Never heard of them.”

Some time before midnight Matija went home and I went to Dubrovnik. Only recently it was the only bar in town, now it was mostly empty. For some reason high schoolers, but so did most others, avoided it like the plague. I believe I dropped in for purely sentimental reasons. Everything looked the same like that night Dina and I came for tea with rum. The only thing is that it was packed then, and now only a lonely bunch of people were in. I ordered beer and sat by the window.

In the yellowish street light the small square looked like a set soon to be populated by actors ready to play a scene, but no one came and everything was the same as before. Around that time Wenders completed his *Wings of Desire*. I knew nothing about this, I just sat there and gazed at the square portending angels dressed in black standing somewhere up there, on the roofs, waiting. That's why, as I said, they were beyond the reach of the street lights. I couldn't see them. But I knew they were there.

## OZANA

Two chairs away there was a woman whose face was covered in hair, I couldn't see it. The same dim red light revealed a little and then – while she was lighting a cigarette, I recognised the English teacher and Sonja's classmistress. I couldn't remember her name, Sonja once told me about her – she came in the second grade, at first they didn't like her, but then she somehow won them over.

In the meantime the waiter locked the door, turned off the neon sign and turned down the music.

“There,” he said, “today is my last day, have one on me, no rush.”

No one objected. He gave us drinks so we had a toast. The English teacher took a sip, for a moment glanced in my direction and said in a bored voice: “You're Sonja's guy, aren't you?”

I nodded. “Ex.”

“How come?”

“She moved to her parents in Germany.”

“So you broke up?”

“Force majeure, long distance wouldn't work.”

“No way, I tried it myself.”

“What, system breakdown?”

“A total and utter fiasco. I don't want to go into detail, but I'm telling you – good thing you broke up. Wait, you're then Vjeročka and Matjaž's kid?”

“Edi,” I shook hands with her.

“Ozana, how do you do.”

The flakes danced again above the city. It was the last snow that winter.

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