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JOSIP BARKOVIĆ — Born at Otočac on January 16, 1918. His latest works present a critical picture of modern society; they have been translated into foreign languages.

Works: *Poems to Freedom*, 1940; *Behind the First Line*, short stories, 1945; *Sons of Freedom*, a novel, 1948; *Three Deaths*, short stories, 1951; *On the Brink of Night*, short stories, 1945; *The Valley of Childhood*, a novel, 1956; *Let's Die for a Moment*, a novel, 1958; *The Green Boy*, short stories, 1960; *Alma*, a novel, 1963; *Floating Ice*, a novel, 1969.



JOSIP BARKOVIĆ

Love Shattered by a River

»AND HE WANTS to take her from me now, now, the damned robber! Just now, when a brilliant career is opening before her, when concert halls are opening for her, and not only in this country, my dear Maestro. Imagine, now...«

They were sitting in a corner of the big hall where they had been meeting since their youth. The Maestro was a well preserved, imposing old man, with keen eyes, who even now, at over seventy, was still able to penetrate into the souls of others, pluck them out of their lethargy, direct them towards broader human aims. Everyone knew it, and Dobrila had managed to organize several meetings like this through her own and her father's friends in order that the Maestro, the last of

those who had tried to do something, should try to persuade her father to go into hospital for treatment. The Maestro was endeavouring to seek out the remnants of the human in the dark depths of this spirit that was rapidly disintegrating and being extinguished, driven to alcohol by failure in life. And the drink had quite undermined an organism that had been weak in the first place.

»I remember our first meetings at the conservatory, Karlo. You came to my piano section somewhat later than the others. Ah yes, that damned poverty! I remember, you were never able to have your own piano—not even later. And then your wife's long drawn-out agony and your other daughter's death. As though it had all happened yesterday. But it's only now, when I listen to Dobrila, that your life seems to acquire its true dimensions. Really, I'm not trying to flatter you, but what Dobrila is today already, is primarily your doing. You yourself have at last succeeded through her success, through what she has yet to give the world. I must say this, Karlo, to you as a younger colleague, that I expect from you the strength to wait and witness her brilliant progress. I wouldn't be a true friend, if I did not tell you that she is frightened for you, for your health. It is a constant pressure on her, that she simply can't shake off, and to be absolutely frank I'm afraid it is questionable whether she will be able to hold out sensitive as she is. Help her! She needs help now more than ever! You must understand, Karlo, you must make an effort! Why, you are only just fifty. You must live for her sake, for what she is going to give us all. You must go into hospital. We've prepared everything. They will take you as an exceptional patient, whom they will look after with appropriate care. I have spoken to the chief consultant especially. I have been friends with his father all my life. He is waiting for you with open arms. He guarantees in advance your stability, the resolution of the tension that has been persecuting you these last years since you lost your wife and daughter. Come, Karlo, listen to me! For your own sake and for Dobrila's! I must not hide anything from you: Dobrila is frail too. She has inherited her fragility from her mother. She needs some new strength, something that is at least a little removed from this rather unrealistic artistic world of ours. He doesn't want to take her away, he doesn't want to ruin her! He is a steady, serious young man, a man who has made a success early in life, without any help from anyone, a man who sincerely loves Dobrila.«

The father was sitting opposite the Maestro, bent and decrepit, his cheeks deeply sunken. He was twisting a little glass of brandy between his fingers, not daring to put it to his lips. His hands were shaking so much that they had constantly to take hold of some object to be steady. He wanted to hide the signs of his agitation, of which he was intensely aware, particularly now, while he was still sober. He tried to listen attentively, but the depression that had settled over his life because of Dobrila's young man, set up such a solid grille against these well-intentioned words, that only occasionally would one slip through the holes, and they, scarcely reached his consciousness.

»I shall go, Maestro, it's very good of you. You see what misery had driven me to. You knew my wife well, and Stanka too. Yes, that's what started it. And then that insinuation, that shameful deprecation, that premature pensioning off. I had 'slackened' they said... The orchestra had to be made younger... Yes, Maestro, I'll go straight

away. I am eternally grateful to you for always being ready to help Dobrila. If that's what you think about her, then I am confident. I shall go! Of course! Everyone needs a doctor from time to time. You can't control your nerves. They need a stronger force, something that will bind them back into a cord, which will connect with life once again. Just let this concert pass. The tension in me will dissolve, I shall give up alcohol. But all the same, Maestro, believe me he will destroy her. He is not an artist. He can't understand her. He is an ordinary trader. The commercial director of 'Musical Instruments Limited'. I saw through him the first time we met. With his keen commercial sense he realized how talented Dobrila was. And, ostensibly, fell in love. With what? I ask you, Maestro, what did he fall in love with? Chopin, Mozart, Beethoven? ... Until he met Dobrila, she told me this once as a joke, he hadn't been to one single concert. He still can't tell an oboe from a flute, a bassoon from a horn. What can a man like that think about the piano, then? He came here from that miserable village on the Drava, he went hungry, completed his training and now he wants to insinuate himself into our world, that young barbarian would like somehow to get his revenge on all of us. I feel it, although people might think: alcohol, he's bemused... It's not that! I think and think for nights on end... I don't sit around in bars. Not a day goes by without my going for a walk right to the park at the edge of town. No, I am in constant touch with the cosmic laws of the human psyche, that can only manifest itself fully through art, and in particular through music. I swear, Maestro, that's how I feel, I can't be wrong; help Dobrila, let her wait to get married, let her belong only to music, to her piano. Now, while she is soaring, she must be as light as a bird. A homely fellow like him will want children straight away into the bargain! And you know quite well what it was that tripped me up... And then, another thing, let me confide my bitter secret in you, as to my own father, he has been a stranger to me from our first meeting. He can't stand me for some reason. Well, Maestro, can a man like that genuinely love my daughter? ...»

If he would only go to hospital, and then to somewhere in the country! To some century-old mansion with a park full of quiet trees. I have met Javor. Could I really be so mistaken in him? No! In this misfortune Javor could save Dobrila, ensure her the peace that is vital to her, so that she can devote herself only to music. She herself had said to me: »If my father refuses to accept him, I shall have to choose. I shan't be able to abandon my father...« Then everything will begin to go downhill. Alongside so seriously sick a man she will never be able to summon the strength to cope with the efforts she will have to put into polishing this great talent of hers—one that is rarely met with in our country...

»Well, listen, my friend. If you simply can't decide on treatment before Dobrila's concert, then go to your sister's until then. That little town is so beautiful, nature has just begun to awaken, then long walk in the surrounding hills. That will strengthen you. And then come back in time for the concert. That way Dobrila will be able to prepare calmly for her début, and be confident that you are in good hands.«

He surprised them by the way he immediately accepted this advice. He would spend the fortnight that still remained until the concert at

his sister's house, in the country—which was already being brought vividly to life by the saps of spring.

His sister reduced his drinking to half a bottle of brandy a day. He began both to eat and to sleep more peacefully without those terrible visions that had shaken Dobrila to the core while she had watched over him.

»Listen to me for once, dear girl,« Javor murmured to her. »You're at the end of your strength. Your nerves are trembling like poplar leaves before a storm. You don't have the right to shut yourself away and destroy yourself. A senseless sacrifice, a sacrifice without a worthy object, devalues everything. You see what headway your energetic aunt is making with him. You are too soft. And one weakness provokes another...«

She was sitting in his lap, her legs folded under her, a little frightened, with a rankling clot of repressed fear, in the power of which she had been living for a long time now. She listened to this keen voice, felt his strong, broad chest, firm thighs and hands that knew how to direct.—He is right, she thought, but a knot of fear caught in her throat and would dissolve only when his hands carressed her breasts in a steady rhythm, when his arm slipped round her waist. She trembled with the desire to melt completely in him and so free herself from the nightmare that was stifling her.

»You'll write and tell him that the concert is on Wednesday. By Monday night it will all be over. The Maestro has promised that he'll give his review to the newspapers straight away the next day. On Wednesday morning he'll read the papers and at the same time he'll get your anxious letter:—Why didn't he come to the concert, didn't he get your telegram on Sunday? But, of course! the telegram must have got lost somewhere because it was Sunday! And that's how this unfortunate confusion came about!«

Through this stifled knot of fear, she felt that she should not agree to this proposal. But all the same it was perfectly clear, the closer her concert came the more he would drink to calm his nerves and it would be worse and worse every evening. She would have to watch by him at night to chase away the blood-thirsty spiders which had ensnared him in their nets, drive out of his bed the thousands of centipedes which were pouring towards his face, the insolent rats that were rushing to gnaw at his feet.

»I love your attentiveness, I love your care, I love the look you caress me with. I love your arms when they hug me, when your hands caress my breasts, when my cheeks tingle with fire and they set my skin alight, when they reduce me to my elements and finally—when I feel from your whole being that wild cry in the primeval rhythm that permeates us to the very core...«

Help me this once! Be patient with him! He gave me light, he led me out of the magma, his hands gave me the gift of the first vibrations of sound. Care for us both, my dearest, for we are bound by something deeper than parental ties.«

On Wednesday morning, alert and lively, at breakfast the father opened the paper. He had hardly slept the whole night thinking only about the bus that was to take him back to the big town at midday.

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He leafed quickly through the titles, looking for the page where there might be a short notice, an announcement of the evening's concert. On the new page the first thing he saw was her eyes. Appealing, with a strange reflection of unfamiliar strength and depth in them.

But then... He had never experienced such fury as took hold of him now. The nurse and the chauffeur who rushed up with the doctor, had to hold him firmly while the doctor gave him a large dose of morphine. They put him into bed and went away. The sister called her daughter from her office to help her take care of him. He did not wake until towards evening. Dazed, vacant, feeble, with hardly a whiff of life in him. He asked only for a little glass of brandy. He stayed like that for a long time, passive, speechless. And then towards sunset an increasingly strong wind began to blow. It brought through the open window an intense smell of blossoming fruit trees. The more wildly the wind howled in the drainpipes and through the rickety windows the more restless he became. He got up, washed, dressed smartly and ate something, to appease his sister and niece. He drank another two small glasses of brandy, and even smiled a little as he set out for his walk.

The wind was becoming more and more ferocious. An irresistible craving overcame him to set off towards a destination that could soothe the fury that was whirling within him. Large, heavy clouds suddenly darkened and closed the horizon on all sides. The wind tore shrieking through the clumps of trees he was passing through, it carried off the blossom petals from the fruit trees, lifted the already rotten leaves from the earth and whipped up tears in his eyes.

From time to time he would smile at his own cunning as he took out from under his spring coat the bottle of brandy that he had taken unnoticed from the kitchen cupboard, and knocked back mouthful after mouthful.

»I don't need a bus! I'll make it by dawn! If I don't get all the way there by morning someone will give me a lift from the road.«

The wind suddenly whipped down the valley like a maddened horse. It was already carrying large drops of cold rain on its mane. It darkened and barred the roads, making crosses against the trees.

The darkness had become absolutely impenetrable. He stumbled but picked himself up again. The bottle had rolled away somewhere by this time and that seemed to him the final treachery. Thunder was heard in the distance, and great streaks of lightning forked across the sky.

»I'm coming to you!« He wanted to utter her name, but his seething hatred would not let that word pass his lips. »I want to look into your eyes once more, right into the pupils, to see why you betrayed me...«

He had quite lost his way, had no idea where he was. He moved slowly, more and more slowly. He no longer knew how long he had been pushing his way through the shrubs as he went down into the valley. And then, quite paralysed with cold and fatigue, through all the uproar, and the increasingly heavy rain, he caught sight of an ordinary wood. Before he had made out what it was that barred his way, the earth gave way beneath him, and he felt the icy embrace of cold water. The swollen river grabbed him greedily and for just a moment he snatched hold of a thin willow branch. And only then did

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a cry, unusually strong in such an exhausted body, dominating all that thunder in the heavens—a cry, illuminated by a vast streak of lightning, hurl up over the entire valley that last, to him most precious, word:

»Dobri!«

Translated by Celia Williams