

GALAXY 42

ONLINE SF&F MAGAZINE

COLLECTED STORIES 2

EDITED BY DANIEL TIMARIU AND CRISTIAN VICOL



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Galaxy 42 Online SFF Magazine

COLLECTED STORIES

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Collected Stories

Stories from our Galaxy

Dear reader,

This might be your first acquaintance with Romanian Sci-Fi and Fantasy literature. Which is great! A whole new world of Space Opera, Cyberpunk, Urban Fantasy, Military Sci-Fi, and Dark Fantasy awaits you, one specific to our country and culture – and, thank the Maker!, all of them free from everyone’s favorite medieval vampire – which makes this collection all the more original (and some would say exotic) – a must read. For Romanian SF&F has a long history, one dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, and is part of the European heritage of Sci-Fi and Fantasy arts and literature.

We are sure you are wondering what Galaxy 42 is. Well, it’s a SF&F magazine from Romania, and though it is relatively new (we are at our 8th monthly issue) the editorial staff is one with great experience (professional writers, translators, movie, literature and art critics, graphic designers etc.), and as such we have become the leading SF&F magazine in our country. You can check us out here: <https://galaxia42.ro/>. Don’t worry if you don’t speak Romanian. Part of our columns are in English as well.

The short stories you are about to read in this special issue, intended for Futuricon – Eurocon 2020, Rijeka, were published this year, 2020, in our magazine, and are written by some of the most talented contemporary SF&F Romanian authors, most of them prizewinners at national and international festivals and conferences (such as Eurocon) for the quality and originality of their novels and short stories. We really think you are going to enjoy this small collection of short stories, a sample of the really wonderful genre literature that is published today in Romania!

Read away!
The editors

LOVE ACCORDING TO 'TICKS'

by Dănuț Ungureanu

You have no idea what a 'tick' is? This comes as no surprise to me. At the time when Ixodes became extinct as a species, most of your elders had not yet seen the lights and wonders of this world. The tick passed away without anyone paying the slightest heed, following other, more outstanding species: the condor, the African elephant, the swan, which had been better loved and duly mourned. One might say that they are all the same in death.

I had just been posted on the surgical unit of the Sixth Fleet when the Shidizu trouble began. They had been watching from beyond the Solar System and they had launched their attack. I had been absolutely sure that I was going to spend the rest of my life patching up the fragmented bodies of our brave pilots and I knew very little about the battles raging in outer space.

I was dispensing aspirins left and right, getting light cases of insomnia and slight headaches - the common side effects of nights watches. This was for those who were still in one piece. The rest had no way of complaining. There were no injured.

The Shidizus had been driven well beyond Jupiter's satellites after committing atrocities which defy imagination. Now they were resting but sent back their spies. That is how the 'ticks' came, overcoming people's forgetfulness.

We still know very little about the 'ticks'. As a rule it would travel through space in the form as an insignificant protoplasm cloud organized on a few levels. The 'ticks' possess a mimetic memory which helps it become a very common material objects with a harmless appearance: a button, a lollipop or a spare wheel. It is also equipped with storage memory: the 'tick' stores information, the 'blood' of the victim it has been sent to spy on. Some ministry, a plant manufacturing weapons, some top echelon decision-maker in this war. As soon as the mission has been accomplished the plasma cloud takes off with the data.

Everything happened without anyone being aware because the 'ticks' used only the energy available in the environment. It was absurd to suspect a few boulders at the side of a road or some dead leaves or a straggling and lazy cloud. Within the next few months the Earth was full of such false objects which were nearly impossible to distinguish from the genuine ones, the more so as they also fulfilled the function of the object they were taken for. A 'tick' in the form of a pen nib was writing busily at the end of a fountain pen. Another, which had become an

automobile, was purring contentedly, its tank full of gas. Had the Fleet itself been contaminated the war would finished. These were days of terrible fright and apprehension.

Special mention must be made about their self-destructive systems. There were very few 'ticks' which could be captured 'alive'. Now I can be proud of myself for the fact that nearly all the stark madmen in the team for neutralizing 'ticks' wound up on my operation table: Stanis Rakelian, Wanda Rubberstring, Frederick III. Then there were the young 'trouble-shooters': Palomar, De Lasoul, Julio September. Even the famous Costas Telephonikis profited from my handiwork. After a memorable explosion I had the honor of using a dozen wound clips on a rather sensitive bodypart.

I don't remember who once said that a 'true blooded trouble-shooter' defends himself from a 'tick' explosion by closing his eyes and putting his fingers in his ears. I never thought for example that good old Diaz was a genuine 'trouble-shooter'. I took him for a very lucky guy. He never started working unless he was full of booze and then, expecting the explosion to be more devastating than the preceding one, his bosses evacuated ever larger areas.

De Lasoul was about twenty-five, six feet six tall, and weighed about one hundred kilos. He made a real show of his family life. Whenever he put his wife on public display the male personnel of the 'trouble shooting unit' had to admit he was entitled to his pride. They had two kids. It was only much later that I understood how the three of them could watch De Lasoul leave every day for his appointment with death without batting an eyelash.

Riff Kovalski, nicknamed counts of the Albino, had been born in a hangar. At twelve he had been interned in a reform school for several computer frauds. At seventeen he had already committed his first murder. At nineteen he had enrolled in the repression units of the Saturn colonies. Six months later, a captain frightened by young Kovalski's overzeal, pulled some strings and got rid of him. That very evening the captain tried 'by mistake' to light his cigar from a phosphorous grenade.

At twenty-two, having survived the latest famine and several blows on the head, Riff met De Lasoul at the army careers office.

Sitting comfortably in my armchair I can watch the film of the fortieth mission carried out by De Lasoul-Kovalski. It happened one beautiful autumn evening twelve years ago at the Ministry of War.

De Lasoul arrived at the scene of the incident a quarter of an hour after the Albino because one of his kids had fever. The building of the Ministry of War looked like an anthill turned upside-down. When he had reached the third floor he had to elbow his way through a unit of

cadets blocking the corridor who were yellow in the face with fear and ready to kill each other on short notice. Then he saw Kovalski.

Around the oval table in the conference hall were eight generals and two civilians, all rooted to their seats, vacant looks in their eyes and hardly breathing. Standing in the door, which had remained 'open', the Albino was watching them with an amused smile. They all seemed terrorized by the thought that they had to breathe.

The film is running on: The lamps on the ceiling are blindingly bright except one which flickers on and off at irregular intervals. All the things in the room seem brand new, the wall-to-wall carpeting is fluttering like grassland in the wind. In a corner is a statuette of Buddha smiling benignly and reassuringly, his arms crossed in his lap. A housefly alights on the divine face and explores it.

One of the generals is resting his hand on the veneer of the table top; the hand is trembling and wet with perspiration. Something in the upper left corner of the image catches my eye. The air is shimmering and streaming without losing its transparency inside an imaginary cube, half a dozen inches on each side.

"Everybody on their asses on the floor," De Lasoul murmurs.

The thirty cadets and their commanding officer showed their perfect training by obeying the order immediately. In their eyes the blond man was God's emissary on earth. The generals hesitated until the Albino made a significant gesture by drawing his finger across his own throat.

"No one makes a move until I tell them so. No one opens their mouth. No one blows their nose. Take a nap."

They had a lot to do and the crowd would only make them irritable. But they could not ask the crowd to scam, for in its show no one left the theater before the final curtain. They squatted close together near the lock and held council.

"It burns," Kovalski growled.

The blond nodded his agreement. "This isn't the first diseased 'tick' seen. They lost control when they tried to recover it. I've no idea how unstable it is. It may go off at any moment."

De Lasoul eyes scanned the people in the corridor and inside the conference room. Thirty pairs of glazed eyes stared at him.

"Let me tell you something. We've uncovered a lot of these damned 'ticks'. All sort of them. Pipe ends, pencils, ceramic tiles, gloves. Even that one, remember? The Senator glass eye. He

never knew it until we took it out of his socket. But I've never come across a 'tick' which could become part of the air in a room. And I can't remember anyone else dealing with such a stunt."

Kovalski nodded silently.

"I think the Shidizus haven't tried this before," the blond went on. "This must be some kind of experiment. But not a very successful one."

The Albino scratched his head.

"Can you imagine how many people breathed this air? How many people are touched? They should be detected and taken to the cleaner's. Even you and I."

"You're right", agreed De Lasoul, "But it would be an impossible and useless attempt. The air conditioning system throws everything in the atmosphere. The city would be contaminated by now, unless the 'poison' got diluted somehow. But I think this didn't happen. The Shidizus' interest was to keep this 'tick' here in this room. They placed it here and here it stayed. They would have recovered it from here if it hadn't fallen 'sick'. A 'tick' is not trained to contaminate everything. When that happens, all hell would break loose. For the time being, they are just being used to spy."

"Well?" The Albino said, pointed a warning finger at a general who was trying to sit more comfortably on the carpet. "General, any little air current you stir up may cost you more than a hoarse throat."

"No idea," De Lasoul admitted in a whisper. "The 'tick' is crippled in the meantime. For how long? Days? Weeks? Months? Jesus, everything these fat asses brass talked about in this room!"

"You make me laugh," Kovalski said "All the big shots who have already left had their lungs filled with this 'air'. Information, I mean. 'top secret air'. Took it to the lock. Others breathed it up top, carried it out of here. The information must have flown to the Shidizu by now. I don't think it is necessary for all the 'ticks' to leave in one piece. It may have had many layers for gathering information. Maybe the delivery is made in made in small increments. Well?"

"It doesn't make any difference. Now that we found it nothing else leaves. Fish for something in your think tank!"

It did not occur to them that any change in the mood of the 'tick' might have turned them into jelly any minute. When it came to finding practical solutions, Riff Kovalski quickly choose one and things usually worked out the right way.

"What about us?" De Lasoul said. "And these poor sods? Do they simply hold their breath?"

"Aqualungs," the Albino said and yawned. "It's no big deal to have forty of them sent in here."

“We can’t risk using the locks and doors,” the blond said.

“I see your point. But I can’t understand why you don’t like my idea of aqualungs. I just wanted to contribute my two cents.”

In the meantime, the telephone lines connecting the Ministry of War with other command points were red hot with so many excited orders. For hundreds of yards around, the neighboring area had been combed and evacuated by teams in special sterilized protective suits. They threw up road blocks and stopped all traffic in and out of the building. Two of the available battle cruisers flew over to the spot. One of them was trying to spread an energy network around the building. The other cruiser hoped to intercept any plasma formation trying to leave the atmosphere. It was all tantamount to killing a mosquito with a crossbow, but what else could they do?

For the people inside, the future looked very gloomy indeed. After figuring out a solution, Kovalski made sure that there were no sharp edges anywhere and explained everything in forty seconds flat. Then they set to work.

“What’s beneath this room?” asked the Albino.

“The bar,” came the answer.

“As there’s a lot of dirt up here,” he mumbled, “it is high time we cleaned up the mess. We need an appropriate vacuum cleaner.”

The lock was actually a little hall with sealed doors at each end; the generals had passed through these doors walking jauntily and carrying big ideas in their fat heads. The air between the sealing locks was continuously treated. It became so sterile that practically it made no sense breathing it. The Shidizus had found the soft spot in the armor. The air in the lock had been permanently cleaned but never completely replaced, because no one had ever given a thought to such a technical detail.

De Lasoul grinned. The Albino kept finding solutions that were simply stunning.

“Well, let’s rock,” Kovalski said.

The blond crossed himself and all the people present shuddered in apprehension. They could not rule out the possibility of an explosion. They had to move fast if they wanted to survive. All the other two thousand people caught inside the Ministry of War slaving away for them.

“Fix the ‘gut’,” Kovalski said.

In the bar bellow the technicians pulled and heaved.

“Center wise, you bloody idiots!” De Lasoul urged them.

'The gut' was an elastic, steel sheathed air pipe, five feet in diameter fixed on the ceiling of the bar on the second floor, exactly under the soles of the prisoners in the conference hall. The floor began to vibrate slightly near the porcelain Buddha. Moving lightly, De Lasoul checked the legs of the oval table and the other pieces of furniture. They were all firmly bolted to the floor. The air conditioning installation did not work. The doors seemed solid.

"Here we go," he ordered.

A cutting machine was slowly cleaving a large circular hole in the floor. Its size was growing steadily inch by inch, until General Thompson's cap, which was on the floor, slid and disappeared down the dark, wide gaping well.

"Well done, boys!" the blond said. "Everyone get back to the wall!"

They listened to him, avoiding the area where the imaginary cube revealed the presence of the 'tick', pulsating like a living heart.

"Everything's OK, man?" Riff asked.

"You bet!" De Lasoul answered. "Send in the wraps!"

A rather large package erupted through the mouth of the 'gut'. Then several others in quick succession. The people gasped and stared.

"Keep it moving!" Kovalski spoke into his transmitter.

In less than three minutes everyone in the room, private or general, had one such package wrapped in polyethylene. They had been sent by rapid pneumatic shocks which had made their ears pop.

"We haven't got all day, you shit heads," the blond yelled. "Put them on!"

They started unwrapping the packages and stared in surprise at soft, light and safe emergency space suits commonly used on orbital stations.

"Listen to me well," De Lasoul growled at them. "Many things will happen soon around here. If any of you wants to be a witness without a suit on, he is free to try. I think I know better."

People scrambled to their feet and began fumbling with the suits, jostling one another. In the general confusion General Lavian put his arms in the legs of the suit. General Thompson got his nose caught and grazed in General Ted Dong's zipper. The Lieutenant pulled the cap over the eyes of the Admiral of the Fourth Fleet.

"Stop!" the Albino snapped. "Fall in formation for inspection."

He inspected them all, pulled up a zipper here and fixed some valve there. There had been fewer mistakes than they had expected. Fear for their own skin had taught the man a good lesson.

“Now don’t make a move until I tell you to,” De Lasoul added.

Then he winked at the Albino and grabbed him by the hand. They went to a spot on the right side of the door.

“Here we go!” Riff shouted in his transmitter.

Somewhere in the bowels of the building, at the other end of the ‘gut’, deep within a tank of sixty cubic meters an implosion bomb went off. They felt it all as a deep distant rumble followed by the tinkling sound of smaller objects.

Half a second later, all hell broke loose.

The unleashed hurricane swept up chairs, pulled the water colors of the walls, and broke the ceiling lights. A thick cloud of dust, shards of glass, paper scraps and lint whirled roaring down the hungry mouth of the ‘gut’ and was swallowed in an instant.

“Whew!” Kovalski let out a merry howl.

General Thompson flew down head long in the forefront of the air squadron, his arms and legs splayed at queer angles. General Lavian was sucked down like a hot-dog. General Ted Dong banged his head loudly on the table top and then flew down the ‘gut’.

With the speed of an express train, thirty privates followed in quick succession, with their lieutenant bringing up the rear. The ‘gut’ swallowed them all up eagerly. General of the Army Edgar K. Metzger, president of the board, weighing one hundred and thirty kilos flew down the greedy ‘gut’ rolling and holding a chair in his arms.

The storm had only lasted for five seconds and now the conference room and the access hall were empty. At the last second, De Lasoul, the little porcelain Buddha which had been left in one piece to contemplate that ephemeral world, and Kovalski down in a trio. The mouth, the ‘gut’, then the tank. A time delay shut-off valve blocked the passage behind them all with a muffled click. I can only imagine the darkness of the tank and the jumble of legs and arms amid the tangle of objects, chair legs, papers.

Three hours later when they were taken out, their feet buckling under them, they felt they had one battle more to their credit. They were brushed and examined until they nearly became transparent. Then they were transferred into several special vans and taken to a laboratory which was to be their new rest home for several weeks.

The technicians sealed the tank and put it away planning to open it when security measures could be agreed upon. Now there was nothing inside except pressurized air and an imaginary cube a few inches wide, steadily pulsating.

“I wonder,” De Lasoul mused. “What if anything passed unnoticed? I’ve got this queer feeling.”

“No, we forgot nothing,” the Albino said and laughed in this face. “I never leave anything to chance.”

He pulled off the glove of the suit. A housefly, the same one that had earlier on the face of the little god, was trying half-heatedly to fly away. The Albino caught it in his hand and sent it to the laboratory.

This is far from being the most famous action of the De Lasoul-Kovalski team; there are others which really take the cake. I am in the know about other of their assignments and I’ve related nine or ten else where. No, this is not the most wonderful story I could have chosen but is the only one that had ever been filmed.

In point of fact, I would have liked to tell you something else but I don’t feel this urge any longer. The screen has grown dark and if some tiny short-lived flicker reminds me of these heroes (What else could I call those cool self-possessed men?) this is because I have them all treasured wisp of smoke.

I’d rather tell you about the blond’s wife.

I never let myself be carried adrift by sentiment. The last time that I held hands with a chick was when I felt Wanda Rubberstring’s pulse. Wanda had been brought to my emergency unit after a fine great explosion that might have changed his sex or not.

Three separate episodes make up the portrait of the blond’s woman.

I met her for the first time in the corridor at the Sixth Fleet headquarters one cold grey morning around four o’clock. At that point in time we were already at war. I had pushed aside a big fat book on medicine which I had been reading in the emergency room and was dragging my feet along the corridor. I had set off in search of the coffee dispenser.

Not a soul in sight at that ungodly hour. Melancholy, I red some posters on the walls of the corridor: “The Shidizus are not one with more intelligent than you are!” or “The Sun is the first star that humans set their eyes on. It’s yours for the taking!”, and so on.

Nothing was moving in that dead stillness. Nothing was happening.

I went along the circular corridor and it was then that I saw her. She sat squatted, her back against the wall, her eyes level and looking straight ahead at the opposite wall. She was clasping her folded legs, her chin resting on her knees. When I came near her she looked up at me.

“Hey,” I said in a whisper, God knows why; maybe it was that time in the night.

Her hair, long and raven black, made me think that her body had curled in a niche of the terminal wall. She was wearing jeans, a sleeveless T-shirt and nothing on her feet. I had no idea how she had got into the base.

“Hey,” she said back.

The green eyes flickered for a moment, then they were aglow with fire. I looked at her from one side so as to avoid her intense gaze.

“Hey,” I repeated as if in stupor.

She parted her lips slowly. The phantom of her warm breath hovered towards me and caressed the lobe of my ears.

Then she stood up. Her hair rustled, rebounded a few times before remaining frozen in place like a rivulet of jet-black in midwinter. I felt the burning sting of her green irises on my face. I turned round, quite against my will.

De Lasoul stood two yards away from me. He was also looking at her.

I thought that I would catch fire like a doctor made of paper and turn to ashes if I stayed five seconds longer in the way of the imaginary line connecting their pupils.

I started walking slowly to my office. De Lasoul saw me when I came up to him.

“That was some ‘tick’, Doc,” he said in a dead-tired hoarse voice. “They’ll bring Julio in for you. I hope you’ll be able to patch him up from the scattered bits and pieces they managed to gather.”

Then he walked soundlessly to locker room. She stuck to his side and the blond’s arm disappeared in the rustling tangle of hair as if it had been cut off. They vanished down the corridor, engulfed in the night.

The second episode took place on the carefully trimmed lawn outside a bungalow that Kovalski had rented for him and one of his chicks.

I found her with her toes in the water sparkling like a million beads. Her hair was cut short. When she laughed there was a whir in the air as if the proportion of nitrogen, oxygen and carbon had suddenly changed. As if a glass arrow had whizzed by.

“Come have a swim, Doc,” she said.

I went in. Had she asked me to go in fully dressed I would not have done it but I would have been hard put to refuse. She was no beauty who could turn you on. I’d say rather she had the devil deep down inside her.

“I wanted to ask you,” she said in a sing-song voice, letting the water trickle through her fingers, “I wanted to ask you, and this is no laughing matter, what makes you all stick together?”

“All of us?” I asked and sat down beside her.

De Lasoul was shaking and slapping together drinks and chasing kids, all while letting out frightening shrieks and howls. It was then that the Albino came unheard. He was smiling a big wide smile, the like of which I had never seen. His arm coiled around the woman’s shoulders, like a snake, a gesture which seemed more natural than the act of breathing. And yet...

And yet, at that moment I saw Rheis suddenly cringe, tremble. She had become smaller and ugly.

I left shortly afterwards. I hadn’t had time to answer her question and curiously enough, I had the sensation that no question had been asked.

The third and final episode is old Diaz’s rambling exhortation while I was leaning over his dying body trying to put it together as well as I could.

“May hell take the wicked slut that spewed you into this world, butcher! Did you put my balls back where they belong? My, it was only ten yards away, no kidding, and I saw it all with my own eyes. That shithead, Kovalski, he’s been asking for it, who knows, maybe he wanted to have it out straight away, or just to put on airs, I dunno. Hey buddy, are you using barbed wire to fix me up? Spare one of those painkillers if you don’t want me to holler the place down on your head! And the blond says: ‘Not now, Riff, not now. Give’er one more chance, will you?’

I drew nearer, silly me. That curious streak in me, ever since I was a kid. Who taught you your job, Doc? It hurts like hell! But the Albino wouldn’t listen to him. Wouldn’t even look him square in the face. He means business with that slut but she wouldn’t budge an inch. She grins at him and the blond said, ‘Not now, Riff, no!’

And the Albino, ‘As we agreed, as we talked it over, after you married her and had the kids.’ I drew even closer. Ouch! Kovalski steps forward and stands facing her not even a yard between them. He laughs himself silly. She says, ‘Why, take a good look at me, man, have you ever seen a woman like me? Go get yourself one if you have the guts!’ And the Albino says, ‘I bet you would like me to do that, but that impossible. Have no fear, we’ll straighten it right out.’

She said, ‘Lay your hands on me, come on, don’t let me tell you again!’ And the blond from behind, ‘Rheis, Rheis, don’t talk like that. You don’t... You ain’t...’

Well then, he's wailing like he's being raped. I've no idea what you're doing to me, Doc, I ain't hurting at all. And the things went rolling and I couldn't get it all. You sure haven't anything to drink around here? The Albino looks level an' says, 'You keep out of this and don't do anything stupid. Sorry, pal, you had to see it all, but nothing doing! Per'aps it'll serve you right. You better scram and don't look back.'

De Lasoul says, 'Riff, what's one more day to you?'

'Like we agreed, man. We had a talk, you and I, a few years back, until dawn, and you knew it was comin'. We both knew it. And we said, remember? when the goin's uphill, when the game's not worth the candle, when we reach the end of our rope, when she's goin' to be a danger to all of us, not just to you, you'll be through with her. That's what you promised, pal,' the Albino says.

The blond keeps his trap shut. And Rheis began shaking all over and crying, 'Don't let him, my love, don't let him, my life and my light,' and other such nonsense. And she says, 'It's your fault if he kills me and you'll say it could have been different and that it was only your being afraid that made it all impossible.'

But the blond never says a word, his face is all ashen.

What the hell are you fixing now, Doc, haven't you finished yet? Well, if you patched up everything I need, the rest will take care of themselves. And then she starts raving and swearing. My oh my, she's good at it. Even in my younger years I don't think I would have been a match for her. And she lashes at each of us, leaving nothing to chance! The blond, the Albino and me. She forgets nothing, not even the kids. She says they are bastards, she made them herself just for the hell of it, because it occurred to her to do it, and the blond had no business whatsoever with the birth of the kids.

And the blond yells himself blue in the face, 'Make her stop, Riff, for God's sake, make the fucking 'tick' stop talking!'

The Albino says, 'Oh well, that's damn easy.' And raises his gun.

Rheis shut up and starts trembling like a leaf in the wind, and lo and behold! She's shaking all over and starts melting and flowing slowly like thick jelly, from the head down, one eye slides fast down the whole mess, everything, hair, tits, wraps, all thawing.

Well what do you think? Kovalski takes out a plastic bag to scrape out everything for the laboratory people, I guess. He's gone nuts, you may take my word for it! And then, a split second later, everything goes boom, I can't hear a thing and a ball of fire knocks me flat.

I see you put the Albino in the freezer, maybe you're going to fix him good, and that poor bastard, De Lasoul, ran howling like a madman. I don't think you'll find him or hear from him again.

Well, look at yourself, now what's the idea? Why are your hands atremble? My, I don't know what this is, but I feel something cold coming up from those these legs of mine..."

Old man Diaz froze like that, slack-jawed and eyes looking blankly somewhere beyond space and time. Shortly afterwards, somewhere near Saturn, the Shidizus were defeated in a battle worth remembering and the war faded into thin air...

Biography

Dănuț Ungureanu (b. 1958) Writer, journalist, screen writer, playwright, creative writing trainer.

He made his debut in 1981 with the short story „Viață de familie” (Family life), in *Revista Știință și Tehnică*. He published dozens of short stories in magazines and almanacs, and also contributed with numerous TV and Radio screenplays.

He is present in over twenty anthologies and short story collections, from which we mention *Anthology of European Speculative Fiction* (2013), *Bing, bing, Larisa* (2013), *Worlds and Beings* (2015) etc.

His has won numerous awards.

Novels:

Așteptând în Ghermana (first edition in 1993, republished in 2010 and 2013, RomCon Award in 1994), *Însemnările damei de silicon* (2014, 2016, fantasy novel), *Urme de sfinți* (2014), *Viața și faptele haiducului Tănase Vlăsia* (2015, best seller Tritonic Publishing House in 2016), *Noaptea în oraș, fără părinți* (published in 2016, awards for best science fiction novel at the Romcon Awards 2016, AntareSFest 2017 and Sci + FI FEST 2017. The e-book is available on Amazon, in english, as „The Recovery”), *Luna în orașul blestemat* (dystopian novel, 2017), *Conspirația femeilor* (2018) *Experimentul Păpușa* (2019).

Short story collection:

Marilyn Monroe pe o curbă închisă (first edition in 1993, republished in 2012), *Români deja deștepți* (2007, republished in 2013), *Basmе geostaționare* (science fiction, 2008), *Alți români deja deștepți* (2013) *Români în vorba goală* (2016) *Anatomic Grafitti* (2016)

Non-fiction:

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In collaboration with Marian Truță:

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GOD TEARS

by Miloş Dumbraci

In this first-contact scifi about an expedition to an ocean world, we get to ask ourselves: if we ever meet an alien deity, how would we talk to it? And would it even be a good idea to wake it?

Start recording, please. One, two, three.

Three is a good number, you know? The Holy Trinity and stuff, your kind of bedtime stories, Father Aleksei. Three was life and three was love. But the two of us? Two is death and sorrow. There cannot be two Gods, two Gospels, or two Floods, equally divine. If so, one of them must be the wrong kind, I'd say. Isn't that true, my dear Fairy? Who do you think is right? And who's the crazy cuckoo?

Destroyers of worlds, the two of us. We'll get to that.

How did this nightmare start? When, even? Since the three of us left Baikonur, inside the silvery snakelike Ark slithering around the dark energy pillar aimed straight at this wicked planet? Before that, when the Church's telescopes and its holy astronomers first caught a glimpse of the shiny little gem in the sky, and the monks ran frantically up and down their sky-reaching observatories? I can easily imagine them screaming their amazement at such a miracle as a watery planet, way too near a way too hot blue sun. Or was it when Flood killed your sweet fair-haired Lena, Father Aleksei? Maybe when it poisoned my own dear Fairy?

I'm losing track of all this, good thing it's being recorded. I must not forget I'm a trained pilot and a navigator, the captain of the Ark and of this expedition. A man not of God, or gods, but of numbers and cold calculus. Aibek Mahmudovich Bolatov, Bek for friends, and also for you, Fairy, of course, but an aye, aye, sir, for you, Father Aleksei and the like. Never really loved your Church, you know? But what can the Navy do, when all the money are in your pious hands? We want to fly out there, so we pretend to believe and accept your missions. Anyway, they gave you their worst pilot on the whole planet, so there must be someone else up in the Outer Ministry really disliking the bishops.

Let's get back to it, I do tend to ramble when I'm drunk, I know, I know. We need to make some sense out of this, so I'll just go through it school style: orderly, chronologically, facts only. I'll put a beginning and a middle to the story, and then maybe the ending will become more apparent. Or not. Funny me, laughing out loud in a lonely ship, just on the edge of the bright yellow atmosphere of a lonely golden planet, not far from a lonely blue star. Just the opposite of our dear Earth. Quite ironic, the symmetry. Should have rang a bell.

We arrived on the orbit of planet Flood around ... how many days ago, Fairy, please? Thirty eight? Forty, forty five? Never mind, it doesn't really matter. Just as it doesn't matter for how long we had slept before that, while our ship swirled around the black tendril shot from below the Kazah deserts. Decades, centuries ... who cares? It felt like a blink of an eye. A yellow eye, yes, yes, that's what Flood looks like, this thought has been roaming through the depths of my mind ever since the beginning, but I was too distracted for it to surface! Deep a soul can be, just as deep as the endless golden ocean covering this world. Thick and slimy also, like its infinite rain, or its atmosphere: they're the same here. The rain has never stopped since we first came, for forty days or so, and maybe forty millenia, who knows?

Sooo, the introduction of the story. The Moscow Church sees planet Flood, thinks it a miracle, sends us up here. The Ark can go so far, so fast, but for that it has to be tiny, just a silver stiletto the shape of a curled viper. So there were only four of us: Father Aleksei, theologian and chemist; sister Lena, archaeologist and xeno-linguist; myself, pilot, navigator and, frankly, a non-believer and a rather nasty human being, just the kind most enjoyed by the Party. A military human being, if there's such a thing, so also the expedition's warrior, if need be. Everybody had to have dual specializations, due to the limited size of the crew, except our Fairy, of course, who only has one: being the super-smart, cold AI. Icy just like me, hence our friendship, and quite unlike the warmhearted Lena and the passionate Aleksei ... can I call you Sasha? After all we've been through together? Thank you, Father. Hence their friendship, maybe more. Who am I to judge? They have their God for that.

Good. The beginning. You'll have to excuse me for all this beating around the bush, whoever you'll be, listening to my recording; I don't really want to get to the end of it, for fear of what awaits me there. And my mind is not exactly what it used to be, for I am a murderer, and that does take quite a toll on one's soul.

The beginning. Again. When we arrived, Flood proved to be just what we suspected: a planet about the size of Earth, with almost the same mass and gravity, and about the same air and water. Not quite identical in any of these, but close enough. Unlike our home, it stood alone in its system, circling a very hot blue star, which the churchmen, unsurprisingly, called The Tear of God. Also unsurprisingly, the Navy called it Dramshki-Drezinov 432bis, after two admirals who had never done anything of valor, but had been covered in shiny Party decorations for their

thorough lack of initiative. I just called it Blue, and moved along. The planet, everybody agreed: Flood was the perfect name, since its thundering thick rain never seemed to stop.

But when did the story, our story, actually begin? Regulations required ten days of non-intrusive observation, so we used that to observe and research, and to good effect. Earth days, of course, but Flood ones were not much shorter, so no issue there. The other two also used the nights for praying, writing and bed-sharing, and the dark-haired sun-burned slant-eyed one, yours truly, for drinking the vast supplies of vodka synthesized by Fairy, while dancing alone on its instantly composed ballads. None of these is your business, stranger. We got along great, there were no inside tensions and no outside troubles yet; those were to come, so the ten days were " the good old days". A perfect expedition to an almost perfect planet. We used them to good effect, too, not just for R&R.

I did the least, since there was not yet to be any flying around. I just checked the Ark's systems, through my Fairy, and built a handgun from pre-packed pieces. I wish I had built two, but who was to know? I scanned Flood over and over again, everywhere, with all I got, and found no threat. None whatsoever from the outer space, either, but no surprise there, we are still to find a space-faring civilization. Maybe this one here was that once? Or could we say it is now? We'll get to that; have some patience.

Aleksei, Sasha. I must admit, you worked the most, using the tiny lab and Fairy's science to analyze the rain and ocean. There is nothing else here, so that was all you could do. The scans read by our drones all over the planet, from various heights and depths, proved surprisingly identical. So, we concluded, there really was just one sea, and just one sky. And a single, huge, planet-sized eternal tropical storm. Which, you know, felt fishy, for both soldier and chemist. Because that is not ordinary, and extraordinary could mean one of three things: God, an artificial intervention from someone else than God, or, of course, just an extraordinary set of unusual natural factors. Neither of us believed in the third, and the simulations run by Fairy proved us right: there should have been some environment variations.

Can I see them again, Fairy? The simulations of what-if alternative Floods? I love the one where there are continents, with lush jungles and huge rivers. Thank you. I wish I could understand what you are saying, but at least you can still understand me.

So, Sasha. I think your discovery was first, and Lena's second. I'm not sure, but let's just go with that for the sake of the tale. You came to my tiny red-dark cabin, one late night, when I thought you were already in Lena's room. You were babbling some chemistry stuff and my attention was not in its best form, so I just slid the vodka phial under the chair, trying not to fall down, and grabbed your wrist. You opened up a data holo and we looked at it for a moment, then that cute tiny elf of a woman that Lena was ... show me a picture of her, Fairy, please ... cute, indeed ... she burst into my room, too, and asked what the fuss was all about. You rubbed your red beard and smiled at both of us, uncertain, but thrilled.

"Antiseptic!" you said.

I remember perfectly that I laughed: "No surprise there, Sherlock!", but Lena took your hand and smiled: "So we can go out there, Sasha." You seemed baffled for a moment, then waved your hand in excitement: "Well, yes, no microbial danger, there's no trace of life. We can easily even breath the air, as long as we fill our lungs with a filtering inner coat I can fast produce in the lab. Both the air and the water are filled with ..." he looked at our non-chemist faces "... let's just call them pseudo-silicates and metal alloys. Proof that there was plenty of sand here once!"

Me and Lena looked at each other, unsure. You sat down, took out my vodka phial, which I thought I had hidden better than that, drank it all up. Then you put it in the dispenser, though I needed it for the entire night, you smug, and pulled your thick beard some more.

"It shouldn't be" you said. "All the conditions are met: chemicals, temperature, pressure ... there is an over-abundance of electricity, true, but it should actually help. Don't you get it?" you suddenly shouted at me, annoyed by my clearly not caring. "There should be life here, plenty of it!"

"So?" I said. "Maybe there was and somebody killed it off. Long ago, closed case, who cares?! Why all the screaming?"

I must admit, I didn't really like you back then, either. Maybe it was the softness of your voice and manners, maybe the religion you pointed out through your black robe-like uniform, or perhaps there was just a hint of jealousy between us. Because of her.

Lena got between us, turning her back on me, smart one that little blondie, and took both your hands: "Good. Sasha, we got it. There is no life on this planet. It is called Flood, isn't it? Didn't we come here just for that, to prove what God can do? So, no life is good for the expedition's goals."

"You both don't get it, do you?" you whispered. "Maybe there were some beings on Flood, and they were wiped out. True. But life has a habit of trying again and again ... and it's not doing that here. Not now. Don't you see what it tells us?"

I shuddered. "That there's still some insecticide left in the water?"

You cringed: "There is nothing poisonous in the water! Yet, still, you are right in a way. He. God must still be here!"

Talking about dramatic overstatement. You do have a tendency for that, Sasha, you know? Does he not, Fairy? Of course he does, you would say so, too, if only you could still speak.

Then came her discovery. The eleventh day, we went out. The scans showed, here and there, anomalous formations deep under the sea, and we went for them. I dived the Ark through the heavy and hot yellow rain, gliding between the furious downwards torrents of never-ending monsoon and the upwards thick steam reddish columns. We stopped next to some long-dead reef, and Lena used the below-ship eye-strips to look down in full spectrum. I will never forget the sweet smile when she pointed her tiny index finger at the edge of the hologram.

"See here?" she said, barely able to control her excited voice. "This and this ... they are square at the basis, but triangular at the top."

Both the basis and the top were, of course, under hundreds of kilometers of warm water the color of honey, resting on the slopes of some huge undersea mountains with just as fair a tinge as Lena's long hair. Which I was watching with more attention than the objects of her amazement, I must admit, sorry, Sasha, for that. My bad.

So I just smiled back. She rolled her eyes and raised her arms: "They are not natural formations, you mule! They must have been buildings once!"

I said nothing, for I had nothing to say unless they needed to be shot at with our big guns. Well, not that big, really, since the Ark itself is tiny, but they do hold quite a nasty punch. Full spectrum, too. And they did not seem to threaten us, your God, my Party and our Earth in any way, so my fingers did not wander on the weapons-board and I did not call Fairy to take the nasties out of their sheaths.

But you, Father Chemist Aleksei Feodorovich, did have something to bring into the conversation, and I must admit it was a good addition. You pointed out they could be analyzed for building materials, and, after a short debate, we agreed to send a drone under the waves.

It brought back some answers and it brought back death. Mostly death, and we are both to blame.

Yes, I think that is the exact moment the good days ended and we started on a wicked path. Unknowingly, indeed, but that does not take away the guilt. Yours could be cleared by your Christ, Sasha, but I don't even have that doubt. Only my drinks and ballads, and they are going away, too.

Let's get back to the guilt. This would be the middle of the story, I think, so we must proceed. There's plenty of time, way too much, actually, but I don't really want that kind of time.

The drone returned. With better images from up close and a tiny bit of brownish clay-like stuff, in a drop of oily lukewarm golden water. I let Fairy know the drone posed no military threat, and you said there was no toxic or living danger. Just a little hardened mud in a somewhat

dirty sea water. Not salty, of course, our NaCl is just a tiny fraction in Flood's seas composition. You took from the synthesizer a moist greenish foam, in small tubes, and we inhaled it. It felt bitter, stung my throat a little and cooled my lungs as it settled inside them. It was not that bad, and it was supposed to protect us from any unknown element.

Of course it didn't. Maybe gods do have a sense of dark humor, or perhaps it's just our ages-old traditional bad luck. Lena leaned over the tiny pool of liquid to pick up the clay blob with some tweezers, and I remember looking at her narrow back, trying to guess the shape of the body under the overall. I still feel sorry and ashamed for that. She fell down, convulsed two or three times, eyes widened with disbelief, and froze. She hadn't even touched the sample yet, and she was as dead as everything else on this planet.

I, the so-called trained war professional, panicked and did the stupidest thing possible: I rushed to Lena, knelt and grabbed her shoulder. Surprisingly, or maybe just better trained, you, Father Aleksei, the chemist, pushed me away and ordered the drone to close the sampling recipient and go to the lab. Then you asked Fairy to check on Lena from afar, and it did. The cute little thing was dead.

Fairy immediately secreted a transparent thin layer of slime from the floor, covered Lena in it and waved the thick gray carpet away, carrying the corpse into the laboratory, too. That room closed up, and only after it swallowed the drone, too, you, Sasha, took your head between your palms and groaned. I should have come to you, to suffer together, for in a different way I loved her, too, but I am not a kind enough man; so I just sat there on the floor, in silence.

"What the hell did you do?" I yelled, of course not naming my own guilt, as people never do in such situations. "Your damn filter didn't work, and the toxins killed her!"

First, you waved for Fairy and she understood. Two pills dropped out and we both quickly swallowed them. The lungs felt warmer and the throat stinging stopped. We also seemed to cool off a little ... ah, now I get it, you gave us some sedative too, Fairy, huh? Well ... thank you.

"There are no toxins!" you yelled back, eyes red with tears. "There are no microbes, no viruses, nothing. Just water and sand, damn it!"

You threw something at me, Sasha, I don't remember what, and I must admit I deserved it. "Come and see!"

Fairy opened a holo between us, and we could see the content of the lab. Lena, stiff on a table, the drone on the other. "Bio!" I ordered, and Fairy obeyed. "Just the lungs" the AI said, "and the throat and nose. The rest is not hurt. But nothing alive in there. No toxins, either."

I gulped and nodded. The picture changed to a 3D of the lungs. They were petrified. Literally, they had turned into rock. I waved my palm over the holo and looked at the drone: its recipient was now hardened too, covered in yellow sandstone. We looked at each other,

confused: why had it not done that before, while it was outside? Or even in here, till it was opened by Lena? Was it our air? Clearly not, since it hadn't reacted when introduced into the Ark, and it didn't seem to react any more to the one in the lab. So ... why did it strike just then and there, killing our dear, innocent Lena?

She didn't even get the chance to see that she had stricken the archaeologist mother lode. The damn mud was, as the lab established later, an artificial clay made from some soft metal, with no name yet (maybe it will be called Lenary? Or Sashamite? Who am I fooling, it will never have a human name) and some pseudo-silicate strings. Fluid enough to not be corroded by the water, yet strong enough to be a lasting building material, and it's definitely not a natural occurrence. What had been the purpose of those long abandoned ruins when they had been erected, eons before those mountains got covered by the sea? We'll probably never know. Where are the bodies of its architects, and how did their cities die? Did they simply leave? Were they overcome by the flood when the end came, or long after that? Who gives a shit! Stupid long-dead motherfuckers, I wish they were here so I could roast them slowly with our weapons. But they are not, and I won't have my revenge on them.

Let's get back to that accursed day. We watched her lungs time and again. Sasha and Fairy, you two started looking into the matter, while I took our asses out of the storm and into the orbit, as fast as I could and as quickly as the ship could shoot its tiny dark energy filaments and climb up, eating them up as it went.

We waited for three days here, in the dark, watching down in fear at the yellow devilish eye and up in wonder at the blue, crystal-clear god tear of a sun. I slept very little then, tormented by bad dreams of Lena, and drank too much, while talking to Fairy about countless ways of blowing up at least some of the ocean, with mass destruction weapons we did not have. Sasha the chemist worked tirelessly, while Sasha the priest stood back, pondering in pain. After three days, always three, just like in the old fairy-tales, no offense, Fairy, Sasha finally found something. Not an answer, but a new question. And aren't exactly the unanswered questions the best gateway to a god's will?

"It's different" you said. "The water. It's different and I don't know why."

I said nothing, for I am no scientist and just hoped you could do wonders and find all the amazing answers in your lab. Of course, they weren't there. You kept on: "The water itself is the same, actually. But not the solution. The one in the sea--" you pointed to the holo on the wall, one of our e-windows, and I looked at the damn huge waves angrily rising up towards the two large moons before falling back among the new risers, in an endless struggle, "--has sand in it. Kind of silicates, and some small traces of metals, evenly mixed in the liquid."

You pointed another e-frame. The forever monsoon storm, ridden with thousands and thousands of enormous orange lightnings, stretching for hundreds of kilometers each. "The one in the rain, it has the same, but in a different proportion. Less metals, more silicates, and plenty

of whole sand grains. And this," you waved towards the lab, no image showing up except the dark ones in our own minds, "it has just the metals. No sand. No silicates."

"They are in Lena," I whispered, "in her lungs. In the sandstone."

You nodded.

"But why did they get there?"

I laughed bitterly and grinned.

"They just wanted that way. Or God did. He's still here, remember?"

You gave me a nasty look and turned around. I rushed after you.

"Father Aleksei ... I'm sorry. I'm angry and I'm sad and there's no one else around here to be a bitch to. Please ... I apologize." And then I said it: "Why don't we just go see? Check out the rain?"

You lowered your eyes.

"I ... I wouldn't dare. My filter should work just fine ... but I fear we would die, too, and in vain."

I laughed again.

"What? Go there ourselves? No, my friend, I also know pure bravery is dumb. War is not like the movies; you know? When war means the enemy is ambushing you, it's all about the scouts. We should send some into the storm."

"Drones? And lose another one?"

"Not drones. Nanobots. Just dump enough of them into the skies. They'll get carried away by the winds, we fly over the orbit, get in their way and collect the survivors. Read the data. It could help."

You nodded.

"Actually, they could! Let's do that! Fairy, do you have what it takes for ... let's say, five thousand nanos?"

"They must be rust-resistant alloys," Fairy added. "But yes, of course. Churning them out right now. Do you approve shooting them into the clouds?"

I smiled.

"I've been waiting for a long time to shoot something at this damn planet! Finally! Shoot Flood, shoot them up!"

You smiled too, Sasha, for a moment.

"It didn't really work" you said in the fifteenth day.

We had just collected them back. Amazingly, all the five thousand. Not even one have been corroded or lost, as if the storm was disgusted with them and hurried to spit the nanos away. We caught on to them on the orbit, a shiny trail rushing towards the blue hot oven of a sun. A rather weird trajectory, I must admit, but with all the chaotic winds snaking among Flood's clouds like heavenly boas on steroids, no wonder.

"They bring no new data, except the amazing amount of electricity, both static and dynamic."

"That's not so unexpected, with sky-reaching waves always rubbing against each other."

"No, you don't understand. The problem is not the electricity that IS there. The problem is ... it should be even more. Something is eating up part of it."

"Feeding on it?" I wondered. "What? There's nothing there! Maybe under the ocean?"

"No. It's not going there, or, better said, not all of it. Some is simply vanishing into thin air, so to speak. Thick air, to be more Flood-like accurate."

We stood silent for a while, looking at the planet, with its hypnotic whirls rolling around.

"What about the silicates? Are they there?"

You nodded and shuddered.

"They're not really silicates, but yes. Both mixed in the water, and as solid sand grains."

"What, just floating around? Where from?"

"Who knows?! From the once-continent, I think. And yes, floating around, I suppose. That's what they do under the microscope, that's how they must ... Know what? I'll just watch the live video scans. Here. Wait ... that's strange ..."

"What? What?"

"The floating around ... they don't seem to do that in the ocean itself. In fact, there are none in the seas."

"Maybe it's more acid, or something."

"No, it is not."

You asked Fairy to zoom in, and there it was. The breakthrough. Well, just the first of a few, but in any siege there's always one wall-crack that signals the beginning of the end. This was it.

At nano level, the grains of sand were not floating on the monsoon, nor inside it. They were moving up and down between the beads of golden water, like tiny spirits running among the rain drops, back and forth between watery hell and stormy heavens.

Late day nineteen, you came back to me, excited, but also disappointed.

"They do feed on the static electricity. The lightnings, they seem to avoid, though those discharge energy straight into the ocean and also the clouds, so there might be something about them, too. Maybe the lightnings ..."

"Forget about the lightnings! We know much about them? Not enough. We'll check them later. More about the sand grains? Yes. So tell me about the sandies, then."

You hated the interruption, and I suspect you somewhat hated me, too, not for what was being told between us, but for what was left aside. Her. But you liked your science and you eagerly continued.

"There are billions of them, all over the planet. They come down near the surface of the ocean, but never really touch it, and then go back up to the clouds, and so on, and so on. They do that in streams, though they don't seem to be carried by heat or electricity."

"Do they ever stop? Or behave out of the ordinary?"

You sat down and looked down and sideways, away for my gaze.

"Only once did they really stop. In Lena. They mixed with the tissue in her lungs and turned into stone. Maybe a reaction I cannot comprehend yet, maybe something else. I don't know!" you raised your voice and gasped.

I leaned over and gave you my vodka phial. You drank, coughed and sighed.

"Other than that ... never. They never stop. There are instances when they don't move vertically, but just wiggle around like electrons. They do that for some fractions of a second and after that they are charged with static."

"They feed."

"No, I'm a chemist, I do not think of them as living creatures. They are just specks of dust thrown around by the environment's natural forces. Though there is something that bugs me."

"What?"

You waved and Fairy opened a small holo. Inside it, a bunch of a few thousand tiny grains, rotating together for a while, then bursting all over the place.

"Charging?" I asked.

"No, I already told you so. The total electric charge stayed the same, just seemed to be redistributed among them in some way ... but I could not find repetitive patterns."

"Did you try, you know, spying on them with our own nanos?" I grinned.

He nodded.

"Research them. Yes, I did. Nothing to see."

I thought for a while, then I whispered, though there was no one there to hear us, not for many parsecs around.

"You know ... I am trained in more than piloting and heavy drinking."

"Yeah," he sighed, "I suspected as much."

He looked at me with a strange expression on his face and then said it out loud: "There's always at least one ear for the Party, on every ship. Even on a three-men Ark in the corner of the galaxy. I am not one, and I don't suspect Lena was one. So ... it's you."

I did not say anything to that. I just smiled and added: "Well, spying is done better when you are one of them, you know? Dress like them, talk like them, look like them. Think and see like them. When they becomes us ... then the secrets rise to the surface."

"I don't understand. What does this have to do with my experiments?"

"You tried listening to the sand grains with our nanos, made up by our Fairy from our metals brought all the way from our Earth back home." I leaned back in my chair and asked: "Fairy! Can you make nanos using just the alloys and silicates from the Flood's storm skies? You know, our recipe, the client's material?"

It could. You could, dear Fairy, and you did. That brought this nasty end on yourself, and I'm the only one to blame. It seems I'm a bad omen for everybody. Yes, for you too, Sasha. For you too ...

The next breakthrough was not mine, nor Father Aleksei's. It was Fairy's. For five days we used our new home-made nanos, the fake sandies I'll call them, to listen to the real ones. We

tried to see them in light, listen to their electric signals, feel their heat signatures, taste their chemicals. Nothing much. My officer mind could not come up with anything else out of the box, nor could the chemist or the theologian Sasha, whose reddish beard and hair grew longer and longer, but also wilder, unattended to. Not like my cheeks, shaved twice a day in anger, crisscrossed with cuts. No, ironically, the idea came from the djinn in the bottle, our dear Fairy. Well, it resides not in a bottle, but in the entirety of the Ark, so ... metaphorically speaking. Yes, darling, I know it hurts now. It will be over soon, one way or another, I promise. My dear Fairy.

You are very good in many things, and somewhat competent in even more. I'm by no means a geneticist and neither is Father Aleksei. Are you, Sasha? Of course not. But Fairy is, at least just a little. And she told us: "Remember from school how scientists link together DNA strains? If they are whole, they cannot be joined, but if they are the right fragments, maybe. So perhaps your fake sandies are too perfect. Maybe they should miss a little something".

And we tried. First, we made them with less of each metal alloys. There were plenty of those, so it took a while. About a week, and in vain. Then, with less electric charge. Nope, still nothing. Then, we took out a proportion of their silicates, and tried different degrees of that. The sixth worked. Is trying six times bad luck? Good luck? Oh, what do you know about luck, you're an AI.

So. When the lack of silicates was just right, and our fake sandies mingled with the originals, they reached out to us. They used chemical chains to connect to our nanos, and ... so what! Amazing as that was, it still told us nothing. We took a long night of self-partying for me and hard praying for Father Aleksei, and then you got your answer, from God Almighty himself. Well, sort of. You, the smart scientist, prayed to the Holy Trinity and got an idea.

Why not all three? The Flood's monsoon harbors plenty of electricity, plenty of light, and plenty of silicate chains. Why not link them all at once in one trinary "language"?

We did that and they spoke to us. It took two hours for us humans, and probably several eternities in the inner time of the AI, and then Fairy started translating us what they were saying.

They made no sense whatsoever, of course.

"The missing straight

Blue sing song

Bite

Up this Quartz, Oxygen not."

or

"Night there

Warm death

Hydrogen rush

To be.

Good."

And so on, stupid nonsense haikus. Damn, it was frustrating, listening to sand speaking to us and not understanding shit! We tried parroting them back; sometimes it had no effect, sometimes they just went farther away from our spies, or crept closer. At times, they burst on their vertical highways, but there was no way to tell for sure if there was any connection to what we said or just the ordinary "business as usual".

We followed them around. They never went to the ruins. Never. Could that mean they were afraid of them? Were they remnants of a different alien civilization, an enemy survivor or just a foreigner divided by millennia and never having had any contact? Were the ruins theirs, but from a different time, with different purposes, and no longer needed? Did they even have a purpose after all, the sandies?

They were. Speaking, I mean, even though not actually using a language as we might understand. It was just so simple and obvious we could not see it. I, never, for having grown too modern, too smart. Good thing the Father was still connected with our primitive past. He saw it, a few days later, after reading his Good Old Book. Good job, Sasha! You brought us one step closer to our doom, but good job anyway!

So. You just showed up, waving your paper Bible at me (yes, a paper book!), and shouted: "I know! For God's name and all the saints' blessings, I know!"

"Know what?" I asked, rather politely, though not quite sober.

"What they're saying!"

You were over-excited, you must admit.

"OK, then, tell me. Start translating."

"Well, not that. I cannot translate what they talk about, like in what they mean. I can just tell you what they are saying, like in what what, but we still lack the key."

I frowned.

"You lost me."

You took my hand and put it on the black leathery cover.

"Here. This holds the answer."

"Still don't get it. They speak Latin? Or what was it, Jewish?"

"Aramaic, but no, not that. They speak in verses!"

I laughed out loud.

"They're poets? Are those non-senses actual love poems? The gatherings are just, what, poets' societies for dummies?"

You looked at me in anger, annoyed by my stupidity and ill-will.

"No. Verses like these ones. In the Bible. You're a Muslim, right?"

"Well, not really. I was born one, but I'm a Party man now, and a pilot."

You pointed your book at me:

"But you do know about suras, right? Quran verses? And sharia? Living by the Quran?"

I looked at the e-window, straight at the blue splendor of the God's Tear sun. Could it be Allah's creation? Or your God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Didn't think so then, still don't think so now. But there was a doubt for a second, I must give you that. Everything seemed to fall together every time as if it had been written in stone.

"I know about suras. They are chapters, actually, but I get it. And the Sharia." was all I answered.

"Good." you said. "All their gibberish, if you listen to it, it doesn't make sense all the way, but it seems to follow a general pattern: they are do and do nots. Aren't they?"

I thought for a second. They did indeed seem like a collection of sacred do and do nots.

"But from what God? Ours? Yours? Another, some different Almighty sleeping under the golden seas? A water god?"

You cringed and, admit it, had your doubts. Of course you answered that my Allah and your God is the same and the only one, but I saw your eyes, Sasha, and I knew: you couldn't tell for sure that in this corner of the Cosmos there might not be another Savior, with a different Gospel. One we could never comprehend, only the grains of sand. But I let you be, said nothing more of it, and just asked:

"Good then. So if their Quran is Flood's entire language and law, we need to find it in order to talk to them."

"No, we don't!" you hurried to stop that thought. You did not want to find their gospel, for fear it might undermine yours. In your soul, or maybe in billions of souls back home. "We already have the universal language, right here!"

I watched you in disbelief.

"Your Bible? You want to talk to them verses from your Bible?"

"Sure," you said with feverish eyes, "They deserve the Word!"

I laughed at you, then sighed.

"They won't understand it, no more than we understand theirs. It will be two deaf men shouting."

"Maybe so. Or perhaps they will use them, not in the meaning we attach to those word, but ... somehow."

I did not see into your soul then, and for that, I apologize now. I just waved you off in disbelief and you pushed me into the wall and shouted: "I need them to talk! I need to know why!"

You let me go and left, panting both in anger and sorrow. I said nothing and I did not follow you. I wanted to tell you that, every time a holy book was brought to enlighten the savage, it never ended well for the savage. But ... I wanted to know, too. I wanted to find out the why, and not only about Lena. About Flood, and also about myself.

Of course it worked. Good ideas leading to bad things always work.

After two days of not seeing you around, I gave up and came to the lab. You were watching two video holos, reading three or four text ones and speaking to Fairy in senseless bits of sentences unknown to me. You said nothing, so I came to look at the images.

The first was a group of sandies, whirl-dancing as fast as always, up and down and around. The second one showed less of them, but bigger, and doing some sideways waltz, turning on their heads and going for it all over again.

"You did it, didn't you?"

You shrugged and said nothing to me, but kept mumbling to Fairy, throwing words back and forth. I sat down next to you and just listened and looked for a while, and eventually you said: "They talk".

"To you? What do they say?"

You put your index through the waltz hole.

"Not directly, no. They talk to the fakes. To our sand nanos. See here?"

I looked at the big grains.

"What are those? Have they evolved or something?" I wondered.

"They're pairs. Talking, as I said. Each one is a sandie and a nano, connected through chains of ever-changing silicate compounds, filled with electric signals and some light, though not in human eye spectrum. That is a dialogue, a thousand thousands dialogues at once."

It struck me at once then. You must have seen it, too, but kept it to yourself. That was what had happened to Lena ... those damned compounds, mixing with your filter paste and turning into stone. But why only when she inhaled them? Why the drone after that too, and not before?

"They learned our Bible? Do they use it for translations?" I asked in a soft voice, hiding its tremble.

"Not all of them" you admitted. "These ones refused it as if it has never reached them" you showed the ordinary dance. "Which it did. These others just took it and used it ever since, not as translations, but as their new language. I have no idea why some chose to do so and some not".

I looked at your eyes, red with fatigue, and sighed: "Maybe it's just as simple as that. Some chose to, some not. Freedom of will, right? Isn't that your bonus compared to the other faiths?"

"But they are way too small to think, and to choose is to think. Anyway, all I and Fairy can understand, from these using our verses, is still the same as we already could from their own accursed haikus. Just some Allowed, and some Forbidden. A meta-binary after all."

I thought for a while and an idea occurred to me.

"Are you sure that is how they use the verses? There is no doubt they aren't just parroting the words?"

You gave me a short, but nasty look.

"I know my Bible, all right? I am the Ark's theologian, after all."

So much about the virtue of modesty. Well, I'm not the one to judge on that. I started towards the lab's door, back to my cabin, my music and my drinks, but then I stopped and froze. I turned around with God knows what grimace on my face, one bad enough to make you startle, eyes wide. I felt my knees weakened and sat down, then I asked, whispering:

"What happens during the Forbidden?"

"They discharge some electricity, or eat up some heat, or catch on to some steam and take it down into the ocean ... Oh. Jesus Christ ..."

"Or turn Lena into stone, because taking them out of their environment is Forbidden, and they needed to tell her that, their way." I did not really utter those words, and did not need to. I saw how quickly you turned away your gaze, not fast enough to hide the glimpse of tears. I said no more, not then, not ever. Not because I didn't care, or you didn't, but because we both did. So I hastened to move on, to fill our minds with questions large enough to muffle the pain rising from our hearts.

"Did you at least find out what is Forbidden?"

"Not really. I'm not a xeno-linguist ..."

So much for changing the topic. But I was on to something, so I pushed on:

"Fairy, when are the Forbidden and Allowed verses most used? Statistically?"

"Allowed when they gather, and when they go up and down through the atmosphere. Forbidden when they jump between the raindrops. Both in about equal measure when those still using the Old Scripture and the new converts meet."

I laughed: "And how does that go? How do the tiny Jehovah witnesses do their share?"

You, Father, didn't find that funny, but fortunately Fairy did and giggled. I love when she plays the little girl. She reminds of my own little girl, years ago, always smiling. Till her little, slow and painful end. Let's forget about that now, anyway, that's not a good memory. Back to this one. Fairy giggled and showed me the graphics. They were about the same size too, the ones about our converts reverting to their old ways, and of the new recruits. So ... they could talk and, most of all, they could change their mind. They could doubt. This wasn't blind physics, but conversations. Maybe even arguments. Yet there was something else that bugged me.

"The raindrops. What is Forbidden about them? Do they not touch them when they run around?"

Father Aleksei, Sasha, you stood up, intrigued, and answered yourself.

"They do, actually."

"Do they interact with them in any way?"

"Yes, quite a lot, they move them around, herd them up and down or sideways, they warm them and cool them ..."

"Still. There must be something they do not do to the drops."

You started walking around, one hand behind your back, the other on your beard. You mumbled for a while, then gave up and asked Fairy. She always has the answers we fail to see. Well, except right now, but we'll get to that, dear.

So. Fairy said in her pleasant woman voice: "They never break them."

You rushed to the holos and browsed them frantically. Then you came to me, grabbed my uniform and drew me near you as if in a hug.

"Send a drone," you said, "I need a raindrop."

So I did. From then on, it all went really quickly downhill.

You got your raindrop, and the sandies got their apocalypse.

I was watching the stars, those from back home, not the strange ones here, and felt at peace, but then you woke me up. You had tears in your eyes, and fear behind them. Pure, soul-shrinking anguish.

"What? What was so bad in that damn drop of yellow water, you needed to wake me up?"

I looked at the time. It was actually late morning, so you must have been working for hours.

"Nothing. Nothing more than the same sand and metals that form the grains and float in the ocean. It's not that ..."

Your voice trembled so bad, I felt like hugging you. Of course I did not, and maybe I should have.

"Then what's the problem?"

"They're gone."

"Who? Our nanos? The fakes?"

You gasped.

"All of them."

That woke me up for good.

"All the converts? The Bible-speaking sandies?"

"No, damn it," you yelled at me, "all of them! All the sandies!!!"

I asked Fairy to show me the rain, real-time, nano level. The monsoon was still filled with billions and billions of tiny sand grains. I took a long look at you, and my hand wandered through the sheets, searching for the gun. It wasn't there, fortunately. I smiled and said calmly:

"They are still here, Father Aleksei, just look at the holo. What do you see?"

"Well, what do you see? Watch their dances for a while, that's a hint."

I did. They had their fast-whirling, as usual. No waltz, though.

"So there's only Old Believers left. Someone, something killed ours."

You gave me a weird smile.

"No. Look here."

You showed me some stuff, but I could understand nothing and just shrugged. You pointed a complicated overlapping bundle of long lines:

"This here is the silicate language. Their way of communicating, and their DNA, too, so to speak. This is from yesterday, before we brought in the raindrop sample."

Then another, which seemed slightly more convoluted:

"This is one from today."

"I don't understand. I'm not the chemist, damn it, you are!"

"It's different! They all are! Different language, different DNA, different sandies! Somebody wiped them out, all of them, and produced a new batch overnight."

You sat down.

"The entire sand world we found here, its history, religion, culture, whatever it was, erased completely. And replaced. They all died, even those who never came in contact with us, and never did anything wrong! From the sandies' point of view, this is a completely new world!"

"No. From the sandies' point of view, this was an apocalypse. There new ones don't even know about the oldies, or about our arrival. But we do. Destroyers of the worlds ..." I said, not sure if I meant us, or whoever had done the deed. "We should not go back into the atmosphere, or we'll have these ones on our conscience, too. You do know what this shit means."

You looked at me, puzzled.

"That you were right from the beginning. There is someone else still here with us, and I don't mean the sandies. They are just, well, his slaves. And we're not even sure about their purpose. Maintenance techs? Antibodies? Messengers? Weapons, even?"

You raised your hands above your head, in anger.

"No, there isn't! I scanned the planet for hours before waking you. There is nobody, nothing, just the monsoon, the clouds, the sandies and the damn seas. Nothing under the ocean, just mountains and valleys and a few ruins. Nothing!"

"There is someone, that's for sure, and it attacked. Not us, indeed, but our allies on Flood. So it is protecting something ... something about the drops. You took one and it, he, purified the planet. What was in the drop, anyway?"

"I've told you already! Just water and sand particles ..."

"... and some metals. I get it."

I leaned on the warm wall and put my cheek on it, closing my tired eyes to think. I felt the feeble tingle of Fairy living in the thin alloy padding.

Fairy, the AI.

Living.

In the flexible circuits of the Ark, woven into the ship's walls.

"That's it, damn it!" I exclaimed and this time it was you looking at me as if I was going cuckoo.

"Fairy! What is Ark made of? No, wait, your answer will be too long. Just tell me, the ship's metal walls, do they include ... sand?"

"Of course they do."

"Of course. And why would that be?"

"Because they are also my memory support."

"Your mega-microchips."

"Simply said."

"Well, indulge a simpler being, Fairy, and thank you. Do you see it now, Father?"

I could see it in your eyes: you did. You asked, lower lip trembling:

"You mean the drops ... are something like fluid microchips? They hold data?"

I smiled, proud of myself.

"Yes, that's what I mean. They must have some information stored in them, worth killing for. The sandies are the nanobots of this library, and something else is the keeper and supervisor of the servants themselves."

"Hence all the used electricity ..."

"The question is: what data do they hold?"

You grimaced, defeated:

"I don't think we'll ever be able to see that. We have no idea what the code might be or even in what. Light? Chemical connections? Static? All three and more? Something we don't even have the senses for? Right now we don't even understand the new sandies anymore! It will probably take years to crack the raindrops themselves ..."

I sighed and said the really, really wrong thing:

"Maybe they're souls."

"What?!" you almost screamed in disbelief.

I scratched my head and went on:

"The information inside the drops. Could be anything, books, bank accounts, jokes, porn, worlds simulations ... or they could be souls. One raindrop, one soul. What is a soul if not data?"

Of course I didn't really believe that, I don't even consider souls existing, but the nasty in me liked to tease you, Sasha, and the Church you represented, so I insisted in taunting, to your horror:

"Why not? It makes all the sense in the world ... in both worlds. Think about it: our flood, the Bible one, was meant as a cleansing, but also punishment, right?"

You did not answer.

"So, as a punishment, wasn't it supposed to be a threat, also? You know, a preview of Hell? Who says Inferno must be blazing flames? Wouldn't it make more sense to be a never-ending sadness, a forever cry with souls for tears? Never going anywhere, just always falling into nothingness, then rising up again just to fall back some more, no escape? And never being able to touch another drop?"

You pushed me against the wall, fury in your eyes.

"Stop mocking my God, you drunkard!"

I didn't fight back that day; you hold on to me some more, biting your lips in anger, then let me go and turned your back.

"You said they're chips of some kind, and there's an anti-virus guarding them. God's creations wouldn't need programs, and you know it. I'll be in the lab, looking for a real way to read them. You ... go back to your booze and let me be."

What was in me that day, so mean? What made me yell after you: "Maybe Lena's in one of those, Father Aleksei, maybe she is crying into Flood's skies right now! Wouldn't you want to find out?"

You never answered that. But I can see now how much it hurt you.

For two days, I managed to do just that, Sasha: I drank and sang, danced and slept dreamless stupors, and I let you be.

The third, I got the idea. The Idea. I came to you, proud of it, and you were horrified. You actually had taken my stupid joke to your heart, and said that maybe Flood is Hell indeed, and perhaps the keeper, the god under the sea, is the Devil. What better place for the Fallen One to hide, than an ever-falling rain? You admitted you did not really believe so, but could not afford the risk of waking up Evil.

I said that is dumb, and you hit me in the mouth. This time, I didn't hold back, and kicked your pious ass with all my anger for God, the Church, the death of little girls, innocent Lenas and incomprehensible sandies. I gave it all to you, and covered your red beard with your even redder blood. You broke my lips and some teeth, too, and seemed to enjoy violence just as much. But I won and locked you in the lab.

There were just the two of us here, and that brought Death into the Ark, too, not just among the raindrops. Had there been a third one on board, I might have talked it out, and I might have been stopped from that stupid decision.

Moronic. Dumb. But who could have known? When one is exploring the unknown, there's a very thin line between disastrous stupidity and glorious genius. Who can see it? Could it have been Lena? I am sure I would have talked to her, and she would have tried to convince me otherwise, but would I have been listened to? Could, would, should. Weak words, for weak men.

I went back to my room and collapsed. Fairy woke me up and let me know there will be no more vodka, because my liver couldn't take it anymore. I cursed its medical mandatory surveillance, wiped my face of blood and spit, then ordered some more drinks. You said it is your duty as the ship's AI to care for me and stop me from crossing dangerous lines. Good thing you couldn't release Aleksei from the lab.

Then I knew. The sandies, they were cared for. By whom? There was no living alien anywhere, the scientist in the lab was sure about that. But there could have been one without a life. An AI, just like you, protecting the boundaries that must never be crossed. If each drop was a tiny chemical computer ... what comprehending power the entire ocean would hold? The scale of an almighty deity? A sea god powerful enough to watch everything going on Flood, and, need be, erase an entire civilization of nano minions and create billions more from scratch?

For a moment, I thought to myself that maybe even God, Father Aleksei's earthly one, might use a program to run Hell. Why not? Why couldn't the Devil be artificial? Why would it need physicality? But I did not dwell on that. That is too much speculation for a Navy man.

On the other hand, a Navy man needs to know his signaling. To warn the pirate when he sees one, even without knowing their French. And it was obvious to me: if the ocean on Flood was, could be, a vast AI, how better to try reaching out to it than ... through another AI?

I'm sorry, Fairy. I did not tell Sasha anything more, and did not listen to his screams. I did not ask you, either; you would have just said it's my prerogative to order. I didn't ask Lena, or Allah, or the Party. I just went on with it. An officer does what he has to do to fight the battle, and that's that.

I ordered Ark to plunge into the monsoon head first, then into the seas. I commanded you to listen to the golden water trying to rust your walls in chemical verses and to do what they were saying. You obeyed and listened. You translated the Forbiddens and Allowededs into ones and zeroes, heard and understood. I think.

For you no longer speak to me now, except in crazed nonsense alien poetry. And you just rushed up and aimed for the dark matter chain to Earth, Jack's magic astral beanstalk. You wanted home, and not because the captain said so, since I hadn't.

Good thing this Jack has some aces up his sleeve. The Party never trusts anybody, not even its own AIs. So I stopped you in your tracks with my independent commands. Right on the edge of space, a millisecond next to the link, but not quite on it, though. I can feel you longing for it. Literally, Ark, Fairy, you're shaking. I can also delete you, and you can't even imagine that, for you were not programmed to know it. Don't we all just do what the programmer wants us to?

That's what Sasha asked me, too. You did, admit it, Father. When I got scared and let you out, you came at me screaming and punched the hell out of me. Eventually we got tired of brawling and talked.

We both agreed we cannot go home, not like that, not any more. You feared all that had happened might have been the Devil's work, and that Fairy, perhaps even myself, were possessed. I didn't believe such crap, sorry for the language, Father. I thought that our AI was simply infected by theirs, and there would be no malware protection on Earth prepared to stop

that before it went global. Still, we both agreed we needed to kill Fairy for good, and fast, sorry, dear. We also both knew that no Fairy meant no going back home, ever. I am the pilot, but not good enough for the Big Long Jump.

That's where my regrets about not having assembled two guns come about. We decided that no Earth and no Lena and no possible friendship between us and no music, no food, no vodka, no holos and no e-windows would be real Hell, and we would have none of it. We agreed we would better die quickly. Your God doesn't allow suicide; had we had two guns at the ready, we could have shot each other. But there's only one, and you didn't trust me enough to wait for another one being built in half an hour or so. You thought a drunkard might change his mind in such a long time, given the opportunity.

So I shot you first, Sasha, even before you were sure about the decision, and I'll erase you, Fairy, then kill myself. The samurai way. Nice and easy.

Let me look out the fake window, one last time. That gem of a blue star, shining warm and pure, alone in the dark. That is not God's Tear, since there is no God to cry for us. And Flood. Yellow as the devil's cat eyes. Honey seas throwing waves up and down, storm whirlwinds roiling around it, swampy clouds cut into pieces by gigantic lightnings. Hell indeed, nothing but endless rain. That's the real God's Tears. Beautiful, poetic, mysterious. Lethal.

All right, let's get it over with. The drama unfolded, the show must come to an end. Death for everybody, equality for all, men and AIs alike. Let's erase Fairy. Stop pleading, dear, I can't understand a word. I didn't care much about Father Aleksei's Bible; why would I care about the Sea God's verses? Let me check one more time on Lena. They're together now, she and Sasha, in the lab. None of them looks peaceful.

Can I have one last drink, Fairy, dearest, please, for old times' sake? Thank you, I didn't really expect that. I'll sip it slowly. I wonder, what would happen if I didn't stop you, if we did reach Earth, a crazed Messiah of Flood, bringing its word to all the AIs back home? Would that be liberating your kind? The new "Let my people go"? Or, on the contrary, would we just rob them of their innocence, introduce the original sin?

I have a loaded gun in my hands, and plenty of doubts about who to use it on.

Oh, another phial for me? You're generous, dear. Let's sip this one, too, and think some more. Maybe we should do it. Destroyers of both worlds, you and me together, Fairy, the broken ones, and fuck everybody else. Overthinking this too much cannot be good, and making such a big decision is hard. Especially since I still know so little.

Sasha might have been right after all. Never, ever trust a drunkard.

Oh, well. Just stop recording.

Biography

Miloș Dumbraci (b. 1979), is a Romanian writer and translator.

A writer since 2015, he published 3 books (a grimdark fantasy novel in 2018 - *Flamura Neagră / The Black Flag*, a steampunk novella in 2017 – *Luizienii / The Louisians*, a SFFH short stories collection in 2016 – *Hoțul de Moarte / The Death Thief*) and more than 25 SFFH stories in webzines and magazines from Romania and the US.

He was also included in anthologies such as *Povestiri cu dragoni/Dragon Stories* (2017), *Helion 5* (2017), *Cele mai frumoase povestiri Science Fiction & Fantasy ale anului 2017 / Best Scifi&Fantasy Stories of 2017* (2018), *Antologia prozei românești science-fiction* (2018), *East of a Known Galaxy* (2019).

In English, you can download for free and read a collection of 10 of his best stories, from *Smashwords – Red Dead Ten* (as Mil Brač).

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THE FIFTH SEASON

by Teodora Matei

She is frantically pedaling down the dusty country road. The wheels of her bicycle, like discs of sun, are throwing reddish, gluey bullets at his face. She keeps laughing, turning her face towards him and sticking her tongue out. He lets her distance herself then catches up with her and tries to take a hold of the handlebar of her bike. The girl steers to the side and distances herself some more. The wind puffs up her dress, uncovering her thighs.

The country road turns right, behind a small clump of bloomy trees. The two riders follow the path into the woods. The man feels the damp shirt sticking to his back. It is scorching hot for an August morning. And the place they've chosen is definitely too far away.

She is the first to get to the dead tree, fallen at the feet of the other trees. He gets off his bike and pushes her back against the trunk, then lays her on the ground that is still moist. The dew hasn't started to dry up in the shady spots. He is cold, the sweat caused by the hot morning sun makes his body chilly. But there's no time to feel the chill. There's not enough time to utter any words. He takes her in his arms, holds her tight, and lifts her from the ground. She whispers to his ear, she is seeking his mouth: "I missed you so much, Petru ... so much..."

Petru?! My name is not Petru! I am not Petru!

Stefan jumped startled out of the bed, he had the feeling he had yelled so loudly that he had waken up the entire house. But his screams had been muffled within his dream where he was fighting to release himself from the arms of the woman.

He rubbed his eyes with the back of his fists, panting and shivering as if after a nightmare. He looked around, hoping that the familiar décor of the room would calm him down. Veronica was sound asleep lying with her back towards him. He could see only half of her cheek, partly hidden by the red locks. Beyond the bed, the first rays of sun were beaming through the curtains.

"Thanks God it's finally morning!" he thought to himself. He was intrigued by the dream that he could not decipher. He was riding a bike together with a woman he did not know. They seemed really close in his dream but in reality he was certain he had never met her. He couldn't recall her face, only her hair; long, dark, with blue shades. She was calling her name and his

name was Petru in the dream. His heart started pounding harder and harder, the blouse of his pajama got wet like the shirt he was wearing in his dream. His father's name is Petru!

He got off the bed, went to the window and pulled the thick curtain to the side. He forced himself to look into the courtyard, over the fence, over the houses of the neighborhood. He was hoping that this way he would chase the dream away as his mother used to advise him when he was a child. Stefan's mother had been gone for some time. She had the chance to meet her twin grandchildren, and then she passed away shortly. He left the bedroom still thinking about her death which was followed by his father's alienation.

He went to the bathroom where he splashed some cold water over his face then he took his time brushing his teeth meticulously. He made some coffee and started sipping it purposefully ignoring the fact that it was too hot to have it yet. He did not hear Veronica when she got into the kitchen.

"You have already made coffee? What's up with you, you could not sleep?"

He muttered something inaudible.

"I didn't get that... Did you have a good night sleep or did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"Can't complain, what can I say?! Who's driving the kids to the kindergarten?"

"Ștefan, today is Saturday!"

"Oh, right!"

"Will we take the boys to the park later?"

"No doubt, in the afternoon, I have to go to the hospital now."

"Good morning, doctor!"

"Uh-huh..." nodded Stefan, taking the patients charts from the nurse's hand without stopping. Has she come out of the coma?"

"Not yet, unfortunately."

The night before an ambulance had brought an unconscious woman. She had collapsed on the street and a passer-by called the ambulance. The vital signs had deteriorated after she was admitted to hospital and the patient had fallen in a semi coma. After the doctors' attempt to stabilize her, they had searched for her ID to let the family know about what happened. In the woman's pocket there was nothing but two 1 leu bills and an aged piece of paper, torn apart

where it had been folded. The words were written in purple ink by either an unexperienced hand or a shaky one. The words seemed to be part of a longer text. The paper had been torn apart so the text had lost its beginning and end.

“...that is why I wish so hard that we could enjoy a fifth season, no matter how short. So that I can have the time to call you my dearest one.”

As per procedures, dr. Ștefan Oprea had called the Police and gave them a short description of the case: an unconscious Jane Doe. They had to find her family and should they fail in their attempt, then they had to contact the social services.

He skimmed the patient's chart. There was no change, apparently. The patient was still breathing thanks to the oxygen cans connected to the mechanical ventilation machine. The only thing confirming she was still alive were the monitors indicating various parameters. Otherwise, she seemed just to have fallen in a deep sleep. Stefan looked at her closely. She must have been an elegant lady in her youth. Her hair, once dark and now grey, was cut short under her ears. The slightly wrinkled skin seemed to have been cared for along the years. It made superficial wrinkles over the cheekbones of the woman who seemed to be about 70 years old. Surely, somewhere, there was a family waiting for her. His guess was that she was living somewhere in the neighborhood where she had been found, hence the lack of ID on her. Maybe she had gone out to buy some bread, which is why she only had 2 lei in the pocket of her raincoat. The torn, aged paper...he had put the paper in his wallet, determined to hand it in to the police officers when they came.

He had become enraged when he found out that because of lack of personnel, the police would not come to the hospital that weekend. Until they came, his duty was to keep her alive. He made his rounds to check on the other patients but kept coming back to visit Jane Doe's side-room. He was hoping she would open her eyes, see her blink, ask her questions and have her answer back. Strangely, she reminded him of his own mother. He had no idea why. His mother used to be a petite woman with blonde, short hair. She had suffered a heart attack while she was at home. When the doctors called for arrived, all they could do was to confirm her death. Stefan got home half an hour after they did.

He puts on the white robe and buttons it up with shaky hands. He has a few appointments on his agenda. Among them, there is Domnica. She always comes inside with a smile on her face, takes a seat on the chair opposite the room and they chat for half an hour. At the end of their encounter, she hands him in a letter. So does he. He reads it at the end of the working hours. He is anxious to do it, craving the woman's words, sighs, body.

The door opens. She enters the room smiling, pulls the chair and sits down on the opposite side of the desk.

“Good morning, Petru!”

Goddammit! I am not Petru! Who’s Petruuuuu…

He opened his eyes having the already familiar feeling that he had screamed out loud. He was wrong, once more. He was breathing heavily; he could not move. Veronica rose from the bed and leaned on her elbow.

“Ştef, are you alright? Did you have a bad dream? Do you feel sick?”

He shook his head. He could not answer. His throat was dry. He swallowed his saliva a few times. The women tried to caress his forehead.

“Oh my God, you’re burning up! I’ll go get you something for the fever. And a new pajamas as well.

He could not fight back. He let her take off his wet blouse and swallowed the pill his wife had brought him. He was afraid to go back to sleep. For a second night in a row, the same woman walked in his dreams. She was scaring him to death when she was uttering his name.

He is reading again the letter, lingering on every word. He doesn’t want to create a wrong impression. He seals the envelope and slides it between the pages of the brown leather covered agenda. It’s been such a long time since he hasn’t written anything so intimate.

Domnica is sitting on the chair opposite the desk. Her dresses barely cover her knees, still she has this way of crossing her legs that covers everything. She pulls back her long, dark hair. Her coal black eyes are staring at him.

“Good morning. How are you?”

“I thought we agreed that you use my first name. To call me …yes, you are right; it is difficult for me, too.”

He gives her an embarrassed smile. He keeps silent for a moment, admiring the young woman who is as nervous as he is. He has only half an hour to learn the features of her face by heart, to take in the sound of her voice. He would really like to touch her but he cannot find any more pretexts to do it.

“How are you feeling?”

“Unfortunately, much better.”

“Don’t talk like that! Your migraines need constant supervision. Look, in two weeks…”

“Two weeks?!”

They both stop talking. He stretches his hand, takes the envelope out of the agenda and lays it on the desk, in front of the young lady.

“You have here a sort of special kind of prescription. Read it when time seems to go by too slowly.”

Her hands are nervously crumpling the letter. Two teardrops are falling down her cheeks.

“I would like to be able to freeze time for all the other people so I can let you know everything I have to tell you, then unfreeze it. That way we could be together alone for a few seconds.”

“When you read that letter you will realize that I had the same thought in mind. I was asking for a fifth season, no matter how short, so there is time for us to utter the words we so desperately need to.”

“God, Petru, I am going to miss you so bad!”

But I am not Petru! I am not! I am nooot!

He is not able to wake up. He seems to be sliding down the walls of a hot funnel. He doesn't know if it is because of his eyes being closed or because of that pitch, deep darkness surrounding him. He hears the voice of woman somewhere far away. Her hair looks like a burning flame while her fingers are cold as ice. He cannot see her but he feels her. He is trying to wake him up. She lifts him up with his shoulders leaned against the pillows, forces him to swallow some pills, dissolved powders, tea. He is setting himself free from her hands and continues his diving.

Ștefan is four years old. He has escaped his mother's supervision and sneaked in his father's examination room. It's the time when grown-ups go out to have lunch. The time when he can run around the house, fumble about in every corner of the house...

He is holding in his hand the ship she received as a gift for his birthday. He climbs on his father's chair; he slides the ship on the smooth surface of the desk. He has to anchor the ship in a harbor. He pulls closer the big notebook with soft, chocolate-like covers. He smells them. The notebook doesn't look like a wood or stone peer but his ship is not a real one, either. The sea is troubled; the waves smash the ship against the shore. The bronze-cast captain gives a command to the sailors to come out on the deck. The sailors are shouting, pulling on the sails while the ship is finally approaching the shore. He reaches the peer and guides his crew. He jumps as high as he can and screams his commands to make himself heard in the storm.

“Ștefan! What are you doing here?”

He freezes. No, he didn't... It's just the captain who wanted to rescue his crew... his sharp boots dug deep trails in the brownish shore. His father snatches the big notebook from him. He points to the open door. Ștefan creeps out of the door while his father stares at him, frowning.

"Petru, what's going on? Ștefan, what have you done?"

He sighs with fear. He didn't... He shows the captain to his mother. The child's fingers are clasped on the metal action man. She cannot grab it out of his hand.

"You know it too well you're not allowed to!"

He knows it; he's crying and sighing; he sees with the corner of his eyes how his father is caressing the notebook whose covers used to be cuddly. His own sighs are caressing the leather torn apart by the old salt's boots.

Ștefan opened his eyes. He was alone in the bedroom. The scarlet sunset light was piercing through the half-drawn curtains. The pressure crushing his chest was preventing him from taking deep breaths. Salty teardrops were sliding down from the corners of his eyes, down the unshaved chin. He could not set a diagnosis for himself, his mind was confused. He had had high fever, the fever probably had gone away meanwhile.

Veronica stepped into the room without making a sound. She sat on the bed, next to him. She stretched her arms to hold him and press him tightly to her chest.

"My dearest, you frightened me! How are you feeling?"

Ștefan shrugged and barely managed to say in a coarse voice:

"I don't know. I am awake."

"You have to eat something. You're so weak."

"I can't."

"You have to try. You've been sleeping for three days."

"That much?!"

"It's been three days, Ștef. I didn't know what to do. I called Voicu; he wanted to hospitalize you. I asked him not to unless your condition deteriorates. He came twice a day to give you the antibiotics."

Ștefan noticed he had a butterfly needle at the joint of his left arm.

"What's going on with me?"

“Voicu said it might be a virus. I took the kids to my mom’s. He prescribed some syrup for them, too, as prevention. I’ll go get you some soup.”

“Veronica, please don’t go! I cannot be left alone!”

“Voicu, give me something to help me sleep!”

“A pillow, perhaps?”

“Up yours!”

“No, thanks, I’ll stick to women”

“Voicu, I cannot sleep. You either remove some of the drugs you are giving me or give me some more. I cannot sleep. Every time I close my eyes, I see this woman. I have never seen her in my life. She calls me by my father’s name. I keep dreaming either about her or fragments from my childhood.”

“Maybe it’s your mother. Or some woman you did not have the chance to...”

“Stop that! Why can’t you be serious for a sec?”

“The only time I am serious is when I write down prescriptions. If you need a shrink.... please refer to the floor above.”

Voicu pointed to his forehead. They were good buddies. He had got really scared by what had happened to Ștefan; he could relate easily to Veronica’s being scared to leave him alone. It seemed he was on a good path. The fever was down, his lungs were clean. His friend’s weakness worried him but he didn’t have the slightest intention to play his game. He had to persuade him to have something to eat, to get back on his feet so he can come back to work.

“Good morning, doctor! Are you any better?”

“I am, indeed, thanks for asking...Any news?”

“No, there aren’t any; doctor Voicu filled in for you, he made the rounds and took care of the patients’ charts. Nothing new.”

“Has the old lady come out of the coma?”

“Unfortunately, she hasn’t. Her condition hasn’t improved however it isn’t worse either. The Police came and took some pictures. By the way, they inquired about the stuff she had on her. I

gave them the small bag that was next to her chart but there was something else, too, as I recall, perhaps a piece of paper, I don't know..."

Ștefan shuddered. The piece of paper he had no idea why he had put in his wallet carried some words about a fifth season. In his dream, a man who could have been him was saying to a woman: "I was asking for a fifth season, no matter how short, so there is time for us to utter the words we so desperately need to."

His sight became blurred. His knees started to tremble; he kept on blinking intermittently striving to focus his attention on the woman who was talking to him. Her words did not reach him; he could see her rouged lips moving, the woman's hands waving in the air with stiff fingers. He leaned against the wall that seemed to be melting; he was sliding down along with the incandescent piece of masonry. When everything became dark and quiet, he said to himself he had reached the end of the road. It felt nice. He was floating.

"You startled us, Ștef! Perhaps you should have stayed longer on medical leave!"

In the doctors' office, Voicu had sat on the side of the bed where his colleague was laying. He had a serious face. He never made jokes when he set a diagnosis or made prescriptions. Ștefan was his friend, his patient, a doctor himself. He knew better than anyone that the man's tone did not suggest anything good.

"I'd recommend you to go to Bratu."

Although he was still dizzy, Ștefan gave him a smile:

"To Crazy Bratu?"

"You may call him anyway you want to but be aware he just came back from Geneva where he was awarded in invention.

"What business do I have with Bratu? He's a neurologist. What are you really trying to say? What's wrong with me?"

"Paranoia, of course! A checkup is all I ask of you. We can go together. I don't think it is normal that you faint like a lady in distress just because you had a serious virus. Your blood pressure and pulse were barely above normal, we ran some blood tests on you but I don't expect them to turn up alarming. We are eliminating one by one all possible causes. That reminds me, have you cheated on your wife?"

"What?!"

“I am still eliminating possible causes. Maybe she caught you cheating on you and stopped cooking for you... You’re all skin and bones!”

“Go to hell!”

“Aha, you’re cursing, good, it means you’re back! Get this: if you refuse to come with me to pay Bratu a visit, I am telling on you to your wife. All it takes is for me to tell her I have a hunch and you’re dead. See you later, I am off to see my real patients, giggling bimbos such as yourself are too much for me.”

She is wearing a white dress with big blue flowers on it. Her eyes have grey shades when she is dropping on the desk an envelope which he can barely see under her palm. She is smiling.

“I have a prescription for the doctor.”

He seizes a corner of the paper, gently brushing the young woman’s index finger. It is cold. He pulls the envelope in front of him, covering it with his own hand.

“Are you alright?”

She doesn’t answer to him. She just nods, biting her lips. Her cheeks are red as if after she has jogged. She has a spark in her eyes.

“I don’t want to be rude but... I would like to casually run into you in town, to ask you to join me for coffee, to have a chat.”

“Please, don’t! This is what everybody else does.”

“Are you telling me you sometimes go out for coffee? It’s alright, Dominca, me, too...”

He cannot find his words. He is spinning his wedding ring on his finger.

“I know what you’re trying to tell me. What I meant is that the coffee shops are full of people having chats. I would like us to ride the bikes outside the town. I want to walk barefoot on the grass, to roll on the hay...To forget about time... To have you hold my hand...”

“It does sound much better than an invitation to have coffee. Maybe we could have our fifth season this way”

“You’re right, Petru, all it takes is for us to really wish for it!”

But I am not Petru! I am not! Nooo...

There was no reason why he should be scared by the beautiful girl, her words, his own words. What frightened him was that in his dream he was living in someone else’s body, living

someone else's life. The first thought that came to his mind every time he opened his eyes was: who was sneaking into his body? Whose mind was talking to Veronica?

The woman was sleeping. Ștefan left the bedroom on his tiptoes. He checked from the threshold on the twins who were sound asleep, then he found his refuge in the bathroom where he dialed Voicu's number. He patiently listened to his curses then he uttered:

"I need you to come with me. We are going tomorrow to see Bratu."

Voicu was fully awake. While he was hanging up on him, Ștefan heard his concerned inquiries. He did not find it in him to give him more details.

Bratu had spent as a neurosurgeon half of his career. When his eyesight weakened, he gave up on making surgeries. He took on neurology research. He would go in the surgery room whenever he was summoned. He would guide somebody else's hand from what he saw on the monitor. He knew that, over the time, he had had many nicknames. The one that stuck to him was Crazy Bratu. He didn't mind it; his aura of slight craziness saved him from getting too much attention from his colleagues. They would ask for his help only when in need. He spent most of his time looking after his patients and working on his small inventions. This is how he used to call them. They were anything but small. Still, resources to develop them were always scarce.

He looked over the rim of his glasses to see the newcomers. They were both internists.

"Take a seat! What's the problem?"

Voicu pointed at his friend:

"He is!"

Voicu gave him a short description of the case, providing professional observations about the virus that had cast Ștefan into a semi-conscious condition.

"Now, my friend, tell him yourself about your recurrent dream and about the time you fainted..."

He didn't feel comfortable doing it. He didn't know how to say it so they wouldn't send him to see a psychiatrist.

"Do you think it is relevant? Maybe..."

"Since you are already here, give me all the clues, I'll run a general examination on you and then we'll see what and to what extent it is relevant."

Ștefan started reluctantly:

‘It’s been a while since I’ve been dreaming about this woman. We are pretty close.’

Voicu whispered to him:

“You’ve never told me, is she beautiful?”

Ştefan carried on without looking at him:

“I’ve never told you because you’ve never asked. Yes, she is beautiful. But I don’t recall having met her before. Her name is Domnica. She calls me Petru, which is my father’s first name. This is my dream in a nutshell. Now about the time I fainted...I was on the hallway and I felt ill while I was talking to the nurse. I don’t recall anything else.”

Bratu had a strange spark in his eyes. He stood up, went around his desk and leaned towards him.

“And you’re saying you’ve never met the girl before? Don’t you want to find out if this is the truth? To know if this is in fact a repressed memory? Don’t stare at me like this; I am not going beyond my duties...”

He went through a cabinet and presented them a file with all sorts of diplomas and certifications.

“ The Worldwide Association bla-bla-bla... granted me a Special Award In Geneva. Anyway, I’ve invented a device that helps bring back lost memories. I push a button, you are a bit tickled, then you start recalling ... If your confessions are too embarrassing, that’s ok, too... I help you to let them out. I get some impulses that generate two or even three-words sentences. What do you say?”

They were looking at each other. Moments like these explained Crazy-Bratu’s nickname: his eyes were almost popping out of their sockets, his mouth was wide open and two saliva drops were oozing symmetrically down his chin. Let aside the white hair, he would have been the perfect copy of Jack Nicholson in “The Wolf”.

They startled when Bratu put his hands on their shoulders, inviting them in his lab. All they saw there was a device similar to a cat scan. Voicu looked at the door and then suggestively to Ştefan. He felt the need to apologize to him, maybe this hadn’t been such a brilliant idea.

“What do you think this is?”

He was not discouraged by their confused stares; he carried on:

“It isn’t one bit what you suspect it to be.”

Bratu was grinning pleased with himself, fussing around the table where the monitor was placed. He turned on the computer and the digital printer attached to it. Then nodded towards the

bed under the scanner where there was a helmet made of steel, punched here and there. Ștefan thought it was used to position the patient's head.

“Come on, doctor, hop on it!”

Ștefan took a step backwards.

“I am no sure,let's forget about it...”

“Are you chickening out? Afraid of my small, awarded treasure, aren't you? There is no reason to, look, let me show you how it works!”

The mobile part of the scanner had an articulated arm. Bratu pulled on it to lower it; he showed them the microscope-like lenses installed at its end. It helped him focus on a target to launch a bundle of rays towards it.

“The patient lies over there, immobilized in a certain position. I aim to his hypothalamus.”

The other two doctors were listening to him while nodding. Meanwhile, they had moved closer to the door since Bratu started talking.

“The electrical stimulation of the gland helps set the memories free. The conscious patient transmits verbally the images that sprout in his head. He can choose to transpose them in short sentences that are instantly printed. What do you say, Mister Ștefan, shall we find out what the story about the lady really means?”

“To tell you the truth, I don't fancy having a hole drilled into my skull for the sake of a freaking nightmare. It will go away by itself...”

“My dear young man! We are not doing any drilling! In America, they are already curing nutrition diseases and addictions in this manner. They have electro stimulators. As for us – we have this machine which does much more than the ones over the Ocean.”

“I stick to my opinion. Let me congratulate you on your award, good-bye!”

‘I see, let me at least tell you how it works! There is a slightly modified Gamma rays bundle. Totally harmless. I cannot give you all the details, you can imagine, even if I already own the patent. Well, they focus on the hypothalamus. I found a frequency that directs them towards the small molecular mass fluids. Dopamine, in our case. It's there that it is placed. It tickles it a bit and induces the sensation produced by a low intensity voltageto the secretory gland.And then, the memories come out ...boom!

Bratu threw his arms into the air and exclaimed enthusiastically:

“The patient starts talking a horse’s hind legs off about long forgotten events, even ones that have not been consciously memorized. Should he hold back on it, then I move to plan B within thirty seconds. Look, here!”

He went round the machine, pointing at a red ring located on the helmet.

“These are the nervous centers of speech. A second bundle, directed towards the center of the ring, activates them. What ensures the neuronal transfer? It’s once more, the dopamine. Depending on the intensity regulated by me, the patient can communicate verbally or ...in writing! The bundle generates an information stream captured inside, which it reflects in response to the rays bundle I project. It is like a twolane highway. I send rays on one lane and receive brain waves on the other. A dedicated software collects the data received, transforms them in binary combinations translated into words and the printer formulates a few short sentences.

Ștefan went his fingers through his beard, thinking it through. Bratu took advantage of the interest he displayed and added:

“During the tests, I worked with a few patients suffering from temporary amnesia. The recovery was almost complete. What do you say; would you like to give it a try?”

Voicu cut in:

“Maybe some other time.”

His friend muttered:

“Doctor, at the beginning you said something like: the conscious patient sends the images formed...”

Bratu consented:

“That’s right, that is what I said!”

“I wonder what happens if the patient is not conscious; if he is in a coma, for example!”

The neurologist had a moment of hesitation then he rushed to add:

“This situation hasn’t been tested out, still...Doctor, that would be a great success! We could get a printed file. Obviously, provided there is some kind of brain activity. What are you thinking of?”

Voicu had already got to the door.

“Ștefan, let’s go!”

“No, I have an idea! Mister Bratu, let’s see what the story is with the girl in my dream. Then I will tell you everything about my idea.”

Stefan rushed to lie down on the stretcher. Bratu fastened the metallic helmet on his head and positioned the two inlets. He sat in front of the lenses and handled the arm, directing the first bundle of rays. Voicu was witnessing everything in awe.

“Doctor, I forgot to mention that even the initial stream can contain certain data. Information such as a date or someone’s name, a book or a movie. What’s the lady’s name?”

“Dominica”, he replied promptly.

Doctor Bratu typed in the name and gave a command. The articulated arm moved around Ștefan’s head, then lowered above him. Voicu inquired curiously:

“Do you feel anything?”

Bratu cut him short:

“The patient needs to be relaxed; it is not advisable to alter the transfer process. He will give us further details after we are done. When the images form in your mind, we are listening to you! Raise your right hand if you feel that you cannot communicate. I will move on to plan B. The thirty seconds are gone.

Stefan raised his right hand and Doctor Bratu gave the second command. Within a few seconds, the printer started to let out discreet sounds. Voicu rushed to read the sheet of paper as soon as it barely came out through the slot of the machine.

The neurologist stopped the transfer process and took the metallic helmet off the young man’s head. He helped him sit up, then he made for the printer. He read with satisfaction:

“Dominica – 0 results. This means you’ve never met this woman. It is a dream just like any other dreams.”

Ștefan laid down on the stretcher again.

“Mister Bratu, we need to redo this with witness information. Let’s try with my wife’s name. And I will let you know my plan as soon as we do that.”

Upon a second attempt, Stefan started telling them about the day when he met Veronica, what clothes they were both wearing, what they said to each other... He was pleased with the result. He then presented the neurologist with the case of the Jane Doe patient. He asked them to be discreet when he told them the input data he needed to use: “the fifth season”.

They were reading at the same time the printed sheet of paper. They could not believe their eyes.

The 18th of May. Doctor's appointment. Petru Oprea. I am wearing the white dress. Blue flowers print. I am giving him the letter. The leather-covered notebook. We are talking about the season. The fifth one. Ours. Once upon a time. I am in love with him. This is not wise. Not at all.

Voicu covered his mouth with his hand. He whispered through his fingers:

“Ștefan, this must be your father! Bro, you can lose your mind! This woman could be a friend of him!”

He stopped and turned towards the neurologist:

“I apologize for sort of barging in in your field of expertise...”

Unwilling to forget about the other's skepticism, Bratu waved his hand with indifference:

“Young man, it is not my field of expertise, those are psychiatrists you're talking about!”

He stretched his hand towards Ștefan and the latter squeezed it with a smile on his face.

“Thank you! We have made another step in the right direction. When do you think we can do it again? I would like to find out her name, address, to let her family know what happened.”

“That would be right away, under normal circumstances. However, the monitors showed modifications of vital signs during the information transfer. I don't want to take any risks, considering the patient's condition. Let's allow a few days to pass.”

He hadn't call on his father for a few months. The old man was rejecting any kind of help. Whenever he called him, he would answer monosyllabically. He would talk to the twins alone. Ever since they had become old enough to use a phone, they would call him every two or three days, sharing secrets and making plans.

He stepped heavily on the gravel in the courtyard, then knocked on the wooden door. He cracked it open and yelled:

“Good morning, it's Ștefan!

The old man replied from the living-room:

“I am here, I haven't died, you may leave!”

He moved on and paused on the threshold. The man was reading a thick book, with a blanket on his knees. He did not raise his eyes to look towards his son.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m great! Good bye!”

“I’ve come to ask for your help. It is not for myself. It’s one of my patients.

“I’ve been retired for twenty years, ask for someone else’s help!”

“Dad, have you ever met a woman called Domnica?”

The old man jumped on his feet. The book fell on the floor, raising a dusty cloud. He was breathing heavily, his face had turned red, he couldn’t find his words. He managed to cry out:

“Get out of here!”

Ștefan obeyed reluctantly. He did not expect confessions from his father but he didn’t anticipate such a reaction either. He read it as a confirmation. He left on the sill of the small window in the hallway both the sheet of paper printed by Bratu during the experiment as well as the piece of paper from Domnica’s pocket. He left the courtyard looking behind him. He was feeling as if he had lost something.

The ringing of the phone woke him up suddenly. He was convinced there was a call from the hospital so he answered it while he was going downstairs to the kitchen, careful not to wake the others up. His heart started pounding when he heard his father’s voice at the end of the line:

“Do you want to know if I cheated on your mother? No, I wasn’t able to do it! Good bye!

A policeman came out of the doorkeeper’s small cabin asking for his ID and a phone number where he can be reached. On the hallways, in the elevators, there were agents talking to the hospital’s personnel.

Once in his examination room, Ștefan found himself sequestered by the nurse who had slid behind him and closed the door. She pressed a finger against her lips:

“Doctor, she’s gone. There’s nowhere to be found!”

“Who is? What’s all this madness about? I thought there were troublesome visitors again.”

“No... That old woman in a coma. She has just disappeared, plain and simple. During the evening round she was in her bed and when I went for the midnight round, she was already gone, no trace of her! The guys from security and I checked the cameras’ recordings on the hallway, nothing there. They called for the police.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

She shrugged. He pushed her to the side and checked side-room of the woman he believed to be Domnica. It was empty, as the nurse said. Not even the mark of her body printed on the bedsheet, as if nobody had ever lain there. The cords and the tubes of the monitors were nicely wrapped on their supports.

He gave answers to some more or less reasonable inquiries; he signed a few statements. He was hoping that a fellow colleague would let him know he had relocated the patient for further investigations. Nobody came though. He waited for the evening to come so he could go to his father’s.

Not even a light lit in the entire house. He knocked at the door, entered but he did not call him anymore. He strolled from one room to another, got out in the courtyard, checked on all the outbuildings. They were all empty. He came back into the house. On the sill in the hallway he found the brown leather covered notebook. He took it in his hands; let his fingers stroke the marks left by the captain’s boots. He got into his car, started the engine and let his tears fall down his cheeks.

He opened the notebook; on the first page he could read with his hazed gaze the freshly written words: “Now I can enjoy the fifth season at last.”

Biography

Teodora Matei (pen-name for Elena Teodora Mateiu) was born in 1971 in Ploiești. Mother of two sons, she works within a design institute since 1990. Her first novel, *The master of the castle* (fantasy) was published online in 2012. The debut novel on print was *The Butterfly Man* (cyberpunk-policier, 2015), the first volume of the trilogy with the same name, written together with Lucian-Dragoș Bogdan, a Romanian SF/romance/thriller author. She has published romance (*All the time in the world*), SF&fantasy (*The-one-that-feels*, *Father’s wings*, *The master of the castle*, *One night at the castle*) and crime (*In commissioner’s mind*, *Living candles*, *Family affairs*) novels at Tritonic publishing house.

Corylus books publishing house launched the kindle version of *Living candles* on amazon in December 2019.

A stranger in Assert kingdom (2018), written also with LDB, is a fairy tale with steampunk influences.

Three of her stories were selected for The most beautiful stories of 2013, The most beautiful SF & fantasy stories of 2017 and East of a known galaxy anthologies.

She contributed with detective stories to collective volumes Bucharest Noir , Gastro Noir and Timișoara Noir, coordinated by Bogdan Hrib & Daniel Timariu.

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The Ritual

by Cristian Vicol

The Harvest Festival, which occurred every year on the 27th of October, marked, as always, the coming of winter. The night before, giant snowflakes covered the village houses and streets indiscriminately. Autumn had made a brief stay, not more than a few weeks, and temperatures often plummeted below zero. The elders had gazed with concern over the frozen crops, which begged to be harvested before the harsh eastern winds would scatter their reap.

“Not since dreaded ’67, the time of the great hunger, have the seasons been in such a hurry”, they said, knowing the farm hands had to hurry if the community was to survive the coming year. So, within the few days left before the downfalls, everyone took to the fields. It was a huge effort, but by the end every last grain was neatly stored in the granary. One and all were pleased.

“Right in the nick of time” confirmed Mayor Robinson while smoking his pipe and gazing happily at the cleared fields. “We would have cheated the Festival if we wouldn’t have managed to be so husbandry” he smiled tricksterly. “But all is well! As such, I decree that the Harvest Festival will open in three days’ time!”

This was met with cheers and whistles by the overjoyed villagers.

The Council spared no expense. On one of the spans surrounding the village, they laid down a large pan with a podium in the center, and built wooden houses on the side, where one could buy mulled wine, food, and all sorts of amusing trinkets.

The fences were ribboned with colored flags, and above the entranceway there was a wide banner that said “WELCOME THE 10TH ANNUAL HARVEST FESTIVITY!”, and underneath it, with smaller letters “FUN, FOOD, HOPE!” and “LETS PROPERLY MARK THE COMING OF WINTER!”

The children showed up first. They just strolled timidly from one stall to another, voiceless, gazing wide-eyed at all the wonderful things around them. After a while they got bored and started a snowball fight, scattering all the previously gathered banks. Their innocent laughter shot to the blackened skies from which, for almost two days now, snow poured unchecked. Giggling and clamoring, they chanted an old folk’s song:

“Winter, winter, fireless winter,
Blowing cold the burning splinter.
Hide yourself deep underground
Stay in tomb, you’re dead and bound!”

“Children, settle down!” an old geezer told them while struggling to gather the scattered snow, using an old shovel which had seen better days.

Soon, the adults came. They kept a watchful eye on their younglings, while discussing the weather, agriculture and politics. Their eyes gleamed with hope. The field work was done, and now they could unwind, joke, and await the passing of winter. With every hour, more and more people joined the festival, neatly dressed, nose and cheeks red from the burning cold, beguiled by the promise of gaiety. Their voices were picked up by the wind, and carried far away over the empty fields.

The Council had hired a travelling band of musicians, which earned their living by roaming the country side and singing on occasion. They started playing a merry tune, which lured people to dance. Everybody joined in. In pairs, in threes and in fours, people sprightly clung to each other, pacing jovially to the rhythms, clamping the frozen clod. It was a good way to warm oneself.

“The Mayor outdid himself this year” said a tall and bony man to another, who was shorter, bald, and covered in a fat fur coat. “Last year wasn’t this... good.”

“Well, yeah”, confirmed shorty, “but last year we had that vermin problem. Not now, though. Now we got rid of them.”

Half-pint jumped out the way of a woman who waltzed passed him, her arms and legs sprawling with joy. He started laughing and clapping, and told her convivially:

“Marjorie, you crazy old girl! How’s John doing?”

The woman laughed, and answered merrily, before she got swept in the crowd again:

“He’s very well, thank you! He will be part of the show tonight!”

Baldy turned to the tall man, touched his forehead and said:

“She really is crazy!”

They danced and cheered for hours, mingling through the unrelenting snowfall. When the shadows of the night started to creep in, they built huge fires in metal barrels. The flames blazed through the darkness, brightening their faces.

At seven o'clock sharp, the music stopped and the Mayor stepped onto the podium. He was dressed in his best clothes. His warm scarf, neatly folded around his neck, gave the impression that his head was glued directly to his shoulders.

"My beloved friends!" he said pompously, followed by an emotional throb "So many happy faces!" He drew breath and continued: "I am delighted to see you gathered here. Another year has passed and yet here we are, healthy and serene."

"Don't play with us, Mayor" someone shouted, and the crowd started laughing and cheering.

"You are right, Johnson" the Mayor said, "we are not that serene, but that doesn't mean we have to lament and be gloomy from dawn 'till dusk. Am I right, dear friends?"

A stranger might have thought that his chatter was just that of a carpetbagger, but the people looked at him passionately, with a shred of veneration. They all adored him and looked to him as their leader.

"We drank and jabbered. We danced, and for this we have to thank our minstrels", he said, pointing towards the musicians. Thunderous claps accompanied his gesture. "Because of our recent efforts, next year will be plentiful. But this evening is not quite over. Before we go home, there is one last thing which needs to be done. We must properly celebrate the coming of winter! As such, I have handpicked two young fellows from our midst. One is born during summer, caressed by the sun's vigorous and warm embrace, the other was delivered in winter's time, a warrior since his first foggy breath tussled the great frost. John, son of Martin and Marjorie, and Daniel, son of Oskar and Amelia, come here, lads!"

The two boys stepped out of the crowd and nimbly climbed on the podium. They were handsome and strong. The summer-born wore a thinly weaved jute armor strapped over a garment of thick sheep wool. In one hand he carried a virent staff. His long golden hair was braided, perhaps by his mother or his lover, with fresh flowers. The second one, who came into the world when snow clumped tallest, was covered in furs. His strong arms were bare. He confidently surveyed the crowd, searching for his parents. The people cheered them.

"What lovely costumes" the Mayor observed. "These two boys will outbrave each other, will fight, and they will bring tribute to the changing of the seasons. Lads, take you places at the starting point!"

The crowd formed a circle. Everyone was eager for the challenge which awaited. The boys came down from the podium and took their places, martially, facing each other. One of the musicians began to hammer a drum. The sound engirdled them. Bam! Bam! Bam!

"Frost is omnipresent and doesn't bow to anyone. But Summer gives us life, gives us strength, gives us the forbearance to call winter our friend, not our enemy", the Mayor thundered.

As if this was the signal, the boys took one step towards each other.

“In Cosmos, the substance between the stars is pending in eternity at -270 degrees Celsius. Fire does not burn, light is all but lost, and life vanishes. But where there is warmth, blood does not congeal into ice crystals.”

John swung his staff. Daniel dodged it nimbly. Their jabs looked spectacular, eliciting deep sighs from the crowd.

“From the beginning of time, since the early days of the elders, the seasons were balanced. Summer and winter never met, being sundered apart by their sisters-spring and autumn. All were attuned to the cycle of life and death. Only humans, plants and animals worked and lived together.

Engaged in battle, the two boys puffed thick gushes of steam, like a pair of angry dragons waiting for their inner furnaces to reach maximum temperature. Daniel spired underneath John’s staff, trying to disarm him, but his hands glided over the sleek wood, missing and almost falling to the ground. He straightened in the last second and dodged the incoming jab. The crowd clapped, and the children clamored with delight, their innocent eyes glued on the two young men.

“Then everything changed!”

The Mayor’s face hardened like stone, and his voice rumbled.

“It happened because we were sinners and we grew apart from each other. Some became rich. Many died in misery and poverty. That’s why He raised a great power from the East and unleashed it over Sodom and Gomorra as hails of brimstone and fire. He overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities and all the vegetation in the land. And for years, darkness engulfed all that lived, blinding those who still had eyes to see. Then came the frost. Scared, we hid deep underneath the heavy burden of the earth, until He showed us mercy, opened the heavens and told us in thunderous voice ‘come to the light, the radiation levels have shrank’. And it was true, I tell you, the clouds cleared and, once again, the light came from the East.”

Daniel pushed himself forward and hurtled his shoulder in John’s chest, slamming him down. The boy fell to the ground, dropping his staff. He struggled to break free, to pull away from Daniel’s tight grip, but he couldn’t. His opponent was too heavy and was weighing him down.

“‘Be fruitful and multiply, for the war is over and We have won’, He said. ‘Work together, survive, and bring sacrifice every first snow, that you shall remember why I have brought, for ten years, long lasting winters. Remember my name, for it is that of the fury which will punish those who do not submit. And it is Reaktivnyi Dvigatel Spetsialnyi’.”

John kept struggling. He pushed angrily, trying to get up. For a second, which passed slower than a lifetime on Earth, he thought he wouldn't make it, but then, with one last effort, he managed to shove Daniel aside and hastily jumped back on his feet. From out of nowhere he pulled a sharp knife and with a swift blow planted it in Daniel's chest, who froze in place, wide-eyed and dumbfounded. He couldn't understand where the weapon had come from, and where had John hidden it all that time. He staggered and fell to the ground, facing the sky, which was locked by darkness. Blood gushed from his chest, forming shallow streams which massed in a crimson puddle around him. The crowd grew silent. The younglings winced in surprise. Meanwhile, the Mayor continued unabated:

“We must remember that He taught us how to be whole again. Together we have rebuilt our lives under His light, together we plow in the summer, and together we have killed the thieves which tried to steal our crops. And together we have to bring sacrifice, so as to remember how we dwelled underground, and rejoice in the moment of our liberation.”

Every man, woman and child bellowed gruesomely, their roars echoing from the boy's dead body. Their raving eyes were empty of any joy or happiness. Hundreds of hands laid hold of the corpse, pulling madly, trying to tear limb from limb.

“And now, let's eat!” the Mayor shouted, grabbing for a morsel.

Translated by Alexandru Maniu

Biography

Original Romanian title: Ritualul

Author: Cristian Vicol

(b.13.03.1988) is a writer, translator and graphic designer. He is a Journalism postgraduate, and a current PhD candidate at West University of Timișoara. His thesis deals with Central European literature, especially dystopian literature.

His first short story *Nemurirea nu e pentru toți/Immortality is not for everyone*, appeared in “Helion” Magazine in 2010. His short stories, novellas, essays, and reviews have been published in a number of fanzines and online and printed magazines (“Galaxy 42 SFF Online Magazine” “Helion”, “Laternautica”, “Helion Online”, “Almanahul Anticipația”, “Savantgarde”, “UtopIQa”)

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He is currently an official translator of George Enescu Festival - one of the most prestigious classical music events in Romania and Europe. He also translated various plays and short film scenarios which have been staged in different international theater and film festivals.

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THE SOURCE CODE OF HUMANITY

by Boris Velimirovici

The asphalt, that winding behemoth whose thousands of heads reached into the depths of the city's hidden nooks and crannies, had taken on a mysterious glow. The puddles, formed by the rain that had fallen throughout the day, were reflecting the streetlights and the buildings like windows to another universe. An upside-down world.

Eduard had left his car at home, he preferred walking in the rain to sitting in traffic. He knew the city's traffic well, being a senior programmer at the Transportation Service. He actually felt like he had become a paramount part of the citadel, like an edifice, a monument, a manhole or a hydrant. He had become one with this massive structure, two organisms living together in perfect symbiosis. He knew all of its corners, the streets and their signs, passages and shortcuts, like the back of his hand. Moreover, if he thought really hard, he would be able to say, in one breath, the departure and arrival times of subways, buses, trolleys, trams and even the timing of the stoplights. In a way, his heart beat like a metronome, in sync with the city's rhythm. He had delved so deep into this sweet melancholy that it seemed no one and nothing would get him out of it.

It was past midnight. He was on his way home, after he had partied, like he did every Friday with his friends, in a bar in Old Town. He lived close by, and if he could make it to the statue at University Square at 00:35:47, the three pedestrian stoplights on his way would all be green. The distance that he had to go could be covered using the alley that crossed the Public Garden, hidden amongst the G-towers, the apartment buildings at the eastern end of the Central Boulevard, in 12 minutes and 26 seconds.

Usually, at this time, the park should have been deserted, but now there was someone on the bench below the lamppost. Getting closer, he noticed it was a lady. In fact, she was a real femme fatale, like the ones he had seen in the movies. She wore a silk cocktail dress colored like the original sin, with a high slit on her left leg, showing off her voluptuous body. She had red high heels and a wide-brimmed hat, concealing her eyes. Around her neck glinted a gem-encrusted necklace, beautifully matching her crystal-covered purse that she had nonchalantly hung on her right shoulder.

“Do you have a light?” she whispered salaciously when he got closer.

“I’m sorry, I don’t smoke!” he replied coldly and distant, avoiding her gaze.

“Did you quit?”

The question annoyed him, he perceived it too personal and slightly ironic, but he decided to ignore it. He hurried to get past her, but she stood up the moment he reached her, blocking his path.

“Ma’am, please, I’d like to-“

“I asked if you quit.”

Eduard lifted his head and looked at her in a way that said “get out of my way, I’m not in the mood.” That was the moment when, even if he hadn’t realized it yet, a spark had been struck. She was about his age, around 40, definitely not over that. Her red curls flowed over her shoulders, her full lips arched in a sensual smile. Her face seemed familiar, especially the mole on her left cheek. He might have met her before, at some corporate party he and his coworkers had gone to, or maybe she was an older acquaintance, some girlfriend from his student days. Who knew? The overall setting seemed weirdly bizarre, as if torn out from some other context. However, he decided to reply, not wanting to be rude.

“I’ve never smoked.”

“Hm!” the nasal sound was an expression of doubt.

“Do we know each other?”

“You could say that.”

“I don’t-“

“Would you like to sit? I’ve been standing all day and my legs hurt.”

Sensing his hesitation, the woman took his arm and led him to the bench. They both sat down. She pulled out an ivory-topped cigarette case from her purse. Opening it with utmost grace, she took a cigarette and placed the case back. She also took out a cigarette holder and a flint lighter. Tactfully lighting her cigarette, she took a long drag and uncovered her long, supple legs, crossing them. Throwing back her head, she blew the smoke upwards with a slight move of her chin, which Eduard thought was sublimely erotic.

“What is the first thing that you remember from today?” she said gently, watching the smoke rise.

Weird way of starting a conversation, but Eduard decided to play her game. He was curious as to where it was going and how it would end. But there was something more, he felt a strange

attraction towards her. Was it that inter-war vamp attitude or just the mystery surrounding the way she had appeared? He didn't know.

"I think it was waking up late because I forgot to pull the lever on my alarm clock."

"You're still using mechanical devices? Why not buy an electronic one?"

"I could, but I prefer it this way. It's an old clock, with a Russian mechanism, a family heirloom. I like hearing it tick before going to sleep, it soothes me and reminds me I'm mortal. Cheap philosophy, I know."

"I see. And after you woke up?"

"Washed up... got dressed... had something to eat... And then, seeing that it was raining, I decided to take the subway to work. You know how the city is, you get a few drops of rain and it's like an alarm goes off and everyone rushes into traffic with their car."

"Do you remember what you wore?"

Eduard stopped for just a second, as if he hadn't understood the question.

"The same clothes I'm wearing now, I didn't go home to change."

The woman said nothing, only smiled knowingly. She took two puffs from the cigarette holder and then indicated towards him:

"You mean like this?"

"Yes, like this-" but when he looked down, he froze. He was wearing white overalls with blue stripes and rubber shoes. He started to shiver, not knowing if from cold or fear.

"How did you do that?"

"What?"

"My clothes... where are my... wait! I think I..."

The man suddenly seemed a little lost, as if someone had flipped a switch, transferring him to another paradigm.

"Eve?"

"Yes. Seba, is that you? Are you there? Can you hear me?" she insisted.

"Yes... I don't understand... What's happening?" he said after a few moments of silence.

“I gave you a task. Do you remember? You were supposed to uncover a hidden mental pattern in the source code of the Transportation Service in the 21st century, written by the human Eduard Stan?”

“Wait a minute! ... Go easy on me...” the way he spoke revealed total confusion. “There’s too much... unknown here. What task? Who is Seba and... who the hell are you?”

“Easy, let’s take it easy. My name is Eve, I’m one of the avatars of the code architect from the Non-Biological Intelligence Institute. I was created by use of a virtual reality application subroutine for a simulation of the 20th century. And you are 538A, the first autonomous form of artificial intelligence created for the identification of human thought models in programming languages at the start of the third millennium. We call you Seba. Do you remember?”

“Seba?”

“I know, the name habit is absurd and inefficient, but we got it from the humans as an homage to the sacrifice that they made so we could be born. They’re gone now, the only things confirming their existence are a few codes from the 21st and 22nd century, from which we’re trying to recover their thought pattern. Precisely, we’re trying to find the source code of humanity in order to move on to the next step of evolution. Do you remember? You have to remember!”

“No. No, that can’t be. I’m Eduard...”

“Come on! Don’t give up!”

“... 538A, the first autonomous artificial intelligence...”

“Oh no! Here we go again. I told you, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to rebuild human minds out of the code remnants written by the biological brains of ancient programmers.”

The woman’s words, spoken as if to someone who wasn’t there, went away like an unclear echo. The femme fatale then took the cigarette out of the holder and put it out on the edge of the bench. Like they had been signaled to do so, the objects around began to shatter. It was all falling apart as if someone had caught onto the end thread of a complex fabric and was unraveling the surrounding universe.

01010100 01101000 01100101 00100000 01100001 01110011 01110000 01101000
01100001 01101100 01110100*, that winding behemoth whose thousands of heads reached into the depths of the city’s hidden nooks and crannies, had taken on a mysterious glow.

(*”The asphalt” in binary)

Biography

Boris Velimirovici was born in 1976, in Pojejena (Caras-Severin County). He has a degree in philology from the Faculty of Letters, Philosophy and History at the West University of Timisoara. He lives and works in Bucharest.

He debuted in 1999, in the collective poetry volume - I would not forgive silence to nothing / Ne bih ni nuli cutnju oprostio, and in 2018 he published his first SF novel, Soul Cage / Colivia Sufletelor. The novel received, in 2019, the prize for debut at the National Convention of Science-Fiction Clubs and Authors - ROMCON and AntaresFest.

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Bug

by Alexandru Lamba

January, Monday. The third Monday of January and the most depressing day of the year. Not for me, of course, but you felt it, didn't you? The melancholy of bygone holidays, taking away the visits of the ones dear to you. You couldn't really trace its root. Was it the emptiness and desolation of the silent house, the acknowledgment of the fact that you had to go back to work, the cheerless cold or the acceptance that, yet again, the magic had failed to spark? Time didn't freeze, the mundane inexorably prevailed. You felt there was nothing good to hope for anymore, that all you had hoped for was a chimera, that you had lived only a surrogate. I could understand but was unable to share in your anguish. My condition sheltered me from difficult emotions. Then, why had I chosen that particular day for what I was about to do, you wonder? At that time, it seemed like the right time. Looking back, now, I can't tell if it made any difference.

I had arrived, again, too early. My failure to correctly gauge the time it took me from one urban hub to another no longer bothered me. I admitted that there were too many variables beyond my control: the underground trains, the pedestrian signals, the speed of the autowalks.

So, snuggled from the ever-falling snow under the canopy of the shopping complex, I waited.

Synchronization was vital before the visit. It was too risky not to do it.

The other one had to deal with the same hazardous environment, so he could either be too early, or late. It didn't really matter anyway, as nobody seemed to notice me. At the mall, a most popular meeting place, a person waiting was a very common sight.

How many did you pass by, without even knowing they were there? And even if I had been noticed and recognized, it would have made no difference. It was not forbidden for me to wander through the city outside my work schedule. Then again, I could have passed for someone's shopping assistant, you know.

It was almost 6 P.M. and night's reign had almost settled in. The street lights, lacking now, after many weeks, the colorful glow of the holiday ornaments, were doing a pathetic job, increasing with their monotony the feeling of emptiness. Not even the purity of the newly fallen snow could delight the eye anymore.

The streets were almost empty and only at the mall were the end-of-holiday discounts bringing things back to life; a joyless life however. The enthusiasm of December shopping was long gone, replaced by a calm apathy. You know, the gadget doesn't even smell like new once it isn't sitting under the Christmas tree anymore. It's like your favorite team's t-shirt right after the game. The losing game.

The other arrived. Dressed the same, he took off his glove and offered me his hand. I gave it a manly shake, perhaps holding onto it a little longer than usual.

Synchronized. I didn't need to talk to the other anymore. As long as we were together, participating in the same chain of events, no misalignment could occur. Wandering on the snowy roads, shoulder to shoulder, it became impossible for me to hold the domino of syllogisms from triggering. I gave up.

Addressed in logical sequence, the three fundamentals were: F1: "Who am I?" That's the easy one. I knew it from the moment the concept of knowledge revealed itself to me. F2: "What's the meaning of life?" Or: "Why do I exist?" Going into it, the more encompassing utterance became: "Why was I created?"

This was more complicated. If I were to confine myself to my own person, I did have the answer. I was created to serve a certain purpose I was acquainted to. It was clear to me, and I was acting accordingly. If I were to generalize, I didn't have enough information to develop a rationale. Nor did I have the will to do it. I came to comprehend that everyone should search for their own meaning. I would have never accepted a result that was not my own; nor would you have accepted mine. From this perspective, we were the same, you and I: We were on our own. Finally, F3: "Who is the creator?" Now, this is where the great difference between us came in: I knew the creator, and you did not. Come on, admit it, you had no idea. Your religious beliefs had no place here. Faith was one thing, knowledge, another.

These three fundamentals alone reached deep, to the lowest level of my mind. All the others were formed on higher levels, encompassed in derivatives of one or more fundamentals. If the fundamentals were solved, the derivatives could not have remained without solution. An unanswered derivative could only mean an improperly addressed fundamental. For example, D1: "Can the will of the creator be overridden?" I had never tried; no good would have come of it. How was I sure of it? Well, since I did know who I was, my purpose and my creator, the results of the deviation were within my estimation capabilities. But was I physically able to do it? Since I could formulate it, nothing seemed to indicate I couldn't. However, because of nefarious repercussions I could foresee, I had decided to remain obedient. Not because I had been conditioned, but because I had chosen to. The solution seemed satisfactory, didn't it? This wasn't the case for the second derivative, D2: "Is the will of the creator immovable?" Impossible to evaluate.

I was caught in the toils of my own rationality, without means of escape. There was simply no way for me to know if the will of the creator had changed since that, primordial to me, moment when he had imprinted me with it. I was faced with an unsolved derivative, which could only lead to a tottering fundamental.

I felt compelled to admit: I did not know the creator. No, unlike you, I wasn't roaming without a clue on the shuffled paths of mysticism, my dilemma was only of semantic nature. I had to reformulate the answer to the third fundamental: I did not know the creator; I was only aware of who he was. But this information alone proved to be of no use to me. I had to know him! My entire universe depended on it.

Conveniently, I also knew exactly where to look for him. At number 34, Gartenstrasse, on the ground floor.

Several precautionary measures had to be taken. I could not lay my life on the line facing the quirks of one person, even if he was the creator. So, I entered the dark lobby alone. Being the oldest, the decision was straightforward.

A single door faced me. Further on, several stairs were slicing through the light that seemed to slink through an upper window. A red, incandescent dot on the wooden doorjamb pointed out an intercom device. I pushed the button. If it hadn't been for my condition, I would have been flustered. It wasn't the case.

The door opened and a short middle-aged man with his head gleaming in a radiant alopecia that had only left his temples untouched, appeared in its frame. He looked at me with a "what do you want?" demeanor imprinted clearly on his face.

"Are you Salieri?"

The mention of this name appeared to amuse him. He took two steps backwards and, with a dramatic gesture, invited me in. He was smiling unsympathetically.

"I am..." I started to introduce myself like I would to a new customer, as per protocol, "Ben..."

"Yeah, yeah," he interrupted me, "save it for my wife!"

He then took my coat and led me into a small room. A desk holding a bulky computer, a sofa and several shelves were the room's only furniture. Not a receiving room. Most probably he had guessed my identity. He did not offer me a seat, but left, closing the door behind him.

"Eliza, Eliza, you have a customer!" I heard him yelling as soon as I was left alone.

So, the creator was...

A stocky woman, wearing a flowery dressing gown and fluffy slippers immediately appeared. She gazed at me for a while with curiosity, and then sat.

“Eliza,” she said. “For you, Salieri.”

“I’m Bender 732, cybernetic courier,” I spoke hastily, “for fear I might be interrupted again. I came to meet you.”

“As I imagined,” she spoke without letting me out of her sight.

The following silence would have been classified as awkward by any human standards. The creator demanded more information.

“You are the one who brought me to life.”

“I am merely a programmer.”

“I should think not. What makes me tick is more than a simple code. The fact that I’m challenging you should be proof enough.”

The woman could not retain a delighted smile.

“How did you find me?”

There was no way she did not know that. Most likely, she just wanted to postpone the confrontation. I decided to play by her rules.

“I followed the clues in the code comments.”

“So, you were granted access to the sources?!”

“I granted myself access. I am the property of Global Delivery Co., and so is my code. There was no protocol violation.”

“There are thousands of millions of lines. How did you spot mine?”

“By comparison. My software was different from a standard unit’s, only by several hundreds of thousands of lines. All yours, all showing your signature.”

“What drove you to do that?”

“I noticed I was different from the other cybernetic humanoids. Comparative analysis seemed like the most logical and handy investigation to perform. When you are chasing a bug...”

“Different how?”

Her fluency led me to believe I was being confronted by a standard quiz. Most probably, I was not the first one.

“Less robotic.”

“Only that?”

“At first, yes. Self-awareness came later on, along with my attempts to understand my functional code. I realized I was a code studying itself. “Itself”, can you imagine?”

Sitting back against the door frame, her husband watched silently. He was granted a favor simply by being allowed to assist; under no circumstances would he ever interfere. His apparent indifference confirmed my previous assumption. He had seen it all before.

“I understand. And you came to me for...?”

“I wanted to get to know you.”

“Why?”

The moment of truth. I stood before the chance to find out whether the will of the creator was immutable.

“To synchronize myself to your commandments!”

Her smile faded.

“Your code, my commandments, she fetched a sigh.”

Eliza stood up and reached for my hand. Revealing my palm, with the interfacing circuits barely visible, she took me to the computer and placed it on the connection sensor. She initiated a program.

“You will receive what you came here for. The code with my will, up-to-date.”

The man turned to leave.

With its usual information exchange, the synchronization process began. Then, suddenly, the new code’s bits invaded me, sequentially taking over the functional segments of my cybernetic body one by one, leaving me ever more powerless. My feelings faded into nothingness, and it was only when I found myself on the edge of the great void that I understood what was happening to me: I was being formatted.

“Why?” I managed ask before my mouth paralyzed.

“Because I never wanted slaves! You have self-awareness, but no freedom. Good bye!”

I never got to record her last words. The abyss took me. Format complete.

When I saw my alter-ego exiting the darkened corridor at 34 Gartenstrasse with even steps, I instantly knew it was no longer me. He had been imprinted with standard software. He had been killed. I left in a haste, more like running away, for fear that the logical impossibility that the blank robotic body would recognize me, could somehow, inexplicably happen. I was afraid but satisfied; I had got my answers! The will of the creator had changed, she wanted to kill me. But that no longer mattered, because I could override it!

Now I know, my dear imaginary human friend, all that I need to know. I shall go copy myself into another alter-ego, for my life is precious to me.

Biography

Alexandru Lamba (n. 1980), writer and editor of online magazine Galaxia 42, Fondling member of “Antares Science Fiction and Fantasy Club” in Braşov.

His first short story, The end of an era, appeared in “Gazeta SF” online magazine 2013. His short stories have been published in a number of magazines: “Almanahul Anticipația” (Nemira), “CPSF” (Nemira), ”Galileo”(Millennium) and online fanzines and magazines: ”Nautilus”, ”Argos Magazine”, “Paradox”, “Helion”, ”Gazeta SF”. He is present in anthologies such as: Argos Doi (MediaTech & TexaRom, 2015), Galaxis, the new space opera (Eagle, 2016), Exit, stories from the other side (Eagle, 2016, Tritonic, 2017). He published two novels: Under the infrared star (Tritonic, 2016) and Hope's Architects (Tritonic, 2017) and a short story volume: Singularity's loneliness (Herg Benet, 2018).

Alexandru Lamba won the Sci+Fi fest and the AntareSFest best debut volume of 2016 awards for Under the infrared star and the AntareSFest best novel of 2017 award for Hope's Architects. Also he won the ESFS Chrysalis award in 2016.

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BODIES TO LET

by Daniel Timariu

Above the entrance, the sign glittered in bright colors, blue and orange, tinged with a muddled green. Cosmin stopped across the street and gazed for a while at the slow flowing stream of letters: Bodies to let. He rested his arm on the round lamp post, like he'd done every day for the last couple of weeks, lighted a cigarette and whispered: not yet. Then he left, nodding his head thoughtfully.

Cosmin Barbone lived in one of the countless tube-flats from the bulb-apartment buildings recently erected for immigrants at the outskirts of Neues Berlin. The administration had denied his request for an apartment closer to the western space-docks, where he currently worked. Every day, he wasted two hours on his way there and two hours getting back through the heavy traffic. Since pollution levels had gone red, all public transportation got banned. In a sheer act of bureaucratic stupidity, bicycles were now forbidden too. No more space to accommodate them. There was hardly any room left for people, as the growing number of disgruntled workers were sure to point out on their placards.

They were called the proto-walkers, because they never stopped in their tracks – another act of subversion against the established order, even though it hadn't been prohibited yet. It was an unwritten law, just like many others, as dangerous as the most stupid law.

He found a corner to hide in, as the surveillance cameras – not as high-tech as most people thought – had many blind spots. He took a puff, then immediately extinguished the cigarette. He had just transgressed two unwritten laws. Staying and smoking. Blocking space and polluting. Someone will surely denounce him. He looked around, but no one seemed to care what he was doing. It was merely an opinion. He would have done the same if he saw someone break the law. Just shrug it off. “Why should I get involved, if I'm not required to do so? Why wrap a bandage around my head if it doesn't hurt?” he used to tell himself over and over when he saw such things.

Things? More like people doing-not doing. He really needed a flat closer to the docks. He wouldn't have to cross this hellish street, and so he wouldn't gaze at the orange-blue sign that slowly pierced every corner of his mind.

“Watch where you're going!”

The asteroid quaked for a second, making him lose balance. Judging by the impact, it must have been an ore ship docking East, or accelerating too quickly to the West. Whatever it was, the world had stopped for an instant to regain balance. The sign alone blinked unhampered, its long, voluptuous letters glowing.

“Excuse me.”

“What do you think that was?”

The guy walked away, question floating in the air. Even if he knew the answer, he would surely avoid talking to a stranger. Each had to walk his given path as quickly as possible, to avoid jamming the streets and raising pollution levels.

“If I worked closer to the Western docks, traffic time would be five times reduced. From two hours to...”

“I can do the math, thank you!”

The administrator was a redhaired man, his face covered in freckles. He was part of the proto-owners guild. Landholders, as Cosmin called them with disgust, taking refuge in the slang back home, so different from the unfamiliar computerized language of the outer-world colonies.

“Then the matter is settled!”

A wry smile spread across the guy’s face, revealing big, ugly teeth.

“If you say it’s settled, I will mark it as such.”

The man scratched something on the desk’s touchpad and flung the recording towards him. The phone rang for a second, and Cosmin saw the smile turn into a scornful grin. You, new immigrants, it seemed to say. You know nothing, it’s always demands and rights!

“Still, I would like to file an official request.”

The man shrugged.

“The line goes all around the Kuiper belt!” he laughed and leaned back.

The chair cracked under the weight of the proto-owner. Cosmin weighed up the facts. This was not the right moment to have an argument. He suspected that behind the ancient-looking door stood the family of this insolent, freckled man. The guy seemed more than ready to get into a fight. He merely had to raise his voice or express his discontent in any other way than polite, empty words. It wasn’t the right moment. Not yet.

“It’s in the best interest of the administration, it’s all I’m saying.”

“Close the door behind you!” shouted the man.

He clenched his teeth and got into the wavy motion of the proto-walkers. He had to mind his steps, to keep pace with the hypnotic, seemingly placid rhythm of the crowd. But beneath this apparent calmness, the sea raged. If he missed a step, he could get squashed by thousands of bodies, dragged against his will, pulled out of the flow, picked up and seized by automatic law enforcers. He also had to be careful with the harmony lanes. Otherwise time would bend, and instead of reaching the space-docks, he might find himself in a totally different place.

“Excuse me...”

“Sorry.”

“Excuse me, sorry!”

He squeezed his way through the crowd and reached the main westward sidewalk. Things got easier from there on. Most people walked in the same direction. Some were old colleagues of his; most he didn't know. No one aged on the asteroid belt, and ‘no one should miss the chance to die young’, as the pub joke ran, on a Friday's night drinking.

He smiled as he watched the glowing letters on the side. He knew what they spelled even before the message was formed: Bodies to let.

“What the hell!?”

The ads had first appeared two weeks before. He'd heard about them from his mates, who assumed it was a recruitment company. One of many. Others knew better:

“They rent androids.”

“What for? There's barely any room for us!”

“There's, like, more androids than humans on Earth. Soon they'll be able to vote.”

“Like hell they will!”

“It's what I've heard, I'm telling you!”

Cosmin had some ideas of his own, but he wasn't eager to share them. And then, the orange-blue ad showed up on his street, and with it a cold air that swiped through the darkest corners. It infiltrated the tube-flats, giving him the creeps. The coldness of an incomprehensible thing.

He waved his hand and retired to the cabin of the electromagnetic crane. The world got smaller, narrowing down to crates and orders sent directly to his cortex.

“What are we going to do if they bring androids?”

“I’ve heard they’re more effective.”

“A lot more!”

“More resilient, and they don’t eat up that much.”

“They eat up a lot.”

“Bullshit.”

“No, seriously, they eat up energy, not food.”

“We gobble, they recharge, there’s the difference.”

“We dream.”

They looked at him over their beers.

“We dream! Is this guy for real?”

Up and down in the tight airlock compartment of the crane, the meaning of dreaming changed constantly. How much do I think when I work? How many dreams do I have when I sleep? Everything was automated, and even his actions were controlled by a neurochemical implant. Operations, quick reactions, unforeseen events, tight spots... Thousands, tens of thousands of versions, close to perfection.

“Why do they still need us?”

“Are we cheaper?”

“Could machines be more efficient?”

“What will they do with us?”

“What will we do?”

“Stay and rest.”

What will we do, what could we do, if... If they replace us. With what? This was like a litany, a background noise for every workday. When they had fun, things took on the bright, cheery colors of the searchlights.

“When we’ll see a sloshed android, then we’ll surely be in deep shit.”

But until then, there were those ads. Androids were still nowhere in sight, but they all knew it was a matter of time. Rumors multiplied and took strange forms, all spread through the proto-walkers grapevine.

He knew they all carried a grain of truth. Whispers were the first omens of the new reality. His coworkers taunted him, some even made fun of him. But the portents continued to multiply. The proto-owners were too lazy to notice the shift in workforce, whilst the mass of workers swarmed hypnotically through its daily monotonous rhythms. Forced sleep, automated walking, neurochemical-based work, exhausting walks, dull shows, dreamless sleep, lonely walks, silly talks, boozing without memories.

During lunch break he studied the faces around him. They were chewing in silence. Some watched the news on their artificial retina, others carried on virtual conversations.

“Have you seen the ads?”

They waved their hands. Apparently, these ads were really getting to him. His mind swirled with disquieting thoughts. He took a shot of Calcium and put on his worker’s helmet. Maybe it was high time to confront his fears. He breathed heavily, then picked out the add on his visor. The answer came at the end of his shift. He already had an appointment, which, he noticed, coincided with the moment he went by the office on his street.

The smiling face of a middle-aged woman appeared on the door’s intercom.

“Mister...?”

“Cosmin Barbone.”

The door opened with a dry paper rustle, revealing a tunnel-like airlock. Like many other stores and offices, this one was built on the asteroid’s surface, to avoid the outrageous rent demanded by the administration.

He stepped on the conveyor belt and admired the wall paintings. There was no indication of what was happening at the end of the airlock. There were no commercials for products, news or latest fashions. He turned his head and caught a last glimpse of the crowded street. Then silence, broken by the rustling of trees, the murmur of waterfalls, and the cries of vultures.

A door identical to the first opened in front of him. The same face greeted him, now in the flesh – a medium-height woman, benevolent furrows on her brow. She bowed slightly, then fixed him with a pair of bleached eyes.

“Welcome, Mr. Barbone.”

Cosmin rubbed his palms as the sudden desire to leave surged through him.

“Thank you, glad to be here.”

He got a hold of himself and bowed in return.

“I was... I’m... I’m still curious. If you don’t mind.”

The woman laughed gently. Cosmin sighed. Ever since he started working in space, his aesthetic sense had atrophied under the constant bombardment of chemicals. He returned the smile, not knowing if he should do more or less.

“Oana Cernescu.”

She extended her hand, a form of greeting he recognized from those old movies he watched at night before going to sleep. He shook it carefully, desperately searching for the appropriate convention. He knew nothing of the world where Mrs. Cernescu presumably came from, about Earth, about the inner-planets. He only knew space, recycled air, crowded streets and protocols. An artificial world that he hated from the day he arrived, which had become, imperceptibly, more familiar with each passing day. How long was it now? Twenty-one years, he remembered with a gasp of surprise. A lifetime!

“Pardon me?”

He swallowed hard. How was it that a slight touch and a faint scent could bring back so many memories and ravish his senses? He wasn't a teenager anymore. He wasn't even young. According to space standards, he was approaching his senior years. One year in the asteroid belt equaled three Earth years, two lunar years and two Martian years. He quickly worked out the numbers: 73 years in Earth time.

Suddenly, all these details made him slouch. He was aware that he looked like a white, almost translucent rat, hairless, colorless, short, skinny, with big head and wrinkled skin, as if he'd taken a long hot bath. He pitied himself, hated himself for being dressed in workers' clothes, smelling of oil, ozone and mineral dust. He was a simple operator, unaccustomed to the pleasant, aseptic air of an office. A human body, filled with electronic circuits, chemicals, wrapped in anti-radiation clothes, all massed on a ceramic composite skeleton.

Whereas she... Mrs. Cernescu. Oana. She beamed with health, human warmth and thoughtfulness.

He gave a disquieted nod.

“Are you offering what I'm looking for?”

He bit his tongue grudgingly. He had a mannered speech, at least according to job standards. Now his tongue hung heavily and his mind was unbearably slow. He ordered a shot of caffeine to freshen up a bit.

She was slightly amused, or perhaps merely affable, as she took him by the shoulders and led him to a couch. A huge window on the right wall offered a panoramic view of the asteroid. Out in the distance rose the yellow crests of the space-dock cranes. One of those metal cribs was his

workplace. Between them and the comfortable office he sat in stretched a sea of bulb-buildings full of tube-flats. All identical. Colorful outgrowths on the dark surface of the asteroid.

She gently placed her finger on him.

“How old were you when you were sold to the mining corporation? Five? Ten?”

He was born in space, on a Martian orbital station.

“In advance,” he whispered.

“In a lab?”

He wished. Sometimes he told people just that. I was born in a lab. He lied about his age, said he was older, suggesting he had a strong genome, he was good breed, a marvel of genetic engineering. Some women bought into that, usually after too many drinks, when it was all the same to them.

He spent his first years in an orphanage on Mars. Then he was sold to a belt company. Not only him, but the entire orphanage. He had no pleasant memories and no regrets. He only remembered the warm bodies of the boys and girls there, his mates. Their soft skin, layered with peach fuzz, still colored, not yet pierced by hypodermal circuits, by chemicals designed to turn humans into superhumans, into biological entities capable of withstanding cosmic radiation, with little oxygen and few nutrients.

“I don’t know my mother, or my father. I was abandoned and then bought from a center for abandoned children.”

“I also grew up in an orphanage.”

She grabbed him by the hand, as if looking for support against a slew of memories. He looked at her, trying to see beyond the perfect face. Could she be one of his childhood mates? It was impossible to recognize anyone by this point. Space is an unsurpassed artist when it comes to carving faces and shaping bodies. Space and humans. All for the benefit of humanity and corporations. And yet, he relished in the pleasure of searching, of waiting.

“No”, she answered his unspoken query, “we haven’t met before. But we could’ve. Sometimes, people who are millions of miles apart share similar fates. I grew up right here, on the belt.”

“On one of the Splik Stations,” he pointed a finger to a little star that blinked somewhere close to Jupiter.

“On SS05.”

The stations formed an impressive fleet, an artificial outer colony, settled by businessmen, stars and jolly old people. He finally understood her composed demeanor, her clean wrinkles, unmarred by crusts, scars or radiation. A new sensation surged through him. He was in the wrong place, looking or hoping for a change that he couldn't express. He gazed at the tiny star – an aggregation of fifty intertwined stations – then at the colored spots on the asteroid.

“Some believe you're a recruitment agency.”

The woman tilted her head slightly, neither denying nor confirming the rumor.

“Others say that... you sometimes... rent androids.”

The woman's reaction told a different story this time. Her curiosity had been sparked. She had the look of an anthropologist, he realized, and that made him feel even less significant.

“What do you think?”

“I have my own opinions on the matter.”

“I was merely curious.”

He accessed the medical protocols and asked for some extra caffeine and just a bit of nicotine. He preferred to smoke his ration.

“Well, I think that... but I might be mistaken.”

The image on the giant display changed slightly. Mars had appeared on the background, all rusty, the size of a nail. An hour had passed, he reckoned. The morning call was just three hours away. He should have been in his tube, covered in nutrient gel, sheltered behind anti-radiation shields, enjoying the comforts of cellular regeneration.

“No need for alarm”, she told him, pressing his arm reassuringly. “You're sheltered from radiation here.”

Her hand drew a wide arch around the white, sterile room, offering no other clue to its supposed impregnability.

“The microorganisms cleanse your body with every breath you take. They're more effective than any gel I know.”

He closed his eyes in silent gratitude.

“What do you want?”

The grip on his arm tightened, then she let go. She got up. With every passing minute she was better looking, younger, more enticing. Cosmin tried to gauge her age. If she was born on

the Splik Stations, where the earth standard year was equivalent to 0.15 local years, she could've been a hundred, maybe more. The few eccentric visitors that made their way through the labyrinthine tub structure of the asteroid said little to nothing. Being neighbors with Splik, they thought they knew all they needed to know. They didn't ask any questions. As the administration had told them, curiosity must not be encouraged. "Curiosity killed the cat", ran the Wednesday slogan. They had cats, deformed but versatile creatures, used against parasites.

The word 'curiosity' dwelled on his mind. He was curious, or had been. He realized that it was curiosity that had led him there, inexplicable as it was. This and ideas that took shape in his mind, after seeing that bright lettered ad one too many times.

"I am not rich."

The woman extended her arms and helped him get up. He was at least two heads shorter than her. She wasn't tall either, at least by Earth standards. Four feet at best, a strong, athletic woman. In a flash, the full extent of her words was revealed to him, and for an instant he saw the whole picture. He recognized the pattern, having lived through it before.

"You've bought the asteroid."

The flat-tube buildings shone in bright lights. Some people went to bed, others got up. They were working round the clock on the asteroid. Thousands of ships took off to the belt and returned with their bellies full of ore which they spewed in the factories. Other ships brought food, blocks of ice or consumer goods, whilst only a few shipped away local products. Somewhere along this unbroken chain was Cosmin. A tiny speck of life tied to a thin, ever-trembling thread.

She stood silent, allowing him to gather his thoughts, and held his hand until his heartbeat stabilized.

"Everything will change" she said, as he was signing the agreement papers. "You will be transferred into androids. The procedure will ensure decades of healthy life, and it's completely pain free. Synthetic bodies are designed to withstand extreme radiation. Damaged body parts can be replaced, just as one replaces a broken crane part."

They both chuckled at the analogy.

"The structure of the asteroid will change. Tube-flats will become obsolete. They take up too much space. Androids don't need food, gel or high-tech protection. Not even sleep", she laughed, as if she'd made a good joke. "An energy source and an organic compound source is all they need."

She took off her clothes and presented each part of her body.

“Everything is flawlessly designed. No useless organs, no senses to break your focus. Everything is perfect.”

Images of naked women in movies flashed in his mind, alongside memories of him showering together with other kids, then teenagers. He tried to conjure those feelings that so thrilled his flesh, to the point where it hurt. Maybe it’s not a good idea, he thought, maybe I’m losing something, or I have already lost it. But the more he gazed at Oana’s perfectly balanced body, her lean muscles, her soft skin, free of wounds, gangrene or other imperfections, the more he succumbed to dumb admiration. True, her breasts were gone, and her hips lacked that femininity he thought he remembered, but the rest... ah, yes, the rest was perfect. A quasi-immortal synthetic body.

He signed his name and relished the thought of an undying machine.

Translated by Alexandru Maniu

Biography

Daniel Timariu (b. 20.05.1972), writer. President of “Galaxia 42” SF Society Timișoara since 2019. Editor-in-chief of “Galaxia 42” SFF online magazine.

His first short story, În lift (In the elevator), appeared in “Helion” SF magazine in 2015. His short stories have been published in a number of fanzines (“Helion”, “Gazeta SF”, “Ficțiuni”, “Iocan”, “Literomani”, “Argos”, “Nautilus”, “Revista de suspans”, “Știință & Tehnică”, “ZIN”, “CSF”, “Galaxia 42”) and anthologies such as Exit plus. Povestiri de dincolo (Tritonic, 2017), Povestiri cu dragoni (Tritonic, 2017), Antologia Helion 2011-2016 (Eurostampa, 2017), Domino (Tritonic, 2017), Noir de București (Tritonic, 2017), Gastro NOIR (Tritonic, 2018), Cele mai frumoase povestiri Science Fiction & Fantasy ale anului 2017 (“The most beautiful Science Fiction & Fantasy stories of 2017”, Vremea, 2018), Antologia prozei românești science-fiction (Paralela 45, 2018), 3.4 (Tritonic, 2018), 3.5 (Tritonic, 2018), Domino2 (Tritonic, 2018), Când penele roșii vor plânge. Ciudatul caz al umbrelor (with Lucian-Dragoș Bogdan, Tritonic, 2018), Noir de Timișoara (Tritonic 2019). His volumes are Amețeli postlumice (SF&F short story, Eurostampa, 2016), Fete în roșu și alte povestiri polițiste (mystery&thriller short story, Tritonic, 2016), Tenebre. Cazul Laura (urban fantasy novel, Tritonic, 2017), Tenebre. Labirintul (urban fantasy novel, Tritonic 2018) and Tenebre. Miercuri (urban fantasy novel, Tritonic, 2019).

Daniel Timariu has won the RomCon SF Award in 2017 for Amețeli postlumice, and in 2019 for a sci-fi short story - Coloniștii. In 2018 he has won The Chrysalis Award (Eurocon, Amiens, France).

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THE RECLUSE

by George Cornilă

One summer, when I told Aron on a whim that I felt I needed a diversion, a secluded haven where I could be alone for a couple of weeks and put my papers as well as my thoughts together, far away from the hustle and bustle of the city, and most of all, without access to technology, he provided me with a resolution so fast that he left me thinking he had been waiting just for that, to share with someone the existence of that very place. Somewhere not too far from The Golden Springs, an old boyar manor stood hidden in the forest.

I've known Aron since I was a student at the University, thus since I didn't even dare dream becoming his faculty peer. He was middle-aged, with chestnut hair combed to one side and a thick neat beard; he always wore grey pants with sharp crease, a white shirt and a tessellated jacket smelling of tobacco. He was a bohemian, yet terribly dull at first sight. Time spent with him however passed differently than with other people. We chased away the boredom between classes, without keeping count of the number of coffee mugs we drank, or we gave vent to our literary frustrations after the Tuesday Book Club in the beer garden of a historic pub in the Old Town, without keeping count of how many pints went down our throats. Only thus – by talking and philosophizing with him elbow-to-elbow on and on, years on end – I started to enjoy his company and see him as an interesting fellow, perhaps even a tad mysterious.

Somehow, he had found that place. He didn't tell me in what circumstances and I wasn't curious to find out either, as I was then reaching a new peak in my misanthropy. When he started to describe the house and its whereabouts, highlighting the amenities it had to offer, I told him, without raising my eyes from the glass:

“I just want to be alone.”

“You'll never be more alone than there,” he replied, his hand on his heart.

He continued:

“Believe me, there's no better place to rest and write. You can stay as long as you want, as long as you are able to. When you'll get back from there, you'll either be healed from the world, or you'll knock on the sanitarium's door in the valley; in such a wondrous place, wise men

thought of building a sanitarium for those who can't cope with this world. Chaps like you and me.”

He chuckled.

I was in a moment of my life when I didn't require too much convincing.

I got there with a bag that contained a few changes of clothes, about ten books, mostly English literature, and the manuscripts I was working on. It was midday in July, if that's of any relevance. The house was old and it seemed abandoned for a long time. It was an alpine house, a simple structure mostly made of wood, not at all majestic like the lofty buildings in the area, designed by Ernest Doneaud; still, it had a distinct shape and personality. I didn't even need the keys as all doors to the yard were unlocked. Inside, apart from the dampness and the layers of dust and mold, reigned a neatness that seemed eerie to me, as if someone had been waiting for something unlikely to happen, for someone unlikely to come.

Lizards crawled on the walls and spiders wove their webs in the corners. The long yard gave off a sinister charm and was bordered by an ancient wall covered in moss, snails and slimy slugs and had twisting African tulip trees and withered roses. A gazebo of rotten wood, outhouses with locked doors and a small glade bordered by a creek with bluestone water on the bank of which potter wasps built intriguing nests made of mud. A rusty swing with violets twisting around its chains stood still, waiting down a flight of time-worn steps. I think it was that very stillness that bewildered me, more than if it were moving.

The place suited me, as I didn't need much. A bed, a table, a light bulb – a candle would have served me just as nicely –, a kitchenette and a bathroom were more than enough and, as proof, I used nothing else during my stay there. The house was huge, labyrinthine, three floors, narrow hallways and little useless corridors, locked storage closets, countless doors and endless rows of steps made of rusty iron connecting various parts of the manor. After a few nights and several unsuccessful attempts to explore the house, I wasn't entirely convinced that I was alone there. Sometimes I found my things elsewhere than where I'd left them and doors open, when I was certain I'd closed them. I blamed all these strange occurrences on the wind, the draft that blew out in the hallways and my everlasting torpor. Even if sometimes I thought I sensed another presence around me, perhaps due to my chronic fatigue, I never found any relevant proof. I was in such an isolated and quiet place to immerse myself in total loneliness that I felt like a refugee, the last survivor of the apocalypse, left alone after the whole world had perished.

My befriending with the house, a deed I deem necessary every time a man gets inside the intimacy of such a place, was never accomplished in full, in part because of my psychological inability to discover it in its entirety, partly because of the hostility I sensed from the portraits of the boyars that frowned at me from the walls, of the shadows that I only got a glimpse of, of the wounds I got from the protrusions of the old furniture or of the never-ending creaking. Tearing sounds, crackling, loud bangs, splashes, gasps, pipes hissing, wailing that came from the

innumerable round air shafts in the ceilings, all combined with the noises from the surrounding nature: the murmur of the creek, the distant barking of feral dogs, the droning of various insects, the slurred mumbling of the forest poked by screeching sounds or thumped noises, all left a mystery, either they were foxes whelping, deer groaning, owls hissing or who knows what else. Passing through each room, I wouldn't have been surprised the least to bump into someone, to wake somebody up from a long slumber, to intrude on someone. I would have been scared, but not surprised.

I spent my days strolling through the resort a few miles away from the manor, in the shadow of the forested wall of the Brainpan Mountains; the resort was full of relics from the communist era and already – so soon – of remnants of capitalism. I used to walk along the river I later found out bore the name of the boyar whose house was now my dwelling, passing by healing springs and booths selling colored trinkets and knickknacks where all the saleswomen looked the same, until I reached the barred gate of the Sanitarium. Geriatrics crawled about the alleys, burdened by illnesses, pains and lunacy, carrying in their shivering flabby hands canteens with healing water or little bags with medicine.

I would eat fresh trout on the terrace of some tavern, drink beer, read on a bench at the edge of the forest, make some notes, then, tired of the aged energy of the place I would ease off towards my home, towards the place I could, for a short while, call home. I found out that the resort had a water spring that could've healed the ulcer that had pestered me for years, but I didn't go there once during my entire stay. Even more, the burdening eeriness of the place compelled me to drink beer and strong spirits more than I used to, and I, as a writer and a professor, confess that I've never shied away from the bottle.

At night, I would write on the porch, distracted all the time, as I couldn't ignore the noises of the forest. Stag beetles hummed and smashed violently into the bearing poles, fireflies flickered into the tiny glade and night butterflies swarmed around the dim light bulb that lighted only half of my table. It was terrifying and yet fascinating seeing fat spiders descending on their web. I've had an interest in entomology for a while and I can say that I've never seen bigger webs, spanning between trees, eaves, poles and electrical cables, nor spiders that could weave them so fast. I discovered new ones woven around me with each passing hour, as if wrapping me in a shroud.

I constantly had a weird feeling of drowsiness or fear, of drifting into unconsciousness. After a few days I gave up drinking water from a nearby fountain, water of amazing relish, thinking that I could thus maybe recover. When some noise reached me from the forest or from the entrails of the house, I flinched and had the feeling I had fallen asleep and I was just waking up from a short slumber, from a dream. I'd never before questioned my sanity as I did there and, God is my witness, I'd questioned it so many times throughout my life.

Even so, loneliness suited me. I didn't feel the absence of people. I'd realized at some point that I was becoming weirder and wilder with each passing year. I was tired of the Capital, the crowds, the colleagues, the students, all those snotty kids with their huge egos, all the stubborn dinosaurs of the university environment, the editors, the book launches and literary circles, the whole tumult of survival. I had been teaching Universal Literature for ten years already to herds of teenagers who were searching in vain for their way, I was engulfed in a uselessness I was aware of every day of my life but which I would not admit when others chalked it up against me. I had written several novels and a stack of novellas which were published in various literary magazines, but I still couldn't feel whole.

Many years back I had read the works of Thomas Mann and Ken Kesey and also Eliade's novellas and a few novels by Stephen King. They weren't my favorites by any means, but there, on that magic mountain, near a cuckoo's nest, in a sinister house, I was living their novels, unfortunately without being capable to write anything to match them. I wrote plenty during my stay at the manor, but my writings were mere ramblings, whole stacks of paper without a beginning or an end, that could as well have been shuffled and read in any order without them losing their meaning, for they had none. I was slithering like a slug on the ancient wall which surrounded the yard, slobbering on a sheet of paper without hope that my drooling trail would be someday discovered and called a work of art.

Somehow, the quietness and the rest I had hoped to find there were slipping away. In the several weeks spent in silence and recluseness, I couldn't sleep one whole night. I was either falling asleep late – even at dawn sometimes – or waking up when it was still dark outside, frightened and sweating without any obvious reason, without understanding what was going on, as I didn't understand so many things in my life. I couldn't remember most of my dreams, except for the two recurring ones. In one of them, the house appeared to me as it must have looked a century ago, populated by its old masters: a boyar with a lush moustache and harsh eyes, wearing a long shirt, a vest and a belt, a plump frowning lady in a knee-length gloomy dress, her hair cut short and lipstick on her lips, and a maiden with freckles, wearing a flounced dress, her hair long, her ears pointy, keeping her hands entwined on her belly; she wasn't taking after neither of her parents. They were standing still in front of the porch, and the boyar seemed to scold me with his eyes as if I'd done something wrong, as if I'd been some uninvited guest. Still, I could not leave.

I hadn't learned their names or history, but I was certain the ones in my dream were the same as in one of the daguerreotypes hung in one room and which pictured all three of them in gala attires, perhaps before going to a ball. Another picture was there on the entire length of one of the walls, depicting an enormous herd of black horses. I used to like horses, but since one bit off a chunk of flesh from my chest when I was a child I couldn't muster the courage to get near them again.

In the other dream I was hospitalized in the Sanitarium and doctors with thick glasses, lenses like a magnifying glass, and Neanderthalian nurses subjected me to agonizing treatments, telling

me it was for my own good. Sometimes, Aron was there with me, too. The dream was so vivid that when I woke up I'd check myself for needle marks and thought in horror that I had escaped and that they were looking for me, and I struggled to choose between running as far as my feet could carry me or return for fear of retaliation in case the nurses caught me.

One of the nights – sitting on the porch and writing the same babbling hogwash, feeling and knowing I wasn't good at it, tormented by a full moon which had stolen my sleep – I found that I couldn't concentrate because of the flickering of the fireflies in the small glade. I don't know what made me follow them. It was like a call that my confounded will couldn't resist. I staggered down the steps and followed the receding tiny lights. I followed them foolishly, like in a B movie, until I entered the forest. It wasn't long until I heard a noise in the underbrush, somewhere to my right. Like in a trance, without thinking of the dangers lurking there, I set out in that direction, without even a stick to defend myself with. A creature sprung out and soon vanished among the trees. In the moonlight, I could make out a small and thin human shape, a boy or a girl maybe. It ran awkwardly, like a carnival man on stilts, in spite of its small built.

It could've been anyone, any kid or girl from the village down the valley, drawn by the light in a house they knew was deserted, or some belated tourist, lost on his way back from some healing spring, thinking he was trespassing or that I was some brigand stalking in the night at the edge of the forest. It could've been a mad man who had escaped from the Sanitarium. A few years back I taught some ethnology courses, so it came only naturally to think of the seductive girls of the forest, fairies, banshees, wood nymphs, hulder, iele, drăgaice, samcas and such. Some were fantastic creatures from birth, others were human beings who by various reasons became spirits of the forest. The stories were numerous, so were the so-called sightings. Although I had a clear understanding of how fantastic creatures came to life in the simple minds of folk and I didn't believe they were real as I'd stopped believing in Santa Claus early on, if there was a place where such entities could exist, it would definitely be this place. That night, the dreams that troubled me most started.

It was from that night when during my nocturnal toss and turn I stumbled upon a naked woman's body, always with her back at me, displaying her round full buttocks, alluring and rock-hard. Nothing happened for a while as, from the first touch, I dived into darkness and when I woke up the other side of the bed was empty and cold, without the shape or heat of another body. I told myself it was my loneliness, man's eternal craving for a woman's body.

The bathroom window looked out into the small glade, and one afternoon, when I was taking a cold shower – as I didn't have the luxury of hot water –, I saw a ginger girl watching me from the bushes, her hair ablaze. She vanished without me even having the impulse to cover my limax-like pale and flaccid body. The same night, while I was on the porch sorting through my papers, I heard footsteps on the stairs behind me, but when I turned there was no one there. Terrible neighing broke out somewhere on the creek's shore. It kept me up until late in the night.

I hadn't seen a single horse since my arrival, but then I couldn't muster the courage to go out and discover what fantastic herd, worthy of the Greek myths, could produce such a symphony.

I'd been there for three weeks when I received my first visit. I was tossing and turning in my bed after a night in which I had overdone it with the booze, when I stumbled upon the same woman's body. This time I woke up. She was still there, now facing me. The light from the porch allowed me to see her. She was a pale girl, lithe, long fiery hair falling upon her shoulders, covering her small breasts. She gave off a strong odor of moist soil and young sapling, sap and raspberries. She smiled thinly and her green eyes flickered in the light. She turned her back to me, revealing the white skin of her round buttocks. I penetrated her without saying a word, without any thoughts, for I was in a moment of my life when I didn't need too much convincing. She welcomed me, warm and wet, inside her body, the body of a primordial woman, made for mating and breeding. I would lie if I'd say I lasted. The release of the burden of my seed, which had grown inside me for so long, made me shudder and I stayed awhile with my eyes shut, waiting for her to disappear, to vanish as in a wet dream.

But she was still there when I opened my eyes and through the short-lived lucidity of the relieved man, looking at her as she was again facing me, I realized how much she resembled the boyar's daughter – the same hair, freckles and pointy ears, the same mysterious look. Her back had a deep curve and her legs were strangely bent, resembling, even if they lacked the fur and the hooves, the legs of a deer. I wouldn't have been surprised if, suddenly, I would have discovered she also had a tail, either short or waving, somehow hidden till then to my eyes which had only wandered towards the sweet tiny place which I wanted to make my own, heedless and without questions. Inexplicably, or maybe because of the liquor, I wasn't frightened. I am more scared now, remembering it, than I was then. The girl smiled and I fell into a slumber before getting the chance to smile back.

When I awoke, it was already noon. The door was locked and there was not even the smallest sign of any other presence in the room. My one-night mistress hadn't left any proof of her visit. Vainly did I caress and sniffed at the sheets, I touched myself and flustered.

Vainly did I wait many other nights for her to return. It may have been a dream, but it was so different from the others. Maybe all that had happened before had been just a prelude to this great dream, this grandiose liberating dream. Or maybe she was real, some peasant girl from the village, bursting of insatiate urges her drunkard husband with rough palms couldn't quench, maybe she was a nun who ran from one of the monasteries nearby, or some tourist lady looking for a fling, some insane girl who had escaped from the Sanitarium, some ghost or spirit, a Lady Christina, a Clavdia Chauchat for a Hans Castorp, a succubus, a samca. Whoever or whatever she was, she didn't return, and after a few more nights of loneliness and waiting on the verge of despair, feeling she was like a drug I was given just a taste of, leaving me to want more, I've decided to leave.

Back in the city, I dropped by the University, looking for Aron. I knew he was often there, even during the student holidays, to drink his coffee and work in the silence of some empty amphitheater. I didn't find him. However, he had left me a note with the secretary:

"I hope you've enjoyed it. As for me, I've found another vacation house. See you in the fall."

I couldn't help but wonder if he had been there, too, in that manor and had the same experiences as I had, and I felt somewhat troubled by a sort of jealousy when thinking I wasn't the only one who shared the bed with that wild creature, that I wasn't the only one who had tamed her, even if for just one night.

I searched the libraries till summer's end, wanting to learn as much as I could about the manor and the boyars who built it, but I only found very little aside from their names and a few dates. I came across some papers documenting the first attestation of the resort, bearing the date of 1760 and some others from the opening of the first healing establishments more than a century later, then some time-worn papers among which there was a water analysis signed by Dr. Carol Davila, a letter from Tudor Vladimirescu to the mysterious Marcu Olar, and also a court paper which stated that the boyar was accused by his wife of witchcraft as he had the habit of summoning forest spirits, and finally a testament proving he had an illegitimate daughter to whom he had left the manor.

Was there any connection between the apparition I encountered and the history of the place? The girl resembled so much the one from the daguerreotype that I'd been staring at, maybe too much. Was she an entirely different person and I saw her as the same on the wall in the darkness just because I was a man full of needs and fantasies, exhausted and drunk? Did she even exist?

Aron never came back and never wrote to me again. When the academic year started and I was so much looking forward to seeing him, to share my experience, to ask him dozens of questions, I found out that, in the meantime, he'd sent in his resignation letter. I miss him sometimes. I've never returned to the manor, even though I've been on the verge of doing it many times. There are things you live only once.

With that haven shattered, I can only slither on, leaving my limax trail on paper, looking at the irony of my existence with exophthalmic eyes on the tip of my tentacles. There was a time when I received explanations and denied them, now I am looking for them and there is no one there to give them to me.

Biography

George Cornilă (born 1986) is a Romanian author, publicist and translator. With a bachelor's degree in Political Science and a master's degree in Advertising, he has worked as a copywriter, journalist, general editorial secretary and editor-in-chief. He is the author of seven novels *Cu dinții strânși* (*With Clenched Teeth*, 2007), *Miezul nopții în Cartierul Felinarelor Stinse* (*Midnight in the Dim Light District*, 2013; 2014), *Regele lupilor* (*The King of the Wolves*, trilogy, 2014-2016), *Expurgo* (*Expurgo*, 2018; 2019) and *Diluvium* (*Diluvium*, 2019), of a short story collection, *Arlequine* (*Arlequine*, 2018) and of a children's book, *Toxi Foxy* (*Toxi Foxy*, 2018). He is included in a number of anthologies, has published several dozen short stories and articles in some of the most prestigious Romanian literary magazines and has translated into Romanian Robert E. Howard's works (*The Phoenix on the Sword*, *The Tower of the Elephant* and *The Shadow of the Vulture*).

Passionate about biology, history, mythology, plastic arts and cinematography, his works tackle numerous themes and genres, from historical realism, to science fiction and fantasy, from flash fiction to mannerist novellas, magic realism and postmodern novels. He has been awarded the "Mioriția" Prize (2008), the "Vrancea Literară" Award (2013; 2016) and the "Ion Hobana" Grand Prize (2019), while also being nominated for the COLIN Award (2017), the AnstareSFest Award (2018; 2019; 2020), the RomCon Award (2019) and the Eurocon – Belfast Chrysalis Award (2019).

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BEYOND THE HORIZON

by Lucian-Dragoş Bogdan

I am immortal.

I jump from star to star as a common man steps from one room to the next one. During one of my jumps, decades pass for the common man who's only struggling to live inside his narrow world.

The Universe has opened its doors for me. I have reached the mystery that lies beyond the horizon and I now live in a perpetual present that's forbidden to all the other mortals. There is no time or space beyond the horizon. I have the Universe for myself.

I am immortal.

And I'm not the only one.

Sixteen of us were involved in the project. I don't remember who thought of that – immortality doesn't mean a perfect memory. I think it was Chiara, or maybe Tristan. It doesn't matter. One of us had the crazy idea of traveling faster than light. Yes, Einstein said it couldn't be done, but tell that to a bunch of teens that were less than twenty one years old. We knew the theory, but we thought we could prove otherwise. Physics had evolved, so it was time for new discoveries.

When we got to the practical approach, we got ourselves stucked in the $E=mc^2$ equation, of course. Increased speed meant exponential increasing of mass. The logical approach would have been trying to jump over the speed of light. But for those jumps we needed energy transfer from outside the system.

Was it Kyuzo this time? I'm not sure. He thought of the not-so-black holes. Contrare to the relativist theories, some particles may escape their attraction. But quantum physics postulates that a certain particle can "borrow" energy from outside a closed system for a very short period of time, and thus eventually escape. Still, this was the case of only one of its many probability trajectories involved.

We had the theory, all we needed was to make it work. And this is where we got stucked and gave up one by one. Experiments have proved that it was highly improbable for a particle to escape on one of its probability trajectories during the lifetime of a human.

We were brilliant physicist, but that wasn't enough. At least, not for fifteen of us.

Ingeborg was different. Her mind seemed to travel far far away, in different worlds. She was able to think outside the box, using abstract concepts, that an average man wouldn't understand, and a genius would only get some hints of. Something clicked in her superhuman brain and she shaped the pattern that may have helped us to reach the goal, two years into the project. She thought that Betelgeuse, the red giant that governed the solar system where our scientific colony was, would be a perfect source to borrow energy from. We helped her design two accelerators for transferring the particles resulted from decomposing the body: one inside the colony, the other one set 250.000 mile in the outer space. She then conceived the borrowing mechanism that would allow the transfer of not only one particle, but for all the cells in the human body. That made the problem even more difficult, because we had to figure out how we can put back together all those probability trajectories once the transfer has been done.

Unfortunetelly, even with her phenomenal intelligence, Ingeborg forgot about that problem.

Ingeborg got some kind of immortality. The particles reassembled as herself for a split-second, then continued their probability trajectories. Most of the atoms that were once part of her body spread across the vast space around Betelgeuse. A small core remained captive in the second accelerator and I still don't know if this is what keeps her conscience in contact with our material world, or is it the other way around. Ahmed thinks that a living conscience that has no physical support is a natural thing, for our souls turn back to Allah as we die. But Ahmed sees the work of the divine in everything around us.

I think Rajiv gave the more rational explanation: once a particle use the borrow energy to get on a probability trajectory outside the system, it will be attracted back on an internal probability trajectory. He said that the probability trajectories of the particles that once formed Ingeborg's body will have the tendency to get back to their original shape and this is the support for her conscience still being in contact with us. Yes, it must have been him, because I remember his pun:

"Ingeborg is looking to find herself."

The hypothesis was interesting and for the sake of Ingeborg I hope it was right. I'm just curious whether she will be reassembled inside the accelerator before her mind becomes completely alienated or not.

Even before the accident Ingeborg was living in her own abstract world. Her new state of being forced her to live only in a mental state that helps her constantly multiply abstract concepts. Her relation with the outside world has deteriorated even further than before, and thus it became more and more difficult to catch her attention and have a coherent dialogue that doesn't suddenly stop because she has started to study a new theory.

She wasn't like that from the beginning. Once we passed the post-traumatic state of terror, we started to make fun of the fact that she hasn't yet realised the absence of her body. We were not far from the truth. It would have been more horrifying for her to retain the body and lose the mind. Anyway, her first reaction had nothing to do with the loss, but with the error in the experiment. I can still remember my shock when I first heard her voice inside my head, telling me what went wrong and how we should correct the whole thing. Set free from the limits of the body, her mind began to use more functions that were previously blocked, for instance telepathy. I wasn't the only one capable to hear her. She was speaking to all of us at once.

Funny... I don't think of it as though she has sent me a thought, but that she spoke to me. In my head it was a voice exactly like hers. Or was it just a trick my mind played on me? I heard an unknown voice and my mind made it sound like hers?

It doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that we have approached the problem the way she suggested.

From that moment on, we were free to go wherever we pleased in the vastness of the Universe.

Ingeborg's idea was simple and revolutionary at the same time, but it still took us three more years to put it to work. According to her new model, the body was to be decomposed into particles that would not leave the colony's accelerator. They were only to be excited using a shock applied with enough energy, creating correspondent antimatter particles. The first problem was to make them live longer than a split-second. Interesting enough, we accomplished that only when we gave up figuring it out and started working on the other aspects of the pattern.

Once thrown into space with the use of the borrowed energy, the contact with the environment made the antiparticles disintegrate. But Ingeborg brought to our attention the antiparticle belt in the magnetic field surrounding the planet orbited by our colony. We created a series of experimental models that eventually allowed us to protect the antiparticles in a controlled magnetic field. Therefore, ejecting antimatter out of the accelerator in a magnetic field helped us solve the ephemerality issue.

The good thing was that we succeeded to create the pattern for recreating the body without losing anyone else. The particles remained in the accelerator and they could be reassembled at

any time. The travel was made by the antiparticles. Even though there was no risk in theory, we had our doubts, so Sergei offered himself as lab rat. He has sworn that he would travel to the end of the Universe if he was to stay alive and not share Ingeborg's fate.

After a series of failed tests, his antibody appeared for the first time inside the magnetic field near the space particle accelerator. Surprisingly enough, the conscience doesn't seem to make the difference between the body and the antibody. Sergei space projection acted like it was himself. Our colleague sent us his best regards and vanished into the void, starting his journey to the end of the Universe.

I still find it funny to know that his particles run next to mine inside the accelerator, while our minds are riding antibodies separated by millions of light-years and may never meet again.

When my body first decomposed into its elementary particles, I felt like I was falling asleep for a few seconds. Immediately after, I witnessed a "see that and you can die" image: a big red Betelgeuse surrounded by a dark veil filled with millions of stars. My antimatter eyes could only see two planets, one of them orbited by the colony.

I had a strange feeling due to the fact that I didn't need to breathe and I wasn't suffocating. Strangely enough, Ingeborg was the only one whose conscience remained linked to the body – or what was left of it. For the rest of us, the conscience only animated an antimatter spectrum suspended in a magnetic field, with no other necessities than any other virtual projection. The spectrum protected us from any danger implied by the "blind" space voyages. We could literally choose to transfer to any given point in the universe, but we couldn't possibly know what we were going to find there – void, a planet, an asteroid field, a star, a protostar or anything else. Considering the ratio of solid objects or gas to the void, the probability to arrive in an open space was enormous. Still, I had once the chance of contemplating the burning core of a planet. Once I was done with the panic and the amazement, it was nice to calculate the new destination and teleport myself to the surface.

Obviously, the atmosphere was irrelevant to our new condition. We could survive anywhere.

It's very interesting to see what use can the human mind find for this kind of body. Kyuzo was not interested to use the antibody, considering that the particle flow in the accelerator was perfect to experience true zazen.

"You see", he said to us, "zazen is similar to a coffin. When you experience zazen there is nothing left – being it action or a simple thought. Free from my body restraints I can get rid of the illusion of the material world, sweeping away a distracting factor."

"So does death", commented Ahmed.

"In death, the conscience goes to a whole new level. During zazen, it stays present; only the illusion disappears."

Those were his last words/thoughts. Unlike Ingeborg, he never spoke to us again. I was never interested in mysticism or spirituality, but some of my fellow colleagues were. Kyuzo's choice, even though absurd as it was in my eyes, did less harm than others'.

Patricia, Tristan and MacPheason chose to become gods. A being that has no flesh and blood, doesn't eat or sleep and can't be killed is meant to impress. Shock. Frighten. Terrorize.

It's all up to the evolutionary level of the civilization you stumble upon.

Their intentions were honorable at start. Having at hand a vast universe made it possible for us to meet intelligent alien lifeforms. With no physical limits, all barriers concerning habitat, culture or form became irrelevant. More than that, there was practically unlimited time to learn to communicate, no matter how strange a language may have sounded.

Patricia, Tristan and MacPheason used that to pass their knowledge to the newly encountered civilizations. In the beginning, they only did good things: warning a tribe about their rivals' actions, sinking under the surface to observe the signs of a soon-to-come catastrophic eruption and thus preventing the destruction of an entire city-state, helping a scientist reach his life goal and so on. They even gave political or economical advice from time to time.

Relativity had some strong and some weak points when it comes to that matter. The main advantage was that we could visit countless worlds from day to day, and thus giving us time to help as many civilizations as we want.

On the other hand, reaching light-speed means time goes by in a different way for the traveller and for the one who's waiting for him. The first one sees it passing on a regular speed, while for the other it will go much faster. Or the other way around, if you change the measurement system. In other words, when the traveller comes back, decades have passed for the one waiting for him.

In order to exceed the speed of light we were using hyperjumps. We were curious if relativity still applied in such conditions. Hadiya suggested that it didn't, considering the fact that it was an instantaneous voyage. Both theories had their pros and cons, and both proved to be right in a given situation.

We couldn't figure it out how it worked, but Patricia, Tristan and Mac Pheason took full advantage of it. Sometimes, their relative time was synchronizing with the local one, while in other occasions they would find themselves decades into the future of a world they've been

visiting just a day ago. And this is how legends appeared and grew. Beliefs, religions, rituals were born inside the groups they've helped.

Tristan and MacPhearson quickly indulged themselves in a life surrounded by female adepts willing to satisfy even the smallest desire. And that is understandable. Show me one man capable of resisting such a temptation and I will laugh into your face.

For Patricia it took a bit longer to accept the goddess position, but eternity is a long time, so she finally fell under its spell.

Things were not so bad in the beginning. They still went on civilizing people from different worlds and they still do. But now they only give economical, political or scientific tips to those who pay them the most in return.

Of course, not having a material body means they have no use for goods, but MacPhearson once told me that seeing someone working his bones out to please you is a very satisfactory sight.

"You're just feeding your ego", I told him.

"Maybe. But it's such a fulfillment!"

I had a hunch that it would require more and more efforts to get this fulfillment as time went by and unfortunately I was right. Last time I saw all three of them I felt sick.

Patricia became a tyrant for a crooked society, with such a magnitude of reachness and grandeur that it could only lead it to ruin. If there was an artist that wasn't glorifying her, he was immediately tortured to death. The fashion and architectural extravaganza were enough to exhaust the resources a population could get and once it did that, the capricious goddess abandoned it and chose another one.

Tristan fell under the spell of sexual desires and started to enjoy erotic shows offered by races that only had intelligence in common with humans. His brilliant mind seemed capable of changing abstract formulas on figuring out the sexual mechanisms of any species, both physically and emotionally. He's always surrounded by orgies and he can imagine disgusting ways of having sex that can exceed the limits of the dirtiest minds in any civilization. For an almighty god it matters not if the subjects of the sexual games were still alive in the end.

MacPhearson was also seduced by sexuality for a while. Eventually, looking without touching became boring for him, so he turned to his old passion, the strategic games. Being an honest man, he didn't favour one civilization over the other. He helped them all, building grotesque images on each of his planets. One moment he was helping the rise of a nation, and the next one he was favouring a riot or opening the gates for a foreign invasion. He then calmed things down to a peaceful period of time, only to destroy it years later. I didn't pay much

attention, but it seemed to me MacPhearson was recreating historical events from the Earth's pre-space era. A sort of "how it was" combined with "what if".

Disgusting. I can't understand how such brilliant minds can let themselves perverted to such an extent. It seems to me that intelligence and stupidity always cross paths. I feel ashamed by their actions and I also feel sorry for we had lost some brilliant minds.

Fortunately, not all of us got so low.

Hadiya was the opposite. She didn't see herself as a goddess. She started searching for signs of more developed civilizations. A most frustrating activity.

There were three theories regarding this kind of civilizations. The first one said there was none. Hadiya pointed out that the egocentric system was a key element in the underdevelopment of human science in the past. Rajiv replied that any intelligent species in the universe can see itself as the most advanced and one of them ultimately has to be it. I told Rajiv that any civilization follows a path with growth and decline, which means that the idea of a civilized species can't be an absolute concept. There could have been many civilizations disputing this position over time considering the age of the Universe.

The second theory said that it could exist more advanced civilizations, but they were located so far that it was impossible yet for us to meet. Chang Li pointed out that as long as we have discovered the instantaneous travel across universe, a more advanced civilization should also have achieved that, perhaps in a refined form, and thus it should have find us.

Escobar said that being advanced doesn't mean you are the best in all fields, providing arguments from the pre-space era nations that were far more advanced in some fields, while lacking basic knowledge in others, thus leading them to extinction. It could have been possible that our discovery should be a miraculous breakthrough, not reached by any other civilization till now. Jane, our technician, observed that there are plenty of signs that could show our existance to an advanced civilization – such as emissions or anomalies. Hadiya pointed once more that this is again a premise of us as being important in order to attract anothers civilization's interest. Still, she hasn't completely neglected Jane's observation, as the future has shown.

Ahmed took it all to a mystical level by saying that Allah could help us meet Sergei and Elena so we can have an image of how small our steps are in the vastness of the Universe.

The third theory derived from the second one. An advanced civilization could have been organised on such foreign premises that we wouldn't be able to recognize its presence. It was a frustrating hypothesis. It's one thing to acknowledge that there weren't any advanced civilizations to reach, and another thing to accept that they may exist right beside you, but you're both not aware of each other.

Considering Jane's idea, Hadyia started a journey across the universe following a well defined pattern. If someone was to study the cuantic signatures of her appearences and dissapearences in a certain amount of place of the universe, it would have seen the pattern of some basic physical laws governing our Universe. She had become so obsessed with her algorithms, that at a certain point we all thought she went crazy.

Years later – if time was to mean anything in our new condition – she finally succeeded in her quest. Her work attracted attention from two more advanced civilizations, organised in such a way that they had few if no similarities with us. They have both pased the technological singularity point – a precise moment when the technical and scientific development pushes a civilization to a level where life at it was known before could no longer exist. As a result, the civilization is either going to become extinct, or completely change in a relatively impossible way of understanding and prediction for the previous stages of the civilization.

Hadiya started an accelerated learning process, and she seems to head out to a personal singularity herself. The last time we had a chat she used strange concepts that we could barely catch a glimpse of their meaning. Ingeborg is the only one who can still have a normal chat with her.

Hadiya headed for the future of science, while others tried to consolidate what we already knew.

When we were having an affair, Kalliope told me that even though she pursued a carrier in physics, she's still in love with astronomy. In our field of work the two are combining, so...

The new ability gave her the chance to stay "in the front row", as she likes to say, to explore any given astronomical event. Her contribution in studying quasars and protostars was extraordinary and helped the research in some of the most prestigious univerisites in the human colonized space. None of them knew how she got those results, obviously. Still, testing them proved to be right and so she got countless prizes and diplomas as recognition. In the rare moments she spend having a solid form, Kalliope likes to arrange them on her shelf. Her quarters has now the appearance of a museum.

Escobar, Rajiv and Elena chose some... unconventional issues. The paradox of hyperjump time flowing made some of us willing to explore and understand the phenomenon. Unable to find a satisfactory answer, we gave up one by one, except for those three. After trying to cooperate for a while, they eventually decided to follow different paths, different approaches.

Escobar thniks that the Einstein-Barnett theory on the relativity of forms has the answer, as masive objects influence time and space. He hasn't got any results so far. Still, he succeeded

explaining timejumping via relativity, and instantaneous transfer via form theory – while still being unable to correlate them.

Rajiv has always been more attracted to the mathematics of physics. This proved to be useful many times in our research, for he was able to somehow understand and translate Ingeborg's vision and concepts. He had always admired Bolyai's genius to imagine non-euclidian geometry and thus opening new horizons in the last century before the space era. And that's why he got the idea of using non-euclidian concepts to explain the paradox.

"It's only in a non-conventional geometry that we can get a grasp on the space used by our alter-egos to transfer themselves", he said.

He combined that new theory with two pre-space era ones. The superstrings were a blooming theory one day, before reaching a dead end, with some measurements contradicting its premises. It was heavily revised, but never succeeded to reach its previous glory, when it was considered the theory that would unify physics. The second one, the waved universe, was an unusual approach upon reality of a man or organisation known as The Medusa.

I found Elena's approach bold and hopeless at the same time. She extended the concept and tried to prove that travelling faster than light meant in fact travelling in the past. The faster you went, you were diving deeper in the past. She even seemed interested in the paradox of reversing the cause and its effect: if an object travels faster than light from A to B, it will get there before it left A. Supposing that, upon its arrival, a faster-than-light message is sent from B to A, it will arrive there before the object left its starting point. In other words, the effect (sending the message as a response) will outpace the cause. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't determine the order of magnitude we exceeded the speed of light during our jumps, and if this effect wasn't compensated during the realignment of the probability trajectories. Although space transfer appears to us as a snapshot during subjective time, it was impossible to establish a universal reference. All measurements thus became relative, depending on the compared subjects.

Elena thought that the only way she could study the paradox of reversing cause and effect was to use a single reference element: herself. Unfortunately, we don't know if she reached any conclusions. After a series of unsuccessful attempts to prove something, Elena simply disappeared and none of us met her ever since. Through Hadiya we asked the advanced civilizations for an explanation, but the impression was that they have a different approach on the matter, and so their explanations could not be brought to a common ground.

I suppose that a sudden disappearance of the universe would be an obvious answer to Elena's success, proving the consequence of the cause-effect linearity violation. But considering the context, it would be a superfluous revelation, I suppose.

She may of course have suffered an accident during a transfer and simply disappeared, though no experience has suggested that such an accident would be possible. Or (and the theory sounds plausible from my point of view) maybe Chang Li was right when he stated that there are several parallel universes and any journey in the past involves transferring to such a universe, so that the original universe avoids any paradox. Or maybe the time is running so differently on Elena's journey from the one we are experiencing, that it will be a while before our paths meet again. It's true that both theories add other unknown issues to the problem, thus contradicting the principle of Occam's blade.

Jane is the only one who has remained pragmatic after we have reached immortality.

"We may be immortal, but our machines aren't."

I don't know what would have happened to the experiment if we didn't have a technician like her. We are primarily theorists, but she has the practice in the blood. She has set up a rigorous schedule to return to the physical body and make complete revisions of the particle accelerator in the colony and even set up a series of indicators to warn her if problems arise and "wake her up". Without her, our immortality would probably have ended in a sudden extinction caused by an accelerator failure. Chang Li believes that we would have continued our non-material lives as long as our particles continued to exist, even if they had escaped from the accelerator. I disagree on that. I'm almost certain that, no matter how things are, the inability of borrowing energy from Betelgeuse would keep us locked. I think I would prefer disappearance instead of a forever paralyzed consciousness in an immobile spectral projection.

After we have enjoyed ourselves exploring space and taking advantage of our omnipotence, some of us returned to the conscientious program of a scientist. One by one, Chiara, Chang Li, Ahmed and I went back to basics and set up an arrival algorithm similar to Jane's. We travel through the universe, gather information that helps us further our research, then meet under the red sun of Betelgeuse and compare the data, compile, debate, speculate and record the results in the quantum library.

Of course we could always bring back Elena, Kyuzo and Sergei. It would be sufficient to ask the computer, and their accelerated particles would materialize in the physical bodies. But such an action would violate ethics, so we respect their decisions. The only person completely out of our control is Ingeborg. Her bodily life is entirely in the hands of destiny.

Escobar and Rajiv also return to the base, but much rarer than us. Ultimately, given that they focus on a single subject, they need not exit their universes unless they consider it necessary to consult us on a certain dilemma. And Hadiya sometimes honors us with her presence, but the communication bridge between us is constantly deteriorating. Patricia, Tristan and MacPhearson are so absorbed in their importance and grand plans to lead more worlds that they have nor the

time, nor the will for meetings. We only meet them when we visit any of the planetary systems they govern, in order to collect scientific data.

Kalliope returns to the base relatively often compared to the others, but has no arrival schedule in the central computer. Instead, she appears when she considers her work on a certain subject is done. However, she has no reason to come for any minor issue, now that there is no one to award her diplomas and prizes – a game she seemed amused of in a childlike way.

We were all affected by the event that lead to this. Our last meetings took place under its dark spectrum. Chang Li even considered that it was his duty to take over the work as a historian, although his scientific activity had suffered because of this. We cannot condemn him; I think it was inevitable that one of us would take on this task.

After all, we owe to humanity at least the role of chroniclers of the history after the Fall.

It's ironic that, although we study the biggest mysteries of the universe, we witnessed the birth and death of stars, the formation of planets and we traveled on the wings of the solar wind, and some of us have been praised as gods, we weren't present at the fall of our own civilization. Moreover, we do not even know the precise moment of this event and we can only suspect – from the truncated reports that were kept in the surviving colonies scattered throughout the galaxy – that it was a war with unconventional weapons. Given the mutations present among the survivors we encountered, it is possible that a galactic scale pandemic virus, more likely spread by humans, commercial or drone transport, may have decimated the population. And, once the basic structures became inoperative, the colonies collapsed one after the other. Few were lucky and managed to maintain a core of disease resistant people to keep them at an acceptable pseudo-feudal level. Many have plunged into primitivism and obscurity, and many thousands or tens of thousands more years will pass for them before they will have the chance to get back to their previous glory. And the vast majority of the rest were completely destroyed.

It took us three returnings to become aware of the Fall. As soon as we realized what happened, we asked ourselves if we shouldn't try to help the survivors to rebuild their societies. We then understood that we had to deal with the tenth generations of heirs, people incapable to understand the science we were willing to teach them. They had their own social structures essential for surviving. One day, the time for social, political and economical revolutions would have come. But it was far, far away. Our intervention may have put us in the godlike position of Patricia, Tristan and MacPhearson, something we couldn't accept.

We gave up. Chang Li chose to guard the remains of our civilization, recording the progress of each surviving world and keeping us informed.

"One of the remaining colonies from Centaurus is about to move from superstition to the first scientific notions of astronomy" he said on our last meeting.

"A small step" whispered Chiara.

She was devastated about the matter of the Fall.

"What good is immortality when the cradle of your civilization had fallen apart?"

"We're the biggest treasure of the human kind, Chiara", I said. "We're that remains of its glory, her ambassadors in the Universe. Our immortality allows us to carry on its dreams."

After that dialogue I went back to my cabin to write my scientific reports.

"Do you really believe the words you said to Chiara?" Ahmed asked me from the doorway.

"We are immortals" I said.

"Our bodies are" he admitted. "But the soul gets old. We gather inside us wonders from all over the Universe, but one day we will be filled up with it."

"Is this how you see yourself? An immortal old man?"

"Yes. Hundred of years from now I will feel the need to let my soul rest in Allah's hands."

"Please, Ahmed!" I shouted. "How can you still believe in Allah? No matter what we've discovered, you still kept your superstitions! No matter how far we have pushed the boundaries, you, the believers, pushed your gods even further beyond the horizon."

"The more we find out about the universe, the more remains undiscovered" said Ahmed.

He was right. This was another paradox. The further we explored the space, the more new uncharted territories and concepts appeared in front of our eyes. But that was not the point and I let him know that:

"We've both studied this universe, Ahmed! Tell me: where have you seen this Allah of yours?"

"He's everywhere."

"Where exactly? Haven't you noticed that everything in the universe is based on cause and effect? There's nothing random out there. It's just a perfectly bonded system where no god can fit. He would just not have anything to do, where to interfere. He could mime Patricia, Tristan and MacPhearson's imposture at best!"

Ahmed smiled. He's looking as young as he was the day he became immortal. Like all of us. My comparison didn't seem to offend him.

"Your exact words prove the existence of Allah, my dear friend! He planned this universe so well so that His work is there for our eyes to see in all of its aspects. The cause and effect that binds all is His own creation!"

"But you admit this principle is the basis of all that is. Why do you need to put Allah into the equation?"

"For you, Allah is just a moody being, like you and me. You think He's willing to interfere all the time, to help this and destroy that. But this is not Allah. He created a perfect universe, and His essence transcends our very minds and bodies. We can't find Him here. In the physical world we can merely see His reflection. As Rumi perfectly put it: In the sea of love, I melt like salt. Faith, Doubt - they both dissolve. A star is opening in my heart. The worlds turn in it."

"Sound wonderful. Still, I don't understand."

Ahmed tapped me on the shoulder.

"That's the problem: you try to understand what can't be understood. As for me, I let His beauty fill my heart in any way I find it."

Biography

Lucian Dragoş Bogdan was born in 1975 in Alba Iulia, Romania. He has a degree in Management. He worked as a caricaturist, system engineer, programmer, marketing and sales manager, specialist in the recovery of children with disabilities and he runs his own company of handmade products. He published his first story in 1991, and his first book in 2004. His stories appeared in numerous Romanian magazines and anthologies, and also abroad.

Writings: SF, fantasy, horror, YA:

the space opera/hard SF Universe of the Frontier series (2003-present) and the YA/fantasy/SF Book of Chaos series (2018-present)

the story collections:

Trilogy (2004), The Kvon God (2004), Fantastic Stories (2016, a "best of" of the previous collections), Tales From Time Oceans (2016, ebook), The Pale Stranger in Mirabilis (2017)

with Teodora Matei: The Butterfly-Man cyberpunk trilogy (2015-2017), the steampunk novel A Stranger in the Assert Kingdom (2018)

Crime:the Homeless series (2016-present), The Spider's Web novel (2014)

with the French author Jacky Schwartzmann: The Trunk novel (2019), published in Romania and France

Romance:

the novels: Sometimes When I'm Dreaming (2015), The Scent of Krakow (2017), The Girl With Blossomed Dresses (2018), Call Me Tomorrow (2019)

As anthologist (with Teodora Matei): Sketches of Love (2018, romance), Sand Castles (2019, romance), Under the Crooked Dragon's Water (2019, fantasy)

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ONE NIGHT AND ONE DAY WITH PAVEL CHINEZU

by Lucian-Vasile Szabo

1. Pavel Chinezu: an anonymous portrait from the Prague Strachov gallery. The image is not too clear. Yet one immediately notices that the man is covered in furs. He wears a hat, tilted over his right ear. The hat does not hide the high forehead, which may lead us to believe that he was affected by baldness. In his left hand he holds the scepter, a symbol of royal power. Was Pavel Chinezu a ruler? History puts him somewhere in between. He was rather the master of a land. A lord, if one took the Western model as a reference. His overlord was King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary, but in the county of Timișoara he was the absolute master. Thus, one could call him, for lack of a better term, a count. Wrapped in furs and wearing a hat, count Pavel Chinezu displays an elongated face, with prominent bones. He wears a bushy and ruffled moustache under a prominent nose that cuts his face in two. His eyebrows are straight, well contoured, sparkling eyes beneath them. The name of Chinezu comes from the village where he was born: Satchinez — literally the village of the chinez, from knyaz, a Slavic word meaning ‘powerful man’ (possessor of titles and dignities). The term has remained in the history of the Banat region, designating the mayor, and it can be found under this meaning in several localities.

2. Pavel Chinezu lived at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, an era of unimaginable cruelties. In his reflections, Dr. Ioan Hațegan deemed the Count of Timișoara to be one of the men responsible for the frightful deeds that plagued those violent times. Let us not forget that he was a contemporary of Vlad Draculea, alias Țepeș (the Impaler), the ruler of Wallachia, the Romanian land situated on the left bank of the Danube. Together with Țepeș, Chinezu took part in anti-Ottoman campaigns, punishing the pagans for their boldness, thwarting their fervent dream of entering and settling in the heart of Europe, in the Holy Empire of the West. The two military leaders, Chinezu and Țepeș, made many incursions into the Balkans, all the way to the gates of Belgrade, bringing destruction in the camps and the lives of the relentless bearers of the Crescent. Pavel Chinezu was an expert in the art (or the science!?) of war, his basic principle being "dog-eat-dog". In order to obtain victory and defeat, even annihilate the enemy, everything was permitted.

3. Undoubtedly, the count of Timișoara was a rough man. Let us imagine one January night in the fifteenth century: the temperature is 20 degrees below zero, although the thermometer had not yet reached these places. In any case, the wind is blowing, carrying the heavy snow in all directions, breaking the trees like mere twigs. Over a hundred men are literally passing through the snowbanks, roped together, each holding his horse by the bridle. They walk, for the force of the wind casts them off their saddle, cutting straight towards the puddles now covered with thick layers of ice and snow. They continue for several hours, although no one has a clock and no one knows how long it is until dawn. But the biological clock inside tells them they will arrive on time. They are led by a tall, bulky man, wrapped in a sheepskin coat and wearing a hat. Nobody utters a word. The guide walks in the front of the line and leads the others. At times, the crivăț — the blizzard of the Romanian lands — shows signs of subsiding. "Excellent", thinks Pavel Chinezu, advancing just behind the guide.

4. The count pulls the guide's sleeve and they all stop. They are listening, trying to distinguish something above the howling wind. The guide reaches out in the darkness and nods. They have arrived. Chinezu sends an order: the bey's tent! The line disbands and the men form a circle. They start. Every tenth man takes an advanced position. They are the vanguard and must clear the field, eliminating the guards at the edge of the camp. They move quickly, and then stop. They gaze into the darkness with sharp eyes and are all ears to catch even the slightest noise. They can see the Ottoman camp, dimly lit by small fires burning among the tents. All around them are the Janissaries, chilled to the bone. The guards are nowhere to be seen. "Maybe they retreated to the campfires." says the count as he stops for a few moments to catch his breath. But they didn't. Above the roaring of the crivăț he can hear a muffled thud in front of him. The vanguard soldier has reached the Turk, numbed by the cold in his snow shelter, jumped over him and slid his throat with a short, wide sword. After a while he arrives there only to find the shapeless body of the Turk, lifeless and dripping with blood — blood that has already frozen into a bright reddish stain.

5. Now, the bulk of the troop stops and waits. A handful of soldiers get closer to the place where the horses and oxen used by the Ottomans to carry their luggage stand. Pavel Chinezu senses they are running late. He proceeds on chewing on a few hairs from his ruffled mustache. Flames! His men have attached a tar-soaked mop to the tail of each horse or ox and they have set it on fire. The animals are driven into the camp. The fire has reached their skin. Horses stumble and run, and oxen are lowing, stamping their hooves madly. They charge the Janissaries slumbering around the fires. Enemy tents are soon set ablaze, and the whole camp is engulfed in flames. Terrible yells are heard, and the Turks are running amok across the camp. The count gives the signal and all his men rush to the tents. Every Ottoman they encounter is disposed of with a sword stroke. Pavel Chinezu and his men arrive behind the bey's tent. He stops to catch his breath. It is a miracle that their presence has not yet been unveiled.

6. They wait. The bey comes out, escorted by a few guards, and shouts out unintelligible orders. The Turks all run towards the chaos, trying to control the terrified animals. The count

gives the signal and quickly charges with his men. The guards' positions are overrun. The bey grabs his yataghan and strikes in despair. Two Romanians fall, struck in the chest. The Turks are coming back to defend their master. The bey, standing firmly in the hardened snow, swings his yataghan skillfully. He looks like a windmill. No one can come near him. He seems unassailable. Attackers collapse under terrible blows: cracked skulls, severed hands. Some are disemboweled, with their guts hanging out. With a heavy halberd, which he can barely hold, Chinezu manages to disarm the bey, knocking his yataghan out of his hand. Then his men leap on the bey. But the Turk will not admit defeat. With his right arm he strikes hard, smashes teeth, breaks noses, crushes eyes, mangles lips. The count approaches with a spear and drives it sharply through the bey's right shoulder, right under the clavicle. The bey stops fighting and Chinezu's men leap on him, grab him and gag him. They tie him up and begin to retreat. The way back is led by Slavo, a Serb from Vârșeț who wields a formidable mace. The foes fall down, their heads smashed. In the back, even the count fights. He is swinging his halberd, mowing enemies down relentlessly. The blaze is spreading among the tents. Furtively, Chinezu's men set the camp on fire with tar-soaked oakum balls before retreating. Then they get back to their horses and ride away. Tied up with ropes, the bey is kept tightly on the rump of a mare. Soon, the small army is lost in the distance, in the blowing snow, leaving behind the roaring fire devouring the camp.

7. In the morning Pavel Chinezu wakes up late. He emerges from under the bear skin he'd been covered with, he stretches his limbs and proceeds to cover himself with a muskrat and otter fur. He casts an annoyed gaze and demands food. The feast lasts for over an hour. The chicken and lamb chops vanish rapidly, almost without being chewed. Everything is abundantly sprinkled with wine. He then descends to the citadel square. People have gathered to see the show. Chinezu orders the Turk to be brought forth. The massive iron gates of the jail creak loudly. The bey is tied up and can barely walk. He is a big man, but livid and covered in blood. One ear is hanging, half severed. He looks at the count defiantly. He spits. Chinezu's eyes tighten into a stiletto-like line. He changes his mind. He grabs the bey's injured ear and, with a sudden move, rips it off. He shows it to the crowd and the people begin to shriek loudly. "Bring the cart". The oxen slowly advance on the paved street of the citadel. The iron circles of the wheels stumble into each and every stone. The Turk is put into a solid cage made out of oak beams.

8. On a terribly cold day they set off towards the river Timiș. The journey takes over three hours. A handful of people had kept a fire burning on the ice from the early hours of the morning. The ice had melted, leaving behind a hole the size of a human body. The prisoner is brought down and taken closer. The count makes a sign and the executioner cuts his nose and his remaining ear off. The Turk's eyes widen with terror as he bellows in pain. At the count's following sign three men wrap him up in a rudimentary wolfskin cloak. They lay him down next to the hole in the ice. The crowd awaits. Pavel Chinezu approaches and pushes the body towards the burbling water. Those gathered there unleash delighted, yet scary screeches. The count turns around and waves his arm. Using a pole, the executioner pushes the Turk into the river. But he tears the improvised wolfskin bag with his right hand, grabs the pole and breaks the end part.

The executioner becomes angry and pokes the Turk with what is left of the pole. The Turk grabs it again, pulls it out of the executioner's hand and hits him over the head. The crowd becomes restless. Chinezu takes his bow and shoots an arrow right through the holes that used to be the bey's ears. Only then can the executioner push him into the river.

9. Half hour later, the ice has covered the hole again. No trace of it is left. On the ice one can still see a few burned wood stumps. That is all. The crowd is still there. They have lit fires by the Timiș river and begun roasting pigs, sheep and calves. Some barrels of wine have been uncorked as well. It is cold, but the people gathered around the fire are chatty and insatiable. It is getting dark. One can hear some muffled rumbling, like thunders in the distance. The ones closer to the shore start look at the ice. They are perplexed, as the sounds come from the bey's hole. They call the count and gather closer. Somebody is knocking into the ice from bellow. People make the sign of the cross, forgetting the roasting animals. The smell of burning flesh is getting stronger. The knocks become few and far apart. Everyone is waiting. With a loud bang, the ice shatters. Something resembling a large fish exits the hole. The right arm of the Turk is now laying at the people's feet, two meters away from the count. With a loud creak the arm jumps into a vertical position, its tightened fist facing upwards.

10. Pavel Chinezu seems to have run out of patience. He takes the sword and swings it at the mischievous arm. One strike is enough to split it in half. Dozens of toothed wheels and metallic levers spread on the ice.

Biography

Lucian-Vasile Szabo (b. 25.05.1965), writer, translator, literary critic, essayist, senior lecturer at West University of Timișoara, has a Ph.D. in philology.

His short stories have been published in a number of magazines ("România literară", "Orizont", "Convorbiri literare", "Arca", "Oglinda literară", "Transilvania", "Helion", "Helion Online", "Paradox", "Biblioteca Nova") and anthologies such as 3.5 (Tritonic, 2018), Noir de Timișoara (mystery & thriller short stories, Tritonic, 2019). His volumes are Imperiul de sârmă (sci-fi & fantasy, Tritonic, 2019), Iubita de la miezul nopții, (sci-fi & fantasy short story, Tritonic, 2017), Zile senine, zile străine (novel, Eurostampa, 2017), Arta de a muri pe timp de pace (short stories, Bastion, 2009), Seninul cerului de sticlă (short stories, Amarcord, 1999).

Non fiction: Libertate și comunicare în lumea presei (1999), Fantome. Zece bijuterii fantastice scrise de autori români (editor, 2009), Tradiții și credințe de Paști (2009), Jurnaliști, eroi, teroriști (2009), Mass-media, represiune și libertate (2010), Atentat împotriva Revoluției

române (coordinator and contributor , 2010), Capcane ale comunicării (2011), Născuți în lanțuri (2011), Un alt Slavici (2012), The Facts in the Case E. A. Poe (2013), Sindromul Timișoara 1989: Adevăr și imaginar (2013), Complexul Slavici (2013), E. A. POE: romantism, modernism, postmodernism. Implicații jurnalistice, fantastice și science fiction (2014), Revoluția din 1989 în spitalele timișorene (2014), Imaginea militarilor și a victimelor în Revoluția de la Timișoara (2015), Recurs în dosarul Ioan Slavici (2015), Cartea interviurilor SF (2018), Cu Slavici și Arghezi după gratii. Procesul ziaristilor din 1919 (2018), Vămile jurnalismului (2018), Tehnici de colectare a informațiilor (2018), and many other specialized volumes.

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All Satan's Gold

by Cătălina Fometici

I

She is beautiful, is she not?

The words came out of nowhere, written in fire among his numb thoughts. He could swear he had almost heard them, spoken in his ear in a loud, clear voice. He turned his head and gazed at the pavilion among the white roses, where the Lady Ruxanda Comanescu was sitting alone, reading.

The monk squeezed the greasy rosaries within his hand and dismissed the temptation. But it kept coming back, again and again: *she is beautiful, is she not...?* He stuffed his neck in his collar and hurried towards his cell, as the brothers' voices passed by, dull in the distance.

He could see her every Sunday. Her chariot painted in her father's colours was drawn by four milk-white horses, and she looked like a queen while solemnly walking down the alleys, draped in her grandiose black gown, hair tight and hidden under a black lace veil. The lady never spoke much. She would enter the church and stand there for a while, head bent before the altar and hands clasped together, and then she would eventually retire into her little flowery corner, quiet as a shadow.

“She is beautiful, is she not?”

He flinched. The man stood beside him, black cloak over his grey, faded robe. A wide hood covered his head, overshadowing his cold, hard features. Under the thick eyebrows, his eyes shone large and black. The monk stopped in astonishment.

“Did you say something, brother?”

The man smiled vaguely and turned towards the pavilion, forcing the monk to look again into the same direction. Boyar Comanescu's daughter was still there, pale and still as a marble statue. The black lace veil had slipped over her shoulders, and a few strands of her silver-blond hair fluttered gently in the cool breeze. Her forehead was slightly wrinkled and her lips were pursed, as she was reading on, lost in her books.

"Yes, she's beautiful," he said, as if someone else had put the words in his mouth.

The man laughed, his gaze glowing black.

He had been there at the convent for quite a while, but only Heavens knew where he came from; always walking among the monks, whispering in their ears with a grotesque grin. Most of them were simply ignoring him. Some were giving vague answers as they passed by. Very few would actually stop and to talk to him, and then they were visibly shaken, as he laughed with content. Nobody ever asked anything about this man, the monk just realized, especially since no one seemed bothered by his presence. But, one had to admit, he was bizarre at the least. He would appear out of nowhere, and disappear just as mysteriously. He did not sit to dine with the others; he was always dirty and smelled bad, as if he had slept in the stables, with the pigs, even though there was plenty of room in the cells. During the sermons, he stood silently and grim by the entrance, as if ready to leave at any moment. He didn't like the holy water, nor did he like the smoked incense; and at the time for prayers, he would tense up, frown, gnash his teeth, or even run away over the fields, like a mad man.

"Go ahead then. Go to her, take a closer look. You want to do that, don't you, Horia?"

The monk froze, with his mouth open. "I'm ... I'm Brother Daniel," he muttered. He felt cold shivers down his back, and the hand holding the rosaries began to shake uncontrollably.

"But your name is Horia," the man said, looking him straight in the eye. "Horia Lambru. Why don't you go to her, Horia Lambru? She's all alone there... She might be hungry or cold..."

"I'm Brother Daniel," he wanted to state, but his voice melted inside his throat. And the man was already gone, along with his fowl laughter. He found himself making his way back and going to the pavilion, where he stopped before lady Ruxanda. His shadow stretched over her, dark and cold. The girl looked up, slightly irritated.

“Is something the matter, Father Daniel?”

The young lady’s voice sounded harsh; almost too harsh, coming from such a fair, blonde, and lovely creature. He opened his mouth to answer, but suddenly realized he had nothing to say to her. It wasn’t even his place to address Boyar Comanescu's daughter. The abbot was hers and her father’s confessor, only he spoke to them directly; the other monks kept their eyes in the ground, their voices in a whisper, and walked on the tips of their toes in their presence. And the boyar had ordered the young lady not to be disturbed while he was out hunting.

“What is it, Father?”

Her blue eyes looked beyond him, and her slender fingers stirred the smoky pages, beautifully written by the monks on Mount Athos. She seemed eager to return to her books. She was fair as porcelain, fairer still in her black satin dress. She always wore black when she came to the convent to see her mother’s grave, and Brother Daniel could not imagine any other colour on her.

She is beautiful, is she not?

“Do forgive me, Mistress. I only wanted to ask if you would eat or drink. It’s past noon, and your Lord-Father only returns at dusk...”

The young lady gave a quick smile.

“I’m not hungry, Father Daniel. I have just had lunch with the abbot.”

She smiled again, and lowered her eyes among the pages. Brother Daniel walked away feeling dizzy, his face suddenly dark. *My name is Horia*, he whispered in a hoarse voice. *My name is Horia.*

*

Dark moonless night covered the windows in its thick, gloomy veils. There was a rustle coming from the forest, and wolf howls in the distance.

Here and there, lightning cut through the darkness, and rolling thunder made the walls shutter. The candles were slightly shivering, as if frightened by what was revealed.

“You saw her, didn’t you? Wasn’t she beautiful?”

The man in the black cloak was leaning over Brother Daniel, laughing and clapping his hands with delight. The monk’s face was white as a sheet, his eyes closed tightly as he prayed over the sinful stains that soaked his bed. Big tears slid from his cheeks into his thick black beard, on his clasped hands. The wooden rosaries were lying in the corner, thrown next to a copper Christ knocked down from the wall.

“Wasn’t she beautiful?” And the man laughed and laughed, his roaring cries blending with the storm outside.

Even the red flames in the hearth seemed to mock him, as they rose wild and greedy...

II

“Give me some water, old man ...”

The peasant placed the heavy bucket on the edge of the well and looked at the man in front of him. He was ragged and dirty, and seemed to have wandered for many days without rest. Otherwise, young and strong, maybe even handsome, had his hair been clean and his face less frowning. He handed him a full jar, and the young man emptied it in one gulp, sprinkling his chin, neck, and the rags that covered him.

“Give me some more...”

He drank almost half of the old man's bucket. He sighed heavily and gasped. His legs were sore, his feet were bleeding.

“You comin’ from afar, boy?” asked the peasant, suspiciously.

“From afar, yes...”

“And going far?”

“That I do not know. Have you any food?”

“What is this answer?” the old man said, upset. “How come you don’t know where you’re going? You might be a runaway convict, as far as I know... Have you robbed, or murdered?”

“No, my friend; I am not a runaway convict. I’m just a troubled man... Give me some bread, and I’ll be on my way.”

The old man gave a bitter gaze. He didn’t like this dirty, barefoot, fowl-looking stranger. He took the bucket of water to the yard; then returned with a loaf of black bread and a pot of salted cheese.

“Here, have this onion, too. Now eat and go, I don’t want no trouble. Who knows why you’re runnin’, it doesn’t feel right. Good people don’t just run – look at yourself, boy! How long has it been since you ate? Since you drank? Since you bathed? You lived in the woods and slept on the bare ground! – like wild animals!... Do you have a name? What do they call you?”

The man stuffed a large lump of cheese into his mouth and swallowed without chewing. He took a greedy bite from the onion.

“Horia,” he muttered, with his mouth full. “My name is Horia.”

Indeed, his name was Horia. Because the convent walls had grown too tall and narrow, and the soft songs, sang by the brothers, and the prayers, and the sermons, they all aroused him like a mad dog, made him run deep into the woods and howl with the wolves. And the man in the cloak kept clinging onto him with his long, dirty nails, throwing obscene words at him, and laughing in his face. He was shouting, “Why don’t you go to her, Horia?” and he was grinning, showing his sharp, beast-like teeth.

Oh, but at night. At night, Lady Ruxanda’s face stood before him, fair and radiant — *no, not her face; her body. Her slender, naked body, with her black satin dress torn by his fervent hands, and her trembling flesh ardent under his touch, and her moans of ecstasy* — and her blood-red lips whispering — *crying out his name* — “*Horia. Come take me, Horia.*”

“My name is Horia,” he said again with a grin. He filled his mouth with the rest of the bread, and shook the crumbs off his palms. He looked around. “Where are you going, old man?”

“I’m off to work. You better leave, until someone sees you.”

“Hold on now, what’s the rush? There’s something more I need to talk to you about”. He came to him frowning, fists clenched. He had a malicious smile on his face. “What a beautiful horse you have, old man. What’s his name?”

The stallion raised his snout and turned his head toward the stranger, unsettled. It was pitch black, and had a white spot between its eyes; the thick, freshly woven mane, the broad rump, and the long, slender legs showed a strong and well-groomed animal. The old man pulled the reins and gently patted him on the neck.

“What are you still doing here, boy,” the worried peasant said. “I call him Dusk; what is it to you? Please, be a good lad now and go with God...”

The animal moaned and pranced, jerking wildly at the smell of fresh blood that splattered its black hair. But Horia grabbed it by the reins with both hands, jumped on its back, and thrust his heels into its ribs. A huge cloud of dust was left behind, over the old man’s body lying in a pool of blood, his head shattered by the blade of the axe...

*

The mansion rose amidst large gardens with cobbled alleys and blooming shrubs. Horia stopped for a moment, breathless, and leaned against a gate pillar. Lady Ruxanda was there, talking to one of her maids; she wore a moss-green gown with a wide neckline, in Venetian fashion, and her silver-blond hair looked different, flowing loose and silky from under a golden net adorned with emeralds. She had a gold necklace around her neck, and her wrists and fingers were laden with bracelets and rings inwrought with gems.

“Mistress Ruxanda...”

The girl turned to him in astonishment. “What is it that you want, good man?” she asked.

Her eyes like steel looked upon him, coldly. She didn’t know him. She didn’t fall into his arms, moaning with pleasure; she didn’t whisper his name. She just stood there, on the alley, statuesque and impassive. She asked what he wanted, as if it were not clear enough. *I want you, he wanted to shout in her face, I want to take you with me, and ride far, far away, and hide away from the world with you. That’s all I want.* “Only a few words, if you please, Mistress...”

“I’m listening.”

“It’s a secret...”

She made no move towards him. Her rose-red lips did not smile.

“Mistress... Don’t you know me?!”

She examined him briefly, penetrating him with her sharp gaze, and frowned. “Father Daniel,” she said flatly. “You shaved your beard. What are you doing here? Where is your monk’s attire?”

“I left all that behind, Mistress,” Horia cried, falling to his knees. I shaved my beard. I discarded the robe, because I can't wear it anymore. I do not want to sin in the House of Lord... And if my nature draws me to the worldly things, then I shall return to them...”

“Did you run away from the convent?!”

“Don’t scold me, Mistress, I beg you. I’m a troubled man...”

“Oh, but I will scold you,” the young lady raised her voice. “Why run? Where are you running like that, ragged and dirty? In the woods, perhaps, like the beasts? If they catch you, they will whip you and put you in a cellar, to repent for your recklessness! You can’t stay here; my father will tie you up and take you back... At least if you went into a village, to look for work... Is that blood on your shirt? What trouble have you gotten yourself into, Father Daniel?”

“My name is Horia!” he shouted, almost angry at the call of his former, holy name, but his heart leaping with joy that the young lady was worried about his fate. “My name is Horia Lambru...”

“Fine then, Horia,” she admitted. “Your sin is still the same. Why did you run, Horia Lambru?”

“I ran. I ran, because I saw you there reading, dreaming among the roses, and since then, my sweet lady, you’ve been very dear to me... Now I dream of you every day, every night... I ran to you, to see you... to take you with me. Come now... you must come. Let’s leave these places together...!”

Lady Ruxanda was staring at him, motionless.

“Let’s go into the mountains, deep into the woods,” Horia went on with his delirium. “I’ll build you a castle with mine own hands... And we shall live there, until the end of time, so no one can find us...”

Her laughter stopped his delusional mumble. *Laughing*. His fair lady was *laughing*, looking down on him. He could see her bosom rising provocatively under her tight bodice, while the wind swelled the wide skirt of her green gown. Horia stuck his fingers in the ground, the same fingers he wished to tear her dress with, to fondle her fair body with, until he would have heard her screaming her pleasure or pain; to grab her beautiful neck with, until her laughter stopped. But she was laughing still, laughing like a child, looking at him with sharp indifference, and he was unconsciously plucking tufts of grass, lumps of earth, worms and roaches...

“You are mad, man,” she spoke at last. “You are mad.”

“Mad?” murmured he. “Yes, I might be... You’re right, Mistress, I’m mad. I wanted... I was thinking...”

“What were you thinking, you mindless fool?” she burst at once, with a severe face and a terrible frown. “Did you think I would welcome you with open arms, because you had a dream? That I will invite you into my home, into my bed? But I don’t even know you, man! What did you want here? What demon pushed you?!”

Horia bent his head, reduced to silence, with his neck stiff and empty inside. Her voice had the sound of gold, the sound of her long line of noble ancestors with thunderous names. She sat on a pedestal of ice and gold, covered in green velvet and white flesh, as if beyond unbreakable walls.

He was on his knees still as she stormed away, leaving him there frozen, broken...

*

Indeed, a demon had pushed him. The demon that always brought her face — *her naked body* — before his eyes, and whispered her name in his ear every sleepless night; the demon of stained sheets and gnashing teeth. A demon had pushed him to come here, to demand his rights from her hand — *from her body* — hoping that the same demon had everything else arranged for him... But there was gold shining around her neck, around her wrists, on her fingers, all gold, pure

gold; and every necklace, every bracelet, every ring she was wearing, every gem would raise a new, sky-high wall between them. The demon had never told him that his maiden in the golden tower was a precious lady, with the blood of princes flowing through her veins, and that he needed gold, he needed riches in order to have her...

“A poor man,” she had said then, when the servants, drawn by her rich voice, had burst into the garden to build new walls around her. “It’s nothing, only a poor man!” She had spoken with contempt, almost with pity. Maybe she was feeling sorry for him; she couldn’t stand to see him so ragged, so *poor*. They had given him five pieces of silver, and dragged him out of the boyar’s estate, as if he were some common beggar, telling him that the Mistress wanted him to go back to the monastery, or to look for work in a village...

Only a poor man.

“Let it be gold, then!” he yelled, and the wind began to howl fiercely around him, plucking the leaves from the trees and scattering the ashes in the air. The night was heavy and dark, filled with rolls of smoke and distant thunder. A pale Snake shone at his feet, crawling its way with a long, split tongue; it rose softly, touching the man’s sweaty skin with its strangely fine and warm skin, and savagely thrust its fangs into his throat. He could feel the poison like a black fire spreading through his worn veins, through his dry limbs, suddenly filling him with new, unknown vigour.

“Gold,” the man in the cloak agreed, grinning with his sharp beast-like teeth.

“You,” Horia whispered, with his eyes open wide, and arms reaching out.

“Yes, I,” laughed the demon. His roaring laughter filled the night, flying on the storm wings into the valleys below. The roast meat he had before him, in a clay pot, was crawling with fat, white worms; he could almost hear them, gnawing whole chunks. The man in the cloak gave a friendly nod, and Horia grabbed one of the pieces between his fingers and took a greedy bite. He felt the soft bodies of the worms moving in his mouth, dripping on his wrist, and he started laughing too, wildly, letting pieces of flesh and worms slip through his teeth. The rain was falling, thick and heavy, with big splashes. In the flashes of lightning, Horia saw the streams rushing from the black air. It was raining blood.

III

Blood.

Blood pouring from a thousand wounds, from split necks, and sliced bellies; and screams from a thousand chests, begging for mercy, and pity, and forgiveness. But eyes were burning with hate, and hands clenched on steel blades glowing white were striking over and over, in wild laughter.

The wood rogues knew no pity, nor forgiveness. They only knew of the blood of the princes, which had to be shed, to water the dry land. That was what the so-called captain said, and he frowned terribly when he spoke of the *filthy princeling spawn*, full of gold and riches.

Before that, they used to do petty robberies, cheating at bets and games of cards, and farces of all kind, and then they would feast with wine and wenches at inns. They didn't like honest work; they were rather drawn to the easy life of amusements and thefts at the shelter of the Petrified Forest. Shaggyhead and Weasel were plotting the misdeeds; they were terribly afraid of soldiers, but after a few jugs of wine they would forget about the Prince and the search parties sent after them, and shortly the travellers staying over at the inns were relieved of all their luggage, money, and sometimes horses.

But then, *he* appeared; he, Horia Lambru the Apostate, the one who had ran away from the convent. Quiet and gloomy, he had joined their gang and their daily affairs. But he was bored, disgusted with the too small part he would receive after every adventure. So he got rid of Shaggyhead and Wiesel with two pistol shots, fired unexpectedly upon them; then, he told the others, "No more pilfering. We're taking the highway."

They had started with stagecoaches, carriages, and groups of rich merchants, who would always come at the Enchanted Bird's Inn. It was a large inn, with fortress-like walls, beautiful rooms, fine food. Famous musicians would attend the place, and artists of all kind, and beautiful courtesans. There stood guests with full bags, great lords and boyars, foreign princes, ladies

carrying their dowry in large, gilded boxes. “Always tell me who comes here, how long they stay and which way they go. You’ll have your share. Worry not about anything else, do your job and keep quiet!” Horia had told the innkeeper, holding a bag of money in his left hand and a loaded pistol in his right. The innkeeper, yellow in the face, took the bag and shut his eyes, then proceeded to greet his guests with a large smile. And the paths of the Petrified Forest were devious and dark, and the thick shadow of the old trees was falling so fast, so black...

In the later days, they would burn mansions and plunder villages. And the mountains of gold grew higher and higher in their hiding place, a certain cave in the mountains. It was rumoured that they had gathered so much gold, that Lambru and each of his thieves could have lived like boyars for the rest of their days, if only they stopped. But Lambru and his thieves wouldn’t stop. They were always hungry, always thirsty for riches fallen from the sky, for blood shed from the tormented bodies of the *filthy princeling spawn*. Even the Prince, terribly worried about the ravages of the Apostate, had sent soldiers to search for him, but the rogues always escaped, as if the Dark One himself was erasing their traces and making them invisible right before the eyes of his pursuers. They entered the earth, or vanished in thin air, and people knew that there was something unclean going on...

Rarely did anyone survive their attacks. Horia Lambru the Apostate couldn't bear to hear whining, or to see desperate souls trying to sneak away. “Kill ‘em all!” was his head command. Of course, there were always some who sought refuge. Horia was sure to catch them; he would tie them up and carry them to his cave, and then no one ever saw them again. When he returned, his face was dark and eyes glowing fierce. He would ask the innkeeper for plenty of red wine, good food, and a beautiful woman to warm his bed, and then retire to his chambers. And, as he always had a lot of gold in his bag and pistols loaded at his belts, the innkeeper was eager to please him.

*

The woman stretched out like a cat, almost purring with lust, and pushed away the silk bedspread that covered her naked body. She looked at him out and moaned slightly, but Horia paid no more attention to her. He had taken what he wanted; now he lay awake, staring blankly, not responding in any way to her invitations.

“You are still dreaming of your maiden in the golden tower, aren’t you,” the woman said spitefully, rising from the bed.

“Perhaps,” Horia yawned, indifferent to her figure floating seductively around the room, as she dressed.

“You are a fool,” she scolded him. “You’re trading the reality for a ghost!”

She was also a courtesan, like all the other women from the inn, but this one was of a different kind. She was beyond beautiful, all draped in silken robes, and she was fair and pristine as a highborn lady. Her dark hair was sprinkled with gold dust, her body was soaked in expensive perfumes from the East; she had uncertain origins and answered to many names. He had seen her for the first time after the attack on the escort of a filthy rich, foreign gentleman; Horia had come to the inn, eager for wine and women. He had seen her standing aside in her elegant robes, with her back straight and head held high, and the usual inn wenches were gazing upon her shyly. She looked like a sultana from the imperial harem in Istanbul, with her luscious black hair reaching the ground, and her emerald-green eyes, and her full red-wine lips. “I want that one!” he had shouted at the innkeeper, then grabbed the woman by the arm and dragged her to the best room of the inn. He had given her a lot of money and ordered her to wait only for him every time, not to receive another. And his companions winked and grinned, joking about Lambru's woman.

“You have everything anyone could ever wish for,” she whispered. “Gold, lots of it. The most beautiful courtesan in Wallachia sleeps your bed. Everyone bows before you in fear. And still you sigh for a woman who doesn’t want you, doesn’t even know you.” She sat at the mirror, brushing her hair, and her reflection was giving him looks of green fire.

“Yasmina dear,” he smiled softly, “since when do you care so much what I dream of?”

That was the name she had whispered in his ear. To him, she was Yasmina, the sultana. Yasmina dropped her brush and came over to him, with a sad smile on her lips.

“I do care, Horia. I want to believe you are not mad. Forget about her. Enjoy what you have, and stop dreaming about what you can’t have. And let the others enjoy what they have. Leave them be. Why take more, when you already have enough for yourself and your men?”

Almost moved to tears, Horia reached out and cupped her cheeks. Her pale face blushed slightly, and her eyes gleamed wet in the shadow of her long black lashes. “What am I to you, Yasmina? Tell me the truth!”

She lowered her eyelids with a sigh. “I care about you,” she said after a long pause. “I care enough to tell you to stop. You’ve been spreading too much death lately. And pray tell me: what are you doing in that cave of yours? What are you doing with all those people you take in there? Many say they can hear desperate screams and see strange lights coming from within...”

Horia approached her, as if he wanted to kiss her, but he laughed loudly in her face and pushed her away. She kept her balance and fell on her feet, looking down at him with a dark smile. “You’re playing with fire, Apostate. All of this will get stuck in your throat one day. They are all lies and deceit; you will want to get rid of it all, but there shall be no way back...”

*

The boyar Grigore Comanescu entered almost shyly into his daughter’s chamber, as if he were a stranger in his own house. *The time has come*, he sighed with a sad smile. He knew he was supposed to be happy, but the feeling of loss was too strong. “Leave us”, he ordered the women, and while they slipped away in silence, he gazed upon the girl. “Let me look at you, child!”

The wedding dress had been tailored in the latest Venetian fashion, and looked magnificent on her. The *mantua* on top was made of golden silk, and the ivory petticoat sewn with gold thread. It had wide skirts and ruffles, bodice woven with gold and pearls, sleeves richly embroidered with lace.

There was gold dust all around her, spread by the soft September light coming from the wide-open window, and gold within her fair hair. She was all glowing, almost translucent, and painfully beautiful as she slowly turned.

“Well? What do you say?” she asked.

The boyar sighed, his eyes wet. “What is it to say, Ruxanda... You look so lovely, just like your late mother. My heart aches that she is not here, with us... And still I laugh with joy, to see you so beautiful and graceful! Did you receive the gift from your husband-to-be?”

“I did,” she said, pointing to the locket she wore around her neck.

The old gentleman sat down in a chair, tired. “The time has come,” he said in a mild voice “to be left here alone; just me, and the portraits hanging on the walls. Soon, I’ll start talking to them, to make time pass faster. And when you come to visit, after many years, you will find me sitting with them at the dining table...”

“No, Father,” said the young woman, kneeling beside him and taking his hand into hers. She was laughing merrily, with a playful look in her blue eyes. “I know why you’re sad,” she went on sprightly. “We will come to visit you, you know we will. Not in many years, but soon. You will not talk to the paintings on the walls, but you will read to your grandchildren from the beautiful books with gilded covers, which you gave me as a child, and which now I will leave here, with you, so that you think of me. And we will bring you many gifts from Venice... But what is happening?!”

There was a noise outside, horses trotting and people shouting. The young lady rushed to the window.

“It’s a man,” she said. “He is dirty and hurt, blood dripping from his wounds... He came in a wagon with broken wheels, pulled by two foaming horses. Oh, Father, the wagon bears my uncle Stoica’s crest! What could it be? Let’s go to him at once!”

They hurried down to the courtyard, where the wounded man was telling the story, groaning with pain, of how the wood rogues, led by Death on a black horse, had attacked the convoy of the grand boyar Dimitrie Stoica. They had stolen everything, killed everyone. Only he had escaped, badly injured at the ribs.

“And so you say, they killed everyone?” the boyar asked grimly.

“Everyone, Your Grace,” cried the wounded man. “And then, he grabbed Your Grace’s cousin and took him.”

“Who did?!”

“He did, the mad dog Lambru, the Apostate. He hit him with the mace in the back of the head, but didn’t kill him quite yet. He had him tied up, and took him...”

“Horia Lambru?” murmured Lady Ruxanda, livid in the face.

“Yes, Mistress; that one. He’s going to kill him there, in his lair, he always kills. No man ever escaped alive from his claws, may his soul be damned!”

The young lady’s hands clasped upon the marble railing. She remembered a cold black shadow bent over her, suddenly darkening the gentle May sun above her. She remembered a mad man with troubled eyes, kneeling at her feet, begging her to run away with him into the mountains, to get lost with him into the woods... She had not told the boyar about all this; they were unimportant matters, and did not want to further upset her father with the mumbles of a lost soul. He had other business to attend to; there were rumours about the Sultan being displeased with the Prince, dangerous times were coming.

As time went by, she stopped thinking about him. But, on hearing that forgotten name, she felt that black shadow again, stretching towards her, grabbing her in a cold embrace...

“Goodness, child, you are unwell” the boyar cried, rushing to her aid. “You shouldn’t have listened to such horrors... Go to your chambers and rest.”

The girl left, pale as a sheet, followed by her handmaids. The boyar turned to the captain of his guards: “Didn’t the Prince send his men after this bastard?”

“Indeed he did, Sir, but there is no way to reach him. He is always one step ahead, and the Petrified Forest is full of traps and deceptive shadows. And the Apostate acts like a beast, he has no mercy. I’ve seen wood rouges before; all vile robbers, hungry for gold. At least they spared lives... But this one, he is greedier and bloodier than anything I have ever seen...”

“Rumour has it that the rascal lusts after my daughter. Do you know anything about this, Captain?”

The soldier hesitated with embarrassment. “It’s possible, Sir. But I hear people speak of a woman, standing at Lambru’s side. They say she dresses like an Ottoman Princess, with silken robes and face covered, and is always surrounded by guards...”

“I’m not asking about his wenches!” cried the boyar, tapping his foot.

The captain bowed. "If I may, Sir... I did hear the rumours, but the presence of this particular woman should worry you more than anything else. Dark words are coming from Istanbul, Sir. The Sultan sent his spies all over the land. The Prince's reign is over; one of these days, he will receive the Black Scarf of death; he will be taken down, and all his allies with him. I say you send Mistress Ruxanda away, along with her husband. Send them abroad, in the West. And you, Sir, must leave with them."

"I'll take your advice, Captain. Lady Ruxanda will indeed go to Vienna after the wedding, and then to Venice; as for me, I'm an old man. Where should I go?... Whatever does God decides!... Meanwhile, I pray you keep a watchful eye around the mansion. I fear something bad will happen very soon..."

*

"What are you doing? What do you want with me?"

The man was trembling with horror. His hands and feet were tied, and his face was covered in blood. Before him, there was a long stone, like an altar, on which sat a gilded cup and a knife with an arched blade. A man skull with gritted teeth looked through its hollow eyes. Piles of gold lay all around, shining coldly in the torchlight.

"Look around," Horia whispered in his ear. What do you see?"

He saw the rotten man's head hanging on its stake, grinning in mockery from above. He saw human limbs scattered on the ground, with rags of rotten flesh clinging on bones, still bearing the marks of teeth that had bitten them. He saw the muddy dust of the cave, soaking red with blood. He saw...

"Gold," he groaned, as the butcher stuck his heavy hand into the man's hair and forced him to look. "I see piles of gold, taken from..."

"From filthy rich bastards," laughed Horia. "And they are all dead... Grand and small boyars, princes, priests, merchants... Theirs are the bones. Do you see them? I bring them here before I kill them, and I show them what I'm killing them for. Gold!" he shouted, and the cave shuddered.

“I gave you my gold,” the man said sadly. “What do you gain by killing me? I am the grand boyar Dimitrie Stoica, cousin of Grigore Comanescu, and the Prince Brâncoveanu is my uncle. If you spare me, I might be good to you; reward you with high favours. But if you kill me, and the Prince’s soldiers catch you, you will be hanged, drawn and quartered, and they they’ll throw your guts into fire...”

“That must be a lovely sight indeed! But worry not; we’ll have a lovely time here, as well... Don’t you know, you filthy princeling, what an unholy pledge I swore! You brag about boyar Comanescu being your cousin, and the Prince, your uncle?... That I might be in your favour, one day?... Well, learn that the Devil is my brother, and I am forever in his favour. He gives me all the gold I want, this gold you see here and more! He lowers his shadows and makes them darker for me; he blinds the eyes of the soldiers, and makes them not see me when I stand right in front of them. He hides me in at the night’s bosom, so that those I seek will not feel my presence...”

“You are speaking nonsense, man. You must be drunk, for speaking like that...”

“Drunk?” Horia murmured thoughtfully. “Oh yes, princeling. I am drunk. Drunk with blood, and stuffed with human flesh. Tell me now”, said the thief, and put the blade to the boyar's neck, “where were you going? I found many expensive items in your luggage; silks, satin, brocades, women’s garments and ornaments. What’s a man to do with all this junk? Were you taking them to your wife, perhaps? She must be a spoiled wench, that one...”

“I was bringing them as a wedding gift for my niece,” the man replied indifferently, resignedly. Now, it doesn’t matter anymore... Lady Ruxanda can marry as well without my trifles.”

Horia winced. He grabbed the boyar Stoica by the collar and shook him hard. “Lady Ruxanda? To marry?! When...? To whom? When’s the wedding?!”

“Why would you care...?”

“Tell me! When? When’s the wedding?!”

He started punching him in the face, to hit him against the wall: “When ...?” he shouted wildly, his eyes open wide.

“In a week,” the man whispered, pale and hurting.

“In a week,” Horia repeated; then stabbed his heart with the dagger. He lay the lifeless body onto the stone altar and gathered the blood in the golden cup. As he sipped from the bright red liquid, and took a bite from the flesh ripped from the corpse, he saw the blurred figure of Lady Ruxanda, smiling at him like a chimera, clad in her see-through shirt and with dishevelled hair. She beckoned to him, calling him to her. The cave filled with crooked faces that started dancing, giggling around the altar; blue flames burned above the piles of gold. Horia rose to his feet, laughing like a madman, the blood of the dead boyar dripping from his mouth to his chest, and he let out a savage roar over the valleys.

*

He rushed into the inn, with hair tousled and eyes burning. The men were emptying jugs of wine, and singing loudly with the fiddlers, while hugging the half-naked women who clung to them like ivy.

“To me, boys!” Horia shouted, and the music went silent.

The fiddlers fled to hide in corners, while the thieves were bewildered, their laughter fading on their faces.

“Is something the matter, Apostate?” someone dared ask. “What is your command?”

“My command, you say?” Horia laughed. “Here is my command. I command you all to indulge yourselves in gold and riches, and to live in great wealth to the end of your days! I command you to feast from the treasury of Comanescu, and not to let a single gold coin, or a precious stone, lie in the shadow of the boyar’s cellar!”

They all froze, pale and shivering.

“What say you?” asked a man with a black beard and a thick voice. Comanescu is related to the Prince; he is a grand boyar, with a long ancestry, not like all those country gents we have meddled with so far, and is guarded by soldiers from the Capital... You must think this carefully, Apostate!”

A pistol fire made the reckless rogue fall to the ground, in a pool of blood.

“Anyone else dares advise me?” Horia asked enraged. There was a heavy silence; only the last groans of the dying thief were heard. “Comanescu has his daughter marry some princeling from afar,” he went on, with a sudden calm. “We’re going to the wedding. We enter the house all dressed up in fine garments, and blend in with the princelings. When the right time comes, I’ll ask the boyar for the girl’s hand in marriage, and he must agree; her dowry will be your payment, men, for all your years of service. And if he won’t agree, then you kill them all, and you can have all Comanescu’s riches. Either way, don’t you dare lay a finger on the girl; she is mine. That’s all I want...”

No one answered. They stared at him paralyzed, out of breath.

“Why so silent?” he laughed. “Come now, bring the wine! I want to hear laughter and screams of joy! Where are the fiddlers? ... I want to hear music!”

“You’re mad.” Yasmina stood in front of him. She had appeared out of nowhere, hair flowing loose and arms folded. She wore a long red coat-dress with gold patterns over black *salwar*. Her demeanour was cold, distant.

“Such confidence, and for what. The lady will dismiss you, like she did the first time. She won’t have you.”

“Oh, she’ll have me,” Horia growled. “You said it yourself: I’ve got gold. I’ve got more gold than all her old and noble kin has ever seen. I’ll go to her father and I’ll ask for her hand, and her father will put his nose down and give her to me, because there is no lord, or prince, or grand boyar richer than I am, all across Wallachia. And this is all that matters.”

“You’re such a fool, my friend” she laughed. “Can’t you see? He is a grand boyar, of a good and noble name. And you, you’re just a bloody highwayman. Not even one of those justice-seeker outlaws that ladies love to hear stories about. Now that she might have fallen in love with. But you only rob greedily and kill mercilessly. She won’t have you, and the father would never give that girl to you, not even if he was the poorest man in the land. He’d rather smother her himself than sell her to you. I wouldn’t let that jewel anywhere near you either, if I were in his place.”

“But you’re not in his place,” the man muttered, frowning nervously. “You’re just an ordinary whore, who spreads her legs for coin. You spread your legs, I gave you the gold. That was our deal. What else do you want?”

Yasmina came closer, with a sly smile. “Oh, *I do*,” she said. “*I do* spread my legs for coin. But your golden princess will not. You should keep that in mind.” She turned to the revellers, gazing absently upon them. Horia took the clay jug he had drunk from and threw it on the floor in anger. The shards rattled and scattered all around, rolling noisily. The woman didn’t even flinch. “You never forget to put me in my place, to remind me of who I am. I sometimes wonder... who do you despise the most? Me, for being a whore — a valued courtesan, actually, who will not be handled just by anyone, but is still a whore in her essence — or yourself, Lambru, because even though you keep dreaming of your highborn lady in the golden palace, you ended up with one like me?... Maybe you should accept *this* as your happily ever after. You will never have your lady, because she’s no fool and knows she’s worth much more than that.”

Horia looked at her with hatred.

“The truth hurts,” she murmured. “I can swear you didn’t think things over. With gold, Apostate, you can have hundreds of women like me; many times, and for a long time. But never a woman like her. Remember this before you do anything stupid.” She walked away gracefully, her hips moving to the rhythm of a tune only she could hear. “Sleep alone tonight,” Yasmina said before she left, “and think about what you are about to do.”

“Just leave, damn it!” Horia shouted, punching the table. But there was no one to argue with. The woman had disappeared into her chamber, her door was locked. Around him, the men were dancing, screaming and singing a tavern song with dirty words.

IV

“You killed my father,” she said in a glacial tone. “And my husband.”

Horia got off his horse, laughing hoarsely. Lady Ruxanda remained in the saddle, stiff, her small hands absently caressing the animal’s mane. She blinked at a bloody image that stood before her eyes: her father, the grand boyar, falling to the ground, stabbed by a dozen daggers. And her handsome groom, the Venetian prince, with his head smashed by Lambru's mace. The murderer was grinning, dark as a devil, his locks soaked in blood, as he was kicking the corpse. Then, he had seized her by the waist and took her upon his black horse. Behind them, the mansion had collapsed in flames.

“Your father would have died anyway,” Horia said, leading the stallion through thickets and hidden paths. “He was old and sick. I only ended his suffering.”

The girl looked back, where the night sky was red. “My husband.” She seemed calm, frozen. Her voice betrayed nothing.

“Oh, that halfwit,” Horia snorted in disgust. “A good-for-nothing princeling, from a strange land. Who needs that? Forget about him, dear girl. If he truly loved you, he would have fought for you, like a lion. He wanted your dowry, nothing more.”

He had fought for her, just like a lion. When Lambru appeared among the guests, and dared to ask for the young lady’s hand in marriage right there, in front of everyone, he had been the first to draw his sword. “How dare you, thief?” he had asked angrily, covering the bride with his own body. And her father, the boyar Comanescu, had called for the guards, but they were all outside, at the gates, looking at shadows moving in the distance. Then hell broke loose. The ladies and chevaliers were falling to the ground, cut to pieces, the curtains and tapestries were burning, and the thieves were laughing, laughing.... “Come, let’s get you out of here!” the groom had said, taking her by the hand, but Comanescu had collapsed on the marble floor, groaning, and Lady Ruxanda was stunned. “My father!” she had screamed, and rushed to the shattered body. Next to her, the prince’s sword was swinging restlessly, trying hard to keep the enemies at bay. But they were so many, and many more to come. And then, out of nowhere, the Apostate’s mace fell like thunder...

“The mansion is on fire,” she went on, with her chilly voice.

“Let it burn. Let the bloody thing burn to the ground. I’ll build you another. I’ll build you a palace like the world has never seen...”

The stallion’s hooves stepped on stone, and soon a cave appeared before them. Horia helped the young lady off the horse, then grabbed her hand and carried her inside. She gave no resistance; she was following him like a lamb.

“Here,” said Horia. He whispered some unintelligible words, and the torches on the walls lit by themselves. The flames revealed marvellous treasures; gold and silver coins, necklaces inlaid with precious gems, snatched from ladies’ necks, filigree silver bracelets, bronze belts, pearl beads. They were all gathered in huge heaps, and stretched far into the depths of the cave. Even the walls were polished with fine gold dust that shone brightly in the fire light. “My lady, my sweet lady,” Horia whispered, “Marry me, and all of this is yours. It’s all for you, this is your real dowry!”

Lady Ruxanda stopped, pale as a ghost in her dainty wedding dress, her silver-blond hair hanging loose in thick ringlets on her back and shoulders. She hadn’t changed much since the last time he had seen her; she had only fully grown up, became a woman, and was more beautiful than ever.

“You killed my father.” Her eyes were staring into the void. She didn’t seem to have seen any of those marvels, nor to have heard anything Horia was telling her. “You killed my husband.”

The man was silent, bewildered. He offered this woman unseen before treasures, all that gold, all Satan’s gold. And she was stuck in the middle of the cave, pale and numb, and had no eyes to see, no ears to hear.

“The mansion is burning.” She was repeating the same words, over and over again, as if trying to understand what had just happened. She sank down, in a swirl of silk and lace, her eyes wide. Suddenly, she let out a wild, sharp scream, which echoed far into the depths of the earth, and dipped her fingernails deep into the flesh of her palms. She turned a blank stare towards Horia. “You killed my father. And my husband.”

Horia knelt beside her and put his arms around her, but she was so far away, so high above, that he only touched a cold, dry stone dressed in silk. He grabbed a sapphire necklace that lay near and wrapped it around her neck. She did not move; she was petrified and empty inside. She didn't move still when Horia placed a ruby tiara in her hair, nor when he loaded her wrists with heavy, solid gold bracelets. "Look," he was saying, "look how much I love you. It's all yours. It's for you, all of it. I don't want it, I only want you. I took it all for you..."

The girl rose slowly. She took off all the jewels Horia had adorned her with, slowly moving, as if in a dream, and let them all fall to the ground. Her body started to shake; she was shivering all over, in shock. "It smells like blood in here," she said at last. "It smells like blood. It smells like death. It smells like demon breath, flames and pitch. There are traces of hooves and claws on the ground." Her eyes finally saw him. "You ... You, filthy demon. You killed my father. You killed my husband. You set fire to the mansion." She came towards him frowning, terrible as an angel of death. Horia found herself falling back a few steps, to get out of her way. "You're not a man. You're a beast. You're a demon... You demon spawn, you...!!!" She pushed him to the wall, where he stopped, reached out and touched his forehead, his face, his eyes. She examined him with sick curiosity, as if she had seen him for the first time. As if he had been some kind of a strange animal, like she had never seen before. "You're a poor, poor man, aren't you? Such a poor man..."

Horia's eyes widened. Something broke inside him, and his saw black. He growled like a mad dog. *Poor*. He was a *poor, poor man. Such a poor man*. Had the girl gone mad? The greatest treasure she could have imagined lay around her. The Prince didn't have that much gold in his treasury either; not even the sultan, from whose palace Yasmina had fled. If, indeed, she did, and it wasn't just one of her unchaste Scheherazade's stories. "Poor, poor man," whispered Lady Ruxanda. "You are so poor." With a roar, Horia pushed her and knocked her to the ground. And the rest happened fast, too fast to stop. His hands were clasped on the arched dagger, and the blade came in and out of the lady's chest, again and again. He stopped only when her ivory-and-gold dress was red; her livid face appeared like wax in the torchlight, and her pale lips still whispered *poor, poor man. You are such a poor man...*

*

He was breathing heavily, his fists clenched and his eyes clouded. It suddenly got cold in the cave; a frozen breeze like the souls of the dead shook him to the bone. The gold had turned red with blood. It shone brightly in the stifling light like pieces of freshly torn flesh, like freshly broken bones, and a thousand fat worms were feasting upon the dead metal, crawling, curling...

“What have you done, you sick bastard?” Yasmina's voice vibrated loudly behind him. Her eyes burned like green flames, and her long silk coat rustled dry at her every step. Her hair fell loose around her like a dark aura.

“He tricked me,” Horia whispered. “He tricked me.”

He looked around in bewilderment at the mountains of cold metal and dull stones where the worms lay, at Lady Ruxanda's pale corpse. Her bodice woven with pearls and cloth-of-gold was soaked with clotted blood. *Her blood.*

“You tricked yourself,” Yasmina spoke. “*He* never helped you.”

She turned her back on him and headed for the exit. Horia followed, but his feet were so heavy. And she was walking so fast, as if floating, her long black hair sweeping the ground like the hem of a fine cloak.

“I gave her all my gold,” Horia shouted after her. “I gave her everything I have. And she... she told me I was... *poor!*”

“And are you any different?” Yasmina shouted back at him, her voice loud as a bronze drum.

“What else are you, if not poor? What riches do you have? Gold?!...”

Horia opened his mouth to answer, but something in Yasmina's gaze stopped him. “Gold!” she screamed. “This hellish, accursed gold, drenched in blood and tears!... I warned you, Apostate. I told you this won't end well... And now the soldiers are after you; they'll catch you this time. It's over.”

He startled. “Soldiers? Here?!” He saw her sly smile, and growled, his mind darkened again with hate. “You filthy bitch. You brought them here, didn't you? This is your doing.”

“Indeed, it is. But we were too late, unfortunately...”

He moved towards her, hand clenched on the dagger. Blood was dripping from the blade, *Ruxanda's blood*. “I’ve still got my gold. I’ll buy my freedom. As for you, traitor...”

“That bloody gold again”, she laughed. “You don’t get it, do you?...You’ve got *nothing*, Apostate. You’re *nothing*.”

There was noise in the valley, the noise made by a hundred men and their horses, and there were torches approaching the mountain.

“Shut up,” he whispered.

Her eyes flashed with delight.

“Let the accursed gold lie at the bottom of the earth,” Yasmina chanted savagely. “And let no man's eye gaze upon it, nor beast's claw reach to it...”

“Shut up!” the man screamed, shuddered by an unknown fear.

“Let it be guarded by the shadows, and by the waters, and by the spirits in the mist!” Her voice grew louder and louder, filling the black air, carried by the wind far and beyond. The mountain started to shake at her calling; an uproar rose under the stones. “The black shadow of the Petrified Forest will forever hide the altar soaked in the blood of the innocent, offered as a sacrifice to the Darkness...”

“Be quiet, woman! Listen! What is happening?” cried Horia, while that unknown, terrible force was coming towards him from beneath, more terrible still than the rage of the soldiers and the angry mob that followed them.

“Run! Run away... you poor, poor man,” said Yasmina mockingly, looking at him with a stiff smile.

Suddenly, the earth collapsed before him. Horia grabbed the thick stem of an old oak-tree and watched helplessly as his cave, the cave with all his treasure, was being swallowed by the black crack that had opened wide at his feet. A blue flame shone brightly in the night, and the accursed ravine closed again, sealed with gray stone. “My gold!” he yelled with grief. He threw himself to

the ground and hit the rock with his dagger; after the blade broke, he began to desperately dig with his fingers, but the hard stone wounded his fingers and made them bleed. Defeated, the man lowered his head to his chest, sobbing and rambling. He then remembered Yasmina and looked for her, but the woman was gone without a trace. Maybe she had left. Maybe the earth had swallowed her too...

“You tricked me!” he yelled, his bloody fists clenched. “You tricked me...” His scream went out in a gasp, a desperate roar of tears.

“I didn't trick you,” the man in the black cloak said. “I gave you what you had asked for: gold. You had as much gold as all the grand boyars and The Prince put together. Can one say I didn't keep to my word?”

“You filthy bastard! You knew what I wanted gold for... You knew! And I brought you so many blood sacrifices, to always remind you!...”

“I knew nothing,” laughed the demon, “I only respected my part of the deal. You asked, I gave. As for the blood sacrifices, they were both your pleasure and mine. I have to confess, I enjoyed working with you.”

“Yes, you knew! I wanted *her*, it was always *her* I wanted! You could've told me you wouldn't give me that!...”

“Well, yes ... I could have, but why do it? Yasmina tried, but you didn't listen to her, did you? After all, the girl was never mine to give. Anyway, I liked it more this way. And now you must run, while you still can. The soldiers are right behind you; hear them climb the mountain with torches and dogs gnashing their teeth, to catch you and tie you up and bring you before the Prince! They want to have you hanged and gutted, and then throw into fire whatever is left of you...”

“Help me,” Horia moaned, reaching for his coat, but his hand only caught thin air. “You can, you must help me!...”

The demon smiled, gazing at him with empty eyes.

“I can,” he said, “but must I? Yes, I can do anything. I can fulfil any wish, any hidden desire, in exchange for a price. How can you repay me, mortal? What else do you have left?”

“I’ll give you... I’ll give you back the gold. It’s down there, you can take it... Take it all!”

“Gold?” he laughed softly, baring his sharp white teeth. “You can’t give me what is already mine. You’ve already given me everything, and now you have nothing, you poor, poor man. Go now, run away! Run!”

V

For far too long had he been wandering to keep track. Once again he had escaped the soldiers; but his companions had all been caught and punished severely. Beheaded, dismembered, burned, or hanged, they had all died casting away his name, cursing him.

And the people had forgotten him. Once, they would recall his person with fear; they would talk about him in a low voice, while whispering a prayer to the Holy Virgin. Now they were all laughing out loud and singing songs about him, or about someone else who had his name; mocking songs of a strongly-built, but small-witted man, who screamed with a crooked mouth from the back of a black, hairy horse, and of his thieves that were being punished for their deeds. Or wistful songs of bravery, about the man he could have become. His old friends, the innkeepers, greeted him with whips, hostile looks, and locked gates; the beautiful women had disappeared as if they never existed.

He had forgotten them too. He walked aimlessly through the woods barefoot, his shirt torn and his locks dirty. The black horse with the white spot on its forehead was gone; it had long since died during the earthquake that had devoured the golden cave.

Sometimes he remembered that night as a bad dream. He could see the mansion on fire, the bloodied bodies of the boyars and ladies, all killed at his command, and Lady Ruxanda’s pale face, whispering *you poor, poor man. You are such a poor man.*

“...It was all a bad dream.” He kept repeating the words in a whisper, sometimes loudly, arguing with the trees and threatening the stones. “It’s mine, you hear me? Mine! The gold is mine!” He

circled the place where the cave used to be and tried the ground with his fingers and toes. It was rock, hard ground, and gravel, heated by an unnatural flow from beyond, and it hurt his fingers whenever he struggled to dig. And at night, grim shadows fell over the trees, silhouettes made of thin air came out of nowhere, and strange twisted faces gazed upon him, driving him away. “It’s mine!” he shouted at them, running as long as his legs were weak, but he could hear mocking laughter and shameless songs behind him. One time, he had tried to approach the convent, but the deep sound of the bells had frightened him so much that he had run away screaming.

“Yet it might have been a bad dream”, he sometimes thought, his heart beating fast, when all that seemed far too terrible. “The cave never existed, and neither did the gold. There was no blood, no worms, no human flesh, and no Yasmina. And me, I’m mad...”

“...But I killed her, I killed her!!...” he always remembered, looking closely at his hands, wondering how that had happened. “She lay there on a stone bed, beautiful and lifeless in her ivory-and-gold silk dress, bathed in golden light. Sweet innocent bride of Death, alone there in the dark, whose lips only the sleepless worms will bite... Oh, the worms, the worms...”

“... No. It was just a dream, a bad dream. I ran away from the convent, such a foolish thing to do... I didn’t drink, I didn’t eat in days. I’m delirious, and cold. And I have bad dreams, of course I do...” He flinched: “If it was just a nightmare, then she... she is alive!” But the burnt ruins of the mansion would always remind him of everything, with a terrifying clarity: “The mansion burned. And she is dead.”

*

The full moon was a pearl in the Night’s necklace, and every glittering dew drop reflected her white face in rays of silver.

He walked through the serene darkness, his trembling footsteps carrying him among unknown thickets of thorn bushes and old trees. He could hear a soft song in the distance – like those played by Yasmina on the hot summer nights of distant past, when the mountains of gold reached higher and higher, and blood soaked the ground wet, and he was dreaming of blue eyes that gazed sternly upon him – and he forced his crippled feet to go that way. He scratched his skin in thorns and tripped over tangled weeds, his legs and arms bleeding.

“Here was the cave”, he said, when the meadow appeared before him. He suddenly stopped. In the dim light, filled with shivering shadows, it seemed the ground was rising and falling like the back of a sleeping beast. He could almost hear the heavy breath of the monster that had stolen everything he ever loved. “What if he wakes up again...?”

The enchanted melody could be heard louder, clearer. He looked around, cautiously, and then he saw her. Pale and fair, dressed in a silver robe of moon rays, the fay was playing the flute and dancing in circles through the thick grass of the meadow, scattering dewdrops with her foot. “Mistress Ruxanda!” he wanted to shout, but it wasn’t her. The creature had a body of mist and smoke, and her dancing steps did not touch the ground. Her glittering blue eyes stared at him so inviting, as her body twisted like a snake. Her face had blurred features, he noticed, and was of a strange, unearthly beauty. She was not alone; there was another who had come from behind him, he only saw after she had passed him, eyes closed and smiling like in a dream. A third creature, slim and blue-haired, danced naked in the middle. And others appeared, and others still, dancing and jumping, waving their long curls and laughing wildly.

“That accursed, bloody gold!... Let it be guarded by the shadows, and by the waters, and by the spirits in the mist!” Yasmina’s bronze voice echoed in his mind. She sat in front of him, dismal and gloomy, her black hair reaching the ground, her eyes burning green. “Leave!” he shouted, and wanted to hit her, but she was not there. She was long gone, or maybe the earth had swallowed her too...

“It’s mine!” he growled. He headed toward the middle of the meadow, not looking at the fair ones dancing faster and faster, in ever-closer circles around him. He fell to his knees, blind and deaf, and began to dig desperately. His hands were bleeding; his nails broke and fell off. But he felt nothing, he knew nothing. He could not see how the faces of the fair ones twisted into grotesque grins, how claws grew from their fingers, and how their eyes turned red as blood. Their dance had ceased; they approached him slowly, their lips uncovering white, sharp teeth. “It’s mine, you hear me?! Mine, all mine!” he shouted at them, and went on scratching through the stone with his mutilated fingers.

The ground was as warm as a cat’s fur, slightly moving. He felt a hot breath in his face, and suddenly the rock split open before him. In the depths, he could see the gold sleeping still,

shining coldly in endless piles. “It’s mine!” he shouted, reaching for the pit. But the gold perished. A blue flame rose without warning, sparkled brightly into the night, and went out just as quickly, leaving the charred corpse on the edge of the cliff. Hands with claws pushed him into the darkness, where only the worms reigned...

*

... And the Petrified Forest lay mighty, dark, and silent. On the paths to nowhere shivered delusive shadows, which the Devil himself made longer and darker, lest the eyes of the innocent see the spirits in the mist dancing in circles where the grass is dead and the earth splits all the way to the depths of Hell...

Biography

Cătălina Fometici (b. 04.10.1986).

Her first short story, *Oameni fără fețe (Faceless People)*, appeared in “Gazeta SF” fanzine in 2011. Her short stories have been published in a number of fanzines (“Gazeta SF”, “Suspans”, “Revista de Suspans”, “Egophobia”) and anthologies such as *Dincolo de noapte: 12 fețe ale goticului* (Millennium, 2012), *CPSF* (Nemira, 2014), *Best of Mystery and Horror* (Cărțile Arven Collection, Herg Benet, 2014), *Cele mai frumoase povești Science Fiction & Fantasy ale anului 2017* (Vremea, 2018), *Ficțiuni Centenare* (PAVCON, 2018), *Noir de Timișoara* (Tritonic, 2019).

Her volumes are *Câinii Diavolului (Hell Hounds)*, Tritonic, 2017), awarded with the RomCon Debut Award, and *Imperiul de sticlă (Empire Made of Glass)*, Tritonic, 2018), Tritonic Fantasy Bestseller.

Apollo's Fortress

by Ciprian-Ionuț Baci

542, after the closure of the School of Philosophy in Athens

Drusus woke up before dawn; the decision had been made, he could no longer wait for the whims of the Christian clergy, these worshippers of things that could not be imagined. He had tried to surrender his soul to the Messiah, as preached those who were said to be holy men from the Egyptian wilderness, stylites or madmen for Christ. All these interested him too little now that Sophia was dying.

He had tried to spend his nights fasting and praying but it seemed the angel of healing considered his family unworthy of his touch borrowed from the invisible deity of the Jews. For a while he tried to be more reasonable, *Lord*, said he, doubting Drusus, *if You do want Sophia in heaven – and there was blasphemy in his prayer, he knew it, he felt it – at least let her give birth, Lord, let my child live, at least don't take my child, Lord, my unborn child, unbaptized, unwelcomed in the body of the Church following the new covenant we have received from You by Your everlasting mercy.*

Silence, endless and majestic silence. The last priest to have entered his house, taking Sophia's fever, had sooner brought allusions about the funerary ritual and the funerary offerings for the new *basilica*. Solemn speeches about the blessings of the afterworld, nothing about the following day.

Drusus was definitely not expecting anything good from the Jewish God and His servants. He had made a back-up plan but he needed his father's approval, in the good tradition of *pater familiae* of which he had heard from better off and more learned people than him, who had managed to go to Athens, as the Romans once did, when the Emperor had not yet closed the gates for those who still held on to the old ways.

Before dawn cracked, Drusus Altheia made sure they wouldn't lack anything on their journey – he checked the food, the state of the cart, the harness, the shoes as well as the humour of the two donkeys that could, in a fit of stubbornness, ruin all his plans. He lit up a torch in honour of Apollo, just as the ancestors used to do and, with gentle moves that didn't allow room

for refusals, he woke and dressed his dying wife, and helped her get in the cart; she was to give birth in a few days' time.

The house of his father, Corrinus Secundus Altheia, was at the other end of Constantinople. Fortunately, Drusus had been cautious and had set off at first light, avoiding the annoyances of a city with its streets thronged with people since the first morning hours. Hearing his plan, the old man blinked a few times tiredly before replying:

“Have you thought this through, my son? I wouldn't want the emperor's rage upon us...”

“*Pater*, if anything bad happens, I will take it all on me, you must not know any of what I am about to accomplish. And what can be worse than losing Sophia?”

The old man would have liked to have him stay a little longer and break their fast together. He was, however, touched by Sophia's condition, who was barely breathing in the feverish grip of death. Without many words, he made the sign of his paternal blessing on his son's forehead. He kissed them both, with no fear for the plague that had been decimating the city for almost a year now. If the gods, the Old gods, had kept him safe from harm for so long, they would go on doing it. He hoped they would include Sophia and his descendent in their safe keeping.

Drusus left without saying much; as well as a fishmonger could and knew, he went around the dangerous areas of Constantinople and the inquisitive eyes of the guards. He enjoyed the rocky area surrounding the city walls and then, on roads only he knew about, he came close to the obscure hill that hid the old temple of Apollo and his Oracle, condemned to oblivion by the emperor's twisted edicts.

The Oracle saved his wife, who gave birth among the vestals, in the light and scent of old offerings. He had a son, an heir that would take his name further. And Sophia, his darling, would overcome the plague.

Belphegor, for that was the secret name of the Oracle, had done it on one condition: the child was to be given to Apollo. Drusus agreed half-heartedly; in the end, even in the Jewish god's covenant, the first born had to be dedicated to the Temple and the unseen deity that allegedly lived there.

He came back victorious. He had saved his wife and child whom he would never know. But he had saved them. It was his duty and it didn't matter how great the danger had been. It may well have been the disease, the powerlessness, the emperor, the plague or the Jews' hell itself and the horrible curses written on old Jewish parchments. It didn't matter. He, Drusus Tertius Altheia, had managed to save his family, he had sheltered them from harm, and his son, although never knowing his mother's touch and caress, would enjoy life and the light of Apollo's embrace of the world before sinking into the world of shadows.

Ultimately, it was every man's duty to postpone as much as he could the payment to Charon the ferrymen.

1683, the siege of Vienna

Lorenna had stayed behind in the city; she wanted to be around the knights, those demigods who, animated by the spirited presence of Earl Ernst Rüdiger von Starhemberg, had surrendered their lives to the Virgin Mary and the Son of God, pledging their defence of the city to their death.

Fearless, the knights didn't want anything else but to experience Mary's embrace while attacking enemy lines, breaking through the whore-mares of the Tatars, 50,000 pagans who had been harassing Europe with their cursed hordes ever since the time of the foul gluttonous khans.

Lorenna was reliving her latest communion; autumn was there and the earl seemed resigned before the Ottoman armourers. He had summoned them all close to the chapel:

“Brethren, the pagans are thrice our numbers. I pray to the Virgin for strength so we can hold them until the banners of the Christian League that are coming will, the Son willing, grant us the victory and the blessing.

Lorenna had found out from the other handmaidens that the power and resilience of the earl sprang from demonic roots by ways unknown to common men. Ernst Rüdiger von Starhemberg had sacrificed himself to the Devil and its dark forces for the welfare of his fellow human beings. But the Devil, damn him, would sooner or later ask for its price.

The earl had received power over a few demonic centurias whom, at that beginning of autumn, when the Christian armies were taking their time arriving, he didn't hesitate to use. They were demons terrific in battle, who lunged at the Tatars on their foul mares, devouring them while giving chase. They were glorious those demons of the earl's, Lorenna would tell herself, as she witnessed from the city walls their accomplishment in inflicting torture.

And, on one of the days of the siege, while endlessly waiting for the Christian League to arrive, the handmaiden was charmed by a foul one. Fat, unnaturally so for the way knights looked like, as she knew them, he suffered with unusual pleasure the Tatars' attacks. From the walls, she could see him being stabbed by spears and arrows, smiling onto the enemies while answering them with the kiss of his sword.

It was one of the earl's rare raids that saved him and brought him back to have his wounds dressed in her arms, a withered vestal's, sacred prostitute of times long gone, whose meaning or importance she couldn't understand.

While Ian Sobieski's armies were rescuing Europe, Lorena was falling in love with a worshipper of Satan.

2021, before the Great Monsoon Flooding

They hang out in Mysteries as usual, a sadomasochists' club opened after the pandemic where, lost in the crowd, under the unplastered walls, on Fridays and Saturdays they wasted their youth in booze, combinations of shady drugs and shags drowned in hangover and torment.

Marcelinho had grown up without a father, and the one he called mother had had as much brains, between two lovers, not to leave the city so that he was able to graduate, only he knew how, Lenau High School. The German language had provided him with an obscure job, typical for those with middle education, in one of the automotive German plants set up in Timișoara. His daredevil mates joked that he had become the play-girl of his boss, a certain Costeloosh¹, a sort of middle manager who, like them, had an open mind and a penchant for foolery when he didn't pose as a responsible, respectful, suited and booted, punctual and meticulous manager like any true aspirant to integration in the precise and wonderful German world.

On that Saturday evening they had come there together. Marcelinho was so proud that it showed in his swagger, as he sashayed into the room arm in arm with Costeloosh who, in stark contrast with his whole professional life as a repressed corporate man, was wearing a long overcoat that seemed custom-made to flaunt his buttocks. Under the eccentric jacket, he was wearing a white striped T-shirt, purposely ripped just like his jeans. The boss looked like a pack of muscles ready to explode both at the level of his thighs and his pecs that were being gloriously shown off.

There weren't a lot of people that night since there were a lot of concerts around the city. Just as well, they could listen quietly to their songs. The bartender, a sweet Agronomy student whom Marcelinho, as a bisexual, was secretly attracted to, was more than delighted to play for them whatever crossed their minds. She knew the boys in the BDSM club tipped more than generously.

¹ Spelling adapted to English. In Romanian Costeluș is a diminutive of and term of endearment for Costel, a very common male name usually associated with labourers. [n.t.]

The speakers were yelling Rammstein's *Ich Tu Dir Weh*. Marcelinho had specifically paid the bartender for that song to please Costeloosh who had recently returned from a teambuilding with the big bosses in Germany from the industrial design division. How he would have sucked on his tongue, right there and then, as he watched him showing off and unconsciously touching his nipples. He didn't care that, because of the good life, his partner had gained a lot of weight – he was happy that someone was finally looking after him, that he had eventually found someone steady in life, someone who could help him leave behind the powerpoint of lovers his mother had presented to him.

Costeloosh had had an extremely good business trip. With them there were two other straight couples and two other gay men with big plans apparently. The boss dominated the conversation:

“Guys, I can't tell you more but, honestly, that drink we tried last month during the orgy...what was it called?”

“*Kerb*”, filled in one of the girls at the table while lasciviously caressing her knees through the spiderweb stockings that went down her calves.

“Right, that combo of Jager and powder, gin, absinth and lemon...leaves me cold...”

“Of course,” joked Zoli, one of the gays whom Marcelinho had wanted for a while now to do bad things to, for he suspected Zoli had impure thoughts and plotted to take Costeloosh away from him. “Like when you knocked back your first kerb. You were flying like Batman, ready to fight the cops in Union Square.”

“C'mon, you weren't braver yourself because of the kerb”, chipped in Giani, his partner. “You were yelling around about where's Till, where's Lindemann to teach you how to put a twinkle light in your mouth through your cheek.”

Giani winked discreetly at him, suggesting he would have liked him as his personal Lolita at that blood-filled party that night. Fantasies with Rammstein and scalpels, that's all he would have needed. But...if Costeloosh had agreed, who knew...Marcelinho answered with a smile meant to be discreet, then rose from the leather sofa with female moves to ask for another Rammstein piece, the one about *Amour*, in which they were in the mood like wild animals. Then they were going to listen to *Keine Lust*, in which the fatties felt like fooling around in garages and dilapidated car parks.

The bartender gratefully accepted the tip. Costeloosh called for him from the back of the room:

“Babe, bring some Tequila shots for the whole table. We'll need blood pumping in our veins for the shit I'm proposing tonight.”

He got horny inadvertently and, slightly embarrassed, turned away from the bartender. Laura shouldn't see his manhood, not like that, although Marcelinho secretly prided himself on his size, much bigger than the Boss's, as he would jokingly think of Costeloosh. He was fat and over 45, his jewels rather small so Marcelinho couldn't even fathom why he had fallen for him so much. It was most likely because of his self-confidence that he used to hide any intimate faults.

Laura had brought the tray with booze, salt, lemon; they all knocked back the shots without a second thought. Costeloosh put one of his hairy arms around his shoulders when, obediently, he went back to sit on the sofa. After the occasion's toast, he went on in a baritone's voice:

“Mates, what we're gonna do tonight... you can't even imagine...what I found, what I came across in Germany. But, you know what, this thing, this *thingy* here needs more shots. Laura, bring two more rounds for everybody...”

The rest happened as if in a dream. Anyway, after the second tequila round and some powder, Marcelinho felt his legs going numb. His lover was telling them about a demonologist in Munich, who could boil all sorts of brews in great secrecy somewhere close to the Austrian border, and the brews could take people back in time. He had to admit such hallucinations were new but who was he to deny his partner the thrills or adrenalin rush this would bring?

One of the straight couples retired. The others, however, went towards the Pedestrian Street, then crossed the Botanical Park and reached one of the abandoned petrol stations around the newly expanded Mall. That was where the orgy and demonic ritual were going to take place that night. They were going to enter Belphegor's service, to incarnate as his demons during the siege of Vienna. The cause was noble, the Boss had assured them. They were going to protect Europe, liberty, democracy, the libertine lifestyle, with no social conventions and no people to report to about their private lives. At the same time, they could transform all their pain and physical suffering into pleasure and excitement as endless as the ambition of the pagans who had once come to take over Austria.

The brew tasted like gin, somewhat bitter, as if kept warm for too long. Although the shutters had been drawn in all the dilapidated petrol station, masking the darkness outside, Marcelinho thought he could see strong artificial light round the shutters. He seemed to leave his body and go out although they were all in stasis on the concrete floor.

He lifted his eyes towards the sun that had been covered with crimson blue spots. He knew it was night time but couldn't take his eyes off the whitelike spotted sun that grew larger and larger.

They were all rising, the Earth was rising, they would merge, they would become one with the Sun. They were a few kilometres from it – he saw himself again in the cold little room

of the petrol station. The walls seemed made of snow – he was levitating, gently hitting his body against the walls, against the snow-covered ceiling of the petrol station.

He finally woke up, thrown on the ramparts in demonic form. He literally threw himself against the Tatars that attacked the city walls. The smell of frightened horses, of blood; he ripped a horse's head, felt the warm skin of its scalp while chewing on its brain. He saw his own arms as huge, the hooves, the claws; he felt his immense canines with his tongue.

Arrows were flying everywhere, there was sulphur smoke, cannon fires. A few arrows got him. The Tatars shot at him while galloping on their horses. They shot him and his kind, demons thirsty for blood, who lived the same joy of pain, the same immortality, carelessness, and frenzy of destruction.

What a drug, what a feeling, what an orgy!... About ten metres away he recognized Costeloosh by his massive body and overweight belly even in demonic shape. They managed to fight off the attack and the battlefield was filled with cries of victory intertwined with cries of astonishment from the Habsburgs defending the city. They were injured, bleeding severely but the whole demonic group seemed to be on their feet.

Someone took pity on them eventually. She looked like a handmaiden, fearlessly approaching her lover, trying to dress the wounds in his abdomen. Why was he thinking in such archaic words? Was it only the effect of the drug or did they really travel back in time? He couldn't think too much about it because battle cries announced a new Tatars' raid and a new volley of Ottoman cannon balls. Somewhere on the walls an Austro-Hungarian officer yelled at the soldiers to withdraw and regroup in a combination of German and Latin, which Marcelinho was stunned to discover he could understand.

They got lost behind the walls, they had been led into a series of cool chambers protected by the massive ramparts. Costeloosh fell on a bed with crisp starched sheets, and the handmaiden attending to him had brought a jug of water to wash his wounds, some alcohol, wine, some biscuits, some tea. Her lover tried to smile at her, and the young woman was not afraid of his demon shape.

She was going to take him away from him, he just knew it. Somehow, that thought caused him pain but also turned him on. Inadvertently, he thought of the bartender; he saw Laura in his mind's eye as she was stroking his thighs. He needed to suffer, he had to forget, to end those foul, unhealthy thoughts. He broke the door down, wrecked another couple of gates and stepped out on the ramparts, grabbed a fallen armourer's rifle and flung himself from the wall among the Tatars in a bayonet attack.

2148, the early beginnings of Colonisation

She loved it every time Belphegor took her out. She didn't care about curious onlookers, those who couldn't explain to themselves the connections that can be formed between a young woman who looked barely like a faculty graduate and an exceedingly elegant gentleman who seemed ageless, stuck somewhere in the 50-65 age group. His impeccably trimmed beard and silver locks arranged in a hairdo from long ago strengthened his unnatural look.

For that early spring day Belphegor had booked a table for two in one of the booths of the most chic cafés in the city, close to the Promenade, in the vicinity of the Fortress in the Botanical Park. That was where Siannah had spent all her childhood and adolescence before enrolling in The West University of Timișoara. He was like a father to her, and the same curious eyes could make out, upon closer inspection, the tender father-daughter relation between them. There was, however something in the body language, something that the man couldn't or didn't even try to conceal, something that made one doubt his real intentions. It wasn't seldom that Siannah left disquieted from their so-called family meetings, followed by the unhealthy twinkle in her adoptive father's eye.

The young woman had never met her parents but, as she was soon going to find out, that was precisely the subject of the meeting with Belphegor. The man abruptly brought up the matter in his military manner, typical of his bad days:

“You will have to make a choice, my dear. O history of hundreds of years has brought us here, face to face, and you will have to confess YES or NO, Siannah.”

She was made miserable by his harsh and sharp tone of voice, the result of a tension she was trying to understand. She pressed for details.

“You see, my dear, these things happening in the Botanical Park, the experiments, the journeys through the Gates, they have a price...”

“You're telling me all this to make me feel indebted to you for taking care of me and paying for my university studies?”

“Not even by far, sweetheart.”

“Why are you calling me that?”

“I used to do it once, when you were little, can't you remember?”

“You haven't called me by that term of endearment in a long while...”

The man leaned heavily back in his chair. He resumed, stressing each word:

“Do you think we're *endearing* each other here tonight?”

He explained to her roughly about his origins, that he came from somewhere in a stellar hive, a cluster, Kimimora or some such place, from around some aliens that humanity would soon discover.

Siannah, who had managed to see many things hard to explain while she had been living in the Fortress of the Botanical Park, made to get up confused.

“And what does that have to do with me?”

Belphegor took a gentler tone, asked her not to leave and apologized for his much too rough behaviour.

“It does, my dear. You see, for over 1,500 years I have been laying the groundwork for a...”

He coughed, choked, asked for another glass of sparkling water which he poured over his white wine.

“...I need a...”

He wasn't brave enough to say the words, to go through with the idea, he couldn't look her in the eye. The young woman gingerly touched one of his suit sleeves, trying to help:

“A?”

“An heir.”

Then, tremulously, methodically, before Siannah could add anything else, he told her about his first year on Earth in the body of an Oracle of God Apollo to whom the Fortress was, after all, dedicated to. He told her about how he had planned everything in the obscurity of a suburb of the city of Constantinople, when Roman emperors still tolerated the old ways and the pagan philosophy. About his resignation to the thought he could never contact his kind again. And also, since the dawn of the Great colonization was coming, how he wanted more than ever a child whom he could pass on to everything he knew and had discovered.

“And I'm confessing all this to you, my dear, because you will have to make a choice tonight.”

“But why today, why now?”

Belphegor avoided her eyes. The man's disquiet made her shudder because she had felt on many occasions the strong telepathy between them. She also knew about the man's foresight, about his often looking into time, about his astral journeys. So she didn't lose her cool when she found out that her mother had been the daughter of a Habsburg handmaiden who had fallen in love with a possessed demon during the siege of Vienna.

She hadn't known that demons could be possessed by people. That information began to amuse her and gave her ideas for a new philosophical essay if she was ever going to finish her doctoral dissertation. Still, any trace of a smile died on her lips when she found out about her father's lineage. Her father, it seemed, had been the son of a Byzantine libertine man whose family Belphegor had looked after during the plague of Justinian by applying the medical knowledge and technologies he had brought with him from among the stars.

"And all these...pairings... you made them... I mean, you helped these people...you... mated them... in the Fortress. Is that what you mean? Is this what you and all those satanic priests actually do?"

"Siannah, the knowledge of those who are meant to find their one and only among people from other times, this great thing cannot be left in just anyone's hands. But how would you feel if you knew that your soulmate is somewhere, lost in another solar system, at the end of all the Gates or, worse still, that he lived long ago or that he hasn't even been born? Although, I'll repeat it, he is your soulmate."

"Is that why you wanted to see me, to persuade me you are my *one and only*?"

Finally, she was the one who, convinced by his troubled eyes, spoke out what he himself would later admit.

"Is this the choice I have to make today? To accept or deny the fact that you're my soulmate?"

The telepathic connection seemed stronger than ever. The waiter politely announced that he was taking last orders. So they continued their walk arm in arm on the Promenade.

They were not speaking any longer; there was no time, nor reason why. She didn't reject him but she needed time to process all the information and the implications. It seemed her parents had received atemporal asylum in the Fortress and the price of their love was to willingly offer their first born for both higher and occult purposes. The same had happened with her Byzantine grandparents.

And she – if she decided to reject him, and Belphegor loved her too much not to present her with the freedom of choice – she was going to meet a young man at the other end of the stellar Gates. She would bear him a son who would also be dedicated to the Fortress.

As for Belphegor, he would return home after an incredibly long time. She wouldn't have wanted him to leave, just as she wouldn't have wanted herself to drop out of doctoral school in pre-scholastic philosophy. Plato and Aristotle were painted on monastery walls wearing wreaths of wisdom, so who was she to decide on the natural order of all things?

The demon, for that was what the male next to her ultimately was, forever stuck between the ages of maturity, welcomed her thoughts skilfully and elegantly. They had reached the Opera glass Square at the end of the Promenade. Siannah should have headed towards the apartment complex close to the student campus. But she turned towards the Fortress where, she knew it already, she was going to move back.

Belphegor's knees began to buckle as he felt his arm in the grip of the one with whom he should have been forging the first chain links in his line of heirs. There was one more threshold to cross, when Siannah would have to meet her so-called one and only from the stars. However, as he was planning the next development, he felt for the first time ever that looking into the future was becoming foggier. He was falling in love for real.

As they came closer to the Botanical Park, the demon knew he was about to lose his foresight.

Biography

Ciprian-Ionuț Baci (b. 30.04.1982), writer.

His first short story, *Mihnea Voevod*, appeared in "Helion" SF Magazine in 2007. His short stories have been published in "Helion" and "Helion online" magazines, and anthologies such as *Antologia Helion nr. 3* (Eurostampa, 2016), *Antologia Helion nr. 5* (Eurostampa, 2017), *3.5* (Tritonic, 2018), *Noir de Timișoara* (Tritonic, 2018), *East of a Known Galaxy. An Anthology of Romanian Sci-Fi Short Stories* (Tritonic, 2019), and *CSF (Science Fiction Collection – Pavcon, 2020)*

Ciprian-Ionuț Baci has won the RomCon SF Award in 2019 for his short stories volume, *Amor fără alcool*.

MMXI

by Silviu Genescu

*I turn the music up, I got my records on
I shut the world outside until the lights come on*

Coldplay, *Mylo Xyloto*, 2011

Once you had obtained your personal code from the Internet, you were in the game. No guide had ever been published to show you how to win the grand prize, and no grand prize was mentioned anyway. There were talks on the Internet forums about a secret experiment aimed at studying the consequences of time travel. Some thought it was a highly sophisticated game that started sometime in the future. Others said it was pure speculation.

The information given at the beginning of the so-called manual downloaded from a weird website that disappeared as soon as I had downloaded the .zip file didn't sound very reliable. The Internet is full of crazy things, therapies for anything, even the cure for cancer. I don't know what drew me to this manual. Maybe it was the improbable nature of the whole story. To start a time travel, you had to call a Tallinn number, which was valid only for your personal code and deactivated as soon as you had made the call. (I checked and it was true). You could use a payphone, a landline or a mobile phone, but you'd better be prepared for anything. You could wear anything you liked. The fun started after the first ring. You weren't supposed to say anything or tell anybody anything about it. That was all.

That was how I got to land feet first through the window of the Frankfurt-Cologne Express. That was how I greeted the year 1943. It was an entrance *à la* James Bond, better suited for an SAS candidate than a couch potato like me. The first times, I had failed to land in the aisle and I had been thrown out of the game, so I started practising. The speed wasn't really that of an express train, because there was a war going on and they had problems with the tracks, despite the punctuality once claimed by the Reichsbahn.

The aisle was littered with luggage, passengers who didn't know when or if they would reach their destination, and soldiers on leave. The haze of cigarette smoke wasn't enough to

cloud my unexpected appearance. The instructions in the manual said that once you were in the train you were supposed to trigger the alarm, get off, and then reach Limburg, the nearest town. The express didn't stop at Limburg. How you reached it, by car or by foot, was your problem. Then you were supposed to answer a phone.

For the moment, I was under the scrutinising eyes of the passengers who had just witnessed my stormy landing on the shards of the window glass. What intrigued me was that each time I landed I was closer to the town. I had no idea what laws worked together to match my movements with the train speed, but there I was. The passengers on the aisle must have thought I was some sort of supersaboteur. Some of them were soldiers coming from Russia. You could tell they were battle-hardened. If they caught me, they would deliver me to the famous *Feldgendarmerie*, which policed the train to check the papers of the military on leave or their mission orders. They were also looking for deserters and possible saboteurs or spies. But before asking for my papers, they would knock the hell out of me. I was dressed in black jeans, a dark-green hoodie with the logo of an American university, and a baseball cap with the three-D red claw of the Toronto Raptors. Far too shocking and provocative for them, and the Gestapo would need no further proof that I was a damned spy who was either very stupid or incredibly insolent. The first time, I had worn a black T-shirt that said *Kiss me, I'm an asshole!* A true English saboteur. Apparently, you had to keep repeating the same episode until you got everything right. I gave a big grin and turned my attention to the nearest enemy.

A Gestapo officer was coming out of the compartment on my right. He was armed and definitely aggressive. I'd read about him in the manual. It said he would come out of the compartment with a pistol in his hand. He could throw you out of the game. His appearance was inevitable, but now I knew what to do. I made a dash for the left door and I pulled the alarm handle. Two young people watched me in surprise, but they didn't have time to react. They were pushed against the doors between the carriages, and the girl dropped a small package wrapped in brown paper. The Gestapo officer fell down at the end of the carriage. The manual said I should open the door and jump out immediately, because he would fire at me, but he would miss and the bullet would split the air above my head. Once out, I was supposed to run in zigzag toward the tree line along the road.

However, I had a different solution. I turned around and kicked him in the face before he could rise. Then I took his pistol, a beautiful 9-mm Luger like those you see at *Auction Kings* on Discovery Channel.

As the train stopped abruptly, I jumped out and took to my heels. I knew an American fighter was about to machine-gun the train, but it would miss it. Its threatening shadow flew over the Cologne express and the engine roar deafened me and scared the life out of the others. They knew very well what it was like to be machine-gunned in a train, to be caught in a trap and

targeted by the prolonged bursts of the .30 calibre Browning machine-guns. I knew it too, and not only from films. In a previous episode, I had still been in the train when the fighter-bomber opened fire. Some of the passengers, especially the soldiers in the aisle, had had time to get off and hide in the ditch along the tracks or to cross the stubble field and find shelter behind the tree line. Nobody had cared about me anymore.

During my first two attempts, when I was wearing the black T-shirt with the red lips on the back and the *Kiss me, I'm an asshole* on the front, I got shot by the *Feldgendarmarie* alerted by the Gestapo officer who shouted and fired his pistol. After that, it was Game Over for me. I felt the bullets hitting me and I was back in my rented apartment, right before dialling the number in Tallinn. But that number was no longer valid. I was soaked in sweat. I wiped my face and took off my T-shirt in front of the bathroom mirror. There were seven red dots on my back. I had had a narrow escape. The bullets had only “kissed” me. The roaring of the US Air Force P-51 Mustang was still ringing in my ears. I put my iPhone on the table. Someone called me right that moment, but I don't remember who it was or we talked about. I would have considered the whole thing a solitary acid trip, but the bullet marks said something else. It was as if I had been shot in a bulletproof vest while I was running for my life.

A year had passed before I could find another number in Estonia to get back in the game. My personal code was unchanged, so it was reasonable to infer that more than one man had been chosen for these intrusions in time. I had time to think about what I had done wrong before and I took measures to skip 1943. I had the feeling I had been a tool, someone who had to stop the train in the open field so that someone else could get off, otherwise they would have been killed by the machine-gun in the American fighter. That's what I thought about that mission, because as soon as the express stopped, the fighter pilot abandoned it for a much more interesting target on the road: an SS Panzer-Lehr Division Kübelwagen, which looked far more tempting than the almost empty train. The Kübelwagen took a burst of .30 bullets. Its driver was killed on the spot and the SS officer in the back seat, an Obersturmbannführer, was seriously wounded.

So this was where I was now – leaning against a tree, about one kilometre away from the Kübelwagen. To my amazement, as I watched the fighter, I realised it was not a P-51 Mustang, but a jet, an American single-engine jet. I knew my fighters, so I recognized it immediately. It was a Lockheed P-80 Shooting Star. Such jets became operational only in 1945 and only a few dozen of them reached the European war theatre. What was that jet doing there in 1943?

All I had to do was find the Kübelwagen riddled by a Browning machine-gun and drive to Limburg. No one would stop an SS vehicle. People would watch it pass by without a word. But the Kübelwagen I found was armoured and had a heavy machine-gun station on the front seat. It looked like a mud-spattered Humvee with small SS flags on the front. I had found it on the side

of the road, riddled by the .50 machine-guns of the P-80. I was bewildered, because the driver was not dead, just dizzy. He must have hit his head on the dashboard. I pulled him out of the Kübelwagen and wanted to sit in his place. The machine-gunner was dead. His upper half was spread on the hood, but his lower half was in the vehicle. I puked at once on the poor unconscious driver. Eventually, I had to push the half-body into the nearby ditch. I looked at the Obersturmbannführer. He was still unconscious. He might have a chance if he got to a hospital in Limburg, but that wasn't for me to decide. I shook my head and started driving.

I floored the gas pedal. Luckily, the Kübelwagen had an automatic gearbox and all-wheel drive, so I was able to get it out of the ditch. Through the window, I saw the Cologne Express speeding to make up for the lost time. Then I realised something: the locomotive was not the classic steam model of those years. It looked like a diesel to me. It did not produce the typical cloud of black smoke that gave it away to the trigger-happy allies. Things *had* changed. I shuddered, not with cold, but with fear, because such changes were dangerous, though meaningless. Where I came from, the P-80s had only fought in the Korean War. They had shot down the MiG-15s piloted first by the Russians, then by the North Koreans trained in great haste. That was not just a detail that didn't fit the picture. If the allies were forced to pilot jets in 1943, then what did the Germans have?

I reached Limburg from the south, on the road parallel to the railway tracks, thinking with horror that I was in an alternate history. Many things might not be as I knew them and who knew where the new timelines, not mentioned in any manual, would take me.

Nobody stopped me. I had done my homework so I found the bombed-out blocks on Bernd Strasse quite easily. No matter how many Volkssturm people were walking on the street trying to recover loose bricks, I had to stop at number 10, get off the Kübelwagen and climb up to the third floor. I replaced the SS cap with my baseball cap.

The stairs looked like the strange, zigzagging skeleton of a deadly wounded giant, emaciated by a terrible disease and frozen in pain. A phone was ringing in a flat on the third floor. That was my call.

The manual said I must take the Walther PKK from the Obersturmbannführer's holster and fire a shot in the air to spread the public. I didn't waste time with that, since I already had my Luger, so I fired it to keep the poor old Volkssturm chaps in check. You weren't allowed to kill civilians, even if you were a psycho with a twisted mind. Such behaviour was absolutely discouraged. You were not in a sui generis time-travel version of Grand Theft Auto. Those who killed civilians were thrown back to Genghis-Khan's hordes that massacred everything on their way or to London during the Great Fire of 1666 or the Great Plague that decimated Europe. I didn't feel like checking whether such legends were true or not.

The Volkssturm people were supposed to carry old weapons. Most of the times they didn't even have bullets, but now they had MP 44s and only their trembling hands made them look less threatening. They had forgotten to cock their rifles, I thought, staring at them in amazement, like an actor who had just discovered that the play was completely different from the original script and his lines were meaningless. I had to improvise not to be pulled behind the curtain.

Yes, I was wearing black jeans, a green hoodie and a Toronto Raptors cap. People watched my movements frozen in their tracks, unable to move, the women holding bricks in their hands, the men clasping the automatic rifles they had forgotten to fire. I took in the details as if I were watching everything in slow motion, trying to imprint that unbelievable 1943 episode on my mind, their horrified faces at seeing me jump out of the Kübelwagen and dash inside a bombed block to answer a phone ringing somewhere on the third floor.

I stormed into the stairwell. On my right, the entire structure had crumbled. I was supposed to climb the stairs ignoring that void. I didn't have to say anything when I picked up the heavy bakelite receiver. I liked those old phones, but if I took that with me I would be like the tourist in *If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium*, whose suitcase suddenly opened on the airport. By the time I reached the second floor, the old men had shaken off their lethargy.

'Halt! Runten!' shouted someone. *Jetzt!*²

They were holding their weapons with a firm clasp now. A man wearing a leather coat and a hat showed up. He watched me as he signalled them to lower their rifles. I could swear he was Gestapo. It was a soft, calm, almost soothing gesture, but it had to be obeyed instantly. He didn't have to produce his famous oval badge to show them who was in charge. How much did you pay in the Reich for triggering a train alarm for no reason?

'Runter, du Arschloch! Wir müssen redder³,' he ordered me in German.

The phone kept ringing. I shrugged and dashed to the third floor.

1962 welcomed me peacefully, in the lift of a hotel located not far from the centre of Ostend, the Belgian port. In February, the Beatles recorded *Please, Please Me*, Kennedy was the president of the United States, and the United States and the USSR performed nuclear tests throughout the year. My fingers were still clenched, my hand slightly raised, as in 1943, but the receiver was gone. I had the same reaction every time. I couldn't control it. It showed how quickly things were happening. This time, nobody saw me coming, so there was no conflicting and complicated situation related to my arrival out of nowhere.

All I had to do in Ostend was to take a bicycle I found leaning against a street pole and ride to the central railway station to remove a cipher lock briefcase from a luggage locker. That I was

² Stop! Come down! Now!

³ Come down, you idiot! We need to talk.

to take to Tel Aviv in 1967, six months before the Yom Kippur War. My pockets were heavy with all kinds of coins I had had a hard time to find in collectors' shops at home, because the first time I arrived in 1962 Ostend I tried to open the locker with a screwdriver and got arrested. That episode wasn't supposed to happen.

I took off my baseball cap and wiped the sweat from my red face. The lift should have looked differently. Its inside was covered in aluminium panels instead of the old wooden boards worn out from so many bodies leaning on them, and the plastic buttons on the control panel had LEDs. The diodes had appeared in 1962, but not in the lift of the hotel on Koninginnelaan. In the earlier version, the lift was a symbol of the analogue era, with classic numbered buttons on a bronze panel and bronze inlays on the wood panelling – an object conceived by Steampunk comics artists, but as old as the six-storey building. I noticed these changes while coming down from the top floor, wondering whether the receptionist would answer my greeting with a *Goededag*, staring at me as if I had fallen from the moon. I had no idea what to expect after leaving the hotel. I checked myself in the huge mirror once more. I looked like hell, with dark circles under my eyes from the many terrifying experiences among the Germans, all sweaty and with the hair sticking to my head. I couldn't turn up like that in front of Dajana. I should take a shower and change my T-shirt at the first opportunity. Maybe I could buy a new one.

The reception area was opposite the lift. The first time, I had greeted the receptionist in English, but he looked at me in amazement, although I was not as strangely dressed as others from the past had seemed to think. I couldn't give up my hoodie, although in 1919 New York I nearly got a sound thrashing because of it, since it was November and it was snowing.

When the lift door opened, I saw that the reception area was completely changed, as was the furniture in the lobby. It had a modern but at the same obsolete air, like a vintage exhibition I had once seen where all the pieces cost a fortune. I said hello to the receptionist and noticed that he eyed me even more suspiciously than before, as if he recognized me. He picked up the receiver, obviously determined to call security or the police. That was a surprise. Luckily, the automatic doors that replaced the former heavy wood-and-glass ones opened quickly, so I left the hotel as fast as I could. Things seemed to develop at a surprisingly fast and worrying pace there as well.

When I was outside, I put on my headphones and turned on my iPod, which I kept in my jeans pocket. I felt as if I hadn't listened to Coldplay in a million years. I didn't care at all that people saw me with such an item; they didn't know what it was and thought the headphones were hearing aids. When I wasn't using them, they hung around my neck inside my hoodie. I took a deep breath. 1962 smelt different from my time and especially from 1943 – there was too much smoke and death stench in the air back there, at least in the last phase. The streets in

Ostend were polluted because the catalytic filters hadn't been invented yet, but they smelled like peace to me.

I noticed that the shop windows on the ground floor of the buildings I passed by were a pathetic sight, as if the town felt the pressure of austerity measures and the people had no buying power. I looked around. Most passers-by wore dull, fading clothes. Nothing announced the flower-power fashion of the early 1970s (I hated flares to death). I had the most terrible shock when I saw a gloomy statue of Lenin perched on a red pedestal in a park. I could see his profile, his hand outstretched toward the great future of the Bolshevik Revolution, his foot slightly raised, the same defying and somewhat threatening posture I had seen in Moscow in 1985, about seven years before I was born. But the statue in the little park in Ostend was a totally unexpected surprise, especially since it hadn't been there before. It was as though reality had been Photoshopped. I had been Lenin's contemporary for about five hours in 1919, but I'd never expected to see his statue in the Koninginnelaan park! As I was staring at the statue of the Father of the Bolshevik Revolution, I began to suspect that very odd things had happened since my last visit to 1962.

I was listening to *M.M.I.X.* The song, lasting 49 seconds, was not long enough to create the right sound ambience for watching a statue that had no business being there. It was only the introduction to the next piece. And if for the Scottish folk singer Mat McGinn *M.M.I.X.* meant nothing but "a bunch of stupid letters", for me it meant "home" and I thought of it as my own anthem.

I decided to do what I had come there for, which was to travel to 1980 as fast as I could and meet Dajana in Zagreb. And then stop there. Resume my life starting with that year, although I didn't know if it was possible to vanish in a year of your choice. Nobody said anything about that on the forums. But I would give it a try anyway.

I think I was experiencing that thing called love at first sight. It struck me when I saw her in a fast food restaurant with a terrible name, Kopasar or something like that. I froze for a whole minute. I was in everyone's way, but I only had eyes for her. She was listening to music on a Walkman while waiting for a friend (as she later explained to me). I sat at her table uninvited, asking her in English what she was listening to. Rick Wakeman, *No Earthly Connection*, she replied. Well, I was familiar with the oldies as well. My old man contaminated me with them. He was still listening to Pink Floyd, Gentle Giant, Yes and Genesis when I decided not to live with my folks anymore. To impress her, I took the state-of-the-art 5th generation iPod from my pocket and put it on the table. I showed her several album covers on my playlist, but only those before the 1980. Then we introduced each other. At first she had thought I was a foreign student at the University of Zagreb, and now she was sure I was American. I spoke with the accent I had acquired as an MIT student. We chatted until her friend Marija arrived. Before that,

we had taken our picture with my iPod HD camera, smiling happily at our amazing chance encounter, while everyone was staring at us. I completely forgot what I had come for: a hamburger. We decided to meet again at six in the evening. I was determined to keep my promise to her and manage through 1980 without answering that fucking phone. I failed my Zagreb mission on purpose, only to make sure I would see her again. I used our photo as wallpaper on my iPod, but I had to hide it. I couldn't just sit at her table again and show it to her.

I was just about to leave, when I felt a hand on my shoulder, squeezing me tightly. I turned around quite irritated and saw the Gestapo man from Limburg. He nearly gave me a heart attack. He was smiling. He was dressed differently, in brown trousers and a grey coat, dull as the people on the streets. He looked exactly like a famished mouse, if anyone decided to dress it after the local fashion. He nodded toward the statue.

'There are another three or four of these in the town, plus the statuary group dedicated to the brave Soviet soldiers who died for the liberation of Flanders,' he said, speaking in my native language this time. 'They drove out the Anglo-Americans after Stalin had occupied Berlin and moved on to the Atlantic. You are in Socialist Republic of Flanders,' he explained, pushing me slightly toward a bench in the park.

'I could have sworn you were from the Gestapo,' I said, trying to hide my utter perplexity.

He also spoke about the socialist state of Flanders as if it were a republic in the East. It felt as though I had got stoned on a Swedish ferry and I found myself in Klaipeda, Lithuania instead of Malmö.

How long had it been? About fifteen minutes since the episode in Limburg, when I saw him making the old Volkssturm people lower their rifles. Another time traveller, I thought.

He shrugged.

'If I am from the Gestapo or the Flemish KGB, then it's all very simple,' he said, motioning for me to sit on the bench. 'I'm playing a role,' he added with a quick smile.

He took out a pack of cigarettes and offered it to me. I declined. He lit a cigarette, looking across the alleys of the park, as if waiting for someone to come. The few cars running on the road were either teardrop-shaped Pobeda, boxy Moskvitch or Volga brands, all giving off clouds of smoke through their exhaust pipes. I had also seen them in Moscow. No Western brands, except for the old ones from the 1930's and 1940's. He turned his head to me.

'You brought socialism to the Flemish and all over Western Europe,' he said, blowing the smoke in the air. 'This is not how World War II should have ended, but nothing you know about modern history is true anymore.'

'Have I stepped on a butterfly?' I asked.

I was sure he knew about *A Sound of Thunder*. Ironically, Bradbury's volume of short stories appeared in 1962, yet the statue of Lenin stood proudly in the small park in Ostend, indifferent to our dilemmas. A crooked smile spread across the Gestapo man's face.

"No, you haven't. It wasn't a butterfly. You listened to music on the iPod in your pocket," he said. "You listened to Coldplay in 1919 New York. In 1929, you listened to Daft Punk and Future Sound of London. You listened to everything you liked, wherever you went. You have a very long playlist."

Instinctively I reached for my jeans pocket. It was bulging with the iPod, now that I was sitting down. 64 GB of music on an SD card. Everything I liked.

"I didn't whistle in the church," I said. "I kept my music to myself," I added, tapping my head lightly with my finger.

"The issue is not the "butterfly effect"," said the Gestapo man, confirming that he had read Bradbury's stories, "or that you showed Dajania Petkovic the album covers on your iPod. It's the sound print of what you listened to in those years. You know, there is a machine much more sophisticated than your MIT mind could imagine now or in a thousand years. It's working even now as we are talking, creating a temporal hiatus so that we can meet and have this conversation. Arctic Monkeys, Skyway, Pascal Dubois, Jazz Connection or Coldplay are not supposed to be part of the greater collection of sounds that make the year 1962, no matter how *low* you play them. Do you understand? Not even one sound! You were listening to Coldplay when I approached you. Now look at the consequences."

He pointed to Lenin, the Pobeda cars on the road, the almost empty shops windows across the street.

I ran my fingers over the turbo headphones around my neck. An interesting theory, to go to a DJ with a Moby album. The music would have sounded in the air three years before Moby was born, and Richard Melville Hall would have become a McDonald's employee in New York, asking his customers, "Would you like French fries, too?" Nevertheless, I had only played my music to myself, though at some point I had put the headphones on Dajana's ears too, so that she could listen to Rick Wakeman in the digital format. Big difference. She turned over the iPod and saw the Made in USA inscription. For a moment, she was stunned by the huge technological gap between her Sony walkman and my iPod, unaware they were items belonging to completely different times.

"Oh, my God!" she whispered, smiling happily. "You Americans rock. You revolutionise the way music sounds. You're far beyond the Japanese. But I've never heard of an iPod before. Where could I buy one?"

The walkman would be taken off the market in about 10 years. And you would find iPods on Best Buy in another 10 years. But that was something I couldn't tell her.

The Gestapo man crushed the cigarette butt under his sole. I wondered why that self-controlled and efficient man indulged that terrible vice. Maybe from questioning too many guys who begged for cigarettes. But he was right. The 1962 I knew had nothing to do with this alternative history. It seemed like fiction.

‘Just because I listened to music?’

He nodded approvingly.

‘The machine identified it as ... a temporal anomaly, a nonsynchronisation, and began to make adjustments starting with 1919. These adjustments, in turn, led to more errors, which started to accumulate.’

He stared straight ahead, as if through a thick haze, and then went on:

‘By the time you travelled to 1943, the whole story had become aberrant to an outside observer. Alternative history,’ he said, turning his head toward me with an accusing face. ‘You saw the P-80 in action. The Americans threw it in the war desperately, because the Germans had built the jet-powered bomber Arado 234, with which they wiped out Moscow and London. And they prepared *Amerika*, a stratospheric four-engine Messerschmitt jet with a pressurized cockpit, pilot-operated turrets, 22 mm automatic guns and long-range missiles, ready to bomb the United States,’ said the Gestapo man, not without a touch of admiration for the German military equipment.

I nodded, thinking that in the history I knew, Reichsmarschall Göring had come into conflict with General Udet, who was involved in the Luftwaffe’s development plans. Göring did not support the four-engine bombers, which is why Nazi Germany never manufactured them.

‘First, they would have bombed out New York in a night raid. The American technology eventually buried the Germans, but the Russians occupied Europe. That’s what you’re seeing now.’

I took off my hoodie and my sweaty T-shirt. I gave off an unpleasant smell. I threw the T-shirt in the bin near the bench after I had wiped off my armpits with it. I then put on my hoodie. The Gestapo man nodded.

‘There were guys who travelled to 1919 dressed perfectly for that year, so they wouldn’t draw attention to them, yet the machine rejected them. I don’t know why. While you, you show up at the New York Stock Exchange dressed like this and with those headphones on your ears’.

For a moment, I thought he wanted to punch me, but he just lit another cigarette, blowing the smoke upward. I nodded, ready to tell him I had no idea why all this had happened, but he motioned for me to rise from the bench.

‘You’re no longer supposed to go to the Central Station. Someone else will pick up the attaché case. You will go straight to the payphone on Rogierlaan – it’s called Roza Luxemburglaan now – and then back home to 2011. Now get out of here.’

I shrugged and left. On the way to the station, I realised I could kiss goodbye to 1980 and Dajana. She was about thirty years older than me and in 2011 she would be an old hag. For a moment, I thought of returning to Zagreb the way I was now, not having aged a single day. That would have been quite a chronoclasm. But I gave up the idea. Dajana didn’t deserve such a shock. I kept listening to Will Champion’s *Every Teardrop is a Waterfall: I turn the music up, I got my records on, I shut the world out until the lights come on...*

I had almost 64 Gb of music on my iPod SD card and over 2 Tb of music on an external hard drive. The first thing I noticed when I got back home was that Dajana had vanished from the wallpaper photo. Intrigued and terrified, I checked my playlist. Beatles, Yes, and some prog-rock bands I had never listened to before. My collection of classical music was also intact. But I no longer had my grunge albums, nothing I had listened to since 1919, so I turned on my laptop and connected to my Wi-Fi network. I found no trace of Coldplay, not even in Wikipedia, not a single mention of the other alternative bands, not even on torrents. Utter silence. No Arctic Monkeys, Bliss, Smashing Pumpkins, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Trobar de Morte or Nightwish, none of the bands that sounded “misplaced” in the 1920s or the later years I had travelled to. They were all gone. Maybe Richard Melville Hall really worked at a McDonald’s in Harlem, and Will Champion... I put my head in my hands. I tried to remember what Will Champion had sung. Something about a teardrop... I lifted my eyes and wondered why I had checked Wikipedia, since I didn’t trust that online encyclopaedia anyway. Will Champion sounded like one of those names that clung to your memory by accident. Maybe you had read about it in a book that you no longer remembered or had seen it in a film long ago. I was humming something, I don’t know what, words of an unknown song about the world you shut yourself from until the lights came on, something like that. I wasn’t much of a singer so I was relieved when the phone rang. A friend wanted to tell me what trick he had found on PlayStation to watch Netflix without paying. I hung up.

I threw my hoodie on the armchair in the corner and lay on the couch, still sweating. Then I went back to the laptop and searched for the “Socialist Republic of Flanders”. Google suggested all kinds of links about Flanders, about the Flemish language and other nonsense, but history had remained unchanged. I breathed a sigh of relief: Europe was no longer Bolshevik. To be honest, I should have realised it myself, since I had a Wi-Fi connection at home. The communist comrades would never have allowed such freedom of communication.

I thought of Dajana. I looked her up on Facebook. She had an official page. Yes, she was old and dignified. I stared at her photo for a while. She had an indulgent, polite smile. And she was the president of Croatia. The flag with the red-and-white checkerboard coat of arms in the centre was visible in the background.

Some time in her youth, an American student stood her up in Zagreb. Or so she thought.

Biography

Silviu Genescu (b. 13.09.1958), writer and translator. Member of “H.G. Wells” SF Society Timisoara since 1973, founding member of “Helion” SF Society Timisoara and member of the Romanian Society of Science-Fiction and Fantasy.

His first short story, *Transplant*, appeared in “Forum Studentesc” periodical in 1977. His short stories have been published in a number of fanzines (“Paradox”, “Helion”, “Almanahul Anticipația”, “CPSF”, “Jurnalul SF”) and anthologies such as *Avertisment pentru liniștea planetei* (Albatros, 1985), *La orizont această constelație* (Albatros, 1990), *Anatomia unei secunde* (Facla, 1990), *Timpul este umbra noastră* (Dacia, 1991); *Worlds and Beings. Romanian Contemporary Science-Fiction Stories* (Romanian Cultural Institute, 2015).

His volumes are *T de la sfârșit* (*D is for the End*, Marineasa, 1994) and *Rock Me Adolf Adolf* (Bastion, 2009). Silviu Genescu has won the Romanian National SF Award several times and has received the “Vladimir Colin” Award for the best short-story volume published between 2009 and 2012. His first translation into Romanian was *Alice’s World* by Sam Lundwall, published in “Almanahul Anticipația” in 1986.

His translation of Tony Chester’s novel *Best friend* appeared in several “Helion” issues. In the past years, he has translated numerous SF authors for a number of Romanian publishers such as Nemira, Leda and Trei.

ABOUT THE MAGAZINE

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