

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

DUŠAN DIM
RED MOONLIGHT

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Dušan Dim: Red Moonlight

Fragment One

Why didn't he tell me what was going on? A simple phone call would've sufficed. I could've helped him out, I could've come over, got him out of whatever it was. We would've thought of something. Anything.

Would I have really come over to help? Would I have?

Wouldn't I have brushed him off because I had some unpostponable meeting with a high priority client in the morning? Wouldn't I have just rejected the call, thinking we're too old for this shit? Or answered it to find a stranger intruding on my space, my world? Wouldn't I have ...

What was I doing that night anyway? Tuesday to Wednesday ... Team building. In the bar at the gym. A business night out. An excuse for finding someone who'll listen to you when you have nowhere to go.

Then it struck me, piercing me like an arrow. Someone did call that night. Several times. Caller ID blocked. I didn't take the call. I thought it was another case of some moron from our branch office in Vietnam who's never heard of time zones fooling around with the phone. I didn't answer, no, because I was busy rattling off advertising slogans to an intern in a see-through top. Team building.

Could that have been my friend Milan? Did he want to talk to me? Did he ...

I reached for my phone from the nightstand and browsed through the menus. Missed calls were deleted. All of them. Like always. Everything was always deleted, every last thing except for the messages about unpaid bills.

It was the middle of the night, and I was sitting up in my bed. The amber of the traffic light kept flashing, water drops kept pounding on the basin – and helplessness lay upon me like a wounded beast.

I was just a poor advertising man, not a chess player. My concentration worked in short bursts. My brain was capable of occasional storming, with ad slogans flashing all around. I wasn't capable of processing huge amounts of data, though, of marshaling it in the right sequence and then foreseeing with ice-cold reason twenty moves ahead, step by step. My thoughts came from nowhere and circulated out of control, their elements

mating to set up short-lived new balances, only to fall apart the next moment and start over again, over and over ...

It didn't work.

It had never worked. Even as a child, when the Rubik's cube was all the rage, I never managed to solve the puzzle without cheating. And when I finally stuck a pair of scissors in it to pull it apart, I could never put the pieces back together again.

I shook the bottle. Empty. Here I was, confused and tired in a town full of windows, walls, and shadows.

I had to get away. Somewhere safe.

The night desk clerk and I faced each other without words, without a greeting. I returned my keycard, crumpled up the bill, and throwing my bags on the backseat drove off into the night.

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Once on the ring road I let down my window. The cold air rushing into the car instantly revived me like a caffeine injection; but then my chest was gripped in the old vice again. My vision grew hazy.

Years had gone by in which Milan and I had hardly exchanged a few words, a few brief notes. Years of running away. Running away from contacts, friendship, truth. Running down the road of loss.

Now I was on the run again.

Running away from Milan, the past. Brod – the town where everybody knew everybody else and where every open door concealed another behind it, bolted and sealed. The town I had walked the length and width of thousands of times, and was now unable to recognize.

A lit-up sign indicated the last exit for Brod.

Ahead of me there was the highway. Ljubljana. Oblivion. Going back to my advertising job. Vying with the blonds from Hamburg and meeting my car payments, and my insurance payments, and my mortgage payments, and my ...

Ahead of me there lay daydreaming about the intern with a chocolate smile, to my right, the eyes of a long-lost girlfriend; eyes whispering from behind a veil incantations about some things never passing, about the secret still waiting deep down behind them for a diver to bring up to the surface; eyes that ...

Straight ahead Ljubljana, to the right, Brod.

Swerving, I left the ring road and returned to the streets by a back road. The town was sleeping; I found myself suddenly wide awake, like a dancer on simmering coals. On the roundabout I took the turn to the shopping mall, which resembled an illuminated island. I parked at the end of what felt like a mile of street lights.

Nearby a billboard featured teenagers in close-up, their faces fresh and radiating excitement as they were gearing up for bungee jumping. DARE – TAKE THE NEXT STEP! It was a campaign for a reduced-price cell phone package offer for students. I knew it. I had come up with it myself. It took me all of three minutes of scribbling in my notepad and a fortnight of meetings, market research, psychological profiling, and presentations, a fortnight in which we kept repeating the same old message over and over, on every slide and every bit of paper: DARE – TAKE THE NEXT STEP!

It was time I tested one of my messages myself: DARE – TAKE THE NEXT STEP!

I did as I was bid and stepped off into the brush, into dark countryside beyond the reach of the shopping mall lights.

The guard rail above the railroad track glinted dimly in the cloudy night. As I came close my heart was pounding. With exertion, excitement, fear. Placing my hands on the metal of the rail I slowly leaned over, as though my eyes would meet the sight of Milan's body down below.

There was nothing. The gaping black hole of a tunnel, with empty and quiet rails issuing from it, two lines curving off into the night on the far side of the long plain.

Where was he standing when he jumped? Here?

An owl hooted somewhere in the wood. A cold breeze picked up. Billowy clouds rearranged themselves, letting pale moonlight through. The rails stood out from the blackness like a pair of thin silvery reflections. And as if this change affected my awareness, another fact stood out clear in my mind's eye: The engine driver had not been able to avoid the accident. He couldn't see Milan because his train hadn't come over the plain; it hadn't been entering the tunnel, but coming out of it. That's what the paper said too. *In the direction of Ljubljana*. Milan dropped in front of it in a split second, *like a sack of cement*.

And that was the wrong direction! It was at odds with what I had learned from the pimply-faced boy in town!

A new fact now cut through the gigantic canvas of silence with the diamond-sharp blade of a honed knife. Undermining everything that had seemed self-evident before.

Someone else had been here with Milan. He didn't jump over the guard rail himself; somebody else had seen to that. In all likelihood the man with the gold bracelet seen by the boy that night.

No, my friend was not just dead. He had been murdered.

Fragment Two

In his immobility, the night clerk at the front desk resembled a mummy that had been left behind. I knew that his fish eyes could not see me and that we were standing on opposite sides of a galaxy, but I gave it a try all the same. I stood right in front of him and said: "Whiskey, please."

I was in for a surprise. His eyelids dropping, the mummy spun around and took his rheumatism off through the staff door.

He returned, carrying a bottle. "There you are, sir," he said. I still had my doubts about him actually seeing me.

"How much?"

He remained the master of his dignity. He mumbled the price without opening his mouth. It was the most expensive whiskey in town, but in view of the time of day and the effort, it was a special offer. I counted out the banknotes, placing them in front of him.

"Never mind the receipt," I said.

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I opened my eyes the next morning before the alarm went off. It was still dark outside, but I was as wide awake and alert as if I had just swallowed a bucketful of amphetamines.

I took a shower, washed my hair, got out my razor, shaved off every last whisker, and wrapped myself up in a big towel. Then I found a fresh pair of black socks and underwear in the closet and put on a fresh beige shirt with thin black stripes. The fine silk caressed my skin. Taking my trousers off the hanger, I unwrapped the tissue paper from the drycleaner's and put them on. They were spotless and creaseless. I fastened a smooth leather belt with a silver buckle.

Locating a trash bag, I did a round of my room, stuffing all the bottles, fruit peels, and newspaper pages in the bag. Tying it up with its string, I placed it in the corner of the bathroom.

I was the first and only person in the hotel dining room and the coffee in the pot was very hot. Filling my cup to the brim I watched the scarlet explosion of the sky in the east. I waited for the red orb to climb above the hill, drained the last sip of my coffee, and returned to my room.

I placed a tie around my neck, adjusting the two ends and slowly tying the knot. Then I extracted a packet of Band-Aids from a small black leather bag. I put one over the wound by the side of my nose. Others were no longer necessary. My skin was healing at an amazing rate, the bruises disappearing, their bluish hue fading. The coffee-crackers-and-alcohol therapy was working.

I put on my suit jacket and over it my black overcoat. A length of white thread lay snake-like on it. I didn't pick it off.

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The town square was a few blocks from the hotel. It had a fountain, two bronze statues, and enough empty space to emergency land a sports plane. It was closed off on three sides by low-rise buildings housing glass-fronted cafés, sweet shops, and cell phone stores. On the east there was the Tower of the Revolution: eight floors of lines of concrete and metal and glass at right angles.

The Tower was built in the mid-seventies as a pompous symbol of the inexorable socialist progress. At the time when I still believed in Grandfather Frost, uniformed guards circled the garishly yellow clumps of narcissi like birds of prey, while a giant clock with bayonet-shaped hands just below the top of the building reminded the entire town of the primary event, the beginning of everything. The resistance, the revolution. The courthouse, the workers' unions, the Veterans' Association, the Communist Party, they were all in here, safeguarding socialism from enemies without and within and paving the way for the new society.

But we grew up, and the old stories grew tired. First the guards disappeared, overnight; then the clock stopped. Early one winter morning, before factory workers started their machines, one of the bayonets broke off the clock. Plummeting, it ended up stuck in a clump of narcissi.

The revolution was over.

The clock had now been fixed. The little hand, reading *DREAM*, was still flat in the horizontal, the big one, though, reading *REPUBLIC*, had already moved from the vertical. It was a few minutes past nine as I briskly approached the Tower. Gusts of a cold wind flapped my coat; above me, blinds rattled. Just before the entrance the buzz fell silent. The door parted, another gust of cold wind swept over me, then the door closed behind me.

I waited in the marble lobby. Soundlessly, like sunflowers in a field, security cameras revolved above me, a potted plant rested in a corner, light crept into dark recesses. For a moment I felt like a statuette in a mausoleum.

Then a thin bleep cut through the lull.

A woman in a black-and-white skirt suit and white patent leather pumps with black bows looked out of the elevator. Placing the toe of her shoe over the gap above the elevator shaft, she barely noticeably inclined her body to interrupt the photocell beam.

“Come in,” she said.

I had counted on a secretary; I got the queen.

She pressed a button and the elevator hoisted us upwards.

Giving my hand a short, firm shake, she said, “Jenny Williams.”

Her gold earrings were large and immobile. Her neck muscles testified to the time she spent in the gym. But the skin under the gold necklace was crepey, and all the treatments with hairsprays and conditioners could not hide the lackluster quality of her hair; in the neon light, Jenny Williams looked like a plastic doll.

Her eyes were focused directly below mine. “Boxing,” I said.

She did not withdraw her eyes, she did not don another mask. “Fighters are welcome,” she said. “But forget about boxing in the coming week. There will be plenty of other challenges for a fighter.”

We got out in front of a huge video wall with motivational slogans sliding from one edge to the other.

BANISH AVERSION TO CHANGE
BLAST AWAY EXPENSES
BE BOLD BEYOND EXPECTATIONS
BECOME NUMBER ONE

“The four Bs,” said Jenny Williams. “The model everyone who joins us must accept.”

Two secretaries sat behind a low colored-glass mosaic wall. Both had pale pink rouge on their cheekbones, silk scarves, red low-cut tops, and short black skirts. Both wore red shoes with black straps winding up their ankles. And both smiled demurely at the sight of us.

“Karmen and Dalma,” said Jenny Williams.

“Congratulations,” I said.

Jenny Williams was in no mood for chitchat. Slightly extending her arm, she steered me into the conference room where some corporate types were already seated around a round table.

“Ivo Černigoj, the representative of Stock & Butler Slovenia,” said Jenny Williams

I greeted everyone and sat down, depositing my bag with my laptop on the polished surface.

I felt eyes dancing over my face.

“Boxing,” I said.

The corporate men exchanged glances. Then the one in a striped suit nodded and everyone followed suit. “I’m the human resources manager,” he said. “We organize jiu-jitsu for our employees. But boxing sounds interesting too. Undoubtedly it boosts one’s confidence.”

I smiled. “As well as broadens one’s perspective on existence.”

“Perhaps we can exchange our views on that later.”

Then followed handshakes. Inbuilt smiles. Guesswork. Business cards flying all around.

Fragment Three

It was too late now to go back into the closed partitions of the information system. It sufficed to accidentally click on the wrong icon for the message to appear: Access denied. The system administrator has been notified of your attempt.

Lorber and I sat in the office, staring at our monitors, our mouses clicking. I heard his every intake of breath, his every exhalation. After about an hour I got up and headed for the door without hesitation or a word of greeting, getting out my keycard. I turned suddenly as though I had forgotten something. Erik Lorber's eyes did not manage to drop in time. They had been following me.

I got myself an espresso from the coffee machine and returned to the office. I again stared at the screen, not seeing the letters and figures on it.

I wanted to speak to Gorki. I wanted to ferret out where the clues I'd found the day before led. I wanted to go on investigating. I needed to think in peace. The clicking and the breathing by my side were killing me. And the rustling. Erik Lorber had just extracted a packet of gum from his pocket.

"Want one?" he asked.

I shook my head, and after moving about some elements in a presentation slide for a while, went to the bathroom.

As soon as I locked the cubicle door and sat down on the toilet lid, I heard footsteps. Somebody walked up to the sink and turned on the tap. I leaned to see under the door and there were Erik Lorber's black shoes. Shining immaculately.

I was being monitored. Physically and virtually.

I sat on the toilet, staring at the even pattern of the tiles, and tried to sort things out in my mind. Was this just tightened security before the big event? Were all the people brought in from outside followed about in this manner? Or was I the only target, and these already the consequences of yesterday's interrogation? Was it an unfulfilled dream of the security staff and guys in turtlenecks? Were they the source of this monitoring? Possibly; but for that, they would need authorization from the very top.

They were afraid of something in the Tower all right, or they wouldn't have reacted like this. Did I know something I shouldn't?

I went over yesterday's events again. I hadn't unearthed anything that could be a danger to anyone. Everybody knew politics was closely linked with major business projects, it was called lobbying; everybody knew land was bought cheap and sold dearly, it was called business acumen; everybody knew money overrode regulations, rulings, and permits, all that was common knowledge. I couldn't have put together a TV news item from the information I had gleaned; it would've only sufficed for a tiny sting on the inside pages of some local paper with low circulation.

The lines of grout between the tiles crossed horizontally and vertically. A giant grid, a network. A confusion.

Where in this network did the upper dam lake, the Accumulation fit in? And which point was Erik Lorber, who was done washing his hands by now but had failed to close the bathroom door, so that I could hear him fiddling with the coffee dispenser.

Accumulation was important. But in what way?

Under my gaze the tiles had transformed into a totally abstract pattern. A dense grid of squares, all equally important or unimportant.

I flushed the toilet, rinsed my hands and practically bumped into Erik Lorber in the corridor.

"You're here?" he said. "We could take a look at the presentation when you have time."

"Okay," I said.

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At one o'clock I put on my coat. "I'll just grab some lunch," I said.

"Wait," said Erik Lorber. "I'll come with you."

Upon leaving the building my card didn't work. The doorman shook his head. "Just a moment," he said and came out of his booth.

He asked me if I had anything that belonged to the corporation on me.

"The cell phone and the card. Quite possibly some other stuff as well, but I can't recall

right now. As far as I know, everything I use to work on the project belongs to the corporation for the duration of the contract."

Jotting it down in his notebook he nodded.

"New security regulations as of this morning," he said by way of apology. "You can leave now."

Fragment Four

I climbed over the embankment to my car, turned it around and drove down into the valley. Weariness washed over me, my eyelids shut of their own accord. They lifted as the car hit a speed bump, then dropped again. Until the next bump. My consciousness was closing down, dissolving into darkness.

Then a flash of light shot through the pitch black. Blinded for a moment, I ducked my head. The light kept flashing, again and again, at irregular intervals.

It was two a.m., and the car behind me was leaping over the speed bumps like an enraged bear. Someone in this town couldn't sleep. On a deserted intersection I saw who it was being carried around by hundreds of horsepower hidden under the hood of a silver SUV with tinted windows. Berginc.

I let him overtake me and fell behind at a distance. Zooming down the ring road, he passed a lonesome truck and swerved almost right in front of it, to take the ramp toward the lake. We were the only ones on the road. As the road turned I lost sight of his headlights, but on the straight stretches the SUV reappeared before me.

I wasn't going to make the same mistake again this time. Wherever he was going, I was going. I accelerated. Berginc was mine, I wasn't going to let anyone else have him. I took a bend in the road at high speed and when I saw him it was already too late. The silver SUV

was pulling up on the sandy shoulder, and I had already shot by.

Slowing down, I glued my eyes to the rearview mirror and waited to become obscured by trees. Stopping by the side of the road, I jumped out, crossed a footbridge and waded into tall grasses. I stopped not far from the silver SUV. Berginc was no longer in it.

I walked as far as the lake and started looking around. For a moment I thought I could discern movement in the dark. I paused, listening. Just a cat hunting mice. Its eyes glinted.

By the lake, I found a track leading back to town. I followed it until a wire mesh fence stopped me. Threading my fingers in it, I listened. Everything was still.

Where could he have gotten to in this jungle? What could he be doing here at this hour?

A wind was blowing from the faraway woods. It blew over the lake, making the grasses rustle and my nose stuck in the wire mesh hurt. The coincidence became tangible. The coincidence of the air, the water, the clouds. Of me and this place. The coincidence of the situation I'd found myself in.

Turning, I started on my way back toward Berginc's vehicle. I was wading through the grasses in the cold wind when I came upon a strip of black soil sprinkled with gleaming white gravel. It was a track leading uphill, and I had stumbled upon it. I trudged uphill, stomping on roots, on molehills. The track was increasingly steep, the gravel sharper. I was cold, and the dust of coincidence disintegrated. The track under my feet was an old one, its origins

unfathomably distant, far back before everything. I trudged and crawled, and the quiet nocturnal whisper transformed into a booming. It grew stronger, more and more intense.

At the top of the rise I saw it. The dam gate between the two lakes. On the upper side, in

the Accumulation, the water was still, reposing like a relaxed animal asleep. It ruptured at the gate, crashing down the concrete precipice into the depths, exploding into Lake Brod. Below, it transformed into froth, white, completely white, like snow.

I had come full circle, returning to the beginning. This was the edge. Here the past touched the present. The present view brought back a memory, reviving a view of a boy who once walked the brink of adulthood ...

... The wind is hot, full of maybugs. I'm sitting on a bench and trains thunder past above me. I'm not alone. She's with me. There were days, weeks, months when I stared at her window day and night. Now she's here, with me. Her white canvas sneakers are resting on the cracked asphalt, the wind is billowing her plaid shirt. Trains thunder past us. The bugs flee.

She is Tanja and I'm telling her about Dražen, the guy who came down among us from planet X. I'm telling her about the changes that are coming. Every pass, every movement, every motion of the basketball players in blue is witness to that. I'm telling her about the break, about the new world, about black American players still breaking baskets and having no idea what they're in for.

And then she says: "What's a bonus?"

"What?"

"What's a bonus?"

"There are so many matches ahead of us, you'll see it all, you'll understand everything."

"I want to know now."

"A bonus? That's ... That's important for strategy. A team can commit eight fouls. When that number of fouls has been reached, the opposing team is in the bonus, and for each foul against it after that, it gets to shoot free throws. Intelligent teams keep the bonus –"

"I don't understand," she says. "But the bonus begins now."

And she plants a kiss on my lips. It slides off my skin into my blue veins. Into my red blood. Bugs whirr around us. They're golden, they're a gift. Who sent them?

I don't sleep that night. I lie in my bed listening to the clattering of wheels on tracks. Train after train after train leaving the station. The windowpanes shake, the air is shredded.

I doze off toward morning, but wake up before my folks.

Small, dried-out bodies of maybugs are lying by the side of the road. Undoing the latch, I open the shack. I break the agreement. I open the box, take the money. The money from the business Milan and I are involved in.

A bundle of deutschemarks is stuffed in the pocket of my green fatigue jacket. I'm

standing outside the hotel. The Yugoslavian basketball team has finished their preparations in Brod. Now they're leaving for the European Championship. Dressed in their blue sweat suits, they bring their bags, place them in the trunk. I stand there, watching. Fighting off maybugs. Then Milan comes. He doesn't ask anything, he just stands next to me and together we watch the basketball players getting on the bus.

"Is there any chance for us?" he says suddenly. "Finally we have a real team, finally we're ready. And we're the only two cutting school for this. What's with this country, what's with these folks?"

The bus makes a turn in front of the hotel, and we see them behind tinted windows. Kukoč, Radović, and Dražen, they're all there. They wave.

"Go blues, go blues," a small group near the bus starts. Some tell one another they're going to lose anyway. Some wonder what kind of a national team this is anyway, who is it that it's representing. Some wave. "For the last time, the last time!" cries out crazy Varga.

Then I hear a bellow from deep down. "Fuck 'eeeeem! Fuck 'em aaaaall!"

It's Milan.

I look at him, at the basketball players on the bus.

"Champiioooooons!" I yell too. "Fuck 'eeeeem! Fuck 'em aaaaall!"

People stare at us. Some shrug, other laugh. Some start cheering, "Champions, champions

..."

The bus slips onto the road leaving town, The calls die out. Whirrrr ... Maybugs descend from trees, plopping down on us.

"Coming to school?" says Milan.

I look at him. I can feel the money in my jacket. I don't tell him because ... I don't tell him.

"Not today," I say.

At the railroad station the clerk gives me two Interrail passes. Two tickets for traveling to the other side. With the tickets in my pocket I head for the old willow tree in the park across from our school. I wait for Tanja to tell her. Maybugs keep dropping on me, like hazelnuts.

Two policemen appear in the doorway. They have Milan between them. They take him to the squad car, open the back door. He gets in. He hasn't been crying. There are eyes behind every curtain, every windowpane. Watching.

There follow one day and one night of panic, of hiding, and of cleaning up. Of not

sleeping. It's my turn the following morning. They question me, lean on me, drag words from me. They sweat, I sweat. They seize all our pot, but they don't find the money. Because it's gone.

The dusk is falling by the time we get out. A hot day is coming to an end. We're standing outside the police station and Milan says: "You stole our money. But why did you turn us in?" I look at him, not seeing him. My gaze is murky, my vision is obscured. I turn away.

"Come up to the Accumulation with me if you dare," I say. "I'll tell you."

But I don't tell him. I don't tell him until we're riding my battered moped back to town, he's bleeding behind my back and I say: "I took the money. I bought train tickets with it. But I didn't rat on us. I didn't."

"I know. This hurts like h— Fuck. I swallowed a maybug."

The surrender has been signed. We can no longer retract it. It has been sealed by the night, by the blood spilled. Forever ...

Street cleaners sweep up the maybugs. Call-up papers appear in mailboxes. I'm rejected by the recruitment board, Milan goes off to serve his stint in the Yugoslav People's Army. And when he returns a year later, we have two decades left, two decades in which we exchange some ten words.

I had now come full circle. I was back to where it had all ended. Here – at the Accumulation – where we had touched the last edge of our spring, without knowing it. On

that night in May the period in which everything seemed possible came to an end. We never got any further.

The water kept flowing inexorably, crashing at the bottom of the gate. Thundering like it did that time. Like it always had. And always will. Water.

Water over which a thin shaft of light flitted. I flinched. The beam of light now flickered on the water surface. I followed it with my eyes to its source, to the gate. There, I saw Berginc.

He walked the whole length of the gate several times, bank to bank. Then he hoisted himself on the metal ladder and started climbing. I saw him again when he was at the top. His hooked nose was outlined against the dark for a second. It looked as though he were sniffing for something here, on the roof of the town. He swayed on the rail for a few minutes, forward and backward, with white foam glistening down below him in the night.

Then he climbed back down. Kneeling, he flashed his light down a concrete shaft. He extracted a tiny notebook from his pocket.

The water thundered, clouds traveled, and Berginc measured, calculated, and took notes.