

Aleksandar Prokopiev

THE PEEPER

*(excerpt)*

*Let me tell you and you tell me. When are we finally going to speak on the phone? How many more hours do you need to wake up? And then? Are we going to go away at least one more time? Or are we just going to meet for coffee? The words sound different when spoken aloud. But if I whisper them they can't be heard.*

*No, I won't take anything. I only want to fall asleep. For your 'good night': a scratch, a cotton ball soaked in St John's wort, and iris, in your home, in my no-home... Birds crawl across the face of the full moon like ants. And then, what else can I do but moonwalk!*

*What? 00:23. So what. Time can gallop if it wants to, recklessly, wild, let it rush, skip the years, believing that it can cut me off from you, but I am getting closer, and you are ever smaller, stepping high, as if you had springs on your feet, fragile, while the sunflowers, delicate themselves, dotted along the right bank of the Vardar, turn towards you. All these whizzing years are in one same day, one same night, in one same midnight, one same morning, then, when you were little, and now when you are not, but still smelling of seaweed even though the waters are subterranean.*

*And the birds that call at each other are seagulls, or at least bear the mark of the sea within.*

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*When I stopped seeing you, when you left, when I lost you, did I lose myself too, did I stifle a part of myself and obscure it in some remote corridor of mine? But what could I do? Sticky and in a rush, I drag myself through Skopje, I peep into its porous details, I relive those useless moments, those specks of dust, those phantoms of phantoms. The little train to Saraj has disappeared, the photographer's shop 'Memento' has disappeared, too, in their places new buildings are replicated, with their fancy facades and entrances smelling of piss, and I am content with the minor catches of the everyday, I melt in the instant news... 00:40... there, the dustmen haven't arrived yet, and the rubbish is piling up, it swells and spreads, and no one can escape any more, not even the eagle with lion's paws that fulfills every person's desire. This is not me, this is not my name, you say, and you? Who are you?, you say, don't you know, were you the daughter or are you the mother, all the same, don't be funny, haven't you recognized me, I have been with you since ever, since you were dressed in a pink blouse and white turned up shorts or in a sleeveless dress buttoned up from behind, all the same, perhaps my tongue starts wagging when I am alone and then I carry on with ambiguities, from head to toe, but it is me, the one that's yours, don't be funny, there...00:42... the dustmen are not coming, have they changed their minds tonight, so what if they are not coming, the rubbish inside us is greater than the rubbish outside, this is not sarcasm, I've never been sarcastic, I've never hurt people, I haven't bitten off flesh, but most of it has already been done, and I can't leave alone all that they say does not exist anymore, I might be unaware, perhaps I don't know myself, but aren't we all unaware, more or less, even the truth and the lie are unaware, they get caught easily, and I repeat, you'll be in my life to the very end, to the end and beyond, in the next life, even only as an*

*episode, as a story, and I'll keep you in there, even when they lock the doors between us, as they have always done, dumbheads! Rhinoceroses! Bullshitters! Nation of frogs lying low in the mud, what can they see, what can they imagine... my beautiful...*

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*00:45...the masks are falling the shades are multiplying the sun is in a cell the moon is marching as a legitimate target along its night path just so it's all the same, and where I am here below the lowest the master of the mud I have my own lifeline I have a stage-trained eye to observe the weakness of the marionettes the life of the termites while being a blind man myself a vagrant myself necropolis lameness swallowing soft morsels servants winter deserted fairground with sagging carousels frogs in a pond cracked pine-cones...*

*Oh my guard, you fool!*

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He is in water up to his knees. Beside him, five women and the sixth, the instructress, exercise aqua-aerobics. The left elbow should touch the bent and raised right knee and then the other way round—right elbow, left knee. And then repeat the same again. The water helps, he guesses, by making the movement of the legs more difficult. *No, no, the back must remain perfectly straight, as well as the other leg*, the high-pitched voice of the instructress yells over the fairly loud rhythm of the disco music coming from the tape recorder, anchored in the sand of the beach. Now the women hold their hands together and squat in the water as if they are going to play ‘duck duck goose’, and then. Still holding hands, they raise unevenly, nudging each other and laughing.

A few meters deeper, he can see Jana playing with the plastic dolphin. The dolphin’s head and front fins are light green, its smooth body is blue and its stomach is dark yellow with blue and green dots. To match the rest, its eyes and smile are in the same yellow colour as its stomach. Reclining over the dolphin with her extremities outstretched, Jana lolls together with the dolphin on the surface of the sea. There is something else—in the sea Jana does not wear the glasses she has to wear when ‘on land’ for correction of her eyesight from her sixth to her fourteenth year. This absence of glasses adds to her distractedness a sort of foggy optimism.

Amongst the photos from that summer, this one is his favourite. She with the smile of an underage sphinx, and the dolphin.

*Is it appropriate for an adult to masturbate over his fantasies? Of course it is! Oh, my guard, you fool! I don’t have to lift my right hand to swear that I’m telling the truth: I am Don*

*Huan de Marco, the greatest lover in the world, and I present myself self-assuredly, regardless of the mind-numbingly anonymous 'factual' documents of the birth certificate type. They mean nothing to me. I can live my choice devotedly and with delight, I can enjoy in you. When I arrive in the casa, the nurses will start promenading on the lawn time and again, barely touching it with their feet, while the black male nurse will urgently leave for Spain to learn Flamenco.*

There are so many 'accurate' people who cut the time into small fractions. And they don't know or they don't want to know that everything will happen anyhow and anyway.

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*Do you know what's new? Pero, the fat son of our neighbours, has become a gynecologist, a professor. Overnight? Yes. And his brother, the even fatter Kole? You won't guess. A painter. From time to time, when I sit on the bench in the garden, he'll ask me, as if in passing, dressed up like a dude in a Levis jeans jacket, white linen trousers and a denim rucksack: Are you OK? I'm really glad you are fine.*

Judging by this geographical longitude an entire hour has passed after midnight. Or perhaps several more dozens of minutes have expired, so it is 'a new day' already. He was never unambiguous about the minutes, even when wearing an electronic wrist watch. *He was born at 11:28 AM (particularly important information when calculating the natal horoscope). He died (as a pensioner, but still at his desk, revising the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of his biology textbook for the second year of high school) at 8:07 PM. Someone calculates, correctly, to a second, the length of the life of the citizen A.M.. Loading and unloading. At the very same second, one more future citizen was born, who in a few days gets the same name, A. and the same surname, M. He also is a child, soon to become a grown man. As in the story about the fat snowflake which will certainly melt, despite appearing so full and voluminous before our eyes. Everything is poignant, but natural. The dispassionate registrar, whose intention is not to remember numbers and names but simply to record them (he is immortal, is he not, holding different times, epochs and eras within), has to spare a tiny moment to reflect. But coincidences are so common, so alike in fact.*

The dustmen are coming. Unloading the containers. Loading the rubbish dumps. Necropolis. *This morning I missed the metonymic ritual—I didn't cut off a strand of hair. Again*

those filthy images. Lameness. Swallowing soft morsels. Servants. Winter. Deserted fairground with sagging carousels. Frogs in a puddle. Cracked pine-cones in the mud.

*I heard the voice from the dictaphone and I thought of you, and then everything got confused. Unable to concentrate. The news about the death of yet another young girl from leukemia. V., from one of the neighbouring streets named after cities from the former alliance of the non-aligned countries—Baghdad Street, Cairo Street, Beirut Street or somesuch. The night before she died (at X o'clock and Y minutes): 'I will become an astronaut and visit Euro Disneyland'. Just as in the unconvincing Hollywood melodramas, less than ten days ago she won an award at an international harp-playing competition. How old were you when she was born (you are both Virgos)?*

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Still, he glances at the noiseless electronic clock. The dial ignores the midnight –  
01:03...00:04...

*...I saw you. Can I sit down? Well, I am busy with my canvases. I'll have an exhibition in the Daut Pasha Hammam. A selection from my work of the last few years. From the cycle called 'Wild People and Domestic Animals'. They managed to piece together a catalogue. Would you like to have a look? – he passes one of ten luxurious catalogues from his rucksack. Yes, that is the chubby Kole from yesteryears, whom Jana, for a laugh, used to call the Swan. He was watching them once, when they were little children, playing under the pines between their gardens. Jana skipping around Kole, first on one, then the other foot, sang one of her invented songs. With round glasses in thin frames, she was wearing a sleeveless dress with a wide square opening and a high waistband below her ribs, almost up to her non-existent breasts. It was buttoned up from behind with large round white buttons. From afar, the dress appeared light blue, but in fact it was checked with tiny white and blue rectangles. It was too short and when she jumped it raised high above her knees. Oh my guard, you fool! Do you know that I even remember the words of the song. When Jana performed for the grinning Kole an entire act, in verse, for two voices—one Jana's, the Girl's, and the other, pitched low and harsh, the Witch's.*

*The Witch: Ha, ha, ha, ha, I am a witch.*

*Ha, ha, ha, ha, I am a witch.*

*I'll turn you into a parrot!*

*The Girl: But I won't let you.*

*Neither will the gods.*

*Your magic won't work.*

*The Witch: Here comes my husband.*

*He'll turn you into a piglet,*

*Or perhaps a rabbit.*

*And we'll enjoy eating you.*

*The Girl: It can't be done.*

*I won't let you eat me.*

*If you try to*

*I'll punch you hard.*

*The Witch: My husband and I*

*Have a little child.*

*Our own baby witch.*

*The Girl: Look how sweet it is!*

*Can a child as sweet as this be eaten?*

*It can only be caressed and loved.*

*The Witch: You are right, darling.*

*All children are sweet.*

*Not to eat, but to love.*

He has retained this image ever since then, in all its clarity, without a single cloud. Memory often shapes people into phantoms, but in this case, not only Jana, which goes without saying, but also the chubby neighbor kid Kole—currently a self-important representative of the young Macedonian generation of artists—have become angels, and this only *because he was her friend then and the image was fixed in him without further consequences*. The fact that the intervening years have elongated Kole the Swan's face and body (together with his nose, which, from being small and snub, has transformed into a dominant feature on his face, with the wide open nostrils of an impatient stallion), have not in the slightest harmed the image anchored in his head. The gaze of the Girl was directed somewhere above Kole (perhaps because it was camouflaged by the glasses), towards the tops of the pines, but when the Girl transformed into the Witch it lowered and pierced the frightened Kole. The sharp and penetrating gaze of a child, cunning and pure at the same time, finally landed on him, the moved observer about fifteen meters away. To remain the same until today, untouched in this decade and a half. Perhaps

because her growing up did not change its light. Jana just stopped wearing glasses, some time after her fourteenth birthday, and completely revealed ('before the gaze of the public', as her mother used to say) her hazelnut eyes. The most timid look can turn murderous, as with the doe after long imprisonment in the Skopje Zoo, and the most vicious look can become warm, as with the mass murderer who, as the gas chamber fills with gas, remembers the Sunday picnic lunch and his mother's smile when she passed him a cup of hot tea from the thermos. *But the hazelnut look, muzzy, or even demanding, was marked with the same freshness, relaxed bright glint which, as much as from the myopia, came from the colour of the eyes (as well as the colour of the eyebrows and the hair) and this had not changed with the years, even when Jana stopped wearing glasses. Blue-eyed children always remind us of the lovely dollies from commercials, the playful olives of black-eyed children bestow on them a touch of the southern temperament. Hazelnut-eyed children are much rarer and remain most human, most elusive. And perhaps, the special effect of the look, hers and yours, is owed to the size of the eyes. Yours are really large, but not like some people's whose faces are consumed by their round ogling eyes that make them appear as if scared, they are slightly slanted, which makes their gaze important, even when uninterested.*

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Or perhaps that image from the past has lodged itself permanently in his mind through a photo he has kept, one her mother gave to him—just her and Kole, their photograph taken in the summer, in shorts and clogs made of blonde unvarnished wood. How much better Jana reflects the light in the picture than her fat friend! It is a fact that in the photo the grass under her feet is brighter than the grass further away. Although it is darker than her white, so white legs...

*Oh, my guard, you fool! 'Who controls the past controls the future, who controls the present controls the past.'* Orwell said this, or perhaps Eliot, or it doesn't matter who, but it is fairly applicable, whether to an ambitious politician or a defeated lover. *The choice of the times past or future is made within, in our fretful souls, and you may justly mock me because your present conquers all, although you don't give a damn about it, and for that very reason, while I tremble and squirm like a worm through my present ruled by the laws of some half-baked parvenus, whose photographs, whether on the front page of the papers or in the obituaries, mean nothing to me.*

*Yes, that's the sum total of my last two decades,* although some jealous colleagues are convinced that he is doing well in his career. Actually, he can't wait for the end of the working hours. And then, when all around him nervously pack themselves into their cars or the smelly buses, rushing to overtake the others to get *home*, he walks to 'Dal Fufo' or some other restaurant on the main square, orders a cappuccino and observes the faces and bodies passing on the other side of the glass. The Indian summer is the most interesting period, between the end of September and the beginning of October, when the tables are still outside on the fenced-off part of the pavement belonging to the restaurant, when the Skopje girls, dressed in a 'mixed' fashion,

in tight sleeveless T-shirts and autumn shoes, or barefoot in sandals with large black sweaters, lightly but firmly walk the catwalk in front of the restaurant, or with the same self-confidence enter the fenced-off area of the observers and, after crossing their too long legs, summon, not loudly, sometimes only by raising their forefinger, the likewise long-legged waitresses.

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He has felt at home on the main square since his childhood. He found it much prettier and more interesting then, not so much because of the Army Hall and the Hotel 'Makedonija', he was only a child and he experienced them as something truly splendid, but still just as a décor surrounding the wide, endlessly wide square whose cobblestones he walked proudly during his long walks on Sundays, holding his father's hand, from the Ristić Residence to the Bridge and back, with the obligatory 'Good Day, how are you?', hats off, 'He's grown so much, mashallah!', and then, there were the parades celebrating May 1<sup>st</sup>, which he watched with a bunch of friends from the neighbourhood from the upper balcony of the restaurant 'Pelister', and most of all, the dusks in which he turned the pedals of his bike through the square, fast, faster, the fastest, while the air whistled past his ears.

They were already neighbours with Jana's mother. Before the earthquake, they lived on the same floor of the building that housed the shop 'Karaorman' in the centre of Skopje. Like the other children from the centre, they played either in the concrete inner courtyard surrounded by the five-floor buildings, then new and now so much smaller and squeezed between the high skyscrapers, or in the small park near the square, in front of Hotel 'Makedonija', and in the evenings, in a mixed bikers' bunch, they would zoom across the corso, through the first strollers, towards the embankment, and from there along the Vardar, yelping and overtaking each other, to the park. There, against one of the benches, usually the one next to the bust of Kočo Racin, by the alley lined symmetrically with blue and yellow flowers, they would prop their bikes. He recalls... No he does not recall, he has never forgotten: Jana's mother always sat on the back support of the bench, with folded knees and occasionally thrusting her shoes in the space between the boards of the bench—in summer her light beige sandals with a bow, in winter her

brown shoes with a buckle. And even in late August the skin of her legs between the sandals and her white turned up shorts was the whitest and smooth, as her daughter's will be thirty years later, without any tanned veneer—genuine china. Her rosy cotton blouse from France, a present from her uncle, sleeveless, with slits on the sides and white embroidered rims, especially emphasized the paleness of her skin in contrast with the other children. In autumn, her complexion, because of the red clothes, in harmony with the fallen leaves on the embankment, is of a darker nuance. She wore a plaited tartan skirt with shoulder straps, red and black lines on green, while the red set of a light woolen blouse with short sleeves and a cardigan of the same material and her legs in dark red tights, sometimes faded on the knees, added to her reddish appearance.

He has read somewhere, he believes it was Proust, that when after many years we meet the women that we have stopped loving we see them as if not from this world, as if, God forbid, they have already died. In contrast, those women, who at every next meeting, still make us experience the same shudder we did in puberty, which in a flash takes us back to our past moments together, those women we easily see again as the girls we have loved and therefore they retain their appearance untouched by the years, even though, not that it is of any importance, they might have gained a few kilos or wrinkles more.

And here, so near to him, her very daughter appears, Jana astride the dolphin, enjoying her holiday with closed eyes. Even whiter, even clearer, as a young she-swan enthralled within her own world. Soon he sees them both together, the mother and daughter, stretched on the sand beside him. *'She obeys me. Every time I call after her, she gets out of the water immediately.'* The mature body of the woman travels three decades back to her elongated, girlish version, and then even further back, in the company of toddlers. *Oh my guard, you fool!*

*Although, back in those early times, his 'infatuation' with the mother was nothing more than a childish sexless choice of a girl to become a member of a privileged company of boys. In those early years, before the earthquake, she was my fellow-traveler on the train from childhood, the train that choo-chooed to Saraj, and we, the children, would jump off it to pick a plum or a peach, and with bitten-off fruit and a morsel in our mouths we would jump back on, on the train that does not exist anymore, as neither do its narrow rails, nor the orchards with plum and peach trees whose place has been taken by some new and crooked illegal buildings, but this train, with the same slow and careless pace, still travels within us, through the salvaged landscapes of our circular journey through life.*

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Almost two decades elapsed between the first and the second time he and Jana's mother were neighbours, the first time they were interrupted by the earthquake, and when he returned from his studies in Ljubljana and settled in his parents' house they resumed being neighbours in Vlae. Jana was already eleven years old but her mother still addressed her with 'mummy's little chick', 'teeny-weeny', 'my little sweet apple', 'little grape' (the fruit she preferred to all others—although her daughter was positively hazelnut from a very young age). She was slightly offended by her mother's baby talk, 'in front of everybody', when she would address her with 'Janushka Pijushka' or 'Mummy's little grape', she pretended she didn't hear her, as if she had been completely immersed in watching television or doing her homework. *Oh, my guard, you fool!*

So he likes sitting in the 'Fufu' restaurant in the centre in early autumn the best, like a viewer from the stalls, while the inventive and sexy Skopje girls perform a spontaneous fashion show in front of him. And as a viewer he acquires some of their inventiveness, he follows, frame by frame, the movement of the passing girls. And all the way into mid-November, he relishes in his voyeurism. 'Peeper', as Olivia used to observe maliciously.

Then again, enjoyment has its climax too, followed by the unavoidable low, and this low, it seems to him it was Fry that remarked upon it, starts with the literal lowering of the outdoor temperature. Some elegiac feeling creeps unstoppably into him with the arrival of that Skopje winter, cold but without snow, when the long-since fallen leaves rot in the mud, when pedestrian life comes to a violent halt and the cars thrum ever louder and dirtier. Towards the end of November and throughout December he is already exhausted, in January he feels utterly apathetic, something between a trodden-upon slug and a deflated ball. During working days he rarely and listlessly crawls to the restaurant, only on days where there is absolutely nothing for

lunch at home, and after he has finished his pizza in a rush, or his vegetarian burger with beans, or one oblong slice of cheese pastry with two spoonfuls of mixed salad, he pays immediately, without ordering a coffee, and leaves. He returns to his flat which increasingly reminds him of a cold hotel room. The central heating is, of course, weak, as it always is on the upper floors of the new blocks of flats in Skopje, and he now lives on the eighth floor in Karpoš 3, in a one-bedroom apartment which, like all the flats in the neighbouring buildings, despite the attractive façade, has a very badly planned interior, a far too long corridor leading from the entrance to the bedroom, doors leading off to the bathroom and the kitchen. He changes into his pyjamas and pulls on a jumper, he turns on the television and stares at the screen from under the duvet. More often than not, he cannot bear it, he pulls on his trousers over his pyjamas, his jumper already on, and goes out to roam the streets of the city. Until he gets sick of it and, tired, goes back to bed.

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*I finished the first fifteen pages, the writer greets his fresh smiling face after his morning shave. He smothers his chin, his cheeks and the area around the eyes with a hefty layer of Dr Pavlović's cream, and so disguised, returns from the bathroom to the computer awaiting him prepared in Macedonian Times 12 B: ... roam the streets of the city. Until he gets sick of it and, tired, goes back to bed. – he reads the last two lines.*

He has started to like this *Voyeur* (or *Peeper* is perhaps better, he has to decide!) although he wobbled a little bit in the first few pages until he found the right place for him. HIM! He had a habit of masking such vague and complicated characters in the third person and his short narratives, short stories, longer stories, etc., ... came out somehow clearer than those told in the first 'me-me' person. Now, thanks to its leisurely costume, his character moved along without any trouble, he could do a pirouette if he wished so, or cut through the text with a flamenco twist, ole!

So, with improved optimism, the writer continues his work, but...

*One question remains foremost: What name shall he give his hero? Voyeur or Peeper? Robbe-Grillet wrote a novel with the same title, 'Voyeur', sometimes translated as 'Eyes That See Everything', and there too, in that novel, there is a girl, but Jana is far from a victim, she is much more a 'desired copy', and his Peeper, unlike Robbe-Grillet's Mathias, suffers no criminal thoughts nor self-accusations. Really, his psyche is totally confused, poor fellow, but, whose isn't? Then, P. it will be!*

*then again, why shouldn't P. (if the problem with the name has actually been resolved) scribble something himself? Again something in disguise, in secret, perhaps under a pseudonym.*

*Jana has been involved in it since the very beginning, for the sake of the Intrigue, (although he started all this far too poetically, but what kind of thoughts can one have after midnight if not fickle ones!). There must be enough space left in the story for the others, for her mother in particular, and, of course, he must avoid linearity (he has never found that hard), but the Lolita cliché should stay, as a somewhat sickly hint rather than something fulfilled. And the way Jana will grow, from a child into a girl, with (in) the flow of the text, whether she will simply slide hither and thither, from a hide and seek girl to a student and then back (a better option!), it will very much depend on the exposure of P.'s relationship with her mother. But the main subject of the narrative is P.—little by little, through an everyday exercise of the eye, we will start peeping inside, into his suppressed nature.*

*This will be a longer narrative, that much can be figured out, perhaps a shorter novel. Hitherto, whenever he has had such intentions, something has always been missing, but now he is near, he can sniff the little novel coming. It will require half a year, perhaps a whole year, but P. is worth the trouble.*

He lifts his eyes from the computer and looks out of the window in his study. Stevo, the neighbour, is walking down the street with a chequered hat on his head. He watches how his

large head, step by step, bobs along (the hat making him look like some Gypsy Santa Claus) and moves from the left to the right frame of the window. The day outside is a grey, December day, but somehow sharp and clear, it is just about to start raining or snowing, and he, softly massaging the cream on his face, still in pyjamas, in a room pleasantly warmed up by the central heating, could see, on the other side of the window pane, the bumps on his neighbour's engorged nose, the discarded plastic bag stuck on the roof tiles of the neighbouring house, the filter of the cigarette-butt thrown on the lawn opposite...

He can sense that this morning will be well used for writing.

With the mouse he highlights *I: I wrote the first fifteen...*

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Before falling asleep he takes the hardback notebook with flowers on its covers, he turns over the filled up pages and on the first empty page he writes:

### ON THE BEACH

*I am above her and sun warms my back. The rhythm of the waves caresses my feet. A tiny drop of sweat on her neck arouses me, invites me, and I lick it. Her look invites me too: 'I'll give you anything you want.' I kiss her already half-open lips. Her teeth like miniature china bite my lips and I punish her by pushing her away from me. I like it the best, the short moment of eternity before the final decision to give in completely. I rub my breasts against her face and she attempts to keep hold of them by licking first one, then the other nipple. The wetness between my legs has nothing to do with the waves of the sea.*

*I go down to kiss her and to lift the wet T-shirt which she wears as long as a dress. She is naked under it. I tell her that I may come prematurely, and she responds that she is dying of thirst and a desire to taste my pussy's juice. She puts her finger inside me while I am nibbling the nipples of her boyish breasts. She says that she would like to taste me and her hands grab my behind as it bounces in front her face. She licks me with her soft tongue, and sounds resembling a baby's cry escape from my throat. She whispers that my pussy tastes very sweet. The sun and the seagulls are our voyeurs. I want to afford the sea some pleasure too, so I spread my legs and I allow the waves to refresh her alternately. I am sitting in her lap, shivering from the rosy light. The smell of the sea mixes with the smell of her inside—the smell of musk and vanilla. She smiles*

*and I can see that her front teeth have the same gap as mine. I find her hand and press it inside mine. 'What's your name?', I ask.*

He signs the text with Nat Ion Car. When he was a child, for a while his 'conspiratorial' name in the neighbourhood was Car Nat Ion (his friends, for example, were called Tom A. To, or Clem Atis, while Jana's mother was called Camo Mile), and he just swapped the name and the surname. Tomorrow morning, when his male and female colleagues go to the canteen to sip coffee and gossip, he will type the text in the computer and forward it to the magazine 'Erotica'.

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Still, he wouldn't accept that 'he has chosen to live as a bachelor for egoistical reasons' as the aforementioned Olivia criticizes him. With her, for instance, he has been together for almost two years and eight and a half months. They break up at the very beginning of his bad period, on November the 18<sup>th</sup>, though the rain, the fogs, and the feeling of loneliness are not the reason behind their breaking up. Olivia, as a matter of fact, lives in a warm two-bedroom flat, much more presentable than his. And there, in her flat, they found a nice occasion for their last row. Nice, beautiful and appropriate. In the centre of the living room, always lit, day and night, 'to create a good atmosphere'. The lamp from Baden Baden. With a wooden body and a great blue head with yellow suns. Naturally, Olivia is terribly proud of her lamp. Especially because of the fact that its creator, the Spaniard Guillermo Rivas, was virtually unknown in the world of design when she bought it. And now he is a brand! That's some talent for recognizing quality! Olivia really knows how to choose quality. Especially with lamps. Her flat is filled with lit and unlit lamps. He can remember some. One standing in the corner by the window in the bedroom, with a very thin, tall metal stand and a shade in the shape of an irregular cylinder. One short, on the floor beside the television in the living room, with a shade made from coppery-silvery wire. One smooth, also in the living room, with a shade in the shape of a Chinese rice reaper's hat and made from thick blue plastic and a stand shaped like the stretched spring of a broken ball-point pen. One wooden, an imitation of the Jewish Menorah, with seven small light bulbs instead of flames.

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So, it becomes fairly murky in January. On Sundays, he almost never goes through the centre, only when he returns from an afternoon show at the cinema in the Mall between 6 and 7. The dark has long since sprawled over the city, but the square is empty except for a few rushing passers-by and a group of loud Roma youths dressed in their best for 'a day out'. All the kiosks are open, with the papers exhibited in the front on shelves, lit, just as through the windows of the 'Fufo' restaurant, behind which, as if in a nicely decorated shop for restaurant furniture, stand the beautiful waitresses in miniskirts, with arms folded or reclining on the bar. While he is rushing across the one-time corso, his gaze is drawn to the entrance of the Ristić Residence, and there, in front of the gates, stands Jana, in a black skirt under a short coat, with silvery make-up that glitters from afar. With every approaching step, it becomes clearer to him that it is only a predictable hallucination—an unknown girl, shifting from one foot to another under her wet umbrella, waiting for her negligent boyfriend. The girl under the umbrella has moved from her place. Now she slowly examines the window of the bookshop. She wears a handbag over her coat, the dark strap over her shoulder. The light coming from the shop window allows him to discern her profile. She is not as young as she appeared from afar, the slender figure supports the head of a woman in her fourth decade, with short black hair barely covering her ears. Several steps closer and a crescent-shaped earring with a round pendant in the middle flashes on her left earlobe. The pendant is red. It is round, but not perfectly. He looks carefully—a heart? A drop? Or a flower? Then she turns towards him, perhaps because of the intrusiveness of his observation, or perhaps to check whether the man she's been waiting for has finally arrived. Caught red-handed, he turns right and continues walking in the rain, feeling on his back the sharp curiosity of her gaze. *Oh my guard, you fool!*

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When did he dare to wait for her in front of her high school? Much later. He needs time. First of all, to see her.

After his return from Ljubljana, he moves in temporarily with his parents, two curmudgeonly seventy-year olds sensitive to cold; for a month or two, he tells himself, until I find myself a flat. He stays for four full years. Is one of the reasons he stays, apart from the garden with its sweet-scented lilacs, jasmines and acacia, the ready meals, the porch where he sips his coffee, squinting under the sun, that it is here he *met* her for the first time? If one doesn't count the very first time he met her, at the entrance to the park, with her mother, when she was just a toddler who had barely started walking. She is already nine now. Jana. Jana still wearing glasses. He watches her growing. She plays, on her own or with her friends, in the fenceless garden which they share with their neighbours, her parents. Her mother, his former neighbour and breezy playmate from the Centre and from school, tells him a recipe for an easy cake: *Very simple—five eggs, thirty tablespoons of flour...* he listens to her with a distracted smile and his gaze is simply glued to the girl with chestnut hair behind her. He starts talking to Jana: while playing hide-and-seek, she runs to him from behind the acacia tree or crouches next to him, beside the improvised birchwood bench put together by his father while he was away studying.

Despite his parents' boring grumbling, he has no intention of moving out. When he is in Jana's company he feels like a funny Aucassin. From his teenage years. With Jana's mother. In his parents' library he found a book with an old French medieval poem in it. He can't even remember what exactly the poem was about, but he remembers the names of the paramours involved in some naïve old-fashioned love affair. Nicolette and Aucassin. He even remembers a

scene with Aucassin, when he, clad in strong and shiny armour, leaves the castle on his horse to fight the enemy. But, as he rides, he is suddenly overcome by feverish love for his beloved. The reins fall out of his hands and, as if sleepwalking, he sneaks into the enemies' camp. He seems to himself to resemble this awkward and enraptured Aucassin, who in Jana's presence becomes spellbound by some mild, chronic love sickness. Regardless of the fact that in the poem Nicolette and Aucassin are of the same age, and that here, in between the houses of their parents, he is nearing the end of his fourth decade, while she, in late September, will be thirteen.

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So, there is a rumour around town that he is an idle peeper. Unwholesome. How blind they are! – he encourages himself. The world he has rambled through for a long time is invisible to them. They should forgive him for forgetting them, he will forgive them for mocking him.

*I imagined it, and I have a right to that, that one day I'll come to the front door of your apartment. You'll peep through the eyehole. Hiding behind the door, you will examine me. The man on the other side of the door won't be one of those who, when the door is unlocked for them, immediately arch their eyebrows, pull a cringing face and pleadingly draw out their syllables.*

*This one is not a beggar—you'll be relieved to learn. He is not a bill collector, either, judging by his clothes (I'll be wearing a black duffel-coat with a red scarf).*

*Only after I have come in, with downcast eyes, will you recognize me.*

*You have changed—you might say.*

*But not in here—I might thrust my hand in the duffel-coat. Here, it is not so.*

*And what is there in there?*

*The city of the heart. Our city.*

*That's why, you might think, we are made of mud and nerves. That's why we do stupid things. And later we make a drama of them.*

*You will lie down on the table, the Dutch table you bought in a second hand furniture shop, stable and wide enough to receive your entire body. You close your eyes while I am unbuttoning your patterned dress. The fifth and last button rests on the stretched fabric between*

*the opened knees. I rip it off. Discarded, it bounces onto the wooden floor. I can hear it rolling while I'm bending over you.*

*She is not your daughter... I'm sorry... she's not our child...— you whisper in my ear while I'm kissing you, and a cool breeze suddenly interferes in the scent of your hair, as if someone behind us has entered the room and created a draught. I imagine it, I comfort myself, she locked the front door when she let me in. Suddenly, I feel exhausted.*

*Oh my guard, you fool!*

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Jana's mother prefers a different photo of her daughter to the 'sea one', black and white, taken before the beginning of the school year in the 'Memento' photography studio. The last evenings of August, the summer heat slowly ebbs and people set in motion on the square and along the embankment, men in shorts and soft unbuttoned shirts, some with caps or straw hats on, women barefooted, so that they can move their toes freely while sitting outside, on the benches or in the cafes, having freed their feet from the straps of their sandals and mules. Two pensioners, one holding his right hand behind his back, walk with moderate pace toward the park, criticizing the machinations of the government. 'This has been my sweetest summer so far,' says the girl in white shorts to her boyfriend, arching her eyebrows, her tanned legs resting in his lap. On the next bench (most of the benches, in the shades of the chestnut and linden trees, are occupied by young embracing couples with their arms and legs intertwined), the guy gives his girlfriend's ear a lick, and then with slower movements proceeds to lick her entire ear shell (to lick up the remaining traces of fruit cream).

This photograph could be given the title 'Jana and Her Violin'. The year before last at the elementary musical school. Her mother, as always, interrupts him: - *Well, you're wrong! That was the following summer, one whole year after our joint summer holiday.* He does not contradict her although he is certain that the photo was taken that very summer, when Jana was playing with the smooth, plastic dolphin in the sea. In both photos, she is still a little girl, unaware that she is growing up, although in the photographic studio, they made her assume a serious pose: holding her violin slightly upwards, off the horizontal, as if playing high passages and attacking the strings with precise movements of the bow. But, in the photo she is not playing. The instinct, ingrained during the musical classes, makes her hold the violin in such manner, as if

in *concert*. They took her glasses off for the photo. She will be wearing them for another year, not longer, but she is used to them and when she takes them off, her myopia makes her eyes, her hazelnut eyes, look dreamy. Then, the world is out of focus for her, or, as her mother says: *when the eye can't see well, the heart has nothing to worry about*. Although posing for a photograph, Jana with her violin, as in the photo with the dolphin, looks distracted. She is engrossed, blinded with the changes of her body—the budding of her breasts, the elongation of her limbs, the appearance of hair in secret places. She doesn't pay much attention to the interior of the studio 'Uspomena', to the walls no thicker than a heavy cloth, to the small red brick castle protruding from the wall behind her, actually from the tiled heater with which the owner of the shop, master Pece, used to heat the shop before the earthquake.

But the world beyond the edges of the photograph, the world to which she is connected through her violin classes on Tuesday and Thursdays with professor Mladenovski, through the musical exercise notebooks, also seems foggy and distant to her, although the people in it are alive and, as her mother says, *do things as they should be done*. Her face in the photograph is so young that he, when looking at it, feels protective of her, but also irritated, because none of her peers has told her yet how beautiful she is. She doesn't hide her almost baby-like softness which makes her even more unprotected. She is wearing a dark green pullover open around the neck and a white blouse underneath. The violin, even in the black and white photograph, suggests its redness with darker stripes in the pinewood and its mild but full sound. It slightly resembles a viola, with a fairly heavy bow.

Behind Jana, between her and the no longer used heater, there is a pot with plastic ivy. The twisted stem of the artificial plant sprouts from the girl violinist's head and stretches upwards, beyond the edge of the photograph, breaks through the ceiling of the now demolished

photographic studio and clings to the drawing on the façade of the Balkan Bank, in front of which a shiny Kawasaki comes to a roaring stop, ridden by a young man in a leather jacket and faded knee pants, just back from his 'summer partying' on Santotorini.

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## HOUSE IN THE COUNTRY

*She had already reached the small crossroads, with a full leather bag in her right hand and a jacket over her left arm, when the long drawn-out whistle of the locomotive announced the even sound of the train leaving the station. She sent off the black snake of the train's shape with her gaze and turned left. The rustling of the poplars. How many were there exactly, five or six? Then a little bit uphill following the dusty road. And there it is, the gate. She stopped for a moment in front of it and dropped the bag.*

*She was met by the strong odor of hay and cattle. She pressed the old doorknob and the gate let her through into the small courtyard in front of the house. Stooping under the vines, she arrived at the low staircase. The key was in its old place, in the little pot hung above the entrance. She unlocked the door, went in, found the switch and the dining room was flooded with pleasant light. The quinces ripening yellow on top of the cupboard gave off a sweet smell. On the dining table, covered with a starched, embroidered tablecloth, there stood a half-empty bottle of Riesling and an empty glass. Beside them, the obligatory siphon of soda. The chair was pushed slightly away from the table, as if someone had just finished their wine and left.*

*Strange, she had not come here for years, but the ambience inside seemed familiar, even intimate. Everything was as it had always been. She was flooded by memories. In order to stop them she busied herself around the house, she brought in some wood and started the fire in the stove, she filled the big pot with water and put on the stove.*

*She felt dirty and dusty from the journey. She should wash, refresh herself... She found an old china basin and a jug with the same blue pattern. She undressed, filled the basin with hot water and skillfully, without spilling a drop of water out of the basin, she started washing herself. The soap smelt of lavender. It slid so easily down her soft, wet skin. She scrubbed herself: the breasts, the neck, the armpits, the thighs, between the legs... The atmosphere of the old house, the nostalgic scents... all that aroused her senses. She gently slid her slippery fingers down her body and felt the desire to be touched by someone, that someone to stroke her all over, to reach her most private parts. In a flash she was on fire and felt a swell down there. Was she all runny, was it the soap or her juices? Quickly, as if ashamed, she washed her burning body with the now already tepid water and from the large horn on the wall she unhooked the male bathrobe, wrapped herself in it and went up the narrow creaky stairs to the upper floor.*

*On the upper floor was the bedroom with the wide double bed, covered with a red silk bedspread. She pulled it off in one move and dived into the soft and cool feathery mattresses. She could feel the pleasant weight of the duvet over her. She was almost naked underneath it, with the bathrobe open and brimming with desire. She spread her legs and started stroking herself. Through the dense forest of hair she felt the swollen clitoris. She tossed and turned, she spread, she stroked herself, she rubbed herself in a rhythm, increasing the wet warmth between her legs. Usually when she masturbated she could, to a degree, control the coming of the orgasm, but this time she moved faster and faster and came instantly, without waiting. And then, with her heart still fluttering, she turned on her right side and fell asleep.*

*Who could guess what she dreamt? The soft bed, touching her all over was somehow replaced by someone's warm large hands. At that moment, she didn't know where she was, at what place, at what time. Was she dreaming or was she awake? But the warm, hungry hands*

*carried her through the giddy labyrinth between the dream and reality, quenching her body with desire yet again. Soon she could feel how his lustful lips seized her erected nipples and started sucking them.*

*As a connoisseur, slowly, bit by bit, he worked on her body. When his thirsty lips moved down and started drinking the nectar which so tellingly secreted from her crevice, she stuck to him so that she could fully surrender herself to his tongue. She melted. She didn't know where her body ended and where his tongue started. The entire world around them disappeared together with its demands and norms.*

*'I want to come inside you', she could hear his voice. Now she could recognize this passionate fiend that knew so well every sensitive part of her body, who knew where to touch her, where to lick her. Her sighs, the rustling movements of the white sheet, his bulging manhood, everything got mixed up... She wasn't aware that she ended up on top of him. She rode him like a fierce galloping stallion. They were rushing toward the crescendo of their mutual pleasure. Embracing her breasts, gently but firmly enough, he followed her rhythm.*

*They came together. Her sighs became sweet groans. He hugged her protectively as she lay on his broad chest, letting the sweet fatigue bring about recuperating sleep.*

*He sent the text and in just two hours, Goran, the editor of 'Erotica' replied with an e-mail. The story is lukewarm. I'll cut it. You move along at a snail's pace. Get to action, faster. Naked sex!!! That's what I want, that's what I pay you for, that's what I want you to send me! And I've told you before—two pages only! Not more, not less! Both last time and this, you've been sending me some drivel. Give me something real. Real fuck!*

A brute! He pays?! He gives him a paltry thousand per text and he sells his dirty magazine at 150 denars per piece!

He is determined to stop working for him.

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He can't remember when he first got concerned with the *security situation* in Macedonia. It might have been four or five years ago when he was still driving his 'Volkswagen'. It's true, it is then that more and more tables in 'Dal Met Fu' started being occupied by party cronies. He overhears how the players of both teams, VMRO and SDSM, alternately praise themselves and denigrate each other much more than the footballers from the national team or the volley ball players from 'Rabotnički'. He is flying back home from Ljubljana (the student connections became business connections). He transfers himself and the suitcase into his 'beetle' at the car park in front of the airport, sets off towards Skopje and turns on the radio. It is around 3:40 in the afternoon, so he catches the news half way through, the Skopje news. The radio announces that stolen Albanian uranium has been discovered in a basement of a house in Vlae, beside a barrel of sauerkraut. The next news is about the iron curtain in the National Theatre that fell during the second act of last night's performance of 'Giselle' and broke the left arm and right leg of the ballet newcomer Borče (he can't remember his surname). The director of the National Theatre stated that the curtain had so far functioned without any problems and that this was the first time that something untoward had happened. Then an interview followed with a renowned woman painter from Belgrade, a former participant in the 'Mediala' movement, and today a hit with the private galleries and the managerial offices of successful companies. Unlike the interviewer, whose voice is quivering on air, she, if he remembers well, sounds slow, even tranquil: *'Well, Skopje is super... super. I am... very pleased. It is inhabited by people... people of good taste.'* And money, he adds for himself. He imagines the opening of her exhibition. A carpet unfolded in front of the Museum of Skopje. On the carpet, businessmen, armed with mobile phones, accompanied by their wives with wide Hollywood smiles, just come out of their large cars

parked in front of the Museum. The odd poodle or Pekinese show off on the carpet, because in their dogs' vanity they understand that the exhibition is the right place for them to be seen, too.

The only thing missing is Bulgakov's Voland!

And then it occurs to him, still listening to the news in the 'Volkswagen' (he is going to sell that pile of rot next year) and driving to Skopje, that something or someone is not exactly *sound* in this country. The radio seems to have guessed his thoughts. The art and entertainment news effortlessly glides into the next slot, dedicated to crime: the accused, the owner of a chain of privately-owned exchange offices in the capital and throughout the country, during a hearing session in the Second Municipal Magistrate Court, threw a hand grenade at the magistrate Lenče (he definitely remembers names better than surnames), but she did not get confused and with a volley hurled the bomb back at the other end of the courtroom. Several of the witnesses suffered minor injuries. *In the Balkans we men are more handsome than the women!*—the 'bomber' managed to shout out while being escorted out of the courtroom.

Today, when the city and the state have got used to the everyday news of violence, the portion of the radio news he was listening to in the 'Volkswagen' seems perfectly ordinary. But a few years ago, in the car, he felt as if Orson Wells had moved to town. Although, even at that time, some mind-boggling affairs occurred throughout the city:

- drug dealers issue warnings by leaving fine embroidered mementoes on each others' faces with broken bottles;
- unknown people are occasionally discovered drowned in the Vardar with ropes around their bruised necks;

- the number of pensioners knocked down on 'Partizanska' is estimated at between five and eight a month, etc., etc. ...

When he goes past the traffic sign officially announcing the beginning of Skopje, he opens the window, turns off the radio and increases the speed of the 'beetle'. He wants to get back to his flat as soon as possible, a one-bedroom flat, but his, to take a shower and to play his Vivaldi CD.

As far as he can remember, the following week, he only listens to the educational programs on the radio. The first thing he hears is that the blue-beaked heron has become extinct in North Pakistan.

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The following direct confrontation with *the breached security of my fatherland* happens much later, in August 2002, when he takes a cab from Trpejca to Ohrid. Actually, on that morning, he feels no particular desire to remove himself from the large rock at the beginning of the village. He sits on it and watches – the lake and the sky. The sky, although some call it *a section of air space*, is one of the prettier things in Macedonia. Especially here, clear, with an occasional cloud or bird, linked to the lake from one side and to Galičica from the other. Instead of only for the weekend, he stays in the village for a whole week. He has just had a swim in the lake, in which families of bathers are still jumping, spraying and yelling. The speedboats and fast cars with their stocky drivers with shaven heads and no necks accompanied by their long-legged girlfriends with large tits have not arrived yet. Only a few fishermen are in the water, two in each boat, or solitary in rubber dinghies, facing their like-minded fellows on the coast with their fishing lines, still, and immersed in their pursuit.

He starts swimming breaststroke style, without splashing, as carefully as possible, so as not to disturb the fishermen (and the fish), and only when he leaves the fishing zone behind does he proceed to front-crawl. When, at every other stroke, he plunges his head in the water, exhaling, and then lifts both his left arm and his head, and when through the drops of water sliding over his face, he sees the backs of the standing and sitting fishermen, together with the village, the mountain and the sky above them, he is taken over by a strong sense that he is in a different life *from long ago*. Although he knows that these fishermen are not the *old* ones, with nets in wooden boats, who fished to survive, these are contemporary, fake ones, with the most expensive equipment packed in a small case, like the inventory of a serial killer, but he still can't,

and doesn't want to escape the all-engrossing feeling of time having stopped, because like this he can experience the water, the rocks, the seagulls, the fish that push through the depths.

So he sits on the hot rock, in knee-length shorts remodeled from his torn jeans and a blue sleeveless T-shirt, still wet underneath them, and a taxi stops in front of him, a beige coloured Golf. The driver, pallid (even more obviously against the background of tanned faces around him), with bluish eyes, young but with an already receding hairline, is returning from the border. With his left arm, hairless, jutting out of the open car window, he offers to take him to town for the price of a bus ticket.

Their conversation kicks off swimmingly from the very start: *We, the taxi drivers, get our left arms burnt by the sun, and the fishermen their right. When it's hot like this, I cool my arm out of the window, like this. And the fisherman, you know, pulls the nets with his right hand.*

*What if he is left-handed?*

The taxi driver laughs and, still with a grin on his face, begins with his confession. He was in the army the whole of the past autumn. As a reservist. They knew in advance that he had been a taxi driver for a long time, that he knew the Macedonian roads from Tabanovce to Medzitlija, and so he was assigned to the car pool. He was in charge of a 'Lada' and an 'Ermine' people carrier. The 'Lada' was for the transport of the officers, while the 'Ermine' was for the ordinary soldiers. The 'Ermine' felt like a can of Coke, especially when shot at.

Once, he was sent on an assignment in Matejče—to give a lift to an American cameraman and a British woman journalist who wanted to interview the 'fighters'. The safe arrival of the foreigners was arranged from both sides and they drove to the village without being stopped, although he had a feeling that there was someone watching them from behind every

bush. At the entrance of the village, they were met by some commander, freshly shaven, spruced up in a clean uniform, who in excellent English sent them to a largish house guarded by a group of armed people knocking about. Without a word they took him to a small hut next to the road. He was stunned with fear when a frowzled uniformed man met him inside, but soon relaxed when he learned that he was a local Albanian who spoke Macedonian in the Kumanovo dialect. He even offered him some tea in a friendly manner and started a jolly monologue about football. He was relieved but still apprehensive of the threatening bearded and armed guys outside. After sitting there with pins and needles for what seemed to him a very long time, several armed guys came in and, again without a word, took him back to the 'Lada' where the foreigners were already waiting for him. On their way back, Angie (that was the journalist's name) started chatting about her Serbian housekeeper as if to justify herself for being forced to co-operate with the other side. He was silent for no other reason than fear of driving over a mine on the road.

Four months later, he was back in Ohrid, in his parents' house. At first, he wasn't even aware that he was home. While in the army, he slept in the vehicles, intermittently, for two or three hours at a time, and since his return he had kept waking up at the slightest noise and could only go back to sleep after lighting a cigarette. In the first fifteen days he wasn't in a fit state to think about what had happened, but later he was overwhelmed by thoughts of the type 'what if this happened...'. He still jumps when he hears a shot nowadays and starts shaking like an idiot. Before the army he used to like guns and shooting and often visited shooting clubs to practice. But after 2001 he could never ever hold a gun in his hand.

He feels better, much better now. He's got a big garden around the house, he 'works it' now: *What can I do?! One has to make a living. So I planted kiwi trees.*

*Can they grow here?*

*Of course they can. I didn't know it either. I have an entire orchard at the back of the house. It calms me down as I watch them grow, I talk to them. I got some broccoli seed from Croatia. There is a market for it, gets a good price. But Ohrid people don't eat broccoli, I have to find a van to take them to Skopje.*