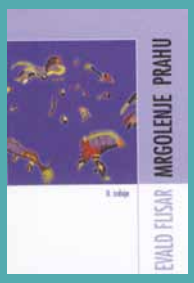
10 novels

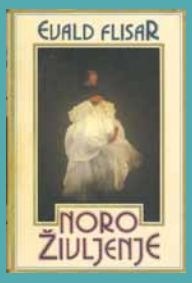
by Evald Flisar

Slovenia's bestselling author and
internationally performed playwright

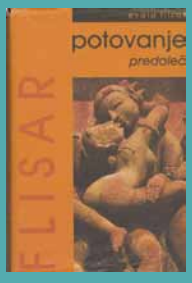
My Father's Dreams
Three Loves, One Death

The Chestnut Crown
Nights with Naked Maya

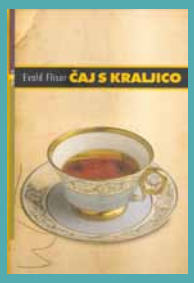


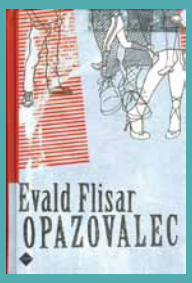


The Sorcerer's Apprentice
Farewell to Salvation

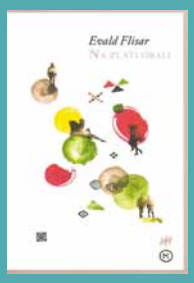


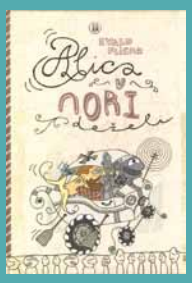
Tea with the Queen
If I Only Had Time





On the Gold Coast
Alice in Crazyland





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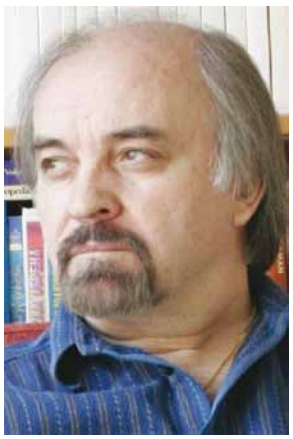
The Author



EVALD FLISAR (1945, Slovenia). Novelist, short story writer, playwright, essayist, editor. Studied comparative literature in Ljubljana, English literature in London, psychology in Australia. Globe-trotter (travelled in more than 80 countries), underground train driver in Sydney, editor of (among other things) an encyclopaedia of science and invention in London, author of short stories and radio plays for the BBC, president of the Slovene Writers' Association (1995 – 2002), since 1998 editor of the oldest Slovenian literary journal Sodobnost (Contemporary Review). Author of ten novels (five short-listed for *kresnik*, the Slovenian »Booker«), two collections of short stories, three travelogues (regarded as the best of Slovenian travel writing), two books for children and teenagers (shortlisted for Best Children's Book Award) and thirteen stage plays (six nominated for Best Play of the Year Award, twice won the award). Winner of the highest state award for prose and drama. Various works, especially short stories and plays, translated into 31 languages, among them Hindi, Bengali, Malay, Nepali, Indonesian, Turkish, Greek, Japanese etc. Stage plays regularly performed abroad; in the coming season in Austria, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Japan. Attended literary readings and festivals on all continents. Lived abroad for 20 years (three years in Australia, 17 years in London), since 1990 resident in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Happy father of a four-year-old boy.

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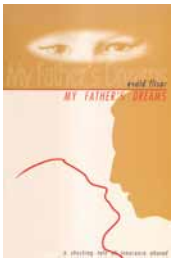
A Tale of Innocence Abused

Evald Flisar

My Father's Dreams

MY FATHER'S DREAMS (original title *Velika žival samote*) is regarded by some Slovenian critics as one of Flisar's finest novels. This "tale of innocence abused", in the words of one critic "a potent mixture of tragedy, perversity and self-awareness-in-retrospect", can be read as an off-beat crime story, a psychological horror tale, a dream-like morality fable, or as a dark and ironic account of one man's belief that his personality and his actions are two different things. Above all, however, it can be read as a story about a boy who has been robbed of his childhood in the cruellest way imaginable: by being told by his father (desperate to protect his social position and retain the respect of the community) that many things he sees and hears are no more than a dream. The critics agree that the reader gains almost voyeuristic pleasure from following the "dreams" of fourteen-year-old Adam on his path to ruin and redemption. In the words of one of them, Flisar's descriptions are "luxuriously sensual, poetic, morbid, prophetic, erotic, hellish, heavenly ..." This archetypal story about good and evil, and about our natural inclination to be drawn to the latter, has the force of a myth; it is telling an important truth without drawing any particular attention to it. (200 pages)



With masterful strokes, Flisar weaves the episodes of his story into an eccentric bildungsroman-in-reverse, moves the action from one mental or emotional state to another, and resolves it with a dream vision ... My Father's Dreams is thus a fascinatingly multi-layered tale, which, with its many meanings, explores different themes and resolves them with unusual silences and telling digressions ...
Igor Bratož, DELO (Literary Supplement)

The reader's enjoyment is almost voyeuristic, and the book is difficult to put down, unpredictable to the last page ... Reading it is like looking into a mirror in which, next to Adam, Eve, father and mother, we soon discover our own face...
Metka Peserl, VECER (Literary Supplement)

I cannot remember anyone in the five centuries of Slovene literature "interiorizing" dreams and forcing them into the reader's consciousness in such a shocking form as Flisar has done in this novel ... Anyone reading this book with the necessary attention, concentrating on its essence, will be deeply unsettled, almost stunned ...
Jože Horvat, SODOBNOST (leading literary journal)

The essence of narrative in this novel works through conflations of expectations based on nearly all available sources. Perhaps the most basic modes of the story vacillate between blasphemy, rebellion, and introspection. If Flisar can provoke the reader to shift from Rabelaisian belly laughs to disgust with irrational authority to new takes on epistemology within a few sentences, he has accomplished something that many branches of 20th-century art have sought, often without success.
Karl Young, Introduction, American edition

My Father's Dreams violates the psyche precisely as the characters are violated. It is via one's own trust and through the aggressive defense of one's own innocence (or ignorance) that the violation occurs ... What we see in Flisar's *My Father's Dreams* is precisely what Edmund Burke defined as the sublime.
Susan Smith Nash, Preface, American Edition

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

My Father's Dreams

It isn't easy to talk of one's early life, even after so many years. However, allowing for lapses of memory, I intend to hold nothing back, otherwise telling the story would be a fruitless exercise. Much of it remains unclear, including why my father shortly after his fiftieth birthday went off his head. The whole thing was all the more surprising because he had never given any impression that he was anything other than the sanest person on earth. So, at least, he appeared to those who knew him. And he was known to a great many people: as a country doctor he covered twenty villages and was paid regular visits by patients ranging from pregnant girls to old men requiring colostomy. It is true that the doctor in the neighbouring district was of a friendlier disposition, but my father could boast a much higher rate of cure. That's why he felt that a guarded measure of disdain for one's patients was hardly a crime. Surprisingly, he was exceptionally pleasant to hypochondriacs, for whom he harboured a special feeling of closeness. In my mother's opinion he could have been a little less pleasant to young pregnant girls, who appeared to be his favourite patients. As far as I remember, that never caused any problems, except once, when a particularly attractive gypsy girl from a hamlet in the nearby woods came for an examination insufficiently clean. This upset my father so that he locked her into a bathing cabin, releasing her only after she had showered twice and once more for good measure. Although he later denied accusations that he had spent half an hour drying her with a miniscule towel, the gypsies threatened him with court action until he mollified them with a wad of cash.

My father was a quiet man, but occasionally he was struck by a fit of anger of such magnitude that he was more shocked by it than anyone else. Usually it was my mother who pushed him over the border of self-restraint, especially when she dared to criticize his "experiments" in the basement of the health center. In her opinion he should have refrained from any work that was not part of his duties at the surgery, and devoted his free time, like most husbands, to his family.

"Family?" was his usual response. "One bastard and one feeble-minded woman are hardly a family."

Mother could bear his rudeness only by turning it into a joke. "Everybody's got what they deserve," she would observe with a bitter smile whenever she felt disinclined to argue. That was most of the time, so eventually they settled for aiming their words past each other, with Father exploding only when he was hit accidentally. But never, not even in the throes of his worst ill-temper, did he hit Mother, however much I felt that that was what she was trying to get him to do.

Whenever I summon my father to memory I see a tall, slightly stooping gentleman of middle age, with slow, careful movements, somewhat plumper round his waist than he would have wished, yet far from being fat, with a neatly trimmed reddish beard and gently graying hair parted on the side, which made him look younger than he was, always wearing a slightly anxious expression, which could, however, together with the softness of his eyes, unexpectedly leap into a warm, puzzling smile, sufficiently charming for him to be known, especially among the female patients, as the "handsome doctor".

It was probably his popularity that irked Mother most, for she desperately wanted his smile to be reserved for herself and me (although I was its happy recipient often enough, most likely because I never argued with Father). Another habit of his that Mother couldn't stand was his natural tendency to be eternally lost in thoughts. Indeed, very often he seemed to be most absent when he was at home, pontificating on God knows what problems or, with eyes closed, completely absorbed in classical music, hardly Mother's favourite.

At first Mother worked as a receptionist at the health center, but shortly after they married Father talked her into retraining for the position of an accounts clerk with the nearby brick factory. Otherwise, ran his argument, the health center would begin to resemble "a family practice". There was hardly any danger of that, for next to Father and his assistant, Nurse Mary, the health center also housed a dentist and his assistant, not to mention their shared receptionist. It was much more likely that Father began to be bothered by Mother's increasing curiosity about

his "experiments" in the basement of the health center, where he was spending much of his time. Once he even admitted as much. He said he had nothing to hide, but simply wanted to pursue his research in peace.

"You mustn't think," he would occasionally turn to Mother with a sarcastic smile, "that marrying a doctor automatically confers on you a degree in philosophy. What could a man of science and a housemaid possibly talk about? Wishes are one thing, but fortunately in this world it is through abilities that we realize our potential." Mother tried her best not to show how lonely she felt. Any objections she found the courage to raise were promptly brushed aside by Father's acid wit, in the face of which she felt transfixed like a small rodent confronted by a deadly snake. Gradually she came to realize that it was much safer to communicate with Father in monosyllables, and to entrust her grievances to me. There were days when she could not stop. With a cigarette perched on her lower lip, dishevelled, with one hand swinging this way and that, and the other firmly on a bottle of Valium in the pocket of her apron, she would cross and re-cross the living room and pile lamentation upon lamentation: that "this man" would send her to an early grave, that she had no one who would "at least try to understand her", that one day she would simply walk out of the house and "drown in the nearby stream", and that, obviously, I must hate her as well, otherwise I would not always "take Father's side". Or that I would, at the very least, grant her an occasional "loving smile".

Evidently I was failing her as much as Father. I, too, was wrapped up in my own world, which was far removed from her notions of an idyllic family life. Whenever I wasn't lost in one of the books I took from Father's library I would wander through the surrounding woods or sit in my room, daydreaming about nothing in particular and everything at the same time. Sometimes I even locked the door, pretending to study for school, while in fact I would be staring out of the window, trying to imagine Father at work, examining patients, lancing boils, signing death certificates. And, above all, working on his experiments in the basement, to which he alone had the right of entry.

I loved Father very much. Without him, my growing years would have been lonely and without any mysteries. I had no friends at school. Father was the axis around which revolved all my joys and expectations. He seemed like a god to me, infallible. I was particularly excited by the smells that hovered about him every time he returned from the surgery: of unusual potions and disinfectants, of unknown acids and bitter-sweet ointments, even – I felt – of blood and lymphatic fluid, not to mention the aromas of hundreds of illnesses, of which he was able, when we had guests, to talk so convincingly that most of those present instantly developed appropriate symptoms. Father laughed, comfortably at home in the midst of pain and suffering, never succumbing to as much as a cold, as if protected by the spell of a benevolent witch.

One day he invited me for a walk to the edge of the wood above our house, where he spent almost an hour of his precious time talking to me. It was spring and the meadows were overflowing with flowers. Sitting on the trunk of a fallen birch tree, we surveyed the village below us: the gray rectangular building which housed the health center, the shop, the inn, the houses, mostly farms, the school which perched like a speck of bad conscience among the trees on the opposite slope, and our home below us, half hidden in the luxuriance of the surrounding orchard.

"Look, son," Father waved his hand. "Life is beautiful. But it is beauty that fills us with deepest anxieties."

Then, using mostly learned expressions, yet visually enough for me to guess what he was talking about, he took the trouble to explain to me the mechanisms of reproduction of the human race and everything surrounding this incredible mystery. He devoted particular care to the ins-and-outs of what he chose to call coitus.

"Sooner or later," he concluded, "the devil will start to tempt you toward the abyss. Don't resist, it's a waste of time. Only be careful not to fall all the way. It's probably not very pleasant at the bottom."

I said nothing. I was thirteen years old. And in any case he hadn't told me anything new; I had already gleaned all the relevant information, laced with photos and diagrams, from some of the books in his library. But to tell him that would have deprived him of the joy of feeling a responsible Father.

Ever since I had learned to read, rummaging through Father's extensive library was without any doubt the greatest joy of my life. The school had quickly become a bore and failed to provide the sort of excitement I craved. Everything was the same year after year, teachers were neither witty nor clever, and hours spent in the classroom seemed to be gliding past as in a dream.

Not surprisingly – to Mother's great sorrow – I was not the star pupil. I just couldn't be bothered.

I was average, quiet, invisible.

But all that changed on the fateful day when we were asked to write a free composition entitled "What I dreamt last night". The theme was right up my street: I had been having unusual dreams for some time. I remembered almost all of them, certainly enough to choose from. So I chose the one I felt the teacher would find at least interesting, if not worthy of singling out for exceptional praise. I decided to record the dream as I remembered it, honestly, without frills. Allowing for a few memory holes (the events took place twenty years ago), my dream essay read roughly like this:

"I dreamt that Mother was returning home from the city by train. Father and I discussed whether the way someone died was predetermined by fate, or whether it was a matter of chance. Our reasoning went like this: if the train bringing Mother home gets derailed, she will survive, but only if fate had decreed that she should not die in a train accident; otherwise she will die. But if she does die, this might also be due to chance, simply because she had found herself in the wrong place at the wrong time. So there was no way of telling. Except, suggested Father, if someone deliberately derailed the train. Then, if she remained alive, we could conclude that the time and manner of death are indeed determined by fate. If, on the other hand, she did not survive, death must be a matter of chance for the simple reason that fate would not have allowed her to die in a train accident if it had decided to dispose of her in a different way. But if fate *wanted* to kill Mother in a train accident, fate itself would cause the train to derail.

"The proposition seemed logical enough, so Father and I hurried along the track all the way to the point at which it passed a deep ravine. There, with a pickaxe, we removed a section of the rail, took shelter behind nearby trees and waited. It didn't take long before the train's whistle sounded just round the comer. Then it all happened much quicker than either of us had expected. One more whistle was heard, sounding almost like a cry for help. Then we heard a horrible squealing and crunching noise as the locomotive jumped the rail and tumbled into the precipice, with the carriages following and with deafening knocks and bangs piling on top of one another at the bottom of the ravine. Less than a minute later only steam could be heard escaping from the pierced boiler of the squashed locomotive. A quick survey of the scene revealed a mountainous pile of twisted metal, resembling a huge, disordered scrap-metal yard, decorated with disembowelled, dismembered or beheaded corpses, amputated limbs, shattered skulls, splattered brains, a few toddlers and even two dogs and three cats.

"Father and I hurried home to await the results of our experiment in front of the TV. When the report finally came, it was worse than expected: one hundred and twenty-three dead, among them Mother, no survivors. That's how Father and I obtained proof that Mother wasn't destined to die in a different way. But neither was she destined to die in this way, for Father and I had derailed the train deliberately. So we succeeded in proving that fate doesn't exist, and that everything, including death, is a matter of chance."

I was very proud of my essay. But the teacher, who read it silently in front of the waiting class, grew increasingly red in the face, until, right at the end, he turned deathly pale. He quietly locked the hand-written sheet in his desk without saying a word. But already that same afternoon he turned up at our house and pressed the essay into Mother's reluctant hand.

"Ask your husband to examine his head. I hope, for your sake, that he will find nothing worse than that your son is trying to make a fool of me."

Mother was so shattered by the event, and especially by the contents of my literary endeavour, that she had to take three days off work. "God help us," she said when she finished reading my essay to Father, who had asked her to do so on account of his alleged inability to decipher my scrawls. "And I had such hopes! This child will amount to nothing!"

"On the contrary," Father immediately put a different view, as was his habit. "A dreamer often turns into a genius." Winking at me, he added: "Right, Adam?"

I found consolation in Father's protection. Yet more and more I began to fall prey to an alarming feeling that I was somehow hovering above my life, rather than living it. Almost invariably I was nudged into daydreaming by something I had read. The intensity of the events that would unfold in my turbulent mind caused a restlessness that would drive me on aimless wanderings across the village meadows and through the nearby woods. In silence and solitude I tried to sweep away the images, which multiplied in my head like a tumorous tissue, to make room for new ones, which

were already hurling themselves against the defences of my consciousness. But I could not sweep the old ones away fast enough. They were pushed by the new ones across the border of wakefulness into dreams. Very soon my nights, too, were swarming with grotesque pictures and curious happenings.

Inevitably it was Mother who first noticed that something wasn't quite right with me. She demanded that Father give me a thorough examination. But Father was full of ready-made, neatly phrased excuses. He said that for a boy of my age it was normal to live as if dreams were a reality. Wallowing in illusions was no less my right than a chronic feeling of dissatisfaction with the world, which in any case was one of the basic human rights. And so on. Mother took a gamble and accused him straight to his face of complete lack of interest in the fate of his son, and of selfishness that was a disgrace for a doctor.

This appeared to have worked. The next day Father decided to subject me to a little professional scrutiny, as he put it. First he wanted to know which books I had borrowed from his library, and from the school library, and from the village library. I mentioned Zane Gray, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, De Sade, Kafka, Goethe, Cervantes, Nabokov and a few others. He seemed astounded by the mixture. He suggested that, for a while at least, I should read books that are read by other boys of my age. But before I could tell him that other boys of my age read hardly any books at all, he had already changed his mind. He suggested that I should stop reading altogether, at least for six months. Then he came up with the final solution:

I should go on reading whatever I wanted, but should record all my dreams and fantasies in a diary, which he would examine once a week to make sure that I wasn't developing a mental disorder.

Without knowing why, I liked the idea of recording my dreams. I bought a yellow notebook and set about the new task without delay. By a strange coincidence, the first dream I recorded was more unusual than any I could remember having.

"In the beginning I found myself returning from school along the path I normally followed. It was early evening and the sky was unusually dark. I walked lost in thoughts, without paying much attention to my surroundings. So I barely noticed the silvery light gradually spreading over the meadows. I became aware of it only when a strange sound appeared in the air above me. It was metallic, yet soft and rustling at the same time. Next I became aware of the presence of an invisible being. At first I tried to ignore the feeling, but suddenly it swept over me with such force that I had to turn. There was nothing. I felt a lump in my throat and my hands went damp with cold sweat.

I began to walk faster. But the nagging feeling that I wasn't alone would not leave me. Suddenly I felt a sharp, stabbing pain above my left ankle. Glancing at my feet, I noticed a gray hen whose long, sharp beak had just struck at my ankle for the second time. Then the hen flapped its wings and began to peck at me as if obsessed. I ran off across the meadows without any direction, just to get away from the unexpected attacker. But the hen wouldn't let go of me; it spread its wings and flapped after me, clawing at my feet, calves, and knees, at every exposed part of my legs. I could feel I was bleeding from many wounds. The hen's eyes were unusually bright, and every so often they began to burn with a piercing glow. Its wings were causing a pulsating, rustling murmur that followed me past the edge of the wood and into the valley. Soon the gray hen was joined by two more: one black, the other white. Now I could also determine the origin of the rustling noise: flying toward me from all directions were multitudes of hens, cackling, screeching, gurgling and producing a variety of other sounds, all of them orchestrated into a metallic murmur that seemed to be sweeping toward me like an approaching flood. From one direction were coming only gray hens, from another white ones, from the third black ones. And not a single rooster among them! Far in the horizon I could see groups of hens rise into the air and sail toward me like dark thunderclouds. The smell of so much poultry soon overpowered me and I sank to the ground, fainting; the last thing I heard was the rush of wings directly above me.

On regaining consciousness I found myself surrounded by endless numbers of quietly crouching hens with their heads drawn back and sunk in their necks. The three different colours had mixed, so the hens now resembled a thick carpet spreading in all directions as far as the eye could see. I rose onto my knees and looked around. Woven into the feathery carpet were myriads of gleaming, freshly laid eggs. I heard a strange crackling sound; little chicks were already pecking their way out of the nearest shells.

Then, right behind me, I heard a noise that was closer to breaking and shattering than gentle crackling. As

I turned I saw emerging from a huge egg, larger even than me, a grim-looking, uncommonly robust chick determined to leave its prison as soon as possible. Within moments it swelled right in front of my eyes into a giant hen that lowered its gaping beak toward me, picked me up and swallowed me. Pulsating muscular walls embraced me, pushing me deeper and deeper, until I slid into a moist cavern full of gurgling noises and a thick soup of acids, which began to turn my body into something horribly different. I could feel my limbs shrinking, my neck extending, my belly swelling, my nose elongating, and then there was a thump, as if the cavern in which all this was happening had fallen and landed on very hard ground.

By this time I was really frightened. I began to press and knock and push against the walls of the cavern to escape its suffocating closeness. There was a crunching noise, something hard suddenly gave way under pressure and my eyes were flooded with silvery light. I was able to take a deep breath – only to find that the overpowering smell of so many hens no longer made me faint, but instead filled me with great excitement. I discovered that I was standing on a pile of pieces of a large eggshell. Without a single thought, instinctively, I bent down, picked them up one by one with my large beak and ate them with a noisy crunching sound. I was so horrified by this act that I opened my mouth to call for help, but the sound I emitted resembled anything but my usual voice. What came from my throat was the crowing of a rooster!

From as far away as I could see my call was answered by a shrill greeting of myriads of hens, flapping their wings and awaiting my guidance. I shook my feathers, which appeared smooth and shiny, caused my crest to achieve full erection, flapped my awesome wings, took to the air and flew across the meadows. There was a stir among the hens, travelling in concentric waves all the way to the horizon. Beating my wings, I flew majestically in a straight line, followed by perfectly formed black, white and gray battalions of my devoted army of female admirers. This is the beginning of a new era, I thought. My era. I rose even higher, while the hordes of hens behind me converged into dark flying clouds. Raining down from these clouds like balls of hail were millions of eggs, which would cover the planet and enlarge my dominions to the ends of the galaxy. Just rising above the horizon in the east was the sun. My crest swelled even higher: the sun had the shape of an egg."

Of course it had to be Mother who first read the account of my dream. Although I had pushed the dream diary deep under the mattress, she obviously knew where to look. When I came home from school I found her on the sofa with my yellow notebook in her lap, and with tears in her eyes.

"Adam," she looked at me as if someone had just died. "What's happening to you?"

"Nothing," I shrugged and turned to go to my room.

"Wait! We have to talk."

I paused and waited, staring at the floor. I ignored her request to sit down.

"Adam," she began, making a long pause before finding the words to go on. "Adam, boys of your age are prone to doing something which is very bad for their health. But they find it hard to resist. How successful are *you* in resisting it, Adam?"

I tried to fake a yawn. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

"You have, Adam," she said, "and a very good one, too, so don't pretend. I'm talking about what boys of your age do with their right hand. And about spots they leave everywhere, especially on the sheets that have to be washed by their mothers!"

"Peter does it with his left hand," I blurted out.

I could almost hear the sound of air being drawn into Mother's lungs. I saw her putting my notebook on the sideboard and rising to her feet. Afraid that she might hit me, I turned to run out of the house – and bumped into Father who had just returned from work.

"Father," I pointed an accusing finger at Mother, "she's read my dream diary."

"Here," she quickly reclaimed the initiative by passing him the notebook, "read for yourself the distortions of your son's lunatic mind. And don't reproach *me* for it, because *you* brought him up."

She pushed him aside so she could pass into the hall, where she clumsily stepped into her tennis shoes and walked out of the house, slamming the door. As Father and I looked out of the window we saw her crossing the courtyard to her bicycle, which was leaning against the door of the garage. She mounted it and furiously pedalled off down the gravel driveway to the road.

"You have no right to read his diary!" Father shouted after her, although she was already too far away to hear him. "Are you a doctor? How many times do I have

to tell you that you're not? Apart from that, the boy's at an age when privacy is essential to him!"

Before nightfall Mother quietly returned, as she always did when she stormed off in anger. Father had used her absence to read, and then carefully read once more, the account of my "rooster dream", frowning here and there, but also emitting a few spontaneous chuckles. After dinner, which mother prepared in silence, and which we ate in silence, Father cleared his throat and passed his opinion.

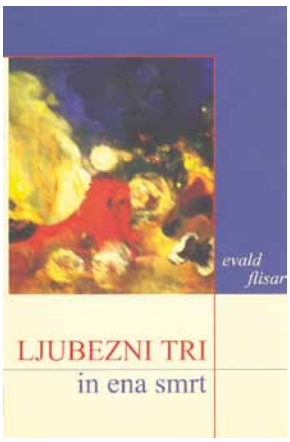
He said that this particular dream of mine, like all the others, was a consequence of my premature reading of books that my virgin intellect was unable even to comprehend, let alone absorb their contents in any meaningful way. So the contents had nowhere to go except sink into my subconscious mind, from where they erupted into my dreams in the form of surreal images. At the same time, he continued, my dreams were a classical symptom of sexual awakening. The metaphoric content of my last dream left no doubt about that: I wanted to peck my way out of the shell, which was my childhood, because it had become too small for me. I wanted to grow a crest with which I could command the allegiance of hens, in other words of the female sex, which the rooster, or man, must fecundate according to a biological programme in his genes. The number of eggs in my dream showed very clearly that my urge had reached a critical stage, and that I could lessen the built-up tension only by more frequent and vigorous masturbation.

What followed was the worst quarrel I had ever witnessed between Father and Mother. Insults were flying about like shrapnel on a battlefield. Soon both of them completely forgot about me, so I slipped out, ran to my room and locked myself in. But even there I couldn't escape the sound of their bellowing voices. I could muffle them slightly, but not completely, by pulling the duvet over my head. Eventually the quarrel ended, like so many before, with Father unleashing the full fury of Wagner on Mother's ears.

A Seriously Funny Book

Evald Flisar

Three Loves, One Death



THREE LOVES, ONE DEATH (original title *Ljubezni tri in ena smrt*, in 2001 shortlisted for *Kresnik*, the Slovenian "Booker") is a novel about a middle-class Slovenian family who move from town to country to escape the excesses of the newly introduced capitalism. But their retreat proves unsuccessful, for the "brave new world of looking after number one" follows them to their remote village, where, in a garden shed, they discover a most unusual implement whose purpose turns into the Great Conundrum, into the sphinx that changes their lives forever. Written with dead-pan humour, this dark yet highly amusing novel explores our inner landscape, which remains mysteriously unpredictable regardless of the nature of the society in which we live. The story is narrated by the younger of the two sons who, with the benefit of hindsight, realizes that the Conundrum was really their projection, a manifestation of their inability to come to grips with the historic changes that have engulfed their lives. On the other hand, the Conundrum had quite a lot to do with the long-lost uncle Jaroslav Švejk, a comic character who suddenly appears out of nowhere and, with all the best intentions, pushes the family to the brink of insanity. (200 pages)

Very Pythonesque, very funny! Flisar handles relationships within his multigenerational family with masterful confidence. The story develops as if in a boxing ring, with each new blow providing another twist. That is why the novel is not only cinematic but also dramatic. The author unveils his entertainingly intoned grotesque with exceptional economy, employing only a minimum of stylistic devices, relying instead on a bitter undertone and, at the same time, almost joyful cynicism...
Igor Bratož, DELO

Three Loves, One Death, almost a Menippean satire, belongs in the realm of seriously funny literature. The author's subject matter is an apparently stable and closely connected middle-class family on the threshold of the 21st Century. In fact, the family is made up of individuals who simulate closeness out of habit or out of fear of being left to themselves... The novel is an effective mixture of astonishing, often bizarre inventions that kept me chuckling and filled me with admiration for the author's imagination...
Darja Pavlič, SODOBNOST

If *The Chestnut Crown* tells a story about the disintegration of archaic family bonds, and *My Father's Dreams* shows the shocking collapse of a family, the third of Flisar's »family novels« causes only mad laughter at the situation in which the family (representing the world at large) can no longer be helped. This is probably the harshest criticism of contemporary civilisation that we find in Flisar's prose. The book is written with a high degree of irony, almost mockery, which makes for smoothly flowing, seductive and entertaining reading...
Jože Horvat, SODOBNOST

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

Three Loves, One Death

When I think of the fate of my uncle, Jaroslav Schweik, I can't escape a certain feeling of sorrow. Not because he was the favourite toy of the Great Cosmic Joker, but because of the confluence of events that prevented him from avoiding what he liked to call »the rapacious embrace of history«. His aims were peace, love and gentle tolerance for all creatures, big or small, stupid or clever, ugly or beautiful.

This is a story about his rise and fall, and about me, growing up in his shadow.

His brush with history happened before I even knew he existed, so my report about it may contain errors and ommissions, for which I apologize. All I have at my disposal are a couple of newspaper articles and a handful of witness statements, none of them official, all in the manner of : »Yes, I was there when it happened.« But since there is nothing realiable about anything since the dawn of man, there seems no harm in giving the (supposed) events a personal twist. In any case we all see things through our own eyes. And thank God for that, as uncle Schweik would say.

»If I saw history riding towards me I would force it off the road,« was his prophetic response to the taunts of his work mates who kept asking him when he would start fulfilling his mother's greatest desire and become a »historical figure«. As a city bus driver he was hardly in a position to achieve anything of significance; to make a name for himself he would have to enter politics, the way into which had for some time been discreetly paved for him by his mother, my grandma. But Schwek remained stubbornly unimpressed by her efforts to move move him from a bus driver's seat to a seat in praliament. »Not for me, politics,« he kept telling her. »Have you forgotten Lenin's words?« she would shout at him. »The world is divided into those who do, and those to whom it is done!« »I want to remain one of those to whom it is done,« was his standard defence.

Jaroslav Schweik became entangled in the undergrowth of our family tree more or less accidentally, thanks to my grandma's indiscretion during her visit to Prague. This was not in itself scandalous, but the trip (which was organized by the women's branch of the Socialist Workers Union) lasted only two days! On top of which my grandma was married, and already a mother of a three-year old girl who later became my mother. But it was the time of hippies and of free love, so no one made too much fuss, except my grandfather, of course. But he, too, was eventually pacified by God knows what devious means.

As soon as my grandma realized that her first-born lacked the drive to make a push for greatness, she placed her dreams of success squarely on the shoulders of the »Czech bastard«, as the son she acquired abroad was affectionately called by my grandfather. Her dreams were a terrible burden for Uncle Schweik, and the only way he could bear it was by trying to remain »ordinary, completely ordinary«. This was easier said than done. Bearing the surname of one of the most memorable characters in twentieth-century fiction was hardly of help, and to make matters worse, he had been given the forename of Schweik's creator! (All thanks to my grandma's belief that this would make his quest for greatness easier!)

And because it never rains but it pours, he was plagued by such rotten luck that there was hardly a step he made which wasn't the first step towards some kind of catastrophe – a definite proof, according to some in our family, that God prefers to punish those who try hardest to live by his rules.

Uncle Schweik could not understand why such a fuss was made about "the usual ups-and-downs of an ordinary man's progress through life". To him, everything that crossed his path was merely "one of those things", as he was wont to brush aside even the most shocking occurrence. His equanimity in the face of disaster startled most people who witnessed it. Once, when he was getting out of his car and opened the door into the path of a passing lorry, with the door promptly shorn off and dragged fifty yards down the road, his main concern was for the safety of the lorry driver.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked him at least a dozen times, and would have repeated the question a dozen times more if the lorry driver hadn't surrendered to a fit of rage and plunged his fist into the middle

of uncle Schweik's face. "He had every right to do so," was the explanation my uncle gave to the police when they asked him if he would press charges. (And this in spite of the fact that he needed seven stitches!)

Many of his disasters became popular talking points at dinner parties throughout the country. No wonder he was eventually offered television appearances in popular TV shows. He accepted the invitations as a matter of course, but turned out to be a great disappointment. Not only did he fail to register (let alone react to) the mocking tone of the presenters, thus depriving audiences of the amusement they had been led to expect, he even refused to admit that the long list of calamities in any way set him apart from anyone in the audience!

In every show his reply was the same: "We are sent to this world to practise patience and calm, and so prepare for the next one, which will not be as kind to us as the one we are so eager to denigrate."

Once again the presenters would confront him with the most notorious examples of his accident-proneness: how in the space of a single day he managed to put out his back by bending down to pick up a pencil, blow up his gas boiler by connecting the wires in such a way that it overheated, and flood his bathroom (not to mention the flat below) by forgetting to close the tap. And how on earth does he manage to trap in the bus door – by closing it too early – more passengers a week than other drivers do in a year? Not to mention the model ship he had been building inside a bottle over a period of years, only to have it turned to jelly by accidentally filling the bottle with acid. And what about the number of times he had been thrown off his feet by trying to repair an iron without first unplugging it?

"Well," uncle Schweik always replied without getting upset, "I never bother about things like that. I became a bus driver because I enjoy getting people to their destinations. Historically, this is not very significant, but I derive just enough pleasure from it to call myself happy."

Were there women in uncle Schweik's life? Nobody knows. There were rumours about his entanglements with various ladies, but never a shred of evidence that he as much as brushed against one accidentally. But thoughts of marriage must have been on his mind at least some of the time; once, when applying for a loan at a bank, he was overheard answering the clerk's routine question "Are you married?" with a deeply felt, "I would like to be, but I've never been asked. As for asking myself, I'm too shy."

One way or another, things remained vague in this area of uncle Schweik's life. In any case there was no shortage of gossip material: quite unexpectedly, and to everybody's amazement, uncle Schweik was offered a part-time job with the Broadcasting Corporation. No doubt a few crucial doors had been knocked at by my grandma, who may have hoped that her son would work his way up to the position of Director General, from where he could enter politics as easily as if walking through revolving doors. He had appeared in enough TV shows for his calm and relaxed approach to be widely known, so it was – according to grandma – hardly surprising that the Corporation's health unit hired him to compose an anti-stress advice brochure which would tell overworked managers and producers how to relax.

Uncle Schweik found the request reasonable and hardly beyond his competence. And so eventually a glossy 80-page booklet was published, paid for by the licence fee, in which harrassed executives were instructed to "always ensure that they sit on the cheeks of their bottoms", and to unwind by staring at a picture of the Alps, dreaming of hiking through green Alpine valleys with their favourite aunt, or, if that didn't work, take up origami. The booklet included a 21-stage diagram of how to make an origami bird; and it was this particular part of the brochure that made uncle Schweik, perhaps for the first time in his life, unashamedly proud. Failing everything, harassed executives were advised to dab their heads with lavender or sandalwood.

But his stress advice was not accepted with unreserved enthusiasm by everybody. Especially not his instructions on how to walk through revolving doors: "Move immediately into the available space. The door will automatically turn as you walk around – do not push. Exit the door as the opening becomes available. If you miss the moment you will have to repeat the process." It was reported that, during the presentation ceremony following the publication of the brochure, the reaction of some of the employees so distressed uncle Schweik that he later walked through revolving doors for ten minutes before an opening became available and he managed to beat a retreat.

For some time there were no further claims on uncle Schweik's talents, nor requests for statements which one

newspaper described as a mixture of platitudes and uncanny wisdom. His last published statement was: "For all of us the only true destination is the feeling of calm." So he practiced his calm (with or without lavender, no one knows) by driving bus number 7 and getting people to work, shops, dentists, employment offices, mortuaries and home again.

But his own destination in life no longer seemed completely unquestionable. Something grim had started to hover about his person, as though the incident with the brochure had left him with a deep wound. Often his smiling face would resemble a mask of pain, and to more discerning passengers this was all too clearly visible. One day a sombre soft-spoken gentleman, who later turned out to be a regular passenger on bus number 7, patted uncle Schweik on the shoulder before alighting and said, "The most ungrateful thing in the world is to be genuinely good."

"Really?" uncle Schweik yelled at the top of his voice, startling all the passengers. Then, more quietly, he added: "Get off my bus and bugger off."

The astonishment of the soft-spoken gentleman was so complete that he practically fell out of the vehicle. The remaining passengers drew their heads between their shoulders until they resembled a contingent of seated tortoises. Few had the strength, or inclination, to swivel their heads far enough to see the soft-spoken (and rudely spoken to) passenger elbowing his way through the crowd on the pavement. Even fewer saw uncle Schweik running after him, or heard him shouting, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

But when uncle Schweik reappeared and climbed behind the wheel of the bus again, there wasn't a single passenger who did not notice that this was no longer the man they had known for years as the man most likely to get them to their destination. Some sinister change had descended on him – not only on him, but on their lives, on the city, on places far away, even beyond the mountains.

It was the mountains that uncle Schweik now regarded as the source of his calm, the shining snowy peaks which on a clear day he could see in the distance through the windscreen of his bus. As he stared at them (true to the advice in his brochure), he gradually regained his old equanimity, and his regular passengers ceased to avoid his eyes as they boarded or left the bus. Even the soft-spoken gentleman reappeared one day, behaving as if nothing had ever happened. And however curious everybody was to hear how he had been travelling to and from work, they all had the good sense not to ask him. Things were normal again; people were reaching their destinations, and uncle Schweik once again enjoyed getting them there. Once or twice he was overheard whistling a merry a tune and seen by those sitting right behind him to jiggle up and down in his driver's seat to its rhythm.

But a feeling of tension did remain in the air. This was not so much tension between uncle Schweik and his passengers, it was more a shared sense of foreboding, as though something were getting ready to pounce on their lives and alter them beyond recognition. Nobody knows whether uncle Schweik was more – or less – aware of this feeling than his passengers. The only thing they could later describe with certainty was his astonishment at seeing a military tank appear on the road in front of the bus.

As a matter of fact this didn't come completely out of the blue; there had been rumours that the federal army might try to secure the international borders of the tiny breakaway Alpine republic. But hearing rumours and seeing tanks actually moving towards the city centre are two different things. Without a second thought uncle Schweik swung his bus across the road, forcing the tank (which was only the first of many) to come to a clattering halt.

Accounts of what happened next diverge in one detail only: whether uncle Schweik *ran* or *walked* towards the machine which represented the power of the dying state. Some say that he swaggered not unlike John Wayne proceeding to shoot it out with a villain. Others claim that he rushed towards and climbed on to the tank like a large ungainly squirrel. But all agree that the young soldier manning the machine gun mounted on top of the tank had little time to react. And the little time he did have, he wasted on trying to make sense of what was happening.

Then he was stabbed right through the heart with a large screwdriver which uncle Schweik always kept under the driving wheel in case he needed to tighten a screw; he liked his bus to run smoothly and without undue rattling. As the young soldier let go of the machine gun he had been gripping more out of fear than with any deadly intent, uncle Schweik lifted his slouching body and tossed it to the ground, where it landed with a thud and after some twitching remained lying still. Uncle Schweik slid down the side of the tank

and started to kick the body. Only then did he pull the screwdriver out of the heart of the first casualty of the coming war.

"What have you done?" shouted the soft-spoken passenger as uncle Schweik started to walk back towards the bus. "You've murdered my son!"

He rushed towards the body, knelt down beside it and lifted the young man's head until it came to rest in his lap. He removed the helmet and ran his fingers through the curly hair of the Slovenian conscript who had been ordered by his federal army commander to ride the tank into battle without being told against whom or why. As they watched the scene, passengers in the bus and soldiers manning the tanks which had halted behind the first, realized that they had reached a point of no return.

Another person who realized that was my uncle Schweik.

"We must remain calm," he was heard muttering as he stood in front of the bus surveying the consequences of his intrusion into history. "We should be satisfied by helping each other get to our destinations; why do we always want more?"

As the boy's father walked towards him, uncle Schweik greeted him with the following words: "I've made a terrible mistake. I deserve to die."

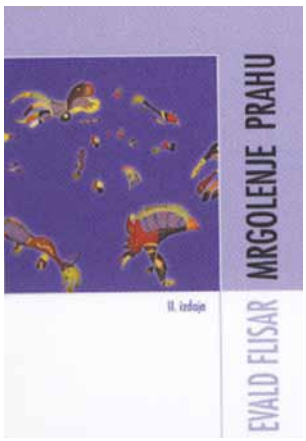
But the soft-spoken gentleman passed him without a word, without even looking at him. Then he passed the bus without raising his head to meet the eyes of his fellow passengers, with most of whom he had travelled to work and back home again for over twenty years, and proceeded to walk into the fields by the side of the road, not back towards the city but right across, towards distant villages, towards the mountains, away from it all, making slow but determined steps, without turning once, not even when one of the tank crew, who had misunderstood what was happening, sent a hail of bullets after him. He just slumped and came to rest in the fields, lying on his back, less than five hundred yards from his son, neither of them guilty of anything, for sometimes there is a war in which the innocent die and the guilty remain alive, trying to figure out what had gone wrong.

Then the tank moved to push the bus off the road. And so my grandma's wish was fulfilled: Jaroslav Schweik, if only by failing to stop it, had written himself into history.

Oedipus revisited

Evald Flisar

The Chestnut Crown



THE CHESTNUT CROWN (original title *Mrgolenje prahu, A Swarm of Dust*) is a new edition of Flisar's first novel, written when the author was only twenty-three. Displaying many characteristics of his later style, *The Chestnut Crown* introduced into Slovenian literature the taboo subject of an incestuous relationship between mother and son, the social environment and magical folklore of the Gypsies, and, through its hero, the theme of the "outsider", the individual rebel unable to come to terms with what he regards as the mediocrity and humiliating demands of society. The book (as well as its dramatisation) caused moral outrage when it first appeared, but it has now been reassessed in the light of later theoretical approaches to literature. The narrative takes the form of a long letter to the Court of Appeal by an examining magistrate who was instrumental in getting the young hero convicted for the murder he allegedly committed. The magistrate has since realised that his rigorous examination technique had in fact carried him away from the truth. By writing to the Court of Appeal and detailing his numerous interviews with the accused he hopes to get him acquitted. The novel is rich with insights into the nature of guilt, prejudice, illusion, justice and truth. (210 pages)

The diction... is wholly authentic, suffused with hidden and revealed passions, with almost naturalistic yet hardly everyday speech patterns, with language brought into the world by life itself, with ideas that successfully rise above ideologies, since they constitute part of the sensual and emotional fabric of life from which they emerge…
Vasja Predan, DELO

The new production of the stage version of the novel confirms the undiminished vitality of this early work by Evald Flisar... of the work which is marked by primeval traumas of individuals in the grip of tradition and the culture of their ancestors, who, at the same time, as people living in the modern world without God, look for temporary solutions in eroticism, fatherhood, regression...
Tone Peršak, DELO

The Chestnut Crown, thematically exceptional in the history of Slovenian literature, has lost none of its force in the years since it was written by the twentythree-year-old author and, in its dramatised form, first produced by the Slovene National Theatre Maribor... *The Chestnut Crown* dramatizes the basic conflict between primeval eroticism without any boundaries and the norms of Judeo-Christian morality…
Peter Božič, DELO

On this level *The Chestnut Crown* is a story of preparations and unfulfilled expectations. It is a search for lost roles: the role of mother for Aranka, of woman for Selena, of man for Weiner, of son for Yanek. The four prime movers are caught in two erotic triangles. At the top are Selena and Aranka; below them are Yanek and Weiner as two contenders. In Yanek's hallucinations the colours of both triangles blend: the green colour of panic, flight, and guilt, and the red color of eroticism, fire, obsession, rebellion…
Igor Lampret, The Chestnut Crown, introductory essay

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

The Chestnut Crown

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but the moment she stepped into the house he noticed that the moon was shining through the window and illuminating a part of the wall and the floor, though not his bed. He remained in darkness. His mother put down the straw basket in which she most likely carried the potatoes, flour and bread that she brought home every evening. Then she went to her bed onto which the moon was shining, knelt, turned down the quilt and, with a few movements of her right hand, straightened the pillow. Then she picked up the washbasin that was leaning against the wall behind the door and placed it on the wooden bench. There was the faint sound of tin against wood. Then came the sound of running water being poured from the pitcher. The moon shone on her and on the entire corner where she stood. She reached behind her waist, undid a button, and began to undress. She hung her dress on a nail that had been hammered into the wooden planks of the wall; then she began to splash water onto her bare body and wash. Yanek could clearly see her figure, but the sight of his mother's body did not arouse any feelings different from those he felt when watching the silver meadows or the outlines of the trees. He perceived her body as matter.

The scent of soap floated over to him and he heard the rubbing sound as his mother scrubbed her feet. She lifted one in the air and stood on the other. He could see her large breasts shaking. He saw her abundant belly shining in the light, how it moved, and how, when she rubbed the towel on her back, she had to lean slightly backward. Then he saw the blackish shadow under her belly. All of this did not seem unusual to him. He was cut off from experience. For this reason, he was not surprised that his mother had taken off her clothes in front of him. It did not occur to him that perhaps she did not see him and was convinced that she was alone in the little house. Then she placed the towel on the bench, poured out the water from the washbasin, rummaged in a little basket that hung from the edge of the bench, found a pair of scissors, walked toward her bed, sat down on it, bent over, and began to cut her toenails. Each time he heard a little pop. The moon shone down on her back. Yanek saw the line of her spine running down the middle of her back and dividing it into two halves. When she had finished cutting her toenails, she lay back, extended a hand in front of her face and started to cut her fingernails. Again the nails flicked against the wall and onto the floor.

Then for a moment she stopped, let her hands fall against her, and looked up at the ceiling as if she were thinking. He saw how her breasts gently rose and fell. It struck him that she was trembling slightly. She had probably begun to feel the cold. But she just lay there and didn't climb under the quilt.

Now I have a problem, respected members of the jury, because I must report that Yanek moved, that he got out of his bed and crawled on his knees toward his mother. What happened that caused him to do that? The human interior is such an anthill of perceptions, sensations, thoughts, emotions and impulses, that, in certain moments, we cannot penetrate it even with the sharpest of eyes. If we put aside the possibility that we are mistaken, we must conclude that the young Hudorovec was cut off from what he had lived through during those moment; that the strange anxiety that had emerged within him when he became aware of women and sex suddenly left him. When the sensual and perceived world flooded him, it weakened his reason and his impulses became even stronger, because, as we noted, his reactions were similar to those of an animal driven by the forces of matter. At such times, his sexual impulse too must have been stronger. It is well known, respected members of the jury, how dogs behave when we see them on the street, how they mate under the eyes of people. First that sniffing about, then running, then general agitation, a sort of courtship, in between some roughness and sharp teeth, some growling, and finally the submission of the female and the act of the male. All of this happens without the presence of the cerebral world. It happens in the context of sensuality, in the framework of perceptions and instincts.

When Yanek crawled to his mother's bed, he was probably not battling with fear or indecision. He didn't

fully realize what he was doing because he had never done anything like that before. He was drawn to the other bed, to his mother's naked body as a male animal is drawn to a female when he sees her and smells her. His mother flinched in fear and cried out: "Yanek!" At this point, the young Hudorovec made an association: his mother's cry made him think of the hoarse voice of the fox he had heard in the forest earlier. But that was only a flash that quickly passed. He did not perceive his mother's fear, did not recognize it. He touched her trembling body with his hand, felt the smoothness of the skin, felt the warmth, smelled her body. He passed his hand over her belly, over the black shadow beneath it, over her thighs down to the knees, then back, to her breasts and her neck. All his feelings condensed into a single one: the hot rush of blood, the tension of his body that wanted to explode, the absence of any thought, excitement, the sensation of flying, the sensation of rising and falling. In each man, a small spark smoulders even during the most intense sexual spasm, a spark that reminds him of the shape of the act and of the presence of the other person. This was not so with Hudorovec. He was absolutely in the realm of the senses. After a short period of trembling during which the strangeness of his behaviour passed into her, his mother also experienced a sort of spasm. The cry that emerged from her throat was a cry of unknown pleasure. She was filled with a strange fever. She embraced Yanek's body, which was very thin, no larger than hers, and began to tear the shirt from it, to cry and whisper strange words as if she had lost her mind.

"Don't be afraid, Yanek…don't be afraid…you mustn't be afraid of such things…everyone does it, so must you…my heart would ache if you didn't… you mustn't be afraid…I am you mother…I can show you how…you'll see, you'll see…" A shallow sobbing came between her words. With eager hands, she completely disrobed him. "There, you see… here. In here…" She pulled him on top of her, clamped him between her legs, grabbed his hair, and kissed his eyes wildly. She scratched at him with her fingers and all the while there was the same shallow moaning, the sighs and whispers. At the start, Yanek only inhaled deeply, then strange sounds came from his throat, a sort of growling. He grabbed his mother by the hair and pulled her strongly toward him.

"Ow, that hurts, Yanek…that hurts…" she moaned. "Let it hurt, let it hurt…it's nicer if it hurts…" Then he bit the skin on her shoulder until she screamed in pain, and began to beat her with his hands, hitting her all over. "Beat me, Yanek…beat me…beat me more… you are good, Yanek, you must beat me, you must punish me…until I die. I'll do anything for you… Yanek…my little son…" Toward the end she wheezed. His spasms ceased, he unclenched his hands, and lay next to her body. Then he rolled onto his right side. He saw that she was bleeding where he had bitten her and that she was bruised from the blows. He looked around him, stared at his organ, which looked red in the moonlight. An association flashed through him: he remembered the red tongue of the panting dog, there, next to the stream.

Then it all broke loose. Thoughts seethed within him. Everything he experienced seeped through the chaos. As these sensations passed through him, he stared at his mother's bleeding body, at her and his own nakedness. A series of images appeared before him. He remembered that he had beaten his mother… everything spun, objects fell from him… a silence roared in his ears. He fainted.

When he came to, he was lying under the blanket in his own bed. His mother was leaning over him and dabbing his face with a damp rag. She was dressed. Again all the previous sensations welled up in him. They choked him, overwhelmed him. He started to sob, suddenly and silently. "Yanek!" his mother spoke to him. "You mustn't cry. Now you must go to sleep. Everything will be all right now. Everything will be all right." The quiet sobbing grew into long inconsolable crying. His mother continued to stroke his cheeks for some time; then she threw herself onto the bed next to him and started to cry herself.

When they had no more tears, their bodies succumbed to mute convulsive shuddering. The shuddering became less and less.

A chill began to grow between them.

Summer came, it was dry and windy, no rain, and it seemed that the land would be scorched from the drought. Old man Baranja took a turn for the worse. His skin became completely yellow and loose. He dried up into a skeleton. He didn't speak to anyone. He dragged himself into the house and wasn't seen for a week. At times he was heard swearing, or throwing things against a wall, or coughing. It seemed as

if death would take him away any time but Baranja stubbornly resisted. In the evening, when the sun was no longer hot, he appeared once again in front of the house and idled there lifelessly on the threshold. He wasn't coughing as hard anymore. Emma brought him brandy. When he sat outside, he kept the bottle beside him.

In the first days of July, three Gypsies returned to the village. They were tired and looked ill-tempered. They tossed their wooden cases into a corner and grimly said that they had lost their jobs. More would come soon. They started to sit around in front of the huts; the settlement began to look like a charnel house. School children wandered through the nearby villages all day as school was out of session. The sun shone blindingly on the arid courtyards in front of the houses. It felt unbearably hot even in the shade of the trees. Nobody spoke. The Gypsies moved slowly and lazily; usually they slept. Even the dogs no longer barked. They just lay around in the heat, their tongues lolling from the muzzles. A dull torpor fell over the people. They spoke hoarsely and with great difficulty, opening their mouths only when it was unavoidable, and then only halfway.

Yanek could not bear being in the settlement during the day. All of a sudden, he had the feeling that a stench of filth, sweat, and squalor came from the houses. The stench was nothing new, he had sensed it before, but suddenly it started to disturb him, to arouse a certain disgust in him. The stench was especially unbearable in the hot sun. It hung in the air among the trees and struck a hard blow to his lungs. Perhaps he also used the stench as an excuse because he didn't want to remain in the settlement. Perhaps he didn't dare to admit that it was something else that drove him out of the settlement, a sort of fear that he would have to speak to someone, that he would have to look at someone, because there was a sort of guilt lurking within him and this feeling was particularly unbearable in the hot sun.

One way or another, Yanek was not in the settlement during the day. If he was not lying in the grass below the stream, he was wandering through the forest where an unusual silence prevailed during the summer heat. Occasionally he was taken quite far, across the valley to the hills in the east, even to the flatlands. Here and there, he sat down on a rotten stump to rest, then he was driven aimlessly onward. He stopped by streams and watched them; he examined trees, felt their rough bark; once a hare darted out from behind a bush and disappeared into the dense wood; at another moment, a whole column of deer ran by. He cooled himself beside forest springs, quenching his thirst. Always, when he came to the edge of the forest, he stopped and studied the landscape in front of him, then turned and went back. He did not walk through vegetable gardens, fields, or meadows, keeping always to the forest where he saw no eyes; where he felt he was alone with the damp silence of the forest, with the sappy smell of the wood.

On these long rambles, his feeling of anxiety was no longer so strong. The feeling seemed to petrify into a stupor in his veins, into a stiffness of body and thoughts. His thoughts moved slowly like the water in forest streams meandering silently between dry grasses. This numbness lasted quite a while, although now and then it was interrupted by sudden bursts of sharp and unknown emotions. At times he was overcome with a fear that nearly toppled him. He didn't know its source nor did he try to discover it. He even allowed himself a certain trembling pleasure when it came. At other times, he was filled with overwhelming joy. He rolled in the moss, rubbed his hands over the bark-covered trees, embraced the trunks, jumped and cried out and chased the echo that the forest sent back to him. But in an instant, the feeling was gone as if swept away by an eddy of water, and once again he was filled with the old inertia, the dead flow of thoughts, the endless wandering through the forest.

He always returned late at night. Each night he made love to his mother. Usually it lasted until morning when his mother went to the village, to work, and he disappeared on his well-worn paths. They almost never spoke. Sometimes they whispered as if they feared they would wake someone, but even this they rarely did. They feared that a loud word spoken between them would cause something to break, to be destroyed. He lived always in the feeling that what they did was something secret and could bear no sound except cries and moans during their lovemaking.

At night, his spiritual inertia transformed into strong emotions that until now had been unknown to him. He still beat his mother, each night worse than before. When he heard her moaning with pain, he felt a special lust. It was similar to the feeling he had when he had killed puppies with Pišta Baranja. There had

been too many of them. They were just small fuzzy balls. They couldn't even see yet, nuzzling against each other, squealing with their trembling snouts, and when he touched them, he felt that the soft little animals were warm, he felt their blood pulsing just beneath the surface of the skin. When Pišta Baranja grabbed the first little dog by its paws and smashed it against the tree trunk, he felt overwhelmed with a terror that nearly knocked him to the ground. It was despair or something like it, a sort of fear before an incomprehensible act, but as the fear grew within him so too did another sensation that the fear kept at bay. When this second sensation was the stronger of the two, he lunged toward the little animals with real eagerness, saliva gathering in his mouth, his eyes gone glassy, and he smashed one of the little dogs so many times against the tree trunk that he knocked its little blind head off and beat its body to a pulp. Then he reached toward the pile of bloody meat and felt it with his fingers.

While making love to his mother, he was overcome by a similar feeling. He hurt her to the point of bleeding and the more she moaned with pleasure as he hurt her, the greater was his desire to torment her until she would no longer enjoy it but would suffer. The wildness of the scenes increased from night to night. If they happened by accident to see each other during the day, he regarded her with glassy eyes and felt both a tremulous fear before her and a convulsive hatred. She always provoked the desire to hurt her. She stared at him with an expression of meek subservience. She reminded him of those good-willed furry puppies tumbling over each other. When he occasionally tired of wandering through the forest and lay down on the moss and closed his eyes, her convulsively moving body danced before him. He saw her grimacing face shining in the moonlight, heard her cries growing distant and then returning again. Even when he walked among the trees, a vision of what they did swam before him. He remembered each object in a sort of nocturnal hue and the whole time his body heaved with the desire to strike her, to beat her, to torment her.

One evening he returned home without even knowing how he got there. The sun had set behind a hill but it was still light enough. He saw Emma in front of Baranja's house, walking up and down. He realized that she was hanging clothes to dry on a rope suspended between two pine trees. The wooden bucket in which she did the laundry stood on a bench in front of the house. He saw that she noticed him when he appeared at the edge of the forest and that she kept looking toward him as he approached the house. He was about to step inside when he heard her calling out to him. He stopped for a moment and then he walked on.

"Yanek!" she called again, louder now. "Come here! Something's happened to your mother."

The words struck him so violently that he almost stumbled over a bush.

"Come," she said. She turned a corner and then walked uphill toward the forest. He followed. Every vein in him was stretched to breaking; feelings of confusion splashed through them. When they came to the edge of the forest at the top of the bank, she whispered to him to walk quietly and, without even wanting to, he placed his feet soundlessly on the ground. Emma stopped behind the acacias, gestured again with a finger, pointing through the trees. He stepped next to her.

The mossy trunk of a hornbeam tree rose up above the thorn and berry bushes. There his mother knelt and shook the dirt off her wrinkled skirt. Then she buttoned up her shirt. A tall slender peasant stood beside her buckling the belt on his trousers. It was Geder. Then her mother picked up the straw basket at the base of the hornbeam tree, looked at Geder, but said nothing. They turned and left, Geder toward the nearby road, Yanek's mother toward her house. Long after he could no longer hear the rustling of their footsteps, Yanek stood there motionless, staring at the tree and the moss below it. The single feeling that seized him in this moment was a sort of hatred toward Geder because he was convinced that he had not beaten his mother. And so his mother would be dissatisfied. He heard her words ringing inside of him… "You must hit me…it's nicer then…"

Geder did it as if mother meant nothing to him. Just like that. The past from which Yanek had been cut off for so long burst into him. He sat down powerless on the ground and memories swirled within him. Images emerged and faded. He saw himself how once, at school, he stole a big piece of bread from under the bench, a piece of bread that belonged to some peasant girl, how he ran home with the piece of bread, his mother was sick, there was nothing to eat, his father and sister weren't taking care of her, how he fell toward her where she lay, pushed the bread into her withered hand and said…bread, mother, bread…eat

some bread, mother…And he remembered the feeling that came after, when he sat in the corner and watched his mother eating the bread and looking at him with bright eyes. He felt a trembling inside him, a happiness. And the priest then appeared before his eyes… do you love your mother, he asked…Love, love…He was in a cold sweat. He suddenly realized that he felt something else toward his mother than he had up until then, and the powerful pain of these memories, of that memory, overwhelmed him. Everything bubbled up within him. His confusion was so powerful that he felt faint. Once again, hatred toward Geder rose up in him, that he should have beaten her, otherwise she was not happy…And mother *must* be happy. He felt tears running down his cheeks. Mother…he sobbed. He would always beat her, he would always obey her, would always do what she wanted.

He saw Emma through his tears. She was kneeling down next to him and looking at him. A sort of mockery shone in her eyes. "Yanek," she spoke, "didn't you know? They've been doing this for a long time. Will you tell your father?" Amazement grew in him but Emma just kept talking. He didn't understand her clearly, but some of her words came through. "If they do it, we could too…I would…would you, Yanek, my husband is away…Yanek…would you Yanek, would you…"

"You don't understand!" He lunged at her and she winced. He saw her wide-open eyes, saw how she fearfully withdrew. He felt confusion in his chest. It exploded inside him, blasted into pieces. It threw him upward, downward, then into the darkening forest…

That night he was more savage than he'd been ever before. He bit his mother's breasts and shoulders. When it was over, he whispered: "Good, mother? Is it good?"

"Yes, my little son…" she whispered and stroked him.

"Is it nicer if it hurts?"

"Yes, son…"

"Shall I always beat you?"

"Yes, son…"

Then they were quiet. He wanted to ask her why Geder didn't beat her as well, why she didn't tell him to beat her. But then something closed within him and he held his words back. Maybe he does, it struck him. And with this hope, his hatred toward Geder vanished and a new feeling replaced it. Then as he sank into slumber, Geder assured him that he too beat his mother, that his mother was happy, and he felt that he loved Geder, he stroked his sleeve….

…then he sank completely…

…and was extinguished…

From then on, Yanek's mother no longer came home so late at night and he also did not wander until dusk in the forest. In the evening, the two sat down together in the house, ate boiled potatoes or corn-flour bread. They quietly spoke to each other and a sort of beneficent peace prevailed between them. They observed each other's movements with pleasure. There was no longer the former alienation between them. They constantly sought each other out with their eyes and were comforted by each other's nearness. The evenings were still humid and the moon still shone in the sky.

One evening they heard a rustling in front of the door. A moment later, the door opened. Standing on the threshold was the giant figure of the old Hudorovec.

They both froze.

Yanek was sitting on his bed and his mother was tending the fire under the kettle.

"Already home?" she asked with a strange voice, mechanically poking the fire.

"Home, wife, home!" said Yank's father. Yanek was surprised that he called her "wife" and with such a strange emphasis. He always used to call her "woman". And he had never before spoken so quietly, so coldly, in such a clipped manner. He placed his worn suitcase in the corner. He shut the door behind him. He did everything slowly and deliberately. Then he reached for his pants and unbuckled his belt.

"And you? You're also home, I see," he said, casting his eyes on her.

"What do you mean by that?" his wife whispered.

Her voice was hoarse and it trembled slightly.

"What do I mean? You should be up there, with the other one. Isn't that so, wife?"

"What are you talking about?"

During this time, Hudorovec had taken off his belt and was pulling it through his left hand. Then he stretched it in front of his chest as if to test its hardness. He did all of that coldly and deliberately.

"Come, wife!" he ordered.

She froze.

"Out, boy!" He turned toward Yanek. "Do you hear me?" he yelled when Yanek didn't move. With these words, his coldness shattered; saliva flew from his mouth, and his eyes became glassy.

"Out!" He lunged once again toward Yanek. Then a great paw swung out, grabbed him by the shoulder, threw him toward the door, banged his head against it until it spun. Again the strong fingers reached toward him and in the next instant he found himself on the other side of the door which closed behind him. He picked himself up, hopped to the nearest pine tree, held it tightly, and trembled.

He could hear his mother moaning in the house. He heard the blows of the leather belt as well. Hudorovec swore and panted. It sounded as if he had grabbed her head and was banging it against the floor.

"There, whore…" he kept saying. "There, bitch…."

"Stop, stop…" cried the woman. "I had to, my darling husband! How could we live? You left and didn't care if we starved to death!"

"You should have worked, whore! There…And the boy should have worked…"

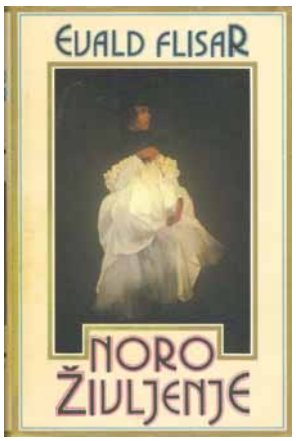
"But I did, I did…" she defended herself, though less often now. A few times she screamed. Then she stopped. The blows kept falling.

Yanek ran away. He ran through the forest. He stopped on the bank and looked at the trunks of the beech trees, trembling intermittently with light. He saw flashes of lightning. Thunder rumbled over the plains, the wind blew across the valley. A storm was coming, the first one after a long time.

The rain fell long into the night. He lifted his cheeks toward it. He opened his mouth and his eyes so he could feel the streaming water. It rustled in the crowns of the trees. The lightning flashed tremulously but never went out completely.

Evald Flisar

Nights with Naked Maya



NIGHTS WITH NAKED MAYA (original title *Noro življenje, Crazy Life*) deals with existential traumas of a well-known photographer who feels uncomfortable in the embrace of our destructive civilisation (whose excesses he brilliantly portrays in his work) and seeks medicine for his pain in other, more spiritual and less acquisitive cultures. This time our "Ulysses" travels through "ancient" Greece and Africa with a delightfully witty yet mentally unstable girl Maya, who, at sixteen, is incapable of absorbing the complexity of the preoccupations of her older and more experienced companion (guide), and who – under the weight of new knowledge and experience – undergoes a tragic process of depersonalisation, becoming a "nobody", her companion's puppet, "naked Maya", divested of her personal essence, while her companion tries to resurrect her as an independent person by the most ingenious means. A thoughtful book about a meeting between innocence and experience, replete with love, sex, bullfights, dreams, memories, death and much more. (200 pages)

Flisar is different from other Slovenian writers; he is exceptional because he believes that people are willing to read books mainly because they hope to derive some pleasure from it. And because he believes that those seeking enjoyment should not be forced to read anything highly unpleasant, he is very careful... We have to read him sentence by sentence, and the more obvious it becomes that the serious author is feeding us incredible fabrications, the more we trust him. Flisar succeeds in proving that novels are always inventions and that our lives, to a large degree, resemble pulp fiction. He persuades us to assume the role of the reader that he has set out for us. Not bad at all, considering that one of the characters tells us that good readers are also good lovers: because they are patient...
Franček Rudolf, VIKEND MAGAZIN

A journey along the trajectory of a special – and in this context also general – kind of love relationship, leading a young girl to a mature man and the mature man to an obscured childhood, a pilgrimage from youthful zeal to the confusion of grown-up doubts, an eager race for sexual experiences of every kind while remaining caught in a circle of whimsical Destiny – these are the paths traversed by the restless narrator... Judging by the success of Flisar's previous books, the publishers need have no worries about selling the first print-run of 6000 copies...
Marjeta Novak–Kajzer, DELO

Already after the first few pages it becomes clear that we are in the presence of polished, cultivated, even refined writing. There is much that oversteps realistic boundaries, yet everything remains firmly within the frame of literary reality. The love journey of Henrik and Maya is one of the archetypal versions of man-woman relationship, of coming together and saying good-bye. The author keeps an ironic distance from the unfolding story and offers the reader different endings to choose from...
SRCE IN OKO

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

Nights with Naked Maya

In truth, Your Honour, I am the victim of books, or rather of one specific cursed book. Not *Lolita*, that would be too simple after all, especially because we are offered the story of Lolita and Humbert Humbert in some tabloid nearly every day; who can possibly be interested anymore in the pathetic coupling of an older man with a female who is still a child? There's too much of that sort of thing around these days. Sodom has expanded so much that its outer suburbs are bumping against the outer suburbs of Gomorrah. There's hardly a scrap of ground available for clean living anymore. That is why I am not going to tell you a story about sexual perversity, Your Honour, nor about sexual abuse, although it must be said that my narrative includes copious amounts of the latter. No, in defence of the crime I am accused of committing, I wish to reveal how quickly, if he takes the wrong book into his hands, a well-balanced man in the prime of life can become the victim of the author's perverse imagination.

As a reader you will agree with me: when we open a book and read the first sentence, we are often overwhelmed by the feeling that we are returning to a place where we have already been, perhaps some seaside town in which we passed a summer, or the village where we spent our childhood. If the feeling is pleasant, then the book takes hold of us and we want to read it to the end. If, however, the first sentence arouses something painful, we respond in two ways: either we reject the book and close it, or we push on in the hope that, despite the pain, the reading of it will scratch away an irritating tic from the skin.

There are books in which the first sentence promises to confirm the illusion that all is well with the world; we read such books when we want to chase away wintry emotions and luxuriate in something warm. Then there are books that create the feeling that we are spinning in a circle, returning to a place we have already tidied up and must tidy up again, or into a relationship that we have already ended. We read such books not only because we want to calm the storminess in our souls, but also in the hope that our disorder will be revealed to us as if in an x-ray.

We do not dare admit that almost everything we do (religion, science, philosophy, the telling of stories) is a way to tidy up or master disorder. If we admitted that, we would have to abandon the hope that life has a meaning that can be discovered (in contrast to a meaning that needs to be created). That is why at regular intervals we open drawers and throw out everything we think we can do without (letters that mean nothing to us; mementos that have lost their sentimental value; clothing we no longer wear). Then we wipe away the dust and feel lighter. We have more space. At the same time we feel that we have concluded one chapter in life and are starting another. Of course we overlook the fact that this is a trick and that we are weighed down by a disorder of a different kind: the absence of rhythm in the soul; the conviction that we should know but do not; that we should walk straight and tall, not weave and bob like a drunk; that, in short, we should know what we want. And who we are.

At such moments we are seized by panic. We go into the world and start searching for answers: stars that will show us the way; fence posts that will define our path; goals that will fill us with energy. We want there to be only one way (not many ways); things to be only of one kind and not also another. We want life to flow in one direction, not swirl around like troubled waters with currents that might sweep us away at any moment. Your Honour, the passion to reduce disorder is not only a psychological urgency in the life of an individual; it also manifests itself in art (where aesthetic reductionism turns into cliquish dogmatism), in politics (where party utopia turns into state bureaucracy), and in science (where the simplification of complexity into theory becomes the ideological conservatism).

When we are seized by the desire to fix ourselves in the chaos, we need an axis as a centre to the disorder: something around which life can orbit. The axis can be many things: Truth with a capital T, fatalism, political dogma, money, sex, political ambition. Anything that in the moment of panic can serve as "the meaning of life." It is in *this* context, Your Honour, that you must understand my story. I tried to tidy up the disorder

in my soul with the help of a book that had the opposite effect; it pushed me over the edge and into an abyss that I didn't even suspect I carried inside me. You know that I studied theology. I wanted to be a priest, perhaps even a bishop, or an archbishop, a cardinal. Whatever modesty I was able to muster in life prevented me from seeing myself in the role of Pope; I *was* tempted by holiness and decency, but only to a healthy degree.

Now, of course, I will never know how successful I would have been in the priestly vocation. In my third year of studies the book came into my hands which ejected me from the orbit of the Holy Church and onto a trajectory toward hell. The book was Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, without doubt a work you have also read, Your Honour, although it quite clearly had a different effect on you. You can imagine a student of theology who reads the following words written with all the authority of a great philosopher: "The sexual desire is the most vehement of cravings, the desire of desires, the concentration of all our willing." You can imagine the reaction of a young man who tends toward pessimism and knows that no less a figure than Thomas Mann described Schopenhauer as "the father of modern psychology", a description later endorsed by Freud.

Reading this book, Your Honour, the ground disappeared under my awkward feet; I swam and danced in pure freedom. Schopenhauer was the first European thinker who knew how to appreciate the achievements of Buddhism and Hinduism; the first to oppose vivisection because he did not recognize the fundamental difference between man and animal; the first who dared to write that he saw the world as a sort of penal colony in which man should live as *compagnon de misères*; the first who dared to suggest that he is inclined toward distrust, anger, violence, and pride.

What madness overcame a feeble student of theology when he read and read again each page of that book! "If that veil of Maya, the *principium individuationis*, is lifted from the eyes of a man to such an extent that he no longer makes the egotistical distinction between himself and the person of others . . . then it follows automatically that such a man, recognizing in all beings his own true and innermost self, must also regard the endless sufferings of all that lives as his own . . . Wherever he looks, he sees suffering humanity and a suffering animal world and a world that passes away."

Does it not seem natural to you, Your Honour, that after discovering this book I suddenly knew what I had to do with my life in order not to waste it? I decided to be a *compagnon de misères* to people, to reveal the suffering in which we live each day, and in this way to inoculate them not only with noble pessimism, but with tolerance and love toward all living creatures. As a priest, I would not have been able to do that; dogma would have tied my hands. I could only perform this task as a writer, for which I had too little talent, or as a philosopher, for which I had too little intellectual acuity, or as a painter, for which I was absolutely without gifts. Do you now understand, Your Honour, why I became a photographer? And why I became so good that international awards rained down on me, especially for my photographs of war atrocities, which all the leading newspapers in the world competed to print?

But let's leave that, Your Honour, and return to Maya who travelled with me along the ancient roads of the Mediterranean and who, however indirectly, brought me where I am now: accused of abuse, accused of murder, although it is completely clear that, however you look at it, I am innocent. And if that is not yet clear, Your Honour, it will be by the time you read this story to the end.

It started when Maya wrote and expressed her admiration of my work. She had received my book of photography *Homo homini* as a gift. (*Homo homini lupus*, man is a wolf to man, is the foundational sentence of Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy, as Your Honour surely knows.) Most of the book is comprised of photographs of war atrocities in Rwanda and the Congo for which I received a number of awards, although it was never clear to me why images of smashed skulls, shot children, headless corpses, raped and massacred women deserved any special recognition. But Maya knew and recounted how "these shocking images had managed to make a case for understanding war as a ritual purification with which the soul of humanity ensures its sanity." She added that she also was involved in photography and would very much like to see the world through a lens as confident and consistent as mine.

What would you do, Your Honour, if you received such a letter? It wasn't the only one, mind you. I received dozens of letters in which the writers (mostly women) only partly managed to conceal that they would like

to know me as a man (no doubt hoping that I would catapult them into fame by putting their picture on the cover of Vogue, because, in addition to war atrocities, I liked most of all to photograph women: nude, dressed, all shapes, all positions). I didn't even respond to most of the letters; I did so only when I felt in need of adventure or when, God knows why, I felt I had to be polite. And I rejected the women whose attractiveness could not compensate for their conviction that Tintoretto was an Italian aperitif. I don't care for dull women; life is too short.

So you will understand, Your Honour, why Maya's letter aroused my interest. On the one hand, her words glowed with the freshness of youth; on the other, they gave an impression of seriousness that I could only associate with an older woman, a mother with grown children, who was left alone and decided that she should do something for herself before it became too late. It seemed to me that Maya was opening a door into a space in which I, too, would learn what still had to be done before I could accept the fact that the album of my life was complete. This feeling deepened when, after several months of silence, I received her second letter. She had enclosed several of her "art photos" and humorously dissected their flaws, which she herself discerned.

For my part, I concluded that the photographs were the imaginative compositions of a novice with no particular feeling for the direct visual expression of the truth of the world, but that her commentaries were the fruit of an original spirit and could easily be attributed to a poet at the height of his expressive power, to a master of irony whose every leap of imagination borders on the divine. I told her all of this, though ambiguously enough so that she could also detect the praise in my criticism. In the letters that we exchanged during the subsequent five months, we issued a series of challenges to each other, creating the outlines of a relationship that we both knew from the beginning would be erotic. When I mentioned in one of these letters that I was departing on a trip to Greece and added jokingly that it would be nice to have someone come along to help me carry the equipment, she replied that, although she wasn't exactly muscular, she could probably manage to hoist a tripod or two on her narrow shoulders. At that point we could no longer pretend that we were not on the path to physical union.

The sexual allusions in our letters became less and less tacit. Nevertheless I still imagined Maya as a woman in early middle age, perhaps born in the same year as myself, perhaps with glasses, perhaps with a small cushion of fat on her stomach, and yet surprisingly, given my usual aesthetic sense, this didn't trouble me at all. You do understand, Your Honour. The excitement I felt at the thought of making love to her arose from the circumstances of our increasing closeness, from the perfection of the game in which we set small, hardly noticeable traps for each other, and also from the element of mystery that was present all the time. It was possible to gather from our letters that we were each looking in the other for an exit from a mental state that we both experienced as a prison, as a commitment to illusions that had outlived their purpose but were still too strong to let go of us without the push of a friendly hand.

Perhaps you won't believe me but the process of our mutual entrapment reached even into our subconscious and endowed both of us with dreams that, with a little help from imagination, we could interpret as messages of fate. Fearing that we had, with our games of temptation and promise, created expectations that reality could not equal, we tried to find a confirmation of our vision of the future in anything that might be attributed to a "higher" power, as this would mean that our love was not a construct but part of the inevitable flow of events.

Maya was the first to use the word "fate". I was more excited by the rules of the flow that carried us along. Increasingly, I was overcome by the feeling that Maya and I had embarked on a journey that was already sketched out in the subconscious where each person has his personal map of inevitability. Allow me to explain, Your Honour. I imagine this map like a network of possible paths among which at each junction we can choose only one (or we find ourselves on one if we are unable to choose). This series of choices, voluntary or forced, constitutes our "fate".

I am convinced that we are woven into our living space like knots in the network that not only fills the space but *is* the space. Therefore any movement or vibration of one of the knots is felt directly or indirectly by all the other knots, and above all by those with which we are existentially connected. I believe that the hands of fate are most present in life at times when we are more than usually bound to meaningful coincidences and associative expressions of urgency which, on the

subconscious level, are already the path that we must follow. Such signs, Your Honour, were increasingly decisive elements in our growing closeness.

Above all, there were dreams. In one letter, she mentioned that she had dreamed of the desert three times in a row, about sand dunes that reached to the horizon. There were only two little black spots in the vastness, her and me, each on one side, each coming toward the other, dying of thirst, convinced that the other had water. In the first dream, despite the effort to get closer, the two points melted into the horizon, becoming smaller and smaller, until they became part of the line of the horizon and could no longer be seen. In the second dream, we tried to chase each other around the edge of the horizon, one spot chasing the other, but the faster one spot moved the faster the other accelerated. Then, all of a sudden, we stopped at the same time. When we saw that neither of us was moving, we started to run again.

In the third dream, we moved across the desert, toward each other. In the middle of the desert sat Maya's teddy bear (she wrote that she called it Henrikbear in my honour.) Two caravans were approaching, one from the right and on from the left. When they approached, one of us joined the first and one the second, each mounting a camel. The caravans then passed each other, both continuing on their way toward the distant horizon. And so we passed each other because we were unable to dismount; it was as if we were glued to our saddles. The little bear remained squating in the sand, the wind slowly burying him.

A few days earlier, I also received a message from the subconscious desert: I also dreamed about a caravan that was coming across an expanse of gray-brown sand, and I also sensed that Maya was approaching me. When the caravan came closer, I saw that it was not comprised of camels or mules or donkeys but of strange creatures some of which reminded me of lions, tigers, and leopards and others of figures from Greek mythology: satyrs, nymphs, and sphinxes. A longhaired girl rode on each of the creatures. As they rode by, each of the girls leaned down to me and asked: "Is it me?" Then a girl approached, riding on the back of a four-legged faun, a teddy bear in her arms. She was the most beautiful and coy of them all. She also leaned down toward me, but instead of saying anything, she handed me the bear.

Your Honour, I won't succumb to Freudian analysis of these dreams, nor Jungian, for neither of these gentlemen enjoys an uncontroversial reputation anymore. In any case, no analysis would be relevant for my defence. All the same, I would like to tell you what I wrote to Maya. "It seems to me," I wrote, "that our souls are meeting in our dreams: unfettered with doubts and scars from half-healed wounds, but as they were when we were young, still children, when the world was a place where everything was possible, as open as a desert, and our souls were not hindered by the growth of what is known as personality. It seems to me that in our dreams, we are meeting at the crossroads where we can choose any direction and create a different life. The dreams are telling us that that is still possible. The teddy bear probably means that it is possible only if we begin where we missed each other in our youth: with our souls in an unspoiled, innocent place."

Your Honour, if you are getting the impression that my correspondence with Maya before we had even met made me childish, softened my brains, this impression is not incorrect. I don't know why this happened, but in the end even I doubted that my interpretation of the dreams was anything more than a figment with which I tried to tempt Maya (to the extent I felt she was still hesitating) and convince her that our paths were linked. The teddy bear I had actually seen in a photograph she had enclosed with one of her letters, the desert was probably the sandy beach on which the bear was photographed. She never sent me a picture of herself (was she afraid I would find her too ugly or old?) so I can't explain why I saw her in the dream as a longhaired young girl. I attributed that to the usual dreamlike fantasies.

Now, of course, I know what happened. The desire for our "fate-decreed" union (that eternal hankering for some external power to save us from the responsibility for mistaken decisions) had brought me to the point where I feared I would lose control, so I tried to find evidence to suggest that the complicity of fate was merely part of the strategy with which we both tried to camouflage our one and only purpose: to have an affair. "Fate" was a part of our foreplay; we titillated our brains with it. This explanation seemed most realistic to me, and it made me feel safe.

And yet my "realism" did not last long; fate provided new signs that it was part of the events. Among the photographs that Maya sent me there was one of a forest that seemed strangely familiar to me. "I spent my childhood here," she wrote. "Every summer, I visited

my grandfather who had a house at the edge of the forest. When you come, I will take you there and introduce you to my favourite trees." I also spent my childhood years near a forest, and it seemed to be very like Maya's forest: with tall pine trees that stood alone or in groves, reaching above the beeches, surrounded by spruces in the background and some type of acacia growing along the banks of a stream that ran between the forest and a wheat field. I thought that our forests were so similar that they might be "neighbours"; I even thought that it might be just one forest, "our" forest, though such a coincidence, Your Honour, could exist only in a story in which the author allowed himself to descend to the level of elementary symmetry. Experience has taught me, and probably you as well, Your Honour, that life is not as simple as that.

Then two more photographs arrived that aroused my imagination. In the first, Maya was four years old, a chubby little Pippy Longstocking sitting on a bench in front of a house with her left leg folded under her right. Her sweet little bun peeked out from under her skirt. With her left hand, she held a beribboned braid of her fair hair, while her right index finger was poked decisively, almost defiantly, up her nose. A teddy bear, almost twice as big as her, sat to her right; it had an elegant tie looped around its neck and a coquettish little hat on its head. Next to the bear sat Maya's grandfather, a sinewy gray-haired old man with the face and moustache of a benevolent walrus. Your Honour, it was as if an electric shock went through me when I recognized the moustache and the expression in the eyes below the furrowed brow! The window in the background was even more familiar; it was a small window with carved wooden shutters. Had I not once sat on that same bench in the courtyard of an old house by the forest, in front of those same shutters, with a moustachioed old man to my right and someone else to my left?

I especially remembered a photograph that someone had taken, and which was very similar to Maya's: on both pictures, the glass of the lower left pane was cracked. Who took that photograph? Who sat next to me that I wasn't able to remember? I rummaged through my old albums, all my negatives and slides – but in vain. I remembered that I still had some old things at my wife's flat in Amsterdam; I called her immediately and told her that the next day I was going on a business trip to the Netherlands and would like to visit her. The outing bore no fruit; among the hundreds photographs I found in a shoebox under the former marital bed, I vainly searched for the picture of the bench in front of the house with the carved wooden shutters.

In her next letter, Maya enclosed a photograph from the sea; there was a group of boys and girls on the beach, and the bay behind them was surrounded by a small town with a church tower. "You probably won't be able to guess which one I am," she wrote, "because there were five of us in the class who resembled each other. In any case you can't imagine what I was like when I was twelve years old. This photograph was taken in Baška, the town on the southern tip of the island of Krk, where I went on holiday three years in a row."

Your Honour, I also went on school holidays to Baška. I also saved photographs of groups of school children on the beach with a town in the background. I also came to feel the first traces of the destructive power of hormones and lust amidst the scents of fish and cypresses and the salty wind-ruffled sea.

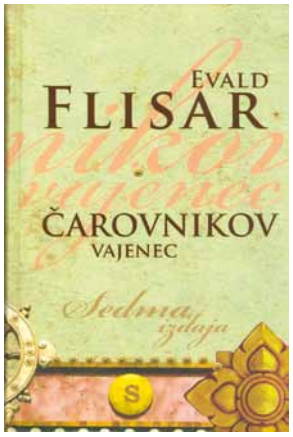
Not only that: when I was seventeen and went to camp in a little tent in the holiday home where I stayed as a boy, I succeeded in deflowering a blue-eyed girl who became my first love. I became a man in Baška, Your Honour. I swore that I would plant a tree at the place where it happened. "It seems to me," I wrote to Maya, "that fate is playing a greater role in what is emerging between us than I previously dared to admit. I have no doubt that it still has plenty of tricks up its sleeve. I hope they are pleasant."

As you will see, Your Honour, fate didn't skimp on surprises. How many of them were pleasant you will be able to judge for yourself. I have known all along that *homo homini lupus* would manifest itself in my life as well.

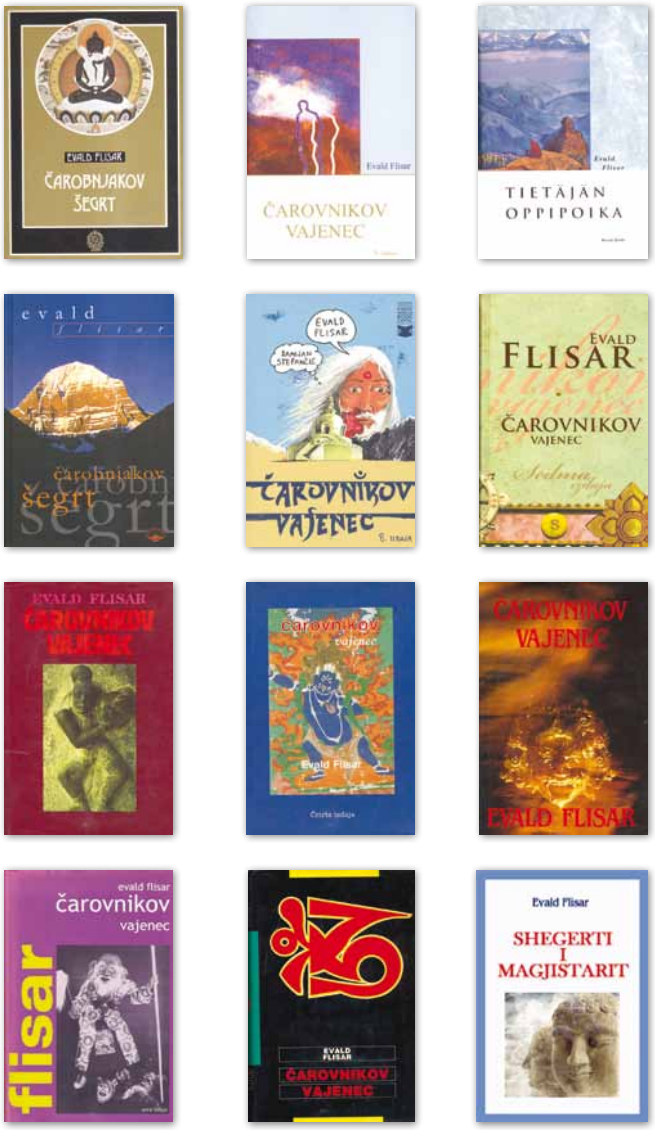
A Book for All Seasons

Evald Flisar

The Sorcerer's Apprentice



THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE (original title *Čarovnikov vajenec*) is the most widely read Slovenian novel since World War II. Described as »one of the best stories on the theme of the outsider« and »a book that refuses to die« (eight editions in 25 years, with the ninth due to be published), it has reached sales figures that are staggering in a country of only two million people (the equivalent on the American market would be well over ten million copies!). This intensely readable story of a young man's attempt to teach himself that he is »all right« as he is, and that the world is a friendly place, crosses the paths of a young Westerner running away from the excesses of his civilisation, a crafty old Indian guru Yogananda, an enigmatic American truth-seeker Henry Napoleon Alexander, and an innocent Tibetan girl Dolma, following them through breathtaking events in the remote mountains of Ladakh and Zanskar. On the one hand, the book can be read as a contemporary bildungsroman, dealing with the personal growth of a philosophically and religiously confused Western everyman with a »globalised mind«, and on the other hand, just as persuasively, as a debunking of the uncritical Western obsession with Eastern spirituality. The narrative force of the book far surpasses its theme, and will continue to enchant readers for yerars to come. (260 pages)



A literary presentation of the totality of the world ...
Dr. Tomo Virk, The Journey is Over, the Way Begins

A work of fiction that comes closer to truth than any documentary ...
Tea Štoka, Searching for a Lost Double

A novel that confirms the significance of inner life for rational human beings ...
Dr. Franc Zadravec, Slovenian Novel of the 20th Century

A masterful tale about a journey to inaccessible parts of the human mind ...
Helena Grandovec, VEČER

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

At the end of the canyon the old man drew my attention to one of the snow bridges that abound in Kashmir. Each winter, snow fills deep ravines and riverbeds to the brim and freezes over, while underneath water digs a tunnel and flows through it invisible, inaudible except to a trained ear. On top, one can cross the bridge without fear of crashing through its frozen layer. But in late spring, as the snows start to melt, the water tunnel grows steadily larger and the snow span above it thinner. Finally, a gap appears in the middle. Before it widens, one can leap across it, but towards the end of July this becomes hazardous. At the end of September, before the onset of winter, only a fool would venture on to one of those structures.

»Each of us carries his winter with him,« pronounced my companion. »And his snow bridge. And his gap.«

These were startling words for an old mule-driver who had offered to take me to Amarnath Cave for less than half the usual fee. But he was right. All of a sudden I saw my journey as a symbolic attempt to leap across such a gap in my soul, and my recent life as a series of such attempts, of jumps undertaken to reach the other side, of vertiginous falls; of attempts to find a less dangerous crossing point, where the gap would not be so wide.

I had always been aware of having a double. As children we used to be very close, but gradually distrust grew between us. The world took the side of my intellectual »I«, while my instinctive part, repeatedly shamed, withdrew. It settled in a dimension to which my intellectual »I« refused to grant equal rights, for to him it appeared inexplicable, non-scientific, however much it continued to be confirmed by experience.

As the old man and I continued our ride towards Amarnath Cave, I suddenly felt that on the other side of the canyon I could see, astride a Himalayan pony just like mine, and riding in the same direction, my rejected double whose absence had made my life so unbearable. But I had waited too long; the bridges which could have brought us together had melted. Now there was a gap between us which my distrustful intellect could never clear without risking a catastrophic fall into mental illness.

Farther up we came upon a group of pilgrims who were returning from a visit to the caves; a small number of men and women resting, drenched by the afternoon sun, on the rocks by the wayside. The old man threw them a few Kashmiri words which drew surprised comments and laughter. As we rode on I could hear them exchanging scornful remarks.

»It's too late,« said the old man. »Lingam in the cave is no more. You should've come a month earlier.«

I knew I would not see the stalagmite of ice which mysteriously appears inside Amarnath Cave each summer and waxes and wanes with the phases of the Moon, reaching its highest point some time in August. But that didn't bother me. My pilgrimage had a different reason. I had been told that inside the cave I would find a remarkable holy man who might want to amuse himself by letting me stay by his side and help me across the gap in the snow bridge in my soul.

After crossing the Mahagunas Pass we reached a plain at an altitude of ten thousand feet. It was inevitable that years of inactive life would sooner or later exact their toll, but until that moment I had felt nothing more than a slight touch of vertigo and an occasional stabbing pain in the lungs. But as we descended towards the wind-swept shadowy plain, the grey rocks and granulated mountain slopes suddenly swayed in a twist and sank into darkness.

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was the mule-driver's face, a mixture of apprehension and irritation. I felt something gluey on my left cheek; reaching out with my tongue, I tasted blood. I must have fainted and rolled off the back of my pony, striking a rock as I fell. I could feel another patch of slippery moisture on the right side of my skull. I dragged myself to the nearby stream and lowered my head into the icy water rushing over the rocks. I watched it grow dark with the blood.

»Shall we go back?« asked the old man.

»No,« I said.

»You have altitude sickness.«

He was right. Vertigo, buzzing in the ears, shortness of breath, pain behind the eyes, rapid pulse, nausea, thirst were all telling me that I had climbed too far

too fast. But never before had I been so close to the most important goal of my life! To turn back now would mean giving up too early. And for that it was too late. After a brief rest I struggled back into the saddle and we continued on our way.

Before long we had to dismount. The path was becoming very steep, winding its narrow and dangerous way past precipitous cliffs. Mist began to appear in front of my eyes.

»Rest,« I gasped, »a short rest.«

And I slid to the ground. I could see something luminous in the distance; it took me a while to realise it was the setting sun.

»We can't rest here,« I heard the old man's voice somewhere above me, »the horses will lose their footing and tumble into the ravine.« He was half dragging, half kicking them up the mountain.

I was lying on a rocky ledge, shivering, exposed to the hungry shadows of the approaching night. The old man returned and helped me to my feet. I let him grip my arm and drag me up the path, with a short rest behind each corner. »It's not far any more,« he kept saying, his voice in the wind sounding as if coming from miles away.

Finally we reached the ponies, which were shivering in the freezing wind, and resumed our journey. Soon a long valley opened before us, so narrow that probably even the sun could not penetrate it for more than two hours a day. It was covered from end to end in dirty brown snow. As we entered it, leaving the wind on the slopes behind us, deep silence enveloped us. All we could hear was the muffled sound of a hoof striking stone here and there, and, each his own, hollow beating of the heart pushing blood in search of oxygen.

Through this cold shadowy valley we finally reached an opening from where we could see, rising before us, the broad face of the Amarnath mountain, casting a threatening shadow, much steeper than I had expected, strewn with white rocks. High up the slope I could see the dark mouth of the holy cave.

»There,« the old man said, pointing at it as if claiming credit for a wonder of nature.

I dismounted for the final ascent to the cave. It took me a while to reach the entrance. As I passed into the damp and dripping interior I could see nothing at first; my only sensation was of being touched, as if licked by a huge dog, by cold, stuffy air. Gradually, the interior of the cave became visible. It was hardly more than a hundred feet high. I descended a steep ramp to an iron railing behind which I noticed a small mound of something that looked like decomposed flowers: perhaps the garlands which devotees had thrown on Shiva's lingam during the August pilgrimage. The wet ground was strewn with litter. I held my breath, listening. The silence finally persuaded me that there was no one else in the cave.

As I emerged into the dying light of the day, I was choking. Where was the holy man I had come to find? He was not in the cave. He was not at the entrance. He was not at the foot of the mountain. How could he possibly live in that empty wilderness?

I had imagined, God knows why, that there would be a village or a monastery nearby. Assured in London, and again in Delhi, and again in Srinagar by ten reliable people that I would find the man I was looking for in Amarnath Cave, I did not expect disappointment. Ten people, I thought, cannot lie. Ten people cannot be wrong.

I sank to my knees, leaning against the nearest rock. Tears welled up in my eyes, tears of an offended child. At the foot of the mountain the old man had already unpacked the ponies, pitched a small tent, rolled out two sleeping bags, lit a kerosene burner and boiled water for tea.

»Did you see Shiva's lingam?« he asked with a touch of malice. »You should've come in August, now it's too late.«

»You know perfectly well I didn't come to see Shiva's lingam,« I snapped. »I came to find Yogananda, the holy man. You swore he would be here.«

»How could a man live in that cave?« he affected surprise. »What would he eat?«

»Why didn't you tell me that before we set off?«

»You didn't want facts,« he said simply. »You wanted a dream.«

I found his words stranger than ever, completely at odds not only with his appearance but also with the work he did.

Even so, I felt I had been taken for a ride for no reason I could understand.

»You're a liar and a cheat,« I said, stepping towards him. »I hate being treated like a fool.«

I struck him in the face.

»I won't pay you,« I said, »and that's final.«

»I didn't bring you here to get paid,« he replied, gently rubbing his painful jaw. »I brought you here to

please myself by getting to know what sort of man you are.«

»Well, you know now.«

»Indeed,« he said. »So don't worry about payment. And if you want to find Yogananda at this time of year, your best bet would be Leh, in Ladakh.«

»What makes you think I believe you?«

»What you do or don't believe has nothing to do with me,« he said. »Would you like some tea?«

I was about to hit him again, but something in his eyes told me that this time he would strike back.

»Yes,« I said. »Thank you.«

* * *

As soon as I arrived in Leh I found a modest room and collapsed on a rickety bed. My head was buzzing, my mind was awash with strange faces of the Baltis, Tibetans, Ladakhis, Indian state officials and Muslim traders with whom I had shared a two-day bus ride, and with the greenery of Kashmiri valleys which seemed to belong in another world – a much pleasanter one than promised to be »little Tibet«, as Ladakh is known.

I expected the high plains to be covered by snow drifts, but even in winter most of the snow remains on the slopes of the mountains piercing the sky on all sides. The winds are violent, sometimes warm, most often cold. They are caused by sudden drops in temperature which fluctuates wildly. There are few trees; in most places all one finds are stunted bushes.

Before nightfall I rose and crossed to the window. I gazed at the river Indus, at the city of Leh sprawling before me. I saw a sixteenth-century royal palace, empty, full of dangerous cracks. I saw a city of brown grey houses with terraced roofs and rectangular windows, shabby, Asiatic, seemingly without secrets. Where in this place would I find Yogananda? What on earth would he be doing in this crowd of Tibetan faces, in the heart of traditional lamaism, he, an Indian brahmin? No doubt the old mule-driver had sold me another lie.

Out in the street, the high altitude sun gathered me into a stunning embrace. I was glad when I reached the winding alleys of the old city, which the sun could not penetrate. Passing a profusion of little shops, I decided that a stab in the dark was the best option I had. So I entered a shop selling padded winter jackets and asked the trader if he knew an Indian holy man Yogananda.

He grabbed me by the elbow and rushed me to the door. I thought I was about to be thrown out. But the trader dragged me across the road to a shop opposite, in front of which sat a plump young Ladakhi with a round cap on his head. A conversation ensued, during which the plump man listened attentively, but kept shaking his head. Then a middle-aged lama with glasses came past, carrying two travelling bags. He paused for a chat, which went on for almost ten minutes.

When the lama finally took his leave I, too, turned to go, but the trader reached out and held me back.

»The lama knows Yogananda,« he said. »Maybe you'll find him in the lamasery of Thikse. Or Lamayuru. Or some other.«

I raced to the government information office to find out how many lamaseries there were in Ladakh. A sleepy official explained that there was one in almost every village. In some there were hardly more than three or four monks, but the largest held hundreds. Reluctantly, he made a list of the most important ones. Outside, in front of the entrance, I spread out the map of Ladakh and Zanskar and soon realised that even to visit a few of the largest monasteries I would need more than three weeks!

I had to lean against the nearest wall. My head was spinning. It was a mixture of rage, helplessness and self-pity. If the wily old mule-driver had suddenly appeared before me, I would have knocked him to the ground and spat in his face. When, after some minutes, I opened my eyes again I realised with a shock that in my rage I had actually visualized him so well that he seemed to be standing before me, almost real, watching me with a mixture of curiosity and surprise – even, I thought, amusement.

»Where have you been so long?« he asked. »You look for me and I find you; is that a good beginning?«

His voice was certainly not an illusion. And neither was he. The old mule-driver was standing right in front of me! But he looked very different. He was dressed in a faded yellow gown, the usual garb of an itinerant holy man, with a necklace of beads round his neck. In his right hand he was holding a thick bamboo stick. Because he was no longer wearing a turban I could see that he was bald on top of his head, with plenty of greying hair falling down to his shoulders. He seemed to be taller, and his bearing more dignified. His eyes were different, too: less conniving, more astute, more spiritual.

It came to me in a flash. »Are you…?«

He nodded before I could finish my question.

»But why did you…?«

»Because I was hoping you might hit me again,« he smiled gently. »Won't you?«

I said I felt ashamed for losing my temper so disrespectfully. And I would, of course, pay him for taking me to Amarnath Cave, as agreed. With interest.

»Don't worry,« he said. »Forgiving fools for their follies is my favourite pleasure.«

An hour later we were on our way to the lamasery of Thikse. Old Yogananda was far from talkative. Occasionally he paused in his stride, turned and looked me up and down with a cynical grin. His wiry body exuded strength which was astonishing for a man of seventy, although strength may not be the right word; it was more a question of lightness and physical harmony. Why had I failed to notice that in the mule-driver?

He walked very fast. Before long I fell behind, increasingly short of breath, unable to understand why he preferred steep mountain paths to the more leisurely road along the river. With each step, my backpack grew heavier. But the old man would not wait. He soon vanished behind the steep rocks overhanging the path.

Go to hell, I thought as I paused to regain my breath. Far below I could see the city of Leh, half bathed in sunlight, half sunk in deep shadow, with me in a far deeper shadow under a vaulted rock, and with my hopes, which had blossomed an hour earlier, in the depest shadow of all. The old man was so scornful that I felt he didn't like me at all.

Lifting my backpack, I staggered on.

Behind the first corner I was greeted by an unusual sight. In the middle of the rocky path, Yogananda was standing on his head, perfectly vertical, immobile. Only the bottom ends of his gown, which had collected round his waist, were trembling in the wind. The top of his head was resting on a flat stone. His feet were held slightly apart.

I waited. After five minutes he slowly bent his knees, arched his back, touched the ground with his feet without lifting his head off the stone, then maneouvered himself on to his knees and finally, without any visible effort, extended himself into a standing position.

»Your turn,« he said.

I explained that my doctor had warned me, on account of a weakened vertebra in my neck, never to stand on my head. He laughed so loudly that the chilling sound flew down the mountainside and vanished somewhere above the valley. This was the first time I heard the laughter with which he would later greet each of what he called my intellectoidiotisms. I almost shivered when I heard it; it was rude, gross and derisive.

»You've brought your doctor with you?« he sneered. »Well, don't worry. You *are* standing on your head. You must've been doing so for the best part of your life.«

He picked up his bamboo stick and walked on.

The path began to descend, so I found it easier to keep up with him. He even slowed down, as if wanting to tease me. Once or twice, in a moment of inattention, I almost bumped into him. Then, without any warning, he sat down on a rock beside the path.

»Carry on,« he said, »don't wait for me.«

I said I would prefer to stay with him.

»Why?«

All I could say was that I wanted to change, become different.

»You *are* different,« he said. »If you wanted to become such as you were you would have better reasons for wanting to stay with me.«

»That's it,« I said. »I want to find myself in my essence. Transform myself into what I used to be. Heal the gap inside me, become whole again.«

»My dear friend,« he laughed, »these are just words, the most worthless kind of poetry. So I tell you: don't seek, because you'll miss. Don't seek, simply find.«

He grinned, waiting for me to continue. By now it was more than obvious that he was not teasing me. But all his statements were so paradoxical that they failed to penetrate the defences of my rational mind. I said that I understood what he meant, in a way, but at the same time perhaps I did not.

He narrowed his eyes and wrinkled his forehead. »You lack innocence. Ideas and philosophies sprout from you like a multitude of weeds. You planted every seed the wind brought you, rejecting nothing. Now you're overgrown by a thick forest of nonsense. Are you prepared to burn it?«

I said I was prepared to sacrifice many things, including what he called my garden of weeds and which is, in fact, a collection of my experiences and knowledge of the world. But yes, I was prepared to let go even of that. Perhaps not by erasing it, but by paying it less attention…

He interrupted me with a chilling laughter. »Why don't you go to the bazaar in Leh? You'll make good money there. But here, my friend, there is no bargaining. And prices are steep! Playing this game, you have to put everything on the table. And there is no guarantee that you won't lose it!«

Gradually we were enveloped by a hollow night of the Himalayan heights, a stillness in which I became aware of my breathing, of the movement of lungs, of how much I owe to air.

I was zipped up in my sleeping bag. The old man was happy with a blanket across his knees. In the moonlight his eyes burned like those of a wild tiger. I told him how some eight years earlier, during my first visit to the Himalayas, I had tried to familiarize myself with Tibetan secrets and learn the art of *tumo*, the heating of he body with an inner fire. And how I failed because I lacked determination and was too superficial, merely a seeker of sensations.

»Are you different now?«

Yes, I said. I am different because my search is no longer an intellectual game. I am different because I am no longer interested in the panoramic breadth of the visible world, but want to descend to its core. For a long time my distress resembled distant rumblings of a storm which never came close. Now I am in the eye of that storm. Now my distress is so real that I find it painful even to talk about it.

I am like a furrow waiting for the seed of something, anything, that will save me. I am like a man with a terminal illness, willing to try anything that might help me.

»Even a kick in the ass?« his voice reached me through semi-darkness. »If it comes with a guarantee that it'll free you of the burden of your unwisdom?«

He said that in reality my distress was nothing more than the burden of my intellectoidiotisms which had started to suffocate me. What would I do if he assured me that a kick in the ass would bring me relief?

Yes, I said, I would accept even a kick in the ass, or whatever he meant by that.

»When I say kick in the ass,« he laughed, »I mean the kind that knocks you flat on your face. I can't handle this overblown language of yours in which everything you say means something else.«

So simple, I thought. *Is* it so simple?

I began to speak, to explain, not so much to him as to myself, as if trying – again – to achieve some sort of overview of my situation. I said I was an outcast, a fugitive from the world of scientific materialism in which I am unable to live in a way that would make me feel at home. Knowledge I have, but not the knowledge of insight and understanding, merely a plethora of facts and opinions, a richness of habits and mental reflexes. My Western world of scientific objectivity disallows questions which can have only subjective answers, or allows them only so long as I am prepared to admit that such subjectivity is not binding. As long as it remains in the outer reaches of religion, poetry, art; as long it isn't subversive.

I long for knowledge which would embrace the world not only in its appearance, but also in its most hidden aspects. I long to be able to penetrate everything that is not visible, to reach deeper than what the world appears to be, and to remain permanently in touch with that hidden dimension.

»And now,« asked Yogananda, »you want me to save you? So they can save the world?«

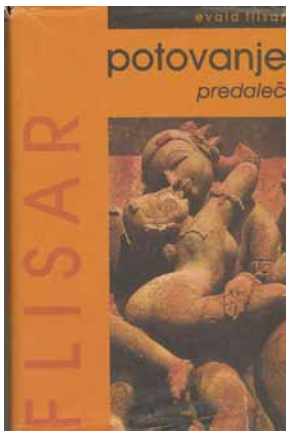
I said I was neither naive nor a fool. All I wanted was for someone to show me the path. Because, I said, the first step was the most important.

»The first step you've taken,« he said. »You believe you can reach understanding by methods which your rational world does not recognize. Why else would you come to an old man who lives like a beggar and twice a day stands on his head?«

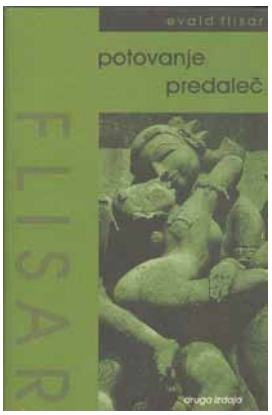
A Philosophical Love Story

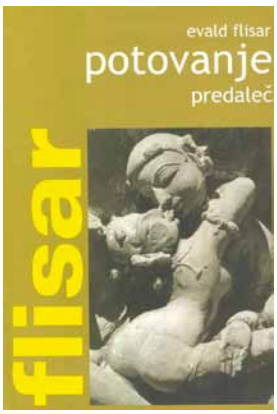
Evald Flisar

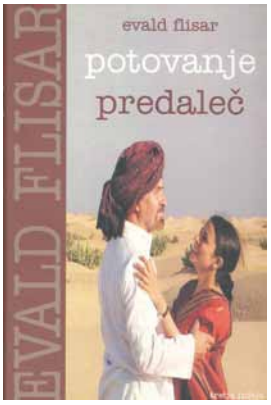
Farewell to Salvation



FAREWELL TO SALVATION (original title *Potovanje predaleč, A Journey Too Far*) is a sequel to the phenomenally successful *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (*Čarovnikov vajenec*). In this equally admired book (five editions in ten years, short-listed for *Kresnik*, the Slovenian "Booker", in 1999, plus, based on it, a successful seven-part TV-series shot on location in India), the "sorcerer's apprentice" – whose mastery had worn off – returns to the subcontinent to look for his guru and, with his help, to complete the training that would enable him to float rather than plod through life. Needless to say, his search for the old itinerant holy man appears almost ludicrous in a country of over a billion people, the point driven home repeatedly by the beautiful Indian girl Shakuntala, who travels with him on his journey in search of meaning and himself. What at first looks like the promise of an erotic relationship across cultural boundaries, soon becomes a new period of "apprenticeship", only this time the teacher is not paradoxical Reason but intelligent Emotion, or "feminine wisdom", imparted by a wise and sensual girl, who represents Anima, India and Woman to an equal degree. She teaches our hero, not explicitly, but by her own example, how not to *understand* the world, but to *love and accept* it by surrendering to the inevitable, just as Prince Arjuna did in the *Bhagavad-gita*. However, the hero realizes early on in his quest that his driving force is not a desire to surrender, but to conquer with imagination; not to discover the world, but to imagine one that would be to his liking. (230 pages)







The novel is a sharp and witty account of a series of attempts to disown one's false self-image. Added to this is the author's analysis of God search and of man's essential dichotomy that has given the European rational mind (called by the narrator simply Lucifer) so much to think about that it has infected all of Western art and philosophy. Flisar simply demolishes the Western concept of personality...
Igor Bratož, DELO

Flisar's meditative travel story builds its meaning and purpose on the fragile divide between fiction and reality, interconnecting a colourful series of events, imagined as well as real, while successfully employing the form of the picaresque novel.
A subtle love story is intertwined with the growth of the narrator's philosophy of life. The traveller in the spiritual world of the East tries – through a series of complex meetings – to renew himself by surrendering to his runaway imagination and becoming someone else...
Dr. Helga Glušič, SLOVENIAN STORY

In this novel Flisar once again, this time differently, draws the reader into an irresistible adventure of looking for the meaning of life. And, at the same time, into an equally attractive and uncertain game of subverting the rules of narration, which, next to real events and people, introduces a magical world of creative imagination in which real life is allowed to merge with dreams and visions...
Josip Osti, SODOBNOST

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

Farewell to Salvation

I am standing on the shore of the Bay of Bengal, imagining that I am Marco Polo travelling across Asia to the court of Kublai Khan. Centuries from now, doubting Thomases will write books about me. The titles will not be flattering: "Did Marco Polo really travel to China?" And: "Wall? I never saw any walls!" Others will defend me, saying: In his time, the Great Wall hadn't even been built!

But doubts about the truth of my adventures will remain. It will be said that my descriptions are richly informative, but in describing the world, I invent more than I really should. In short: too little precision, too much imagination.

And yet: how real is the world? And if both exist, the world of empirical facts and the world of imagination, which is *more* real? Are my thoughts the reflection of the world that I perceive with my senses, or is the sensed world a picture created by my thoughts?

In India, where I arrived several days ago, there is no shortage of bearded men who do nothing else but search for the answer to just that question. Most of them believe that the world that I see, smell, and hear is no more than a reflection of my thoughts. Illusion, *maya*. The only real thing is the Spirit that some say is God. Because it is unutterable and indescribable, it is worshipped in the form of idols. Each of us can choose his own. If we don't like any of the available ones, we can make up a new one.

For this reason, there is quite a crowd of such idols. One has the head of an elephant, another the form of a monkey. They are worshipped in temples where, amidst singing, dancing, and playing on instruments, fruit and food are brought to them and half naked devadasis, holy female servants, entice them with sensual movements until the idols forget their seriousness and consume a part of the offered bounty.

The leftovers are polished off by the devadasis. In some temples, the charms of the devadasis can be enjoyed not only by the idols but by believers as well. What a pity I didn't live during the thirteenth century! Making love to the devadasis would be not only a plea for God's kindness, but living proof of it!

But facts are facts. Cars roar past me and my lungs are filled with the smell of cheap petrol. So I would rather imagine myself as an entrepreneur who has flown to India to implement a business idea. The idea is so simple that I can hardly believe nobody else has thought of it.

At least a million Hindus live in England, America and elsewhere in the world. The only thing they miss in the comfort that many of them have created for themselves is the sacred, healing waters of the River Ganges. Those who can, take a pilgrimage every couple of years to Haridwar, Varanasi or Prayag where they bathe with other believers on the steps descending into the river. And almost everyone who goes on a pilgrimage takes away a bottle of the river water, which maintains its miraculous power even in a plastic bottle ten thousand miles from its source. One single drop before death is enough for salvation.

I imagine myself as the owner of an import-export firm travelling around India to find a business partner with whose help I could import one million bottles of sacred water from the Ganges into America and Europe. Would I ever dare to drink a drop of the sacred water that I intend to sell? Probably not, given that I have a sensitive stomach.

Except before death. A man can't be too sure.

But a vagabond like me would have a hard time finding a partner who would invest money in my company. Which is why I prefer to imagine someone else as a merchant of holy water.

Who, for example? I shall make him up.

Thin, nervous, with a freckly face, a burning cigarette between his lips. Bravo! That's more than realistic. He has already calculated his potential profit. And he's in a hurry: a real businessman. No doubt he has a gastric ulcer.

To entertain myself, I imagine that I am an English tourist who has flown to India for his annual vacation. I will accompany him around the market. I will move into his mind and think his thoughts. And I will wonder why I have such a sour face.

It's because my wife has been nagging me for more than a year that she wants to see the Taj Mahal, or Toj Mahal, some building with towers. I'm not sure what's

so special about it that we had to fly around the world to see it. You see it in two minutes and then what?

There are other things to see, my wife said. I can just imagine, I said: mosquitoes and flies, filth of the kind that raises the little hair on my scalp that age has not yet taken away, not to mention my stomach which is in a permanently raised condition, given that all you can get around here is some lethally spicy goulash called curry. And the noise and the crowds: there are so many Indians that they have no choice but to walk over each other. They sleep, so I've heard, under the open sky, right on the sidewalk.

A fine thing, I have to say. I'm only sorry that I didn't dig in my heels and refuse to go.

To tell the truth, for some time now I have been pursued by the feeling that I am not moving in the right direction. A strange emptiness, the tension before the storm, is building up in my chest. Many times, in the midst of work (I make paints and varnishes), my hands have stopped and I found myself looking out the window into the distance. Wondering: what is the worth of what I do, what I have created, what I want to preserve? Something should come out of all of this, some happiness, or at least satisfaction. And yet all I have is a dark feeling, as if an illness is eating away at me.

Cancer of the soul, my wife's sister remarked not long ago.

No, that's not me. I am the one I see as a reflection in the glass doors of the hotel.

Or am I imagining myself, too?

I will ask the gentleman in the turban carrying a briefcase in his hand and coming toward me on the sidewalk.

"Please, could you tell me…am I real?"

"No," the passing Indian recoils.

"Do you see me? Can you touch me?"

"Why?" He looks at me, frightened.

"Can you confirm that I am as real as you?"

"I am in a hurry," he dismisses me, moving on.

"Wait," I yell after him and pull from my pocket a faded photograph of the great teacher Yogananda. "Have you ever seen this man?"

Without looking, he drills his finger into his forehead to indicate that I am crazy, and continues on his way.

I walk into the sea of faces in the market. The French poet, Rimbaud, while travelling in Africa, sent postcards to his friends with the same entreaty on all of them: "Can somebody please tell me what I am doing here?"

How well I understand him! I don't know who I am, I don't know why I'm here, I don't know where I should go. I only know that someone or something is driving me on and that someone or something is pursuing me.

But where should I go? Where, in this country of a billion people?

A young Australian couple walks by me and the boy says to the girl: "I read somewhere that the first sentences you see when you open a book, any book, it doesn't matter on what page, contain a secret message from your subconscious."

"Really?" the girl said amazed.

"Yes, about the current state of your soul, and how to proceed…"

And then they are gone.

As for me, I am already in the nearest bookstore.

The first sentence that meets my eyes in a randomly selected book given to me by the bookseller, speaks about Terah, a producer and merchant of idols, and his son Abraham, whose job it was to watch the stand when his father was not at the market.

After the son tried in vain to convince his customers that they should no longer worship idols, he grabbed an axe and smashed all the idols except the largest one. He offered his father the following explanation: the gods were hungry so he brought them food. Then the largest god got angry, grabbed an axe, killed the other gods, and ate all the food himself.

A message from my subconscious?

I sit on the morning beach in Goa, surrounded by a pack of playful village dogs, and listening to the murmuring of the sea.

I imagine that the message comes from the invisible angel that has volunteered to be the god of my journey. And it means the following: my soul does not have enough food for the Great God and for all the little ones that have multiplied inside me like worms in an apple.

The Great God wants to be the sole proprietor of my soul and demands that I kill the less important ones. The Great God is not kind to the little ones. Far from being a social institution tolerant of parasites, the Great God is cruel and possessive; he wants me for himself. I must get rid of the idols inside me.

I did not carve them from wood as Terah did. I have carefully, albeit unconsciously, created them over a

period of four decades, abandoning or breaking some of them along the way and replacing them with new ones in accordance with my needs in various places and times, in accordance with my ambitions, of which the main one has always been to survive and, if possible, expand the empire ruled by my inner kublaikhan, my ego, my awareness of myself as an individual with a name and a history.

Some of the idols I simply took as mine when I saw that others were worshipping them, or because I felt in them the clamouring echoes of my fathers and grandfathers, messages I could not ignore although they took up a lot of the space that I thought should be mine alone.

But how can I get rid of all these images that I still view as the precious furnishings of my inner life? How can I abandon my attachment to these long-standing friends?

By saying: I imagine?

Imagination is a wild and dangerous thing. Insofar as it tends toward the creation of substitutes for divine reality, it must be a source of irritation to God. Imagination expresses dissatisfaction with divine creation. It is the fruit of a smouldering resentment toward God for banishing man from paradise. Perhaps it is even a strategy for returning to paradise – given that the path of love, which is what God proscribes for man's return – is too difficult.

But the prince of darkness, the fallen angel, has similar goals. Certainly Lucifer has a majority share in the multinational company that manufactures idols. Anyone who buys or gets one of the idols for free from this enormous factory doesn't even realize that he has become a fighter in Lucifer's army that marches through history with the stolen weapons of human imagination, capturing step by step the lost territory that Lucifer believes belongs to him.

When a student asked the mystic Boehme: "Where does the soul go after death?", he answered: "It doesn't need to go anywhere; heaven and hell exist everywhere together."

The universe – which is also, as the Indians say, the individual human soul – is one single place in which God and Lucifer, sun and shadow, remain eternal gladiators with no hope of victory but never defeated.

Defeat is the privilege of us who are the carriers and witnesses of this struggle.

* * *

And now I am at the gates of hell, which the Indian Lucifer has renamed from Bombay to Mumbai. That is the trick of devils at all ends of the universe: when it becomes widely known that the clinic is really a torture chamber, you hang a new name on the door and again the hopeful will impatiently wait to get into your fitness centre.

At such times, you can add new equipment. Next to the rack on which the fulfilment of desires diminishes in equal proportion to the effort applied to achieving it, you can set up a Sisyphean tower for the lifting of weights on which the heaviest weight keeps knocking the patient on the head in proportion to the build-up of his muscles to lift increasingly heavier weights.

In Lucifer's clinic, the patients must have the feeling that contraptions for gratification are too numerous to test. A fundamental part of every good product line on the market is choice. It is not difficult, of course, for the devil to hire the best marketing specialists as they all secretly worship him as a great guru and he is indeed a genius inventor of games for the naive.

No wonder that Mumbai, unlike Bombay, pulsates with new energy: trains arrive from all corners of India and disgorge the hungry, the dispossessed, the persecuted, those sent by others but above all those driven by some internal engine that never stops sending the unenlightened in the direction where, besides a crust of bread, they might also expect a pat of butter.

And yet how can I resent their ambitions and dreams? We are all foot soldiers in the army of the defeated whom God, for some reason, has abandoned on the battlefield. Besieged and betrayed, we must turn to someone for help, and we turn to the first one that convincingly offers us the possibility of escape. Crippled in spirit and infected with the viruses of a thousand dissatisfactions, we care little if it is Lucifer – just so long as the lights of his city beyond the horizon are brighter than the darkness in our hearts.

Oh India!

An ever-seductive lover, flattering and magical. And at the same time cruel, indifferent, and unfaithful. Mother, sister, friend, and whore. An infinite canvas on which a thousand mad painters have left traces of their worst hallucinations.

In the heat that steams off the wrinkled asphalt of the pavement and emanates like radioactive death through the open windows; in the glittering sunlight that bounces off the shabby unpainted walls of

crumbling plaster; in the sickly smell of exhaust; in the sharp smell of urine and human excrement next to the street that a passing breeze blows into the interior of the vehicle, it seem to me that the great producer Lucifer has already begun to shoot his film of the year, his statement about the world, his creative vision.

Whenever the bus stops in front of a traffic light or in a noisy crowd that doesn't want to move, branches of thin brown hands swing in and out of the open windows and doors, eyes infected with bitterness shine beneath curly crowns of black and, here and there, gray hair, voices cry out in an inaudible language: "Give, give, give!"

But Bombay is also the richest city in India. With only one percent of the entire population, it generates one-third of the national income. Bravo Bombay!

Amidst the magnificent architecture from the time of British rule, in the glare of sunbeams that bounce between banks and office towers, I am suddenly overcome that the sense of *luciferness* I feel all around me is some strange, imported European neurosis, perhaps an Alpine one, perhaps my own private bug that crawled into my luggage and is now buzzing around me, agitated by the unbearable heat. And yet despite its venom, it cannot harm a huge city of fifteen million people, a country of a billion people, a planet of six billion people! Less still can it harm God who is greater than everything, seen and unseen.

It can only harm me. And maybe it already has. Maybe it has already stung me.

If it has infested me with the plasma of Lucifer's blood, then I am a carrier of evil without being aware of it, just as a carrier of typhoid fever can infect thousands of people without having any symptoms himself. Maybe I have already infected thousands of people with evil and maybe there are enough silent carriers to infect the whole world.

The most worthy of Lucifer's cynical humour is the possibility that among the carriers of evil there are saints, honest and good people, innocent children. And maybe the infection is transmitted through words, through the most beautiful words, the most elevated. Through poetry. Prayer. Novels. Maybe Lucifer has hidden his poison in the expression that is God's favourite: "I love you."

Was it not Lucifer, "the retriever of light", who, ever since his fall, has poisoned the human mind, been a parasite on his ambitions, fanned momentary delusions into tragic errors? Did he not transform himself into a serpent that came to Eve, flattered her, and persuaded her to taste the forbidden fruit that would reveal everything that God had hidden from man?

And wasn't he happy when Eve learned that the only thing God was hiding from man was knowledge about his mortality, because he wanted to protect him from a life of anxiety?

Ever since then, Lucifer has wakefully sat in ambush in order to send as many uncertain souls as possible into the empire of evil where a hungry worm named Doubt penetrates them and cuts them off from divine influence. Is there not a tiny Mephisto behind my ear or hidden under my hair, my own personal devil who puts thoughts in my head and words in my mouth that seem to be mine but in truth are Lucifer's propaganda, manure for the soul so that stinging nettles might grow inside it?

I imagine that Lucifer has no eyes with which to measure the width of his colonies and enjoy the sight of his sweating subjects serving him in the pursuit of personal gain at the expense of the common good. But it is difficult to imagine the master of arrogance indifferent to his own success: surely he must delight in it.

Does Lucifer see reality through our eyes? What kind of gaze does he have? Would I flinch if he looked at me? Would I even recognize him?

Or is his gaze present in the eyes that are averted, pretending that they have only fallen on me accidentally, though they keep lurking, waiting for the moment when they can return unnoticed and continue their spying? I do not labour under the illusion that the prince of darkness is not acquainted with my reasons for coming to India; his informers told him as soon as the reasons became clear to me. It is even possible that he knew them before I did.

If Lucifer knows that the Great God has instructed me to kill all the little gods, he may fear that he too is on the list of victims – a former angel, almost a little god whose self-regard would not allow him to be number two in heaven, which is why he created hell so he could be number one at least there. And if he really does fear that, then he is the one who has been following me the whole time.

He keeps me in view through the thousands of black, curious, amazed, evasive eyes that stare at me from the crowded pavement through the window of the bus, looking away and then at me again and again, glancing

at each other and then, in surprise or confusion, fixing their gaze on me like a leech, looking at others on the same or the opposite side of the street, passing on the message: he's coming!

The only thing that comforts me in a strange way is the knowledge that India has not changed at all during the years of my absence. This applies above all to the Indian concept of the "luxury hotel" that invariably includes piss-stinking carpet ("The bedding is not dirty, sir, that is the natural colour of the sheets!"), at least ten cockroaches and two or three mice ("A mouse, sir? Not possible! There are no mice in this hotel."), a shower that drips like a ninety-year old with a chronically enlarged prostate, an air-conditioning system that rattles like an old dredger for five minutes and then rumbles to a stop ("We have a little problem at present…"), and an infinite number of cloned room boys that tiptoe along the hallways and mysteriously cluster in front of your door the minute you step from your room – not to ask if they can help you but already certain that you are going to give them a tip ("I a good boy, sir.").

What relief! There are places that still belong to God. Where disorder, sloppiness, carelessness, slyness, and, above all, laziness are still part of the natural flow, Lucifer did not succeed in imposing dominance. God is open and kind and allows each and everyone to live in accordance with his deepest nature. God is not a tyrant who would line people up and force them to paint *Arbeit macht frei* on the factory door, but rather allows everyone as much ease as they want to have. His only guideline is: "Be…!" Everything else he leaves up to you.

But not Lucifer.

He has strategies planned down to the last hair and probably lectures in his free time at the best schools for business management and leadership. Lucifer is an entrepreneur *par excellence* and can transform everything in the world into a marketable commodity. You want love? – pay for it! You want to be happy? – work hard for it! You want to be proud of your children? – put them in leading social positions!

Along the way bribe and use people, be economical with the truth, trick your friends which are God's biggest miscalculation, since with them he had exposed himself to much abuse, pursue your goals at the expense of rich and poor, healthy and sick, smart and stupid, don't look back at the corpses that cover the battlefield behind you. Think of ways to justify all of this and call it philosophy.

Lucifer's world is not God's world. It is not simple.

Especially in the morning when Bombay awakens to the chaos of an ordinary day. Shod and unshod feet scamper along the sidewalk to the rhythm of Lucifer's drum; offices and stores suddenly transform into termite hills in which thousands of deals are closed; film stars in their villas on Malabar Hill beautify themselves before chauffeured limousines deliver them to Bollywood, the mythical capital of the Indian dream factory. Their neighbours in this exclusive district, politicians, millionaires, and gangsters, get ready for the first move of the day, perhaps practising new tricks: a surprise blow to the nape of the neck, the sale of non-existent shares, the hostile takeover of a company.

While passing through the noisy crowded streets of the city, I am once again touched by the invisible god of my journey. What does he want to tell me as he directs my gaze to the numbers on the buses? Why do three eighteens pass by one after another? And why then does the god of my journey direct my eyes to the number of the taxi in front of me, and why again that number 1818? And why does the taxi driver reveal to me during our conversation that he comes from a family of eighteen children, and that his oldest son is eighteen years old?

And why is the European girl sitting on the sidewalk in a side street and reading *The Chinese Book of Changes* about the same age?

Ringing in my memory is the sentence of the passing Australian: "I read somewhere that the first sentence you see when you open a book, any book…"

Of course! The god of my journey, the voice from the primeval forest of my subconscious, wants to send me a message in order to guide me on my way!

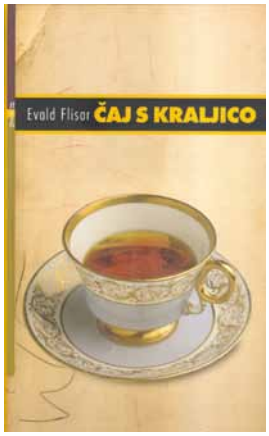
Immediately to a bookstore!

The eighteenth hexagram of *The Chinese Book of Changes*: "Set out across a great body of water. Success if you keep to the path." And also this: the reason that I set out once again on the travels, which years ago did not deliver me to my destination, is certainly that my ideals and desires are opposed to the principles to which my soul naturally gravitates. Gathered inside me, each on one side, are opposing forces that must finally settle accounts.

I need a friend who will be able to tell me which side has to win so that it won't be me who will suffer defeat in the end.

Evald Flisar

Tea with the Queen



TEA WITH THE QUEEN (original title *Čaj s kraljico*), short-listed for *Kresnik*, the Slovenian "Booker", in 2005, is set in London of the Sixties and early Seventies. Among adventurous foreigners drawn to the city of promise are Vili Vaupotič, a young Slovenian painter who arrives with the great hope that within two or three years his paintings will be hanging in the Tate Gallery, while he himself will be invited to the annual Queen's tea party for successful immigrants (Sir William Wowpotitch?); Sandrina, a mysterious beauty from the cross-Channel ferry who becomes Willy's Muse and fatally influences his relationships with other women; Cleopatra el-Kaffash, "an Arabian weight-lifter" from Alexandria who has come to London to find a husband, ideally an aristocrat "although upper middle class will do" (until the wedding she must remain a virgin, so she begs the obliging Willy to teach her the meaning of the word *fellatio*); Alexei Ivanovich Solouhin ("just call me Dostoyevski"), a supposed escapee from a Siberian gulag, an ambitious but unsuccessful writer who wants to become another Nabokov, an impulsive life-gambler who re-invents himself on a daily basis; and many more… And finally there is Lord William Hattersley, an eccentric lover of art who elevates Willy from the fight for survival to the heights of recognition and material comfort. However, will the young painter be happy now? (280 pages)

Flisar's latest novel is a bitter-sweet tale of lost illusions, rich with unexpected reversals and (self)reflections. The external narrative is merely a means whereby the author creates in front of the reader's eyes »a stream of those aspects of reality that most people, because of their trivia-laden minds, no longer register«. The novel's admirable flow is interspersed with »a cacophony of aggressive sounds« forcing their way into the minds of the characters from outside, revealing that »the outside reality is kinder than the reality of our souls«. A welcome addition to everyone's library...
Milan Vincetič, VEČER

Tea with the Queen is marked by the author's unique sense of humour. And because readers like to see this kind of humour combined with narratives that have a meaning and purpose, it is hardly surprising that Flisar's books are widely read. A similar fortune is awaiting *Tea with the Queen* which, in terms of narrative mastery, surpasses even his legendary *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, in the past twenty years the most widely read novel by any Slovenian author...
Josip Osti, SODOBNOST

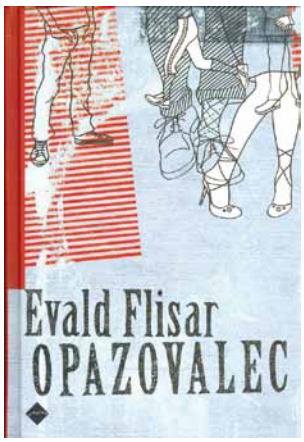
As a storyteller Evald Flisar is irresistible, capable of drawing the readers instantly into a kind of conspiracy whereby they take delight in the figures on the big chessboard hand in hand, so to speak... In this respect *Tea with the Queen* is a luxurious, vibrant story about eternal human fallibility, about our blindspots and hopes, mistakes and sorrows; in other words, as universal as a story can be. Thanks to the author's exceptional feeling for nuances, dialog and dramatic fabulation even such a long novel is a pleasure to read...
Igor Bratož, DELO

Flisar's latest novel is a highly readable ode to megalomania, to appetites that, in the hell of their irrationality, reach carnevalistic dimensions... The explosive mixture reveals the contours of no less than a pop art fresque, while remaining throughout a hedonistic meditation on the possibilities open only to the passionate and the brave, to those who have managed to become Luck's lovers... Flisar's novel is a veritable celebration of human delusions, false hopes and colourful nothings...
Lucija Stepančič, SODOBNOST

A Metaphysical Thriller

Evald Flisar

If I Only had Time



IF I ONLY HAD TIME (original title *Opazovalec, The Watcher*, short-listed for *Kresnik*, the Slovenian "Booker", in 2010), is a novel of masterful suspense; one of the critics described it as a metaphysical thriller. Twenty-two-year-old Simon Bebler, lost in the imaginative worlds of novels and films, is told that he is terminally ill and has at most a year to live. Into this meagre span of time the young student of literature intends to cram everything that life can offer anyone lucky enough to reach the age of ninety. Inclined to see himself in the roles portrayed by his favourite movie actors, he plans to experience at least some of the stories that he has read or seen on the screen, all mental and physical states it is possible to experience, good and bad, moral and immoral, dark and sunny, positive and negative. He does not want to die with the knowledge that he has been robbed of life, so he sets out to stage a life for his benefit. But no sooner is the drama unleashed than it slips from his control and he is faced with the question of whether he can remain on top of events or is bound sooner or later to end up as their victim. He finds himself at the heart of unexpected events in New York where he meets unusual people, among them Al Pacino, Bruce Willis, Woody Allen, Uma Thurman… Are they who they appear to be or do they merely resemble their famous namesakes? Who is pulling the strings in this game of appearances? Flisar's narrative machine poses questions faster than his characters can provide the answers. (250 pages)

It's in the little boxes that we should be able to find the key to this novel which speaks of the emptiness of the world that has turned us into blind prisoners of traditional as well as contemporary rigid beliefs. To open the boxes we need only a bizarre introductory moment: in Auster's case a wrong telephone number, in Flisar's case a wrong diagnosis... Flisar has proved once again that he is a master of storytelling and of sudden twists that frequently disrupt the world around us but often happen only in our heads, where we have too many secrets and not enough information...
Milan Vincetič, VEČER

A firm, attractive storyline is – next to his polished style and inimitable black humour – one of the main distinctions of Flisar's writing. Structurally, we could say that Flisar's »metaphysical thriller« revolves on two intertwined axes: one is the question of the meaning of life (or, rather, of what sense it makes to go on with life), the other is a detective search for the meaning of the story which has sucked the hero into a vortex of mysteries... Although the author deliberately creates a distance that turns us into voyeurs, we are firmly enveloped by the plotline...
Maša Ogrizek, BUKLA

Novels like this one can fill the reviewer's heart with fear. With their ontological plurality, bravado and narrative daring, they create wonderment and astonishment. I believe that a good review can become a part of the work reviewed, achieving a kind of relationship similar to that offered between fiction and reality in Flisar's book. This relationship is constitutive and very important... In Austria, where his plays are regularly performed, Flisar has been called a »black moralist« – a precise definition. He is trying to tell us something, but like all the best writers he prudently hides his narrative tricks and moral convictions up his sleeve...
Aljaž Kovač, SODOBNOST

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

If I Only had Time

The apartment at the top of the seven-storey building looks across Central Park to the west. Although the sun has not yet moved far enough to shine through the big windows, the large rooms are lit as if by the glow of an invisible light. The rugs are thick and soft; the antique furniture in the living room is massive and comfortable; the paintings look as if they are portraits of reputable ancestors. The bathroom is so spacious that it could hold ten fat Americans. The Jacuzzi is bordered with tiles, each one different, each mosaic square followed by a rectangular one, each composed of a different combination of colours. The mirror behind the four sinks covers the wall up to the ceiling. A fleeting glance in the mirror gives Simon the feeling that he has caught a thief; he quickly retreats into the hallway. The kitchen and dining area is completely white, modern, clean, sterile, furnished with all the newest appliances. The refrigerator is so tall it almost touches the ceiling. A crystal vase filled with fresh red roses stands on the table. A yellow envelope is propped against the vase. On it are written the words OPEN IT.

Simon hesitates. Maybe Vincent Vega left a message for the cleaning lady. Or for his lover, which would explain the rose. When he examines the envelope, he notices it isn't sealed. He pulls out the sheet of paper and unfolds it.

"Welcome to the Big Apple, Simon. I'm sorry I wasn't waiting for you. I'll be away for several days. Make yourself at home. Avail yourself of anything you find in the kitchen; there is some excellent wine there. Don't be shy. Apex Catering will supply your meals. If you don't like something, let them know. For additional instructions, go into the living room and press the red button on the black answering machine next to the green phone on the mahogany cupboard in front of the French windows."

Simon places the letter down on the table and turns toward the living room. He stands in the doorway and looks around again. The luxury strikes him even more than it did the first time; but now he is more relaxed, feels safer. The seating arrangement alone, all in light brown leather, would cost more than a decent studio apartment in Ljubljana. A big screen stands in the corner by the window; Simon knows that this is called a home cinema. Under the screen, behind the glass doors of a two-metre wide cupboard, is a carefully sorted collection of DVDs. There are at least a thousand films there. Amazing guy, this Vincent Vega.

A padded rocking chair with a high backrest stands in front of the screen. Something that looks like a remote control sits on the small table next to it. In this chair, with a view onto Central Park, which looks more like a forest than a park, in front of a screen that is at least two metres wide, with a collection of what are probably the best films of all times, Simon could spend half a year without missing a thing. Except for books. He is amazed that he doesn't see any books in the apartment. Apparently Vincent Vega is a visual type of person. Maybe he doesn't read at all, although he seems extremely literate. But the mahogany cupboard is there, right in front of the French windows. And sitting on it, the black answering machine. Next to the green telephone. Simon approaches it and reaches out to press the red button.

Something holds him back. A feeling rises within him, a feeling he doesn't know how to name, and this causes him to hesitate. Everything is happening too fast. Everything seems hardly believable. His heart pounds. First he must make sense of his impressions. He must calm down. The harmony of all the different colours in the apartment fills him with anxiety: everything is too beautiful, too perfect. He still can only half believe that all of this is really happening. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his cell phone to send a text message to Violeta. Or Soraya. Or at least his mother. Wish you were here. I am in New York. Something is happening that exceeds the boundaries of imagination. I am both exhilarated and filled with anxiety that might turn to panic at any moment. I think I need help. My life, always so ordinary, so Ljubljana ordinary, is slowly changing into fiction. And yet it is all very real.

Too long for a text message. He decides he would rather smoke a cigarette. He notices an ashtray beside the remote control for the home cinema on the table next to the easy chair. An unusual ashtray, cut from a multi-coloured stone that, though not glass, appears

transparent. Simon reaches into his pocket and pulls out a box of cigarettes, lights one, and inhales deeply. He sits in the chair and rocks gently back and forth. Despite his fatigue, he suddenly feels as if he's just woken up, full of energy and hope, even trust. Life is happening to him.

He smokes two more cigarettes. While doing so, he stands up four times to press the red button, but each time he changes his mind at the last moment. He notices that his nails are dirty. He stands up and goes to the foyer where he left his baggage. He rummages for a key in the inside pocket of the jacket he hasn't yet taken off and uses it to unlock the suitcase on wheels. He looks for his toiletry bag, rummages through it, and pulls out a little pair of nail clippers. He returns to the living room, sits in the easy chair, and begins to clean his nails. All the while his cigarette is hanging between his lips. If he lowers his eyes, he can see that the tower of ash that has been accumulating at the burning end of the cigarette will fall any second. He takes hold of the cigarette to flick it into the object that he believes to be an ashtray but perhaps isn't. Too late: when he leans forward the ash falls onto the precious carpet. Then the burning ember falls from the cigarette paper and, before Simon can put it out with the sole of his shoe, burns a big black scorch-mark into the carpet.

Simon stands up and looks at it. It measures about three centimetres across. Could he cover it if he moved the chair a bit? He reaches out his hand but then reconsiders. Sooner or later Vincent Vega would discover what happened: he would know who was at fault and who tried to hide the traces behind him. Simon decides he will apologize for the error as soon as Vincent Vega steps across the threshold. But he won't have to do it today. For several days he will be completely alone.

Almost unconsciously he presses down on the button.

He hears a voice that reminds him of Dustin Hoffman's voice. In fact it is so similar that Dustin Hoffman himself might have recorded the message.

"Hello, Simon. Vincent Vega speaking. First I would like to tell you that smoking causes lung cancer and for that reason there is no smoking allowed in the apartment. I hope you will respect this rule. If you must smoke, do it on the balcony. You can lean against the railing, look out at Central Park, and flick your ashes onto Fifth Avenue below. The wind will scatter them before they fall on somebody's head. Second: look around the apartment. Don't feel embarrassed. Go to sleep if you're tired. You can sleep in my bedroom. The bedding is clean. You can sleep in the library where the sofa folds out. You'll also find a secret cupboard there. If you look at the shelves behind the door, third shelf from the bottom, you'll find a mock copy of Conrad's novel *Nostromo*. Press very gently on the letter N and it will open on its own. Put the package that my friend gave you inside and press on the letter N again. The cupboard will close. That's the only mock book; all the others are real. If you want to read, read. If you want to watch films, you've certainly found them already. If you feel sick, call Dr. Barnard who is my personal physician. His number is saved in the telephone directory under Body. If you feel depressed, look under Mind for the number of my psychoanalyst, Dr. Woody Allen. You can trust him. He's good. He knows how to listen. One more thing before I finish. The cleaning lady comes each morning. Her name is Esmeralda. She's from Mexico. She won't trouble you. She has her own key. She knows you are here. She's young and very sexy. Enjoy. More later."

The light next to the button stops blinking. Simon is seized by a terrible fatigue. A sleepless night, the flight from his pursuers, the avalanche of novelties in the apartment, and no doubt also his sickness, have all overwhelmed him. He decides to have a couple hours of sleep. First he goes to the kitchen and pours a glass of water. Then he returns to the hall and opens the door to the room on the left. He looks at the bookshelves covering the walls up to the ceiling. They take his breath away. Apparently Vincent Vega loves more than just films.

Of course, this doesn't mean that he's read any of the books; maybe he inherited them, maybe he just collects them. Yet the arrangement is like a library, each area designated with a label: Poetry, Novels, Short Stories, Essays, Plays, Philosophy, Psychology, Ecology, Politics, Law, History, Biography, Humour. The room is perhaps even more spacious than the living room. A single sunbeam penetrates the half closed venetian blinds, illuminating a bronze statue of a mermaid standing on a table in the corner near the door. An enormous globe stands by the window lit from within by a bulb. Somewhere in the middle of the room, between the mermaid and the globe, a piano waits, with a rotating stool in front of it and a pile of music on the upper shelf. A comfortable extendable couch built into the bookshelves is located along the right wall.

And the secret cupboard? The third shelf from the bottom right behind the door. Simon finds it with no difficulty, and the first book in the section of Novels is indeed a mock copy of *Nostromo*. He carefully presses on the letter N. And he waits. Nothing happens. He waits again. Nothing. Did Vincent make it up? Then Simon remembers that on the recording he emphasized that it should be pressed very lightly. He tries again; this time he only touches the button with the tip of his finger. Something moves to the left of the shelf: six rows of books silently slide into a recess, revealing an opening that is a metre and a half wide and two metres high. Simon studies the contraption and realizes that the bookshelves slid three meters into the interior of the wall along metal tracks extending along the floor and ceiling. On both sidewalls there are additional narrow metal shelves. Carefully arranged upon the shelves are packages of the kind that Simon had brought from Ljubljana. The only difference is that the packages are no longer wrapped in paper but instead are ordinary light-brown boxes, each the same size. There must be at least thirty of them. Simon cannot resist the temptation: he reaches for the nearest one and lifts the lid. The box is empty. So is the second, the third, the fourth.

The mystery deepens. Who is the owner of the apartment? What does he do? What is in the package that Simon brought for him? He decides to find out. He goes back into the hallway, opens his suitcase and pulls out the little package he brought. Although he's already done it three times, and especially carefully when he picked up the box at Kompas in Ljubljana, he still hopes that something will jingle, ring, or rattle; that he'll hear something that will help him to figure out what's inside. But the contents of the box don't make any sound. Actually the box is so light that it could be empty. Simon goes back to the secret cupboard and takes one of the empty boxes from the shelves. In his left hand he weighs one, in his right hand the other. Surprisingly, the empty one seems to be about the same weight as the one that he brought. Had he brought Vincent Vega an empty box?

At the very instant that he begins to remove the wrapping paper, the doorbell in the hallway rings. Simon jumps up and stiffens. After three seconds, the bell rings again. It is impossible to tell whether someone is ringing in front of the main entrance downstairs or in front of the door to the apartment. Simon lays the package with the half removed wrapping paper on the shelf and tiptoes into the foyer. He carefully presses his eye against the peephole and then quickly withdraws. Standing outside is the large man with the shaved head and the red windbreaker who had threatened him with a pistol in the airport toilet.

How had he found him? What had he told the doorman to be let in? Simon rushes back to the library and softly presses the letter N on the mock copy of Conrad's novel *Nostromo*. The door to the secret cupboard quietly slides back into place and again there is the wall covered with bookshelves. Vincent Vega's package is safe. At least that. Because there is no indication that the stranger in front of the door is going to stop ringing; now he presses the doorbell every five seconds. Simon returns to the hallway and looks through the peephole. The bald man has just reached into the pocket of his windbreaker, pulled out his pistol, and is now pointing it at the door.

"Vincent, I know you're there. I'll count to five. If the door doesn't open, I'll shoot off the lock."

Simon instinctively withdraws and presses himself against the wall. Then he takes two steps and hides in the bathroom. He counts to five in his mind and waits for the sound of the shot. Instead of a shot, he hears voices. A man and a woman's voice. He returns to the hallway and cautiously looks through the peephole.

A woman is standing in front of the door to the neighbouring apartment with a shopping bag in her left hand and a bunch of keys in her right. The perspective from the peephole does not allow Simon to discern if she is beautiful or ugly. She is dressed in tight pants and a light knee-length coat, unbuttoned. He listens to the conversation.

"When did you last see him?"

"I don't spy on my neighbours," retorts the woman.

"We're friends. I need to find him."

"Call him. Surely you have the number of his cell phone."

"My cell phone was stolen. Do you have his number?"

"I have no reason to have it. I only know the man by sight. Excuse me."

She turns, takes the key to her apartment, unlocks it, and disappears from Simon's field of vision. Simon hears the key turning in the lock. The stranger in the red windbreaker moves down the hallway toward the elevator. He presses the button, the doors open, and

now only an empty hallway can be seen on the other side of the peephole.

Simon rushes to the kitchen and eagerly gulps down a glass of water. It's not clear why he is so thirsty all of sudden. Too much is happening and too quickly. How can he relax, how can he fall asleep when the man with the shaved head might come back at any moment and shoot through the door? Should he notify the doorman? Call the police? Get Vincent Vega's number from the doorman and call him?

He returns to the library and presses on the letter N. He waits for the collection of novels to slide away and reveal the shelves with boxes. This time, he thinks, nothing will prevent him from opening the package that has put his life in danger; not the bell, not a threat, not his own thoughts.

But the package isn't where he left it. Did it fall on the floor? There's nothing on the floor. He clearly remembers that he laid it on the shelf at the height of his head and in doing so had pushed the row of light brown boxes aside to make room. But the package with the half-removed wrapping paper is not there. Has it vanished into thin air? It isn't on the floor, isn't on one of the other shelves, not among the books, not on the ceiling. Simon feels a sudden chill. He retreats from the secret cupboard and for some time stands in the middle of the library to collect his wits. He goes to the couch and collapses on it. His heart is pounding. Something is happening to him that seems not just unusual, but quite simply impossible. Has his disease spread through his entire body? Has it started to metastasize in his brain?

He looks one more time in the cupboard, hoping that he will spy the package on the shelf where he left it.

It's not there.

He presses the letter N and waits for the door to close. Then he rushes to the bathroom, leans over the toilet, and vomits. The cheesy remains of the Lufthansa sandwich that he quickly ate as the plane was descending bursts out together with stomach acids that burn his throat and mouth. There's something red in it, blood maybe, or a half-digested piece of tomato. He slides down to his knees, kneels in front of the toilet, and waits for his stomach to stop heaving.

From this position, it suddenly seems to him that he hears the ringing of his cell phone. He vomits a last burst of slimy liquid. Then he stands up, goes to the sink, rinses out his mouth, and washes his face. An automatic sensor causes the toilet to flush the moment he steps away from it. He rushes to the foyer and rummages through his shoulder bag. But he doesn't find his cell phone. He looks in the pockets of the light gray jacket that he still hasn't taken off; no cell phone. He picks up the shoulder bag and shakes its contents onto the floor of the foyer. Passport, airplane tickets, New York City Lonely Planet, toiletry bag, digital camera, paper tissues, two packs of cigarettes, plastic bag of pills: Paracetamol, Lexaurin, Ranital.

Where is his phone? Did it fall out of his pocket? He doesn't understand anything anymore. Whatever happened, the fact is he cannot call anyone since he had all his numbers saved in the phone. And nobody can call him. He is completely alone, locked in an apartment in New York that he cannot leave because a man with a shaved head and a red windbreaker is standing in front of the door. There is no doubt about that. And now the package is also gone, the package that might save his life.

For a while, he stumbles around the apartment in the blind hope that he will spot his cell phone or the package or both. He goes from the kitchen to the bathroom, from there to the toilet, from there to the library, from there to the living room, from there back to the foyer where he opens the one door that he hasn't yet opened. Behind it is a spacious sleeping room with a large French bed. The sight of the bed reminds him that he is extremely tired and he should rest. Maybe his senses are betraying him because of exhaustion. Maybe some of the things that seem to be happening are merely temporary delusions.

Simon pulls his things into the bedroom and leaves them on the floor. When he closes the door, he notices it has a bolt. He bolts the door, strips down to his underwear, and climbs into bed. The sheets are soft and silky, the blanket just the right weight, the two pillows not too soft or too hard. Everything is perfect, even the colour of the bedding, which is a soothing green. It doesn't matter, thinks Simon. One way or another, I'm already dead.

He closes his eyes and tries to sink into sleep. But he can't. He is hovering somewhere on the margins, trying to silence his troubling thoughts. Almost all come in the form of a question. Who was the homeless fellow in Ljubljana? Was their meeting a coincidence or had fate taken a hand in his life? Is God a playwright who writes a personal script for each human being, assigning

us the roles we play in the drama of our time? Or perhaps God gives us pre-existing patterns in myths, fables, novels, plays, and films, that we imitate, not even realizing that we are not the least bit original, that our lives are only a reprise of one of the many other lives lived by millions of people before us. Who is Vincent Vega? What does he do? Who is the man with the shaved head and the red windbreaker who claims he is Vincent Vega's friend? What is really happening? Apparently something different from what it seems. The real story is somewhere between the lines. Simon has become the victim of a game, but what kind of game, intended for whom?

And so on and so forth: until he passes over the border of consciousness into darkness and confused dreams. When he wakes he remembers nothing, although he vaguely realizes that he dreamed about something; as he vaguely realizes that he is not at home in his own room but rather in the bed of a person he doesn't know at all, in a luxury apartment in a foreign city that he also doesn't know, in a haunted place where he fears that things disappear against the laws of physics, in a world of illusions where only the symptoms of his fatal disease exist. The fact that in a year or two he too will disappear forever strikes him as he slowly ascends into wakefulness as something that does not affect him personally, but is an echo of a story about someone else, something he read somewhere, that he saw in some forgotten film.

But then reality floods over him like a blow from a father who wants to punish his son for disobedience. He is shocked to realize where exactly he is and what exactly is happening to him. The sun is shining through the window that looks to the west, illuminating a blue bathrobe that hangs on a hook in the door to the bathroom. Simon flinches: the colour is the same as the bathrobe that Soraya usually wore when he came to visit her. Was the robe already hanging there when he came into the bedroom and locked the door behind him? How did he not notice it? Was he too confused, too tired?

Had things started to appear and not just disappear?

From the bed it is impossible to say for sure whether it is a man's or a woman's robe. Simon walks to the door to confirm. He puts on the robe and concludes that it is too big for him. He opens the door to the nearest built-in closet. Men's suits are hanging inside: there are certainly not less than twenty of them. He takes down a jacket from one of the hangers and measures it with his eye. The size is the same as the robe. There is no doubt that the clothing is the property of the mysterious owner of this luxurious apartment. Simon respectfully puts the jacket back on the hanger and opens another one of the built-in closets. The sheer number of undershirts, shirts, ties, bowties, pants, casual jackets and overcoats astonishes him. How much does Vincent Vega earn that he can afford such a wardrobe?

Simon returns to the bed to lie down. For the moment, he has no other desire but to rest awhile and collect his thoughts. The bed is in the corner of the room. On the wall beside him, Simon notices a built-in console with a series of round black circles in a neat row. They are numbered from one to twenty. Inside two of the circles are somewhat larger, gray, unmarked buttons. More out of curiosity than anything else, Simon softly touches one of the buttons. He hears a half-squeaking, half-scratching sound as an oval space slides open on the ceiling. A large white screen slowly descends from the ceiling; it stops when its bottom edge reaches the foot of the bed. Simon thinks that he likes Vincent Vega even more now: he watches movies in bed. The twenty buttons on the wall console offer access to twenty DVDs. What luxury.

He presses button number twenty and waits. After several minutes, just as it seems nothing is going to happen, images begin to dance on the screen. A man and a woman are kissing. Al Pacino plays the male role; the woman is an actress that Simon has never seen before. Or he has but he doesn't remember. Although he has seen every film with Al Pacino, he doesn't remember this scene. The actress is young, half the age of Pacino. She has short blond hair, almost white, and though she may not be among the most beautiful of Hollywood actresses, she possesses something that most of the others lack: emphatically sensuous features, a slightly turned-up nose which gives her the appearance of boldness, soft flushed cheeks, and a gently rounded face that has a slightly Oriental cast. In the beginning, the kisses are tender and tentative, the touch of lips alternating with looks and smiles. But then suddenly the lips are sealed together and the tongues engaged in a real duel. The scene is extremely erotic; Simon stiffens.

He becomes even stiffer as the camera moves down and reveals their bodies. Both actors are nude. Pacino

kneads the actress's right breast with his left hand; she caresses him with her right hand and gently massages his swelling organ. Simon rubs his eyes. For a moment, he thinks he is not awake yet and must be dreaming. Al Pacino made a porn film? And Vincent Vega has it in his collection? Powerfully excited, Simon stares into the screen as the actress spreads her legs, revealing her unshaved pubis. When Pacino's left hand abandons the curve of her abundant, though not too abundant, breast and slowly moves down along her flat stomach to her belly button and then, finger by finger, down to the trophy that, in impatient expectation, is being raised to him, Simon becomes dizzy and convulsively presses on the button to stop the film. In vain; only when he presses on the gray button and the screen slowly rolls back into the ceiling where the oval hides it, can he breathe again. And yet his heart still pounds wildly; the scene is still there in front of his eyes.

He stands up and restlessly paces the bedroom. Why didn't he continue watching? Why does he feel assaulted? Why does it seem to him that pornography does not belong here, in this apartment, which, from the beginning, had awakened in him less sensual and more intellectual associations? Is Vincent Vega, despite his years, and surely he must be at least forty, like an inexperienced youngster who must satisfy his needs by watching clips of others doing what he would like to do himself? That doesn't seem possible. Certainly he is a normal, healthy, sexually active man who uses pornography for variety, to stimulate the imagination, to heighten excitement, which, after all, many people do. Simon doesn't want to think of Vincent Vega in any other way. Although he has never met him, Simon respects him, even admires him. Somehow he knows he is the only person he can trust, and he can only trust someone who is not the captive of a problematic sexuality but has such matters under control. Not like Simon himself who, in this moment more than ever before, realizes that in his case such matters are not under control and indeed are extremely complicated. Just as everything else that has to do with the world and life.

In the same instant, it strikes him that it is not the sexual habits of Vincent Vega that bother him. He is most shocked to find one of his favourite actors playing such an unexpected role. Why would Al Pacino do such a thing? He can't need the money. For fun? Or was he filmed secretly? Does Vincent Vega get all his money by blackmailing famous people? Is that his job? Could the package that Simon brought, and that mysteriously disappeared, contain images that would ruin the reputation and life of someone important if it fell into the unscrupulous hands of the media? Whose reputation and life? And why did he have to bring the package to New York? Anyone could collaborate in this criminal activity simply by sending the package by express mail.

Simon steps to the window and gazes through the venetian blinds at the crowns of the trees in Central Park. On the other side of the park, the sun is almost touching the tops of the towers that rise above the trees. Soon it will be evening. Night is coming, and what will it bring? He has never felt so lost before. Anxiety pulsates through him in rhythmic waves. He thinks about smoking a cigarette but then remembers Vega's warning. Anyway a cigarette would not be enough; he needs a tranquilizer. He rummages through his shoulder bag for the box that carries his Lexaurin tablets. He unwraps one and puts it in his mouth. He can't swallow it without water so he unbolts the bedroom door and goes to the kitchen.

The dining room table is set for dinner. Arrayed upon it are silver platters with five different Chinese dishes, a bowl of rice, a plate, a white napkin, a bottle of California red and a crystal glass. It is difficult to guess how long everything has been on the table; the candles under the warmers have burned down about halfway. Somebody brought all of this. Somebody has been in the apartment while Simon was sleeping. Someone has the key. Someone has access to the apartment. Simon notices that the rose in the vase is no longer red, but white. Whoever brought the food changed it. A card leans against the vase. Written upon it the message: *With the Compliments of Apex Catering. Please report any dissatisfaction to Claire Hudson, your personal caterer.* And a telephone number. Finally a number he can actually call.

But not just yet. He pours himself a glass of wine and takes a sip, swallowing the Lexaurin tablet that he has been holding on his tongue the whole time. Then he goes back to the bedroom and puts on his trousers. He returns to the dining room, sits at the table, and begins to eat. The smell of the food reminds him that he is actually hungry. The food tastes wonderful, worlds away from the Chinese food available in Ljubljana. They know how to do it here. And Vincent

Vega accepts only the best. *Please report any dissatisfaction to Claire Hudson.* Actually, Simon thinks, everything is less horrible than it has seemed. Food comes, somebody takes care of him, sooner or later it will become clear where the package and his cell phone disappeared to; sooner or later Vincent Vega will return and everything will be alright. For now, he will stay in the apartment, relax, read, watch movies, eat food that will be brought to him, bathe, enjoy a Jacuzzi for the first time in his life, maybe begin to write a diary. Not for the future, as he once did in primary school, firmly convinced that after his death his writings would end up as an exhibit in the National University Library. Nor would he do it to gain a perspective on his life when he grows old because, after all, he has no prospect of growing old. No, he will write a diary, if he does, for the most mundane of reasons: so that he can arrange all that is happening into some kind of order. Otherwise it will begin to suffocate him.

He goes into the living room, lifts the receiver of the green telephone in front of the window, and calls the number on the card leaning against the vase on the table. A pleasant female voice responds immediately.

"Claire Hudson here. How can I help you, Mr. Vega?"

"I'm not Mr. Vega. I'm Barton Fink. I am living in Mr. Vega's apartment. I just ate the Chinese food that was here. I don't know when you left it. I was sleeping."

"Was there anything wrong with the food?"

"I don't remember when I last ate anything so delicious."

"That's very kind of you Mr. . . . Fink, you said? Can I take down your breakfast order?"

"I'm not interested in breakfast. Maybe I'll be dead tomorrow morning. I am interested in how I might get in contact with Mr. Vega. I lost his card. Someone stole my cell phone and I don't know the number by heart."

"You're calling from his number, Mr. Fink."

"His home number. I need his cell number."

"Mr. Vega does not allow me to give information to unauthorized people."

"Unauthorized!? Listen, I am living in his apartment!"

"May I take down your order for breakfast?"

Simon puts the receiver in the cradle. Only now does he notice that the red light on the telephone is blinking. He lifts the receiver and places it down again. The light is still blinking. Could that mean that there is a message? Simon hesitates though he doesn't know why. He knows that the message is probably from Vincent Vega. He probably has something new to tell him, something important. But something tells him that new and important information is probably tiring. He has reached a sort of truce with himself. He has decided that he will not get excited, that he will not look for reasons and answers, that he will simply enjoy the pleasures offered by the apartment.

Curiosity wins: he presses the button.

"Simon, this is Vincent Vega. I hope you like the apartment. I didn't know what kind of food you liked so I ordered Chinese. From now on, you can call Claire directly and order. They serve Indian food, Mexican, Creole, French, Italian, Brazilian, anything you like. It looks like I'll be detained here longer than I expected. You'll have to be on your own during this time. But you're a resourceful young man, aren't you? I ask only one thing of you: don't form an opinion too quickly about what happens in the apartment. Allow for the possibility that things mean something other than what seems most likely. Everything will eventually become clear. If you get bored in the apartment, go for a walk. Go to Central Park. Get some fresh air. Visit the museums and galleries. Walk the streets. Feel the pulse of city life. And don't forget: my doctor and psychiatrist are available twenty-four hours a day. Call Dr. Allen. Arrange to meet him. It can only help. Good luck."

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

Tea with the Queen

The next day we placed notices in five newsagent's shops announcing that "a writer and painter will be guiding tourists interested in culture around the artistic quarters of London: cheap, intense, funny, and unforgettable." Oddly enough, on the first day some twelve people were already gathered at the appointed meeting place under the statue of Nelson in Trafalgar Square, mostly American, retired couples, a few younger Japanese people, and a handful of hippies from various European countries. Solouhin's Rasputin-like appearance had so excited them that they even appeared willing to forgive his impossible accent, especially after he explained that he was a Russian writer who had escaped the Siberian gulag and had become a slave to the idiotic desire to scrape out an existence in the free world; that is, until his magnificent trilogy would be published and his own house would belong among London's most notable residences.

"You can call me Dostoevsky," he said casually to the group.

After a moment, he introduced me as a painter whom Tito had banished from Yugoslavia because I refused the order to depict his wife as less fat than she actually was in an official family portrait. I did muster a modest measure of patriotism by being prepared to reduce the lady's mass by five kilograms, but not by the twenty that was demanded of me. That was the reason that I, like him, now resided in this brave world where freedom was so absolute that the authorities couldn't care less if we freely collapsed from starvation as we struggled for our five minutes of fame that would come when the fashion-driven gallery owners discovered my genius and subsequently elevated me to the status of most recent wonder of the world.

The Russian's anecdotes on my account were exaggerated but I didn't have the heart to object, especially when I noticed that we emanated a magnetism that attracted more people to our group every day. That is how, for the price of three pounds per head, we started our daily tours through the parts of London that Dostoyevsky, in his quick and idiosyncratic manner, designated as "important milestones in the most interesting city in Europe." Between locations that were not too far from each other we went on foot on the crowded sidewalks. In order to avoid losing anyone from the group, which grew bigger day by day, one of the participants had to carry a placard with the words *London Literary and Cultural Tour* written on it. This honour usually belonged to me. We conquered greater distances by using the tube. The tour began at ten in the morning and ended at three in the afternoon with one stop at the Italian restaurant, Amalfi, in the middle of Soho where Dostoevsky had negotiated a ten percent fee for each guest he brought. In addition to the fee, it usually happened that one of our more generous clients covered the cost of our lunch. We tended to order with tactical modesty, eating something less bountiful than the tourists themselves did, except, of course, when some merciful American sponsor entreated us to eat enough for bad times as well. On such occasions, we threw caution to the wind and ordered three portions of cannelloni or spaghetti Bolognese and polished off three pints of beer each. Most of our clients saw the opportunity to do something good for two slightly comical refugees from behind the Iron Curtain as a real experience. Almost all wanted to be photographed with us to show their neighbours, relatives or grandchildren just in case we really did become famous one day.

In any case, Dostoyevsky greatly exaggerated our role as "dissident artists" and sometimes it was possible to hear mocking remarks from members of our group. This didn't bother him at all, though it did me. On a number of occasions, I had to remind him that we were not runaway clowns from some Russian circus but serious young men trying to earn a living so we could dedicate at least a few hours a day to our art. It was important therefore not to compromise our dignity.

Art is not framed, was Dostoevsky's predictable response. Art *is* and *must be* everything we do, each step we take, each gesture, each word. All of our lives must be created as if we were writing a novel: not with the recording of schematic stories, but openly, researching all possibilities, finding the central flow of events that carry us ahead on the rules of our own internal dynamics. And if these dynamics demanded

that we abandon writing and painting, then so be it. To dedicate art to life, that was our goal, and not the other way around, because, after all, we had long since outgrown primary school didactics, and time itself was eminently in favour of improvisation.

As the days passed, his words aroused concern in me, even fear, since Solouhin was the best example of a man without a centre I had ever met; a man who improvised each day with the same ease as if he were brushing his teeth. Actually, I didn't know him that well, what remains in my memory is a series of his improvisations which revealed that he liked me in his way and felt responsible for me – in the same manner that an older brother might care for a younger one who had entered the wide world for the first time. The problem was that he took on this responsibility on his own, without even my implicit consent, simply because he wanted to play the role of a generous man initiating a less experienced acquaintance into the mysteries of the big bad city. It was my mistake that I didn't refuse this kind of relationship the moment it started, when I could have done it without jeopardising our friendship which was very precious to me.

It is true that Solouhin did not show all his cards in the beginning and that we slid into our mutual dependence almost accidentally as we looked for points that might connect us. But I did sense early on that he was appropriating my life as if he saw in it the material for the novel he could not write. His daily efforts to reshape my ideas and plans brought him happiness and a feeling of accomplishment because I, as he openly admitted, was significantly less stubborn than his fictional characters. More and more I came to believe that my life must not become just one of his improvisations and that we must soon, perhaps even tomorrow, have a conversation about this.

It wasn't at all clear to me why he dragged me along with him on the tours that he could have easily done on his own. Honestly, he needed me for nothing more essential than collecting three pounds from each participant and to take care, to the extent possible, that we didn't lose anyone in the crowd. In addition I was expected to say some educational words when the subjects of Canaletto or Constable came up. At such times, he would inevitably insert a bit of spicy information, which he had dug up the day before, God knows where, and didn't bother to tell me about. This was to emphasize that he was indispensable and that, in all respects, I was merely his assistant. It is true that he honestly shared the proceeds with me and made sure that I ate as much possible each day at Amalfi; given that the whole thing was his idea, I could only be grateful.

Of course, the London this self-appointed refugee from the Siberian gulag presented to largely uninformed foreign tourists was more than anything else the invention of a writer who wanted to take revenge against the city for the indifference with which it blocked his efforts to become a part of its élite: in other words, that this person, this Someone, Aleksey Ivanovich Solouhin, like Conrad and Nabokov before him, would become much read and adored, and thus one of the reasons that tourists came to London in the first place. This was not terribly obvious, but his pain, being a mirror of my own, was close and familiar and it often struck me that some of the more perceptive tourists also perceived it.

All the same, Dostoevsky, a natural performer, never slid from irony to cynicism; his acute senses told him that a negative tone in a London tour guide would lose customers as fast as it causes a writer to lose readers, and so he remained (regardless of the fact that he was becoming increasingly fed up with the role he played each day) entertaining, all-knowing and polished.

"Look," he said, entering Ebury Street, "one of my friends who likes to listen to Mozart – his wife contends that he breathes Mozart from morning to night – was strolling through the city with his five-year old daughter and came by here. He pointed to this very house and said: you see, this is where Mozart once lived; here, in this house, he wrote his first symphony at the age of eight. The little daughter was amazed: I didn't know Mozart was a man, she said, I thought it was another word for music."

This pleased our clients so much that they seemed to yearn for more anecdotes. And thus Dostoyevsky averted the tourists, without their realizing what was happening, from asking questions about more specific matters about which he knew very little. His gift as a raconteur never failed him; sometimes I got the feeling that he just made things up as he went, and if an anecdote was met with a good response, he incorporated it into his repertoire. As he did with the following one about Marx: "For five years, he lived in poverty on Dean Street where he secretly copied from others his most celebrated work, *Das Kapital*. At least,

that's the conclusion that a certain Mr. Leoni came to (the present owner of the house and of the Italian restaurant Quo Vadis on the ground floor) when, rummaging through Marx's former rooms, he discovered a carton of books in which numerous sentences were underlined and the margins filled with Marx's comments in German. Mr. Leoni was very disappointed to realize that this most renowned book had not sprung fully formed from the great thinker's head. From then on, Mr. Leoni always voted conservative."

It happened from time to time that Solouhin's hypnotic voice would capture even me and I would slide into the role of one of the tourists experiencing the otherwise known London through the eyes of the caustic Russian. Dostoyevsky had the rare gift of imbuing the words he repeated each day with authentic enthusiasm. It was due to this facility that so few of our clients requested to be taken to the Highgate Cemetery where they could see Marx's bust and stand at the grave in which his bones had long ago putrefied: Solouhin knew how to muddle people to the extent that they forgot about Highgate altogether or even (and this never ceased to surprise me) believed that they had actually been there when we returned to Soho, which was Solouhin's favourite neighbourhood.

"Ladies and gentleman, we have arrived in the heart of the most lascivious square mile in London." The ladies blushed; the gentlemen would have liked to linger in the narrow streets in which neon lights twinkled from every storefront: porn film, peep show, topless bar, Swedish massage. Solouhin, in order to assuage any feelings of embarrassments, immediately began to reel off information about the history of the neighbourhood: how an avalanche of lust was triggered by the curvaceous Italian, Theresa Conelys (the lover of, among others, Casanova, and the mother of one of his many daughters), who came to Soho in 1760 and, with the rich experience acquired in the beds of several European capitals, made a career under a series of names: Madame Pompeati, Madame Trenti, the Sultana of Soho. She took up residence in the aristocratic Carlisle House where she threw renowned masked balls attended by English nobles, foreign ambassadors, and artists of the theatre such as the playwrights Garrick, Sheridan, and Goldsmith. At that time, Soho was a neighbourhood of palaces and shacks, the home of both wealthy notables and the ragged predecessors of the *lumpen proletariat*. It served as a shelter for refugees from all corners of the world. In the sixteenth century, the French Huguenots came and Greeks fleeing from Turkish violence.

"One year ago, there arrived in Soho the genius writer Aleksey Ivanovich Solouhin, known to his friends as Dostoevsky, who did not remain in Soho but instead moved thirty-two times in twelve months, exactly as many times as Dickens did throughout his life," he said every day in the same tone and at the same place, in front of 21 Doughty Street which is now a museum. Here our clients could look at the high table at which Dickens stood and wrote while chatting with his visitors. "Geniuses have at least one privilege: they need not be behave as ordinary people."

And then onward to new literary pathways: to Southwark, south of the Thames, where Dickens wrote his novel *David Copperfield* and where his father spent half of his life in jail because he could not settle his debts; and then to Kensington to the house on Young Street in which Thackeray wrote *Vanity Fair*. Later, walking by it with a friend, he supposedly exclaimed: "On your knees, man! Do you not know that this is the house in which *Vanity Fair* was written?" Then he added: "I shall kneel with you because I also have a very high opinion of the book in question." And then to Chelsea to Tite Street where Oscar Wilde lived, and around the corner to Tedworth Square where Mark Twain resided for some time. Legend has it that this giant of words, during the most difficult decline in his career and life, met Wilde by chance and greeted him with a doffed hat, "though that is not possible," Solouhin concluded victoriously, "because by the time Twain travelled to London, Wilde was already in jail in Reading." Twain came to Europe to escape the creditors who were bankrupting him: he tormented himself in the house on Tedworth Square, writing his only bad book, *Following the Equator*. News went around that he was sick and dying and the New York Journal sent instructions to send five hundred words if the writer was sick and a thousand if he were dead. Twain responded with the words that have since become immortal: "Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

At this point, the tourists, of which at least ten and at most twenty joined us each day, were so tired that some of them could hardly bear to go on. It seemed to me that even more than the walking and the abundance of information, it was Solouhin's manic babbling that

tired them. The stream of his words didn't stop for even a second; he spoke, narrated, improvised, lied, entertained, joked as if his life depended on it, and I was amazed that he didn't realize how exhausting it was to listen to him after the first hour, during which he was redeemed by the fact that he was new and amusing, especially when he took us in the Tube and other passengers looked at us as if we were members of some alternative theatre group hired by the London Underground for loud entertainment.

All my efforts to soften his fanaticism fell on deaf ears and a lack of understanding. ("We'll lose them with silence, my dear Willy; words are the chains that bind them to us.") In vain I explained that once they'd paid us their three pounds, they needn't be chained to us any longer than they themselves would like to be. Although I managed to convince him each time, he nevertheless would fall into the same eager trance as we walked the city each day, almost as if he were propelled by an engine that he did not know how to stop. More and more I felt that Solouhin was not his own master; or indeed that someone else resided within him, some usurper that occupied his body and lived off his blood.

Precisely at this point in the tour, in front of the house where Mark Twain had lived, we too were overcome with weariness, especially Solouhin; his taut energy would suddenly collapse and I would sense in his eyes a combination of despair and anger so uncharacteristic that they hardly seemed to belong to him, at least not to the Solouhin I knew. "I would shoot them all now," he once whispered to me, "from the first to the last." Without doubt, there existed not only Willy I and Willy II, but also two Solouhins. The only difference was that we (both Willys that is) were somehow connected and functioning in an argumentative harmony; it would never happen that one would not even realize what the other was doing.

With Solouhin, I didn't have that feeling, and I began to fear that Solouhin II, when the time was ripe, would be manifested in a way that would astonish even Solouhin I, and that it would be a dramatic and spectacular event.

Yesterday it finally happened. Some hotshot from Boston had, from the very beginning, been following Solouhin's explanations with an arrogant, mocking expression, making comments now and again to his tiny bespectacled female friend. Just after Solouhin had cited Twain's famous words, he nonchalantly remarked: "In your case, it might have sounded a little different. Something like: *Reports of my gulag experience have been somewhat exaggerated.*"

For an instant, all eyes hung on Solouhin's face. Surprisingly he didn't frown; he even smiled agreeably as if he were participating in the joke made at his expense. The smile remained fixed on his face even as he took a step toward the Boston hotshot and, using both hands, slapped him twice, once with the left and once with the right. In the first moment, the victim of the attack couldn't believe what had happened. The group, which that day numbered some twenty people, stood paralysed. The first to react was the hotshot's friend who rushed at Solouhin and kicked him in the shin with the sharp point of her right shoe. Solouhin's great paw, which had always reminded me of one of Frankenstein's limbs, casually swiped the glasses from her face, broke them, and tossed them to the ground where what remained of them laqy crumpled under the heel of Solouhin's enormous shoe.

The next to react was the astonished recipient of the slap. Though he quickly raised his fist, Dostoevsky, who had never mentioned he was a kung fu master, threw himself into the air and thrust both his feet straight into his victim's face with such force that the blow crumpled him, raising a blue welt on his cheek, and causing him to fall to the ground with a bloody nose.

"This is terrible," said someone in the group. Another woman exclaimed: "We must call the police!" A fat woman from New Zealand started to run through the square screaming: "Help! Help! Help!"

At this point, Solouhin leaped onto the chest of the tourist from Boston and started to jump as if he were trying to pound down an uneven tile. His gorilla weight had probably already broken three, four bones with the first jump; I feared that he would soon crush the man's entire rib cage.

Now three male members of the group lunged toward Solouhin. He shook them off with one wave of his huge arm and continued with his rib breaking; it was clear that he wanted to kill the unfortunate fellow who had dared to insult him. The three men rushed toward him again, two more joined them, and it appeared that they would finally subdue the mad Russian. But no, Solouhin ran toward me, who was watching the events as if nailed to the ground, and pulled from my

hands the placard with the words *London Literary and Cultural Tour*; he swung it and with one great sweep knocked to the ground all of his attackers. I have never in my life seen such cold-blooded and masterful rage combined with such a pleasant, icy smile.

Now we both noticed that the woman who had been running through the square screaming and calling for help had succeeded in engaging a chubby bobby who, billy club in hand, was rushing toward us. Solouhin fled with long kangaroo jumps toward the nearest corner and disappeared. Although I was as shocked at his outburst as the others, I had no choice but to run after him.

I barely managed to catch up; I don't know if either of us had ever run so fast. We ran along the Thames toward Earls Court and didn't stop until we heard a police siren above the noise of the traffic; at that point, we ducked into the nearest pub and came to rest at a table in the darkest corner. We immediately noticed that some of the guests were wondering if our out-of-breath condition might have some connection to the sound of the police siren that had just wailed by. In order to banish suspicion, Solouhin immediately launched into a lecture on health.

"Jogging, my dear Willy," he said in a loud voice, "jogging will solve the problems of the world. Although today, to put it mildly, we have overdone it. Not to mention the exhaust fumes we've inhaled. Next time, we'll run in the park."

We each had a beer and then walked on in the hope of putting as much distance between us and the unpleasant scene as possible. But outside the sense of menace only grew; we knew they were looking for us. At every corner, we feared running into them. We turned into a half empty pub in a side street and again sought out the darkest corner.

We finally dared to look each other in the eyes.

Both of us knew that many things in that look would have to remain unsaid. Words would not allow us to pretend that we had not reached a critical point in our relationship. And then each word would rest on the next word until we had built a wall across which we could only hurl insults. I could have asked: Why did you do it? And he probably would have answered: I don't know, something just overwhelmed me, I'm sorry, but now it's too late. We both knew that there was no rational explanation for his actions and that he was more surprised by them than anyone. At the same time, we both sensed that his outburst of violence was rooted in the growing discrepancy between the dreams that had drawn us to London and the cold reality that not only caused us to lose hope but even to lose air to breathe. Words at this time would inevitably have forced us to confront the fundamental question: did it make any sense to persevere? And because we both sensed that the answer would not be positive, we wanted to avoid the question altogether. We still had enough strength for illusions, too little for truth. And so we agreed on a conspiracy of silence in order to give ourselves one last chance.

When we finally did speak, we did so simply and practically, like cautious thieves who wanted to avoid the hands of the law. We pondered whether there was any possibility that the police would knock on our door the following day. In a city of eight million, it would be a miracle. No doubt they would try to trace us through the newsstands where we had hung our advertisements, but in places where masses of people went on errands each day, the owners would hardly be able to remember us. The tourists in our group, in contrast, could describe us very precisely, especially Solouhin, who was such an imposing figure that couldn't be missed in a crowd. They would probably be able to lead the police to us. And yet amidst all the violence that takes place daily in London, our case would hardly attract the best men in the Scotland Yard. Immediate migration would not be necessary; it was important to avoid for some time the places where we had taken the tourists. Of course, our means of earning money had now disappeared but this occasioned a sense of relief more than regret; our days had become terribly repetitive recently. We were ready for something new. And by this time we had earned some money, not as much as had been stolen from me, but enough that we could afford a little rest.

Above all, I felt that I must once again dedicate myself to painting; not only in order to protect my deflated self-image as an artist but also the undiminished faith that, at least in the long-term, art was the only thing that could bring more money than what was needed for mere survival.

Dostoyevsky was unable to muster sufficient strength to get on with his novel or search for an agent and keep sending his creations to addresses that had not yet rejected them. "I must clear my head," he said. "I have to get out from under this gravel that's buried

me. What I need is enough money to live for half a year; I'm not the sort of writer who can write while working. When I write, I must live with my characters day and night. The intrusion of the real world has confused me to the point that my imagination is crippled; first I must heal it again."

He disappeared the next day and I could only wonder where he had gone to get well and in what manner. Like myself, he belonged to the class of people that can only deal with reality in small doses; one drop too much and we are carried off to a place where it is impossible to keep our balance. But while the events of the previous days may have struck Dostoyevsky as reality, they appeared to me as a sort of dream-like confusion, like one of his narrative improvisations peppered at the end, as if he were writing a story, with a reversal, with a brutal physical showdown. Only by wrapping the events in an imaginary mist could I push them away far enough so they wouldn't consume me.

Nevertheless, the painting I was slowly dabbling at during the days Solouhin was away contained a number of grotesque Munchean elements, shaping itself into a scream of protest in the hope of turning the world's attention toward the rights and dignity of the dispossessed among whom, it was now clear, Solouhin and I had landed after briefly scaling the summits of euphoria.

The figures that appeared on the canvas looked their best at about two in the afternoon when the sun shone on them; at that time, it almost looked as if they held in their hands, not umbrellas, but placards; they hurried along with them, aggressively projecting themselves into the space in front of them, heading somewhere to the left, towards an invisible fortress of resistance, toward gaping mouths from which dictates and ultimatums emerged. They were blind and deaf to their immediate surroundings and under the feet of these humiliated and insulted figures could be seen, carelessly trodden over, a white puppy and a rosy baby that had fallen from its buggy, its mother standing horrified to the side, and the reflection of the sun in a puddle on the ground, also trodden upon, of the sun that the rushing figures had failed even to notice.

Evald Flisar

On the Gold Coast

On the Gold Coast (original title *Na zlati obali*, published in November 2010) is a novel about the power of literature to influence the actions and feelings of readers, in this case a group of European travellers in Africa whose paths keep crossing in unpredictable ways. A son looking for his lost father, two couples looking for the possibility of travelling together, and a third – who decisively influences events and draws them all together – are retracing the journey made through West Africa by a well-known travel writer who has mysteriously disappeared, leaving behind only an unfinished account of his journey. The manuscript of the unfinished book reveals that the author was travelling through Africa in the company of a dissolute young lady who had drawn him into a life on the dark side and made him abandon his steadfast morality. His son believes that he may still be alive and perhaps ready to reclaim his old self, and return home. But many surprises await him on his turbulent journey. Not a single thing in this ambitiously interwoven African story turns out to be what it appears to be. Secrets and mysteries, real and imagined, chief among them the source of our desperate urge to take control of life instead of remaining its plaything, are resolved only at the very end, when apparent fragments are retrospectively joined into an unexpected whole. (240 pages)

»My favourite subject matter is the psychological violence that we visit upon each other because of our fears, ambitions and fixed ideas. That's why I am interested first of all in the individual, in his or her personal truth, his or her story, and how it unfolds, or runs aground, through relationships with others. Only then does my interest turn to the wider social picture, and to general human conflicts and misunderstandings. I love and hate my fictional characters to an equal degree; they comprise the best and the worst of me, and the best and the worst of most people I know. Most of my characters, caught in the grip of unrealised youthful fantasies, are dissatisfied with things as they are. They tend to shift away from reality to the comfort of imaginary, alternative worlds in which they can be what they want to be. Another characteristic is their paranoia, their fear that they are being followed by someone or something that will reveal their most intimate secrets, their weaknesses, and expose them to the mockery of the world, That's why they are constantly fleeing from one role to another, constantly trying *not* to be what they fear they are. Role-playing is in their blood. To call this book a novel about Africa would be misguided. It's a novel about a group of European travellers in Africa, in Africa of a certain period, in Africa as seen and (mis)understood through their eyes...«

The words of the author at the press conference introducing the book, published by Mladinska knjiga, the largest Slovenian publisher, in November 2010

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

On the Gold Coast

After an uncomfortable drive acrosss the savannah Peter and Sylvia reached Bolgatanga, the first bigger town in northern Ghana. The taxi driver deposited them in front of the Black Star Hotel, where they intended to spend the night. The rooms had air-conditioning.

"Except that nothing works," said the boy at the reception, "the air cooler doesn't work, there is no electricity." But when they entered the room they were pleased to find the air-conditioner making a lively noise. The boy had been wrong. Perhaps he wanted to tell them that the toilet didn't work, for when Peter pulled the chain, the water rose over the sides of the pan and flooded the bathroom as well as part of the room.

Being hungry and thirsty, they immediately went to the hotel's restaurant. It was airless and stifling hot. Ventilators under the ceiling were motionless. The menu was three pages long. Some dishes had wonderfully seductive names. But when they finally chose what sounded most promising, the waiter told them that all they had was chicken with rice.

"Right," they said. "And two orange juices."

The waiter sighed and twisted his eyes towards the ceiling. "All we have is beer, sir, only beer," he said in the manner of someone who was tired of stupid questions.

"No soft drinks?" they expressed surprise. "Lemonade, coca cola, mineral water?"

"Tap water," the waiter replied.

Peter ordered beer, Sylvia decided to try tap water.

"But it should be cold," she said.

The waiter, who was already leaving, turned and came back to the table. "How can it be cold when we have no electricity, we've had none for two weeks, the refrigerator doesn't work. Water is warm, the beer is warm, and the sun is warm."

The rice was sticky, overcooked and stale. The chicken leg did not seem to have any leg. The warm beer had a metallic, poisonous taste which made Peter nauseous. The water was best of all. Whether it was really boiled, as the waiter assured them, was another question.

It soon became obvious that they couldn't believe anybody. The boy at the reception said that there were no buses anywhere because they had all broken down. There were no spare parts. But the waiter told them that the bus for Tamale left every morning at seven. A guest at the next table interrupted to say that this was a lie. The bus left at five, not at seven. But he would strongly advise them to be there at four; because there were too many passengers and not enough buses, they had stopped issuing reservations. Now only those with sharp elbows manage to get aboard.

The boy at the reception was right. There were no buses.

They set off to see the town. After a few steps they got the feeling that they had fallen through a time warp into some kind of parallel world. Bolgatanga gave the impression that its rightful inhabitants had left in great panic, and that normal life came to a standstill at that very moment. They could see the signs of their abrupt departure everywhere: in half-finished houses which, without any windows and doors, resembled large red-brick skeletons under the tropical sky; in neglected plots of land, which weather-beaten boards described as "supermarket", "bank", "school"; and in the doors of dusty shops, which were hanging half-broken off their posts.

The people who lived in the middle of this desolation gave the impression that they merely camped there; that they were Huns on the streets of the town vacated by the Romans. No houses were being built. No road was being repaired. No wall was being given a fresh coat of paint. They could see no one replacing broken window panes. Everything was closed. Nothing was for sale. Stalls stood deserted in the shade of the trees along dusty streets. Inside the shops they could see darkly gaping shelves, empty. Here and there they came upon a woman selling paltry mangoes, half-ripe oranges and blackened bananas. The few vehicles they saw cruising the streets were all ancient bangers.

They walked to the nearest bush-taxi station to check out what was on offer. In Ghana the bush taxi is called tro-tro or mammy wagon. The vehicles resting in front of a petrol station gave the impression that they had been brought there from some other world. Each of them did have four wheels and four tyres (so

smooth that one could almost see one's reflection in them), and each also had a steering wheel and a cabin, proudly marked Austin, Chevrolet or Bedford. But the contraptions attached to the cabins reminded one of a deliberate sabotage by an evil-minded apprentice: haphazardly nailed-together timber frames, covered with punctured awning, under which were arranged low, free-standing wooden benches. Some vehicles were enormous, five-ton trucks, others were small, rickety, leaning dangerously to one side. One, at the edge of the station, had collapsed altogether.

But strangest of all was that nothing was moving: even here, where one would expect a crowd, the world had come to a standstill. In the quarter of an hour that Peter and Sylvia spent examining these most unusual means of transport not a single vehicle either left or arrived, and only one was surrounded by a small group of people who gave the impression that they were setting off on a journey.

Then, already near the exit to the street, they came upon an unusual scene. Sitting on a dusty backpack was a young European girl, lost in some kind of neurotic self-absorbtion, nervously playing with the curls of her unwashed and uncombed brown hair. Had they passed without saying anything, she probably wouldn't have noticed them, but the moment she heard Sylvia's "Hi" she looked up as if seeing a ghost.

"Oh," she exclaimed in a tone which was a mixture of relief and astonishment, "oh! I'm soooo glad to see you!" No sooner had she said this than she was up on her feet, reaching for their hands. "Do forgive me, but I haven't seen white faces for more than two weeks." She very nearly gave them a hug.

"Irene," she introduced herself. "From Switzerland. But now for more than six months travelling in Africa. And for more than a *week* waiting for transport to Kumasi!"

Peter and Sylvia said they were hoping to go the same way, although it seemed they would die before transport became available, not of some tropical disease but of thirst. There doesn't seem to be anything except warm beer.

"I know a place where they might have something," Irene immediately tried to be helpful. "State hotel. Catering Guest House. But it's a little out of town."

They hired a puttering, clattering taxi which took them through the town onto a dusty road leading north, past a neighbourhood of concrete blocks which gave the impression that no one had lived in them for a long time, except rats and dogs. It took them along a narrow road winding its way through neglected fields, and deposited them in front of the state hotel building, which was not only new and finished, but also freshly painted. "In this hotel they have everything," said Irene, who had obviously been there before.

She led the way to the reception, where they found not a soul. It was hard to escape the feeling that the hotel did not have a single guest, and that the staff, if there were any, were employed for no other reason than to maintain the place for the possible arrival of some high-placed state functionary. They carried on and found themselves in an open concrete courtyard with rows of wooden chairs, in front of which, fixed to a metal frame, stood a large cinema screen. The young porter, who was fiddling with an ancient-looking projector, told them that a film would be shown at eight in the evening. After that they would remove the chairs to make room for dancing. On a covered stage in another corner of the courtyard they noticed three young men preparing speakers, microphones and amplifiers. The hotel had its own generator, there was electricity, no doubt a refrigerator as well. The young porter asked if they wanted to take a look at the discotheque.

"First we're going to have a drink," said Irene.

They learned that they could have beer, but only in the bar which would open at nine in the evening. It was six o'clock. As for water, it was available in the restaurant which would open at seven. Before then they could have a look at the discotheque.

Okay, they said. Obviously the boy wanted to show them something of which he was especially proud. As soon as he opened the nearest door and led them down a flight of stairs into a cellar Peter felt as if they had tumbled down those stairs out of Africa and into a world a million miles away from the dreary reality they had left outside. Spread out before them was a huge cavern with a circular dance floor, with tables and leather chairs in discreet corners, with romantic lighting and wall decorations. High above the dance floor perched a glass cabin which could be reached by a spiral staircase. "That box up there is mine," the porter said proudly. "I'm a disc jockey."

He invited them to follow him up the spiral staircase. And there, in his box, he had the latest state-of-the-art sound system, the best available anywhere in the

world at that time. He inserted a CD and pressed a button. The cavern began to vibrate in the rhythm of wild rock'n'roll. He pressed another button. Red, blue and yellow snowflakes began to flicker over the walls and the dance floor. Peter tried to imagine a crowd of perspiring black bodies engaged in frenzied movement, young couples in discreet corners, the "romanticism" of entertainment which is the same the world over.

Suddenly a young woman appeared on the dance floor. In the middle of criss-crossing multicoloured light beams she started to dance to the rhythm of the music, jerkily, harmoniously, but also, in an unsettling way, convulsively, with her limbs resembling the arms of an octopus, flailing about in search of a grip: as though she were trying to pull herself out of herself, escape herself, leave herself on the dance floor, a flaccid body with no life in it, while her soul would sour high above the world, looking down on it as on a painful past. It took Peter and Sylvia a while to realise that the woman on the dance floor was Irene, who had sneaked down the staircase behind their backs. "Please don't go," the singer's voice rose above drums and guitars, "please don't go."

Irene, whose aggressive desire for immediate friendship filled them with incomprehensible anguish, was dancing as though with each of her movements she were fighting for life. The violent jerks of her slender, almost boyish body were turning more and more into an erotic plea for an understanding hand that would pull her out of quicksand before it swallowed her altogether. Her brown, creased and in parts ragged long skirt swept round her ankles now this way, now that way, but always in the opposite way than her hair, which, dishevelled and stuck together, circled around her head like the nimbus of a holy woman who had fallen into Lucifer's trap. Just before the music ended she collapsed and remained motionless on the floor.

They ran down the staircase and bent over her. She opened her eyes and looked first at Peter and then at Sylvia. "I'm sorry," she whispered in a weak voice. "I haven't eaten anything for four days."

They helped her to her feet, and leaning on Peter's shoulder she managed to get up the flight of stairs, across the courtyard into the reception, and from there into the restaurant, where she collapsed on a chair at the first table. The young porter brought her backpack. It was only twenty to seven, but the porter whispered something to the waiter, who said they could order. All they had was rice with beef stew. "Oh, please, please," said Irene and, trembling from exhaustion, rested her head on her arms, which she had crossed on the table.

Cold water? Yes, but unfortunately only in the bar, which opens at nine. Beer? The same. The only drink available was warm water. Peter and Sylvia left most of the food on their plates. The beef was unchewable. But Irene ate everything, including the beef pieces, which she didn't chew but simply swallowed. In the end she picked up the plate with both hands and licked it clean.

"Would you like another portion?" Peter asked. "Yes I would," she replied without the slightest embarassment. The second portion disappeared in the same way as the first, only faster, and this time too, openly as a child, she cleaned the plate with her tongue. "Oh," she sighed when she finished, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Peter paid and they said good bye. They didn't want to wait until nine, they were too tired. Outside it was already dark, but not a light to be seen anywhere. The young porter said the hotel phone was out of order, so he could not call a taxi, and it was unlikely that one would come past before nine. Fortunately Sylvia had a torch in her bag, so they set off along the winding road through the fields, hoping to make it back to the Black Star Hotel. Somewhere halfway Irene fell behind and vomited both portions of beef stew into the ditch. When they finally reached the hotel and paused in front of the entrance to say goodbye, she said, "I'm so grateful to you. Shall we have one more drink?"

They went into the restaurant and approached the bar. "Beer," Peter said. The women didn't feel like arguing either, so they ordered the only thing they were sure to have. But the waiter leaned back as if announcing something he was particularly proud of. "Not at all," he said. "Beer is available only at lunch time."

"Well, what do you have, for God's sake?" Peter asked. "We're thirsty." The waiter waved at the shelves behind him. "Whiskey, rum." They also had lights all of a sudden. Because it's Saturday, the waiter explained. That's why the ventilators don't work. If they work, there is no light, and vice versa.

They moved to a table in the corner and ordered three whiskies. Peter was worried that Irene's empty stomach wouldn't take kindly to an assault by straight

liquor. It was unlikely it had recovered sufficiently after all that convulsive vomiting. But she downed the whiskey in one go and humbly asked if she could have another. Peter passed her wish on to the waiter. She didn't down the second drink, but rolled the glass with her fingers as if looking for the right words for some sort of confession. She was overtaken by Sylvia, who asked her in which hotel she was staying. "That's what I wanted to tell you," Irene responded gratefully. "For some time now I 've been sleeping rough. I've run out of money. Would I be going too far if I asked you to let me wash in your room?"

Peter looked at Sylvia, who without the slightest hesitation said yes, of course, no problem at all, why not do it right now. "And you can pay," she said to him before taking Irene to the room. Peter ordered another whiskey and tried to think calmly about what was happening. Everything was moving a little too fast. Only four hours had passed since they met her at the bush taxi station, and yet he felt as though they had spent together five days. Irene's presence had filled the bleak desolation of the place, and of their journey through Africa, with something that was, although unspoken, pregnant with a foreboding of something dark, even dangerous. He shuddered at the thought that they knew next to nothing about her. He settled the bill and picked up the backpack she had left on the chair; it wouldn't have been safe to leave it there. He hoisted it onto his back and with a heavy step, strangely excited, climbed the stairs to the second floor.

The bathroom door was slightly ajar; he could hear the sounds of running water and vigorous splashing. Sylvia was making the bed, smoothing out the sheet, tucking it under the mattress. "Good," she said, "you haven't forgotten the backpack." There followed a heated exchange. We know nothing about her, Peter kept repeating, nothing at all. Let her shower and go.

"Listen," Sylvia said. "She is tired and unhappy. Something happened to her. Something terrible, I would say. But I have no intention of prying into it, and neither will you. It's obvious that she would like to forget something. Let her sleep here, the bed is big enough for three, we can't throw her out on the street."

It's not a question of throwing her out on the street, Peter said. According to her that's where she was before they, by the will of God-knows-what peculiar fate, ran into her, and if they hadn't spoken to her she wouldn't have seen them, and would still have been where she was. And where she will be when she dresses and leaves their room, so that they can go to bed, tired as they both are.

We may be tired, admitted Sylvia, but she is tired a hundred times more. Has Africa really turned him into a complete paranoiac; what could possibly happen to them if they allowed her to spend the night? And if he doesn't want this, they can hire a room for her, there must be no shortage of vacant ones, but they are not sending her out into the night, and that's that.

The argument was cut short by Irene, who came from the bathroom. Her washed hair was straight, smooth and shiny. She looked completely different. She had wrapped herself in Peter's towel. "What a relief," she sighed. "Like being born into a new life." Then she noticed her backpack, and another wave of joy swept over her. There was nothing fake about it; it was genuine, almost childlike in its sincerity. She opened the backpack and rummaged inside it. "Everything's dirty," she said plaintively, "I have nothing to wear."

Peter felt an urge to get away from this, so he went to the bathroom to take a shower. Under the jets of water, still warm from the heat of the day, he tried to figure out the nature of his feelings. Was it anger, or was it excitement? Their journey, which had started to lose its purpose, and their lives, on which the desolation of Africa had started to inflict aching wounds, had suddenly been disrupted by a third person, who brought with her something new and yet familiar, something long missing: the feeling that the only source of life's energy is the relationship with the Other, and that the commonest source of pain is also the only way to salvation.

As soon as he closed the tap and reached for the towel, he found himself in complete darkness. They were left without electricity. He dried himself, wrapped the towel round his waist and felt his way out of the bathroom. First he ran against the wardrobe, then against the door which was ajar, and only then did he manage to move along the wall as far as the small table which he knew was standing opposite the bed. There was a flash of lightning, and in the split second of trembling light he saw that Sylvia and Irene were already asleep; Sylvia on the left side of the bed, Irene in the middle, with the right side waiting for him.

To avoid running into another piece of furniture, he waited for another flash of lightning. As soon as it came he moved to the bed and carefully, so as not

to wake them, stretched out on the side they had allocated to him. By agreement? But they were both asleep; what a ridiculous thought! He tried to fall asleep as soon as possible.

Then, suddenly, the noisy air-conditioning unit shuddered to a stop. In the silence that filled the room he could hear the breathing of the two women. Lightning was joined by thunder, and a tremendous storm was unleashed on the town. The wind pushed its way through the gaps in the window, and because it felt cool, Peter went to open it. He could see amazing configurations of lightning, dancing over the plain all the way to the horizon. The first drops of rain hit the tin roof of the hotel with the weight of dead pigeons. The sound increased to torrential hissing. Thunder moved about like a drunken giant wearing metal clogs.

When he returned to the bed he heard Irene say, "I'm so afraid. Can you give me a hug?" In a flash of lightning he saw her lying on her back, propped up on her elbows, staring out of the window. He also saw that the towel into which she was wrapped had come undone and that she was lying there completely naked. The thunder was so violent that Sylvia couldn't have been asleep, but she pretended not to be aware of what was happening. Peter decided to do the same. But already after the next crash of thunder Irene shuddered and repeated, "I'm so afraid. Please, please give me a hug."

She started to sob. There was nothing false about it, the crying was subdued, and deeply shocking. It was Sylvia who first surrendered to the immeasurable sadness that filled her gasping sobs. She placed her arm round Irene's waist and gently pulled her towards her. "Everything will be fine," she said in a comforting tone, like a mother to a child. Irene turned towards her and placed her right arm round her shoulders. "Both," she said. "You must both hug me."

There was a silence in which a long, trembling bolt of lightning lit up two embraced women and a man who was lying next to them not knowing what to do. If the woman in the middle had not been naked, and if this nakedness hadn't seemed calculated rather than accidental, he probably wouldn't have hesitated for quite so long. But for Peter the whole situation was something completely new, and he was fast losing ground, falling into a black emptiness in which he could sense nothing that would stop him before he broke the barrier between normalcy and madness, and found himself where most of what he still managed to control in his life would remain no more than memory.

Then he heard Sylvia's voice. "Why are you so cold?" she said with more than a hint of reproach. "Why are you so," she looked for the right word, "ungenerous?"

Fine, Peter thought. If my wife sees generosity as my readiness to embrace a naked woman lying between us, then I will do so, and let her take the responsibility for everything that may follow. He turned around and placed his right arm first round Irene's waist, and then, encountering there Sylvia's arm, moved it a little lower onto her hips.

He could feel how she twisted her body slightly to snuggle up to him, pressing her buttocks against his legs. With his arm dislodged, he moved it up to place it round her shoulders, but as he did so, before completing the movement, she raised her right arm just enough for his to end up on her chest. Before he could pull it away, she placed her right hand on the back of his and pressed it against herself in such a way that his palm came to rest on her left breast.

"Now it's okay," she said. "Now the storm can last forever."

Her breasts were small, but the nipples were not: swollen, erect and full they seem to be screaming for rough caressing, for gentle kneading, for an approval of the arousal with which they responded to the touch of someone else's skin. Outside, the storm weakened, thunder withdrew across the plain, and the rain settled down to a monotonous murmur. Peter could feel Irene's fingers on his, and his on her breast, while with his elbow he could feel Sylvia's arm, with which she was holding Irene round the waist, and which, a few inches higher from where Irene's buttocks had snuggled tightly against him, was touching the skin on his belly, now also bare, for his towel, too, had come undone and left him skin to skin with a stranger his wife was holding as tightly as if she wanted to protect her. From him, or from barely controllable desires that had welled up inside her?

"You are so good to me," whispered Irene in the dark. "I want to repay you. Both of you. I'm yours, if you want me."

Silence. Thunder still rumbled somewhere in the distance, but the flashes of lightning were too far away now to light up the bed on which they lay in the expectation of a resolution, astonished at the barely

believable difference between day and night, at the speed with which the world had turned upside down, at the gap between desires and judgement that kept reminding them that such a thing cannot be the fruit of an impulse, but of clear decision for which they would need at least two months, if not three.

"I like you both very much," continued Irene, and gently squeezed the back of Peter's hand which was feeling the burning roughness of her swollen nipple.

After a while it was Sylvia who spoke first.

"Thank you," she said. "It would be difficult to imagine a nicer present. But you're ours already. If we wanted more of you we might end up losing you, which wouldn't make any of us very happy. Besides, we might lose each other, which wouldn't make you happy either. Right?"

A good twenty minutes must have passed before Irene replied in a whisper, "Right." Soon after that, safe in their embrace, she fell asleep. The storm finally faded away: the last rumble of thunder in the distance, the last flash of lightning, the last push of the wind, the last trickle of rain. Silence. Once again stifling heat began to return to the room. In less than half an hour they were all bathing in sweat. This was another, quite welcome reason for loosening their three-way embrace and moving away from each other in the hope they might yet catch some sleep.

The next morning there was no sign of the torrential downpour; the thirsty soil had absorbed every drop of moisture. They hired a taxi and drove off towards Kumasi. Irene was glad she wouldn't have to hang around any longer, waiting for a truck going south. She had spent eleven days in Bolgatanga, and although during that time some vehicles did set off towards the south of the country, neither seemed reliable enough for her to entrust it with her new, fresh, recently regained freedom. They didn't want to pry into what exactly she wanted to say with these words; they were hoping that sooner or later she herself would feel the desire to explain them.

The road was deteriorating at an alarming rate. Little potholes were becoming large potholes, and it wasn't long before the driver had to resort to a dangerous slalom in his attempt to avoid them. But he was so clumsy, or tired, that he often drove right into those he most tried to avoid.

At four in the afternoon a large truck came towards them. The driver saw it too late; he twisted the steering wheel to the right so suddenly that they left the road and ended up in a wide brambly ditch. If the brambles hadn't brought the car to a halt, they probably wouldn't have stopped at all; the driver appeared to be so confused that he never even thought of applying the brakes. The ditch was too deep for the car to get back onto the road on its own; the driver said they would have to wait for someone to help them. He didn't seem too perturbed. They climbed out of the car and stretched their limbs.

Irene set off across an empty field, towards the late afternoon sun, which was breaking through rainclouds and painting the landscape with melancholy light. She walked slowly, with her head lowered, her hands numbly swinging. After about two hundred yards she stopped. For a while she stood there as if not knowing what to do. Then she sank to a crouching position, buried her face in her hands and began to shudder. Peter and Sylvia looked at each other. After the previous night, this was the first time that they didn't immediately avert their eyes. Even so the look did not last more than two seconds. But it was enough; they followed Irene across the field. Crouching next to her, one on each side, they put their arms round her shoulders.

"Can you see the door in the horizon?" she asked, wiping tears off her cheeks with the back of her hand. "There," she pointed across the desolate plain without any trees or villages, "there should be a door there. But I can't see any. Some people can. Through that door they can enter a parallel world, in which everything is turned on its head. In that world injustice is done to those who in this world do injustice to others. I used to wish that I would find that door and pass through it. But I no longer do. Now I know that it's easier to suffer than to cause suffering to others."

While behind them a passing truck, using a metal rope, tried to pull their car out of the ditch, Irene talked as if she, too, had to pull herself out of a hole into which she had driven her life; she talked fast, as if afraid she would run out of time. She was running away from her husband, a French rascal, with whom she had lived in Niamey, the capital of Niger. They had met while she was holidaying on the French Riviera. She liked him because he was witty, daring, adventurous, everything that in those days she longed for. And when he said that he wouldn't mind spending a few years in Africa, she went along with him. But his business ventures failed, and he began to sell

her to other businessmen and to local bigshots. He taped the encounters in hotel rooms with a hidden video camera, and then sold the tapes to those whose lives, marriages and careers could be ruined by them. And all the while he was promising that this wouldn't last very long. All they needed was enough money to return to Europe, open a shop with African carvings, and start leading a normal life. First a year passed, then one more, then another, and still there wasn't enough money. In the meantime he had taken to beating her. All her doubts, self-disgust and desperate pleas drove him to a murderous frenzy which he could drown only in alcohol.

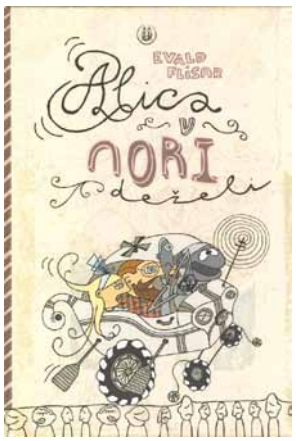
One day she had paused on the bridge across the River Niger, a swampy, lazy body of water so wide one can hardly see from one side to the other. She stood there watching the women who were standing up to their knees in water, washing clothes. She felt a sudden urge to get soaped, washed, wrung, dried and ironed like one of the shirts in the hands of those laundry women. She wanted to be like new, without a trace of old stains. She looked across the river where everything seemed dead and yellowed. On the other side, the savannah ran as far as Volta, Mali, Senegal. She stared into that hollow emptiness and at the end of it imagined a door through which she could leave this world, in which, she felt, there was nowhere to run. In the end she convinced herself that such a door existed, and that she couldn't see it because it was too far. One day she threw some clothes into her backpack and set off towards the horizon. But the invisible door kept moving away, it refused to wait for her.

"Forgive me," she whispered. "In your company I experienced the first true goodness in more than five years. That's why I offered myself to you. I believed that love in the embrace of goodness would cleanse me. Now I see that I, too, simply wanted to use you. I'm sorry."

They drove on. The car had a battered door, scratched mud-guards, and a broken front light. The driver wasn't happy. The night had announced itself, but was approaching slowly. And then, suddenly, everything changed! Rising on both sides of the road were the magnificent, incredibly high walls of the Ashanti jungle. Savannah, the aching yellow emptiness, had finally vanished. Here there were again unstoppable growth, opulent greenery and warm moisture. Twilight was turning to darkness. And when it got dark, the horizon moved closer, and with it the invisible door, through which now even Peter and Sylvia would have liked to enter the parallel world. Or at least return to the Black Star Hotel, to the midnight embrace, in which the soul of their fellow wanderer could have cleansed itself.

Evald Flisar

Alice in Crazyland



ALICE IN CRAZYLAND (original title *Alica v nori deželi*), short-listed for *Večernica*, the highest national award for juvenile literature, in 2010, is an exceptionally funny book that delights young and adult readers alike. It follows the adventures of Alice (yes, the one from "Alice in Wonderland") who is now twelve (a holder of three MA degrees) and her uncle Jumper, a renowned economic adviser and saviour of collapsing states. Bound for Trinidad and Tobago they are washed ashore on a large island called Poteroonia. This country is of course a nightmarish vision of the end-game of our own civilisation: having exhausted all natural resources except a claylike substance called poti, the Poteroonians have no choice but to use it as a means of propelling and sustaining their economy. So everything is made of poti, even cars (Potiyota Mark 2), furniture, trees etc. Unfortunately, because they have to dig the last layers of poti from under their capital, Pottington, they need an increasing number of supporting pillars to prevent the collapse of the city, so they have to break most of their products within days of buying them (for which they earn awards). To get enough supporting material they organize National Destruction Days. Professor Jumper is engaged to work out a solution for their predicament, but he finds it hard to balance the conflicting (self)interests of leading Poteroonians (such as Pots, Potsy-Wotsy, Poteroonko, Poterspot, Poterolla, Potiella and a host of others with similar-sounding names), and the inglorious end of this ludicrous society (so reminiscent of our own) seems inescapable. Even serious critics have admitted that, reading this book, they have found themselves laughing out loud. (120 pages)

Do you remember Alice in Wonderland? Evald Flisar has decided to tell us a story about what happened to her at the age of twelve, and because he has done it with »childlike enthusiasm« the book is very funny. Alice is now twelve, has three MA degrees and is a researcher into human stupidity... Not only the young but adult readers as well will be impressed by the originality of the author's imagination, and both will be offered a chance to search for parallels in the sorry state of contemporary society...
F.Žumer, OTROK IN DRUŽINA

In Flisar's *Alice* an allusion to the collapse of Western civilisation is easy for all to see. The bearer of positive values is a twelve-year old girl, and we may ask ourselves why the author has chosen a girl instead of a boy. Possibly because of the principle of cooperation as opposed to competitivness? The girl is the bearer of progress, order and sensible solutions. Literature for the young needs more hope, for the child is a symbol of new beginning, change, incorruptibility. What lifts Flisar's book above the current literary production for the young is not only a clear warning that unrestrained chaos, dystopia and consumerism lead to a cataclysmic end of our civilisation, but also the fact that the author has succeeded in passing on this message without preaching and moralizing...
Milena Mileva Blažič, SODOBNOST

Is this what the author is trying to tell us? That the world he describes in his book is actually the world we live in? Well, I have a message for him. It is irresponsible to draw attention to the mistaken path on which mankind has found itself by writing books about it, no matter how funny. To frighten young people, let alone children, with warnings that the ground on which we are standing is getting thinner by the minute is, to my mind, regrettable. Has the author forgotten that he, too, was once young? How would *he* have felt if his teachers had fed him with suggestions that the world is less perfect than he had been led to believe? Children should be spared harsh truths until the age of twenty-five at least. Then they should decide for themselves.
Peter Poterunkovič, PREFACE

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

Alice in Crazyland

Alice suddenly awoke from the black night and saw a blue sky above her. She noticed two surprising facts as she came to: first that she was lying soaked to the skin on a sandy beach next to a foamy sea, and, second, that somebody else was lying on the same beach, not far away from her, and no less wet. It was her Uncle Jumper. Together with his backpack.

"Uncle Jumper!" Alice exclaimed. "I don't think I've ever been so happy to see you!"

Professor Jumper sat up and looked at her in amazement.

"What happened?"

"We were travelling to Trinidad and Tobago," Alice lied, "when a tidal wave triggered by an underground earthquake struck, and threw our boat into the air as if it were no heavier than a box of matches. Most of the other travellers drowned but we were washed up onto this desert island."

"I am not in the habit of swearing," said Professor Jumper, "but at this moment, the devil can drag me to hell, I wish I were!"

He walked a few steps along the beach, then a few steps toward the sea, then a few steps back. Then he folded his arms over his chest, lifted his head as if he were staring far across the sea, and suddenly spoke again.

"We are standing on a beach on the island of Trinidad and Tobago," he announced. "Regardless of one thing or another, we are precisely where we intended to be."

"But Uncle Jumper," Alice politely interjected. "Trinidad and Tobago are two islands, not one. And both with lush tropical greenery. Look around. There's not a single blade of grass on this island!"

"As soon as we go farther inland, palms will be swaying above our heads, so too will the sweet smell of pineapples and oranges. A true paradise. You'll see!" He put on a fresh shirt, reached for his drenched backpack, and said decisively: "Let's go!"

"Uncle Jumper," Alice stubbornly remained in her place. "I have serious doubts."

"So do I," said the deep voice of a man in the near vicinity.

Professor Jumper and Alice were so frightened that they froze for nearly five seconds. Then they turned and could hardly stop themselves from exclaiming together: "Oh my goodness!"

An unusual man was standing and observing them from not far away. He was a head taller than Uncle Jumper and five times thinner, almost malnourished by the look of him, slightly bent in the shoulders, grey skin and greying hair. Indeed, he was grey from head to toe. He wore strange clothes that hung on his thin frame. They were also grey and terribly wrinkled, made from something that could hardly be called cloth. He held in his hand a grey briefcase that was so large it might have been a suitcase, and he wore grey clogs on his feet. He looked as if he had been rolling in ashes for five days or more. The one part of him that was not grey were his light bulging eyes, which leapt with surprise from Alice to Uncle Jumper and then back again.

"Who are you?" Alice asked bravely.

"And who are you?" retorted the gentleman with bulging eyes. Then he looked at the professor and added: "And who are you?"

Professor Jumper straightened his posture as he hadn't in a long time: "I am Professor Jumper from Slovenia, a world renowned expert who often appears on television. Your government has hired me as consultant for economic affairs because you are very poor and soon you will have nothing to eat. Judging by your appearance, the situation is much more serious than I expected. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that you are a member of the welcoming committee."

The grey gentleman circled around the professor and observed him more closely. Then he walked around Alice who seemed to make a better impression on him.

"No, sir, I am not a member of the welcoming committee. I am the head of the bureau that issues permits for aliens that land on our beaches." He opened his grey briefcase, took out a handful of forms, and handed them to Uncle Jumper. "Fill out these ten forms and sign each one twenty-one times. In your own hand."

Professor Jumper did not refuse the offered papers, though he also did not take them right away.

"I'll do that," he said, "under one condition. That I may fill them out in Japanese and sign each one five hundred times. In somebody else's hand."

"Bravo, Uncle Jumper!" Alice expressed her moral support.

"Not a problem, sir," said the grey gentleman who did not appear perturbed at all. "Although in such cases, the rule applies that you must fill out the forms with three pens simultaneously and sign your first and last name at the same time with large and small letters."

"Who comes up with these rules?" Alice protested.

"The committee for coming up with stupid rules," the man answered. "Who else?"

"Alice," the professor seemed suddenly confused. "Say something!"

"I think what this pleasant gentleman is trying to tell us is that the inhabitants of Trinidad and Tobago have a sense of humour."

"Trinidad and Tobago?" the grey gentleman gaped. "What's that?"

"That, my dear chap," Professor Jumper raised his voice, "is the country in which we are standing right now!"

"The name of this country, sir, is Poteroonia."

"Poteroonia?" exclaimed Alice.

"Exactly right, miss," responded the grey gentleman.

The professor could no longer restrain himself. "Listen, my friend. Here you are in the middle of the day, in your work place, as drunk as a lord. I shall have to report this. What is your name please?"

"Pots, sir," the gentleman responded pleasantly. "And I shall have to vaccinate you against poti fever. I am also the head of sanitary services."

He took from his briefcase a gigantic syringe, so huge that neither Alice nor her uncle had ever seen a larger one. "The needle is long but, in fact, we had to make it even longer. Some people have very thick skin, you see. Now close your eyes and lean over."

"I have back problems." Professor Jumper searched for an excuse.

With a sudden gesture, the man called Pots pulled the glasses from the professor's face and threw them at his feet.

"Alice," the professor wailed. "I can't see anything."

He bent over and patted the sand in front of him. Alice leaned over and helped him to find his glasses. When they were both leaning over, Pots plunged the long needle into each of their behinds, first the professor's and then his niece's.

"Ooooow!" they said one after another. And then again: "Ooooow!"

"There," Pots put the syringe back into his briefcase. "Now you can give me your luggage."

The professor had put on the glasses that Alice handed to him. He could hardly overcome his desire to lunge at Pots and throw him to the ground. But instead, he rocked on his toes, almost hopping, and said: "I cannot express my horror over your behaviour except by saying directly that I am absolutely speechless!"

"Excellent," Pots calmly said as he dragged both backpacks across the sand and across the grey plains toward the interior of the island until he and they were nothing more than points in the distance.

Alice and Uncle Jumper have indeed, in their astonishment, lost the power to speak. When they finally regained it, Alice asked her uncle: "What do you think we should do?"

"I think we should take advantage of this moment and escape."

"Where?" asked Alice. "Back to sea or toward the interior of the island?"

"To the police. In order to report this disgraceful theft. How could we be so stupid?"

"There was nothing of value in my backpack," Alice shook her head. "Only a cheese sandwich and an apple."

"Do you know what was in mine?" Uncle Jumper was growing increasingly agitated. "The manuscript of my newest book: *How to solve the economic problems of the world in one single stroke*. I would have certainly won a Nobel Prize for ecolosophy. Maybe even two!"

"You can write it again."

"Are you mad? It took me five years to write!"

Uncle Jumper's face had become so red from anger that it was glowing. Soon, thought Alice, it will explode and singe his beard.

"Good day, sir and madam," a man's voice in the near vicinity suddenly announced. Once again, Alice and Professor Jumper froze for a second. The voice was nothing like the voice of the so-called Pots who had just robbed them; it was more high-pitched, almost like a mouse, while Pots' voice had reminded them of a rat. Uncle Jumper suspected that another criminal had appeared from who knows where. When they turned, they saw a quite heavy man in uniform beaming stupidly at them.

"Police?" Professor Jumper asked, growing cheerier again.

"Something like that," the man responded, a pleasant and idiotic smile pulling at the corner of his lips. He was about as tall as the professor and approximately as fat, surprisingly, given the malnourished version of the previous local. He also gave the impression of having rolled in ashes for five days.

"May I help you?" he inquired.

"Absolutely," said the professor who had decided to report the theft immediately. "An escaped lunatic just double-crossed us with some crazy half-baked story…"

"Just a moment, sir," the solicitous policeman interrupted, "your watch, please."

The professor hardly knew why, but he simply handed over the water-resistant Swatch watch that the grateful students of last year's graduating class of the Ljubljana School of Economics had given him.

"And yours, miss," the police officer turned to Alice. She also handed over her wristwatch as if she were in a trance. Perhaps it was the expression on the policeman's face; each feature gave the impression that he could be trusted.

"And your bracelet," he reached out his soft greasy fingers. "And necklace. And your hair barrette, miss. And all of your rings."

Alice had three rings: silver, gold, and copper. She rotated them each day so none of her fingers would get tired of the rings. Because of this, it would be difficult to say which of the rings was on which finger at the moment. We can only reliably say that all three soon found their way into the hand of the pleasant police officer; right after her gold bracelet, her silver necklace, and her hair barrette made from a mixture of opal, ruby, and nephrite.

Alice liked her beautiful and precious things. And yet now she handed them over to the pleasant policeman as if it were the most normal thing to do.

"Thank you," the policeman smiled. "Goodbye."

He stuffed everything he had collected into his jacket pocket, turned, and, despite his girth, hurried away across the sandy plains toward the interior of the island until he too was only a small point in the distance.

"Goodbye," Alice and the professor said together, waving.

But the man was in a terrible hurry and didn't turn round even once.

Then they stood on the beach for nearly five minutes and looked at the sand in front of them. They didn't dare to look each other in the eyes.

"Uncle," Alice finally addressed him, "do you think we did something stupid?"

"No, why?" responded Professor Jumper with no real conviction. "The police officer suspected that a dangerous thief was in the vicinity and he decided to place our most precious belongings in safe custody."

"Kick me," said Alice. "Maybe I'll wake up."

"I'd rather slap you," retorted Uncle Jumper.

Alice and Professor Jumper began to trade blows. Slaps echoed down the beach. Slap, crash, bong. Bang, bang, boom. Soon they were so dazed that they didn't even know how long they'd been slapping each other. It continued for some time longer.

"Are you awake yet?" Alice finally asked.

"Not exactly," answered Uncle Jumper, "but I'm badly swollen. It's good that I took my glasses off otherwise they'd just be broken shards. Why are you hitting me so hard?"

"To wake you up if this is a dream. But apparently it's not."

"Do you know what?" Uncle Jumper said. "We shall simply have to adapt to events."

"Wise," said a man's voice in the near vicinity.

This time they didn't freeze at all. They jumped up lightly and turned around in the air. When they landed on the ground again they saw the same grey malnourished bandit who had stolen their luggage and was now offering them some sort of clogs: a small pair for Alice and a larger one for the gobsmacked Uncle Jumper.

"Your shoes, sir. And yours, miss."

"I think there's been some sort of mistake," said the professor.

"And I think there hasn't been some sort of mistake," said Pots and placed the larger pair of clogs in front of the professor's feet. Then he stood up and slapped him across the face.

"Oh my," remarked Alice. "I also think that there hasn't been some sort of a mistake."

"I think there has been…" the professor started.

"There hasn't been," said Pots and slapped him again.

"Listen you," the professor said angrily. "Just a few minutes ago a policeman took my valuable watch and my niece's most valuable jewellery, and that was the

second robbery we have experienced on this island, and now you offer me some sort of…. what are those clogs even made from?"

"They're made from poti, sir," Pots responded. "With an emphasis on the o. As in dotty. A person can occasionally be dotty. In other words, a person can sometimes be mistaken." And he slapped the professor once again. "And sometimes not."

"Alice, what is poti?" Uncle Jumper turned to his niece again. She was standing quietly next to him and looking with interest at the offered clogs.

"I think it has to do with…." she started in a dreamy state of reflection. "Aha, I know… it is most definitely… or maybe not… it is… aha… in short," she concluded. "Why don't you ask this refined gentleman?"

"Sir…" the professor turned to Pots – and immediately received another slap. "Why do you keep slapping me?"

"One moment," Pots responded, "and there will be an informative lecture on the subject."

He took a few steps away, pulled a small clay tablet from his pocket, dusted it off, stood up straight, and started to read:

"In many countries, consumer and other manufactured goods are made from iron. Aluminium. Concrete. Cotton. Wool. Animal skins. Wood. From materials that we do not have in Poteroonia. The only thing we have is poti. The upshot is that it is forbidden in Poteroonia to bring in anything that is not made from poti. There are some exceptions: those few things that cannot be made from poti. But happily such things do not exist."

He shoved the tablet, which apparently was also made from poti, back into the pocket of his poti jacket. "Did you understand the lecture?"

"Hardly," Alice said.

"Hmmm," said Professor Jumper, "who was the lecturer?"

"Professor Poter Pots," the malnourished fellow said with great pride. "The authorized provider of information to uninformed foreigners."

"Well, would Professor Poter Pots be able to inform me," asked Uncle Jumper, "where our belongings disappeared to, our luggage and other things?"

"They've been turned into jelly," Professor Poter Pots enthusiastically exclaimed, "Potsy-Wotsy ground them up!"

"Potsy-Wotsy?" asked Alice.

"Who else? Potsy-Wotsy is the official grinder of accidentally imported, undesirable, and extremely harmful materials and objects. Yours shoes are destined for a similar fate, once you finally take them off and put on these poti clogs. The sooner the better! Which is to say: now!"

Without speaking, Alice and Uncle Jumper took off their shoes and handed them to the impatient Pots. He tucked the shoes under his arm and walked across the sand into the grey interior of the country.

"Where are you going?" Professor Jumper called after him.

"To organize your transport," he yelled back.

"Uncle," Alice said when she was alone with the professor, "I fear that we have fallen into the underwater jaws of the Bermuda Triangle. We have fallen into a world that is so unreal that it almost feels as if it doesn't exist."

"As a philosopher, I would support you," Uncle Jumper responded, "but, as an economist, even things that cannot be held in the rational mind strike me as real: numbers, graphs, curves, financial crises. I personally believe that we are experiencing a small *personal* crisis of the consciousness, maybe self-consciousness, maybe only *self*-confidence. What do you think is on the other side of the sea? On what shore would we land if we jumped into the air right now and flew freely across the sea?"

"I think we'd land right in the middle of the ocean," Alice answered grimly. She put on the clogs and made a few awkward steps. They made an awful squeaking sound. "Well, at least we got something," she commented tartly.

But before Uncle Jumper could come up with a suitable answer, they heard an unusual roar: as if an orchestra were approaching, an orchestra of bulldozers and garbage trucks and race cars and rattling washing machines on the fastest spin cycles. Not at all pleasing to the ear, let alone for the spiritual calm our heroes so clearly needed.

An unusual vehicle appeared before them. Looking at it, it was almost impossible to determine if it looked more like a boat or an automobile or perhaps an unhappy combination of both, if not even a third thing. Or a fourth. The only matter that was not in doubt was that Poter Pots sat behind the wheel, and the pudgy fellow in the police uniform who must have been Potsy-Wotsy sat beside him.

"Taxi for you," the first said.

"And for you, miss," the second added.

"Where does the taxi driver intend to take us?" the professor asked.

"Around the corner and happily onward, as they say," Poter Pots exclaimed happily.

"Happily onward," Potsy-Wotsy repeated, clapping his hands like a child who has just arrived at the seaside.

"My goodness," Alice exclaimed, "how can you bear this racket? My ears will explode!"

"No good," Potsy-Wotsy exclaimed. "If you ears were made from poti, we would at least be able to make some minimal use of the fragments. But since they are not, they might as well stay where God put them. Ha-ha!" He slapped his hands on his knees and exclaimed again. "Ha-ha!"

"How noisy it must be on the highway!" Professor Jumper commented. "Without earplugs, a man could hardly survive."

"Sir!" Poter Pots exclaimed. He stepped out from behind the steering wheel, went to the professor and hugged him as if he were embracing a long lost brother. "Thank you. You have given me a wonderful idea for a new product made of poti. Poti earplugs! I see you are a first-class inventor."

Then he whispered into Uncle Jumper's ear: "We must make a private contract. It would be enormously beneficial to both of us. Of that I have no doubt!"

"Nor do I," the professor retorted and slapped Pots across the face. "Yet it all depends on which one of us learns our manners first."

"I agree," said Poter Pots and slapped the professor back. "If you please and welcome once again. Now I kindly ask you both to enter the taxi."

"One, two, three!" Potsy-Wotsy cried and slapped his thighs with his open hands.

"Alice," the professor discreetly turned to his niece, "what do you suggest?"

"I suggest that we adapt to the situation, Uncle Jumper," said Alice as she placed herself on one of the two uncomfortable seats in the taxi. "As you said, if we are destined for this adventure, and apparently we are, otherwise we would now be at home in our beds with our favourite books in our hands, we wouldn't gain much by resisting. As the gentleman said: around the corner and –"

"Happily onward!" exclaimed Potsy-Wotsy and once again slapped his palms against his thighs.

"What do you call this rattling vehicle, rattlemobile?" asked Professor Jumper as they left the grey beach behind them and turned onto the grey road that led into the grey distance all the way to the grey horizon. Other vehicles with unusual rattling shapes rattled toward them.

"Potiyota Mark 2 Super 16V," the driver proudly responded as he neatly avoided one of the oncoming rattlemobiles that had almost slammed into them.

"Do you have a lot of traffic accidents in this country?" Professor Jumper asked when he finally managed to catch his breath again.

"Not enough to fulfil the government quota," Poter Pots lamented. "It's a serious problem and we are doing our best to correct it. But you know how it is. Some people are just too frightened to unexpectedly drive into oncoming traffic."

"I'm not!" exclaimed Potsy-Wotsy and banged his hands on his thighs. "Why, I –"

Before he managed to explain the reasons for his fearlessness there was a terrible crash. It sounded so terrifying that more than half a book could be filled with detailed descriptions. But Alice and Uncle Jumper heard it for only a second before everything was doused in darkness. It would be difficult to say precisely how long the darkness lasted; the one thing about which there is no doubt at all is that afterwards the two were lying amidst the wreckage of the rattlemobile next to the driver Pots and the customs official Potsy-Wotsy.

"Oh," Professor Jumper was the first to speak. "My glasses!" he wailed.

"Here they are, Uncle Jumper!" Alice rummaged through the wreckage. "Are you alright?"

"I'm afraid not. I have a big gash in my head."

"Where?"

"Here!"

"That's your mouth, Uncle Jumper!"

"It was never so big before!"

"Close it and it'll shrink. The bigger problem is that we are without our driver and Posty-Wotsy."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the professor and jumped up and down to shake off the tiny shards and fragments. "It was possible to deal with the first fellow, but the second one, excuse the expression, is an idiot. I know that you are very accommodating, tolerant, politically correct and all that, but I simply cannot find a kinder word for him."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Jumper, but I thought he was very nice," said Alice. "He reminded me of two gentleman whom I once met in the country on the other side of the looking glass. The first was named Tweedledum, the second Tweedledee."

"Forget the past," said the professor, placing his glasses on his face with a sudden gesture. "Oh!" he jumped. "They're still here!

"And not only that!" Poter Pots rose victoriously from the wreckage, brushing off a few pieces from his nose, ears, and hair.

"And not only that!" Posty-Wotsy stood up from the wreckage immediately after Poter Pots, the shards and fragments falling from him on their own.

"I don't remember when I was last so pleased with myself!" exclaimed Poter Pots. "Both cars completely destroyed! I can claim with no exaggeration that today was a very productive day!"

"Who was at fault for the accident?" Professor Jumper asked.

"I was!" Poter Pots defiantly asserted responsibility. "Who else? I have you as witnesses. You saw how I deliberately drove onto the other side of the road. You won't, I hope, after all I've done for you, fail me now!"

"You mustn't!" Posty-Wotsy chimed in.

A rattlemobile, very similar to a police car, with a blue light flashing on the roof, pulled up beside them. Here we go, thought Alice: three hours of filling out forms, three hours of bickering, two hours of taking finger prints, five hours listening to witnesses, four hours measuring the distance and drawing the scene of the accident, all together a day and a half. What a wonderful beginning!

But it happened quite differently: the police officers who should have recorded and confirmed how the accident happened, whether the guilty party had drunk too much perhaps, stepped out of their rattlemobile, stood at the edge of the road, and tried to hitch a ride. Hardly had they stuck their thumbs in the air when a kind lady picked them up and victoriously rode away.

"After me," Poter Pots gestured, heading toward the rattlemobile that the police officers had left on the side of the road. "After me!" Posty-Wotsy repeated, after Poter Pots. "After them!" Alice said, after Posty-Wotsy. There was nothing for Uncle Jumper to do but to accept the will of the majority. Less than five minutes had passed before they were on the road again.

"You stole a police car," remarked Uncle Jumper right after they avoided another collision by a hair.

"Stole?" Poter Pots laughed. "When you cause a car crash, the police are required to provide you immediately with another vehicle. That's the law. With a little luck, this one won't last long either!"

"Are you alright, Uncle Jumper?" Alice turned to the Professor who was as pale as a wall.

"I have the feeling," Uncle Jumper responded, "that there will soon be another terrible crash…."

And that's exactly what happened. And then two times more during the drive to the capital city of Potington. And a third time on the outskirts of town. Four traffic accidents in the space of an hour! It was a good thing that the maximum speed of a Poteroonian rattlemobile was only thirty kilometres per hour. Twice during the drive, Professor Jumper asked if it wouldn't make more sense to park somewhere and continue on foot.

"No, no," Poter Pots shook his head decisively each time, "on foot we can't cause any crashes."

In fact, Alice and her uncle were not so much troubled by the snail's pace but more by the bad suspension. Neither one of them had experienced such jerking, shaking, and jumping in their lives. Alice could somehow take it but she was worried about her uncle who had a bad back. If it became necessary to jump high and far all of a sudden, an additional injury might turn out to be a fatal impediment. But Poter Pots pressed on regardless and so, despite four crashes and eight shattered vehicles, they finally arrived at the main street of Potington Town with no serious injuries aside from the usual bumps and bruises.

There was such a terrible noise of rattlemobiles crowding one past the other that a person would have to shout at the top of his lungs for someone sitting next to him to hear. But conversation in Poter Pots' rattlemobile was not hindered because of that; rather Alice and Professor Jumper were simply speechless. Potington Town was so peculiar that they could not have imagined it in their wildest dreams.

Everything was made of the same grey clay: buildings, sidewalks, streets, traffic signs, buses, rattlemobiles, rubbish bins, even the signs on stores. The people were also all grey and they marched up and down with grim faces; the traffic conductors were grey and numerous and were mostly clearing away the wreckage from crashed rattlemobiles that collided into each other as they went around corners as if it were the

national sport of Poteroonians. They also cleared away the remains of objects that flew through windows of high buildings from time to time and smashed against the sidewalks: chairs, tables, cupboards, pans, anything you can imagine. Horrible, Alice thought, this city is sick with a destructive fever. She didn't say this aloud, because in any case nobody would have heard her.

They stopped in front of one of the larger houses at one of the larger squares and walked up a grey staircase to the grey third floor where Poter Pots invited them into a grey room with grey furniture and a window that gave on to the noisy bustle of the square. Even inside it was impossible to avoid the noise though it subsided enough to allow conversation. Under the condition, of course, that you didn't whisper but raised your voice as loud as you could.

"You've come to me for tea," Poter Pots announced. He gestured to Potsy-Wotsy who immediately brought to the middle of the room a little table made of poti and three little chairs made of poti, and then disappeared through the door into the neighbouring room.

"It looks like everything is made of poti," commented Professor Jumper who seemed unable to move from the window.

"Even the trees," Alice added.

"All my idea if I may say so," the otherwise pale grey Poter Pots glowed. "When the last real tree disappeared, we decided to put replacements on the street. For decoration. We organized a competition with prizes, which is why all the trees in Potington are unique, each made from the first to the last by a reputable artist."

All of a sudden, the floor started to shake. Professor Jumper reached out his hand for something and Alice also wobbled about. But Poter Pots remained calm. A hollow ringing sounded from deep under the city; it echoed until the floor grew still.

"An earthquake?" the professor asked when he was able; he feared earthquakes more than anything else in the world.

"We used to call them earthquakes," Poter Pots explained, "but we haven't for a long time. Then we started to call this kind of event a first-level alarm, then a second-level alarm, and finally a lowest-level alarm. Then we got used to them and started to see them as an everyday thing. Which they are. Nothing worse happened than that the wind blew through the mines under the city."

"You extract poti from under the city," the professor asked in horror.

"It isn't anywhere else to be found. All the poti is under the city. As much as there is left."

"Oh my god," the Professor looked in horror at the floor beneath his feet.

"Do you mean to say," Alice raised her voice, "that the city could collapse into the hollow mines beneath us?"

"Of course," Poter Pots replied, completely unconcerned. "It could happen any time. But since nobody knows when it will happen, we have decided to live as if it will happen any minute. But never this minute."

Evald Flisar - Selected theatre productions

Evald Flisar - a selection of book covers