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A RAM'S HEAD AND A WILD BOAR'S TOOTH

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A Novel

Dedicated to my mother,
Because she always believed in me.



„My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighborhood. This is my street. This is my life. I'm 42 years old. In less than a year, I'll be dead. Of course, I don't know that yet, and in a way I'm dead already. Look at me, jerking off in the shower. This will be the high point of my day, it's all downhill from here.” – American Beauty.

PROLOGUE

As a professional movie critic, I have seen countless hours of movies. Some of them due to the nature of my work, but mostly out of personal curiosity. I have also read screenplays, some even more than once. ‘Vanilla Sky’ is an example.

Consequently, as I refrain myself from a subtler inner recognition and delay it for a while, hopefully till fuller maturity, I started viewing my life as a movie from my favorite genre.

A romantic comedy.

All in all, the story that follows isn't one of those elaborate movie stories, where it is difficult to differentiate between reality and fiction; it's a most predictable one, where the plot is supremely simple. You can almost guess the ending from the first frame of the movie.

In my defense, I seem to have been more intrigued by the changes in the psychological states of characters than by the flow of simple facts towards predictable consequences. But, because of its influence on emotions, this is still my favorite genre. People take an interest in history, biographies of significant people or Flemish painting, others are interested in dollar fluctuations into the sterling zone, there are philatelists and numismatists... I love romantic comedies.

Movies of this type usually contain several common elements:

At the very base there is love between, usually, two main protagonists: a guy and a girl, or lately, a guy and a guy, a girl and a girl, a transsexual and a girl, why not?

Love at first sight (which happened to me once or twice) is also possible. Or, maybe, they start off meeting as uninterested parties, or they hate each other, and then that so-called hatred develops into real love (that also happened to me, once).

It can be melodramatic, because genres don't have clear demarcation: a couple has been in a relationship for a few years and they experience tedious and gloomy phases, but their love prevails eventually – I don't know if it's true or not, but it still sounds nice.

Someone is running after someone else – this is an important and almost always present element. Furthermore, someone falls. Physically falls. It's funny when someone else falls, you'll have to agree. It's usually the guy running back to a girl after a breakup, as if he had just realized how much the person which is leaving means to him. He doesn't realize anything. He is just afraid of loneliness and he's running after someone to hang out with, that second glass of wine, Latino-jazz music, discreet lighting, kissing in the rain. He falls, but he doesn't give up. The audience starts laughing as he slips and falls, and when he gets up, they yell: "Don't run, you idiot!"

Kissing in the rain. If someone has no affection towards kissing in the rain, a cult classic movie 'Singing in The Rain' incites it. This aspect is not present in every movie, but personally I am a huge fan of kissing in the rain. There are several reasons for that: the rain gives an additional dose of romance to the art of kissing. And also, my late grandfather, god rest his soul, said to me once: "Son, before you decide to get married, let a heavy rain fall onto the girl."

Love wins – the romantics can't flee from the classic 'Only Love Remains' moment. An example for that is a 2005 movie 'London'. Jason Statham stars in it and I could watch it over and over again. Most of the movie takes place in a bathroom of an elite apartment. There is cocaine, alcohol, women, regret... Everything a good movie should contain, as it's believed. Is there a happy ending? Believe me, love does win at the end. Who hasn't seen it, go online or buy a DVD. Remember DVDs?

There are more alternatives except the above mentioned, however listing all of them by far surpasses the foreseen limits of this work, as those who know everything would say, but, alas, they do not have the space or the time to present that I, however, do have the space and time, but I do not know how. I can just try.

That's all about romantic comedies and movies in general. For now.

There is a story to be told to the reader.

Trust me, like some movies, this book includes all the necessary elements needed to capture someone's attention: love, alcohol, love, failure, alcohol, nudity, an attempt to restore a failed love, depression, more alcohol and a few less important things, which came out of inconsiderateness or out of pure mischief.

Henry Miller once said: "There are only three things to be done with a woman: You can love her, suffer for her, or turn her into literature."

I've been through the first two things, so I'll give the third one a chance.

Cheers, Mr. Miller.



"I think everybody's got that special someone that gets under their skin and doesn't go away." – Californication

1

I'm falling through the darkness. Everything around me is black, but at the same time, tranquil, deep and calm. There is no sound. It seems like the fall will last forever. Almost like a space-walk. Until I was hit strongly in the face. An actual wall. And then, probably the floor. The landing is painful. It always is...

I try and get myself in a sitting position. At first, I see only silhouettes, and then the outlines of the furniture in what seems like an unknown room. A painful snap of the neck turns my head back to the pillow. The inflatable bed is on the floor. A ray of light, shining from somewhere, illuminates empty beer cans, a pizza box and the clock telling me it is 5 am.

I try to continue sleeping. No dice. My head is spinning, full of thoughts that match my current physical and emotional state: bad, dark and no way out. With my better eye, however, I spot a half-empty bottle of vodka on the shelf. With significant effort to get up, I make it! After a few sips, I fall back onto the pillow. Everything fades away: bad, dark and no way out. Vodka has done its magic. I could even hear the sound of light Latino-jazz from somewhere. Thank you Stan Getz.

This new, almost bearable condition, is interrupted by the voice from the next room:

"Get up!", I recognize the voice of my boss, Dejan Antonijevic, a rather bitter guy in his late forties, suffering from the consequences of his life choices. He's been through three divorces and has a total of three children. Sometimes he would get their names mixed up, as if he himself wasn't sure which one is from which marriage. For some reason, he was always full of understanding with me. As it was the case right now.

It's dawn. I recognize the office. If I only knew what day it was today? After a few more sips of vodka, I thought – don't push it, it doesn't matter what day it is. It's almost daytime. On the screen of my computer I see that Skype is on. My memory slowly returns, with morning sickness:

I spoke to my ex-girlfriend, again.

I still loved her.

A few years ago, Jovana went to the USA. She entered the lottery for the American green card, and she won. They say that the odds of that are 1:10.000.000. Or greater. She and I met by pure chance, a day before her wedding.



“Women ! What can you say ? Who made 'em ? God must have been a fuckin' genius. The hair - They say the hair is everything, you know. Have you ever buried your nose in a mountain of curls... and just wanted to go to sleep forever ? Or lips - and when they touched, yours were like... that first swallow of wine... after you

just crossed the desert. Tits ! Whoo-ah ! Big ones, little ones, nipples staring right out at ya... Like secret searchlights. Mmm. And legs - I don't care if they're Greek columns... or secondhand Steinways. What's between 'em, passport to heaven.” – Scent of a woman

2

Memories get irreversibly blurred over time, but I know clearly what happened that evening. I was at a big party with Zdravko, to this day a good friend of mine.

The apartment was huge, full of smartly dressed people, blasé, with bits of staged spontaneity shared between them. They conversed in small groups, with drinks in their hands, as if they were listening to each other. Women would giggle from time to time, although nothing humorous happened.

I told Zdravko, fixing the knot on my tie:

“My friend, we ought to present our host with some sort of gift.”

“We brought a French cognac”, he said, “but we drank it on the way here.”

Zdravko was tall and blond, athletic. Although he was about 15 cm taller than me, we looked somewhat similar, as it is often the case with good friends. Sometimes people would ask if we were brothers. Be as it may, even drunk, we tried to behave like gentlemen, as much as possible.

“So, what should we do?” – I asked.

“Relax. Go and get us a drink. We'll figure it out” – he said, looking toward the girl that was serving the crowd. She was a blond in a short, plaid skirt, haplessly pretending she wasn't looking at us.

Avoiding close verbal and physical contacts, which are nearly inevitable in that sort of crowd, I found my way to the kitchen. I opened the fridge, looking for a drink with a decent percentage of alcohol associated with it.

“Is there something to eat?” – a girl’s voice interrupted me. “Yes, I am talking to you. You, with your head in the fridge. Is there any food in there?”

I looked up and I saw a girl, whose name was Jovana, as I learned afterwards. She didn’t look like a *belle*. She had a large nose, freckles on her face and braces on her teeth, but I must admit, with all that, she had an amazing smile. The kind of smile that could cure all diseases. Among all the people I wanted to escape from, she looked like someone who could make the evening bearable.

I scanned the fridge.

“I don’t think there is. There is some Belgian beer if you are up for a liquid meal. Other than that, I don’t see anything interesting... There is some bad wine. Just because it is expensive, it doesn’t mean it’s good.”

“I can’t have beer. I haven’t eaten anything the entire day. Is there any vodka?” – she answered so casually, as if she was asking for a tissue. And I thought she was hungry.

“I think there is!” – pleasantly surprised with her question. By that time, I knew a thing or two about women and alcohol. Or so I liked to believe.

I spotted a bottle of Absolut on a shelf above the fridge. I poured it into shot glasses. Just as I was going to propose a toast, she interrupted me.

“Is there any ice?”

“You are the lady of the house here, or something like that, and you’re asking me?”

She didn’t respond, and I opened the freezer.

“Wait, wait, wait!” – she moved by me. She smelled great. Under the ice cubes there were two packages of puff pastry pockets, or croissants, or whatever you want to call them.

“Will you bake these? Please, I am so hungry.” – there was glow in her eyes. Or maybe the vodka I just had started to kick in? Then again, who needs ice anyway?

“Right, you haven’t eaten all day. I will bake them. Give them to me. You can’t live on vodka and beer.”

She looked at me as if we knew each other for ten years, and not just ten minutes, smiled and walked towards the living room. That smile is gonna be the end of me.

“I’ll see you around.” – she said. Her walk was graceful.

The oven was already hot, I found a baking sheet, some cooking oil and flour. I tossed the puff pastry in. People passing by gave me strange looks and mumbled: ‘... who is this weird guy and what is he doing?’

Zdravko walked into the kitchen and reminded me:

“Have you finally found something to drink?” Pointing to the living room he said: “That place is more boring than a dinner with one’s own wife”. He sniffed the smell coming from the oven. “You are making puff pastry? Beautiful!” – he took the bottle closest to his hand and returned to the living room, passing by Jovana, who was returning to the kitchen.

The puff pastry was done. It wasn’t the best meal I prepared in my life, but it was decent enough, considering the circumstances.

“The dough is very dry.” - Jovana wasn’t satisfied. “Check if there is any ketchup. And then, please, put some ketchup on my pastry.” – she was holding the pastry towards me. I looked at her and realized her eyes were brown.

“Do you want me to put ketchup on your pastry?”

“What are you waiting for? Don’t you want to put ketchup on my pastry?”

“Are we still talking about food or?” – The conversation was going in the right direction. For connoisseurs, explicit enough.

As I was expecting her reply, we heard clamor from the living room. A voice announced that mister Mirko was going to address his guests.

The reason of our visit.

Our friend Mirko was in a relationship with his girl for six years and he invited guests with the intention to finally propose in front of close and, somewhat, dear people.

Zdravko was leaning against a doorpost and drinking vodka from the bottle.

We were both viewing the same scene we’ve seen so many times before: gaudily girls in expensive clothes literally jumping around Mirko’s girlfriend, going crazy about her hairstyle and engagement ring. Have I mentioned Mirko was rich? He’s so rich he could buy all seasons of The Simpsons. On DVDs! And there are around 30. Or more. So, you do the math.

"I give them six months of marriage.", Zdravko said nonchalantly.

"Why such a short time? They've been together for about six years."

"When relaxed socializing becomes formalized, all the good stuff fades away. Admittedly, the façade sometimes remains for a longer time, even if the inside is rotten." – Zdravko took another sip from the bottle. Then he added, almost for himself: "Too much money..."

He seemed certain of his explanation, although it made no sense at first glance. I agreed. Even if it makes no sense, that is how things work. The moment each side gets an insight into this newly formed alliance, they start understanding the lack of ratio between what they invest and what they expect in return.

My eyes were looking for Jovana. I wanted to finish the pastry conversation we started. She was nowhere to be found.

Disappointed, I drank up a bottle of warm Belgian beer and stepped out on the balcony to have a cigarette. I pulled out a pack of Lucky Strike Black when I saw her. There she was. Surrounded by moonlight. Her hands twisting the railing. Silent, still, crying. I gave her a tissue and said:

"Go ahead, cry. You have a reason for it. If you were into Mirko."

"It's not that." – she said silently.

"What is it, then?"

"It doesn't matter. Leave me alone!" – she was trying to get rid of me. Unsuccessfully. I would never leave a crying girl alone. She finally gave in and said:

"Everyone is getting married out of love, only I am doing it out of interest."

I was confused, but then she explained the entire situation: she won the green card lottery; some guy gave her the money to marry him, so that he could get a green card too. They were supposed to get married as soon as the next day.

I said the only thing I could think of:

"Can I kiss you?"

She looked at me, with tears in her eyes. I wiped them from her face. She said quietly: "You may."

That was the first time we kissed. We were together for a year, until she left.



"When you come in on Monday and you're not feeling real well, does anyone ever say to you: 'Sounds like someone has a case of the Mondays?'" -

Office Space

3

"Get ready for work! New interns are coming in an hour. Get yourself together", my boss warned me.

I started a well-practiced routine: I put eye-drops into my eyes and cracked open up a pack of the strongest chewing gum to freshen up my breath. When I had more money, I had a special cream to get rid of dark circles under my eyes. I realize that all the steps we take to conceal something often just flaunt the observers' imagination. However, an entire industry of concealers, correctors, deodorants, wrinkle-resistant fabrics has been developed.

Dejan woke me up at the right time. An honorable man. I walked into the main room, where he was, waiting for me with a cup of coffee:

"Did you speak to that whore of yours again? You always get shitfaced when you talk to her!"

"Can you be a bit more considerate boss? She is a porn actress. I think they might even refer to her as a 'porn star'."

"A porn star, a porn actress. Does she bang people for money?"

"Erm... Technically yes, but there's a fine line between..."

"There you go, a whore! Why do you take it so seriously? My father used to refer to theatre actresses as whores. Never mind that, do something useful, clean up the office a bit, tidy up that bed. The newbies are coming, the office is supposed to look decent before they get here. And stop spending my Skype, god knows how big a bill I'm gonna get."

“Boss, they don’t charge for Skype additionally. You just pay the internet part. The bill is always the same. Regardless how much you talk to someone.”

He is the boss, and yet he doesn’t know that much. Unbelievable.

“Stop talking. Clean up the office.” – his answer was clear.

Dejan wasn’t right about Jovana. After all, she did have health insurance. She was employed full time. She had a union representing her. Technically, yes, she did provide sexual favors in exchange for money, but a lot of money. She made much more money than I did.

Even with all the effort I put into preserving her dignity, I felt bad. The only one I could cheer up was the devil, who always napped somewhere close by: Mr. Crash.

I chased away my gloomy thoughts by getting the working area into a more decent condition: hiding the inflatable bed, stuffing the cigarette buds under the carpet, cleaning the dust off with my hand, and then wiping my hands clean on my jeans...

Soon enough, the employees, also known as human resources, started arriving. Around fifty of us worked here. As anywhere else, there were all kinds of different people, scattered around different scales of life, sounding like something in A minor.

The company I worked in was creating ‘video content’, but over time we grew into ‘movie critics’ and god knows what else. They spoke about website development, branding, design... All I know is that people were coming and leaving like on a conveyor belt.

That morning, five new interns or trainees arrived, call them anything you like. They would come in for a probation period, as was the custom, with a previously arranged minimal or non-existent salary. Every time a new group came, Dejan would welcome them with an encouraging speech, about a promising future.

The longer I listened to his welcoming speeches, the more they sounded like the sound of old vinyl records - completely worn out.

The same old story about company progress and a *successful career* has faded during those five years I spent there. The worn-out rhetoric reminded me of the words of Ostap Bender: “Car racing through the rampage and carelessness.” Nevertheless, the new employees were thrilled with the prospect of a career in a company which was officially considered as one of the most promising in the region.

Given one of the interns was assigned to me, I started preparing. As usually, I expected an idiot, so instead of two-finger, I had a four-finger vodka. Vodka is good: it has almost no scent, it relaxes, or rather anesthetizes. It seemed it made it easier for me to work.

Before the expected intern, Dejan's determined and confident secretary, Nikolina Todorovic, jumped into my office. When she spoke, she somehow managed to be louder than anyone else in the room. She always had something to add, to comment, give her opinion on this and that, especially if no one asked for it. On the other hand, as a woman, she was gorgeous and gracious, although she didn't seem to care for compliments, except for ones regarding her organization skills and business success. She had an extraordinary nice bottom. It almost seemed that the expression 'Nikolina's bottom' could be introduced to the standards of desirable proportions.

She always undertook ways to 'motivate' employees, which consisted of admonishing, reminding of deadlines and obligations. I am pretty sure that was not in her job description. Anyway, who cares? Unlike me, she claimed she loved the company we both worked for. Where I saw a steady job and a regular pay-check, she saw something bigger. Maybe a feeling of belonging or something else?

She demanded my reviews which, as she said, were not yet written.

"Of course, the reviews are ready, Nikolina." - I answered calmly.

"Why haven't you emailed them? We were supposed to published them an hour ago!" - she was yelling, like in a bad theatre play.

Irrelevant. She was a brunette with almond-shaped eyes. As I was looking deep into them. I thought: "What is an hour compared to eternity?"

"Here, I am sending them right away, don't worry" - I said.

"Did you have them proofread?" - she went on.

"Of course not. When I write, proofreading is not required."

Although being well-paid was the most significant thing, I also knew I was good at my job. Something balanced, by itself, saves the energy for the effort of balancing other things in life.

She was sitting at my computer, scrolling through what I've written. When she finished, she got up and said: "Send it!"

She walked away, toward the main room. I was alone. I decided to go toward the bottle of vodka, hidden in the bookshelf, just as the new intern stepped into the office.

It seems people can be unpleasant even unintentionally. Aleksandar Stanojev, a young man in his early twenties who looked like a person no one listened to, but had a lot to say.

After he introduced himself, he asked me:

“What do you think about the new Batman v Superman movie?” – he said confidently, as if Batman and Superman personally starred in a ton of them.

Movies about superheroes were dominating the cinema and have created an intense buzz amongst the crowd. Sometimes people from the media wanted to hear my opinion. Was it because I was a movie critic or for some other reason? Just because I wrote a critic for the new Batman movie, doesn't mean I wish to discuss it. If someone wants to know my official opinion, they can find it on the website.

Zdravko recently mentioned that the Peruvian army discovered a bat, size of a man, deep in the Andes. Was that the real Batman?

Also, I hated discussions. A discussion is a sign of not having ideas, and the pressure of vanity eradicates the search for a solution. Those who don't believe me should gather several smart people in a room and have them try to solve one issue.

Simple solutions are being sabotaged by committees.

It seems that a good thought is to be found only in one head. There were people whose opinions I truly valued, because they were not contaminated by discussion. They were few. They were not present.

Aleksandar went on:

“I think Zack Snyder did a great job. It wasn't an easy task to put Batman and Superman in one movie. The way he handled cinematography was brilliant. If you just look at...”

As he was going on and on about the movie, which, by the way, wasn't particularly good, I was looking towards the bookshelf. Behind a row of Anton Chekhov's books, there was that translucent, fine liquid. A hidden place where no one will bother to look, as we live in an age where the interest in print media rapidly declines.

Worst of all was that Aleksandar continued talking, but I didn't hear his voice anymore, only hissing which kept intensifying in my ears. I decided to interrupt him:

“Why is Batman so important?” – I asked him, in the state of a mild abstinence crisis.

“Well, he's a superhero! But, he's only a man.”

“You are right kid.” - I said, although I was just a few years older than him. “Tell me, where do you see Batman in thirty years?”

“Well, you know, from the comics, he becomes handicapped, and he finds his replacement, and the guy he's training...” – he kept talking into the void with practiced confidence.

I already learned that an interlocutor is often just a dam, which bounces back an echo of one's own thoughts.

“Yes. We all know from the comic books what happens to Batman.” – I interrupted him. “But, tell me, where do *you* see him in thirty years? No, make it forty years.”

It would be an understatement to say he was confused. He stuttered. He probably tried to remember all the advice he read online about how to act in a job interview. After a few moments, he continued. What else could he do? The hissing in my ears went on, and my eyes circled towards Chekhov on the shelf and the precious liquid behind him. I decided to end this torture. Sometimes I did not accept stupidities with gratitude.

“Go home!” – I almost said, “Leave me alone with vodka and my thoughts”. I remembered the peaceful last years of Howard Hughes' life. I went on:

“Since Batman, alias Bruce Wayne, is about forty years old when the movie takes place, it means that in another forty years he will be around eighty?”

I looked Aleksandar in the eye and went on: “If he lives that long. Having in mind he spent most of his life being a superhero and undertaking demanding superhero actions. It's likely he's had a bunch of injuries and can't even walk properly, and it's even possible he ends up in a wheelchair.

Now, after all those years of fighting bad guys, losing his loved ones and inevitable vanishing of his physical strength, how does he feel?”

I asked a question. Before I got my answer, I went on:

“He is probably alone, wrinkled and grey-haired, in his enormous villa. Alone. Alfred has died a long time ago, may his soul rest in peace. Is mister Wayne thinking about his adventures? Is he haunted by his memories? Or does he sit by the window in his dark study, watching groups of people wandering off into the night, chasing simple pleasures, while he drinks his expensive whiskey? Probably a Macallan 50”

I finished my sentence. Aleksandar was looking at me with confusion in his eyes.

I got up and petted his shoulder friendly: “If you want to write about movies, you should try and think in images more.”

It was time to show him around the company. We left the office. I told him I had to return, because I forgot my mobile phone, but I went to take a sip of vodka. Chekhov deserves to be respected, after all. Even lying comes a bit easier than.

Our workspace was located on the second floor of a large building. It looked quite impressive, with the best equipment, occupying around 400 square meters. I took my future colleague through the studio floor, explaining our work process. I showed him where is the production, and where are the logistics: computers, cables, kitchen, chill-out zone, restrooms, balcony if he was a smoker, even though I smoked in my office. I didn't say anything about Nikolina, whom we ran into on.

I returned to my office with my newfound protégé. I was the person who was supposed to pass their knowledge and experience on to Aleksandar. But what can I teach him, really? Especially, having in mind that I myself roam around, stumbling in the gloom of this thing they call life.

Aleksandar, whose new nickname was Alex, however, was not stingy with words of praise regarding the workspace we just toured around. In his defense, everything one could see seemed modern, classy and sophisticated.

Impressive.

But, like anything else in the world, the company hid within itself some deep opposites. The dark side of the Moon.

Essentially, it was like a farmer's market. Guys from the IT department knew all the secrets about the girls from branding. The girls from branding pretended they were not interested in the guys from IT. Everyone knew everything about everyone. It didn't matter whether any of that was true. I was quite sure there was a rumor going around that I had a drinking problem. Maybe they were right.

I gave Aleksandar a routine task – to write several critics about movies I assumed he had never seen. Anything produced before 1995: 'Days of Wine and Roses', 'The Lost Weekend', 'Clean and Sober'. That was one of the means I used to find out how much a person is truly interested in movies, or if they've just seen 'The Avengers' a few days ago and they thought it was the best movie ever made.

"I am sorry, I haven't watched these movies." - Aleksandar said in confusion.

"None of them?" – I pretended I was surprised.

"Well, no. Unfortunately." – he went on, blushing.

To end his discomfort, and to finally give him something to do, fearing he will want to continue talking to me, I acted decisively. I took the role of his supervisor. That

kind of attitude will help him accept the discomfort as an everyday thing. That's what they thought us. Wrongly. I always think it's not difficult to be kind.

"Here is what we'll do – watch the movies from the list at home. Download them, stream them, find a way. Go to the cinematheque if nothing else. Now just write a review for any movie of your own choice."

"Any movie?"

"Yes. Any."

"But maybe you haven't seen it." – he said, catching his breath.

"It's not decisive whether I've seen it or not." – I looked him in the eye, knowing he will notice big black circles surrounding them.

"The point is, whatever you write needs to be catchy, if you know what I mean. It doesn't matter if you write that you've seen the worst movie ever or 'The Godfather 2'. What's written should be interesting and likable to the average Joe. It should make sense. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course!" – he said by default right away. A kind of bluff even I used at the beginning of my career.

The positioning of computers in my office was organized in such a way that I had visual control over other people's computer screens while no one saw the contents of mine. Although, whenever I can, I try to minimize my conceitedness, I realize it does matter in which position you are. Even the boss, when he criticized me, knew my worth.

Aleksandar was sweating, starring at the blank page, just like I saw a blank mess on my first workday.

There is a certain fear of an empty page that needs to be filled. I don't think anyone has overcome that initial fear. It's the same mystery all writers and people who like to scribble a couple of words together encounter. A mystery that only Sherlock Holmes could solve, while on his usual doze of opium.

I left him to try and write something. Maybe he knew a thing or two. It's easier to reach knowledge when there is no one hovering over your head. I got back to my ongoing work. I was surfing the internet, looking for new movies that could be interesting and worth writing a review about.



"You make me want to be a better man." – As Good as It Gets

4

Hollywood stopped making good movies at beginning of the second millennium. After 'American Beauty', everything went downhill. Even the hotshots in Hollywood started playing it safe.

In addition to movies about superheroes, it seemed that it was lucrative to make sequels. As soon a movie was out and it made a decent amount of money, they would immediately make a sequel. Disregarding the fact whether that sequel was needed as a continuation of an idea or not. Sequels worked as long as they were making money. It's like they had a formula. Sometimes I would watch a movie, and afterwards I was not able to remember what I watched – the same thing or part II, III or IV? I was unable to resist the pursuit for meaning. Basically, all the earthly things are definitely finite. Extend them a bit more? Why not?

Scandinavian cinematography was becoming increasingly good, ever since the moment Christopher Nolan made a remake of a Norwegian movie 'Insomnia' with the same title, with Al Pacino and the great Robin Williams. They were peaking now. In addition to movies, they made excellent TV shows: 'Broen' and 'Forbrydelsen' come to mind. They were just as good as the American TV shows, which have become more serious than American movies. It seemed that TV shows were created for an audience of more refined taste.

Meanwhile, my thoughts drifted off to Nikolina, so I looked up her Facebook page.

I can still remember her profile photo. She was more beautiful in reality.

The point of every serious Facebook search comes down to one thing: you go directly to photos and look for an album titled 'Seaside' or 'Summer vacation' of as recent date as possible. Trust me, you can learn a whole lot from that album. The problem arose if there was no such album, as it was the case.

I was condemned to skimming through random photos. I saw photos with girlfriends, photos of boring interiors, exotic food, photos with the same guys, and photos of animals. Then, of her drinking juice, or eating lasagna... Pretty much what every girl has in her profile. Disappointed with the lack of album (seaside), I got back to mindlessly browsing the internet. I had to finish my last review.

The day was passing. By the end of the workday, Aleksandar sent me the review he did. I promised I would read it by tomorrow and give him some feedback.

Never do today that which you can do tomorrow.

I sent him off home. As soon as he left, I took a few swigs of vodka. As I was leaving, I noticed that Nikolina's desk was empty. Too bad, she left before me. But, what would I even tell her if she was here? Would I manage it? Would there be anything else we could talk about, other than mindless work-related topics? How many employees speak only about that even outside of the confounds of the office?

Empty words.

The boss wasn't in his office, which was an everyday occurrence, as he usually spent less than half of the workday there. The remaining time he spent, like a normal person, hanging out at casinos and pubs. Chilling.



“Lads, you'll sleep enough when you're dead and buried. You have to get out on the streets. You have to talk to a stranger. Drink a beer for breakfast. Take the ugliest girl home from the party. You'll be surprised what'll fall in your lap if you open up and embrace life...” – Scrubs

5

Our studio was located in the old part of town. The city aspired to become a metropolis, but it seemed that the decay started earlier. The pubs, where something they now called music was blasting, were always full. Kids were fighting with no regard to old-school rules. Respect for the elders disappeared a long time ago. Buying and reading books too. It seemed there was nothing left to rely on anymore.

As a boy I liked hanging out with older guys. There were junkies and sports hooligans, but there was a sense of order. After a fight, everyone would go for a drink together. If some of the grownups told me to go and buy them a beer, cigarettes or a porn magazine, a ‘no’ was not an option. Of course, they would provide the money.

I hate it when I see a sign in a shop: “Sale of alcohol and cigarettes to minors is prohibited by law.” Whoever came up with that didn’t think of the parents who sent their children to do the shopping. How can a kid buy beer and cigarettes for their dad now? And what if the parent is handicapped? Back in the day, if a kid bought cigarettes and a 6 pack, the salesperson would respond with: “Is that all, neighbor?”

Accumulation of prohibitions leads to anarchy. Generally, whoever wants more order is about to get more disarray. Only those who do not watch do not see that.

As I was driving home in my old Fiat, I was observing people around me, an old habit. When I saw a couple on the street, I wondered how long have they been together, whether they are in love, how many times has he supported her, failed her, stuff like that. That makes a tedious journey somewhat interesting.

I lived not far from the office, and yet I went home by car. Partly due to a habit, but mostly due to my laziness. I never cared for walks, or the advice of nutritionists and

life coaches. Whenever someone said: "I'm going for a walk.", I would think there was something wrong with them. What is the point of going for a walk? They say it's healthy. If you want to engage in a healthy living style, go for a run, or even better a swim. There is practically no chance of running into a nosy acquaintance when you go swimming. There are ways to get from point A to point B without burdensome thinking about habits.

I lived in a studio loft apartment.

Through the windows, all I could see were pigeons and towers of surrounding churches. The studio was quite expensive, modern equipped. I like comfort and peace. I'm not a snob. The stale smell of cigarettes and scraps of ordered food made for some sort of equilibrium. In addition to that, it hasn't been cleaned for a few months – an activity I used to practice.

In a corner, next to my computer, there was a stack of unfinished scripts I used to work on from time to time. I haven't finished anything so far. It all stopped with an initial idea and a few pages of elaboration. The rest of it swam slowly somewhere in my head, waiting for my attention.

As hard as it is to start something new, it seems it's even harder to finish what you've started.

For a while I studied Capablanca's chess endgames, which threw me even further off balance. There was an order of right moves in his thinking. What about in life?

My computer was always on, like in flight control. In the country where I lived, internet laws were quite mild. By that I mean non-existent. Every movie, TV show, video game, literally anything could be downloaded from the internet. In the West, for something like that I would probably share a prison cell in Stadelheim, with Fritz, the man who held his daughters locked in the basement for several years.

I sat at the computer, going through my search history. Via few porn websites I followed my ex-girlfriend's work. She became one of the most desired porn actresses in three years, since she moved to USA. Her stage name now is Jada Ivy.

Once again, I remembered the night she left. We were both on the verge of tears. She was sorry she was leaving, and I said I would support her in anything she wanted to do. In hindsight, I must admit that was not exactly what I had in mind, but since I am a big supporter of ideas of peace, openness and tolerance, I decided to move past my own prejudice and truly support her. The devil, Mr. Crash, who I kept seeing from time to time danced a jig. I heard his hooves scraping the asphalt when Jovana and I parted.

Before watching her videos, a drink was a must. Without the relaxing effect of alcohol, I was unable to observe the girl I was still in love with satisfying another man or woman.

Honestly, scenes with women were much easier for me to watch.

If someone tells you they don't watch porn – they're lying. To appear cool in the eyes of other people or to lie to themselves. Personally, I was so familiar with the subject I was able to name around 20 actresses and even a few actors. Even if you woke me up from a drunken stupor, I was still able to name at least 9.

I found a half-full bottle of rakia in the fridge. I set by the computer and played a few videos. At first it was not easy to watch. But, as alcohol started to kick in, the scenes seemed funnier and less personal. I knew Jovana well and I knew exactly when she was acting, and when she wasn't. She always acted, but in a few scenes, it was obvious she was truly enjoying herself. I stayed clear from those videos because I believed that was not possible without me.

It's a nice feeling, lying to yourself.

After yet another wasted night, and having in mind there was no rakia left, I decided it was time to go to sleep. I tottered to my bed, which was extremely easy in a studio where the action of crawling to the bed is a short and easy task. I dropped to my pillow and closed my eyes. Oddly enough, thoughts about Nikolina started popping out. I imagined her lips moving, without bothering with what she was saying.

My brain, inspired by the porn I just watched and rakia I consumed, couldn't stop thinking about the things Nikolina and I could be doing now. A gift from Jovana?

That night, I slept peacefully.



"Looks like I picked the wrong week to quit sniffing glue." – Airplane!

6

Everything is easier after Monday. A striking day after a sleepless weekend. I was more productive on a Tuesday. My hangover was slowly fading, although it often lingered until Wednesday. I was reenergizing. Aleksandar was doing well. Was it due to my supervision or his talent? He was taking on more work, which meant I was able to dedicate my time to more important things. I stated exchanging messages with Nikolina using a company chat.

Communication through online chats has certain advantages in comparison to a live conversation. As if there are no jitters. We were able to exchange pictures, songs, funny gifs, and all those things younger generations use to substitute immediate communication. Although there was a plaster wall between us, I felt our relationship was becoming more intimate. I spent more time with my eyes pointed toward the screen, and less toward the shelf with Chekhov's books. I awaited her every reply impatiently.

And then a Friday came. The day all the employees, the human resources, look forward to. Another weekend when a normal worker can forget wearing out of their own life, at least for two days. A window between work and more work. For most it meant hanging out over drinks. As for a couple of years I was an integral part of that machinery, I was also coming up with my secret evil plans.

"Any plans for tonight?"- I wrote to Nikolina just before the end of business hours.

"I'm going for a beer with Milica." – she replied promptly.

"I though you and I could go for a beer, but OK. Some other time..."

The three dots at the end of the sentence suggested I was expecting an answer, as much as I understood chatting.

"We already made plans. You can join us if you want?!" – she wrote.

This was an explicit invitation.



"The weekend has landed. All that exists now is clubs, drugs, pubs and parties. I've got 48 hours off from the world, man. I'm gonna blow steam out my head like a screaming kettle, I'm gonna talk ood shit to strangers all night, I'm gonna lose the plot on the dancefloor. The free radicals inside me are freakin', man! Tonight I'm Jip

Travolta, the Peter Popper, I'm going to never-never land with my chosen family, man. We're gonna get more spaced out than Neil Armstrong ever did, anything could happen tonight, you know? This could be the best night of my life. I've got 73 quid in my back burner - I'm gonna wax the lot, man! The Milky Bars are on me! Yeah!" – Human Traffic

7

In the last few years, as far as co-workers are concerned, I spent most time with two producers. People refer to them as the Blond and the Dark-haired one. They both had brow hair, however. Blond was a bit chubby, shorter, blue-eyed, with freckles. Dark-haired was thin, tall and with a bit darker complexion. They enjoyed partying. We usually got drunk together when we collectively went pub crawling.

Our company organized official parties every year. Usually near the end of the summer, while the dresses are still short, and cold white wine spritzer is a natural substitute for lemonade.

A few years back, the restaurant was by the river, with a spacious terrace for dancing. The protocol was always identical. Dejan gave one of his motivational speeches. The newbies were thrilled, they stood in front rows, while we, the experienced ones, set in the background, enjoying our drinks.

After that, there was socializing, music, and dance. Employed slaves acting like free people.

I never liked a crowd, so I usually sat with my buddies. We ordered drink after drink. Blond was sitting next to me, when Dark-haired tottered to our table.

"Wanna go outside and roll one? – Dark-haired asked, already tipsy.

"Sure. Who's got it?" – Blond sobered up for a moment.

"Does it matter? Let's go out to the balcony before it's gone." – Blond rushed us.

They both looked at me, as if they expected my permission. Since the spritzer had no effect, maybe some other substance will work better? Unfortunately, they did not serve the cocktail 'Brain Damage'.

"Let's go. This wine has no effect, anyway." – I concluded.

After a few puffs, I felt even worse. I never took well to the pot. I returned to the table. I felt dizzy. I grabbed the passing waiter's sleeve and asked him to bring me rakia. It was time to make a hard switch.

After he brought me a bottle of rakia, instead of a glass, I estimated the waiter as a good and decent man and tipped him, although everything was paid for. Combination of spritzer and rakia, amplified with the after-effects of pot had me running for the restroom. I got up and lost my balance a bit, but as any experienced drunkard I remained on my feet.

The way to the restroom led me through a sweaty group of co-workers. Mission impossible at first glance, pretending to be somewhat sober, while I was tottering among people, like a ball in a pinball machine, colliding with walls. I felt like I was in a Guy Richie movie. Primarily, the scene from 'Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels', when a guy loses everything in a game of poker and leaves the premises. It was very acceptable.

The restroom seemed tidy. After the job was done, I stood in front of a mirror. I looked fantastic, an epitome of everything a lady would desire. Or did I?

"Excuse me! This is the ladies!" – I heard a voice, with a slight crescendo, behind my back. I noticed Milica in the mirror.

"Really? It did seem weird there were no urinals." – I replied. In order to make things right I added: "There is toilet paper inside, don't worry."

Another co-worker entered and discredited my calming reaction. I realized it was time to leave before the screaming starts. With a deep bow to the ladies, I left the room.

I spent some time with everyone else on the dance floor. There was general delight, caused by the magnificent antics of the DJ. I didn't quite understand what genre the music we were listening to belonged to, but it was definitely at around 90 and 100 decibels. When the light started turning on, I was sweaty and thirsty. Sadly, they stopped serving drinks. My co-workers were standing in little groups outside, discussing where to go next. I was unable to spot those two, but I did see my good friend, the waiter, heading toward the kitchen.

I followed and entered behind him. Cooks, waiters and cleaners were already halfway done with cleaning everything up for the next party.

The waiter put down his tray, filled with some empty glasses and full ashtrays, but there were also two almost-full beers. When biology speaks, the ethios listen. With self-esteem provided by the previously consumed alcohol, I walked through the kitchen with the grace of Baryshnikov, grabbed both bottles, hoping no one will notice. My action was seen just by a few employees, at least five by the bottle.

In front of the restaurant, people were discussing where to continue their well-deserved mental relaxation. I was rather drunk, and the night was young. It certainly seemed that way to me. I was about to take my phone and call Blond and Dark-haired, but then I saw a taxi, in which two couples were just entering. So, I entered with them.

Irresistible need for movement and socializing is typical for inebriation. I sat in the front and in the back seat, left of me, an unknown guy addressed me with “dear teacher”, “coach”, and “master”. Bourgeois conventions of introductions were unnecessary; we all agreed we’re going downtown, to the city center, where any good party goes to die. The taxi driver stepped on it and turned up the music.

The lights were flickering, music rode the wind, the earth was spinning. Laughter was mixing with music. I thought the driver was speeding in comparison to regulations, but no one seemed to care. After a few sharp turns, nausea, powerlessness and anxiety started. The bliss from just a moment ago was replaced by the cruel reality. I did have a drink too much.

“Driver. Stop, I’m not feeling well!” – I mumbled.

At first the driver didn’t take me seriously, but after scanning my face he hit the brakes and lowered the window. I stuck my head out. An enormous relief followed. Pieces of food, mixed with some drink, were sliding down the door of the car onto the pavement. After a moment of silence, my co-passengers started laughing hysterically. I wiped my face with my sleeve.

A touch of class.

“Are you alright?” – The taxi driver asked.

“Ofcourselameverythingisfine” – I mumbled something that resembled a sentence.

Realizing I am definitely losing interest for any further fun, I took out my wallet and gave him a 500 dinar bill. He looked at me unkindly as I was getting out, he will have

to wash his car after all. But at least he will not have to wash it on the inside, just outside.

Some people are simply ungrateful.

I stumbled out of the car and set on the curb. As the car was driving away from me, I noticed that there was no taxi sign on the roof. I felt bad for giving the driver 500 dinars.

But that was a couple years ago. I'm sure Milica doesn't even remember our encounter from the bathroom.



"We are men! Throughout history, we have always needed, in times of difficulty, to retreat to our caves. It so happens that in this modern age, our caves are fully plumbed. The toilet is, for us, the last bastion, the final refuge, the last few square feet of man-space left to us! Somewhere to

sit, something to read, something to do, and who gives a damn about the smell? Because that, for us, is happiness. Because we are men. We are different. We have only one word for soap. We do not own candles. We have never seen anything of any value in a craft shop. We do not own magazines full of pictures of celebrities with all their clothes on. When we have conversations, we actually take it in turns to talk! But we have not yet reached that level of earth-shattering boredom and inhuman despair that we would have a haircut recreationally. We don't know how to get excited about... really, really boring things, like ornaments, bath oil, the countryside, vases, small churches. I mean, we do not even know what, what in the name of God's arse is the purpose of pot-pourri! Looks like breakfast, smells like your auntie! Why do we need that? So please, in this strange and frightening world, allow us one last place to call our own. This toilet, this blessed pot, this...Fortress of Solitude. You girls, you may go to the bathroom in groups of two or more. Yet we do not pass comment. We do not make judgement. That is your choice. But we men will always walk the toilet mile... alone". – Coupling

8

Back in the office, I was thinking about my next step. I had this enormous desire to get drunk, right then and there. Everything is easier when you've had a few drinks, although my experience has taught me that a morning drink doesn't cure a hangover – it just postpones it. My thoughts were interrupted by Aleksandar.

"Excuse me, sir."- he said rather politely – "I'm done for today. I've sent you the texts."

"Thank you, Alex. Please, don't address me so formally. I'm not THAT old, yet."

"Alright, then. I'll see you. Boss."

“Yeah, sure. Have fun!”

Aleksandar stepped out of the office. It seemed I managed to send him off home with a smile. When he left, I removed Chekhov's books and grabbed the almost empty bottle. I poured the remaining liquid into my coffee cup and sat comfortably in the chair. I've put my feet up on the table and dozed off. I was awakened by the knock on the door. The cleaning lady made coffee. I respected those so-called 'common' workers, and they knew it.

Later, around dusk, I was sitting in my apartment having a beer. I couldn't get Nikolina out of my mind. I wanted to see her.

But, in order to see her, I had to move. I was sitting in my boxer shorts, silky ones granted, but you will agree that attire is just not good enough.

To my plain shirt, jeans and white 'Convers All Stars' tennis shoes, as always, I added a touch of individuality.

I've always liked bracelets. Every bracelet, expensive or just a ribbon from pieces of fabric, had its own special story. How I got it or where I bought it. What it meant to me.

I always bought one for myself during my travels. Material things can serve as a good reminder.

Places. Moments. Persons. Situations.

Memories.

I took a dark brown leather bracelet I got for my 18th birthday. It was a personal thing, like my own sign, a symbol of positive distinction. That is not an issue easy to explain, but those who understand will understand.

After a short taxi drive, I was standing in front of 'The Ram's Head'. I looked at its neon illuminated inscription. No sense, or a message. What a stupid name for a pub. Let's play: my future pub's name will be called 'A Boar's Tooth'. So far, I have no idea what that would mean, but it sounds kinda catchy.

I was welcomed by the tobacco smoke at the entrance, which was a rarity, because nowadays smoking is banned in most pubs. That is what progress brought us. Watch any movie made before the 1990s and you will see that's just stupid. If someone wants to smoke, it's their business. If someone is bothered by the smoke, they should go outside. Soon, they will ban drinking, and what will we have left?

I made my way through the crowd. Working class heroes were getting a drink on, for a moment trying to forget the struggles of everyday life. Anxiety poured over me

like a draught beer into a mug. What will I say? How should I act? Will I be able to... Fuck! I saw Nikolina and Milica sitting in the corner. There they were. Two very beautiful women, but I had eyes only for one.

Nikolina was having a dark pint. She looked at me and smiled. She embraced me in a hug which lasted a while longer than a hug between co-workers is supposed to. I greeted Milica with a slight bow.

I was trying to hide my anxiety. I think it worked, since we engaged in a conversation so boring that it's not even worth mentioning. Fortunately, the waiter showed up soon enough. I ordered a drink. And then another one.

There is a moment, an elusive one, when I am perfectly drunk. A moment when everything is allowed, when anything can go, every thought can become a reality. In order to make that moment last, I slowed down.

With a lame excuse and some unnecessary further explanation, Milica left us. Nikolina and I were alone at the table.

"How about another beer?" – I wanted her to look at me, and not at her phone.

"It's late. I have to go soon." – She didn't look up.

"Fine. One more drink? I don't like to drink alone." – a white lie I was hoping she believed.

I ordered a large and a small dark pint. She finally put her phone down and turned to me. We were sitting without speaking. Most of the time you can't think of all those things you were so eager to say. However, it was a pleasant silence, the kind that couples which have been in a happy relationship for several years encounter. I lit another cigarette.

"Any plans for later?" – I asked.

"I have to go. I must go home. I don't want to stay too long." – she replied.

"It's only midnight. The night is young!" – I said.

For reasons unknown, people have different perception of the passage of time.

"You're not gonna leave me here alone, are you?" – an unnecessary attempt at humor.

"I'm gonna have to. But we'll get together again!" – she replied, looking at the large, oval clock on the wall. A wooden frame of a clock, with two protrusions on the top, indeed looked like a ram's head after so many drinks.

We finished our beers and started walking toward the exit. I walked her to the taxi. We were talking, laughing, enjoying our time. I was surprised with her sense of humor. I didn't know that side of her. At times sarcastic, but honest wit, with measure.

"So, we'll talk tomorrow, or the day after?" – I asked.

"Okay." – she answered, as she was going through her phone.

And then another hug. A kiss on a cheek. Our first time. One remembers those things always, even many years later. As she was entering a taxi, I couldn't help but keep looking at her through the rear window.



“Tell me Miss Trench, do you play any other games? I mean besides Chemin de fer?” – Dr. No

9

When I got home, I looked at the calendar. I saw that a holiday was tomorrow. The accounting department called and whoever worked would get paid double. I was not that person. Holidays changed every now and then, depending on election results. I still had time to spare. I didn't feel like sleeping yet.

I rang Zdravko and got coordinates of a house party along with brief info on the situation on the field.

I took a taxi smiling, fixing my bow tie and tuxedo lapels. I brought a bottle of expensive chardonnay. I was welcomed by the lady of the house, in a long dress and just the right amount of cleavage, slightly older than myself, with discreet makeup. Charming.

Like a madam from the 18th century.

“Thanks for the wine, you shouldn't have. The gentlemen are in the salon.” – she brought me in through the foyer.

The salon was lit with discreet lightning, in red velvet. The card table was at the far end of the oval room. Zdravko and several other chaps in smart suits were playing preferans. I didn't greet them because I didn't want to disturb the game. I stopped in front of a semi-circular display cabinet with books, bottles of exquisite drinks and crystal glasses. On the first shelf, believe it or not, there were collected works of Anton Pavlovich Chekov, first edition. I smiled. “So, there is someone else in this house that knows me from before”.

Zdravko nodded to me. The first game was completed, he thanked his rivals and got up. I said hello to the guys, as I knew some of them from passing.

“What took you so long? What’s happening?” – Zdravko asked as he approached me, fixing his bowtie. He poured cognac for both of us. I wouldn’t share this with someone else, but he always listened to what I had to say. Honestly listened.

“I went for drinks with a girl from work.” – I answered, offering him a cigarette.

“A girl from work? There’s a development. You haven’t mentioned her before. Is she hot? Do you have vulgar thoughts about her?”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe. It’s not like that.” – I surprised myself with the reply.

“You’re daydreaming and wandering again my friend.” – Zdravko went on honestly. – “What are women for anyway?”

In a way, he was right. The game of nature and sexes cannot be discarded. It’s a matrix. Whatever is to happen, will happen. More of a consolation, then certainty, as it seemed at the moment.

Noticing I got into some deep thoughts, Zdravko changed the topic:

“Do you have any cash for the pot? We’re being expected at the table. I think you might be a sort of a lucky charm right now, because, if you’re not lucky in love... well, you know.”

We set at the table. That was the easiest money we ever won.



“Top five things I miss about Laura. One; sense of humor. Very dry, but it can also be warm and forgiving. And she's got one of the best all time laughs in the history of all time laughs, she laughs with her entire body. Two; she's got character. Or at least she had character before the lan nightmare. She's loyal and honest, and she doesn't even take it out on people when she's

having a bad day. That's character. Three; I miss her smell, and the way she tastes. It's a mystery of human chemistry and I don't understand it, some people, as far as their senses are concerned, just feel like home. I really dig how she walks around. It's like she doesn't care how she looks or what she projects and it's not that she doesn't care it's just, she's not affected I guess, and that gives her grace. And five; she does this thing in bed when she can't get to sleep, she kinda half moans and then rubs her feet together an equal number of times... it just kills me. Believe me, I mean, I could do a top five things about her that drive me crazy but it's just your garden variety women you know, schizo stuff and that's the kind of thing that got me here.” – High Fidelity

10

Love is like luck. You have to go all the way to find it. To deserve it.

I believed that as soon as the next day. I got a message from her. And then another, and another... Like in romantic comedies, from the beginning of the story.

My days were passing by in the state of relaxation and peace. Like the first summer break after a rough school year. I can't remember when was the last time I felt like this. Every day was filled with positive energy. Exchanging messages with Nikolina spread from the company chat onto the coyness of my cell phone.

In the workplace we behaved as if nothing was going on. Hidden looks and smiles. We were building our own world in the midst of everyday life. During that time, I was actually looking forward to going to work.

Monotony was replaced by outpours of energy and creativity. Aleksandar was working enthusiastically, and so did I. It seemed he really was talented.

I wrote a few new reviews that were very well accepted. Even other employees read them, which was never the norm.

I don't remember who sent a message to whom: "See you after work?"

Did I send it to her, she to me, or simultaneously to each other?

Irrelevant.

Our pub, 'Ram's Head'. We got in and set at our table. The place was fairly empty. Just the two of us and some folks around plaid tablecloths, minding their own business.

"Dark pint?" – I asked.

"Sure."

It was the best date in a while. She was laughing, she knew about Bond, Heath Ledger, Hugh Laurie, Dominic Cooper... And then a strange thing happened. She pressed her legs against mine. Intentionally.

I remembered my father's words: "Being a man is not easy. It includes restraint, both in decisions and in actions. The devil likes haste and impatience, the rush and anxiety. Look around. People are running about mindlessly; postponing is an unknown category to them."

He was right. I didn't speak for a while, trying to remain calm. We looked at each other.

"Do you want to walk me home?" – she asked quietly.

"Sure."

It was cold outside, like in a ' Fargo ' episode. We were walking through her neighborhood. It was 2 a.m. – already or just, depends on how you look at it. Dead silence. Around us the city was sleeping. Here and there an odd couple would appear, just like us, trying to snatch a piece of night away from the following day.

I also believe in yesterday, like the lads from Liverpool. Only what has already happened is certain. Future is only now. Tomorrow doesn't exist. Time is a manmade concept anyway.

We entered the corridor of the building she lived in and sat on the stairs. We had a few more cigarettes left. I lit my own, and then hers. Etiquette from the times of matches. She broke the silence:

"There is something you don't know. I've been in a relationship with Dejan for three years. I am sorry." – she said silently – "Everything is so very complicated."

“Relationships are complicated. I honestly don’t care what is going on between the two of you.” – I lied. I couldn’t think of anything better to say.

Of course, I was interested in who she was with. Why with him, and not with me? Eternal question. Possessiveness is a biological category. I was boiling on the inside: may you have something, then lose it! Somehow, I managed to calm down the hurricane of oncoming thoughts.

Wait, I told myself, that’s a completely different thing, far from us. I stirred the conversation toward easier topics. The laughter was back soon. When we ran out of cigarettes it was 4 a.m. Tomorrow was a workday. But who cared about that?

We were standing in front of her door. She was looking for the keys in her bag, and I was looking at her. I came close. Her fragrance was a mixture of beer, cigarettes and Dolce & Gabbana – Light Blue. It was beautiful. I took her by the hair and pulled a strand gently. Our eyes locked.

This is older than us.

Her breathing was heavier. I closed my eyes. We were kissing for a long time. She grabbed the lapel of my coat and took a step back.

“I will see you later.” – she ran inside.

I watched her as she went inside. Did I do something wrong? Hasty? Love has no timetable. I only acted on my feelings. I started walking home as the sleepy sun was rising over the boulevard. Long shadows of buildings were getting lighter.



"I think she's this amazing human being. Never seen anyone like her. The way she talks and looks. She wears these sunglasses, and when she takes them off, her eyes... are like the clouds clearing to let pass the moon. Sometimes I just wanna cry lookin' at her". – Sing Street

11

Despite constantly revisiting my actions in my head, I was at peace. We were exchanging messages all the time, and we were seeing each other outside of the office more and more. Secretly, hidden, we didn't want anyone to suspect there was something going on with us. Business is business... Honestly, she cared about that more than I did.

"Don't expose yourself if you don't have to." – my father used to say. Why should we ruin this with any troublesome publicity? So many people live their lives thinking about others, yet they know nothing about themselves. They feel bad if they are deprived of news and meddling, harming others, and even harming themselves. That's the only way they exist.

Secrecy gives a special kind of magic to a relationship. You know you are doing something you shouldn't be doing, but you can't help yourself. People have always desired that which they cannot have. Their boss's girlfriend, for example. That thing with the apple has been an impossible thing to avoid. They were human, just like us, I guess. Conspirators for the sake of love do no harm.

We were mostly together at night, illuminated by the moonlight, or an odd neon light. We were kissing on the stairs in front of unknown residential buildings, on benches. Between kisses we would talk, open a can of beer, smoke a cigarette. We would laugh.

I remember asking her what would it have been like if Anna Karenina had been sending Vronsky text messages or emails? The protagonist of Tolstoy's novel had

surely been writing letters by her hand on perfumed, rose paper. She would start them with words: "My dear lover..."

I conformed to my emotions. I promised Nikolina I would write her a letter someday. I still haven't. The romantic movies from the beginning of this story were here. I decided to take her out on a proper date. Big things were about to happen. Or so I thought.



"The best way to break old habits is to make new ones." – Clean and Sober

12

Somewhere, around that time, I ran into Jovan Teofanovic. It's been a long time since we saw each other. It appeared to have been the right time. It was what people usually refer to as a chance meeting, but more meaningful. As we were shaking hands, I remembered I had been thinking about him a few days earlier. He was older than me, but we understood each other well. In addition to Zdravko, he was the other one. You know, one of the two.

Whoever has many friends is either wrong or has wandered off into philanthropy. I am not a misanthrope, it's more that I am uninterested and lazy for more frequent contacts. Respectfully, it seemed that I have already heard everything people intend to tell me. Years, even decades of superficial conversations are wasted time. You could compress all that into a mindless one-week tune.

But to what end?

Like myself, Jovan was stuck in the world of capitalism. He was in the business of programming. I honestly don't know what kind, simply because I've never asked him. We had more important topics to talk about. Programmers were very well paid, but they worked hard to earn their money.

He was not a spry person. When we'd sit down, with a bottle of whiskey, usually John Daniels, neither of us spoke much. Sometimes he would plug in his guitar into his home amp and play 'The Girl from Ipanema' flawlessly. This time too, as if we've seen each other only yesterday, he asked me in a relaxed manner if I was up for a field trip to a winery in Irig.

Of course. A chance to run away from so-called reality. Iron Maiden was blasting from the speakers as we were leaving the city behind us.

A small town of Irig is a lovely place in the mountains, about half an hour drive from the city. As I've never been on a tour around wineries, I created an image of what it should look like in my head. I was imagining a huge metal gate with the name of the winery incised in the middle. We were to be greeted by the hostesses and then escorted through the enormous wine cellar filled with different sorts of wine. A sommelier, in a perfect three-piece suit, would be explaining to us vividly the origin and the process of fermentation, as we tasted the offered sample...

Jovan stopped his car in front of an ordinary wooden gate in the center of Irig.

"We've arrived!" – he said as he turned off the engine.

"This is it? This is the winery? It doesn't look like one." – I was surprised.

As we've entered the courtyard, a small, red and yellow dog greeted us, wagging the tail. Mutts have always been the best dogs.

The owner stepped out of the big old house, covered with so-called paper roof tiles. An older man with a three-day grey beard, but with posture as if he were younger than us.

"Jovan? What took you so long? I've been waiting all day for you!" – the owner said with a smile.

"Here we are, we got held up at work. You know how things are." – Jovan excused us.

"Lads, you'll work too much until you're dead and buried. You have to get out on the streets. You have to talk to a stranger. Drink wine for breakfast. Sometimes you have to stop and enjoy yourselves."

"That's why we're here!" – Jovan said.

Our host opened a large wooden door that led us to a place directly out of a Jules Verne novel, hidden near the center of the earth. I expected a huge wine cellar, an industry... What I discovered was infinitely better than that.

A small cellar – with oval walls and ceiling, made completely from bricks, with old wooden barrels on the sides. One of them had a year engraved in it: 1924. On the other side there were modern metal barrels, with the names of grape varieties written on them.

"What shall we taste?" – the owner asked us, as he was polishing up the wine glasses with a cotton cloth.

"I will have some Merlot, and my friend will have some Hamburg, the best to start with." – Jovan said, smiling.

Hamburg flowed from the barrel with the grace of a splendid red waterfall. I took the glass and raised it toward the lamp on the wall. Rays of light were refracting through the fluid. The palette of colors was changing as if it just passed through a rainbow. We raised our glasses in a toast. That Hamburg was the best rosé I've ever tasted. Unlike wines that are often ingested as a shortcut to altering one's state of consciousness, this one was meant to be consumed with pleasure.

After rosé, I tasted Merlot, Chardonnay, Zupljanka (made from an autochthonous grape variety). The owner left us for a moment. Jovan and I remained down there. The scent of the old cellar and the taste of the exquisite wine left me in a feeling of trance.

"Do you know how we call this cellar?" – Jovan asked me, as he was observing his Merlot.

"Heaven on Earth?" – I replied, as I was slowly drinking up the wine.

"No. Although, you are close. We call it 'the capsule'. When you come in here, you feel as if the time stops." – Jovan said.

It really did seem like time stopped. For a moment we forgot our daily struggles. Furthermore, it was becoming clear there were none. Most struggles people deal with are imaginary, the real issues get buried. We were enjoying the wine.

The owner returned: "You boys look like you could enjoy a little snack!"

Enter ham, pork sausage, cheese and pastry. The evening was getting increasingly better. I don't know how long we've stayed in 'the capsule'. We were laughing and telling different stories from our lives. I learned a few things about wine making from the owner. I gained a new respect for the work these people do. Especially this kind, who make wine primarily to enjoy it with their friends, and not necessarily to make money from it.

At some point, the lady of the house opened the door.

"Are you getting into the house, it's late?" – she asked her husband, after she greeted us.

"Leave me alone, I'm with my guests." – he told her, not harshly at all.

That sentence was enough, her head disappeared from the door and we returned to the wine. After a few more glasses I was moderately woozy. This was no ordinary

drunkenness. It was not an attempt to escape reality. The feeling was great, merry. The drunkenness from a fairy tale.

“I’m sorry about the missus, she just cares about me too much. I love her to death! What shall we pour?” – the owner asked us after who knows which glass.

“What will you take?” – Jovan looked at me.

„Hamburg!“ – I yelled like a king after winning a battle!

“Pour six liters of Hamburg for him. I will have ten liters of Merlot, six liters of Chardonnay, four liters of Zupljanka and add four more liters of Hamburg.”

“Isn’t that a bit too much?” – I asked Jovan.

“Of course not. You must have supplies. What if floods or avalanches start tomorrow, and I am not able to leave my apartment for a week, and there is no wine?”

“In that case, I will have ten liters of Hamburg as well!” – I decided I would also stock my own supplies.

It was late when we said goodbye to the kind host. I had no idea how long we’ve stayed there. And I didn’t care. We filled the trunk with bottles. A heavenly scene: wines of different colors – red, rosé, white. They were glowing like fireflies in the moonlight.

*Jovan still claims that I drove us home,
but I don't buy it. Was it us or someone
else? The question remains open.*



"Isn't everything we do in life a way to be loved a little more?" – Before Sunrise

13

I needed a few more things to pull off the perfect date with Nikolina. I had my car, a stereo system was a must, a blanket and a few pillows were already taken care of. All I was missing was the 'serum of truth'. And now I had it – that is the name we gave to the Hamburg wine.

I let Nikolina know I had a surprise for her.

She previously told me she didn't like surprises, but I managed to tickle her imagination. I don't even know how I did it. It appears I can be persuasive enough when the right opportunity presents itself.

She arrived at the previously arranged time. We hugged and smiled.

"Where are we going?" – she asked after a kiss.

"All information will be given on a need-to-know basis". I opened the door of the Fiat for her and played 'The Beatles Instrumental Relaxing Music'.

Just for the fun of it, I asked her to put a scarf over her eyes. She agreed with an inviting smile.

After about ten minutes, I stopped the car and led her out. The wind was blowing as I held her hand, guiding her to the spot that was waiting for us. Eventually, I removed the scarf from her eyes. She didn't say anything for the next few moments.

There is a spot, just outside the city, with an amazing view. Watching from the hill over the river and the bridge crossing it, and somewhere far away, there was civilization. Only a few people know about it.

Incredible.

People go to Bali, Maldives or Dominicana, and merely a kilometer beeline from the center of their own hometown, miracles are already possible. The sky was full of stars. Only the lights from the bridge and city lights from across the river were coming to us. I used to come here to rest from my thoughts. This was the first time I brought someone along. Some good people have made a wooden bench which we sat on.

"I don't know what to say. It's beautiful!" – Nikolina was silent.

"You don't have to say anything."

Cars were crossing the bridge over the big, dark river. The lights sliding en route to an unknown destination. The sound of engines doesn't reach this place. The only thing we could hear was the howl of the wind, playing with her hair.

I bought the blanket from my car, a bottle of wine and two wine glasses. I've put the blanket around her shoulders. I gave her the glasses to hold them while I pour Hamburg. I sat next to her.

"Cheers."

She tasted the wine. We were alone together, watching over the big river and the city, under the same blanket. Anticipation of a shelter for two? As the peace of a future home?

"I've never been here." – she was looking toward the bridge, into the void.

"Sometimes I come here to rest my mind." – I said. "The feeling of space, distance. I don't know."

"You must have brought every girl here." – she said, chuckling.

"No. You are the first."

I don't know if she believed me or not. It doesn't matter. I usually try to be honest.

Bliss and peace were broken by the ring of her phone. She distanced herself from the bench so I couldn't hear the words. I wouldn't have eavesdropped anyways. I was interested in her life, but not like that.

When she returned, she said she had to go.

"It's alright." – I said.

As I was packing up the stuff, she seemed nervous, pensive. We headed toward the town over the same bridge we were observing from the hill moments earlier. From a distance it looked like the hill Sean Connery climbed in the movie of the same name. The magic of the place disappeared behind us.



"I woke up this morning with a hangover and a sore wrist." – Spin City

14

The desire to drink and the need for alcohol diminished. It appears that the problem of addiction to substances, which are supposed to induce the feeling of happiness, was overestimated. It was easy to abandon something if you had the right motivation.

After a long while, I was getting up fresh and well-rested, ready for work. Days when I couldn't wake up, when I was beaten, hungover, with bad thoughts and nausea were behind me. I knew coming to work would bring me yet another meeting with her.

Aleksandar and I had become an excellent tandem. We were writing together and completed each other's sentences. Our reviews were fantastic, judging by the readers' comments. Dejan was pleased, and he invited me to his office to talk. I passed by Nikolina's desk. Lightly, without anyone noticing, I ran my fingers through her hair and very gently pulled a strand. We didn't say hello, but I caught her secret smile in the corner of my eye.

Unlike my office, Dejan's was much spacious. He was the boss, after all. I sat opposite him. Between us, a massive rosewood desk. In my head a thought – does he know?

"Morning, boss. You wanted to see me?" – I said, trying to hide my discomfort.

“Listen, you have been doing a good job lately. Everyone is extremely satisfied.” – he looked me in the eye.

Dejan always had *the talk*, and he didn’t like pussyfooting. He knew exactly what he wanted and what he intended to say. I admired that about him.

“I decided to give you a raise.”

“Thank you, boss. I didn’t see that coming.” – I tried to appear modest.

“The reviews have been excellent lately. Keep up the good work. This is a small incentive from me.”

“Sure. Thanks a lot.” – I was sincerely grateful.

“Now get out and get back to work.” – Dejan ended the conversation in his style.

On my way out I saw Nikolina. My smile told her everything was fine. Without a word I returned to my office. The policy of the company was that employees mustn’t tell each other how much money they make. It was top secret. If the word came out that someone was discussing it, they would probably get fired on the spot.

I sat by the computer and continued surfing. For the inconvertant, if there are any, the internet is a beautiful place where you can find anything. You just need to know where to look. Also, it is very important to know what to avoid. For example: ‘important’ websites that publish news and similar stuff where you can’t learn anything smart, should be avoided. I preferred reddit.



"- Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

- What are you doing?

- This is the first day of the rest of your life, but what kind of life will it be? Will it be a life of fear? Of, oh, no, no, no. I can't do this. Of never once believing in yourself?" - Breaking Bad

15

The following week, I got an invitation from Nikolina on chat. She was throwing a party in her apartment. She was having her friends, co-workers, old business associates over. Dejan, as I was aware, was away on a business trip.

I started getting ready for that night as soon as I got home. I got dressed without hurrying, I played 'Handle with Care', and watched a few of Jovana's videos. I placed a dark red and grey, thin leather bracelet on my arm.

The gathering at Nikolina's was planned for nine o'clock in the evening. I wanted to be at her place already at seven, but I've adopted the be-reticent attitude. I had a beer, and then headed there with a bottle of good old Hamburg, as a present. It was ten in the evening. The ideal time, I thought. When I stepped into her apartment, I gave her the bottle of wine. She pretended not to recognize it.

A lady's gesture.

The apartment was cozy, with images of her and her family, several plush toys and mementos on the refrigerator. It looked inviting and tranquil. A place where I could imagine spending the rest of my life.

Among the guests there were a couple of people I knew from work. I sat with them at the beginning. We touched upon a few common topics and there was no need for formalities.

However, as the party was informal, the seats were not assigned, and people were running around like in a game of dodgeball. After a few drinks, I started moving too. Somehow, Nikolina and I finally sat together. As we sat, our legs started touching again. Encouraged by copious amounts of alcohol, the guests became increasingly relaxed. Bad jokes and loud laughter without a reason engulfed the room. Requests for songs on YouTube were being shouted one after another.

This is common for all house parties: guests in various stages of drunkenness have their own music requests. They interrupt each other, so that the average duration of, usually a techno tune fortunately lasts less than a minute. Simultaneous conversations, or rather speeches, and vain laughter are another staple. Those that don't drink can hardly participate.

The night was long. At the end, guests started heading to their homes, or towards better destinations. The acquaintances from the beginning of the party called a taxi. I looked over at Nikolina talking to her girlfriends. Just the usual: "See you".

We headed toward the exit. As a proper hostess, she walked us out. The handshake was a tad longer and stronger than usual. I saw a puzzle in her eyes, something I was unable to interpret but wanted badly to solve. I got into the elevator and went down with the others. A taxi was waiting.

I looked up, toward her window, as if I knew which one it was, before I got into the car. The gang in the taxi agreed on final destinations and we were on our way. I was bummed, disappointed, as if I expected more. In the distribution of addresses, by chance, or blind luck, I was the last one. As I arrived in front of my residential building, I got a text:

"Come back."

I didn't waste time. I yelled: "Drive back"! The taxi driver promptly hit the gas, and, after a few traffic violations, he got to the point we started from. He was older, perhaps he recognized the glow in my eyes.

I stood in front of her place a few moments, just to smoke a cigarette.

How could I have such divided feelings when I knew what I wanted?

What should I do at her place?

What was I hoping to achieve?

Am I in love?

Eventually, I threw the cigarette bud away and headed to the entrance. In the elevator, I was looking at the mirror, making sure I looked decent. Of course.

The elevator stopped.

I had no idea what was waiting for me after I rang the doorbell. Maybe this, maybe that, maybe Dejan waiting behind the door with a knife, ready to end me with a swift shiv to the neck. Even that seemed like a good option. I rang the bell. It doesn't matter what happens next.

Nikolina opened the door. We kissed, without saying a word.

It's amazing how spontaneously it all happened. The Americans sometimes claim people need to be more spontaneous. That's rubbish, you either are, or you aren't. It can't be taught.

We took our clothes off, or rather ripped them off from our bodies. I was unable to break away from her lips, and I didn't want to. It was, by far, the nicest thing I felt during the past few years. I wanted it more than I was able to explain to myself.

I remember we rolled naked around the bed, which was moving so much that we probably woke up the neighbors. After a few hours, we fell asleep at the same time, holding each other.

Naked poetry.



"Falling in love is a crazy thing to do. It's kind of like a form of socially acceptable insanity." – Her

16

The light, with its ribbed rays, shattered through the shutters and woke me up. Nikolina was watching TV. A rerun of 'La vita è bella' I believe. Thank god, it was the weekend. I got up and hugged her, smiling. Reality struck us, briefly.

"Are you hungry?" – she asked. "I can't cook now, let's order something."

"Okay. Do you have a guilty pleasure place? I guess we deserve some junk food after the night we had." – I smirked.

"There is this place, called Brickwood. They are a pizza joint mainly, but they have amazing crisp garlic potatoes!"

"Sure. Sounds good." – then I turned off my phone.

I avoided other people's calls, even friends. By good fortune, she neglected her phone too. We were kissing too much to be bothered by the outside world.

And, just like that, Sunday evening. As if it lasted a month. However, a working Monday was ahead of us. She offered me to stay over. Something that appeared so natural. We fell asleep holding each other.

A softly set sound of the alarm clock woke us up. After a weekend like this, it was surprisingly easy to get up. On the way to work, as a safety measure, I got out one turn earlier and walked to the office. I probably had no reason for such a maneuver, but I remembered my father's words: "Don't expose yourself if you don't have to."

According to the texts we've exchanged, we were supposed to meet later that day. I got out at the end of the shift, lit a cigarette and saw her.

I headed toward her, but she was looking in a different direction, she didn't want to see me. A familiar white car stopped next to her. A Bentley. She sat inside and kissed the driver, Dejan.

Not as passionately as she would have kissed me, I assured myself, but a kiss is a kiss. The thoughts started rushing. Is that it? Will we see each other again? Is it done? Does she need all this?

Maybe I should have told her to simply break up with Dejan and be with me, but that idea isn't ripe yet. First of all, I didn't know the details of their relationship, nor did I want to know.

At the same time, I myself had a few undefined, as they say, *partner issues*. Which is a euphemism for complicated, intricate and hopeless relationships.

Romantically I was in a murky place, mainly due to my situation with Jovana. I've been having conflicting feelings – that it was all over, and that I was free, but then immediately I would renew any request for friendship. I was hoping for some sort of future consolidation of our relationship.

Closure.

The devil's laughter was recurring, and the scraping of hooves got louder. The unprovoked thought of the end. I wasn't even fully grown, and I was absolutely aware of the transience. I thought of us, the pre-failed protagonists of those messed up relationships.

Only he was satisfied. The Devil. Mister Crash.

Eeriness. Nothingness. We are all but actors, instilled in a play, that is inevitably ending miserably. When the brain starts dealing with whose kind of thoughts, there is no stopping it, except in the nearest pub.

That is where the working class is. The human resources, as they say today.

I always had respect for those people. Factory workers, bricklayers, electricians. They've all come for one or many beers, before going back to their home sweet homes. There was a particularly important sentence they used before each new round of drinks.

"Fine, but just one more."

I set down in the corner and ordered a beer. I had some money and cigarettes. I was sufficiently supplied. I had no idea what the next move was or if there was even one. I felt bad.

I arrived home. Agitated from seeing the sight of Nikolina with Dejan, I opened the fridge and found rakia. There was just the right amount to calm down my thoughts. I lay in bed and watched the ceiling spinning out of control until I fell asleep.



*“Rakiju ne pijem,
ali vinjak derem”. –
Kad porastem biću
Kengur*

*“I don't drink
rakia, but I drown in
Vinjak!” - When I
grow up I'll be a
kangaroo.*

*More on Vinjak, the magical
drink from Serbia, in later
chapters!*

17

Zdravko, Jovan and I have a peculiar, you might say, ritual.

At least two times a month, we would get together at a local cemetery on a Saturday. There isn't a better place to have a nice quiet beer, having in mind everyone around is already resting in peace.

We didn't binge. A few cans of imported beer, usually Stella Artois, a little bench by the cobblestone path and conversation. It was a free zone, where we could rant about our problems, which seemed easier to deal with when looking over crooked monuments, engraved with some long time passed from-to years.

We were involved in the corporate world and capitalism, which has been tightening us increasingly. All three of us had steady jobs and were good at them, but still, sometimes a man needs to confide in someone. Which is why there are true friends.

I remember good times, years before my inevitable employment and 'going to work'. I remember a summer when we were getting together every day and starting it, of course, with a drink. We had barely any money then. We had to rely on some shrapnel in or back pocket which our parents provided. Toppled by an occasional win in betting.

Depending on the financial situation, we would drink vodka from plastic or from glass bottles. Trust me, the one in glass bottles is better. Although, come to think about it, the one from plastic is not too shabby either.

There was no Monday, Tuesday or any other day. Let alone the dates or months. All days were the same.

Flat.

Several years earlier, on a late Saturday afternoon, we were sitting at a casino like, betting-shop (these stores are commonplace in my country, where the laws are light and betting is a natural pastime) waiting for the game to end and expecting some serious financial gain.

What we considered a *serious gain* back then meant enough money to take the girls out on the town and give them a good time. We would be returning home drunk from our endeavor in the morning, while the girls got lost somewhere along the way. They were just supporting actresses in our nights out, anyway.

We were watching the only match remaining on the betting stub. Jovan was nervous because he was exchanging messages with his, as we used to say then, 'steady girlfriend'. Zdravko and I were relaxed. We preferred casual relationships. We had a tab in the betting-shop, because we were serious customers and paid our debts in due time.

The end of the game came. Our team won. A serious amount of money in our hands. Zdravko was already on the phone, arranging for some girls to join us. A night out, freedom. We didn't care, nor did we know or have anything else to do. The prospective good time was somewhat ruined by Jovan, distracted by the ongoing communication with his 'steady girlfriend'. After a few drinks, we were able to think a little better than usually. OK, not better, but it was easier to come up with a cunning plan.

Jovan, however, was a serious player. He texted his girlfriend that he was going home to sleep and that he will give her a call from the landline phone from home as soon as he gets there. Does anyone remember landline phones?

He ran home like the Flash. He basically broke into his apartment, where he still lived with his parents at the time. He grabbed the landline phone and called his girlfriend. I can imagine the expression of delight on her face when she saw the call from the landline at the prearranged time.

He made sure he sounded sober, or at least he did his best. He said he was going to sleep and that he was turning off his cell phone, as he had to get up early the next

day. With expressions of love from both sides, the conversation was over. He stormed down in front of his residential building, where we waited for him.

“Shall we?” – Jovan asked.

“Let’s get a taxi, and then we’re off. We’ve got the money, we will manage!” – Zdravko replied, handing him a bottle of vodka we were drinking from.

“No way. I’ll drive. Hop in!” – Jovan shouted.

A few meters from us, there was a white van, of unknown brand, old, but well preserved. Jovan’s father used it for work mostly. There were crates, empty bottles, torn bags and cans inside. We didn’t mind. We were headed downtown.



"Lepa sela lepo gore. A ružna ostaju ružna čak i kad gore. 'oćeš pivo?' – Lepa sela lepo gore

"Pretty villages burn pretty. Ugly ones stay ugly, even when they burn. You wanna beer?" - Pretty Village, Pretty Flame

18

Downtown is basically the city center. We parked not far from it. We walked to the fountain, where people used to gather and stop for a while, just like us, to get rid of daily thoughts and head further into the night. There we were. Passing the bottle among ourselves clockwise, like dice in a game of Monopoly. We drank the remaining vodka. As Zdravko went to the nearby kiosk to buy some beers, I watched people around us.

The fountain was surrounded with many different faces. From the most beautiful girls to nasty boys, which looked as if they were released for the weekend from the institutions that turn bad people into worse. They were mostly having meaningless, futile conversations, not caring much about the opinions of their interlocutors. Were the three of us so different? Not much. That is how things are in Marseille, Almaty, Edinburgh, Wiener Neustadt, Wrocław, Hyderabad and in the Slavia square in Belgrade, as I've heard.

The world in the palm of one's hand.

Somehow, out of nowhere, we found ourselves in the company of three girls that were having drinks from purple cans, before going to a club. I thought, three on three, not a bad situation one can find himself in. They were well groomed. Their clothes and hair – trendy. Without too much talk, everything was clear.

Conversation between me and one of the aforementioned girls was going smoothly. Sadly, I don't remember her name, but I believe she had curly blond hair. I never forgot the names intentionally; I just never paid enough attention back then. When we finished our drinks, we agreed it was time to go. They accepted our invitation to tag along, and a trendy pub, one of them said, was close, we just had to pass through a park. In the chilly darkness, I noticed that blondie and I were alone.

Jovan and Zdravko were already gone with their respective dates. I wasn't worried, I felt they were close. Right in front of us, a creature was walking through the dark shadows of the park.

A Satyr? How many thousands of years does this magic last?

I kissed the girl on her neck, and then above the cleavage. She didn't fight me, and to what end?

Later, as we were exiting the park, the lights of the place we were heading for were visible. I noticed it was the 'Ram's head'.

She asked me at the entrance: "Do you like it?"

"The place looks decent. I've never been here before. But I would never take you on a date here. I have class!" – my first impression.

Jovan and Zdravko were sitting with the girls. We sat at the table Nikolina and I would share years later. Coincidences are a regular thing. They don't exist only in bad movies. Around us there was a bunch of awkward guys and girls, trying to seem important. We ordered drinks for the girls too.

"I will stop carrying my phone when I'm out drinking. At some point, I have the urge to call my ex-girlfriend, although I would never do that sober."

Zdravko started the topic familiar to all of us from before.

"So, have you heard from her?" – Jovan asked lazily.

"Heard? She came to my apartment". "How nice of you to think of me, I missed you in all these years since I got married", "she said".

"It happens to the best of us." – I told Zdravko, trying not to sound like I'm expressing condolences.

"Aye, my friend, but when I took a better look, I realized she was still very hot. A bit chubby. But she still had everything God intended to give to a woman. We reached an understanding swiftly.

Her husband is a software developer, who works only nights, due to the time zone difference." – Zdravko went on.

'Come to my place tomorrow, between two and three in the morning, we have so much to talk about.' – "She smiled when she was saying this, as I was undressing her with my eyes. However, that is not the point!" – Zdravko continued.

“What happened next, my friends, is something that can happen only to me. The said night was the Saturday when hands of the clock move from two to three in the morning.” – he took a big sip and continued. “How can I be there between two and three in the morning when that hour doesn’t exist? At some point, a brainless genius though it was a good idea to remove an entire hour from human existence, in the Autumn. Not from the celestial way, of course, but we still observe the hands of clocks. We adhere to it.” – he added, obviously disappointed, as if all that happened yesterday, then he went on. “An Idiot! Such experts should be killed, Ostap Bender said a long time ago. It’s both funny and silly. I felt so dumb that I erased her number from my address book and got drunk.”

“What else was there to do? I read that a dude from the West noticed that in the summer the sun already shines, but the workers – the resources, still sleep.” – I said.

“It’s a pity, wasting so much daylight, when people in halls and basements work under neon and LED lights anyway.” – Jovan noticed.

We didn’t even notice that the girls we came with were gone. I guess they realized we didn’t need them anymore. Truth be told, we had a habit of having long conversations which no one, except the three of us, could understand.

We finished our drinks, although vodka was already warm. Jovan looked towards the bar. There was no one.

“We were talking about the holy discontent which pushes humanity toward progress. But here, I only see stupidity and damage, which is not even for the benefit of the capital owner, because in that pyramid, which is robbery, he is merely an inserted pauper.” – Jovan proclaimed.

I remembered that, before technical science, Jovan studied industrial psychology.

A voice was heard from the back room.

“Those great inventions serve the devil. Because of the fission and fusion, cloning and other shit, the world will go to hell!” – The bartender stopped there, went quickly to the fridge and brought a bottle of ice-cold vodka to our table.

“Boys, drinks on me!” – he shouted. Then he went on – “Great inventions are simple. Say, flush toilet. You pull a lever, and all the shit is gone.”

I liked the way he was thinking. In this age, it was not uncommon for well educated people, with the ability of realistic and abstract thinking, to work as waiters, socks sellers or doorkeepers. With all due respect for every job.

Jovan noticed it was a pity that the girls left:

“We should have gotten some.”

Zdravko took the bottle of vodka from the table and opened it.

“I got mine!” – he said victoriously.



"This place is like somebody's memory of a town, and the memory is fading. It's like there was never anything here but jungle." – True Detective

19

After so many years of friendship, I simply knew I could trust these guys. The following Saturday, as we were opening another beer at, as awkward as this sounds, *our* cemetery, I confessed to them about my current situation regarding Nikolilna and my online status with Jovana, the girl they knew about from before.

After all the info, toppled with more beer, having studied both Facebook and Instagram profiles (which, in Jovana's case, due to the nature of her work, could be called Titstagram or Pornstagram), we approached the process of solving the problem, aware of its complicity and volatile transparency. After all, it was about women.

"You should let it go. You are creating a problem for yourself. And that girl, what's her name, Nikolina. And the dude you said was your boss." – Jovan said, over a sip of beer.

"It could be serious. I'd give it a go and see what happens." – Zdravko went on.

"Does this girl know about Jovana? And vice versa? Does the boss know?" – Jovan asked

"No one knows the whole story except you guys. I don't see the problem." – I said, trying to come to terms with the facts.

Jovan was more ruminated, Zdravko more practical.

"But the whole thing has a tendency of getting out of control. What should I do?"

Bewildered thoughts came to my head.



"Get on the merry-go-round, you gotta ride it all the way. Round and round till that blasted music wears itself out and the thing dies down and clunks to a stop."
– *The Lost Weekend*

20

The next day at work I got a message from my co-workers, about a gathering in a popular pub. I wasn't going to go. I didn't feel like doing anything. However, only bad movies don't appreciate the chance of a sudden change in the main character.

And then, there she was:

"Do you want to go?" – Nikolina asked, walking suddenly into my office. "I know you saw me with Dejan in the car, what were you thinking? You already knew. Jealousy? Ridiculous."

She was right.

"Come on, let's go to the party!" – she added.

"You go, I am bored with that mass-socializing fad." – I went on, looking at her.

She was desirable as hell. Biology kicked in, initiating emotion and making self-torturing thinking obsolete. "I don't feel like going."

She looked at me: "Neither do I".

We kissed.



"We can't define consciousness because consciousness does not exist. Humans fancy that there's something special about the way we perceive the world, and yet we live in loops as tight and as closed as the

hosts do, seldom questioning our choices, content, for the most part, to be told what to do next." – *Westworld*

21

I was lying on the couch, watching Nikolina taking her shirt off. Her – and this is an understatement – perfect body could spark lewd thoughts even in cardinals. I picked her up and carried her into the shower.

The only thing better than a naked female body is a wet naked female body. Remember, I like the rain in romantic movies.

Wet as we were, I think we got into a series of love acrobatics in all the possible spots around the apartment.

After a love marathon, I went home to get ready for the aforementioned gathering. I was weak. It seems that only inconsistency is reliable. We did what we both wanted, now we could party.

Was that all there was?

I took a long look at myself in the mirror. The same set of questions burst into my mind again. What have I done? Have I fallen in love with a girl that already has a man? How can I get out of all that? Do I even want to get out of it?

I certainly don't.

The thoughts in my head were in turmoil again. My brain was speeding up, it's already at 100 km/h. I opened the fridge. Disappointment: there was not even a drop of alcohol.

I ran to the store. Few cans of beer and a pack of smokes, to get the night started. I returned to my flat. After a can and a half of beer, my thoughts started slowing down and I started getting ready for the party. Before I headed out, I left one beer in the fridge, for tomorrow morning. One needs to plan ahead for the hangover.

Another club, another night out. Sadly, we weren't in the Ram's head. We were in some hip, bullshit place, with uptight guests, interesting only to themselves. I arrived late, most of them were already there. A couple of reserved tables. Nikolina was dressed impeccably, drinking wine.

Well, let's have some fun: the universe moves too, doesn't it? Girls were dancing alone in super-short skirts, men having one drink after another, "bottoms-up". No question like: "Where is the sense in this madness?".

There is no sense.

Last bell. Last round. A few of us left at the table. The Blond and the Dark-haired appeared from nowhere.

"Shall we have another one?" – they said unanimously, as they were sitting down.

"I will have the same. Double vodka, ice and lemon." – I replied.

"Let's have another one!" – everyone at the table agreed.

"Where should we go next?" – a collective thought spread around the table like a computer virus.

I looked at Nikolina. She shrugged, as if saying with her eyes 'let's go, and then we'll head somewhere together afterwards'. Or at least that is how I interpreted it. We headed to an after-party.

'After-parties' had the potential to be good. Although, one could never really be sure before actually going. As in life, nothing is ever certain. This 'after-party' was in an old basement, far from the eyes of the world. An old library, apparently deserted a long time ago, now passes as a retro-hip club. The ambience was fantastic. The DJ was playing good music. People danced.

I've let myself go. I went to the bar, my natural sanctuary in every club. One simply needs to find a free part of anchorage. I had my drinks easily. The reality started to blur. Life became easier. I became part of the crowd in the dancing floor. Like in the music video of the band 'Underworld', song: 'Two Months Off'. I danced like the dude in the video. If you don't know that song and that video, the Internet is always close.

Due to the sensory overload caused by the dynamics of the events at the club, I haven't immediately noticed Nikolina who approached me.

We held hands. We started dancing. We looked into each other eyes. People around us drifted far away.

In the secrecy of the same apartment, we left just a few hours earlier, the clothes were flying all over the place. Afterwards, tired and satisfied, we went to sleep. Her head on my right shoulder and one cigarette, to share.

It's sweeter that way.

I felt a burst of honesty.

"Nikolina, I need to tell you something." – No good conversation ever started with those particular words.

"Go ahead." – she said already tired, with her head on my chest.

"I have an ex-girlfriend in America. We talk sometimes." – I went on.

"Why are you telling me that?" – she was awake.

"I don't want to hide anything from you, like you didn't hide stuff from me. I believe there is no commitment between us, but if you agree, I would like to see where this thing takes us."

Long pause without a single word. As they say in scriptwriting – a BEAT.

"I'm tired. Let's sleep, please." – she turned her head.

She fell asleep immediately, while I looked at the ceiling, questioning my decisions yet again.



"Their morals, their code; it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. You'll see- I'll show you. When the chips are down these,

uh, civilized people? They'll eat each other. See I'm not a monster, I'm just ahead of the curve." – *The Dark Knight*

22

I went to lunch with Zdravko. A vintage Tuesday for us. We went to a pub straight from work. Nice weather, a garden, two large draft beers.

A bit of rest.

I haven't spoken to Nikolina since the weekend. We exchanged a couple of brief, indifferent messages. She probably had to spend some time with Dejan as well.

After a few sips, a sound of an incoming message? Yes, but from Jovana. Startled, I thought of Stephen Hawking for an unknown reason. I wasn't moving. The beer was getting warmer.

"Have you discovered the secrets of the universe?" – Zdravko asked me, impersonating the voice of the great Mr. Hawking.

"No, I haven't Zdravko. This is an even greater mystery. Take a look." – I answered with the same voice.

I handed him my phone. Apart from Jovan, he was the only one I told what was happening with Jovana after she moved to the US. He didn't comment. Others probably knew too, but I didn't care about them. Zdravko looked at the message. We sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Do you want to read it too?" – Zdravko asked, while he was ordering another round.

"Certainly. But there is no rush."

We toasted. I lit a cigarette.

I haven't been in touch with Jovana for a couple of months. My quondam drunk Skype call was our last contact, as far as I remembered. I looked at my phone for a few more seconds. Finally, I opened the message: "Hey, you! Do you think we could talk on Skype tonight? To have a little chat. It's been a while. The last time you were rather cute. :)"

"She put a smiley at the end of the sentence." – I told Zdravko, still staring at my phone.

"Like a regular smiley?" – Zdravko asked.

"Yeah. A regular smiley face."

"Then everything is fine. Except she is probably rushing to a movie shoot. He-he." – Zdravko unleashed a common tease.

"Maybe she's shooting a scene with a girl?" – I replied casually.

"Or with two girls?"

We both gazed into the sky, imagining the scene. The sky, with cirrus clouds, looked like a big, gorgeous image of a half-naked Jessica Alba.

"May I charge you gentlemen?" – the waitress interrupted our thoughts. "My shift is ending, so..."

"No problem." – Zdravko was already taking his wallet out. "Bring us the bill." – and, after having a look at her smile, he added: "And give me your phone number. For future reservations, I mean."

We both chuckled. I answered to Jovana: "Of course we can. I'll talk to you in the evening." With an eye of a connoisseur, Zdravko was observing the waitress, as she was leaving.

"When are you going to stop doing that? It's not moral" – I told Zdravko.

"Moral?! You are talking to me about moral?! You were in relationship with a married woman for a year!"

"Her marriage was out of interest, for the papers. Out of mutual interest for both parties."

"Explain that in court!" – Zdravko said furiously.

"What court?" – I went on.

"I will sue you!"

“Sue me for what?”

“For... About... For... For violating the holy institution of marriage! Shame on you! It's because of people like you, who don't care about rules and regulations, that women think all men are the same. Shame on you! Shame.” – Zdravko answered, with the conviction of a Deputy Prosecutor.

We both started laughing.

“That's enough. Pay, and let's grab something to eat.” - I finished my beer.

“You want to go to the Chinese place?”

“Sure.”

The waitress brought our bill. Zdravko paid and took her phone number.



"In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." – Max Payne

23

I was sitting in front of my monitor, waiting for the Skype call. A can of beer was hidden away from the view of the web cam.

An unnecessary act of an idiot adult.

I couldn't stop thinking about Nikolina. On top of that, I didn't want Jovana to see me drinking... Completely irrational... Skype rang. Another sip of beer.

While Jovana was here, physically I mean, we lived together for a short period of time.

Her parents were away for two weeks once, and during that time I moved in with her. We were both unemployed. She was finishing her studies, and I gave up on mine long before that. I had an odd job here and there: English teacher, IT contractor, interior decorator... But all of that was far from a permanent job. We were essentially free, without obligations.

We went out. Went to dinners. Spent time with friends. One of them was Zdravko. The others are slowly fading away in my memory. When we didn't feel like going out, we stayed in, watching movies and series. Even then I had quite a bit of knowledge about the visual art that is cinema. We had similar taste. We slept together, took showers together, ate together, got up together.

At that time, I liked to cook. I used to bring her breakfast to bed. It was summer. We were preparing food naked, which resulted in us forgetting a hot frying pan on the stove. We almost burned the place down. The accident was avoided, but I did have to scrub the burnt frying pan for about an hour later. It was worth it. More than anything else, we liked making pancakes. Real women like pancakes, although Jovana always preferred Nutella over traditionally better Eurocream, our domestic chocolate-hazelnut spread.

When her parents returned, I went back to my parents' house. We continued seeing each other every day. Just to be clear: in my country it's normal for children, no matter how old they are, to live with their parents.

Thinking about it now, that might have been the perfect relationship. It had an expiration date, like a chocolate bar. We both knew that at some point she was going to leave, and that will be it. That is probably why we were so honest with each other. There was no time lost caused by planning. When you have a deadline, you know that you have to deliver your best.

Another ring of the Skype pulled me back into the present. I answered.

It takes several moments for the connection to work. I don't know why. Jovana appeared on the screen. Exactly as I remembered her: wet, messy hair, no makeup. Her big nose and the smile that restored all hope. She looked perfect. And when she cleaned up, she looked phenomenal too.

"Hey, hi!" – she yelled.

"What's up?" – I said

We exchanged greetings rather eloquently. That is how our Skype calls usually started. The calls used to be more numerous at first, but over time, they became less frequent. And always, for the first few minutes, we would just sit in silence, looking at each other.

Naturally, we avoided work-related topics. There were so many other topics to discuss. No matter how long it's been since we talked and seen each other, we enjoyed spending time together; just like at the beginning.

I am glad I met a person like that in my life.

After about half an hour of idle chit-chat, the conversation took an unexpected turn.

"Have you thought about how you're going to spend your vacation?" – she asked me, as she was doing her hair.

"No idea. No plans." – I was honest.

"Do you want to go to Rome with me?" – she said, fixing a strand of hair behind her ear.

The Eternal City? She and I? We haven't really seen each other for two years. I paused to think about it.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" – she went on in a humorous voice.

"OK. Fuck it. Let's go!" – I decided.

"When can you take time off from work?"

I had more than enough days off that I could use at any time.

"Whenever you want." – I answered most honestly.

"Great! Let's say in about a month. I've been looking at some flights. I could come home for a week and then we can go for a trip. I always wanted to see Rome."

"Me too." – who wouldn't like to see Rome, the city to which all roads lead?

"Awesome! I'll let you know soon when I'll be arriving, and then we'll talk about further plans." – she said with a smile. That smile's going to be the end of me.

We spoke for another few minutes, and then suddenly she said she had to go. To a shoot or somewhere else. I didn't ask her; she didn't say anything. I learned a valuable lesson from Jovana, regarding male-female relationships. While she was still here, I had a habit of telling her about nights out with my friends, that almost always included some female company. She told me: "It's fine to keep some things to yourself. I don't need to know everything." I never managed to adopt that.

"I love you." – she said.

"I love you too."

I hung up. I was staring at the screen. What did I just agree to? I'm going to the heart of Italy for a vacation, with my former girlfriend, who's now a porn star? What will I tell Nikolina? Should I tell Nikolina? As usually, I had more questions than answers. I went to the fridge. I was drinking beer in silence, smoking and thinking about my next move. I didn't know which one was the right one.

I already mentioned my respect for chess: I will let the other side have the next move. That should provide me with a better insight into the situation.



"Tonight, we will be partaking of a liquid repast, as we wend our way up the Golden Mile, commencing with an inaugural tankard in The First Post, then on to The Old Familiar, The Famous Cock, The Cross Hands, The Good Companions, The Trusty Servant, The Two-Headed Dog, The Mermaid, The Beehive, The King's

Head, and The Hole in the Wall for a measure of the same. All before the last bittersweet pint in that most fateful terminus - The World's End. Leave a light on, good lady, for though we may return with a twinkle in our eyes, we will, in truth, be blind - drunk." – *The World's End*

24

The next few days I worked according to an established pattern. If I didn't have to, I avoided talking to anyone. Even Nikolina. I needed a few days for the new impressions to settle in. After a few days I felt I was ready. I decided to tell Nikolina all about the vacation I arranged with Jovana. I had an urge to do it, but I still kept putting it off.

Putting stuff off isn't necessarily good, but it is beneficial, as historical memories dictate. We tend to send unimportant messages with a moderate delay.

Monday. I got to the office before everyone else, which was not difficult having in mind I didn't sleep the previous night. I went by Nikolina's desk and put a 'Kinder Surprise' into the drawer. Who can resist the sweet mystery of a 'Kinder Surprise'? I heard they are forbidden in the USA. I don't know why, maybe someone didn't bother to open it and just ate the whole thing. And choked to death. Regardless of that, I left the 'surprise' and waited.

I was at my desk. Aleksandar was doing his work, while I sat in silence, waiting for Nikolina to message me via chat. I looked toward the shelf and saw there was dust all over Chekhov. It's been a long time since I reached for the magic fluid hidden behind his work.

"Look into your drawer." – I wrote to her on chat, not being able to wait anymore.

No reply. For the time being, at least. I even though I should run to her desk and take the 'surprise' back. Things were not developing exactly as I imagined.

"Thank you. You shouldn't have." – the answer arrived.

"Do you have time to meet today?"

I forgot about delaying things. As I said previously, inconsistency is a natural occurrence.

Behind my back, Mister Crash was digging with his hoof: "Forget the delay, it's urgent, hell, everything is urgent, what are you waiting for? You don't know what you're waiting for? Some reason? Fool!" – an oink and a giggle.

I calmed down, waiting for the answer impatiently.

"I am free around 9 p.m. I will text you where to meet me."

Satisfied with that, I focused on my so-called obligations of the workplace.

After the expulsion from Eden, Man hadn't had enough. – "By the sweat of thy brow, thou shalt earn thy bread." – but he also invented time.

I worked hard for a whole hour. Aleksandar was gone, and I was trying to finish one of the reviews I've been neglecting. I couldn't. It didn't work well when I was impatient.

I came home and lay down, trying to get some sleep. I was thinking: how did people arrange meetings when they wanted to see each other back in the day? There were no cell phones. They would arrange details via telegram or using landline phones: "I will see you at that time, at that place." How did it work before that? They were exchanging letters. Reliable third parties were carrying messages. Or even a pigeon! It seems that communication was easier then, despite all the technology we have now.

In a tsunami of thoughts, I must have fallen asleep. In my thoughts, Nikolina and Jovana alternated. I knew there was only one correct solution. But life is not math. The message on my phone woke me up. A message from Nikolina.

We met in her neighborhood. After the kiss, I took off my jacket so we could sit on the stairs. I brought a few dark beers. After some casual topics and a few smokes, I decided to tell her what I had in mind.

"Nikolina, I..." – I started but stopped. Confused by the sound of my own voice in the gloomy silence of the street.

"Yes?" – she was drinking a beer, not looking at my face, and I avoided looking into her eyes too.

“My ex-girlfriend called me. She wants us to go to a vacation together.”

“Fine.”

“I said yes and in about a month we are going to Rome for two weeks” – I went on.

“What do I have to do with that?” – she asked me calmly.

“I don’t know. I just wanted to share that with you. I hope you understand.”

“Of course.” – she said, struggling with the lighter, lighting another cigarette.

We continued sitting in silence. I felt I didn’t need to explain myself to her. Emotions can fool a person easily, even myself. I lay down on the concrete and put my head in her lap. I looked her in the eyes.

“I want you to know she is someone I like, but I think we can keep this thing between us going.”

“I understand. Do what you decided to do. I will be here when you return.” – she looked at me with a smile and kissed me.

I looked at her face and the stars above us. A moment of tranquility. That was enough.

We each went to our separate homes. I didn’t want to push it. I said what I had, and I believed she understood.



"In my opinion, the best thing you can do is find someone who loves you for exactly what you are. Good mood, bad mood, ugly, pretty, handsome, what have you." – Juno

25

Airport cafés are terrible. Firstly, they charge for a beer three times the normal price. Secondly, no one knows where the toilet is for a person to relieve themselves. At the table next to me there were some flight attendants, who just arrived from Marrakesh or Ibiza or some other exotic destination. Obviously tired, but still in a good mood. I was in a relationship with a flight attendant a long time ago. It's a specific kind of relationship. They are used to living their lives according to a strict schedule. Whoever saw 'The Flight' knows what I'm talking about.

I looked at one of them. She had dark rings under her eyes, as she probably flew 36 hours non-stop. Still, we smiled at each other. She was drinking coffee.

"What will you have?" – an impolite waiter interrupted me, addressing me informally.

"Heineken. Draft." – I answered, looking at the flight attendant.

"We do not have draft beer, sir."

Sir? The waiter is clearly messing with me.

"Fine. Vodka. Lemon. Ice." – I went on.

"We don't serve alcohol." – he replied.

I thanked the guy and got up. Jovana's airplane is landing in about 15 minutes.

She came out through the river of people, pulling a huge suitcase. Whenever we travelled somewhere, she carried a huge suitcase. A kiss. A smile and a hug. I took the suitcase. A casual conversation started: how was your trip, where was the layover? I always hated airports as places of forced meetings and separations.

“So, Jovana?” – I said, opening the Fiat’s door. – “How is it in the promised land? Across the pond as they say. There, where people go to have their dreams come true.”

“It’s wonderful!” – she sighed. – “How is it here?” – she asked, as she was fixing her hair, looking at the mirror.

“I dunno. We’ve grown up, we have to work. It sucks.”

“You still like to complain?”

“Absolutely.”

Yes. We knew each other very well. I looked at her. That was the girl I remember. Only now she had a different, unconventional job. But, still, it’s a *job*.

She was looking through the window, at the plains on each side, stretching into eternity. As if she had missed it. I drove her home and dragged the traditionally huge suitcase to her apartment.

I loathe that suitcase.

Jovana’s mother, a woman who always respected me, greeted us in the way all our moms do: with a warm smile, a long hug, and a tear in her eye. She gave me a hug too. She was widowed for a long time.

I brought the suitcase into the flat where only her mother lived now, and where Jovana and I used to kiss back in the day. The memories started coming back to me. The kitchen, where I used to cook. The bathroom where we used to take showers together. The rug where we used to make out. The images were almost alive.

“Sit down, kids. I haven’t seen you... in such a long time. Well, Jovana, my darling. How are you? How are things over there?” – her mother started asking too many questions, not knowing what to say first. The two of them have probably communicated via social networks too, that was not difficult. I wasn’t sure if she was aware of what Jovana did there. I realized that it was time to stop the onrush of my thoughts.

I needed to get out.

I excused myself: “I can’t stay. Thank you. You two have so much to talk about. I’m sure it will take a while.”

“Stay, son, please. I prepared puff pastry.” – Jovana and I looked at each other.

‘Puff pastry?’ – always and forever.

“Thank you once again.” – I took my cue.

I left her with her mother to catch up. She's been gone for a long time. Family, or whatever anyone has left of it, has no price.

I went out and lit a cigarette. I returned to the car and headed home. But, at the crossroads I turned toward the opposite direction. Vague feeling. Something like remorse.

I was waiting for Nikolina in front of her building for a few hours before she arrived. It would be an understatement to say that she was surprised.

“What are you doing here?” – she gave me a confused look. “I thought you were already gone.”

“Not yet. I was passing by. I did, however, wait for a few hours. I wanted to see you before I left.”

“When are you leaving?” – she asked, going through her backpack, looking for her keys or her phone.

“I'm leaving tomorrow morning. Will I see you when I return?” – I looked her in the eye.

“Of course. I already told you!” – she got her keys out.

“A kiss for safe travels? You know how things are with terrorist. The airplane might explode. This could be the last time we see each other. I don't want to leave this world without having kissed you at least one more time.”

While I was saying all this nonsense, she couldn't help but smile. I leaned in toward her.

“You are the one. I want to be with you.” – I whispered into her ear, certain that I said it a few times already. I kissed her as gently as I could.



“Joe, we can't go running around town with a hot princess!” – Roman Holiday

27

Nowadays it's quite hard to get into an airplane. First, one must arrive at least an hour earlier, to check in. Second, there are at least three checkpoints one must pass. Taking one's clothes off, everything metal too, while dudes from the security doublecheck every little detail. I never got to the point of 'rectal examination' and I hope I never will, as intriguing as it sounds.

I am not sure how Jovana passed all those controls, as she always had a piercing in her tongue. I never asked her. Maybe I will someday.

Anyhow, after all the inspections, one reaches the waiting area, until the gate opens, and passengers are finally allowed onto the aircraft. Jovana brought her tablet so we could watch a movie. Low cost companies usually don't have in-flight entertainment. The flight to Rome is around an hour and a half long.

“What shall we watch?” – she asked, looking at her tablet.

“Just not one of your videos.” – I answered, half-joking.

“You are really incredible. I knew you were going to bring that up eventually.”

“I'm just saying because I've seen them all. Some of them I even know by heart. My favorite is the one when you and another girl are by the pool and then...”

“Just shut up and stop annoying me.” – she laughed.

We watched a TV show I recommended to her, called 'Happyish' starring one of my favorite stand-up comedians, Steve Coogan. The show is about a crisis of a middle-aged couple, who move to the suburbs to escape corporate lifestyle, only to

find that lifestyle waiting for them there. The show, sadly, wasn't granted a second season, but I sincerely recommend it to everyone.

We landed in Rome, the Eternal City. The procedure of exiting an airport is somewhat easier than entering. As if the security couldn't wait to get rid of you. We found a taxi and headed toward our destination. One can find some splendid spots via Airbnb. I was barely able to get that humongous suitcase of hers into the taxi.

Our host, Carmine, welcomed us warmly. He showed us the room, gave us the Wi-Fi password and offered us beer. It's a common misconception that Italians drink only wine. Jovana went to take a shower and Carmine and I sat on the balcony.

The apartment overlooked a railway station. We communicated in solid English while drinking 'Peroni'.

"You've got a nice view, Carmine. Tell me, how far is the city-center?"

"Uh, it's about an hour on foot. So better take a taxi. I'll write you which one is the cheapest."

"I don't feel like going to the center tonight. I'm beat. We'll go tomorrow. But is there a place we could have dinner around here?"

"Of course there is. You are now in Pigneto. I know a great place you could go to. Nevertheless, I suggest you take a walk. The neighborhood is amazing, there are numerous pubs, live music. I'm not sure what your girlfriend likes?"

"I think she's not my girlfriend." – I said.

He wasn't surprised by my answer. Italians are naturally chill.

"It's one of those things? Never mind. Go out. Walk around. Enjoy your night." – he gave me the apartment keys.

"Thanks, Carmine. We'll be seeing you the next few days."

"Enjoy. There is some more beer in the fridge."

I was alone on the balcony, drinking 'Peroni'. I put my feet up on the railing and sat back in my chair. The bathroom had one door exiting the balcony. Jovana came out with just a towel on. She passed by me and entered the room. She smelled exquisite. I followed her in. The towel fell off. We hugged and kissed. I could say that what followed next was love making, but something was missing.

I went to take a shower. I took one beer along to keep me company. When I returned to the room, she was still laying naked on the bed, going through her phone.

“What are you doing? Why aren’t you dressed yet? It’s not that I don’t like seeing you naked, but I thought we could go out and eat something.”

“I’m coming, I just need to check in that I got to Rome.”

Fucking social media.

“I found a place on Foursquare with awesome pasta.”

“Come on, forget that. Let’s go out for a walk, and then we will find a place to sit. Drink. Eat. Enjoy”

“But, it has 4.2 stars on Foursquare and they say the service is excellent and...”

“Leave the phone and get dressed, please.” – I was adamant.

We got dressed together, jumping over each other to reach the suitcase. One unplanned selfie before we left, and we were ready. If there is such a thing as an unplanned selfie.

Pigneto is a lovely neighborhood. It was somehow missed in the process of commercialization. There were cafés everywhere, and people sitting by the fountains with glasses of wine, speaking in melodic Italian language. We walked hand in hand like on the cover of ‘The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan’. Jovana was pressed against me, her hand around mine, my hand in my pocket. Almost like teenagers. We were exploring the streets.

As I was hungry and even more thirsty, I picked a small place where I heard the Beatles - instrumental version. We sat in the garden and ordered a bottle of homemade rosé. It was exquisite.

“What should we have? I’d like a pasta of some kind...” – she said.

“Of course, you’ll have pasta. We’re in Rome.”

“Right, genius, what will you have?” - she looked at the menu.

I locked eyes with our waitress. It seemed my pub-magic worked in Italy too. She came to our table at once. She didn’t ask where we were from, but she greeted us in English. I ordered an appetizer and two different main courses.

„Grazie mille!” – I said proudly at the end.

The waitress smiled and left. Jovana didn’t give up going through her phone. The Beatles from the speaker and the music of Italian language mixed together in perfect harmony were not enough for her.

“Where should we go tomorrow? Rome is too big. We need a plan!” – she said, without looking away from her phone.

“I don’t know. We’ll see tomorrow. Okay?”

“You know I always liked that spontaneity of yours?”

“I know. Look, we have ten days to enjoy ourselves. Leave your phone. If we can’t have a good time in Rome without technology, then that’s not the real thing.”

“What’s not the real thing?” - she looked at me.

“Spontaneous good time. Pleasure. Vacation. I never had a bad time with you. Wherever we were. Whatever we did.”

“I know. I am so glad I am here with you.” - She put her phone into her bag.

We enjoyed the food and another bottle of rosé. After dinner, we headed toward the apartment, both tired from the flight. The linen smelled of lavender. I think she fell asleep instantly. After a long time, I also fell asleep next to Jovana.

I think that is how you know you truly love someone. When you can fall asleep next to them with ease.

In the morning, we went to explore the Eternal City. I wanted to see the spots where ‘Roman Holiday’ was filmed. The rest was up to Jovana to plan.

Experienced travelers will tell you say that no real tour of Rome is complete without a Vespa. It’s a staple of Rome, even Italy. I don’t understand idiots driving big racing motorbikes through the Eternal City. Or any other city. Vespa rules. It looks nice, it’s comfortable and you can ride it in plain tennis shoes.

These are moments I will never forget: riding a yellow Vespa around the Colosseum and the Roman Forum, with a beautiful girl behind me. The driving culture in Italy is tailored towards motorcyclists. When traffic lights are red, it’s quite normal for motorcycles to go around cars and stand in the first line by the pedestrian crossing. No one honks their horns, no one curses. There is an absence of the nervous delivery guy late to deliver a pizza.

I stopped at a red light. We looked glamorous. While shirt, jeans, white Converse sneakers. Behind me, a gorgeous girl with long blond hair wearing a denim shirt. Next to us, a Fiat 500 stopped, with lowered windows. Inside was a bit older, but still good looking lady, with big glasses like Sophia Loren. She looked at us and smiled.

“Ciao, bella!” – I yelled to her, intoxicated with our Roman adventure.

“Ciao, ragazzo!” – her reply followed. She spoke too fast like all Italians, smiling all the time.

„Sorry, I don't speak Italian. Maybe English?“ – I broke the illusion.

„Funny. You could pass for an Italian. Enjoying your time?“ – she spoke in English and looked at the girl behind me.

„Yes. You have a beautiful town.“

„Enjoy! You are young. Just like Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn. 'Roman Holiday'! Ciao!“

The traffic light turned green. I hit the gas and with a loud „Grazie, signora!“ drove away. We reached 'the wedding cake'. The place considered the very center of Rome. Somehow, we found a parking spot. We started walking through narrow streets built in bricks and stone. History was coming at us from all directions. For the clueless, history is merely the written past.

Here and now, we needed to find a bistro with wine and homemade ham. I saw a place at a corner with red plaid tablecloths. The sound of acoustic guitar coming from inside the place grabbed my attention, and in their window, ham and cheese. Bingo! At least I thought so. I headed toward the entrance, when I realized Jovana was a few steps behind me, with her face glued to the display of her phone.

Will it ever stop?

“What are you doing? Let's eat. Instagram won't help with that.”

“I want to check online if this place is any good. I'm just checking Trip Advisor.”

I stopped and watched her, as she was completely lost in finding 'relevant' info online. The place seemed quite decent to me. There were a couple of free seats. The waiter was smiling, and he was serving draft beer. A grey-haired gentleman was sitting alone, drinking cappuccino and reading 'La Gazzetta dello Sport'.

But it seems that was not enough for her. Nowadays, whoever owns a smart phone has the liberty to become a restaurant critic. And not just that. If a place was rated as good, then it must be good. Why go to a place that the crowds rated good for *them*?! Can a man go to a bistro which seems acceptable without an electronic recommendation? What is the worst thing that can happen? Food poisoning? Or run into an unkind waiter? I've been to way too many pubs in my life and I know that's not a deal breaker.

If beer is warm on that specific day, that's a whole different matter.

“There is a restaurant with excellent rating two block further.”

I didn't like when she says 'block'. Sounds so American.

"They have awesome sweets. Come on!" – she yelled.

"I don't want to go there. I want this bistro with the fat waiter, cold beer and homemade ham!" – I've put my foot down.

Several pigeons flew up in the air.

But, like other women from my life, Jovana was already disappearing in the crowd, without an answer, almost running up some stairs toward the heart of the town. I rushed after her.

We were finishing desserts at a corner bodega as the Sun was setting, the Spanish steps were filling up with people.

"I will never get used to... what you do." – I told her again, as I was firm believer in the old saying: "whoever has something to say, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

"I never asked for your approval." – she contrasted.

"It's not approval. And you have approval, even if you never asked for it. I just can't get used to the fact that you sleep with several men a day and an odd girl."

"But you must admit that you watch me here and there..." – she smiled and bit her lip.

"Of course I watch. I'm only human. I'm even satisfied with some scenes. I just want to know..." – I paused.

"Whether I enjoy it?" – she knew me too well.

"Yes. I guess. I have no idea."

She took another bite of the dessert and continued. "Sometimes I enjoy it, but most of the time it's just getting the job done. Nine to five. The way you work in the office. That is how I do this. I mean, that is how I see things. I'm going to the bathroom. Pay, so we can go."

"Yeas dear!" – I replied.

I was driving the Vespa down the streets of Rome with Jovana behind me. It was late, but the city had no intention of sleeping. Suddenly, a flap of the wings. Pigeons don't fly at the night. Batman, is that you? Haven't you gone to Florence with Cat woman?

The things I think about and my behavior are not stumbling stones. What does 'we're not made for each other' actually even mean?

I was thinking about that when we got to the apartment.

"Shit!" – I heard Jovana's malcontent voice from the room. With an opened bottle of wine and two glasses in my hand I stepped out of the kitchen and found her rummaging through suitcases.

"Shit! I was sure I brought it. It must be here somewhere! I brought a pack of weed and now it's gone. I'm sure I packed it!" – she seemed nervous.

"Why do you need weed? We have wine."

"You annoy me." – she continued rummaging through stuff – "So persistent and stubborn. If it makes you feel better, *those things* that I do cannot be done without the help of *something*."

I went out to the balcony, set in a chair, the lights of Rome stretched into eternity. I understood her. It's hard to do anything without the help of *something*.

"I will get you a joint tomorrow and then we will smoke weed on the balcony. If the lady agrees."

"How will you get weed?" – she asked furiously.

"I don't know yet. I will think about that tomorrow. Have some more wine. The night is wonderful."

I poured her a glass. We toasted and drank up, as Rome continued sleeping, like the vast sea whose expanse is made out from the lights of suburban areas.



"Now let's smoke the rarest weed known to mankind. It's almost a shame to smoke it. It's like killing a unicorn, with like, a bomb." – Pineapple Express

28

I woke up before Jovana, at the crack of dawn. I used to enjoy sleeping, but my insomnia had other plans. I took my phone, and, like any real tourist, I Googled: 'how to buy weed in Rome?'.

Google is the real thing, when used properly. I read a few websites and found the best way to do some morning shopping.

It was around nine in the morning. Pigneto was just waking up. The waitresses were putting the tables out on the street. The scent of fresh pastry was in the air. I noticed a group of black dudes sitting on a bench. According to Google instructions, I looked eyes with one of them as I was passing by. With a tilt of my head upwards, I showed him what I was interested in. He understood my non-verbal sign very well and approached me. He was smiling. We spoke in English.

„Hey, man. What are you looking for?“ - he asked with a smile.

„Weed. You know, to roll.“ – I showed the gesture of rolling a joint with my fingers.

„Of course, man. But, not here, let's go around the corner.“

He went around the corner. I followed him because Google said that was what you should do. He looked around, and then pulled a handful of weed and hashish from his pocket.

“Here, man. Pick what you want. I have excellent hashish. Just for you.”

He showed me little lump and gave me to smell it.

“That's good. How much?” – I pretended I know anything about the quality of hash.

“For you, man, 20 euro” – he said, smiling.

“Mate, that's a lot. I'll give you 10 euro.” – I answered.

The Turkish custom of bargaining is apparently applicable while buying drugs. Who knew? The seller and the buyer don't take this custom personally, either.

"It's too cheap for 10 euro. I have to make some money too. Let's say 15, man?"

"It's a deal."

I gave him three banknotes.

"If you need more, I'm here all day. Have fun man."

On the way back, I stopped by a shop and bought a cheese pie and a couple of pastries. Awesome breakfast: hashish and pastry. When I returned, Jovana was making coffee. My T-shirt suited her well. I showed her the lump. She was as happy as if she just received an AVA award.

Later, we decided we were going to visit Vatican. As we were riding on the Vespa, I wondered if that was an appropriate place for a porn star?

If one can trust 'The Young Pope', where Jude Law plays Pope Pius XIII as an unconventional pope, it is. The Pope from that show would probably welcome Jovana with his wide-open arms. Just like myself, he would surely have many questions regarding her job.

We parked in front of the walls of The Vatican. It was far from the holy, calm and serene atmosphere I imagined. Cafés were packed, shops with knick-knacks were open even on a Sunday! An enormous number of tourists from all corners of the earth stormed the streets. We asked around and realized that the line to enter the actual inner sanctum of the Vatican was way too long. If we decided to wait, many years of our lives would be lost.

I was looking for an alternative solution.

There are special Vatican tours organized by tourist agencies. The matter is simple. Promoters were addressing people on streets, offering them a place on the organized tours, accompanied with a guide. Every two hours, there was a group of 10 to 15 people going into the Vatican. The best thing was that those organized groups had their own entrance and there was no waiting.

From 70 euros for two people, I haggled down to 35.

Soon, as part of a privileged group, we passed through massive walls and found ourselves in the Vatican garden. Our guide, a fragile, wrinkled woman around 70 years old, raised an umbrella and took us in.

Gold is everywhere. Huge frescoes and wallpapers on the walls. The pressure of human voices and bodies, from all directions, as we walked creates an aura of claustrophobia. All that happening at 45 degrees Celsius.

Whoever wants to see Vatican should stick to the Internet. Or they can play 'Assassin's Creed 2', where they can see all the architecture, without tourists.

Finally, the moment I personally waited for the longest time arrived.

Entering the Sistine chapel.

As soon as I walked in, I looked toward that magnificent ceiling. I read about it. I saw it in movies. And now I was actually there. I imagined Michelangelo climbing up and down the scaffolding during the years of painting.

My thoughts were interrupted by the guard who told me I was not allowed to stand in one place and that I had to keep walking, adding something like 'Photographing is forbidden'. Of course, I managed to snag a photo of the ceiling, despite his warnings. It was not possible to remain longer under this magnificent sight, due to an invasion of people. The scent of tourist sweat is heavy.

Maybe that was what Robin Williams meant in his famous monologue in the movie 'Good Will Hunting'? Also, to my disappointment, we did not meet the Pope.

My father told me a story about a former Minister of Exterior of Yugoslavia, who ended his audience with the Pope, saying: "I regret not having met your wife.". What happened to him and similar characters? May God help them.

We took a walk across St. Peter's Square. We took pictures. Just before the sunset, I had this brilliant idea: we should go for a ride through the streets James Bond drove through in the movie 'Spectre'. Even though he drove an Aston Martin, and I was riding a Vespa, I could picture Dave Bautista following me in an expensive car. Was it a Ferrari?

Speaking of that, I never did understand people who don't like James Bond. Whether he was a fictional character, books or movies, some people simply dislike him. They always have comments like 'that's not possible, 'how does he always get the girl?' or 'what kind of secret agent is he if everyone recognizes him?' I have only one answer to all that: "Are you James Bond? No? Then, how can you understand?"

Eventually, we parked near a small, hidden *piazza*, shopping for obligatory souvenirs.

It was time for me to buy a bracelet. I was looking around the counters. I had absolutely no idea what I was looking for, but, like in all my previous travels, I knew I would find the thing that was waiting for me.

“Looking for a bracelet again?” – Jovana commented.

“Yes. Every time I go somewhere...” – I tried to get a sentence in.

“Can’t decide? Let me pick something.” – she interrupted me.

I smiled because Jovana knew me, despite all the years we were apart. We stood at a little counter of a seasoned Roman salesman. Dressed in pitch black leather, he had a cowboy hat, whose shade was covering the wrinkles on his face.

Jovana picked a blue-red braided bracelet, for which the salesman said it was made that afternoon. She insisted on paying for it.

I was thinking whether I should buy her a ring. To get *that* over with! Here and now. Get married.

Be done with it.

Getting hitched to a porn star is a novel idea but it comes with some repercussions. Imagine a scene:

“Mom, dad. This is Jovana. You already know her as we’ve been together before. Anyway, we decided to get married. Truth be told, you should be aware that during the past few years Jovana was in the business of making movies for adults, quite successfully too. On various websites you can find excerpts or even entire movies she has made. I can tell you, with certainty of a person following, and admiring, her work for a long time, that she is amazing at what she does, and you should be proud of her, like she is of herself. We will give you an hour to get acquainted with the history of her work. Here’s a computer. We’ll be in the salon. I will go open a champagne, so we can toast. Cheers!”

Instinctively, deciding not to commit, I chose a silver necklace with a heart pendant.



"I'm going to tell you something. Your life is your own. You have a contract with your wife? You have certain things you do jointly? Bond there. And there are other things, and those things are yours. And you

needn't feel ashamed, you needn't feel that you're being untrue. Or that she would abandon you if she knew. This is your life." - Glengarry Glen Ross

29

I took canapes and wine onto the balcony. Jovana had already rolled a joint and lit it up as soon as she saw me. I hesitated, took a few puffs. When will I have another chance to sit on a balcony overlooking Rome in a company of a porn star?

Blissful mood.

Like when you're watching your favorite movie, all by yourself. I was smiling as I was looking at her legs, resting against the railing.

"Describe your typical workday." – I interrupted the silence.

"I can't believe it! I knew it! I knew you'll ask me that!" – she laughed.

"I am curious. What will I say if my mom asks? How will I explain it to her?"

"Idiot!"

I deserved it, I was really annoying, and now I was bitter too.

"Do you like your job?" – she looked at me through the smoke of a cigarette that had a specific scent.

"It can be good sometimes. Sometimes I don't even like it. However, good days outnumber the bad, for now."

"That's how things are for me too. I usually come to a location at 9-10, it depends. The location is usually a house rented for that day. If there is a pool, even better. First, I say hi to the director and the guys and girls I am shooting a scene with. Then the makeup. At around noon we usually start shooting. I always take an 'Adderall' to have enough energy during the entire day. And some weed." – she took a puff.

"What is this 'Adderall' you speak of?" – I asked.

“It’s basically concentrated caffeine in a pill. You take one and it’s like drinking four Red Bulls, except your heart is not racing. Think of it as a legal ecstasy.” – she went on.

“Then we start. Spontaneously, I suppose. Some shoots are easier than others, I think. I like it when the actor knows what he’s doing. I don’t like an amateur, who can’t get it hard, then he has to take two Viagras, and then we have to wait another half an hour. Then we go in an order. Position after position. There’s no rule. It depends on how the director decides.”

“I think that’s enough information for now.” – I said. Why do I even keep starting the topic, I thought.

The girl I was still in love with, I guess, was doing stuff like that and spoke about it like it was a completely normal thing. Maybe I wasn’t even in love with her anymore, but I knew she was the girl I had the best relationship with ever, and I respected her. A job shouldn’t be the thing that defines a person. Can it?

“Now what? Don’t you want to know?” – she was smiling.

“Not really? I will watch a documentary, it’s easier that way.”

“But we’re not together anymore. What I do is not supposed to get to you.”

“It doesn’t get to me, I just assumed it would be easier for me to hear about it from you.”

“Let’s go into the room, I will show you how it actually works.”

“I have a better suggestion. How about we watch a movie?”

“Fine. I have the ‘Gladiator’ on the tablet. I’m going to the bathroom; you make the bed.”

“Yes darling!”

While I was making the bed, I asked myself how many other men would have turned down sex with a porn star? And for free. However, other people didn’t know her like I did. For them, she was a piece of meat. For me she was a person with feelings and an attitude. We lay next to each other and watched the movie. Afterwards, I was unable to sleep for a long time. The nightmare of the same suicidal questions.

I already mentioned I was all for maximal tolerance.

It seems I kept negating the phenomenon of an archetype, which was ‘older than us’. So far, I have been unable to fight it. Has anyone succeeded at it?



"What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad." – Matrix

30

Our flight arrived late. It was past midnight. Zdravko picked us up and gave us a lift back to the city.

We left her in front of her building, and the two of us, without even discussing it, walked to the closest shop and bought a couple of beers.

August, warm summer night, starry sky. We decided to have those beers sitting on the steps in front of the store. Behind us was a sign: 'consuming alcohol in front of the store is strictly forbidden'. Zdravko offered me a cigarette.

I asked: "Haven't you heard that alcohol and cigarettes kill slowly, but surely?"

"Yes. But we're not in a hurry anyway." – he replied, and then went on: "So, mate, how was it?" – he asked, as he was opening the can. "What's it like to be in the Eternal City with a porn star?"

"Excellent, my man, excellent, although that's just not it."

"Just not it?" – he repeated – "What does that even mean?"

"I honestly don't know. It's just not it, somehow. The girl lives on a different continent. She does what she does. What should I expect? That she would leave all she has and return here for me? I mean, what do I even have to offer her?"

We sat in silence for a while, so I continued:

"And let's say she does that. For me. I mean, we are not exactly as jealous as the Arabs, but those thoughts would still haunt me. Thoughts I cannot cover up with intellectual reasoning, it's an archetype, I guess, it doesn't allow the transition to 'whatever'. I can't even conceive the sin, as an irreversible preceding fact."

“Qualifying your emotions in respect to the concept of sin is not easy, but, instead of ‘irreversible’, you could have said ‘unbearable’. Why should you torture a man? Many laws of universe are irreversible, and yet are easy to bear. The sin is unbearable.” – Zdravko said, then took a sip.

There we were. Two young men, in tennis shoes and jeans, drinking beers in front of a small local store, discussing topic of eternity. From behind the clouds the Moon emerged, as if it wanted to join the conversation as well.

Moving away from everyday subjects was not an unusual thing for us: incomes, expenses, watching this or that, seeing this or that person, who’s for and who’s against something. All trivial things. Having an unspoken understanding of eternal mysteries and secrets can’t be solved by anyone... but Him.

“The thing is that it’s not the same kind of love it used to be. I love her more as a friend. Like I love you.”

“Hey man! Cut the gay crap.”

“You know what I mean” – we both laughed.

“I know. That’s normal. You will always love her, just not in the way you used to. That’s why they say one should never go back to old loves. Or old habits. Do you want another beer?”

“Sure, why not.”



“Whatever we had when we were together, when we were in love that feeling of just being able to lie in bed for days and not give a fuck about the outside world -- is gone. And I feel like there's nothing I can do to ever get it back. Do you know how painful that is?”- London

31

Jovana was leaving the next day. I couldn't sleep all night. I promised I would take drive her. I picked her and her enormous suitcase and headed toward the airport. We barely spoke during the ride. We reached her terminal. I could not go further. We kissed and hugged. I whispered into her ear:

“I love you.”

When people are parting, the feelings are gentle. I saw a tear in her eye. Or at least I wished I did.

“I love you too. I will always love you. I will never forget the time we spent together, but life has taken us on paths that were already written. You have to follow your path. You have a talent. You must be tenacious.” – she said.

We hugged once again and agreed not to talk for a while. She went toward the gate. She went toward the airplane. Toward USA.

Forever.

I have always been a fan of pathos. There is a sort of poignant beauty in it, when you feel bad in that manner.

Romantic movies and the immeasurable pathetic character.

I parked in front of my building, went into the closest store, bought two bottles of white wine, sparkling water and cigarettes. I retired to my apartment. Solitude feels good sometimes.

The next day was a workday. Like any other workday. I have been drinking spritzer in the silence of the night, expecting the sound of my alarm in the morning.

I got dressed and looked in the mirror. I seemed decent. However, as I was sleepy and weary, I decided to take an 'Adderall'. Jovana left me a box before she left.

It kicked in fast.

I was running around in good spirits, like an Energizer bunny. With Aleksandar and some people I don't even know, I spoke, not only about things that happened during my absence, but also about plans for the future. My thoughts were jumping from one topic to another. Like in the movie 'Limitless'.

Nikolina's desk was empty. I found out from co-workers that she was out of town, doing some work-related stuff.

During the lunch break I bought a souvenir, small silver earrings shaped like hearts. Undetected, I've put them into the drawer of her desk, which was once occupied by a 'Kinder Surprise'. Under them, I wrote a note: "I'll see you later."

She answered via email a bit later:

"Not today. Within next few days. I'll let you know when."

I wrote just "OK" and put a smiling emoji at the end.

I wanted to believe that I finished what I had with Jovana, and that I was free to fully commit to Nikolina. She would break-up with Dejan and we will be together.

It will be the best relationship ever!



"Wine is fine but whiskey's quicker, Suicide is slow with liquor. Take a bottle and drown your sorrows, Then it floods away tomorrows." – Ozzy Osbourne

32

On Friday, I found out, by chance or luck, that Nikolina would be in the Ram's head, with some co-workers, celebrating a trivial thing. I wasn't directly invited, but I decided I would be there, given the fact it was a public place. I remembered her words: "I will be here when you return."

Around midnight I was finally ready, so I headed toward the good old place I knew so well. Through thick smoke and wine fumes I spotted Nikolina at the table. She was casually dressed and deep into conversation with Dejan. He was rarely seen in the company of his employees. I wanted to pass to the other room, but the Blond and the Dark-haired practically dragged me to the table: "You have to sit with us." – they said in unison.

A couple of rounds in, we were speaking about the usual topics like work, weather, and upcoming movie festivals. Dejan had quite a few drinks and he started hugging Nikolina.

It bothered me, just as it bothered me when he picked her up with his car. Although I knew well that my boss had her long before me, I didn't even try to accept the fact that I was the intruder in their relationship. I selfishly wanted her only for myself. And he, he could just piss off. To me he always did look like a kidnapper and an enemy. How can emotions twist thoughts with such power? I didn't really care.

I left the place, saying a white lie: "I'll be right back..."

I didn't want to go home. I wasn't looking forward to an empty apartment. I wanted to end up at Nikolina's and to wake up next to her. To spend the whole weekend

together, like we did before. I was encouraged by a couple of looks she gave me, so I waited, walking around the parking lot like an idiot.

It was cold. The lights at the Ram's head were not going out. There was no call. No message. More than an hour passed. In order to warm up, I headed to a small store around the corner, to get something to drink. The familiar face of the salesgirl welcomed me. Just like waiters and taxi drivers, I memorized people's faces who worked nights, for a miserable wage.

"Hey neighbor! Everything is sold out. Sorry, it's weekend. Quite late at night too. I may have just one more bottle of *Vinjak." - Her friendly voice greeted me.

"Sure, why not? Would you like me to tell you something about Vinjak? A story I heard from a friend." - I said, lazy.

She was tired, but she smiled: "I'd love to. There aren't many customers now, and I will be here until morning."

"You see." - I started my story - "In the past, our country was vast and promising. Workers received their thirteenth salary regularly. Schools took pupils to the seaside, free of charge. Foreigners started to notice our peace and tranquility, purposeful employment and satisfaction. They started showing an interest in our industries' products: airplanes, submarines, tanks and tractors, but also homemade cooking, cheeses, selected food and, of course, our liquor."

"Anyway, speaking of Vinjak." - I held up the bottle and admired the beautiful red-black liquid in the neon light. "The foreigners were interested in the process of making this miraculous potion. Having visited cellars with hundreds of oak barrels in which the wondrous fluid matured, tarnished with dozens of world-class awards for top quality, they also asked for necessary laboratories, devices for determining numerous parameters, sample selection, filtration, accentuation, accommodation, alcohol determination, standardization and what not, just like elsewhere in the world."

"One of the hosts, a real Master of Chemistry, said he would try to shed some light onto that aspect too. 'So, if you are interested in analysis and quality control we do here, I can assure you it is highly sophisticated.' - the Master of Chemistry continued. 'Ace! Come for a minute!' - he yelled, looking toward the door with the writing 'The Analyst' on it."

**Vinjak is a traditional drink of the South Slavic peoples. When you have enough of it, it smells like chocolate and opens up a magical portal to a fabulous land where everything seems possible. Alcohol-by volume 40%.*

“Since no one replied, they sent a young assistant inside. A few minutes later, Ace appeared at the door. An old, grey-haired gentleman, expert in the process of distillation and a professional taster. Dressed in white, like a doctor in the emergency room, with test tubes, beakers and pipettes of various sizes protruding from his pockets.

He greeted the guests: 'Interested in the laboratory treatment? Maybe one day we'll introduce it. Until then, one evaluates what one drinks.' He opened the tap on the closest barrel and poured a deciliter of the drink into a beaker. He took a good sip from it and, after holding in briefly in his mouth, he swallowed Vinjak and said: 'Excellent! Ready to ship!' After a bow, he returned to his room.

Experts of the foreign delegations stood still, in silence. Eventually one of them spoke: 'We get it, but what will happen once Ace is gone?'

'Not to worry, Ace has long been teaching a younger apprentice to follow in his footsteps. Just as Ace's father was taught by his grandfather, his grandfather by his great-grandfather. And now, please join us for a banquet!' – said the Master of Chemistry."

I paid and put the bottle into the inner pocket of my jacket. Outside, a chilly, late-summer night breezed over my face. Still there was no call. Between us, waiting and self-hatred are mutually exclusive. I took a few big sips from the bottle. Out of nowhere, my thoughts changed direction.

Well, if not with Nikolina?

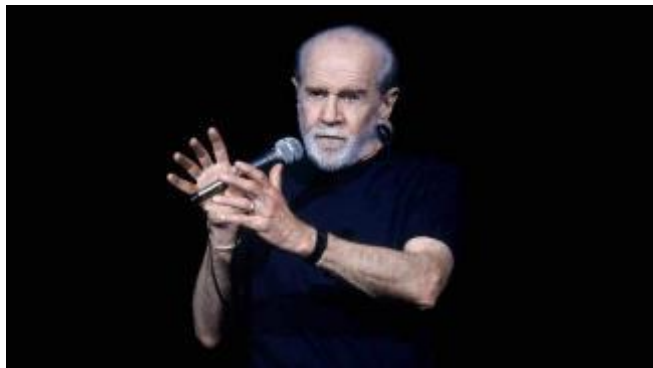
I decided to play a round of Russian roulette with the list of contracts in my phone.

The drop-down list of names scrolled down and stopped– Milica.

Ace, now almost real, sitting next to me, and I took a few more sips of the magic potion from the bottle, until I gave in and sent a message to Milica: "Is it OK if I come over to your place?"

There was something soothing and promising in her simple and quick reply: "Sure."

I headed towards a taxi.



"Here's all you have to know about men and women: women are crazy, men are stupid. And the main reason women are crazy is that men are stupid." – George Carlin

33

It wasn't simple to approach Milica's apartment. One of the reasons was the fact that she lived on the fourth floor, and the building had no elevator. The second reason was the rough plastered wall texture on the hall, so I often came, or left, with white traces on my clothes and a few scratches on my face. Milica didn't mind that. We haven't seen each other for a while, more precisely since I started seeing Nikolina.

I could blame alcohol and excuse myself, saying it made me sin, as it is usually considered, but that would be an empty excuse. A man is personally responsible for his actions and the resulting consequences. Alcohol allows everyone to lower their standards easily. But the consequences, they will always come.

In his stand-up act, Robin Williams said: "Alcoholics reach that moment when they get too drunk but keep going. That is the moment when brain steps back, and lets the body take over." Truth be told, I thought about it afterwards, there was a pinch of revenge involved as well.

Eventually, I found the door and knocked. It made no sense to ring, as it was three in the morning. One should consider the neighbors. Milica opened and I almost fell over her. She was laughing. I tried to be charming as I was taking my jacket off, but the half-empty bottle of Vinjak fell out of my inner pocket. Had I been sober, it would have broken for sure. The jacket wouldn't cooperate. It just wouldn't come off of me.

I tried to excuse myself, saying: "It's holding on to me as a defensive player to the striker." Eventually, I managed to set myself free of the jacket, with Milica's help, and her touches made me think the most tender thoughts.

As much as I remember.

I managed to sit down on a couch. She offered me some wine. After beer and Vinjak, that seemed like a natural progression of events. We each had a glass, as I was doing my best to listen to her. She was talking about how her day was, her night out, failed relationships, girlfriends...

Her monologue was interrupted by the ring of my phone. I looked at the display and barely made out the text by squinting with one eye: Nikolina.

"Hey. Where are you? Come to my place. I'm alone." – Nikolina sounded worried.

"Now? Isn't it a bit late?" – I was winking at Milica.

I felt like Hank Moody.

"No. Come on, I'm waiting for you."

"I'm not coming" – I said decisively. "I am busy."

Milica started laughing, and I chuckled a little bit with her.

"Who is that? Who are you with?" – Nikolina asked. Her voice had a strange ring.

"There is no one. I am alone at home."

Milica laughed even louder and said something funny. I will probably never remember what.

"Who are you with? Tell me!"

"No one. I told you I was alone."

"Don't lie. I can hear someone else!" – she was furious.

I looked at my phone and realized the speaker was on. An honest mistake.

"There is nothing to worry about. I am here with a friend. I came by for a drink." – I kept talking, as if nothing happened.

"I can't believe it! Enjoy! Goodbye!" – she hung up.

"Wait. It's not like that. Hello?! Hello..." – it was over. She hung up.

I looked at my phone until the display turned off. I've put my head down on the couch, crawled into a fetus position, hugged the Vinjak bottle and covered myself with my coat.

When I woke up, I was fully dressed. It was late morning. The phone safe in my hand. My wallet in my pocket. Not bad for a start. I looked around and I realized I was

not in my own apartment. I have no idea how long I slept. I took good two swigs of Vinjak to stop my incoming hungover.

Audentes fortuna iuvat.

I got up and, instead of Ace, I saw Milica sleeping in the next room. I sneaked out of the apartment quietly, without her waking up. The street was filled with people and cars. Fragments of last night's events swam in my head. That vague feeling that something went wrong crept into my mind. I waited for Nikolina, but I ended up at Milica's place. Something wasn't quite clear. I sent Nikolina a text: "Hi.". There was no answer. I assumed she was asleep.

I guess nothing happened between Milica and I. I fell asleep fully dressed on her leather couch. She was in the other room. I went home. A few cans of beer in my fridge. I purchased a few more afterwards. With every crumpled can and a new one opened, I was more certain I did nothing wrong last night.

I rang Nikolina to try and explain how having my phone's speaker on in some other girl's place means only complete trust and honesty. Alas, she didn't answer.

Odd.

After the fourth time I gave up and sent her a text: "Call me when you find the time."



"If I'm gonna be an old, lonely man, I'm gonna need a thing, you know, a hook, like that guy on the subway who eats his own face. So, I figure I'll be Crazy Man with a Snake, y'know. Crazy Snake Man. And I'll get more snakes, call them my babies, kids won't walk past my place, they will run. 'RUN AWAY

FROM CRAZY SNAKE MAN,' they'll shout!" – Friends

35

Later in the evening, the sound of my phone woke me up. "That's her!" – I thought. I looked at display and realized it was Zdravko.

"What time is it? Why are you calling me this early?" – I stuttered.

"Early? It's half eight, the night of the waxing crescent moon, made for good times, is upon us. Come, meet me!" – Zdravko was enthusiastic.

Miraculously, I got out of the bad, finished a warm beer and went to the pub. Zdravko wasn't in the Ram's Head, but in the place where he took the waitress's phone number. I joined him. A dark beer had already been waiting on the table.

"You look horrible. As if you have been drinking vodka from a plastic bottle." – he laughed.

"Not far for the truth. Let me tell you what happened..."

When I finished talking, Zdravko couldn't stop laughing.

"You are such a buffoon! I can't believe it. Well done." – Zdravko was hysterical.

"Nothing happened. I fell asleep on the couch."

"I believe you. But what does Nikolina think?"

"Why?" – I asked, puzzled.

"Because you cheated on her."

"I did not cheat on her, but anyway... She has a boyfriend. It doesn't make any sense."

“It’s a perfectly harmless thing, to you and me, but she could see your actions as an act of cheating. It doesn’t matter that she has a boyfriend. You can’t act like that. You wanted to have your revenge? There is an old saying: ‘When you want revenge on someone, dig two graves.’”

I could almost hear the familiar voice of Mr. Crash behind my back, similar to oinking: “You got busted, you moron!”

I came to, as Zdravko clinked my glass with his.

“You have to help me find her. I need to talk to her!” – I said with a dead look in my eyes.

“How?” – he was puzzled.

“Let’s go downtown tonight. Visit a few places. I know where she usually hangs out.”

“Neat idea. That sounds like so much fun. We are going to chase your wannabe girlfriend, who has a boyfriend and whom you cheated on. I can’t think of anything better to do, or what could go possibly go wrong in that scenario. Of course, I will come with you. Miss this? Never! Where’s the booze!? Flowin’ like mud around here!” – he shouted kindly to his waitress.

While we were emptying our beer mugs, I came up with an amazing pub crawl route with pubs and clubs. Like in the movie ‘The World’s End’. We had one drink in every place. I threw up somewhere along the way, but I soldiered on, like every other person with a goal.

During our endeavor, we came across various freaks that can be seen only on a Saturday night, downtown, where the good times go to wither and die. From half-naked teenage girls in the company of fat vulgarians that drink only whiskey aged 12 years, to former professional politicians, looking for someone to buy them a drink. Unfortunately, as much as I could remember the following day, we did not find Nikolina.

The next afternoon, I informed Aleksandar that I have to take another day off. I was crumpled in bed until dusk, fighting with my grim thoughts. Suddenly, there was a text from Nikolina on the display: “Are you alright?”

I pressed reply:

“I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“We met last night. You were at the club with Zdravko. You were not able to stand on your feet.”

“Yes, I remember, I wasn’t that drunk.” – the worst bluff attempt.

“Great. I just wanted to make sure you got home alive.”

“Yes, I am very much alive. Let’s meet? Talk?”

“I can’t today. You will see me tomorrow, at work.” – She was straight and to the point.

Cold. Like a bullet to the face.

At work. Great. There is nothing as romantic than seeing each other at work. The sexiest place in the world. Be as it may, she got in touch with me. And when we meet, we will talk, and everything will be perfect like before. Relieved to some extent, I fell asleep.



"My job consists of basically masking my contempt for the assholes in charge, and, at least once a day, retiring to the men's room so I can jerk off while I fantasize about a life that doesn't so closely resemble Hell." – American Beauty

36

No need to underline that I got up two hours before the beginning of work and got very carefully dressed: my Tom Taylor jacket from Rome, trousers in the same shade of grey, deep red shirt, silvery-grey silk tie, ankle boots made of soft leather.

When I arrived at the office, I looked for Nikolina but heard she was not in. She went on a business trip, abroad. Again.

I said hello to Aleksandar, who was sitting in my office. As he was telling me about everything that happened during my absence, over a coffee, my head was ringing with: "You will see me tomorrow, at work."

Milica came in. With a friendly smile she said: "Boss wants to see you." That's something, at least I didn't put my tie for nothing, I thought. The doors to his office were open.

"Good morning, you wanted to see me." – I sat in the chair.

"Do you know why I wanted to see you?" – Dejan started calmly.

"I have no idea, boss. It must be something important."

"Hmm... Important. Don't play dumb. Nikolina told me everything... I've already made up my mind."

I didn't say anything, I stopped to think. I'm losing a steady job, which is bad, because, except for a bit of savings, I had nothing.

"Is it OK if I smoke?" – I asked.

"Of course." – Dejan offered a wooden box full of cigars. "Cohiba", it said on the side. "Here." – I lit one and took a smoke.

He went on:

“You know I ruined three marriages. Nikolina means a lot to me.” – he took a cigar and lit it. He did not raise his voice.

I looked at him through the bluish cigar smoke. He had deep lines on his face I never noticed before.

“I decided to let you go. I will write it was consensual.” – He gave me a piece of paper. A blank severance check. “Write the amount you want.”

I wrote the amount, which was similar to my yearly earnings, plus a bit more. He signed without a word. I remained silent. What’s the purpose of empty words, of justifying? I took another drag and put out the cigar. Crystal ashtray, with the company logotype, so many years spent here. And for what?

I got up, made a light bow to my already former boss.

“Goodbye.” – I said. He didn’t say a word.

As I was leaving the company. I said goodbye to the Blond and the Dark-haired.

Aleksandar was not in the office.

As I was waiting for him, I unintentionally saw a part of his review, which said: “As we are talking about the movie ‘Interstellar’, I should stress it makes no sense. I do hold Christopher Nolan in high regard, but the movie has some flaws. I spent many nights thinking about it. If Matthew McConaughey did send himself back through time in order to go forward through time, to return himself through time, to send himself into space and then find that fifth dimension by pure chance, to send himself back through time again, to go into space again... It seems to me that the plot is in a constant loop. That Matthew McConaughey is trapped and that everything keeps happening repeatedly. Therefore, I conclude that ‘Interstellar’ is actually ‘Groundhog Day’ in space, with Anne Hathaway, who unfortunately isn’t naked in this movie...”

Alex interrupted me while I was reading his review. I looked at him with a smile.

“You’ll get far kid. Look my drawers and the closet, I am going on a long business trip.”

“Boss, are you finally going to go through the study journey you told me about? The one in India. At the invitation of Ravi Shankar’s grandson? Their cinematography is mighty... Congrats ... I can’t wait to see your reviews about Bollywood.” – Alex talked nonsense as usual. We shook hands.

As I was passing by Nikolina's desk, I looked back and saw Milica smiling at me, showing me the world-famous pinky and the thumb gesture for 'Call me'. I waved at her and left the place where I spent five years of my life.

As I was walking to my car, I was thinking: what next? What to do? People identify themselves with their job, they build their careers, chase something they believe will fulfil them. Through that rush for status, they don't realize they are losing themselves and, as Seneca said: "they call their hard-earned poverty – wealth", forgetting the most important things, love and family.



"Do you spend time with your family? Good. Because a man that doesn't spend time with his family, can never be a real man. "– The Godfather

37

Whenever I feel genuinely bad, I reach out to my father for help.

As the most intelligent person I've ever met, he must have an idea about overcoming a situation like this. The man who has read all the books in the world, who played guitar and hung out with musicians from local and world rock circles.

As usually, he was sitting in an old rock'n'roll pub, where artists gathered. Painters, poets, musicians. My father, whom, like so many other children in the world, I addressed with "pops", hasn't been playing actively for a while now, but was still considered one of the best guitar players in the city.

Stories were still being told about his gigs in the 80s and how he used to come down from the stage, having played the last instrumental section four times longer than the original, while girls stood in line, waiting to get his autograph.

After his former band split up, he invested all his money into a solo album that was to be released any day now, for the past 20 years. He was sitting at his usual table, with a painter, whom I knew.

"Son! Sit with us. Cher and I are just discussing literature. We came to a conclusion that it is music, in essence."

Cher, the painter added, addressing me:

"The arts have been integrated in us a long time ago. If you write a book someday, I will paint the covers, and the text will be heard as music."

Sasha Cher was an academically trained painter, who spent his money mostly on travelling. Women need not be mentioned specifically. He officially stopped painting, but from time-to-time, my pops would buy some of his beautiful remaining abstractions.

As I was moving the chair, a stocky, middle-aged man with a broken nose approached us. He looked like former boxer and reeked of booze. He was also a part of my father's inner circle, which I knew very well.

"Doctor!" – my father was known under that name, as he was considered the 'guitar doctor' ever since his college days. – "I have a problem!", the boxer said, breathing heavily.

My father and the painter looked at each other. They already knew what this was about.

"Hello, Iceman. You have one problem? People have hundreds of problems, and you have only one. You are one lucky man! You see, son – this is a real man. Only one problem in today's world. That's rare. Iceman, let me solve that problem. How much do you need?" – my father asked him.

"200 dinars, Doctor. Just to buy bread." – Iceman was trembling from withdrawal.

"Here, Iceman, have a grand. Now you can buy bread tomorrow as well, and the day after." – my father gave him the money.

"Thank you, Doctor. You've always been a good man. God bless you! Thank you so much!" – Iceman ran out of the pub.

"You do realize he will drink all that money?" – Cher asked.

"If he's going to drink, let him. That's his choice. After all, there is no need to worry in advance. Or backwards. Today's trouble is enough for today."

Cher added: "Quote from the Scripture? But common people know this too. I'm on my way to meet our friend Kole. He told me recently that his father, a man who still works in his garden even though he is past eighty, when asked 'What do you plan for tomorrow?', answered: 'For tomorrow? I plan to wake up. After that, we will see.'"

Cher said goodbye and left. Father and I were alone.

"What is the matter son? Do you need money?"

"I don't need the money, pops. I wanted to ask for your opinion."

"Ask away."

"I got tangled up in a complicated and messy relationship with a girl."

My father laughed honestly, as any parent would: "You don't say. And who hasn't? Son, my life too would have been just peachy if..." for a moment he wandered off, then he snapped out of it. "I suspected something like that. Sitting like that, all gloomy... Steve, bring us two double Vinjaks!" – Steve, the waiter, went to the bar and started pouring.

My father went on: "Listen, son, the wise men of many epochs knew a thing or two about women, however no one can say they have some definite and reliable cognition about the nature and the essence of the being made out of a man's rib."

I listened to him carefully. We both took a sip, then I said:

"Truth be told, that's not all, I also got fired from my job. It's called consensual termination of contract"

We finished our drinks. I was explaining to him the how's and the what's of what I did until I got into this agonizing situation eventually. He was looking at his glass, turning it around with his fingers. Then he let it fall onto the floor. It shattered into pieces. The waiter came running immediately with two new crystal glasses and put them on our table.

"You see, there is no this." – he pointed to the new shining, handcrafted crystal glass – "Without that..." – and pointed to the shattered glass on the floor with his hand.

"No new glass without breaking an old one, you mean?"

"No rise without a fall beforehand. In order to know the good, you must get to know the bad. You say you're in trouble. I believe it's ten times worse than that. Now is the best time to do what all smart people do when they fall."

"And what is that?"

"To get up."

"And if they fall again?"

"They get up again."

"And for how long should they go on like that?"

"As long as God keeps them alive."

We sat in silence for a while, then he added: "I believe that is what happens after this life too, although reliable information for the afterwards are still scarce."

"Once you told me that optimism lies in that very lack of information." – I continued.

“Someone surely said that before me, and not just one person. That is what hope is based on.” – He poured Vinjak into our glasses.

“What do you mean? ‘Someone surely said that before me. Wasn’t that your original thought?’ – I asked him.

“There aren’t any original thoughts left. If by now no one spoke about something, that means there was no need for that topic.”

It’s hard to follow him, I thought. As if he was exchanging letters with Castaneda. The space between us, though, has miraculously become lighter.

“How’s your writing going? Those scripts of yours? Will you make something out of them?” – he switched over to daily topics.

“I never got around to finishing this last one. I keep correcting the resolution.”

“The main thing is not to give up. Would you like something else to drink?”

“No. How is mom?” – I asked genuinely.

“She is fine, at home, messing around her flowers and plants. Have you talked to your brother?”

“Not in a while. How is he?”

“I think he’s doing something with computers in his office. Go visit them. Do you need some money?” – he asked again. “As for the job, should I ask around? Pull some favors?”

“Not yet pops.” – I answered him.

I remember how he used to tell my brother and me how he and his brother, my uncle, were never scolded or criticized by their father, my grandfather, after some troubles they got themselves into. Firstly, he would help them solve the problem, adding: “Later on, we will advise on the matter.”

I drank the last of my Vinjak: “I’m off. Are you going home?”

“I’ll stick around and have another drink, it’s too early for me to go. I’ll see you.”

I left my father in the pub. Soon enough, a few characters that liked spending time with him joined his table. Among them there were some who used to tell me I got my charisma from him. I wonder what else I inherited as well.



"Starting with these people who read self-help books...why do so many people need help?! Life is not that complicated. You get up, you go to work, eat three meals, you take one good shit and you go back to bed. What's the fucking mystery?! And the part I really don't understand, if you're looking for self help, why

would you read a book, written by somebody else?! That's not self-help, that's help! There's no such a thing as self-help...if you did it yourself, you didn't need help. You did it yourself!" – George Carlin

38

The time was passing. I felt a need to do something. To act. Communication between Nikolina and myself has ended. One evening, as I was surfing the internet mindlessly, I saw that Nikolina's birthday was in two weeks. That is an ideal chance for me to show her how much she means to me. All I needed to do was to come up with a perfect present. Not pricey, but magical. The sound of bird's wings flapping brought me back from my thoughts: "Music. Make a music box for her...", more a thought, then a sound.

So, a box that plays music when you open it. I know the music she likes by heart.

I found a DIY website with instructions on 'how to make a music box'. It seemed fairly simple. All it took was a wooden box, an MP3 player, a switch button and speakers. The contact on the player needed to be connected to the switch which was to be placed on the lid of the box. Simply, when the box is closed, nothing can be heard, when it's opened, the music starts.

In one of those 'do it yourself' shops, that seem to be popping up everywhere, I spotted a small retro suitcase. It had all the necessary characteristics of the box from the DIY website. It could be opened and closed.

The next thing was the MP3 player. This was a bit more difficult, having in mind players of this sort were long gone. Expensive mobile phones and other technological innovations were used nowadays for music listening. But that was solvable.

A Moroccan guy, an immigrant, had a store in the neighborhood. He had everything, from cables to satellite dishes. I bought two MP3 players and the switches. I also found speakers.

Now I needed a workshop with a soldering iron and other tools. I remembered there was an ideal workroom in my parents' home. It's been a while since I've been home anyway, and it was about time I visited my mom.

My parents' house was surrounded by nature, on the outskirts of the city. Both mother and father were now retired, and they decided to retreat there, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. I parked my trusty old Fiat under a walnut tree that was at least 50 years old. As kids, my brother and I used to climb it every day until a branch broke, so I fell, broke my arm and got spanked.

My mother greeted me with a hug that felt like a known, sincere cure for cancer. While she worked, she was employed as a nurse. Obviously, that was not her first dream. As a little girl, she used to adore figure skating. As I was growing up with her, I used to watch encounters of Plushenko and Yagudin, the two biggest skaters of their time. I cheered for Plushenko because he seemed natural on the ice, as if he were floating, while Yagudin was a cruel professional, who performed every movement with perfection, but never with a smile on his face.

"You have forgotten your old mother! Went into the city and stopped calling home!" – she said, kiddingly.

To be honest, I took her words with a dose of remorse. One should see their parents more often. It's easy to forget what they've done for me, but I was not one of those people.

"I haven't forgotten about you mom. And you are not old. And you will live for another 50 years. At least!"

"Listen to you, 50. Make it 60! It's good that you came. I bought two sacks of bell peppers. They need to be roasted, and then we can make a salad together."

Whenever I had the time, I would help my mother, even in regular chores around the house. Inside, on a dresser, I noticed a photo of Jovana and me.

"When will you put this photo away?" – I asked.

"Why should I put it away? Look how beautiful you both are."

It really was a nice photo, from a few years back.

"The photo is nice, but we are not together anymore." – I wanted to change the topic.

“Have you found a new girlfriend?” – she continued.

“I haven’t.”

“As soon as you find one, I will put that photo away. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“How is little Jovana? Are you in touch? What does she do in the wide world?” – she went on, putting her apron on.

That has always been a troublesome question. Not just for my mother, but for everyone who was not familiar with Jovana’s true calling and the choice of her profession. Most of the time I was able to dodge those questions, but with my mother...

“She is fine. She gets by. She works... She works in a company, as an advisor. Something to do with landscape architecture. I’m not quite sure. She works on several projects.”

“Does she work on those projects alone?” – my mom asked.

“Well, rarely alone, sometimes with one person, sometimes with a few people. It depends.” – I tried to maneuver.

“Good thing she got by.” – she was genuinely glad.

“Yes. Yes. She managed fine. She is choking on... on money, I mean.”

“She’s rich?”

“Well... not rich-rich, but she’s making good money.”

“I’m so happy for her! Shall we start roasting these peppers?”

“I can’t do that now. I will come by for the weekend. I will need the workroom. I want to make something.”

“What are you making?” – mom asked.

“A music box! I will come by on Saturday and tell you everything.”



"It's not your fault." – Good Will Hunting

39

I don't know if any of you watched the series 'Breaking Bad', and if you didn't, you should. It's a much better series than 'The Game of Thrones'. I'm not saying that 'The Game of Thrones' is bad, but I am saying that 'Breaking Bad' is better.

Anyway, there is an excellent scene, where Jesse Pinkman, while in rehab, is trying to treat his crystal meth addiction. He tells a story about making a music box while he was in school. When I found myself in that makeshift workroom with all the materials I needed, I had the energy Jesse possessed while he was making his box.

I factored in the good old Murphy's Law into the box-making equation. I was careful and precise. The suitcase was punctured, MP3 player disassembled, button rewired, wires connected to speakers, everything was soldered. For the first song, I chose a great theme from an excellent movie: 'Seven Pounds'. She told me long ago that was one of her favorite movies. It is strange how one can remember some small things, while so-called significant things are often completely forgotten.

Eventually, I open the assembled suitcase. It doesn't work. Nothing. Trial and error. Disassemble, discover what's wrong. I had another MP3 player. Ha! Or, as Steve Coogan playing Alan Partridge would say: "Aha!"

A couple failures later, my mother joined me:

"Try the other one again." – she said, calm.

“You can see it’s not working.” – I was already pissed.

“Well, you probably didn’t connect something properly.”

“I know mother. I obviously didn’t connect something properly. I just don’t know what.” – I was turning the contraption upside down.

“Let me take a look. Where is the manual?” – she was serious.

“There is no manual, just a YouTube video.” – I felt the tension. “Pass me the wine. Please.”

“Here is the wine, son. I will have some too.” – she gave me her glass, inspecting the mechanism. “I really don’t know; it seems like everything is alright. Maybe that MP3 player doesn’t work either.”

“It’s possible, mother, it’s quite possible.”

“Well, OK, let’s try again, with another one.”

“I don’t have another one, I had two, they both failed. Now they are fried.” – I thought it was naïve to believe that Murphy’s Law refers only to the first attempt.

“So, what will you do now?” – she asked compassionately.

“I don’t know.” – I emptied my glass. “I will finish that bottle of wine and go home. We’ll continue tomorrow.”

For the failure, I blamed the old supplies, the Moroccan neighbor who sold me the stuff, even Nikolina, who got me into this entire mess.

“Where is this wine from?” – I asked, intrigued by the soothing taste.

“It’s from Irig. Your father was recently there with his drummer friend. Brought a couple of bottles.”

I poured another glass. “The truth serum’ started showing its beneficial effects.

A bit calmer, with my thoughts sorted out, I came to the conclusion that the wires and switches don’t care about the outcome of my work. The Moroccan sold me his goods honestly, as for her, Nikolina had absolutely no idea about the project I came up with.

“How do you plan to go home?” – my mom interrupted my thoughts.

“The same way I got here. Driving my car.”

“You had too much wine.” – she almost yelled.

“You are right, mother. May I stay here for the night?”

“Of course, your bed is ready. But when are we going to roast those bell peppers?”

“We’ll do that tomorrow as well.” – I promised.

In front of the entrance to the house, we had a garden fenced with a rosemary hedge. In the evening, a large hedgehog would often come out from somewhere. He liked milk and cheese pie. Afterwards, he would waddle off. I was wondering where he was now, as I was moving around the fire, while the smoke somehow always managed to find its way directly into my eyes. I did not care. The old-fashioned way of roasting bell peppers is still the best – on a wire. All that was necessary was a big pile of woods to keep the flame constant. Then you roll the peppers into the pages of old newspapers, wait for them to soak and finally peel them off.

On the other hand, things weren’t that simple with MP3 technology, let alone more modern one. I found a shop online, that was still selling MP3 players. It was named, modestly: ‘We are the best.’ Just in case I ordered 6 players.

As I was expecting the delivery, I went to my room, where, as an old friend, the script for Cameron Crowe’s ‘Vanilla Sky’ waited for me. I watched the movie more than 20 time, and I read the script even more. There is a great sentence in it, that is etched into my head with laser precision. „She’s warm and wicked, a mildly reformed party girl, the kind of girl first-novels are written about.“ The sentence was never spoken in the movie, but it perfectly describes Cameron Diaz’s character, when she appears for the first time on the screen, display, whatever.

Many people say that ‘Vanilla Sky’ isn’t a good movie, as it is the remake of the Spanish movie ‘Abre Los Ojos’. I find the American version much better. Mainstream does not automatically mean – worse. Ask Cristopher Nolan if you don’t believe me. In fact, I will ask him myself, as soon as he explains to me the plot of ‘Interstellar’. The good thing is that Penélope Cruz stars in both movies. And she’s naked in both.

I was going through the script, admiring someone else’s words on paper and compared how precisely they where they acted out in the movie. Pierce Brosnan was right, when he said: “You can make a bad movie from a good script, but you can’t make a good movie from a bad script.”

At the end of reading, I ran out of wine, so I decided it was time to go to bed. The MP3 players were to arrive the next day, anyway.

The next day, after wasting a couple more MP3 players, I started doubting my creative abilities. The same thing happened, as with writing scripts. It was easy to start something. To work on it for a while, and then give up. “Why so serious?” rang in my mind. The sentence connected the Joker said in the movie ‘The Dark Knight’, played by the amazing Heath Ledger. God rest his soul.

My mom walked into the workroom. Like any other mother, she immediately knew I was in trouble. She offered to help me.

That is the true definition of mother's love in the most basic sense. To help her son when times are hard. Without a question, a comment or any criticism, just because that was the right thing to do.

Again, she took up the task of making the box, as if she were assembling it as a gift for someone herself. I admired how she put everything in its place in a short time. I played the role of an almost silent observer. She soldered the last wire.

The moment arrived. The box was sitting on the table, closed. I hesitated to open it. Flashbacks from 'Se7en' started popping up in my head.

"Open it, so we can hear how it works." – she said calmly.

"And if doesn't work? What then?" – I was unsure.

"Nothing. We try again!" – I love that woman!

With my hands shivering, I opened the box. The music started playing. Hurray! A straight A. My mother and I celebrated with a high five. A ritual that we regularly practiced when something was well done. I put one of my half-finished script into the box, with a card and a Kinder Surprise, of course. I wrapped the box in golden paper and wrote "A GIFT" in black, tall letters. As a final touch, my mom added a large silk red ribbon.

Everything was ready.



*"Try getting a reservation at Dorsia
now you fucking stupid bastard!" –
American Psycho*

40

The morning of Nikolina's birthday was upon me. It all came together. It was a non-working day. Even though that information had no meaning to me now. I put the present on the back seat of my car. Quite quickly, I got to the parking in front of her building I knew it very well. It was early afternoon. I called her. After a few attempts she didn't answer the phone. It was over. Or maybe she's sleeping?

"Hello?" – she answered after the seventh try.

"Hi. Happy birthday." – I was enthusiastic!

"Thank you." – she was stone cold.

"I have a present for you. Could you come down for a few minutes?"

"There's no need, really. Thank you."

"No use, I'm here. Just come down." – I hung up.

I was sitting in my car there, in front of the building she lived in, waiting. The same building in which I spent some of the most beautiful moments in my life. Minutes lasted like hours. What will I say? How will she take the gift? Why didn't I drink more than one shot of Vinjak?"

The tsunami of oncoming thoughts was interrupted by the sight of Nikolina. She looked wonderful. Wearing a track suit, her hair down and without makeup. I got out of the car and came close to her. I wanted to kiss her, but she moved back. Ouch. I pulled myself together quickly, took out the flawlessly wrapped box from the back seat and handed it to her.

She took it into her hands, looked at me, confused.

"What is this?" – she was flipping the box.

“Of course I won’t tell you. Just let me know if it’s works. And be gentle!”

As she was still looking at her present, I got back into my car and drove off.

Later, in the silence of a nearly empty pub, over a beer, I was waiting for her to call. To message me. Anything. The waitress knew me. She would bring a full beer as soon as she noticed that the previous one was almost empty. As the day was coming to an end, I was the only guest. The beers kept coming, unlike a call or a text.

It’s OK, I will hear from her tomorrow, she is celebrating, and busy. I paid and drove away, back to my empty home.



"My name is Joe Clay. I'm an alcoholic." – Days of Wine and Roses

41

The following day brought nothing new. No one called me. I thought that was good, as the line should be free, in case Nikolina calls. Many hours later, I was still staring at the display of my phone. Even the sun went down. Still nothing. I considered sending a text, but I was still in touch with reality.

Barely.

I reached to grab the first bottle near me when the phone rang. I jumped like a puma after its prey, but the phone read: 'Zdravko'.

I answered anyway.

"Mate, are we going out tonight?" – he didn't know about the state I was in and about my perfect, but obviously failed plan and its consequences.

"I'm not in a mood tonight. Go without me." – I kept it brief.

"Don't be like that. There is an awesome party..."

I hang up on him, for the first time ever. That meant I truly didn't feel fine. In moments of despair, I even opened Nikolina's Instagram page. Naturally, there was nothing interesting for me there. Even the fact that a good deal of media information has long been based on social media monitoring, could not have justified my actions.

In movies "Trainspotting" 1 and 2 there is a famous "Choose life" monologue. It is particularly good in the sequel, where Ewan McGregor's character talks about social networks: "Choose Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and a thousand other ways to spew your bile across people you've never met. Choose updating your profile, tell the world what you had for breakfast and hope that someone, somewhere cares."

Over many drinks, I would listen to 'Coldplay' and daydream about Nikolina. Thinking about her, drinking, occasionally going out to the store to get more booze and cigarettes. These were my only day-to-day activities.

The next day, or the one after, I don't remember clearly, I decided to visit a psychologist. Dejan mentioned someone to me earlier. While I was working for him, they had a psychologist the employees were able to visit, whenever they felt a need to. I was sure the psychologist was on the take and later retold the content of these conversations to the bosses. Some psychologists invented their superiority, often by imputing their current knowledge before a séance.

However, the guy Dejan hired to provide employees with psychological counseling was a very decent person, with ease in his approach and casual courtesy. I knew him quite well. We used to hang out in the same pubs from time to time, as we lived in the same neighborhood. I had his phone number. Assessing I was sober enough, I called him. He answered after the second ring:

"Hi. I was just thinking about you. I haven't seen you in a while at work. What's happening?" – he was kind.

As a smart man, he never inquired about daily events, unless he really had to. So, he had no idea I left the company. I opted for a short conversation, as he had a certain aura of professionalism around him.

"I need a psychologist... Yes, I, personally."

He answered calmly: "Of course. I do too, from time to time. You and I have known each other for a long time. I don't think I could be objective enough with you. I mean, I would root for you. I would underestimate the bad and overestimate the good things. Do you understand?" – professionalism consumed the conversation.

"I think I do. I don't think I could write a good review for my brother's movie. What do you suggest?" – I agreed.



"Let me tell you something you already know. The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place and I don't care how tough you are it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard ya hit. It's about how

hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done!" – Rocky Balboa

42

I was anxious before the very arrival to the séance, session, therapy, conversation. Call it as you wish. In an old building, on the second floor I walked into an office, that looked like the one in 'Good Will Hunting', where Robin Williams spoke to Matt Damon.

Nemanja was about 15 years older than me, but he appeared younger. He wore a plaid shirt and a fine velvet jacket and dark suede boots. In addition to professional, he also had some respectable life experience as well. He was divorced two times and had a successful stint in rehab behind him.

After several conversation, we came to the conclusion that I was depressed due to the loss of a girl, toppled with an unsuccessful attempt to restore this failed relationship.

Sounds silly, I know.

I felt pretty miserable because the psychologist defined the relationship with Nikolina as a failed one. "That is a loss of an introjected object, professionally speaking." – he said, or something similar to that. "And as far as alcohol is concerned, it has made you receptive to the condition you are now in."

As simple as it could ever be. I agreed. What's the point of complicating things to infinity and beyond? The causes are, obviously, clear, but what are we going to do with the consequences on my mental health? Getting to know me, the psychologist completely gave up on the 'academic' approach to my case. He started to comfort me sincerely. Although a non-smoker, he allowed me to smoke during our séances.

He assured me that I had done everything I could and that I could not push the matter any further.

We met once or twice a week, depending on the arrangement. I noticed that he did not impose a sense of guilt. He did not address moral and ethical dilemmas. That's what I once told him: "You do not condemn obvious mistakes, like so many others."

He thought about it and then said: "We do condemn the sin, but not the sinner."

"Sounds good, it feels familiar. Where is that from?" – I asked.

"The New Testament." – Nemanja said, and then, for some reason, added: "You know, the internet knows no eternal truths, lacks charisma and creativity. In the age of the internet, very few people check the facts which concern them personally and their origin. The result of such a search can be disastrous. Fortunately, more and more people are less likely to believe apparently contradictory data in the same place."

After a few months I did start to feel better. Nemanja led me to conclude that for every ascent, except faith and will, a balance of support must be struck. When you are lifting something, lean on both feet, I simplified.

The series 'True Detective' is awesome, at least season one, with Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson. The second season is worse, as far as I'm concerned, although Colin Farrell brilliantly portrays an emotionally wrecked detective. Anyway, in the series, in the very first episode, I think, Woody Harrelson has a brilliant line: "Past a certain age, a man without a family can be a bad thing".

It's simply not normal for a person to go through life alone.



“Let me give you a little inside information about God. God likes to watch. He's a prankster. Think about it. He gives man instincts. He gives you this extraordinary gift, and then what does He do, I swear for His own amusement, his own private, cosmic gag

*reel, He sets the rules in opposition. It's the goof of all time. Look but don't touch. Touch, but don't taste. Taste, don't swallow. Ahaha. And while you're jumpin' from one foot to the next, what is he doing? He's laughin' His sick, f***in' ass off. He's a tight-ass. He's a sadist. He's an absentee landlord. Worship that? Never.” – Devil's Advocate*

43

I decided to visit my older brother. Johnny is three years older than me. I haven't seen him in a few months and now felt like a good time as any. He is the most gifted person I know. He has photographic memory and was a programmer once upon a time. With his knowledge and skills, he is able to run a company of 500 people, but he never cared for money. He worked as much as he needed, in order to have a life which suited his needs. Above all, he despised capitalism and the nine-to-five life. I admired him, among other things, because he never got into the race with capitalism and because he lived life at his own pace.

The dusk was turning into a quiet warm late spring evening. His office, which doubled as a living space, was located on the first floor of an old, five-story building.

I haven't been in the area for a long time, but one thing has not changed. In front of the residential building, on the steps, sat the 'eternal neighbor'. I never knew his real name, but everyone called him that, so I accepted it. He looked like he was 50, though I'm pretty sure he wasn't over 35. All gloomy, he sat on the steps in a grey rustling sweatshirt with dirty dreadlocks protruding from under his hood.

“What's up, neighbor?” – I asked him, as if we've seen each other the day before.

“I'm huffing, it's a crisis. I can't afford anything better.” – he answered.

Huffing, for those who don't know, is a colloquial term for inhaling glue. Around here, people consume Tigar, a universal adhesive which has a variety of uses. Successful enjoyment of it requires only a nylon bag. Earlier, when the standard was slightly higher, the eternal neighbor enjoyed marijuana or ecstasy and he always shared with his acquaintances. Old school. Now he's reduced to glue.

"Have you seen my brother lately?" – I went on.

"He's at home. He doesn't go out much. He has some people coming over all the time, I have no idea what's going on. I've been there a few times, we got drunk. The usual."

The neighbor was currently unemployed. His hair salon, which used to be right next to the building entrance, was closed. Before the hair salon, he had a game room. Even before that, he ran a used video cassette store or the like. I walked past him, left him some money, and walked inside.

As I was approaching the first floor, a deafening noise was becoming louder and louder. I approached the door of Johnny's apartment in the hallway and heard rough male voices on the other side, making hooligan noises one might hear during a heated football match. I opened the door and somehow walked through the lobby. An elderly man was sleeping on the floor. I had to step over him to open the door to the living room.

What I saw was an extraordinary sight.

The furniture was arranged in a circle, along the walls of the room. There was a ring, painted in red on the hardwood floor, and in it, two roosters were fighting each other. At that moment, the smaller rooster was attacking the larger one, which had already lost its eye. The hardwood floor was covered with feathers and blood. A dozen sweaty, drunken men were cheering with banknotes in their hands. They were jumping around the red line, shouting when their cock gave a good blow to the opponent and vice versa.

I didn't know anyone.

My eyes finally found Johnny. He was sitting at a table behind the horde of people, with a laptop and a bottle of whiskey in front of him. I approached him. We hugged.

"Bro. What's going on?" – saying I was surprised would be an understatement.

"Easy money. Believe me, easy money. The tenant council president gathers these thugs and organizes cockfights for money. I am here, part-time."

"How did you find them?" – I looked over the crazy crowd.

"4Chan. How else!? There is a whole subculture of people who are into this. I just gathered them into one group called 'Rooster Lovers'."

"Subtle!" – I was thrilled. "You always had a talent for making money. However crazy that turns out."

"If I hadn't, somebody would have already thought of it. There is a whole market here to explore! Trust me on this." – He entered some numbers into a spreadsheet.

Our conversation was interrupted by the general tumult of the crowd. I looked towards the ring and saw that one of the roosters had fallen and the other was triumphantly jumping around on one leg. Johnny began to calm the crowd: "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! There is one fight left for tonight! We have a special rooster brought by my good friend Jesus de Salamanca directly from Mexico! Fighting against him, we have the rooster of Mr. Kacevic from Slankamen. The fight will begin in a few minutes, please prepare your bets. The odds are written on the blackboard."

In the corner of the room there was indeed a blackboard with decimal odds written on it, like at the beginning of 'Casino'. It was obvious that Jesus' rooster was an absolute favorite in the next fight. Johnny pulled me aside.

"Listen, do you have any money? Like cash? We can make a nice earner here!" – he was enthusiastic but silent.

"If we put everything on Jesus' rooster?" – I had a solid stock of severance money with me.

"Don't even think about that!" – Johnny interrupted me. He looked around to make sure no one was listening and went on – "We will put everything against Jesus' rooster. Jesus is not from Mexico, actually. He is a guy I met while I was in the beekeeping business. You remember that time? Anyway, Jesus, or Jovica to his friends, trained his rooster to throw the fight."

"Jesus, excuse me, Jovica, trained a rooster to throw a fight?" – I asked in disbelief.

"Yes! It's a sure thing! I just sell this story with Mexico to get the crowd worked up."

I saw 'Jesus' bringing the cage covered with a shiny red cloth and putting it down gently into the ring. The opponent rooster was ready. I hoped that this was not the dumbest thing I'll ever do: betting on a fixed cock fight.

"So, I'm putting my money against Jesus' rooster!?" – I asked.

"That's right. I can't because I run this show, I keep the numbers, earnings and all that. But no one will doubt you!" – Johnny took my money and went to initiate the fight.

The fight started. Jesus' rooster was almost twice as big as the opponent's and, even though I'm not a cock fight enthusiast, it seemed like he was winning. And then, suddenly, when the opponent's rooster barely managed to touch him, Jesus' rooster fell on the floor and stayed there motionlessly. The crowd went silent. The wide-eyed people watched the surreal scene in complete shock. The little rooster was calmly walking around the apparently defeated opponent. Johnny declared the end of the fight.

"Gentlemen, that was the last fight for tonight. I hope you all enjoyed your time. We will see you next Tuesday, and now please leave the premises! Goodbye."

It was dawning. The apartment was cleared out. Jesus, Jovica to his friends, was lying next to a nearly empty bottle of tequila, on the couch. His rooster was walking around the table Johnny and I were sitting at. Although the table was full of empty bottles and overflowing ashtrays, the rooster moved gracefully, like a bull in a china store, and didn't break anything.

Johnny poured some more whiskey into our cups. My eyes stopped on the laptop display.

"Johnny? Could you hack someone's Facebook profile?" – I asked?

"Does the Pope shit in the woods?" – he stopped rolling a cigarette.

"You know, I never understood that analogy. Are we to assume that during 2000 years of history, no Pope ever relieved himself in the woods? Even during the dark ages?"

"You are not wrong. Hacking Facebook is easy. You know that I hacked the internet provider to reduce our bills by 50 percent. Do you remember how I did it?"

"Yes. Everyone said it was impossible..."

"Then I took a telephone in which I installed a little software and delivered it to the roof of the internet provider's building using a drone. You see, the catch is to approach the system you want to hack physically. After that, it's a walk in the park."

I never fully understood the methods Johnny used completely. He was a genius programmer, further implying that he was also a genius hacker. He continued talking. "Hacking a Facebook account, that's amateurism. I just need that person's email address, a cigarette and twenty minutes."

"Nina... something gmail... some numbers after that. I'm not sure. Wait, I need to check my phone." – I looked it up.

I took my phone and started listing, looking for Nikolina's private email address. I don't know what I wished for. Maybe I just wanted an inside view at whatever was happening behind the curtain. Behind her Facebook account. I wanted to read her messages and see who she was exchanging them with. There is no crime there, as far as I know. As Nemanja said, the relationship has already failed.

I found her email, but I stopped. If I did this, and I was sure Johnny could do it, I would be taking an uninvited look into her privacy. That wasn't right. I drank the whiskey from my cup.

"Never mind, Johnny, I was just being curious."

"I mean, that will be easy, piece of cake. There might be some nudes too." – he laughed, rolling a cigarette.

"How do you know it's a girl?" – I asked him.

"Well, we're not gonna hack the profile of some guy with a moustache, are we? Come on!"

"We're not gonna hack anyone's profile." As if that last sip of whiskey sobered me up, I went on: "Whatever Nikolina did and whoever she exchanged messages with is her business and so it should remain. If she didn't want to share everything with me, I wouldn't want to find out anything this way. Unless a day comes when we sit down, have tea and tell each other everything we never did before."

"You know we don't push things." – he answered calmly.

I was getting ready to leave.

"Where are you going?" – my brother asked.

"I'm going home. It's morning, I should sleep a little." – I pinched his ear lightly. That was our greeting since we were kids.

"You are right. Come by sometimes, I am here most of the time."

I put on my coat and headed out. I greeted the rooster with my eyes and left the facility.



*"When You Love Someone,
You've Gotta Trust Them. There's
No Other Way. You've Got To Give
Them The Key To Everything That's
Yours." – Casino*

44

One fine day, the telephone rang. It was Zdravko. Since I haven't seen him in a few weeks, I decided to answer. I spent some time with my family, it was time to see my old friend too.

In the summer, life becomes simpler.

I managed to iron my shirt and I put five bracelets on my arm, because my confidence was generally low. I looked at myself in the mirror, took a few sedatives and headed to the pub.

Zdravko was asking the staff what happened to the waitress with whom he once exchanged numbers. No one remembered. But what is truly *remembering*, anyway? And for how long? We were drinking our third beer, myself slightly faster than Zdravko. We never complained to each other. Too much. He knew I would tell him what's going on in my life if I want to.

I do not remember how the night started, more or less it was usual for us, but soon enough, there were three girls at our table: a black-haired, a blond and a brunette. They were from out of town and came here to study. In most cases, 'studying' was already a lost cause, in terms of spending parental money on alcohol, makeup and wardrobe. With an end-goal close to: "someone (with a lot of money) will eventually notice me".

Just before closing time, the waiter came. We paid the bill, and, with our newly found friends, we went out into to street. We didn't feel like going home, so we asked the girls for a suggestion on 'where to go next?'. "We were supposed to go to a party, up in the old Fortress." – the black-haired girl started explaining – "but Jovana had an argument with her boyfriend and now she doesn't want to go there."

I think Jovana was the blond. Why did her name had to be Jovana?

“Listen, Jovana.” – I don’t know what made me address her that directly. Was it because her name reminded me of a very special time, and person, in my own life? “If your boyfriend is there, you should go, you should see each other. I’m sure the thing you quarreled about is insignificant, minor, and you’ll laugh about it in the morning as he brings you coffee to bed.”

Jovana looked at me with a smile. Approval in her eyes. Thin legs with white heels have already decided. Fortress here we come! It’s always difficult to squeeze five people into a taxi. According to traffic rules, a standard vehicle can fit four people, plus a driver. However, with a little bit of effort, and a significant bribe, we were off.

We got to the Fortress. A monumental 14th century structure that lasted through many wars and plagues. Now it hosted hotels, bars, museums and casinos. We went inside and headed toward the club. The club on the Fortress is a haven. A last resort. If you find enough space to rest your arm on a railing, and you’re lucky enough that the waiter and bartender don’t move you every minute, there’s no need to move all night. This club is becoming my favorite spot quickly. Girls that came with us have disappeared.

To the right of the bar was a makeshift podium above which was a DJ counter. Young people were jumping to the sounds of music, sometimes even in rhythm. Also, almost everyone had a bottle of water in their hand.

Despite the explanations of the respected experts, this phenomenon cannot be explained in any way. Through the unimaginable crowd, a familiar face made its way to us. Boza Stankovic recognized us. He was short and stocky and wore dark glasses. He talked very fast.

“Yo, yo, gentlemen! What brings you to such a wonderful place? I thought you two were just making rounds in banquets, patisserie shops and high-class cafes, without thinking of the rest of us who love trance, good parties and underage girls. Zdravko, Zdravko, as handsome as ever. If I didn’t know you, I might have even tried to hit on you. Ha-ha! But, seriously, lads, what will I have to drink? That’s funny, isn’t it? Because I didn’t ask what you will have, but what will I have to drink! Get it? It doesn’t matter. I will have just water, so it won’t cost you much.”

“Boza, did you, by any chance, have a pill or two?” – Zdravko asked him.

“Of course, I did!” – Boza answered proudly. “What do you think that I would come here all straight? I don’t think even I could endure such torture. If you want, I could get something for you guys.”

Boza pondered briefly and then, with an unexpected haste in his pace, he wandered off into the crowd. Zdravko and I toasted with our warm beers that have

arrived a moment before. We didn't have enough time to take a sip, when Boza returned. From his pocket he pulled out a little plastic bag, full of 'candy'.

"Listen up, guys! I recommend the Superman. I took it two hours ago and it's still working. It's so good! It makes you fly. Trust me: it makes you fly! Oh, dear, I'm so high... Just be careful. You take one half first, and then, after an hour, the other half. Although, some people say: 'Better two at once, then half and half!' Ha-ha!"

"Ok, Boza, stop nagging already. How much do we owe you?" – Zdravko inquired.

"Zdravko, my good man, don't insult me. You owe me nothing. I got this from a friend, to put them back into circulation."

Soon after that, Boza disappeared in the crowd. Zdravko and I shared a Superman and topped it with a beer. Whenever these easy things are around, I think of the movie 'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas'. Terry Gilliam, one of my favorite directors of all times, expertly showed the consumption of substances and their impact on the human psyche. My favorite sequence from the movie is the one where Johnny Depp talks to crocodiles in the bar.

I was tired, so, instead of beer, I ordered a Red Bull. After an hour, nothing. It was not possible that Boza would give us some colored aspirins, he was an honest and fair criminal.

"My friend, we should take another half each, this isn't working." – I whispered to Zdravko.

"Go ahead, but none for me, I'm feeling awesome." He was already dancing in the rhythm of the music, with a pair of glasses over his eyes he got from who knows where.

I had another half and downed it with beer and Red Bull. After another half an hour, still nothing. I felt a mild influence of alcohol, but nothing even similar to the substance I was promised. I lit a cigarette and decided to take a walk.

Due to the smoke and lights coming from the opposite direction, I wasn't able to see clearly. Everyone was facing the stage. I tottered to a group of scantily dressed girls who were swinging water bottles in their hands. I turned to the stage too in order to see what was so fascinating. The DJ, with his cap turned backwards, was hitting his mixing console without any logic.

The only DJ I respect is Pete Tong, from the movie 'It's All Gone Pete Tong', which does not show the glamorous life of DJs some people believe in, but how to deal with fame and, above all, how to get up when life knocks you down.

I went back to the bar and ordered a beer. Maybe it would have been better if I had ordered water, I thought. From there I saw Zdravko in the crowd, kissing a cute girl. Smart man. As soon as I approached the bar, the waitress panicked because I was tottering and was apparently too pale. I tried to say something to Zdravko, but that is where the night ended for me.

What happened next has already been told so many times by my acquaintances at the time, my so-called inner circle of friends, and is still often recounted. There are at least ten versions of the event.

Zdravko never recounts. He just says: "All people involved were adults."

Zdravko and I slept in my apartment that night and tried to reconstruct our erased memory. In the morning, in the bathroom, we saw our own faces in the mirror. We laughed out loud.

Despite the terrible headaches, what we saw was: two faces, distorted by the previous night's drunken partying, just like in the Jean-Michel Basquiat's painting 'Dos Cabezas'. For those in conversation, the painting was created in two hours. The two heads represent the author and the present master Andy Warhol.

All in all: it was just another regular night.

Well, the Earth is spinning too, what was yesterday is happening today.

And it will happen again.

THE END

EPILOGUE

In the story you read personal names are fictitious.

The events are real.

The experience is deceptive.

Things always come back to the beginning.

I'm finishing the script and plan to send it to an online competition. I have an interview for and a new job ahead of me. I turned 30 in May. I don't have a steady girlfriend. I do not use social networks that much. I'm in touch with my parents and my brother.

"To achieve great things, two things are needed; a plan, and not quite enough time.", the great Leonard Bernstein said. I have both at the moment.

Dejan sold his company and moved to Argentina with Nikolina. They started a new business there and, as I hear, they are doing well. I never found out what happened to the music box I gave her for her birthday. It doesn't matter. "Out of sight, out of mind" works.

Jovana does what she does. Since we parted at the airport last time, I haven't watched any of her movies. She can watch them herself, while she's alive and kicking.

Mirko at whose wedding celebration we met has died. Heart attack, most likely. He didn't leave a will. Inheritance claims are pending, and even creditors have appeared from somewhere. He was buried in 'our' cemetery. So, one could say that he still drinks beer with us when we meet there on Saturdays.

Aleksandar, my assistant at the time, called Alex, bought Dejan's company and has incorporated it into a worldwide integrative system of that genre. I haven't spoken to him. I wish him all the best.

The cleaning lady who used to make me coffee is now retired. She has grandchildren.

The Blond and the Dark-haired opened a restaurant. As usually, they wanted my opinion:

“What should we name it?”

“A wild boar's tooth.” – I said, I'm fed up with “Rams' head”.

“Why?” – they asked, as usually, in unison.

“Bob Dylan said so.” – I finished.

Jovan is still able to play “The Girl of (from) Ipanema” flawlessly. We meet from time to time, usually on Saturdays.

Zdravko still calls, I call him back, we meet. In the best sense of the word, he is always resourceful. He responds to challenges with tolerance and compromise. We are tight.

He has never been married.

He's never without women.

I changed my cell phone several times, but the number is still the same.

You can watch a movie and it will pass as an event, but if you interpret it and then adopt what you interpreted, it will become an experience.