

# Seconds Out

**Miljenko Jergović**

The tram drivers always rang the bell as they went round the corner by the Medical Institute. Perhaps it was just to warn anything that was coming the other way, or perhaps it was the memory of an earlier accident, or perhaps they were just superstitious. Nobody paid much attention to the ringing trams: the occupants of a neighbouring block of flats had stopped registering the noise long ago; it was like the ticking of a grandfather clock. Nor were the cats on the wall of the army warehouse roused from their summer naps. So the years went by and the sound of the tram-bells continued to be heard over the flat land that stretched all the way to Marijndvor and the stop at the junction of Titova and Tvrtkova.

The noise didn't bother the regulars at the Kvarner, a tiny bar in which a handful of relics induced cirrhosis of the liver by drinking large bottles of Sarajevsko or Nikšičko beer and Badel brandy. One day, Meho the Paratrooper showed up in the Kvarner with an old pal from his days in military service, a retired boxer known as Mišo the Heart from the Slavija club in Banja Luka. As with any newcomer, the regulars welcomed Mišo the Heart with two unspoken questions: how much money does he have in his pocket, and will he disrupt the atmosphere of the Kvarner? Because real drinkers seldom get into fights or smash things up. They prefer silence, peace and contemplation. Any sudden movement can provoke hard drinkers. Even a curse uttered too loudly is enough to make them grab a bottle and start breaking

the furniture. That's why the tabloid press always gives the wrong account of drunken punch-ups. All a drunk really wants to do is protect his constitutional right to have one more for the road.

About five minutes after Mišo the Heart walked into the Kvarner, the first tram went past the Medical Institute and rang its bell. Seconds out! Instinctively, Mišo put his fists up like a boxer right in front of Velija the Footballer, who, no less instinctively, grabbed hold of an ashtray and whacked the boxer in the face. Meho the Paratrooper jumped up to defend his old comrade. Mirso the Ballbearing fell off his chair in surprise. Lojze the Professor exclaimed, "Crucifix and cruciality!" Zoka the Barman dropped a glass.

Then Mišo stood up and grabbed Velija the Footballer by the arm. "Sorry, pal," he mumbled. "It was an accident." Velija looked at Mišo doubtfully for a moment. "That's all right," he said. "It can happen."

To make thing better, Meho the Paratrooper bought a round of drinks for everybody. However, before the drinks were poured, another tram came round the corner ringing its bell.

Mišo the Heart glanced anxiously at Meho the Paratrooper. "Hey — let's get out of here," he said. "These trams really fuck me up."

"We can't leave yet," replied his friend. "Don't you remember, I've just ordered more drinks?"

Mišo the Heart shuffled nervously in his chair as Zoka the Barman doled out the beers. A few sips later, yet another tram could be heard — seconds out!

Once again Mišo the Heart put up his hands like a boxer. Everybody in the bar was watching, and they all laughed, even Velija the Footballer, who apparently hadn't laughed since the cup match in 1951 when he poked out the eye of Pandurović from Proleter FC in the heat of the moment. It was obvious that everybody liked the washed-out boxer who had nothing left in the world except the memory of a bell. Just for that, Mišo was bought another beer.

The next day he turned up at the Kvarner by himself. The regulars greeted him with looks of delight. Velija the Footballer clapped him on the shoulder. Zoka the Barman, who was wiping the glasses, called out, "Hey you, Heart-Attack, seen any more trams lately?"

Mišo the Heart looked at the barman with mock horror and ordered a beer. When the first tram passed by, Mišo was ready for the bell, and so he just raised his middle finger, but the next one caught him by surprise. The more beer he drank the faster and more confident his reactions became. The regulars, who had deduced as much, kept on buying Mišo beers. His reflexes became part of the daily routine. Only Lojze the Professor doubted that a person could fail to get used to the trams within a few months.

It hardly mattered in the end. As far as the Kvarner regulars were concerned, Mišo the Heart was like the cuckoo in a clock announcing each hour. On days when he didn't show up at the bar, the others felt a kind of emptiness; it was as if they were missing out on some-

# **m** YOUNG CROATIAN WRITERS OF THE NINETIES **o**

thing vital and important. Time slipped through your fingers when Mišo wasn't around. Beer lost its flavour. You couldn't even get drunk on brandy. Empty pockets and impermanence, not to mention the threat of war, these were the only certainties. And yet when Mišo the Heart turned up again the next day, his pals awaited the first tram with a sense of unbridled joy and optimism.

On the sixth of April 1992 a notice was pinned to the window of the Kvarner announcing the death of Lojze the Professor, and there was also news of the first shells to be dropped on Jarčedole. That day the regulars talked more than they drank. With a clear head, Edo the Engineer, Velija the Footballer, Meho the Paratrooper, Mirso the Ballbearing and Stevo the Thief analysed the political situation. *Que sera, sera*, it was decided. But Mato the Villain observed that Lojze the Professor would probably be the last of the boozers to die from cirrhosis in the traditional way. The others shrugged their shoulders.

Just then Mišo the Heart walked through the door. He sat down at his usual table and lit a cigarette. "This match will last a hundred and one rounds," he said through clenched teeth. "Geddit? I won't be KO'd by trams or upper-cuts or your piss-taking. This is what'll kill me!"

He beat the left side of his chest three times and looked meaningfully at everybody present.

"Mišo isn't mad," he went on. "And the heart doesn't have biceps without reason. I know what you all think

when I come down here. If you let me in the door again, it won't be Mišo the Heart any more, but Mišo the Chetnik. Fuck you all! It's only just occurred to you where you are and what's going on, but while the soldiers were sharpening their knives, you fought to buy me drinks. Now it will be Mišo's fault that you didn't catch the last train out of here. Go on, smash my head — so you won't have to think about it later. And fuck you all!"

Mišo the Heart covered his face with his hands. The others were silent. Then Zoka the Barman mumbled awkwardly, "Oh, for fuck's sake, Mišo, I'm a Serb too."

When he didn't respond, Velija the Footballer stood up and was about to say something to Mišo, whom he'd already patted on the shoulder. but it was too late — the boxer jumped at Velija and delivered an almighty punch, the likes of which Bosnia had never seen before. Unsurprisingly, Valija the Footballer collapsed in a heap on the floor.

"Please, Mišo, don't!" pleaded Meho the Paratrooper, on the verge of tear. "It's a dreadful shame."

"What is, you baboon?" Mišo replied. "If you don't know, what's the point in my telling you? But think of the trams — and think of the rest of us. It's a great shame when you talk like this."

Mišo the Heart looked shocked, as if he really had suffered a heart attack. He fell back into his chair, white as a sheet, with an utterly vacant expression on his face. The incident was over in a couple of minutes. It wasn't even

long enough for a tram to go by.

Zoka the Barman poured brandy into a glass and took it over to Mišo's table. For a while nobody else moved and the bar-room was as quiet as a grave. Mišo began to wipe away his tears — and then a crowd of people gathered round his chair. But nobody could think of anything to say. Outside, in the distance, you could hear machine-gun fire and the sound of explosions. Suddenly you noticed that the trams were passing by without ringing the bell. It was as though each soul in the room was passing from one body to another and changing into something that was painful and unrecognisable. That night the regulars parted without a word. The following day a shell exploded in front of the Kvarner, breaking its window. The local hooligans climbed into the bar and ran amok, destroying the place and stealing the booze. Most of Zoka's customers never even came back to see what was left of the Kvarner. Perhaps they moved on to other bars or ended up in another story.

The ex-boxer from Slavija in Banja Luka was shot on the bridge by the First High School. Some witnesses claim the bullet went straight through Mišo's heart. Others say he was struck in the head. The daily newspapers wrote about yet another well-respected athlete who had been cut down by the enemy's hand. And that's all, folks, except to add that most of the trams in the depot were hit by incendiary bombs and are now burned-out wrecks.