

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

TADEJ GOLOB
ALI BOMA YE

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Tadej Golob: Ali Boma Ye

Chapter 9

Friday, 7.12 p.m.

Primož was late and the changing room was already locked because of the junkies who gathered around the nearby medical centre. He opened the door with his own key and relocked it behind him. The benches and hangers were almost full. It was Friday after all, the day for both recreational and competitive boxers. He made some space on a bench and found an empty hanger. He changed, picked up the bandages, gloves and, out of habit, his gum shield, his water bottle of isotonic drink and opened the door into the gym.

The recreational lot were in the middle of the gym, working with Silvo, who had stopped competing the year before. He had also gone as far as he could and was the only one in the club who could say he had boxed with world champion Dejan Zavec.

“I boxed for a year,” he sometimes says when they ask him, “and I boxed with Zavec. Anyway, it was soon over, but at least I had the courage. All the others suddenly pissed off.”

“Up, down, up, down...” he shouts, waving his outstretched arms, palms downwards, and jumping slightly forwards and backwards, roughly in rhythm with the music coming from the radio in the corner. There are about ten of them, mainly older, perhaps two who are young enough to hope for a boxing career.

There are also some young women, there to lose weight and to get a pert arse, for which boxing is great. Sometimes there is a student or two from the theatre academy and Andrej shows them the punches, movements, the defence that they need in a performance. Usually they arrive quite scared, with big eyes and big gloves, and once one of them that Andrej brought for a drink said:

“I was surprised, I must admit. I thought that you...”

“What?” asked Primož.

“Well, you know... the stereotypes about sportsmen, especially martial arts...”

“Illiterate morons?”

“Yes.”

“No, that’s football players,” said Tine.

“And I’m the greatest Slovene writer,” said Primož.

She smiled politely once more.

“Aha...”

Once he and Katarina signed up for a yoga course, partly for her sake, partly for his bad back. During the third class he found himself faced by two angry older women.

“This is where I lie,” said the first one, using her foot to shift the mat that he had placed in the first row in the practice room.

“What do you mean?” he asked, since there was nothing to indicate this and nothing had been said.

“This is our space,” said the other dragon, while the first still nudged at his mat with her foot, pushing it backwards. “We always lie here!”

“Let them be!”

Katarina took him by the hand and they went into the second row, where with every turn he knocked the old guy next to time with his hand or foot, causing him to breathe out angrily.

“Did you see their faces?” he asked Katarina as they walked home, only about ten minutes away. “If you put them next to Mike Tyson they would make him look quite friendly.”

On the other side of the basketball court is a boxing ring. One of the rare gyms in Ljubljana with holes drilled in the parquet specially. If it wasn't for Andrej there wouldn't be. He is beside the ring, watching two thin guys boxing, wearing helmets and soft gloves. Next to the ring two others are doing sit-ups, two are skipping with a rope and two are hitting a punch bag.

“Time!” shouts Andrej and they all stop, sweating. A minute's break.

Primož sits on the bench and starts to wind the bandages round his wrists and hands. Out of the corner of his eye he sees that Andrej has noticed him and that next to him is Tine, wearing a knee support and evidently training again. Tine puts his gloves on and steps into the ring. He waves and Primož nods. He gets up, shakes his arms and legs, and trots round the gym, slowly, warming up, behind the recreational lot who are kicking their legs towards their outstretched arms. He has the feeling that his legs would fall off if he started to sprint, his mouth is dry however much he drinks. His nose hurts least of all.

“Stop!” shouts Silvo and the recreational group halt in surprise. “A round of applause for our national champion.”

They look at him in confusion and he points to Primož, who is just trotting past the ring and Andrej for the first time. “Don’t you have televisions at home? That’s him, the Slovene Rocky Balboa.”

Silvo claps and his group join in, but there is almost no sound because they all have bound hands. Primož smiles and waves his left hand, boxer fashion, from the elbow. He is both embarrassed and pleased. His twenty-five seconds of fame. He runs past Silvo and gives him a high five.

“Cheers, man” says Silvo, “you killed him!”

Then he turns back to his group.

“Now you lot come on, come on, army exercises,” and he gets them doing star jumps. “If you don’t move your arses I’ll put you in the ring with him later, only don’t start crying then.”

It seems fine to Primož what Silvo has done. He runs and wonders whether the stale taste that has been in his mouth since morning will disappear if he exercises it away.

First lap, second lap, third... tenth. He stops near the ring where Andrej, who is leaning on the ropes, stopwatch in hand, is watching two boxers. One of them is Tine. Primož swivels his head. Left to right, then the other way, then up and down...

“Time!” calls Andrej, but Tine continues to punch the other guy, whose face Primož can’t see.

“Time!” yells Andrej once again, but Tine acts as if it’s nothing to do with him and gets in two more punches and Erik – Primož can now see that it is Erik – turns and shows Tine his back.

“Idiot,” he says to Tine, removing his glove. With his freed hand he feels his jaw and repeats what he said and adds: “Box on your own, you fool.”

Andrej slaps Tine on the shoulder. Primož rotates his hands at the wrist, first inwards and then outwards, jumping rhythmically as he does so.

“So,” says Andrej, “how’s our almost champion?”

“Almost champion-like,” says Primož, standing with his feet apart and circling the upper part of his body so that his palms touch the floor. He hates this exercise.

“You survived?”

“Don’t ask. Avgust dragged us round some casinos. I didn’t know there were so many in Ljubljana. I was on sick leave today and that one...” he pointed at Tine, “...was sleeping until now.”

“Alright for some. I wasn’t so fortunate.”

“I thought you wouldn’t be in today,” says Andrej.

“I thought the same.”

Primož is warming up. The first beads of sweat appear on his forehead. He wipes them off with his t-shirt and goes over to the bench, picks up his gloves and turns to a free punch bag. He circles it, striking an imaginary point on it with light direct blows. He still has sawdust in his mouth and it seems to him that the wet patch descending from the neck of his t-shirt stinks of cigarettes. Then he remembers Miss Tarantini.

Sometimes he thought of the neighbour who once slashed his car tyres. To this day he still doesn't know why. Sometimes of the unknown member of the scholarship committee, sometimes of the 'certain talent' and 'authors with excellent references' in their report, sometimes of newspaper headlines, slick yuppies, rich businessmen, inconsiderate fools... Sometimes he simply thought about boxing. But this time he thought about Tarantini.

A strong blow with the right.

Her compressed thin lips.

Biff, biff, biff. A combination, a left, a straight left, a right. Fast and on target.

On her crooked teeth behind thin lips that she opened just enough to hiss.

"Do you like beating people?"

Yes, I do...

And bam, bam, bam against the bag.

I rea-lly en-joy it...

Bam, bam, bam ...

Tarantini hisses, a punch, a crack, the crunching of bones giving way, limpness, dead limpness sliding beneath the table. Up jumps the ethnic-poet-writer, a punch, a screaming lesbian... Raining down on them, fleeing around the studio, but they have nowhere to run because wherever they go in this small round kennel he is there and he bludgeons them! You've fucked with the wrong guy! A sound guy comes running up behind him... critics, committee members and stupid readers, all the old hippies and he beats them, jumps on and flattens them. You've picked on the wrong guy! Old women who faint at the words "cunt" or "prick" (with the distorted faces of those two from the yoga class), a punch, bam, naïve young religious types, cross punches, fools who seek something more in literature, dimwits, biff, upper cut, upper cut, upper cut, left, right, left, left, left... Picked on a tiger, a Siberian tiger... There's nothing else, you don't understand, idiots, there's nothing other than shitty letters and punctuation marks, commas and three dots and exclamation marks and sentences, get used to it or score some LSD, for fuck's sake!

Primož bashes the punch bag as if he's gone crazy. And every time he would like to drop his arms from tiredness he remembers that stupid cow and her do you like beating people... do you like beating people... do you like beating people...

Slut, slut, slut!

When he eventually stops he is dripping wet. The wet patch on his t-shirt has combined with the one on his shorts and on the floor in front of the punch bag is a small puddle. He pushes away from the bag and turns towards the ring. Andrej is watching him.

“Shame you’ve never been like that before,” he says when Primož looks at him. Primož smiles in confusion, as if caught doing something forbidden. Tine is leaning against the ropes next to him. He is tapping his chest with his hands.

“Hey man, will you go in the ring with me?” he asks.

“No, thanks,” says Primož.

“I told you he wouldn’t,” says Andrej.

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t be bothered,” says Primož.

“What are you scared of?” asks Tine caustically. “You’re almost a champion. How hard is it for such a champion to get in the ring with some poor failure?”

“Because I don’t have to. Because I’m hung over.”

“Time!” calls Andrej and with relief Primož turns his attention to the punch bag and Tarantini. When two minutes later he hugs the dancing leather in front of him, out of breath, Tine is beside him.

“Sorry, but this doesn’t seem fair to me.”

“What doesn’t seem fair?”

“That you won’t get in the ring with me.”

“Am I obliged to?” asks Primož. Tine stands close, looking at him. Too close. “I had a fight yesterday, I’ve got beer coming out of every orifice... Give me a break.”

He says this louder than he intended and Silvo’s group, which is now resting, turns towards him.

“Any time,” says Tine, his lips moving in an unpleasantly similar way to Tarantini’s “I’ll slaughter you, you know it and that’s why you don’t want to box.”

There is suddenly an eerie silence in the gym. They are all staring towards them, apart from a solitary skipper right on the other side, who also stops when he becomes aware of the silence around him.

“I’m not so sure,” says Primož untruthfully.

“You do. Even before my injury I could never get you between the ropes.”

“Bla, bla, bla...” says Primož. “Get in touch when you’re national champion.”

“You’re not even champion!” shouts Tine and pushes his wrapped hand against Primož’s forehead.

Primož strikes, but Tine easily fends off the blow and throws his fist towards Primož. He stops just in front of his nose.

“Knockout,” he says. “Round one.”

There is silence in the gym. Primož feels eyes watching him. He feels old, tired and fat.

“Christ, I can’t be arsed,” he says, slowly pushing Tine’s hand away and turning towards the ring.

Friday, 7.55 p.m.

Primož spreads the ropes and gets into the ring, an improvised ring on the parquet of a school gymnasium. Once they timed how long it took them to stretch the ropes, fasten them to the posts and insert them in the holes in the floor. How long was it? With his teeth he unfastens his right glove, to take it off and put on the softer ones for training, to put on a helmet, but he outside the roped off square he sees Tine wearing ordinary gloves, no helmet, waiting to start, as if afraid that Primož will change his mind. Around the ring the competitive boxers gather, then when Silvo joins them his group as well. Andrej stands behind Primož.

“Here, helmet,” he says, holding it out.

“Did you really not know that it wasn’t me who went down in Ptuj, but Kirn?”

“That’s the picture I have in my head, you on the floor, not Kirn.”

“Why is that?”

“Why, why... I don’t know. Why difference does it make?”

“All the difference in the world,” says Primož. “That’s the thing.”

“Since when?”

“Since yesterday.”

“Eh?”

Primož puts in his gum shield.

“Okay, so it wasn’t you,” says Andrej, still offering him the helmet.

Primož shakes his head.

“Three times two minutes and a minute’s break,” says Andrej looking first at one, then the other. Tine nods, Primož doesn’t. He shakes his head and through his gum shield half articulates:

“Three times thff ... thfee minutes.”

Andrej looks at Tine, who just waves his hand.

“Right,” says Andrej, taking hold of the stopwatch that he has on a rope round his neck, “the fight of the century is about to start. Ali, puma je, or whatever it is ... five, four, three, two, one – time!”

The two fighters go slowly towards the centre of the ring. Around it everyone in the gym are gathered. Tine raises his hand to greet them by striking his glove.

Insert no. 1

Primož was born in a hospital where his mother, a primary school head teacher, had been for months before the birth because she was an at risk pregnancy. And when he was born, a month prematurely, he had a head of completely red hair. Supposedly his father, who was some kind of bureaucrat at the municipality, something to do with water, had said to the midwife:

“Have you rubbed his head with something or what?”

In primary school they called him Carrot, because his hair had faded somewhat to orange, particularly because his mother was head teacher. Today he would have been able to appear in a Benetton ad, in those days he was not so lucky. Today, although his hair still has a red tinge it is mainly brown, but people still pick on it. More than on others, and that got on his nerves. He could forget about Carrot, if they left him alone... but no. There was always someone. There was always one who expected Primož to dance to his tune. That he would sing when they kicked him in the balls.

We won’t go into this too much, but it went something like this: *...the night I was born, Lord I swear the moon turned a fire red...*

And it’s quite possible that it was thundering and lightning then, but I would have to check.

Insert no. 2

What does Primož know about Tine? He is over twenty and studies mathematics. His father is a well-known surgeon at the teaching hospital, something to do with the abdomen, his mother (they are divorced) a cosmetic surgeon. (On her website she offers operations to the labia, with before and after photographs.) Tine lives with her. He has been boxing since the age of sixteen

and when he reached eighteen he invited Andrej, Avgust and Primož for a drink and since then they have hung out together, in spite of the fact that Avgust could be his grandfather, Andrej his father, Primož too.

“I have always wanted to box with you,” he said to Primož during his birthday celebration when he had already had a few drinks.

“And you were disappointed?” asked Primož.

Tine was a good looking guy. As tall as Primož, but a little lighter, and with longer and more muscular arms. When you looked at him you thought he belonged in middleweight, and not barely in the welterweight category. Primož was satisfied that there were four kilos between them and that he was in middleweight. Tine had fists like hammers and his punches hurt. He had everything needed to become the kind of boxer that the club had not had for a long time, a real boxer, an Olympic boxer... Then Tine, future champion, had been sitting one summer day cross-legged at the beach at Portorož and when he got up the meniscus in his left knee had torn. Primož found a certain irony in this. He was what he was, but the worst injury he had suffered in the twenty-five years he had been boxing was a herniation between his fifth and sixth vertebrae, which had cleared up on its own after a month's rest.

Now Tine was well, already past twenty and he still hadn't been national champion, while he should now have had his first Olympics behind him. And of course, Primož would pay for this.

Friday, 7.58 p.m.

Tine raises his right hand, offers his left in greeting and Primož reaches towards it with his, but before they touch he twists his body forward and to the right, pulls his right hand back and with all the force that his seventy-five kilo body can muster he rotates back with a deadly, destructive force that lands on Tine's undefended head, on its centre, his nose.

... *'cause I'm a voodoo chile ...* and so on.

For a moment no one can be heard in the gym, nothing. Primož's heart is going like the clappers, he can hear it. Tine lies on the floor, his nose twisted to the left almost flush with his cheek. Then he gasps and tries to pick himself up with pointless, uncoordinated movements. Primož turns and heads towards Andrej, who is standing behind the ropes, stunned.

“You're fucking sick,” he says and then rushes over to Tine, who looks like a beetle turned on its back.

Primož sits on the bench by the window. Andrej is getting Tine through the ropes out of the ring. Tine leans on the ropes and takes deep breaths. Blood is pouring from his nose and Andrej

picks up a towel and offers it to him. Tine does not take it. All the others, the competitors and Silvo's group, are still around the ring. They wait, looking now at one, now at the other. Tine takes off his gloves and straightens his nose. It creaks and Tine gasps, but barely, you have to give him that. The blood is still pouring and Andrej is still offering him the towel.

"It's broken," says Andrej.

"Yes," says Tine with a sigh. "You think I should go to casualty?"

Andrej nods.

"Can you give me a lift?"

Andrej nods again.

As Tine passes Primož, he says: "You broke my nose, you cunt."

"Any time," says Primož.

Primož does a headstand. He holds it until all the blood has run from his body, then he lowers his feet to the floor behind his head and stretches them. He retains this position. He feels how his backbone stretches, how the sinews in his legs stretch. Beads of sweat from his stomach slide towards his neck. Above him he sees the gymnasium lights, protected by wire mesh. In each of these, almost all of them, there is a badminton shuttlecock caught by its feathers. Andrej's head appears in front of one of them.

"So what was all that about?"

In this position it is hard for Primož to talk, but he doesn't feel like straightening up.

"Final fight, you know... Something new..."

The head disappears, retreating footsteps can be heard, muffled footsteps, of trainers across parquet.

"You have rather a lot of these final fights."

When he straightens up the gym is empty. Now he's in no hurry to go anywhere. For ten minutes or so all the showers will be occupied. He takes off his gloves, leaves them on the bench with his gum shield, goes over to the wall bars and chooses a basketball. He leaves the bandages on his hands and throws. He gets a basket, in spite of his tired, tense muscles. It's all in the mind. He was good at getting baskets, but that was all as far as basketball went. He couldn't make it. Height, jumping ability... But now he is getting baskets. From the key – plop! A lay-up – plop!

He throws at the basket, in Buddhist fashion, ommm, it's all in the mind, soft, at the net and scores. Ommm and tap, tap, tap ... Ommmm ... In the meantime, the door opens and Avgust's white head appears, then he comes in and sits on the bench.

Chapter 10

Friday, 8.16 p.m.

“I hear I missed something interesting.”

Primož puts the ball back with the others and goes over to his stuff.

“Fancy a beer?” asks Avgust.

He shakes his head.

“My head’s still hurting from yesterday and I promised the kids we could watch TV together.”

“Mine hurts too... Or did...” He smiles. “Then I had a smoke and it stops.”

Primož sits beside him on the bench and unwinds the bandages from his hands.

“It’s been a long day.”

“So you finished?”

“Yes.”

He’s going home.

Primož looks round the gym. An ordinary gym but for those holes in the floor. He has spent twenty years here. Twenty years, but it could be just yesterday. Even Andrej is the same. He has the same hairstyle and still listens to Bon Jovi. Their hair is thinner, his and Andrej’s. Everything is the same and everything is different.

“Probably, I’ll still turn up here. Look at me now. Where am I?”

“What about tomorrow? Will you come here tomorrow?” asks Avgust.

Will he?

“Will you feel like it?”

Would he? To get up every day at 5.30 in the morning?

“I don’t know. Sometimes, maybe.”

“Well who would feel like it?”

“If I do, I’ll call you, right?”

Avgust nods.

Primož picks up his bag and heads for the door.

“Hey,” calls Avgust.

“What?”

“You walking?”

“Yes.”

“Then we go together. If you feel like detour I can give you the photos. I’m moving this weekend and I am putting everything in boxes and I found them.”

“Photos.”

“From Berlin. Boxing.”

“Yeh, of course. I’d like to.”

“Okay, let’s meet outside,” says Avgust, pulling tobacco and papers from his pocket and beginning to roll one.

He was standing in front of the glass door smoking. Primož waved to the doorman, who was waiting to lock up.

“There’s no one else,” he said.

They slowly walked past the TV centre in the old town and although it was still quite early, just before nine, Ljubljana seemed empty. It was dry and relatively warm.

“So you’re free until November, eh?” asked Primož.

“Yes, I’m on standby in case they call, but otherwise I’m free.”

“Does it ever happen?”

“What? That they call?”

“Yes.”

“With these tours that last three weeks, yes. People get fed up, get ill, drunk. All sorts.”

“And where are they now?”

“They’ve been in Stuttgart, today Munich... They report a bit. They’ve got a web page, that Philharmonic page, there were some pictures, and Facebook...”

Avgust threw his cigarette end on the pavement, stepped on it and almost immediately lit another. They went along Miklošičeva street, across the Three Bridges and Primož thought that Avgust was one of those rare people with whom you never knew what he was going to say next.

One of the few interesting ones. That he hadn't completely worked out. And for the first time that day he felt good. Physically, but also otherwise.

"How are they doing?"

"It's success, in any case." Avgust took a first drag on the cigarette and waited as if he wanted it to settle in his lungs. "If you have one of them well-known ones everyone has paid. When you pay at least hundred and fifty Euros of course you clap. People clap themselves. Someone said that to me once: Now it's the public's turn. It's a kind of release, it's okay... Of course it's okay. Here at home and elsewhere. The Russians are impressive. When they really like something they don't get up and applaud. That happened to us once in Russia, it's really impressive. You finish – and nothing. They get up and silence."

"Nothing?"

"No, that's their bravo: silence, respect. Then they applaud."

Avgust stopped talking and took several steps in silence.

"I'm trying to remember what we played, but I can't. Different stuff, I know. We played different stuff in Moscow to St. Petersburg. Germans, if they like you, clap, clap, clap."

"And did you play well when the Russians clapped?"

"Yes," said Avgust and then again, as if in confirmation, "yes, yes. Or they were polite, I don't know. Of course, it wasn't big deal, you can't make big deal out of us, but if you look at what we get paid we are good. You can't such a good cheap orchestra anywhere. The good German orchestras can afford not to take their own, but a Japanese, a Korean, a Canadian if he's better. These Asians, they're often very good, and Russians. They can afford that. We have something similar, but if someone can play for two hundred Euros more in Klagenfurt he'll go there to play... Or Trieste, in Teatro Merdi..."

He laughed and so did Primož.

"I mean Verdi. But we're better, we play better than them."

"So why didn't you go with them?"

"They don't want someone who's always grouching," said Avgust.

"How's that?"

"Oh, there's always something, it's not what it was the last time. But now it's that one of the bassists is retiring. There were eight of us and now there'll be seven only. They're not getting a new one. In Yugoslavia the philharmonic orchestra had eight bassists, but now seven it seems is enough. So I say to them: and why not six?"

"I didn't know there were eight bassists in an orchestra."

“There won’t be no more.”

They got to cafe Maček and Primož looked at his watch.

“You in a hurry? We can walk faster.”

“No,” said Primož, “we’re going for a coffee.”

“Not to mention what happens when we play Mahler, who wrote some pieces for ten bassists. You’ll only hear the trumpets.”

They sat outside, but under the awning, so that Avgust could smoke.

“Our conductor is a fool. Beware of bad musicians who become conductors. The problem is, nobody good wants to be a conductor. Not here. Because if you’re good, you go abroad and earn more than a conductor does here. If you’re no good you got nowhere to go, but if you want money you become a conductor. You don’t even have to play any more and you’ve got money and you can fuck young women musicians, even if you’re old.”

Primož looks at his face to see if he’s kidding.

“That happens?”

“If they want in, they give him a blow job.”

“Oh, come on!”

“He told me himself. When we were in Portugal, he was drinking with us and he told us which one blew him.”

“He was bullshitting.”

Then he remembered Polona and her professor, the president of various juries. Was it possible she blew him because he liked her?

“Maybe they like him,” he said.

“People got to eat,” said Avgust. “And they got what they got. Today they all know how to play, but they don’t all know how to give good blow job. I mean, if I think about Berlin, you should have seen it. They were all at it.”

The waiter brought the coffee.

“Besides which, he’s religious type. You wouldn’t believe how many religious types there suddenly are in the orchestra. You know why he became a conductor? Because it suits everyone that the conductor is bad. He won’t arrange any tours because he’s got no connections, because he doesn’t speak foreign languages, because he can’t get any good musicians, I mean soloists. Tours cost money. If we’re at home we don’t cost much. Except when it’s like this one, but he didn’t arrange that, the director did.”

“And what will you do now?”

“Me?” asked Avgust.

“Yes.”

“I’ve got two years to retirement. I’d rather get fired and then I’m unemployed for two years, and I can go on a computer course and then pension. And then I’m going to Bolivia. But a little house and fuck an Indian woman. With the money from here it should be possible.”

“Will you be going to evening training?”

Avgust pulled a face and shook his head.

“You know what I’m like. I need a smoke at eight in the evening and then I can no longer run round the gym. Then I...”

He waved his hands in the air, as if conducting.

“...then I’m somewhere else. I don’t give a toss about boxing.”

They were silent for some time. Avgust nervously fiddled with his packet of cigarettes, pulled one half-way out and then pushed it back in.

“My dad was Partisan,” he said. “Then he quarrelled with his colleagues when he went to Paris, but anyway. And I’m not going to sit by and watch how they shit on his reputation. You’ll see, when I’ve had enough I’ll kill the lot of them. One day I’ll come to Philharmonic and say: I not taking this anymore! And then I shoot them all, you see.”

“This is going to screw you up, you know.”

“I’m already screwed up. I’m not joking. When I freak out there’ll be all hell to pay.”

“Smoking grass will screw you up,” said Primož.

“That as well.”

“If you don’t go and exercise a bit at the gym, you’ll get screwed up even faster.”

“Yes,” said Avgust, “I know.”

Primož raised his hand to ask the waiter for the bill and then he remembered he had no money with him.

“Have you got three Euros?”

“No,” said Avgust. “I got one Euro. Payday tomorrow and then I have, but now I’ve only got one Euro.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We bring it tomorrow,” said Avgust, getting up with surprising agility and stepping onto the street. Primož hurried after him and they ran some thirty metres until the darkness hid them.

“He’s not going to run after us,” said Avgust, lighting a cigarette.

Damn money, thought Primož, and as soon as he thought of it it seemed that everything was hurting again.

“Now that I got more space, now I got two rooms, I put things in order, get a cupboard, a table, so that one room will be kitchen and living room, the other for sleeping, no smoking allowed, so my clothes don’t smell of food and smoke. It’s basically okay... Except for that Serbian guy next to me, who has two rooms and is totally crazy.”

“Still?”

“Once I told him where to go because he fucked something up and since then he’s not speaking to me. He fucks up and I’m the guilty one. They’re good that that, the Serbs. They screw things up and then make sure they criticise others. I’m not the type to say: you’re this and you’re that, but that’s how it is. But it’s too expensive otherwise, I’ve got to put up with it. If I took a small apartment I’d be paying five hundred a month with costs, etcetera. This way I just have a crazy flat mate. There’s got to be a fucking catch. I’ll kill him, too, when it’s the right time.”

They came to the old tower block and he found the key in his jacket pocket, took a last drag before he threw his cigarette on the grass in front of the building and unlocked the door. He led Primož to the lift and when they were inside he held the door with one hand and pressed the button for the fifth floor with the other.

“If you don’t hold it shut,” he said, as the lift moved creakily, “then you don’t go nowhere.”

Friday, 8.30 p.m.

Avgust basically had just one room, if you didn’t count the small entrance where you could hang your coat and leave your shoes, but nothing else. You entered it through a tired looking door. Through the white paint you could see the strips of artificial wood. In the only room worth the name was a bunk bed, which left about a metre of space on one wall and a little more on the other, where there stood an armchair of indeterminate colour. Now it was dark grey, but what it was when it was made probably no one knew any more. Next to it was a small round table and on this table stood a single hot plate, while above it was a window.

“Make yourself comfortable,” said Avgust, sitting in the armchair.

Primož looked around to see where he could make himself comfortable, then he sat among the boxes on the lower bunk, which were evidently ready for moving. He counted seven of them.

Meanwhile, Avgust rolled a joint, lit it and handed it to Primož.

“No thanks,” said Primož. “I’ve had enough of all that.”

“I’ve got to, otherwise I’m all on edge,” said Avgust.

“I’m on edge even when I smoke. Even more.”

“I get the shakes. I can’t help it.”

He took two deep drags without breathing out and then relaxed a little in the armchair. He smiled and said kind of softly:

“That’s how it is.”

Primož looked around for the bass, but couldn’t see it.

“Where do you keep your bass?”

“I don’t have one,” said Avgust. “In any case I practised on the one from the Philharmonia and I needed the money, so I sold it. They say last week, you don’t even have your own bass and I say, I’m paid to play, not practise.”

“Where did you keep it when you did have it?”

“Here,” he said, pointing to the top bunk. “I sleep at the bottom, the bass at the top. It wasn’t a bad one.”

“How well did you play?” asked Primož. “I mean, how good are you?”

“I got good technique,” said Avgust. “And I played everything and I don’t need to prepare much. Some have no technique and play clumsily. If you’re clumsy and you don’t practise you play even more clumsily. As you get older. But I have the technique, so I don’t need to. With me it’s C, C, not C major.”

“If you wanted to be a really top musician, let’s say, I don’t know, the Berlin Philharmonic...”

“Yes, the Berlin Philharmonic is good,” said Avgust. “If I wanted to play for them?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you know what I’m like. I can be good. I can be good for part of one piece or even a whole piece, but I don’t have staying power. I can’t play well the whole time. I mean really well, top class. We’re all good, in any case.”

He grinned.

“Can’t you train yourself up?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you can, maybe not. I’m probably not the best person to ask. Could you box among professionals?”

Primož shook his head.

“Maybe you could get trained up and now you’d be fucking Claudia Schiffer,” said Avgust.

“Why Claudia Schiffer? Isn’t she a granny now?”

“I’m an old guy,” said Avgust with a laugh. “In Paris I fucked this woman who’d been out with Bob Dylan. A chubby little painter. She said: ‘You only want to fuck me’ and I said ‘Of course.’”

He was still grinning and as he did so he reminded Primož of Anthony Quinn.

“You know how much she liked it.”

Then he sank into the armchair and took a drag, the smoke spread round the room and into Primož’s nostrils. He started coughing.

“Sorry,” said Avgust, “I’ll be quick.”

“You’re okay, I cough so easily. I cough when I just see someone smoking.”

Avgust took two more drags, like it was an ordinary cigarette and stubbed the rest out on the hot plate.

“Anyway, now I’ll get an extra room and it’ll be better... Are you all okay?”

“Yes,” said Primož.

“But it still bothers you, doesn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” asked Primož, although he knew.

Did it bother him?

It wasn’t just the age limit. It wasn’t that everything hurt when he got up and that he had to do yoga to be able to touch his toes and warm up for half an hour before he could land full strength blows.

“When we were hitting punch bags in the morning I never thought only about boxing.”

“Women, yes...” sighed Avgust.

At least not the last five years. Work, money, books, women least of all. When you are twenty you never think while boxing and if you do it’s about women. He was constantly thinking, or at least that was his impression, thinking about money, about the fact that he hadn’t got any. About bills.

“You’ve got a beautiful young wife,” said Avgust, although Katarina was hardly much younger than Primož and she wasn’t his wife, but she was beautiful.

“I know, I wasn’t thinking about women.”

Avgust spread out another paper and filled it with... Tobacco or grass, wondered Primož.

“Were you married?”

“Yes, in France. She’s now a big cheese in the Ministry of Culture.”

“And you’ve got a daughter, haven’t you?”

“Now our daughter has own family, two kids. She’s married to a doctor, but he’s a good man.”

He licked the paper, stuck it together, turned it in his fingers...

“Maybe I’ll move to France when my health starts to bother me and my son-in-law will look after me.”

...he lit up. Primož coughed, although he tried hard not to, but Avgust didn’t even notice. He carried on talking:

“I was a musician and played at night, she was making career for herself and during the day I looked after the kid. We went fishing together. I slept from four, when I came home after playing in the clubs, for a few hours, and then I took Evridika and we went fishing. Then she starts grumbling she is earning more than me, that I don’t have regular job... Ridiculous, when you think we met when I am playing in a club – and that the kind of club that I wouldn’t go in if I didn’t have to – and at that point it was okay. Anyway, so I say if that’s how it is I look for a job and we see. And I get one with orchestra in Grenoble and then I move there and go to Paris only for the weekends. Then I find a woman down there, because I can’t go without fucking, and she finds out...”

“Today I found out that I can’t read that small print any more. What you get on product labels,” said Primož.

“When you’re young you think it’s for ever, but it’s not. Then you think that being old means having grey hair like Richard Gere, otherwise everything’s the same. Then you think the worst thing is if you can’t get it up, but that’s not it either. The worst are your teeth. Mine are all wobbly at the front and I have to get the whole lot changed, and do you know how much that costs?”

“It’s not that I want to be young for ever,” said Primož.

“Once I look cool if I don’t shave, now I just look like a vagrant. That’s what getting old means,” said Avgust.

“Right, but I don’t want to be young again, I just don’t want to be old.”

“I’d be young again,” said Avgust. “No problem.”

“I don’t know if I’d start boxing again. I wouldn’t feel like it.”

“You’ve got books. Write books.”

“It’s not the same. A book’s a book, if it’s good it’s fine, if it’s bad it’s just bad. One more, what’s the difference?”

If you’re bad at boxing it hurts. There is pain, fear, but there’s also the pleasure of mastering all that, the pain and the fear and the ape opposite you. If you took a hundred people at random and put them in the ring with Šarh, even though he’s got a glass jaw, how long would they remain on their feet? They wouldn’t, they’d be on the canvas at the first punch, and he had remained standing, for three rounds, and at the end Šarh was the one on the ground. How could a book give the same satisfaction? And there’s no bluffing. Well, less. Okay, there are judges and points and all that shit, but in the end it’s all the same. If you’re good, you win and go forward, and in the end you’re world champion. If you’re good at writing books, you’re nothing, if you’re really good, it doesn’t mean anything in this country, nada, there are people queueing up...

“I’m a good writer,” said Primož and Avgust grinned.

“Of course, we’re all good.”

“No, really, I am. Sometimes I think I’m not and then I go and read some Slovene writer, others as well, and I see that I am. If I wrote like them I’d kill myself. But it doesn’t help. If I was as good a writer as I am a boxer I’d be able to live off it. But there are only two million Slovenes, the market’s not there, you can’t live off such a small market.”

“Get the book translated and publish abroad?”

“You know what our problem is?” said Primož.

“What, Slovenes?”

“Yes, Slovenes, writers. Besides the fact that we are fucking useless... They are fucking useless.”

“My Slovene is not all that great,” said Avgust. “Most of it I don’t understand, then I can’t be bothered to read.”

“No one knows who we are. If you’re from Romania you’ve got Dracula and Ceausescu. If you’re from Bosnia, you’ve got the war. But from Slovenia, you’ve got nothing. We don’t exist.”

“We got Carniolan sausage,” said Avgust.

“And the Avseniks. We invented Oberkrainer music, accordians and that,” said Primož.

“You didn’t invent nothing. That’s German music. If that’s Slovene music then we’re better off with nothing.”

“When we went to that presentation in Munich it was Carnival time and at the airport there was a brass band playing ‘Golica’. Giving it all they’d got, like they were going to attack Stalingrad with it.”

“When I first came back to Yugoslavia I played in a folk group. That’s Slovene music, not the Avseniks.”

“If we don’t have the Avseniks, we don’t have anything,” said Primož.

“But if that’s Slovene music we’re better off without.”

Then Avgust spent some time getting excited about Slovene kitsch music and Primož let him, and in the middle of his tirade Avgust rolled another joint and lit it and offered it to Primož, who again said no thanks.

“On Monday I’ve got to come up with eight hundred Euros, which I don’t have,” said Primož.

“I don’t have any, otherwise I lend you.”

“I’m not saying it because of that. I’m thinking aloud. Eight hundred Euros, otherwise the bailiffs will come. I don’t know what they’d take... The dishwasher, maybe, and the television.”

How did he manage this eight hundred on the basis of what was a few hundred?

“Just regular bills, I didn’t just blow it.”

“Unlike me,” said Avgust.

“And if I’d got a scholarship, which I should have done, I wouldn’t be knee-deep in manure, but I didn’t.”

Avgust’s cigarette went out and he relit it.

“I’m not saying that it’s an excellent book and that I should have got it. Although it is. No, I should have got it because I got an award. According to the rules that they wrote themselves – but I didn’t.”

“Kill them,” said Avgust.

“I didn’t get a scholarship and they’ve reduced my salary. They gave it to...”

Polona, God forgive her, it’s not her fault.

“...and now these demos, these people who stand there yelling that the country has been stolen from them. They’ve all stole it from me. For what should I go on the streets and throw cobblestones? Where should I throw them? Forward or backward?”

“It’s all fucked up,” said Avgust. “In France cobblestones are different, bigger than ours,” and he indicated a square as big as a brick. “That’s not for someone from the Faculty of Arts to throw, that’s for someone who works at Renault, for it really to fly.”

“Yes,” said Primož, wondering what else he wanted to say.

“It’s all fucked up,” said Avgust, lighting up, but this time an ordinary cigarette.

“But it’s not necessary.”

“I don’t know,” said Avgust, “to me it seem increasingly like it is. If you’re smart, if you’re stupid it isn’t.”

“What? If you’re smart, you’re fucked, otherwise not?”

“Yes.”

What if he has not talent for writing, just as he didn’t for boxing?

“What if I don’t know how to write?” said Primož.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Avgust.

“Because it’s just words?”

“Because it doesn’t matter.”

What if books aren’t only sentences, letters, punctuation? What if there’s something behind them that he doesn’t see? What if the heights of the literary language really do exist? Some kind of magic, higher intelligence or, even worse, what if limitation is behind it? What if you have to be an idiot to write? That you have to believe in your own shit, your mission, your legend? That you have to wander round, breathe, shit, sleep like a writer? That you have to fly with angel’s wings? That you have to fuck them?

“Peu importe,” said Avgust, who was hardly moving now. Even his lips not.

Primož checked the time on his moibile.

“I’d better be off... Oh yes, those photos?”

Avgust scratched his forehead and tried to stand. Half way up he ran out of steam and sank back down again onto the armchair.

“There. Open that box,” he pointed to one of the smaller ones, placed on top of the largest on the bed. “Open it and inside there’s a... you know... envelope.”

There were quite a lot of photographs. Primož flicked through them quickly and counted around fifty. Most of them the size of an exercise book, some smaller. Black and white, some with details on the back, written in pencil, others without any. He went through them.

“I’ll try and work out who’s in them, if there perhaps any known ones. Do you know who all these guys are in the photos?”

He looked at Avgust, who was asleep. He put the photographs in the envelope, carefully took the cigarette from Avgust’s hand and stubbed it out on the hot plate.

Chapter 12

Friday, 9.15 p.m.

“They were waiting for you,” said Katarina.

“Where are my little rascals?” he asked out loud, but no one responded.

He went into their room, but they weren’t there, and then into the bedroom. They were lying in the dark. He turned on the light. They were covered with a blanket and didn’t stir.

“Oh, they’re already asleep. Okay, I’m going to watch television...”

“Dad, where were you so long?” asked Špela.

“Yes, mum wanted us to go to bed but we waited for you,” said Maks.

“You know, I was beating people up.”

“Dad, don’t be silly,” said Špela.

“I was, really. And tomorrow I’ll carry on.”

“Bla, bla, bla...” said Maks.

And the day after tomorrow and the day after that... until they leave me alone.

He stripped down to his underpants and vest, and lay in between them. They chatted for a while until the kids fell silent and then they went to sleep. Including Primož.

Friday, 10.04 p.m.

When he woke up all he could hear was the voice of a television reporter speaking from some foreign or local crisis point. He carefully extracted himself from between Špela and Maks, who had curled up to him in their sleep, and looked into the room with the television, which was also the kitchen, dining room and living room. Katarina was asleep on the couch. He switched off the light and looked at the screen. He picked up the remote control and flicked through several channels before returning it to the original one and going back into the bedroom. He turned on the computer and while it was loading he carried first Maks, then Špela to their room. They did not wake: Špela mumbled something, Maks not even that.

He sat the computer and typed. He clicked on Gmail. User name: sputniksojuz. Password: ecrvtb. He waited...

Accepted. Nothing new, apart from Polona Maurer, Polona Maurer, Polona Maurer, because of course no one else knew this address, since it was created for polono.maurer@gmail.com.

“Aren’t you afraid that he will somehow come across our correspondence,” he asked when they started.

“He’d never do anything like that.”

“Like what?”

“Read my mail.”

“Because?”

“Because he trusts me,” she said.

He highlighted all the mails, put his finger on the erase key and held it down, then reconsidered. He clicked on: *Here it is...*

Loading...

Polona appeared on the screen, or rather her groin. Her pussy, with her finger at the top, touching her clitoris, and in the background her right breast with its nipple erect and her face, or rather her chin and nose. He looked at it for some time and then clicked on talk, looking for the real person.

10:32 Polona: can you imagine how I’ve been jumping around with the camera, trying to get a good picture

me: Ha, ha...

Polona: but nothing’s good enough for you

10:33 me: Compared to the live ones, maybe not, but that’s the way it is. But take your panties off.

10:36 Polona: I can’t send you something, just anything, that doesn’t look good, because then you may not like it in real life any more

10:37 me: I will, I will

10:38 Polona: The light is bad and it didn’t look good, trust me

10:39 me: I’ll be the judge of that. Come on...

Polona: I tried and erased it

me: Come on...

10:40 Polona: Do you think if you keep writing my photographic skills will improve? it's boring.

10:41 me: I'd go down on you with my tongue and a little later with my finger and a little later, you know...

Polona: oh yes, very seductive

10:42 Polona: yes, I'm wet straight away just thinking about you naked beside me.

me: And then I'd watch you sit on me and tremble a little. But until then I'd like to see your cunt.

Polona: with your wonderful prick beside me, inside me.

10:43 Polona: yes, if you were here I would.

me: It was good last time.

Polona: it was crazy, just crazy.

10:44 me: Send me a photo so I can go and jerk off in the bathroom, because I can't wait any more.

10:45 Polona: ;) I can't, no

10:46 me: So at least turn on one of your lights and give me something imaginative.

10:47 Polona: I sent you my other bits, is that okay?

10:50 me: it's great. really. if you go a little lower my whole day will have meaning.

10:54 Polona: fuck it Primož, I don't know why I'm sending you such pictures, and where's one for me?

me: You'll get it.

10:55 Polona: but you delete this or I'm fucked, I mean the pictures

10:57 Polona: I'm totally mad

11:02 me: yum, yum

11:03 Polona: ;) you're also mad

11:04 Polona: but I was really aroused

11:11 me: Now open your legs a bit and stroke yourself with your finger and send that.

11:13 Polona: what, I should put it between my legs?

11:24 me: the camera

Polona: we'll see what happens

11:34 Polona: if I'm already undressed and taking photos, I may as well take the opportunity for another orgasm, thinking of you

And so on ...

He read it once, twice. Then he pressed CTRL-A, delete. Are you sure? Yes. He highlighted all incoming messages and at 22.35 sputniksojuz left earth's orbit and disappeared in cyberspace.

He turned off the computer and returned to the other room. On the TV they were talking about courage. In the studio there was a solo yachtsman, a woman sky diver and about three others, plus the interviewer.

"Tell us," she said to the sailor, "what it's like on the open ocean, when you're all alone and..."

10:51 p.m. Katarina: Are they asleep?

me: For a while, already.

10:51 p.m. Katarina: I'm going to have a shower.

10:52 p.m. me: I'll join you.

10:53 p.m. Katarina: Brrrr! What is it with you and water?

me: Počaki malo.

10:56 p.m. me: You've got lovely tits. :))

Katarina: You've got a lovely prick.:))

10:56 p.m. Katarina: Mmmm ...

10:58 p.m. Katarina: Shall we go to the bedroom? Did you carry them to their room?

me: Yup.

Katarina: Did Maks have a wee?

11:02 p.m. me: That's nice.

Katarina: Of course it is, baby.

11:03 p.m. Katarina: Shall I suck you a bit?

11:04 p.m. me: Come here ...

11:06 p.m. Katarina: Mmmm ...

11:07 p.m. me: How do you want it?

Katarina: Take me from behind.

me: Okay.

11:10 p.m. me: Turn round.

11:11 p.m. me: I love you, my little fuck partner...

11:12 p.m. Katarina: Fuck me, fuck me...

At thirteen minutes past eleven Katarina and Primož are lying on the bed holding hands. They lie still so that she doesn't leak onto the covers.

"Eleven years we're together and we're still at it like rabbits," says Primož. "That must be some kind of record."

"Twelve," says Katarina. "If you hadn't woken me I'd have slept all evening. Those two wear me out."

"Listen," says Primož, "let's agree never to get at each other. That we won't attack each other. I was thinking about it today... I mean, all this crap with money, but they can't make such a mess of things as I can myself."

"You shouldn't blame yourself so much," says Katarina.

"I won't any more. What can they do to us? When did anyone last die of starvation in this country?"

They lie there for some time, Primož stroking her breast. Her nipple hardens.

"If that's the right criterion" he says.

At twenty past eleven Katarina is in the shower again and he's in front of the television, where the girl is talking about skydiving. She's shy and the interviewer has to winkle it out of her.

"Tell us," she says "tell us what it's like when you jump out of the plane and there's nothing but emptiness beneath you..."

Tut, tut, tut, he says in his journalist head. That's not the way to do it. You need to prepare, silly cow, find one of her statements and then throttle her with it, not just throwing it out like this. You get the worst kind of rhetorical bullshit when you attack them with 'tell us what it's like when...'

Why is he even watching this? He grabs the remote to turn it off, but changes his mind. There's something buzzing in his head, something that has to find a way out. He goes into the bedroom

and puts on his trousers, socks, jumper and a coat. He comes back into the living room just as the interviewer is attacking a hitherto unidentified man with a beard.

“You’re a zookeeper,” she says. “Is that the right term?”

Do some research! thinks Primož. Show a little respect to a man who has to shovel chimpanzee shit.

Katarina enters the room. She is naked, rubbing her hair with a towel.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got to think about something.”

“Where?”

“There,” he says, pointing to the balcony and then heading for it.

“Oh come on, let’s watch together if there’s something on TV,” says Katarina.

“Just a minute,” he says, hurrying on to the balcony before she gets a chance to ask what he has to think about, because he doesn’t know and he is afraid that whatever it is will disappear with the question.

Friday, 11.25 p.m.

It is still. There is just enough of a breeze to slightly shake the leaves of the maple that almost touches their balcony on the third floor. There is a small area of greenery behind them and then another block of flats, the same as theirs. They both date from the Seventies, built on what was once marshland. “We sometimes used to come here for wood,” one of the indigenous inhabitants had told him. “And below the trees there were two ponds.” During the recent floods, water inundated the block of flats that Primož can now see over the top of the maple, but theirs was untouched, especially the third floor. The maple is nothing special if you look at it from the car park, but here, from the top, it is wonderful, particularly in the spring when the leaves open, or autumn, when it is so colourful. From dark green in the centre of the crown to reddish, and ever more yellow at the edges. If Primož stretches he can reach the branches and last winter he hung fat balls for the birds. There were many different varieties came, but Primož could identify only sparrows, which were the most numerous and the bravest, and tits with yellow chests and white patches on their black heads. Then there were some reddish ones, and some with orangey bodies and a couple of bigger ones, blackbird-size, that were like dinosaurs in comparison with the sparrows. When the bigger ones appeared the others withdrew, but they just looked nervously for a second at the two yellowish-green balls in their plastic net and then flew off. Primož hope they had something to peck at when they weren’t at home. Of course, there were no birds now. They were sitting in their nest dreaming bird dreams.

Chirp-chirp, cheep-cheep, tweet-tweet... and so on.

The little sparrow is waiting for its mother, holding onto the branch. She has gone for millet, behind the hedge...

Sometimes he toyed with the idea of finding some cave in the mountains, far from here, far from everything, and stocking it with enough tinned food and other supplies to last a year, and then sit there writing a diary. Impressions. Each day one page in the book. Lyrical, with endless descriptions of clouds and the sunlight, and things that he could see from where he was sitting. Of course, Primož won't do this. Because of Katarina and the kids, because of the fear that he would finally go crazy on his own somewhere... And also because he was worried what he would look like when he returned to the valley after a year. With skinny legs, a flabby gut, prematurely aged.

Primož sits on the chair and puts his feet on the railing, which is made from larch wood, as is the floor. Katarina had wanted wood because it gives a feeling of warmth, and you could stand on the balcony summer or winter and not feel cold. Then of course they ran out of money for fixtures and fittings, and in the flat they still have only bare bulbs and wires instead of light fittings.

But that's not why he came here. He came here to think. He came, to find a solution. To drag the cart from out of the mire, and he would do it. To interrupt the sequence of... unpleasant events. There must be some trick involved and he would find out what it was.

If the wind blew drops fell from the leaves. From the morning. Even if it didn't rain any more it would not dry out until April. From one leaf to another, and then to the ground. He couldn't hear them dropping to the ground, but he guessed that they didn't evaporate in the air. That's time, he said to himself. Nothing would be possible without time. No drop would fall. That was the fourth dimension and time has time. Endless time. He does not, he has very little. If he thinks about it: only yesterday he was attending primary school, today he is sitting on the balcony. In comparison to that everything else is trivial.

He has to deal with trivia. In comparison with what can happen to the universe and everything, this is trivia.

Nevertheless, what should he do?

He looks at his watch. A little before midnight, when this Friday would be over once and for all, just as every other day was over – important ones like 31st December 2000, or the day when he met Katarina, or the days the kids were born, and one day when his life would be over. Just as Sanja's life would soon be over.

He would stand in the procession behind the urn as it made its way from the chapel of rest towards her grave; they would probably be playing "I Can't Get No Satisfaction"; there would be no Slovene flag because she didn't like that kind of thing, although it was in the regulations;

Polona would be there and many others, and he would stay near the back of the procession and flatten the snow that fell, for Sanja would die when the first snow fell and they would bury her in the family grave. Her ashes. A billionth of a universal time unit later he would also die, and Katarina, and the kids. So he was dealing with a negligible period of time.

“I hope we die together, holding hands,” Maks once said, when he was still in nursery school.

But until that time, to the last billionth of a billion... what to do? Should he submit requests? Who to? What should he write? To the editorial office of which newspaper? Dear so and so, I hesitate to mention this, but I am possession of a miraculous power: I can see through people, I can look into their minds, I can see what they are thinking and what they intend to do. (They are fucking boring.) Would this be of any use to you?

He would make snowballs and throw them at the lower branches of the cypresses as they went past, furtively, underarm, to knock snow off. They would go past the part of the cemetery once reserved for children, judging by the dates of births and deaths. They would go past the grave of the girl who was born the same year as him and died at the age of five. At her funeral her mother fainted, her father comforted her but he was in no fit condition...

“My little girl,” sobbed the mother, “my little girl...”

A week later she went to the gravedigger and asked him if he could dig her up, so that she could once more look at her little girl, and to the end of her days she would wonder why she was not holding her hand when they stood by the roadside, at the junction of Prešernova and Šubičeva streets. She let go because she was thinking about... What? About what? When, when did she let go of her? Moments before, she was holding her right hand with her left hand, as always, and then, as if in slow motion, like in a film showing what is happening to someone else, the girl runs onto the road because she is not holding her, and everything that was before difficult, complicated, and important disappears. There remains disbelief and the sentence: this cannot be, this cannot have happened, no, no, no... to the end of her life. What if... Every morning. What if... What if I hadn't... He doesn't want to write about this.

“Your problem is that you're a poet,” Andrej once said to him. “You think too much. Boxing's about instinct.”

He doesn't want to write about this, although he could. He doesn't want to. He doesn't want to feed on someone else's pain.

“It's best if I remember just one move, otherwise I get confused,” said Maks, when he gently asked him what he was doing.

“This is so hard,” he said out loud on the balcony, but not loud enough to be heard by their neighbour or Katarina.

“It's no good,” he said, also out loud.

It's no good, he thought. Nothing interested him any more, not even boxing. He was getting old, putting on weight, becoming wrinkled, all he needed now was to go bald... (he doesn't know)... if he isn't already... (he senses).

"I don't reach the heights," he said. "I don't reach the heights of poetic language."

There's no room for dickheads there.

Nor blockheads, deadheads, bigheads, airheads, boneheads, acidheads, dopeheads, eggheads, lunkheads, maidenheads – ha, he finally stopped counting. What did it matter? A billionth of space time one way or another.

They would find a cure, Sanja would get better and after a tough fight Primož would beat Trifunović, although he wasn't going to box him, Polona would get married and move to Reykjavik. And when they were both very old they would meet once in the park with their grandchildren and... A trainee would appear who would take over readers' letters and he would get an office and a parking space.

That girl did not die...

They won't, he won't, they won't, it won't and she died. And that's it.

Keep your office and your parking space. He didn't care.

There was a knocking on the window.

"Have you had your think? The film's starting."

"Just a sec."

...and the sparrows met, chatted for a long time, and she ate all the millet for her little one herself.

Now he knocked on the window himself.

"What?" said Katarina.

"Can you bring me the phone?"

"What, now?"

"Yes, it's urgent. Something I forgot."

He pressed the keys twice, looked through the list and pressed for a third time. He didn't care what time it was, or that it was Friday. If it even was still Friday. He waited for the voice at the other end and then said:

"Okay, let's do it."

And:

"Yeh, yeh..."

And:

“Yeh, of course...”

And:

“I don’t mind...”

And also:

“Whatever...”

And:

“And one more thing... I’d take the first thousand on Monday. Morning.”

And:

“Okay. See you.”

Then he got up, opened the door to the living room and asked Katarina if she’d decided what they were watching.

Final chapter

One week and half a day later, 8.45 p.m.

“Thanks, and say hi to Dejan,” says Andrej.

“You’re welcome,” replies the young man, putting away the bandages. Primož looks at his wrapped hands. “I’ll send the ref to check things off.”

“Yeh, of course,” says Andrej.

The other guy opens the door and then turns to Primož.

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed.”

“Ali boma ye!” says Andrej.

“Did you finally see him?” asks Tine and because of the splint on his nose his voice sounds kind of... well, nasal.

“Good film,” says Andrej.

Primož raises his fists and looks at them, then he picks up the gloves from the table and holds them up in front of him.

“Can you feel the difference?” says Andrej.

“Yes.”

He rubs a glove against his chin and cheek.

“They’re thin.”

“You shouldn’t have agreed to pro rules,” says Andrej. “Anyway, it’s done now.”

Avgust sits with his camera on the bench by the wall. He has an unlit cigarette in his hand.

“And you shouldn’t have said that you’d make mincemeat of him,” says Andrej.

“Did you read it?”

“Who didn’t?”

“It goes with the genre. Like beef consommé with Sunday lunch.”

Avgust snorts.

“What?” asks Tine. “What’s wrong with beef consommé?”

“It’s the soup of death,” says Avgust, “and I’m not arguing about it with you.”

“I don’t know if Trifunović will understand it in that way,” says Andrej.

“On the radio they said that Slovenes are always against immigrants from the south,” says Tine.

“As far as I know Trifunović was born in Ljubljana,” says Primož. “I wasn’t. If anyone is an immigrant to this shithole it’s me.”

“My dad is an immigrant,” says Andrej. “But he’s actually not a Slovene.”

“How can that be?” asks Tine. “How can he be a southerner if he’s called Novak? You can’t get more Slovene than Novak.”

“Novak is my stepfather’s name,” replies Andrej, annoyed. “Can we maybe talk about what we’re going to do out there?”

“We’re not doing anything,” says Tine. “He is.”

“Okay, then, him. What are you going to do?” he asks Primož.

“What’s your dad’s name?” asks Primož.

“Fuck you!” shouts Andrej. “What does it matter what my dad’s called?”

“It must be Harambašević,” says Tine. “Or Meho.”

“Meho is a first name,” Primož points out.

“Maier,” says Andrej.

“I knew a Maier in Berlin, but he was German, not a Bosnian.”

“But my dad’s not Bosnian!” yells Andrej.

“But if you said he was a southerner,” says Tine.

“I said he was an immigrant. That he moved here. He came here because of his job, met my mother, then he went back to Austria.”

“Okay,” says Tine, “but then you’re neither a southerner nor a German.”

“Austrians are so frigid,” says Avgust. “You play your heart out and... polite applause. Like corpses. But also for their own – the Vienna Philharmonic it’s the same, clap... clap... clap...”

“My father never went to the opera in his life. Now, if you don’t shut it I’m going to forget that you’re old and demented, I swear it!”

“Philharmonic,” says Avgust.

“Nor the phil-har-mon-ic, either.”

Someone knocks at the door.

“I’ll sign off on the binding,” says the referee.

He examines Primož’s wrapped hands and signs the bandage.

“And good luck,” he says.

“Thanks,” says Primož.

In the mean time, Avgust puts the unlit cigarette in his mouth, Tine crosses his hands in his lap and Andrej is still catching his breath.

“Well?” says Tine.

“Have you got a plan?” asks Andrej.

Primož shakes his head.

“Hide behind your gloves, lean on the ropes and wait for it to be over,” says Tine.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” responds Andrej quickly. “Hide behind your gloves and you’ll see what happens. He’ll kill you.”

“Otherwise he won’t?”

Andrej stops, shakes his head slightly to left and right.

“He won’t exactly kill you.”

“Thanks.”

“Look,” says Andrej, scratching his head. “If you box, if the two of you box, you don’t stand a chance.”

“But isn’t that the basic idea of this evening?” asks Tine.

“Shut it! Your chance... What I’m saying is you’ve got to really fight, you know what I mean? Not box, but fight! Get into the ring and beat the shit out of him. Kick him if needs be.”

Primož nods.

Avgust clears his throat as if he means to say something, but it might also just be his smoker’s cough.

“Hard work paying off,” he says.

“Yes, and so?”

“If Primož hit him, he’s dead.”

“Thanks,” says Primož.

“And how should he do that? Any ideas?” asks Andrej.

“There’s no need for idea,” says Avgust.

“What do you mean: no need for idea?”

“You do it, that’s it.”

“What are you, some kind of Buddhist?” says Tine.

“I’m Catholic...”

“You, a Catholic?” says Andrej in disbelief. “When were you last in church?”

“Have you been?” asks Primož.

“No, of course not, I’m not a Catholic.”

“In broad sense,” says Avgust, “in broad sense I’m Catholic. All four of us are.”

“Maybe he should try one round like this,” says Tine. “First round you crouch behind your gloves, let him think that you’ve had it, and then a good punch when he opens up.”

“Yeh, of course,” says Andrej. “Do you know what a round means? Three minutes with this guy? Do you think it’s like a round with you?”

“Andrej, you’re such a Slovene,” says Primož. “An eternal optimist.”

“Austrian,” says Tine.

“Have I ever put you down?”

“If we forget about when I ended up on the canvas in Ptuj, of course.”

Andrej is silent for some moments, as if thinking, and then he says: “Sorry,” and the word sounds strangely natural and sincere. “I don’t know why it seemed that way to me.”

“That’s not important. It doesn’t matter,” says Avgust.

“What doesn’t matter?” asks Andrej.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You can’t say ‘nothing doesn’t matter’, can you poet?”

“Nothing matters,” says Primož. “You say ‘nothing matters’.”

“That’s right, ‘nothing matters’.”

“No, nothing doesn’t matter,” says Avgust.

“If there’s nothing, then it can’t matter,” says Andrej. “It can’t matter if nothing matters. Nothing is nothing, Nothing times five is still nothing.”

“It’s not about grammar,” says Avgust.

“Slovene is a stupid language,” says Andrej. “If it’s nothing then there isn’t anything to matter, for fuck’s sake.”

“I’m sure Austrian’s a lot better,” says Tine.

“Nothing doesn’t matter,” repeats Avgust stubbornly.

“What doesn’t matter?” asks Andrej again.

“It doesn’t matter if you fuck up, because you haven’t.”

“Of course,” says Andrej, but somewhat cautiously.

“Everyone gets what’s coming to him eventually.”

“Thanks,” says Primož.

“I thought it was all going to pay dividends today,” says Tine.

“It will, today it will all pay dividends.”

“What dividends?” asks Primož. “What are you talking about?”

“In Zürich, when I was in the Zürich Tonhalle Orchestra, we had a conductor, American, Jewish guy, very good, called Zinman, he always say when we go on stage: ‘Now we’re going on stage, make sure that what we’ve been doing pays dividends.’”

“For a moment I thought you were sane,” says Andrej. “You always fool me into thinking that you are sane, you old penguin, but you’re not.”

“Why have you been training every day?” asks Tine. “Because of the national championships? To be the champion?”

“To keep my weight down.”

They do not speak for some time. About ten seconds.

“Did I hear you say that your family are in the hall?” asks Andrej.

“Yes.”

“Is that good?”

“Let them see.”

“How work pays off,” says Tine.

“I put money on him. A hundred,” says Avgust.

“That’ll certainly pay off,” says Tine.

Then they sit for some time in silence, listening to the noise from the auditorium. It is gradually diminishing.

“It went on for a long time,” says Andrej. “I thought the first direct punch from the German girl would send her down. Women’s boxing, that’s all we need.”

“Can you help me with my gloves?”

Andrej takes the gloves and pushes them on, then ties the laces.

“Okay?”

“Okay,” says Primož, punching with both of them together.

“You shouldn’t have agreed to pro rules,” says Andrej once more.

A head appears at the door.

“You’re on. When you hear the music, go out and down the aisle towards the ring.”

He goes.

“Did you choose the music yourself?” asks Andrej.

“Yeh.”

“What?”

“You’ll see.”

“Maybe ‘Bed of Roses’,” says Tine.

Primož enters the auditorium. He is wearing blue shorts, a t-shirt and a track suit. Just behind him, to his left, is Andrej, on his right Tine, both in tracksuits saying Ljubljana Boxing Club, and Tine with a splint and plaster on his nose. Behind them is Avgust in his philharmonic tailcoat and a camera around his neck. They are still below the stand and people can’t see them. They are waiting for the music and when they hear the opening bars, before the vocal starts, and people begin to roar from excitement (how little it takes sometimes, thinks Primož, and how he has to torture himself as a writer), the four of them move among the Roman legionaries with their plastic swords, shields and helmets. Primož doesn’t run, he doesn’t jump, he walks slowly between the dressed up soldiers waving his right arm. Thirteen thousand people who don’t care for faggots, lesbians, Bosnians and so on. Or poets (or writers). Primož smiles, waves and blows kisses with his glove, but he can’t see them, he’s not looking at them. He’s looking at Trifunović, who is already in the ring, jumping, circling like an impatient shark. He is waiting for him, waiting for his prey. Primož waves and has no plan.

...It's the eye of the tiger. It's the thrill of the fight... rumbles from the loudspeakers, rumbles from the stand around and around the auditorium. Trifunović is obsessively boxing his own shadow.

“Don’t worry,” says Andrej, “In the ring he looks bigger than he really is.”