

## Igor Beleš

**Igor Beleš** was born in 1978 in Vukovar, Croatia. His short stories were published in the magazines *Zarez* and *Fantom slobode* and internet portals *Kritična masa*, *Čitaj me* and *XXZ Magazin*. He is a two-time finalist for the *Prozak* literary award, and he might have been a three-time finalist if he hadn't become too old for that award in the meantime. He received a scholarship from the Ministry of Culture and the City of Rijeka for literary creativity. He is one of the initiators and editors of the literary magazine *Književnost uživo*. He is a member of the informal literary group Ri-Lit and one of the screenwriters of the board game *Arcadia Tenebra*. The short story *33* was adapted into a radio drama. His first novel was *Dawning in the West*. With his second novel *When Cabbage Leaves Start to Peel* he won the Fran Galović Literary Award 2023. He lives and works in Rijeka.



### Works:

*Dawning in the West* (*Svitanje na zapadu*, Edicije Katapult, 2012), a novel

*When Cabbage Leaves Start to Peel* (*Listanje kupusa*, HENA COM, 2021), a novel

# WHEN CABBAGE LEAVES START TO PEEL

**Publication date:** September 2023

**Number of pages:** 376

**Edition:** hardcover with jacket

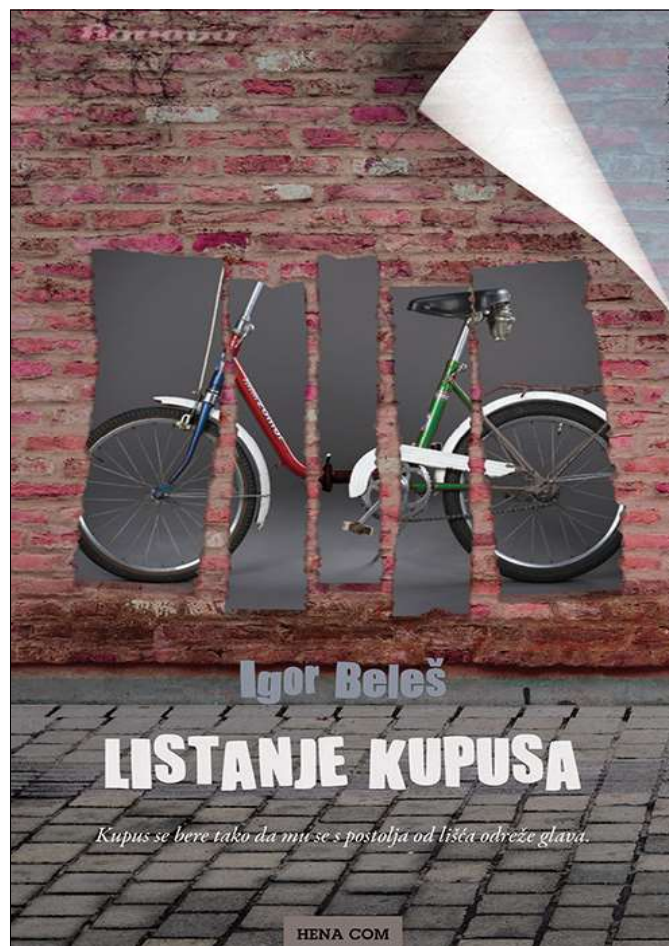
**Format:** 13,5 x 20,8 cm

**ISBN:** 978-953-259-417-1

**Foreign rights:** hena-com@hena-com.hr

## About the novel:

In 1991, five eleven-year-olds, inseparable members of the An group, set out to investigate the mystery of the disappearance of children and some families from their settlement in Borovo, Eastern Croatia, which changes rapidly, with more shots and detonations being heard by the day. They appreciate their friendship above all, and the fact that they are suddenly named Serbs or Croats means nothing to them, while this becomes crucial in the world of adults. Eventually – mainly because of misunderstanding of the world around them that no one really tries to explain, and also because their parents are hardly coping well in the galloping war – they will get into more and more trouble, and their idyllic childhood, marked by comics and music, spiced with first loves, will gradually turn into horror. *When Cabbage Leaves Start to Peel* is a beautiful, painful, tense, humane and emotional novel. It is a mixture of Enid Blyton's famous 5 and the movie *Stay with me* – the only thing is – this novel is for adults, for those who never managed to grow up because of the war and for those who did grow up, but were left permanently scarred.



Igor Beleš

## **When Cabbage Leaves Start to Peel**

*Translated from the Croatian by Mirna Čubranić*



## CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

### 1

Spring is the best time for planting cabbage, and autumn for harvesting and pickling. The closing credits of my childhood began in spring and ended in autumn, when the cabbage leaves start to peel. Cabbages are harvested by cutting the head from the stalk. We were more fortunate.

It all started on a rainy Tuesday in 1991, in a room that could have been the embassy of the planet Eternia if it had not been Goran's room.

We sat in anticipation. Dragan and I on a green sofa, and Bojan behind the desk, trying to fit his arms between the Masters of the Universe figurines without knocking them down. Goran, not caring about knocking them down like Bojan, placed a blue box on the table. The box had *Risiko Das große Strategiespiel* written on it. None of us had any idea what that meant. Goran had studied Russian at school; Bojan, Dragan, and I studied English, but we hadn't made it beyond Sandy, Bill, and his ball, so it didn't matter. Under the title, there was a drawing of a cannon, a horseman, and infantry in battle, with a battlefield in flames in the background. We understood the drawing, but we weren't thrilled. Our mood was reflected in the view through the window, as the first spring storm raged outside.

Goran turned on the light and took a chocolate bar, trying to open it quickly with trembling hands. His new Benetton shirt with horizontal black and white stripes, which he had just put on for the first time, was stretched tight on his belly. His father never seemed to get the size right, as if he forgot that his son was growing and quickly devouring all the sweets that came his way, and since he saw him only two or three times a year, he bought clothes from memory. Goran liked new things, so he squeezed himself into tight shirts and pants anyway. Not to mention that he was one of the few in Borovo who wore famous brands. The rest of us were dressed in several sizes too large anonymous shirts and pants bought on sale in Vukovar's Nama department store or Velepromet. Unlike Goran's, our pants reached the tips of our toes, and the sleeves of our shirts were always loose around the arms. Our parents thought we were growing too fast, so they bought us larger clothes to last us longer.

"Here, this is what I got from Dad today," Goran said, tapping the Risk box with the index finger of his right hand. Frowning, he put half of the chocolate into his mouth.

We all knew why he was disappointed. That morning at school, when he told us that his dad was coming, he was obsessed with the He-Man action figure he had wanted so badly. His collection counted more than half of the inhabitants of Eternia, but not the main hero. Dragan compared it to badges. He said, "It's like having a badge of every party member except Tito."

## CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

Dragan's dad was a passionate collector of badges and alcoholic beverages. Unlike the drinks, the badges he didn't use. As he was an alcoholic and would turn aggressive when he drank, it was a good thing that he kept those badges tucked into albums with red covers.

Dragan didn't collect anything except bad grades, and his knowledge of badges and different types of beer, brandy and wine was not enough to improve his average. However, he had a good memory of different vintages. He could tell which years were the best and which the worst from his dad's drinking bouts. 1987 was the worst.

The silence in the room rolled with the tune of Bajaga & Instruktori playing in the background. Goran had a lot of records, but the turntable always had *The Shop of Secrets* album on top. He was so lazy that he even didn't bother flipping it, so we always listened to the same four tunes.

Goran's dad was the only of our parents who didn't work in the factory but in Germany, and his visits usually elicited excitement because of the presents he would bring for Goran. Once it was a tent, another time a Commodore 64, then a remote-control car, but the mysterious Risk box seemed to have killed the excitement of that special day. Disappointed, we wanted to ask what it was, but we didn't. We continued to sit in silence in the room covered with posters of Eternia's heroes. We didn't even know the names of half of them, but most of them featured He-Man, who, according to Dragan, was the Tito of Eternia. We looked curiously at the blue box that was supposed to contain He-Man. The turntable went silent then continued with "Life is Sometimes Gray, Sometimes Yellow".

Somewhat reluctantly, Bojan started opening the box and then glanced at Goran, who nervously signalled him to continue. First, he took out the instructions.

"German again," said Bojan after bringing the sheet closer to his glasses. Then he looked at the box, then at me, and exclaimed: "Oh, Zoran, upon your life!"

*Oh, upon your life* was his father Filip Fink's favourite phrase. "Oh, upon your life, go and buy me some beer from the store" or "Oh, upon your life, why do you always have to be late, Bojan" or "Oh, upon your life, I'll work myself to death in that factory".

Bojan looked at me and finished the sentence in the same tone: "I'll laugh myself to death. These soldiers are even smaller than your winkie."

We looked into the box and realised that the soldiers were carrying sabres instead of rifles and were only half the size of the plastic soldiers we used to play with: partisans, Germans and quislings. That made us laugh, and laughter was much needed, since it wasn't just this Risk that troubled us.

## CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

Strange things started happening in our neighbourhood, and no one noticed or seemed to care except the children, even though, from what we saw, the situation was more than serious. If Goran's dad hadn't come home, we'd probably spend the afternoon discussing what to do about the strange events that pulled the grey veil over the early spring, rain clouds aside.

"Oh, upon your life!" Bojan repeated, and we chortled, including Goran, who nearly choked on a crumb of chocolate.

Bojan loved to make us laugh. He was the shortest among us, and although we were all eleven-year-olds, he respected us as if we were his elder brothers. He was blond and always smiling, just like his father, from whom he also inherited his poor eyesight. Rarely could you see him without his glasses, but whenever he took off the brownish frames with thick lenses, I was amazed by his handsome face. A face to be showered by countless kisses from all the girls at school and a few punches from jealous boys. With the glasses on, he could see all too well that he was plain to most kids, except to us, who loved his jokes.

Goran took the instructions, let out a heavy sigh, and walked ungracefully into the living room. He was the tallest and widest among us, and his thick, curly black hair seemed to enhance that impression. He was the only child in the family, so he had his own room, toys bought specifically for him instead of being handed down from an older brother (or in my case, a sister), a collection of *Politikin Zabavnik* comics that his dad had put together in hardcover, a BMX instead of a Poni coaster brake bike, and a real skateboard with a skull design instead of rusty roller skates that made it impossible to go five meters without putting at risk the design of your own skull.

Working in Germany, Goran's father was more absent than present in his life. He made amends by buying toys and anything else that Goran's heart desired. And despite the full room and stomach, Goran's heart had many desires and a big hole. To make matters worse, his mum wasn't too interested in him either. She preferred new dresses bought with Deutschmarks and endless walks with her girlfriends. My mum didn't particularly like Goran's mum. She used to say, "We know who pays for those dresses, we know who wears them, but we don't know who takes them off."

Before he met us, Goran didn't have any friends. His childhood was filled with toys and sweets. In exchange for his new possessions, we offered him conversation, understanding and friendship.

Dragan's dad wouldn't send Dragan for beer with the phrase, "Oh, upon your life, go buy me some beer from the store." Instead, he'd silently pull him aside by the ear and shove a brown woven bag into his hand with five empty bottles of Apatinsko beer to be replaced by full ones. On good days, he would slip

## CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

him a few banknotes as well, but most of the time Dragan had to ask the shopkeeper Jasna to open a tab in her special notebook kept in a drawer under the cash register. The notebook was a directory of all the local alcoholics, including my stepfather. Aunt Jasna was always kind to Dragan and would remind him to tell his father about the debt that was already on the tab. Even with his limited knowledge of mathematics, Dragan could tell that the debt was only piling up. Perhaps that's why he was the most reserved among us.

He was a skinny boy, a complete opposite of Goran, even though they lived on the same street and had the same unruly hairstyle. Carrying the burden of those five half-litre glass beer bottles made him twist his back and hip to the right like some bug boy. His posture remained distorted even when he wasn't carrying the beer. His body seemed to meander when he'd stand straight. But it wasn't just his posture that was unusual. We didn't know if he was born with such big ears or if his father, older brother and kids at school had a hand in their development. They protruded from beneath his long, curly black hair as an open invitation to pull. On countless occasions did I find myself tempted to give them a tug, but resisted. Unfortunately, others involved in Dragan's life did not share my virtue.

My story, in turn, is specific in its own way. My mum worked in the factory like Goran's, Dragan's and Bojan's, and had been through three marriages with two men. The first marriage resulted in my six-year-old half-sister Sanja and a quarrel that led to its end. The cause was my dad, whom Mum married as soon as she got divorced to make me a legitimate offspring, or so she told me. Awful questions riddled my head. What would have happened if I remained illegitimate? Would I have been born in prison? Do illegitimate children go to school or spend all their time in prison, digging a tunnel to freedom and education? Because I became legitimate in the eyes of the Party if not the Lord's, I didn't go to prison or church. Instead, prison came to me as my half-sister made sure to make my childhood hell. Sanja and I were nothing alike. Her hair was blond, mine brown - or trots, as she referred to it. She was the tallest in class, and I the shortest. At the age of eleven, my nose was longer than hers. I had straight A's in school, and she a series of resits. I listened to Crvena jabuka (Red Apple), and she to Plavi orkestar (The Blue Orchestra). We could not even match the band colours. Mum, by the way, listened to Bijelo dugme (White Button), and dad listened to music only when he was sick. He sought comfort in Toma Zdravković's songs. Dad stayed at home only when he wasn't feeling well. Other days he spent at the factory and in taverns, gallantly sharing his high spirits and salary. When he got a headache and an upset stomach from the factory and tavern, he'd spend two days lying on our brown sofa, sipping coffee, with a kitchen towel tied around his head like Karate Kid. Instead of the emblem of the sun, he had "Fant"

## CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

written on his forehead. But that was my dad, not Sanja's. She blamed me for not having her dad anymore, a normal life, and a cute guy to keep her company.

After that short-lived idyll, Mum first had a quarrel with my dad, then divorced him, and then remarried her first husband. Sanja was happy, and I was left with scratched Toma Zdravković records and the "Fant" kitchen towel. My stepfather forbade my dad from coming to our house and tried to persuade Mum to send me to live with my dad, so he wouldn't have to see me.

In a way, we were all "damaged" goods, like the flawed shoes our parents used to steal from the factory, trying to convince themselves and us that flawed stitching wasn't so terrible as long as the shoes fitted fine. And that's why we had our *-an* group – to find a place for all our imperfections, both in life and footwear, and create lifelong friendships.

## 2

Goran returned to the room with his dad. Uncle Boro was the biggest man I had ever seen, even larger than Popeye's Bluto. His face was shaved smooth and kind, though, with a black moustache. Beneath, an original German Marlboro cigarette hung from his lips.

"Goran, fetch me an ashtray," he said and sat down on a small chair opposite us, placing the Risk board on the floor.

His bulky figure and the smoke filled the room.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he addressed us as ashes from the original German Marlboro fell onto the drawing of the battlefield in flames.

The rest of the afternoon we spent playing Risk. Goran's dad explained the rules, and we started our war. The initial reserve gave way to genuine excitement. The game lasted for hours, without us noticing. Dragan was the first one to capitulate, then me, and a big battle ensued between Goran and Bojan as Goran's mum Mirjana entered the room.

As soon as her new red dress and blond hair styled like Madonna's from the "Papa Don't Preach" music video appeared, Bojan lost interest in the game and stared at her dreamily through his thick glasses, his face turning the same colour as her dress. Enthralled by the game, Goran didn't notice his mother but took advantage of Bojan's distraction by cutting short Bojan's cannonade and sweeping his infantry off the board. Then he rigged the dice to knock him out of the game.



## CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

"Boys, I think it's time to stop the warfare for today," Mirjana said.

The digital clock on the nightstand next to Goran's bed showed 20:12, which meant I was already 12 minutes late home.

Then she sighed, shrugged her shoulders and added: "You have classes tomorrow morning."

We got up and started putting the game pieces back into the box.

"Hey, this is not how I left it," Bojan said.

"Well, it's over now," Goran replied and quickly put the rest into the box.

### 3

It was no longer raining outside, but the darkness was almost impenetrable. Daylight saving time hadn't started yet, even though we were well into spring. We stood by our wet bicycles. Bojan and I rode Ponies. Mine was green, Bojan's blue. Dragan rode an old Partisan bike of undefined colour. Goran had a brand new red-and-white BMX. He took it to the basement and came back to see us off.

"We didn't get a chance to talk," he said.

We knew he was referring to the strange events in the neighbourhood, but kept silent with our eyes glued to the ground.

"You want to talk about how you cheated to beat me?" Bojan broke the silence, smiled and hopped onto his bike.

"Come on, you know it wasn't like that," Goran said and handed each of us a chocolate bar. "This time he brought me only the white ones. Probably because I said I loved them the last time he was here, but now they taste kinda yucky."

I mounted my bike and felt the moisture between my legs.

"Let's talk about it tomorrow after school," I suggested.

The others nodded.

"Let's go," Dragan took the lead, "and see whose wet balls are the fastest."

"Booo, cheater, booo, cheater," Bojan chanted before he followed suit.

Bojan and I saw Dragan home at the beginning of the street and then passed the tennis courts, swimming pool, sports hall, cinema and the bachelors' boarding house on our way towards the factory.

The evening was cool after the afternoon rain. Only the constant humming of the factory broke the silence. Lit up, the factory looked forbidding, like a castle or a prison, as our parents often described it. Borovo, the largest Yugoslav rubber and footwear conglomerate, was once owned by the Czech Bata. Bata built the settlement and invented the 0.99 pricing, but, according to the old folks' stories, Borovo was handed over, not sold, to Tito and the party.

The factory was enclosed by high walls and it occupied one third of the neighbourhood. Children were not allowed to enter, but adults were, grumbling. They used to say that they were leaving their best years in there, that it was a difficult life, and they pushed us to study even when we had already done our homework, so we wouldn't end up there like they had.

We crossed the first and the second railway crossing, turned left and continued alongside the wall that separated the factory from the rest of the world. At its end, the street continued with identical two-storey red houses like the ones in which Dragan and Goran lived. The whole settlement was red: the houses, the factory, the workers' hall... The visionary architect of Borovo, František Lýdie Gahura, loved red buildings surrounded by greenery. My house was the second and Bojan's the third on the left. The light above the front door of my house was on.

"Oh, upon your life, your mum has prepared a welcome party for you again," Bojan said, circling around me on his bicycle.

The light made me worry.

"Lately she's been more nervous than usual. Chances are she'll break up with Marinko again."

"Yeah, sure. Don't expect to find another use for your Fant cloth than to clean Tomo Zdravković records. See you tomorrow morning at half-past six." Bojan pedalled away before I could reply.

"That's what friends are for," I yelled after him. "When the going gets tough, they run away."

Bojan sang back: "Worry not Zoran, you suffer from love, it's hard to bear."

I covered the bicycle seat with a bag and entered. My wet crotch didn't go unnoticed by Sanja, nor did my being half an hour late go unnoticed by Mum. Marinko, my stepfather, pretended not to notice me, as usual.

I retreated to my room to change before supper. The green lamp with a pull cord shed dim light on those four square metres whose walls were covered in posters of Bajaga, Crvena jabuka, He-Man and an original Commando. The old light-brown couch, on which Dad used to wait for his hangovers to pass, served as my bed. A few cigarette burns remained to remind me of him and his hangovers. Sometimes, when I felt sad and missed my dad terribly, I would put my fingers into those holes, thinking I could connect with him that way.

Opposite the couch, there was a single wardrobe and a bookshelf. Besides the Vjeverica edition and Branko Ćopić's collected works in burgundy bindings with gold letters, there were a few comics from the Golden Series. Mostly Zagor, Tex, two Dylan Dogs and one Martin Mystery. Next to Martin there was a Masters of the Universe Ram Man knockoff figurine. Unlike Goran's rubberised plastic Ram Man, mine was of the ordinary kind, and every blow it endured in battles left a new dent. Besides, the original Masters figurines came in a box with a mini comic, while mine came with neither. It was wrapped like a mummy in a torn napkin with the logo of the Rubin brandy.

I looked through the window at the soaking wet settlement; on one side there were the factory and the Danube, and on the other, the railway and the road leading to Vukovar. I was certain that the neighbourhood had started to change. Despite the interesting Risk day, I couldn't stop thinking about the series of troubles that our group codenamed Empty Chairs. Tomorrow, we'll probably do something about it, I thought as Sanja shouted my name.

"Zoran! Zooraaan!" I heard her squeaky voice from the ground floor.

I pounded down the wooden stairs to let her know I had heard her, or else she would never stop.

"Why does that kid always thump like an elephant?" I heard Marinko's voice. Even though we had lived with Marinko for seven years by then, I still couldn't get used to him always addressing me through Sanja or Mum.

I headed towards the dining room. The TV in the living room blared as some politician shouted hoarsely to the applauding crowd. Sanja grabbed me by the shoulder, pulled me back into the hallway and said into the telephone receiver: "Your boyfriend needs you, and please don't take long, because I have a boyfriend too." Her pale face was red from countless pimples, and her blonde ponytail swayed to the rhythm of her mean words.

## CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

"Yes?" I said into the receiver, expecting to hear the tut-tut sound of a free line. It wouldn't be the first time Sanja tricked me like that.

"Just calling to let you know I got home safely," said Bojan instead. "What's the situation at the Savić dynasty's house?"

"I'm still Moguš," I said.

"Sure you are, legit or..."

"Zoran! Zoraan!" Sanja squeaked again.

I stretched the black Iskra telephone cord as far as the doorway, trying to give Sanja a dirty look. Sanja joined her right hand thumb and index finger under her nose, then separated them, ran them around her mouth and joined them again at the chin. This typical local gesture was called "greasy borek", and Sanja always used it to provoke me, especially when she thought I was talking nonsense, which was most of the time.

"Why does that kid always mess with the cord? The phone isn't his toy."

"I have to go," I told Bojan.

"Wait a sec, I have a theory about the empty chairs."

For a moment, I hesitated.

"I'm listening."

"Maybe all the missing children in the neighbourhood got into a fight with your mum."

Jokes about someone's mum always cheered me up, but not that evening.

"Unlike you, at least I'm not in love with someone's mum."

"Oh, little Moguš can sting just like the Savićs," Bojan replied. "But now, seriously, I noticed something new about the empty chairs."

"Zoran, come to the table," Mum shouted loud enough for Bojan to hear.

"I really have to go now, we can talk about it tomorrow after school, when we all meet."

"Tomorrow after school then," Bojan said. "See you in the morning."

For the supper, Mum served Marinko's favourite dish, baked beans Macedonian style. Mum first filled up his plate, then Sanja's, and finally mine and hers. That was her list of priorities.

"Enjoy your meal, kids," she said. Her face was always beautiful and tired at the same time, a trick only she knew how to pull. How to look dignified when you've had enough of everything. Her mouth was a thin line, as if she had forgotten how to smile, and her hair just like mine, brown and unruly.

"It's about time, I'm famished," Marinko said and took a sip from the brown bottle of Apatinsko beer.

## CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

I looked at him. He hadn't had a haircut for a while. Not that he needed one, as he was losing his once thick grey hair, which used to be blond as Sanja's. When I dared to look at him long enough, I imagined how his hairline gave way to his forehead. And right across the middle ran a vertical furrow like the one Mum used to make in dough with a round cutter when she baked cookies. That wrinkle would deepen even more when he addressed me in the third person.

"We would have eaten already, if Zoran had come home in time," Sanja provoked even though she hated baked beans. She pretended to enjoy them now.

"Some kids never learn from words," Marinko concluded and belched loudly.

"Sanja," Mum said, "when we eat, we don't speak. Zoran, if you're late again, you won't leave the house until summer, except for school. And you, Marinko, why can't we watch anything else on that TV besides those politicians?"

Marinko looked at her with his light blue eyes and took another sip of beer. Mum stood up slowly and turned off the TV and the voltage stabiliser. Then she turned on the record player and played a scratched Tomo Zdravković record.

For the rest of the supper, we listened to the same "who's to blame" line of the song *Hey, Branka, Branka*, at which the stylus got stuck.

## 6

I spent the evening in my room, listening to the soft patter of rain on the window pane and Radio 202. I had several cassettes from bands like Bajaga, Crvena jabuka and Bijelo dugme, but my Grundig cassette player had the strange habit of chewing tapes, so Momčilo, Žera and Alen sounded like they were suffering from indigestion.

Radio 202 played songs by bands like Denis & Denis, Zana, Ruž, Galija and Parni valjak, as well as by foreign artists such as Duran Duran, Madonna, or R.E.M. As I was still outgrowing my obsession with Minja Subota, most of the good and popular songs I first heard came to me through the wall between Sanja's room and mine. Later on, I started listening to the same radio stations. At the time, this was the only concession I was ready to make to her.

To occupy my mind, I decided to read a comic book. Since we didn't have a video recorder, and I envied Goran for having one in his room, including the remote control in a transparent nylon freezer bag, I made my

## CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

own version dubbed "comicrorecorder", which consisted of an empty Borovo shoebox with a slot in the middle that looked just like the one on video recorders. The only difference was that instead of inserting a videotape you inserted a comic book, which you could then take out by opening the box top and read. I drew control buttons with a blue marker and wrote "VHS" on the slot. My biggest problem was to pick the brand name. Grundig was out of the question because of my disappointment with the cassette player. Toshiba was the brand of Goran's video recorder, so I didn't want to have the same one. I often saw the term "Hi-Fi" in magazines, and I liked how it looked and sounded, so I made my decision.

From the Hi-Fi comicrorecorder, I took out a Zagor comic entitled The Monster Cave. I had this feeling of being trapped in a cave, a neighbourhood cave where children disappeared on a daily basis, and adults pretended not to notice. I wondered how Zagor would solve the mystery of the empty chairs. Maybe he would yell his "AAAAAAA" and do his tree jumping across Borovo's parks, while Čiko would devour all the pork rind buns in the bakery. With that thought, I dosed off for a second and then jumped out of bed as if fleeing from some Darkwood monster.

"Oh no, I have a history test tomorrow," I said aloud, loud enough for Sanja to hear me from her room.

"Shut up and go to sleep," I heard her hiss from the other side of the wall.