



The Beauty from Zagreb

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Trams please me, no question – they know where they have to go.

My neighbour's book says: 'He walked up the steps of the Pentagon. The admiral on the door said, "The President is waiting for you..."'

She reads very slow. She turns and says: 'Fuck off. Get your own device.'

My stop.

A lady with the voices tries to push me off the sidewalk. You never know how many they are.

Here is my friend.

'We'll drop China,' Damien says. 'They'll have to fight for all the stuff they'll need, and then go bankrupt. They won't make it. Too much wrong geology.'

I'm lost. 'Too little geography?' I say, to keep in step.

'Nice one,' Damien laughs. 'At all events, they're out.'

Does he sell, or does he spy? I wonder.

He leaves, our usual brief meeting, saying, 'This is the end, beautiful friend.'

As we part, he kicks a storefront window. He must have iron boots. The glass shoots up into frosted roots, they call it 'making a rose' if it's a peacock. It's like a snowflake. 'No future there,' he says, 'No, none at all.'

I can't hear what his admiral says when Damien has run up his steps.

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Here's everybody – friends, chatting in real time, real presences. There's Alvin, Bosh, me, Cayley, and the rest, all words.

'Those Russians never get it right! Communism, and now whatever... never no peace.'

‘It seems Homer was a clan. They started off the whole book thing. And hung up on that one war, just like in Europe. Those odd stiff people, stabbing each other. Like families of dwarves, in the circus, or musicians – powerful upper bodies, obsessed. Then comes Christ, and they swallowed him too.’

‘He’s off to fight, Adnan is.’

‘Well, we’re all busy busy.’

‘Should we stop him. Somehow?’

‘He wants to go back, start it from a different history. Think of all the cadavers, intervening, while it was going wrong, he thinks. That evens it out. He’ll make some more, the faithless dead, guys who don’t count. The wrong side won, he’s the redresser.’

‘He’ll drop in more corpses, till he’s done, that’s for certain. But if he’s to be punished, it’ll happen over there. And he’ll see it’s not so pure.’

‘He’s not pure, just stubborn. And there’s no room here for him. He’s learnt to argue, not give in, but he hasn’t learnt to reason. They don’t teach them that.’

‘Everyone’s doing something now, not like before, when they only reaped and sowed. Years back, they went into the Underground. That didn’t get them far.’

‘You mean the subway.’

‘We were taken in by China: it’s just more exotic food, that ends up here.’

‘I don’t get on with your kid.’

‘You don’t know how to take him. If he torments animals, tell him “no”. Obnoxious is the same all over.’

‘I feel they’re all fragile and evil.’

‘It’s so, but there’s no one else to love. And they’re indifferent to you.’

‘Once there were lots of human species, side by side. Clumsy, stupid, painters, starwatchers, all roaming. Firing at the elephants. Maybe there’s a better crowd arisen among us now, facing down challenges, not giving in. They don’t laugh at us. They need our cash. Damien is surely one of them.’ That’s me, that’s what I think.

‘Often, Damien steps out his frame. That big voice! Kicking things. He says, “If the rich won’t run everything, we’ll need another of those rebellions. The false revolutions – our generation’s been full of them. Or else we’ll need to shut the bottom classes up....they’ll not find work to suit, and I’m not paying them to lounge. We’ll need to set the cops on them, poor things, there’s nowhere they can go, and as for their horizon....!”

‘Damien knows it can’t be fixed. We’ll never be again what we once thought we were.’

I say again, this time to Alex, another of the new, the coming, species, when we are alone. ‘It can’t be fixed...’

Damien'll fix it. They write books about him. Waves of angry people, classes that rise and fall, and then are batted down. That's what he sees. He's the guy – they listen to him, follow his advice. Is he a superior one, the better sort, emerging species? Or just a louder voice?

Alex says, 'You can't stop Damien. Besides, it's just ideas. It's all committees, in the end. I'm on them all. And you – it's clear, you aren't the better sort.'

'This Homer thing,' I say. 'It seems there was a pack of them, a family biz. Each one invents an episode, and joins them up, a hero sticks the fancies like a glue. The real protagonist, the "I" – was Homer number one. Maybe he even fought – some skirmish....' and I carry on.

'So what?' asks Alex. 'The Greeks – they didn't make the team. Got it all from Africa....'

'We lesser ones,' I say. 'For us, it's only stories. Animals don't tell them, only us; we hoisted up ourselves, and told them. Tales. Concoctions. Gods and heroes, like you do at school, and good guys, bad guys – maybe you can get to shoot the right set, even keep your cash. That's it, is all! Sure, we're more advanced than chipping flints, but still – we haven't got the brain to solve the real enormous things....'

'Look,' says Alex: 'Remember this, forget the species maybe that's evolved, and gives advice, and wears iron boots. There's always a survivor. Everything goes down... some lizard thing creeps from the pile and starts it off again. It's gardening, my friend.'

Our brains are exhausted. Alex says, 'But you – you did your bit for freedom, in the streets.'

'I thought about all that,' I say. 'For us lay guys, what is there left, but freedom? It's the least – besides, you can't go in the streets and always shout for cash.'

We part. I take the tram: the woman's book says, 'He nuzzles down between her thighs....' I say to her, 'That doesn't turn one on,' and she says, 'Oh no! It's you again! Another book. This one I wrote myself. You can read it when I've done another page.'

I say to Chloe, when I'm in our room, 'This story thing. It really fits, with everything. There's "I" is God, or "I" that's making rhymes, or leading monkey armies, or just sitting there, letting it all drop off like sweat. We primitives, we lay guys – we have Homers, who pretend they are some warrior; who travels round the world, and then it's vengeance, more slaughter. Probably another war. You see, it is all stories. Now, as it all comes to an end, you need some guys that can survive, and maybe solve the business....'

'What crap,' she says. 'You and your friends. It's wishful, all this stuff; and envy. You'd like to tough it through, like Damien.'

‘Damien has the ears that matter,’ I say.

‘You always were more suspicious of your side. Maybe you’d be happier – over there, with the others. It’s them that don’t want you, though,’ and Chloe laughs. That sets it out, just everything.

I go back on the tram. The woman with the little pad is writing – ‘...looking for a safe and easy ride, he chose an elephant. Then someone thought to spice it up, fired pepper spray right down its nose....’

‘Ha!’ she says, ‘it’s you again! People love prose, it’s like warm food. It’s sitting round campfires. There is no quest; although it has an end – that, you can’t twist or fake.’

‘I’m sure it’s true,’ I say. ‘It passes time, that’s passing anyway.’

We’re at her stop. Her bag clinks as she starts to leave. It’s full of canisters of pepper sprays. Then, there’s an insistent sound, like someone close to you, crunching ice cubes. Behind us – there’s a guy, much relaxed, shot through the eye, just sitting there.

There’s the noise, and we all act as if we’re in Juarez City, and we have some theory, some analysis. There’s guys around the guy, being photoed by their mates. The woman says ‘small cal, hi vel’, and that seems right. I look at her quite close, the first time, her sly sexy face. I guess she’s about sixteen. That’s ok, you see she knows it all, maybe not deeply, and I say, to fill the space, ‘That’s real target shooting.’

She doesn’t answer, and we stand and look, as if we’re partners and she got off the shot.

This was the moment I decide to quit Chloe, go with this arty witch.

I tell Chloe, ‘There was this guy, behind – shot through the eye. Like there were snipers.’

‘It’s fixed,’ she says. ‘The tram comes round the curve, and you just squeeze the trigger. The people ride that tram – are all the usuals.’

‘It seems so out-of-date,’ I say. ‘Like rock and roll, the fear, the shot from out the heavenly blue. Things are not chance, not now. We’ve all been told the worst.’

‘You could be loud, like Damien,’ she says, seeking more fruitful arguments.

‘You know how much he gets?’ I ask. ‘These guys are not amongst us. They buy in, then they’re bought out. Their job is all the same, it’s talk and dinners. Putting the creatures in the ark, pretending they are saved. We others are invisible. Left in the rain.’

‘You shouldn’t mind that,’ Chloe says. ‘I know you’ll do a great thing. Losing your work – it’s nothing – like when Damien climbs the tree. He knocks the soft fruits off. Like you. Down they go, and make another tree. I’d recommend

you where I work, but you don't know colours, can't cut shapes.'

I don't rise to this. 'The middling people – it's their time,' she says. 'Only the communists had some hope, a future – and look where they have ended up! The religious ones – they knew how it all would end, the saved, the damned. Now, it's the turn of in-betweens. The moderns. Dependent, angry. On the streets for petty things.'

Next day, the woman's on the tram. 'You ought to turn your head,' I say. 'Your profile, like you're on a coin – it's dangerous. Makes you a target. Show both your eyes, and look at me.'

I see her page. '... my father kept a hardware store,' it says, 'till he died duelling in the Bois.'

'Where are you from?' I ask.

'No!' she says. 'It's too direct. You pry. And I'll not tell.'

'Far far away,' I say. 'But not where you would want to stay.' She's silent.

'The Caucasus? Balkans? I see a mountain, and the sea.' She reads her book.

'Croatia? I know exactly what you are. "The Beauty from Zagreb". A title that would make you proud.'

She laughs. 'Yes, yes. Exactly right.'

I know her name: Wittgenstein says a name could be sacred. Luisa.

'Luisa,' I say. 'Chloe wants to live on an island. She hates this country too. It means she'd learn some Portuguese. Putting little turtles in the sea, among the sharks. I'm quite attracted.'

'That's your secret, then,' she says. 'They give us secrets, that way we blackmail them. Then they go after us, to punish. A secret's there to tell, at the right time. The music never stops. You do.'

'You knew that guy, that's dead?' I ask.

'A bit. Everyone on the tram. He used to read what was on my pad, like you,' she says.

'Who gives us secrets?' I ask.

'The state. Sometimes God,' she says. 'Don't sit by the window, if you've spilled your secret.'

'My friend Damien,' I say, 'talks to the President. They're dumping China, their fear of it. No resources. Except people, like the hundreds and thousands they used to put on cakes.'

'People is best,' Luisa says. 'Having only them, you don't need dig the soil.'

'My friend Alex says the future's on the table. You have to disbelieve your friends,' I say.

'Come on!' says Luisa. 'Stop trying to peek at my underwear. This is where I live.'

We leave the tram. It passes by where all of us live. 'Here's my cat,' she says, though first you notice the red flowers, their yellow tongues, the white grass frizzed, the tiny birds. 'See – the birds have blue tongues,' she says. It's true. 'Here's my cat,' she says. 'I have to kill for it. Food,' she says.

'Ludwig was right, where language ends, hunting begins.' She holds an axe.

'A chopper,' I say. 'The "chopper" should be mine....'

'It's underwear again,' Luisa says. 'You live in double senses. It's you who hopes you've got the chopper.'

It's a scalding moment, and I stand nearer to her than I need. 'There's other ways of feeding cats,' I say.

'Jesus!' she says. 'If that's not bonding! Doing its dirty work, fresh kills.'

'You must love real hard,' I say.

'Your friend Damien....' she says. 'You shouldn't just dump countries. There's the people, too. Not their persons, but the quantity. It's not convention, saying that, nor humanism: you can see them all, on trains and stations.'

'You know philosophy quite well, Luisa,' I say, quite at a loss.

'Oh yes,' she says. 'I live in the world, just like you.'

'Let me take the axe,' I say, not knowing what to do. There's the cat, brownish, asleep.

'That's it,' she says. 'Axe. Get the name right. That's the first thing, if you want to be a writer,' and she puts brown cat stuff in a bowl. 'Or a thinker.'

'Is this place yours?' I ask.

'The place, I guess. Yes. But not property. That's an illusion. When you're dead, it slips away, transmogrifies,' she says.

'This kind of talk, Luisa, is crap,' I say. 'Its being true doesn't make it interesting.'

'Well,' says Luisa, 'what you going to do? Do something. You want to chop me up?'

'No. And I wouldn't know how to start with sex. But – there's money here, around?' I make a question of it.

'Money has no place,' she says, teasing. 'And it's not property. Maybe it's an illusion too. And my lover, Franz, as well.'

'We all have people who love us, Luisa,' I say heavily, 'or have or thought they did. But it's good he's left the grass and birds.'

'It's time you went to Chloe,' Luisa says. 'Enough sex for today. I'm quite too young!'

'I have to leave,' I say. 'Leave this city. Do something.'

'We shouldn't sit in the same row, on the tram,' she says.

'Why ever not?'

‘Maybe I don’t like you. You’re so full of your own desires. You should listen to you.’

‘Here, Luisa, take the axe. It’s yours,’ I say, and she does.

Then – here’s Alex, on the tram. Like Damien, he’s from the species more advanced. ‘I don’t want to hear about desires,’ he says. ‘I’ve seen the President. He reflects. He isn’t deep. A Narcissus. And he wants out. The others, round him, against him – they are naturals. Steeped in their desires.’

‘Of course, Alex, everything’s desire,’ I say. ‘Like waiting for your stop. Getting off. Having no ticket. You want to hear about Luisa? Precocious. A joker. Fun stuff. Not like Chloe. I’m suffocating in all that. I wonder what Chloe’s really like? No one can care, be serious, and plan like her – it must be fake. As for me – if it’s by sea you go, the thing is – arriving on some land. It doesn’t matter where.’

Alex waves his shoulders at me. ‘Damien is everywhere,’ he says. ‘He pours his poison in the President’s ears. And you can’t say you’ll suck it out...’

Here he comes, Damien, boarding the tram, and pushing through. His sealskin overcoat – that must be hot. It’s toe-length.

‘Away, away,’ he shouts. ‘Show me the pedal!’ He takes the tram’s controls, and throws the driver from the tram, and we accelerate. There goes the palace, there the mint, there the river, yellow-grey. ‘There and back again – on no! We’re on a loop,’ and round we go, the clumps of passengers surge up, to board, then back they shrink. Looking behind – they’re matchstick bundles, every head aflame, identical with questions and with rage.

We scramble off the tram.

‘I’ve things for him to sign,’ shouts Damien, hoisting quires of onion skin, and showing us the fatal space without... the signature, the cross!

‘The President! He’s dying on me,’ Damien weeps. ‘He must confess as well. But we can’t think who to.’

‘I’ll cover policy,’ says Alex. ‘For what that’s worth. This chancer here – he does confessions. He loves ’em,’ thrusting me forward. ‘He thinks they’re secrets. No one says what they really did, in case there’s resurrection.’

Here we are at the bedside, here the President, unattended. ‘Fuck it,’ he says. ‘I should be the last to go. I am the tops, and now some creep...’ and on he croaks and sobs.

‘Someone got off a lucky shot,’ says Damien. ‘Just okay each bundle, and you’re done. It’s the jobs for all your boys and gals. The heritage. Succession.’ He forces the fat files upon the President.

There’s bandages. Is that an eye, there on a dish?

‘Such promise,’ Alex says, ‘and then it all jelled down, the only thing that’s ever left is boundaries and plinths.’

Everything always must be finished off by someone else. Or lost and put in store.'

'Sign these!' pleads Damien. 'Not your name, just put OK.' It looks as if it is KO. 'That, I can adjust,' says Damien. 'We'll need to clean our suits, go on TV. Maybe a funeral pyre, an alabaster urn. A mausoleum where the guys can muse. Black horses too, and maybe human sacrifice....' He's cheered. 'The law that says "no funeral smoke" – we shall abjure it for a week.'

'It's not "abjure", you cretin,' Alex says. 'It's something else, that slips my thoughts.'

There isn't much to do: I ask the statesman, as he dies, 'Is there something you would like to tell, regret? One of those cadavers that you spread around – is one particular to you?'

I wonder what you do if someone should confess... forgive? reprove? say we're all responsible, perhaps? But no – I never vote, I don't pay tax I can avoid. They offered us a gun, I never picked up mine. I've never even joined a *manif*... – no, I'm clean.

'Fuck it,' says the President. 'I see no afterlife, no tunnel, no bright light. I should have taken out the guy that shot me, that is all, that's my regret. I paid a heap of guys to do just that.'

It's all unedifying. History.

'The last words have been circulated,' Damien says. 'It's all yours now, the end.'

'Goddam it,' sobs the President. 'I thought I was exempt. Maybe I'll bomb some guys, to make us safer still,' and Alex says,

'No, no! The time has come for noble thoughts... We'll have to take our chance. No more talk now, so we can say you died in peace.'

'No flames. No worms. And no one gawping at me,' the President begs. 'Perhaps a gentle chilling....'

'Oh no,' says Damien, checking the big guy's pants for cash, 'Don't be a feeble, now. Who wants to end up like a box of beans, stretched out, mouth gaping, like a stockfish, dumped in a freezer?'

'Where's his women?' Alex asks. 'His generals?'

'Oh,' says Damien. 'They're with the coffin, down the corridor. Hear them ululate. And the snappers. Gathered round the empty oaken case. All is taken care of. Just the big guy here, with us to send him off – find his successor....'

Outside, there's tanks, and military types with feathers in their hats. Here comes a rocket – Damien says, 'I thought we might send him up, to circle us in space. But then – he's not so fatherly. Too weepy. And besides, there's everyone up there, to spy on us – the corporals and the divas. Then a casket falls, and half Siberia's up in dust and fire.'

In fact, the President is taking death quite personal, as if it happened only to himself.

‘Well, now,’ says Damien, ‘who’s next? The empty throne calls out for bum...’

‘It could be me,’ says Alex, preening. ‘I am a hero of the war.’

‘So are we all! You, Alex?’ Damien scoffs. ‘You sop. You bowl of grey, you workhouse gruel. You shot the guys they told you to – it is the ones you’re not supposed to that defines. No, no, you’re rule-bound, Alex. Rather, a guy like this,’ he pokes at me. ‘Seems humble, but his head is full of crazy moths. You’d need to read some speeches. Tell some jokes. A song. Perhaps a dance.’

I think – ‘Luisa. She’d not fit. Too young to be first gal. Besides, she has a palace of her own. Chloe’s too dowdy, she would never do.’

‘The music, Mister President,’ says Damien.

The near-cadaver brightens. ‘That girl – “I’ll be your somebody, Your somebody to love.” That’s what she sings. First I love her. Then – everybody loves me.’

‘Exactly!’ Damien says. ‘That is just right. On brass bands, arranged.’

‘Let’s settle where you’ll put me,’ says the President.

‘A wall. A pavement – like in Hollywood. A mountain with those faces – we could pack you in your nose – up on the monument. Trees for your ear hairs...’ Damien talks on. Alex says,

‘You love this, Damien.’

‘Of course,’ he says. ‘I give a skip when it’s to someone else and not to me. We’ll put this guy here in his box, and up and down the hill he’ll go. And he’ll not feel a thing.’

We stand, bored, uneasy. Damien says to the big guy, ‘You want the kiss, old pal?’

‘Only from you, Damien. That Alex – I’ve seen him skin ’em in committee – don’t let him near me!’ says the President. He goes on, ‘Did I hear “skin”? “Flaying”?’

‘That was you,’ says Damien. ‘Loose phonemes only. We’ll be cool.’

‘Just chill me out,’ the President says.

Damien takes out a hipflask, waves it around.

‘And where’s my women?’ asks the President.

‘Oh, you know,’ says Damien. ‘They have a sense of history. Passes the old and – as they say – “Cosy fanny” for everyone. You want loyalty, you have to pay. Along comes the Heldentenor – and they’re beneath the spell.’

Damien fills his mouth from the flask, leans over the body. Liquid passes between them, Alex and I – we turn away. A dreadful intimacy.

It's over. 'Long live someone else,' shouts Damien. 'Now – the end of paranoia, hypochondria too. Hear those old Greek doctors, diagnoses tumbling down the stairs. Now,' he turns to me, 'You don't want it? Too heavy, the job? Soldiers in one drawer, trumpets in another. You're sure?'

'It's choosing the first lady, and the second,' I say.

I don't want the job.

'Right!' says Damien. 'You're an imperceptible loss. I'll start the procession, get the fireworks out. I do love bangers!'

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