

CHAPTER ONE

Salvation and Other Disasters

By JOSIP NOVAKOVICH

Graywolf Press

■ [Read the Review](#)

Sheepskin

Since I can't tell this to anybody, I'm writing it, not just to sort it out for myself, but for someone nosy who'll rummage through my papers one day. In a way I want to be caught but I won't call this story a confession. I should pretend that it's somebody else's story, that it is fiction. I wish I could set it in a different country--outside Croatia and outside the former Yugoslavia--and that it was about somebody else, a former self, a formerly uninformed me. I don't mean that I want a complete break with my past--nothing as dramatic as suicide, although, of course, I've entertained thoughts of it, but the thoughts have not entertained me. I have survived knives and bombs: I should be able to survive thoughts and memories.

I'll start with a scene on a train in western Slavonia. Though it was hot, I closed the window. Not that I am superstitious against drafts as many of our people are. Dandelion seeds floated in, like dry snowflakes, and all sorts of pollens and other emissaries of the wild fields filled the air with smells of chamomile, menthol, and other teas. It would have been pleasant if I hadn't had a cold that made me sneeze and squint. The countryside seemed mostly abandoned.

I had never seen vegetation so free and jubilant. The war had loosened the earth, shaken the farmers off its back. Strewn mines kept them from venturing into the fields, but did not bother the flowers. The color intensity of grasses and beeches in the background gave me a dizziness I could not attribute to my cold. I saw a fox leap out of orange bushes of tea. Of course, it was not tea, but many of these wildflowers would be teas if broken by human hands and dried in the sun, mellifluous teas, curing asthma, improving memory, and filling you with tenderness. If we had stuck to drinking tea, maybe the war would have never happened.

I leaned against the wooden side of the train, but gave up, since the magnum I had strapped on my side pressed into my arm painfully. I would have probably fallen asleep, intoxicated with the fields and the musty oil, which doused the wood beneath the tracks. As a child I had loved the oily smell of rails; it had transformed for me the iron clanking of the gaps in the tracks into a transcontinental guitar with two hammered strings and thousands of sorrowful frets that fell into diminished distances. I'd have dozed off if every time I leaned against the vibrating wall of the train the gun hadn't pinched a nerve and shaken me awake. And just when I was beginning to slumber, the door screeched.

A gaunt man entered. I was startled, recognizing my old tormentor from the Vukovar hospital. He took off his hat and revealed unruly cowlicked hair, grayer than I remembered it. His thick eyebrows, which almost met above his nose, were black. I wondered whether he colored them.

The man did not look toward me, although he stiffened. I was sure he was aware of me. I had dreamed of this moment many times, imagining that if given the opportunity the first thing I'd do would be to jump at the man, grab his throat, and strangle him with the sheer power of rage. My heart leaped, but I didn't. I gazed at him from the corner of my eye. He looked a little thinner and taller than I remembered. I did not know his name, but in my mind I had always called him Milos. I ceased to believe we coexisted in the same world--imagined that he was in Serbia, off the map as far as I was concerned.

I looked out the window, and the sunlit fields glowed even more, with the dark undersides, shadows, enhancing the light in the foreground. The train was pulling into Djulevci. The Catholic church gaped open, its tower missing, its front wall and gate in rubble, the pews crushed, overturned, and the side wall had several big howitzer holes; only here and there pale mortar remained, reflecting the sun so violently that my eyes hurt. At the train station there was a pile of oak logs, probably a decade old, but still not rotten. And past the train station stood the Serb Orthodox church, pockmarked. It probably wouldn't be standing if there hadn't been guards around it, night and day. The Croatian government wanted to demonstrate to the world--although journalists never bothered to come to this village--how much better Croats were than Serbs, but that was a show. The Croat policemen sat on chairs, one wiggled a semi-automatic rifle, and the other tossed a crushed can of Coke over his shoulder.

There was a time when I would have thrown grenades into the church, owing to my traveling companion and other Serb soldiers who had surrounded and choked the city of Vukovar for months. Fearing that I would starve to death, I had minced my sheepskin jacket and made a soup out of it. The day before the soldiers invaded the city, I'd seen a cat struck in the neck with shrapnel. I picked her up and skinned her. I

overgrilled her because I was squeamish to eat a cat, and once I had eaten most of her, I grew feverish. I wasn't sure whether the cat had gotten some disease from rats--I would not have been surprised if I had caught the plague this way--or whether it was sheer guilt and disgust with myself, that I had eaten a cat, that made me ill. My body, unused to food, just could not take it; I was delirious in the hospital, but there was no doubt what I saw was not a dream: soldiers laughing, crashing wine bottles on the chairs, dragging old men in torn pajamas out of their hospital beds. A man with black eyebrows and a gray cowlick that shot out trembling strands of hair above his forehead came to my side and spat at me. He pulled the sheet off my bed and stabbed my thigh with a broken wine bottle. I coiled and shrieked, and he uncoiled me, pulling my arms, and another pulled my legs, while the third one pissed over my wound and said, "This is the best disinfectant around, absolutely the best. Na zdravlye!"

"There, pig, you'll thank me one day, you'll see," said Milos, and stabbed my leg again.

Other soldiers came and dragged a wailing old woman down the stairs.

"How about this guy?" one of the soldiers asked about me.

"No, he's bleeding too much," said Milos. "I don't want to get contaminated by his shitty blood."

A tall French journalist came in and took pictures of me, and muttered in English.

"What are you staring at?" I asked. "There are worse sights around."

"Yes, but they are not alive," he said. He carried me out, while my blood soaked his clothes. He pushed me into his jeep, and we drove out and passed several checkpoints without any inspection. He took me to the Vinkovci hospital, which was often bombed. Two nurses pulled glass from my leg, tied rubber above and below the wound, stitched me up, wrapped the wound--all without painkillers. I wished I could swoon from the pain. I ground my teeth so hard that a molar cracked.

Thanks a lot for the pleasure, I thought now and looked at my silent companion on the train. At Virovitica, we'd have to change trains. Mine was going to Zagreb, and I did not know whether he was going there, or east, to Osijek.

He got out of the compartment first, and I did not want to be obvious about following him. Many peasants with loud white chickens in their pleated baskets filled the corridor between us.

When I jumped off the train into the gravel, his head covered with a hat slid behind a wall. His shadow moved jerkily on the gray cement of the platform, but I could not see the shadow's owner. Milos must have been behind the corner. Maybe he was aware of being followed.

I thought he could be waiting for me in ambush. People walked and stepped on his shadow, but they could not trample it, because as they stepped on it, it climbed on them, and I was no longer sure whether it was Milos's shadow, or whether they were casting shadows over each other. Not that it mattered one way or another, but I suppose that's part of my professional photographer's distortion and disorientation that I look at light and shadow wherever I turn, and I frame what I see in rectangular snatches; I keep squaring the world, in my head, to some early and primitive cosmology of a flat earth, where nothing comes around.

I rushed past the corner. There was a kiosk stocked with cigarettes and many magazines featuring pictures of naked blondes. I stopped and pretended to be reading the train schedule posted at the station entrance so I could observe Milos's reflection on the glass over the departures schedule. He rolled the magazine he had bought into a flute, and entered a restaurant. I followed. There was an outdoor section under a tin roof, with large wooden tables and benches. A TV set was blaring out a sequence of Croatian President Tudjman kissing the flag at the Knin fort, after his forces captured Knin. The President lifted his clenched fist to the sky. What kind of kiss was it, from thin bloodless lips sinking through the concave mouth of a politician? I detest flags. Anyhow, I was not in a loving mood right then, toward anybody. In Vukovar we thought that Tudjman had abandoned us. Maybe he was partly responsible for my wantonly following a stranger down the stairs, to the lower level of the country dive. Milos sat below a window with fake crystal glass that refracted light into purple rays. I did not sit right away, but walked past him, following arrows to the bathroom across a yard with a fenced family of sheep with muddy feet, who eyed me calmly. I walked back and sat at a round table about two yards from his.

He ordered lamb and a carafe of red wine in a perfect Zagreb accent. In Vukovar I remembered him using long Serb vowels, ironically stretching them. Maybe he was now afraid to be taken for a Serb. I couldn't blame him for that. Still, a man who could dissemble so well was dangerous, I thought.

I ordered the same thing. When I pronounced my order, I used the same wording as Milos, in my eastern Slavonian leisurely way, which to many people outside my region sounded similar to Serbian.

Milos looked at me for the first time and, hearing my voice, gave a start. The waiter, slumping in his greasy black jacket with a napkin hanging out of his pocket,

eyed me contemptuously. His mouth was curled to one side, and one silver tooth gleamed over his shiny fat lower lip.

He brought one carafe to Milos and one to me along with empty glasses. Milos drank, I drank. He opened his magazine to the centerfold of a blonde with black pubic hair, and then he stared at me. What was the point? Did he pretend that he thought I was a homosexual stalking him and about to proposition him, so this was his way of telling me, No, I'm not interested? If he imagined he could confuse me this way so I would not be positive I had recognized him, he was dead wrong.

I had a postcard in my pocket; I pulled it out and began to write--I did not know to whom. To my ex-wife, who'd left me at the beginning of the war to visit her relatives in Belgrade? They had filled her head with nonsense about how Croats were going to kill her, and how even I might be a rabid Croat who would cut her throat. The nonsense actually served Miriana well; she got out right before the city was encircled by Serb troops and bombed. From what I hear she now lives with a widowed cardiologist whose Croatian wife died of a heart attack. Miriana used to visit Belgrade frequently even before the war; she had probably had an affair with the cardiologist. Her running away from the fighting may have been simply a pretext for leaving me. Anyway, I didn't have her address, so I couldn't write to her--no big loss.

I wrote to my dead father instead, although this made no sense either. He had died of stomach cancer last year in Osijek, perhaps because of the war. Without the anxiety he could have lived with the latent stomach cancer for years.

"Hi, my old man. I wish you were here. Not that there'd be much to see--in fact, Virovitica has to be one of the dreariest towns in Slavonia. But the wine is good...."

My meal arrived. I folded the postcard and put it in my pocket. The meat was lukewarm. Who knows when it was cooked--maybe days ago, and it stayed in the refrigerator. I grumbled as I cut.

Milos swore too, as he struggled. He asked for a sharper knife.

"This is awful! They charge so much and give you only the bone!" he said to me.

If he thought he could engage me in a conversation and thus appease me, he was wrong, although I did answer. "Yes, they figure only travelers would eat here anyway, and once they get our money and we're gone, they can laugh at us."

He gulped wine.

I navigated my blade through the stringy meat.

"Where are you from?" he asked me.

I called the waiter. "You forgot the salad."

"You haven't asked for it."

He was probably right, but I still said, "Yes, I did."

He soon brought me a plate of sliced tomatoes and onions, with oily vinegar. That helped subdue the heavy and rotten lamb taste. Funny how finicky I'd become in a hurry--not long before, I had chewed on a sheepskin jacket, certain that I'd starve to death, and now I behaved like a jaded gourmet.

Milos bent down to search through his luggage. Maybe he's going to draw a gun? I thought. I slid my hand into my jacket.

Milos took out three dolls, the Lion King hyenas. What, is this possible? My torturer is buying toys for kids? He put the magazine and the hyenas into his traveling bag. Maybe that was his way of saying, I am not a guy who'd stab anybody, I'm a kind, family man.

He looked toward me, and I felt self-conscious with my hand in my jacket. So it wouldn't look as though I was pulling a gun, I fumbled in the pocket and took out my pigskin wallet. The waiter eagerly came to my table. I gave him fifty kunas, certainly more than the meal was worth. "I need no change," I said.

"Excuse me, four and a half more kunas, please," asked the waiter. I gave him five coins.

"Preposterous, isn't it?" Milos said. "How can they charge that much for this? If I had known, I'd have controlled my appetite, could have bought another toy for my kids."

Was he appealing to me again? I had no sympathy for family men. My marriage failed perhaps because I had no kids. My business failed because the likes of Milos bombed my town, and here I sat as a twitching mass of resentment. I took another gulp of wine. I first used a toothpick and then whistled through my teeth to clean out bits of meat that got stuck there.

Milos looked at me with annoyance. He clearly didn't like my whistling. So what, I thought. If it bothers you, I'll do more of it. And who was he to complain? He slurped wine as though it were hot soup. And with his sharp knife, sharper than mine, he cut through more lamb, and I couldn't escape remembering again how he'd cut into my leg.

I scratched my swollen scar through the woolen fabric of my pants. It itched to the point of my wanting to tear it.

"Do you think there are fleas here?" I asked loudly, as if to excuse my scratching, but looked at nobody.

The waiter strutted and dumped tiny coins on my table ostentatiously, probably to make a statement that it was beneath him to take my tip. The rattle of the change scared two turquoise flies off my plate.

"Flies are all right," I said. Not much had changed since communism. I used to think that rudeness was a matter of fixed salaries, no incentive. But here, I was pretty sure the waiter was part-owner of this free enterprise establishment, and he was still rude, and did his best to disgust his customers. And, of course, customers hadn't changed either. They used to be rude, and I would continue to be rude. But before I could think of another insulting question, Milos asked one. "Hey, my friend, do you think I could buy a sheepskin jacket anywhere around here?"

This may have been a jab at me. But how could he have known I'd eaten a sheepskin jacket in Vukovar?

The waiter answered: "Maybe in a couple of hours. We are just getting some ready."

"Could I see them?" Milos was standing and picking up a thick cloth napkin that looked like a towel from his lap.

The waiter grabbed a large hair dryer from among plum brandy bottles on the shelf and waved to Milos to come along. Although I was not invited, I followed. They had identical bald spots on their heads.

Behind the sheep stall, in a shed filled with hay, on thick clothes wires hung two sheepskins, dripping blood into aluminum pots on the dusty dirt floor.

I wondered why the waiter collected the blood, why not simply let it soak the ground. Maybe he made blood sausages; maybe he drank it, like an ancient Mongolian horseman.

The waiter aimed the blow dryer at a sheepskin, filling it with air. Rounded like a sail full of wind, the skin gave me a spooky impression that an invisible sheep was beginning to inhabit it.

"This'll be a terrific jacket," the waiter said. "Give it an hour, if you can spare."

"But what about the pattern?" Milos said. "What about the buttons?"

"Fuck buttons. You can get those anyplace. But fine sheepskin like this, nowhere. Two hundred kunas, is that a deal?"

Milos stroked the sheepskin's tight yellowish curls.

"The winter's going to be a harsh one," said the waiter.

"Yes, but sheep won't save us from it," I said.

Milos quit stroking, and as he turned around, he stepped on the edge of a bowl, and blood spilled over his jeans and white socks and leather shoes.

"Seeing this is enough to make one become a vegetarian," I said to the waiter. I was nauseated.

"I'll be passing through town in two days again," said Milos. "Could I pick it up then?"

"No problem." The waiter walked back, Milos followed. The waiter pushed in a silvery CD, and Croatian pop came on, tambourines with electric organs that shook the speakers. The music was cranked beyond the point of clarity--blasted. No conversation was possible.

Milos walked into the backyard. I thought that his Serb soul wouldn't let him listen to Croat music. He gave me a look and winked. I wondered what he meant. The waiter smirked, perhaps thinking there was a gay connection established between Milos and me. Milos went into the toilet, an outhouse next to the sheep stall.

I went behind the outhouse. There was a hole in the gray wood through which I could see his back. I put the gun in the hole and shot through his spine. His body jolted forward and then fell back, right against the wall. I shot again. Blood flowed

through the spacing between dry planks. Because of the music, I was sure the waiter couldn't hear the shots.

I rushed away from the tavern yard through the rear gate. A train was whistling into the station. I jumped on the train even before it stopped. I wondered why I was running away. I should have been able to explain my deed--revenge against a war criminal. I went straight into the train toilet and shaved off my droopy mustache that made me look melancholy and forsaken. Now in the mirror I looked much younger, despite my receding hairline and the isolated widow's peak.

I thought I'd feel triumphant after my revenge. And I did feel proud as I looked at my cleared lip. Great, I am free from my sorrow, from the humiliation. I won.

But as I sat in the soft seat of the first-class coach and looked around holes burnt into the velvet seat by cigarette butts, my heart pounded and I could barely draw a breath. The smell of stale tobacco and spilled beer irritated me. I turned the ashtray over, cleaned it with a paper towel, and threw it out the window. The awful mutton seemed to be coming up to my throat. I was afraid.

If I was caught, and there was a trial, public sympathy would be with me. Many people want personal revenge. Forget institutional revenge, forget the International War Crimes Tribunal in Den Haag.

When I got off in Zagreb policemen in blue uniforms with German shepherds strolled on the platform but they did not stop me. They probably did not look for me. The war was going on in Krajina; one more civilian dead in the North made no difference.

Drunken people frolicked all over town, beeping their car horns, the way they did when their soccer clubs won. As I walked I expected a hand on my shoulder, from somewhere, perhaps the sky. It did not happen. But what happened was worse. At the tram stop, I saw a man exactly like Milos. I thought it was him. Were my bullets blanks? But where had the blood come from? How could Milos have made it to the train? When he saw me, I thought I noticed a fleeting recognition, the cowlick on his head shook, but that was too little reaction for what had happened in Virovitica. It was not Milos from the restaurant. This man was a little shorter and plumper. He looked genuinely like the man from Vukovar who had stabbed me, more than my Milos from Virovitica did. What if I had killed the wrong man? We rode in the same tram car. I forgot to buy my ticket, I was so stunned. He had his punched in the orange box near the entrance and stood, with one arm holding on to a pole. What to do? I wondered, as the tram jangled us around curves, and slim young ladies with tranquil made-up faces stood between us. I could not just kill the man, although this was probably the one that

I should have killed in the first place. He got off at Kvaternik Square. Now I could blame him not only for my injury but for the death of an innocent man, his double. But I could have been wrong, again. I couldn't trust my "recognitions" anymore. I hadn't felt particularly ecstatic after my first murder, not for long anyway, and I was not looking for ecstasy. So I did not follow this man. I was crazed enough that I could have killed him too, but I wanted to be alone. Enough stuffy trams, oily tracks, expressionless people.

I walked home, near the zoo, just south of the stadium. In the streets I saw another Milos look-alike. Was I hallucinating? It was getting dark, true, but I looked at this third Milos keenly. They all had the same gait, same graying and trembling cowlick, same heavy black brow. I was glad I hadn't killed the man on the tram. How many men would I have to shoot to get the right one? It was absurd, and I was afraid that I was going insane.

I watched TV in my messy efficiency. Crime, if this was crime, was no news. Only Serb mass exodus from Krajina and Croat mass exodus from Banja Luka and Vojvodina made the news along with Mitterand's prostate. I drank three bottles of warm red wine and still couldn't fall asleep.

Next morning, sleepless and hungover, on my way to buy a daily, I thought I saw a Milos look-alike, leaning against the window of an espresso cafe, staring vacantly, as though he were the corpse of my traveling companion from Virovitica.

In the papers I saw the picture of my man, "Murdered by an Unidentified Traveler": Mario Toplak, Latin teacher at the Zagreb Classical Gymnasium, survived by his wife, Tanya, son Kruno, and daughter Irena. Clearly, I got the wrong man. This one was Croatian, judging by his name. But then, even the man in the Vukovar hospital could have been a Croat. He could have been drafted. The fact that he did not kill me and did not drag me out onto a bus to be shot in a cornfield now gave me the idea that wounding me may have saved me. I could not walk, and since I gushed blood it would have been too disgusting for anybody to carry me onto the bus, so I was left alone. He may have been a Serb, and he saved me nevertheless. Why hadn't I thought of that possibility before? Maybe I should have sought out the man to thank him. But thirst for revenge makes you blind. Is this a real thought? I'm probably just paraphrasing "Love makes you blind." I'm filling in the dots in prefab thoughts. Can I think?

At Toplak's funeral there were almost a hundred people, so I felt I was inconspicuous in the chapel. His wife wept, and his son, about four, and daughter, about five, did not seem to understand what was going on. "Where is Daddy? I want my daddy!" shouted Kruno.

"He's going to visit the angels in heaven, so he could tell us what it's like there. He'll bring back some tiny clouds who can sing in foreign tongues, you'll see." The widow whispered loudly. Maybe she was proud of how well she was shielding her kids from the truth.

"How can Daddy fly to heaven from here?" asked Irena.

I could see why she worried about that. The chapel was small, stuffy with perfume--I detest perfume, as though breathing wasn't hard enough without it!--and too cramped for any Ascension to take place. Tanya looked pathetic, tragic, dignified with her dark auburn hair, pale skin, and vermilion lips. Her skirt was slightly above the knee; she had thin ankles, a shapely waist with round, sexily tilted hips. She was in her mid-thirties. After the funeral, I gave her a white carnation, which had fallen in front of me from a precariously laid bouquet during the prayer. (I wondered, could you make tea from carnations, at least for funerals?) "I knew your husband," I said. "I'm so sorry."

She took the flower mechanically and put it in her purse.

"Could I give you a call, to share memories of him with you?" I said.

"Not for a while. What would be the point anyway?" She gave me a look through her eyelashes, grasped her children's hands, and walked toward the chapel door. Kruno turned around, looked at the varnished casket, and asked, "How come the box has no wings? How will it fly?"

Toplak was in the phone book. I called her a month later but when she answered I put the receiver down. I was too excited, I couldn't talk. I feared that I wanted to confess to her. On several occasions I waited for hours not far from her house and followed her. Every Saturday morning she went to the neighborhood playground with her kids.

In the meanwhile, I had grown crazed and lucky in everything I did. I can't say that I was a shy man--I used to be, but photography, shoving my eyes into everybody's business and intimacy, freed me from that affliction. At the end of August 1995 I took on loans, sold a small house in Djakovo I had inherited from my father, rented a shop, and photographed a lot of weddings, funerals, births. I accosted couples in the park who seemed to be on the verge of getting married, got their phone numbers; I put up ads in all the funeral parlors, crashed funeral parties with my camera. I hired an assistant, made a lot of money. The country seemed to follow the same mood swings as I did. After Krajina was conquered, and all the transportation lines in Croatia were opened again, and there were no threats of bombing in Zagreb, everybody was on the make. Optimism, investment, spending--many people seemed to have money, while

months before hardly anybody did. If I had talked to Tanya a couple of days after the funeral, I would have had nothing to show for myself, but just two months later, when I approached her at the playground while her kids were jumping up and down the slides, I could boast. It was a superb day, with leaves turning color and fluttering in the slanted rays of the afternoon sun.

I came up to her bench, camera slung around my neck, and said, "Hello, you look beautiful. Would you mind if I took several pictures of you?"

"Oh come on, that's an old line. Thanks for the compliment, but I don't think so." She did not even look at me, but laughed.

"I'm serious. I don't mean nudes, though I'm sure they would be wonderful too, but just your face, your figure, dressed. Your expression, your mood, that's art."

Here, she was taken aback by my speech, and she looked up at me, raising one of her pencil-defined eyebrows. I was standing against the sun, casting a shadow over her left shoulder but letting the sun blaze into her eyes--her hazel irises glowed with emerald undertones, like moss in a forest in the fall. Her eye colors composed well with the turning leaves, as the soul of raving colors. I wasn't lying--I did want to take her picture, and it would have been terrific.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"Slightly. I came up to you at your husband's funeral and gave you a carnation."

"Oh yes. And even then you were about to offer something. What did you want to talk about then?"

"I was on the train with your husband that day," I said--actually, blurted out.

"Yes?" she said, and then looked over to the playground to see whether her kids were safe.

I waited and didn't say anything for several seconds. I did not want to give away any clues, but her husband was the only ostensible link I had with her--I wanted to use it, so she would not evade me and leave as a stranger. My desire for her was stronger than my impulse toward safety.

"We chatted briefly," I told her. "He told me how much he loved his family, you and the kids, particularly how crazy he was about you, how lucky to have such a beautiful wife. But that's not why I came to the funeral, to see how voluptuous you

are." She grinned as though she understood that I was lying and waited for me to go on. "He went off to the restaurant, he was hungry. I was surprised when I did not see him come back to the train station, but I figured the meal must have been great if he'd miss the train out of that God-forsaken station for it. I hope, for his sake, that it was."

"Really, he talked to you about how much he loved me? I wish he'd told me he loved me. Anyway, I don't believe that he said it."

"Maybe he was shy with you."

"And not with you?" she said. "Maybe you're right. He was a moody self-obsessed mathematician. Anyhow, he was a homosexual. We hadn't slept together in two years. I don't know why I'm telling you all this, maybe just to let you know that I have reasons not to believe you."

"You seem to resent him." I was amazed. I had thought Milos was defending himself from a possible gay stalker in the restaurant, but he was actually trying to pick me up. The waiter may have been partly right to smirk and think there was a lewd connection being established.

"I know, it's irrational, but in a way I blame him for leaving us like this. Now I have to work full-time, support the family, the kids are a mess, as though we didn't have enough problems."

"Did he serve in the army during the war? I've heard that in post-traumatic stress, many straight men go through a gay phase." I was bullshitting, just to appear natural, and also, to find out whether her husband was in Vukovar as a soldier, after all.

"That's interesting. Yes, he was in the army, in Zadar, and was wounded." She was studying me, and nibbling on a pencil eraser.

"What army?"

"Funny question."

"What work do you do?" I asked.

"Curious, aren't we? I teach English, mostly private lessons, and I teach at a school."

"Could I sign up for an intensive program?" I asked.

"That depends," she said.

"Don't you want to make money?"

"Sure, but there's something strange about you ... I didn't mean it to come out like that. What I mean is, I don't know you."

"Do you have to be intimate with people before you give them lessons?" I joked. It was not a good joke, but she laughed, perhaps because we were both tense.

She let me take pictures of her kids, I took several lessons, and paid well. She allowed me to take pictures of her, in her funeral dress, with the red lipstick. She could not be as pale as she'd been during the funeral, so we touched up her face with white powder to intensify the contrast with her hair. I don't know why I hadn't taken pictures at her funeral; it hadn't occurred to me then.

That was three weeks ago. I've taken her and the kids to the movies, to the zoo, and now that the first snow has fallen, I'll take them skiing. Tonight I paid for a baby-sitter and Tanya and I took a walk in the old town, past the lanterns, in narrow cobbled streets. A cold wind chapped my lips, and they hurt, until I kissed her in a dark corridor, a moist, tingling kiss. We trembled.

When I got home, I saw that I had vermilion lips. I had forgotten to wipe them. I am still filled with tenderness, and I'm drinking red wine. I'm looking forward to another date, tomorrow night, hoping to make love to her.

I don't know why I'm having success with her--perhaps too many men are in the army, many have been killed, and there's a shortage that may be working to my advantage. Maybe she's stringing me along, maybe she's suspecting me and investigating the case. I think my guilt gives me extraordinary confidence--I have nothing to lose. I am tempted to expose myself to her, and this temptation thrills me just as much as the erotic seduction does. I am dizzy from her images--and his--swarming in my head. I should go back to the western Slavonian fields, and gather wildflowers, bury myself in their scents and colors. Then I would not need to remember and rave on the page from a strange desire to be caught. I would live like a fox in a bush of red tea.

(C) 1998 Josip Novakovich All rights reserved. ISBN: 1-55597-271-3

