

84/2

FOUR SHORT STORIES

DAVOR SLAMNIG

THE DRUG (Droga)

»No,« she thought, »I don't dare wake up.«
And from the fear that she would wake up, of course, she woke up. And morning was the worst of all. Instead of being cheered up by the rays of sun that stole through her sleepy lashes, she felt only a cold airless abyss in the center of her body and soul, that eerie misery like what a person feels when they go to bed at three at night and have to wake up at five in the morning, in the morning when life looks like a meaningless, morbid, masochistic game, and when they could easily quit playing that game.

She glanced at the clock. It was two in the afternoon. She had slept for sixteen hours. There was no hope of falling asleep again. She had to get up, she had to eat something, she had to get hold of a little. . .

But there was no money. She couldn't work any more, she couldn't concentrate, she kept fainting. But she somehow had to get to what she couldn't do without.

»Now I'm going to get up,« she announced to herself. However, she sat up in bed too quickly. Blackish-orange spots danced before her eyes. »I have to be careful.«

She collected the clothes strewn around the dusty floor and pulled them on herself. She didn't raise the blinds on the windows. The sun was strong, clear, pure, good, she would have shriveled up in front of it like a demon before the cross.

She sat down beside the telephone and put it gently between her trembling knees.

»Hello?«

»Hello, Branko, is that you?«

»Yes,« a man's voice answered wearily. »Who is it?«

»Vera.«

The voice was silent for a while.

»So?« it finally said.

»Branko, you have any?«

»I've told you a hundred times, Vera, not on the telephone!«

»Branko, I need it,« she said, on the brink of tears.

»You don't have any money, of course?«

»I don't,« she whispered.

»Come over at ten this evening.«

»Not until ten? But, Branko, I'm up a creek!«

»Vera!« said the voice, as if scolding a little child.

»All right, at ten,« she said, crushed. Something clicked in the receiver and it started to buzz.

She turned on the television. »I have to hold on somehow till ten.«

She carefully watched the Sunday midday program, trying to enjoy what was happening on the screen, trying to ignore the fact that it was infinitely stupid, and that time was moving as slowly as a cloud of cigarette smoke in a room without a draft.

And then Vlado came. His visit was more horrible for her than the long, lonely waiting. Love kept them together, while her dependency, which she couldn't give up even in the name of love, kept them apart. And, worst of all, she couldn't keep herself from asking him, »Did you bring a little. . .?«

And he, of course, answered as he had already answered her a thousand times:

»No, and you know very well that I never will, that I never could do it. And no matter how I suffer because of your suffering, I know that sort of solution is so temporary that it can't be called a

1 XA

solution at all. And if I gave you any money, I know exactly what you'd spend it on.«

She lay on the bed and smoked, unsuccessfully fighting back her tears, while he filled her refrigerator with food.

»Vera«, he said and sat down by her on the bed.

»Vera.« he said again, and suddenly found himself in her desperate embrace. He kissed her forehead, her eyes, lips, neck.

»No, Vlado, not today, no way today. . .« she wept by his ear. But love had already forgotten the situation and the reasons, and took hold of their bodies. All the hopelessness melted into tenderness, all the pain into passion.

And afterwards, clinging to one another, they didn't talk. Their thoughts wandered along well-trodden paths, which were so twisted that the end always came back to the beginning.

»I'm going«, he said and got up.

»Vlado, stay, please«, she said.

»I have to go«.

»Vlado, you don't know how important it is to me for you to stay here now!« she said, convinced that she would never go to that shameful appointment at ten, that she could really give it up forever, if only Vlado would stay with her that night.

»Vera.« Vlado said the same way the voice on the phone had said it. And it meant just the same thing: »Why do you ask for the impossible, Vera, when you know it's impossible?«

He left.

Existence once again became a cold, hard, metal cube that jabbed her in the chest with its sharp corners.

At half-past nine she tried unsuccessfully to tidy herself up, then put on her coat and went out. At exactly ten she rang at the door of Branko's apartment.

»Just a minute«, Branko laughed. »So you really are up a creek. Come on, come in. Take off your coat«.

In the room sat a big, fat, dark man, obviously drunk.

»This is my good friend Mario. Mario, this is my good friend Vera«.

Vera tried to smile.

»I have some things to do now, I'll have to retire to my office«, said Branko, grinning and winking.

»Branko, give me a little now!« she said in a panic.

»Afterwards. And then only if you do a good job«, Branko laughed and shoved her in the backside so that she flew onto the couch. There Mario grabbed her.

»Have fun«, said Branko and went out of the room.

And Mario began to fumble all over her, in those holy parts of her body in which she had taken Vlado, with such tenderness and desire, a few hours before. And while her brain writhed with disgust and shame, her body enjoyed it just the same way as before. She was infinitely loathsome to herself.

After an eternity Mario got up, put his clothes on and went out. She heard how he went into the other room, how he and Branko talked and snickered together, and how Mario left the apartment. Only then she got dressed, with trembling knees, and went to Branko.

»Give it to me now«, she demanded.

»Wait a second, the customer had some complaints. . .« Branko laughed.

»GIVE IT TO ME!« she screamed.

»No panic, no panic. Here,« he said and gave her a little bag filled with powder.

»Only that much?« she asked.

»You can get less, if you want,« Branko lost his temper. »I'll need you again soon. And now get lost.«

On the way home she had to restrain herself to keep from running. She squeezed the little bag in her pocket.

»Who knows what he really gave me. Who knows if it's worth anything«, she thought, frightened. She ran up the stairs, unlocked the door of her apartment, locked it behind her and hurried into the kitchen.

Her hand shook as she opened the little packet of powder. She opened it, looked inside, smelled it, licked her finger, dipped it into the powder and put it to her lips. She gave a deep sigh of relief – Branko hadn't cheated her. The coffee was excellent.

THE SILENCE (Tajac)

An uncomfortable silence took over a group of friends. People anxiously combed their brains, searching for the slightest shadow of a potential fresh sentence, but all they could come up with were sighs.

»Ah«, said Boris.

But what suffering, worry or desire it was that forced that »ah« out of him, that was not expounded.

»Yes, yes«, agreed Irena. People were falling deeper and deeper into the mire of exchanging emotions without a rational framework. They bunched up their scarves and tried to at least remember what they had been talking about before the silence. Perhaps the last topic wasn't entirely exhausted, perhaps something could be said in addition, without any obligation, and when a free and easy din of voices develops in a group, the individual can inconspicuously disappear – »I'm going to the john«, a person would say, and simply wouldn't come back. By the time they remember: »Where's Zoran?«, he's already far away, in the safety of lunch, cramming stuffed cabbage into his mouth and reading a book.

But none of that. The last topic had evaporated into what can't be called the past, because it didn't register in the memory. Only by examining the present situation – here I am, sitting with my friends at a table – do we arrive at the conclusion that some sort of topic must have existed.

Zoran was sitting and smiling as if something interesting had occurred to him, but as if he felt that it really had nothing to do with present company and so didn't want to say what it was about.

»What are you laughing about?« Ksenia asked him, because his blank gaze had happened to come to rest on her new shoes.

»Oh, nothing«, said Zoran, extinguished the smile and started staring out the window. His mind was completely blank.

Irena was counting to herself. »The disgusting weather today« – we already said that. »What's on at the movies« – we already said that. »Did anyone see that on TV yesterday« – we already said that. »What time is it« – I already asked that, and I didn't leave. I can't light a cigarette, I just put one out. »Ha-ha«, she laughed, looking at the floor.

»What are you laughing about?« Ksenia asked her, because Irena's blank gaze had come to rest on her new shoes. Are they really laughing at my shoes? Or are they snickering because they don't have anything to say, just like me? If I ask them what's wrong with my shoes, they might answer that they weren't even looking at them. Or they might say that they're hideous. Better not to ask anything.

»It's not important«, said Irena.

Oh, so it's not important that my shoes are hideous, is it? Or you're laughing about nothing and you think that doesn't concern me? Maybe you think it doesn't concern me that I have hideous shoes? Perhaps you think I don't know that I have hideous shoes?

Boris puffed his cheeks full of air, then let it out through a little opening in the left-hand corner of his lips. »Pffff«. After that the situation seemed to him to be even more hopeless. He started tapping his fingers on the table. Then that seemed stupid to him, so he stopped. He started humming some sort of melody. The melody wasn't a melody that already existed, nor could it be said that Boris was improvising it at that moment, since he wasn't putting any sort of conscious effort into giving it an esthetic shape. The notes came out by themselves, automatically. He hummed very softly.

»What?« Irena asked, because she thought he had said something.

»Nothing. Just humming«, apologized Boris and stopped humming.

Zoran, in order to stare out the window, has to keep his head in a position that made his neck hurt. He wanted to put his head back into the previous position, but then he would have to turn his face towards the others. They might interpret that as if he wanted to say something to them. After he said nothing, they would smile at him inquiringly. To that he would have to smile apologetically, if he kept on saying nothing. He decided to keep his head in the same position a little longer. His neck was hurting at a constant intensity, but the pain was getting on his nerves more and more.

Irena felt that she had to say something now at any cost, for otherwise something terrible would happen. I'll say that something terrible's going to happen, she thought. But if I say that, then I've already said something, something, so the terrible thing won't

happen. »And what's supposed to happen?« someone will ask me and laugh, the idiot. I'm going to say nothing. Just nothing. Let whatever it is happen. She felt herself sweating. It seemed to her that everyone was breathing harder. She coughed to clear her throat.

Ksenia heard Irena cough and immediately felt an irresistible urge to cough herself. How stupid, she thought. Why do I have to cough now too? There was all that time before anyone cleared their throat, but I have to get obsessed with it right after Irena coughs. I just won't. Her throat contracted with the desire to cough.

Boris coughed.

Ksenia coughed.

»One coughs, and right away all of them cough«, thought Zoran. His neck was on fire. He turned his head toward the others. Because of the coughing they were all staring at the floor in embarrassment. They're staring at my hideous shoes again, thought Ksenia. Zoran sighed with relief. They didn't even notice that I turned my head. Ksenia hid her feet under her chair and immediately regretted it.

Enough time has gone by since I put out the last one, so now if I light up a new one there's no danger of anyone thinking I'm a chain smoker, thought Irena and lit up a cigarette. Irena's a chain smoker, thought Ksenia, but right now I'd rather light up a new one as well than say, »Irena, you're a chain smoker«. because really it's none of my business, she could say. Ksenia lit up a cigarette.

I said something last. I said something last, Boris repeated to himself, having been the last to say, »Nothing. Just humming«. Let someone else say something now, they can't expect me to say something again. The words »nothing« and »humming« resounded in his head as if someone had recorded them on a tape loop. »Nothing. Humming«.

Zoran heard Boris unconsciously tapping his foot on the floor, and realized that he himself was also unconsciously tapping his foot on the floor in the same rhythm. He stopped at once. Boris tapped out two more bars, then he stopped too. No one moved any more. Only the soft sounds of breathing and an occasional tic at the corner of someone's mouth revealed that these were living beings.

Inside themselves they were running through meadows dotted with dandelions, they felled the wild

rhinoceros with one perfect shot above the left eye, they kissed passionately beside a deafening sea, they kissed once again, and once again, they lifted a burden, they carried their stones, they shouted and shouted.

»How boring«, said Irena.

»Dreadful«, said Ksenia.

»Let's get out of here«, said Boris.

»Wait till I finish my beer«, said Zoran.

»You've been drinking it for a hundred years already«, said Boris.

And that was the end of the silence.

THE POTATO FAMILY

(Krumpirova rodbina)

Zorica loved to eat. And just as she was about to eat up this one potato, the potato spoke up in its potato voice and said, »Don't me eat, and I'll grant one wish you!«

»Oh yeah?« said Zorica, and started poking at it with her fork.

»Ow, ow, that's me hurting«! it squealed.

»I'd like to be thin«, lamented Zorica. She was a bit plump, to put it mildly.

»You shall be thin – if you don't eat me. And if you spare my other brother potatoes, and my nephew spaghetti, and my niece rice. . .«

»Some magic«, said Zorica, impaled it on her fork, put it in her mouth, chewed it up and swallowed. She felt hov nicely the little potato settled into her somach. »It's nice to be thin, but it's also nice to eat«, she pondered good-humoredly. »It's better to be sincerely fat than hypocritically thin. Besides, it's never too late for a change. People have lost more weight than this before«.

She had in mind the complicated, somewhat sad, but instructive example of her close friend Doris's mother, Marta. As a young woman Marta had been very fat, and very happy, until Ernest, a young crop-duster pilot, came into her life. Of course, she fell in love with him, and the problems began.

Ernest, perhaps because of the nature of his profession, had an unusual aversion to any excess of weight, including that of the body. He loved her witty phlegmatism, her disarming cheerfulness, but on the inevitable sexual plane he remained cold. The creak of a bed beneath her opulent body made Ernest see visions of an airplane wing broken in mid-flight.

Marta decided to take a desperate step. She started on a dangerous diet: for a whole month she ate only green apples and drank only warm water. She lost forty pounds, bought a new wardrobe, and went to show herself to Ernest.

Ernest's surprise first developed into enthusiasm, then into arousal. And thus, on a folding bed in a bachelor hotel room, for the first time they flew together without restraint over precipitous erotic pinnacles. Only after the very last of the fuel was gone did they glide downward, still embracing one another, to the misty airport of sleep. The pilot dreamed of flying in and out of sun-drenched clouds, the girl dreamed of turkey with dumplings.

And so the first ecstatic weeks went by. The whirlwind of passion was interrupted only by sleep and by Ernest's job. While he was flying she waited for him, reading the papers, making endless cups of coffee without sugar and smoking cigarette after cigarette. Meanwhile, in his airplane, Ernest thought about her constantly. One day he drew a huge but short-lived heart with insecticide in the sky above her apartment building. The residents developed various ailments, such as watery eyes and acute inflammation of the respiratory tract, and so complained to the crop-dusting company, »Aeroflit«. Ernest was fired from his job.

The couple was suddenly confronted with those bleaker aspects of everyday life, which crawl out of the woodwork the moment there's a lull in the intoxication of »higher« feelings and »lower« passions. Ernest accused her of smoking too much. Marta insisted that it made it easier to control her appetite, he said there was no need for her to make sacrifices because of him, she started crying and said that he hated her because he thought it was her fault that he couldn't fly. Ernest loudly asked what had happened to the person he had known before, and how could a cheerful, carefree girl manage in such a

short time to turn into a peevish shrew. In short, they broke up.

After she was flung from the flowery plateau of happiness, which she had achieved with so much self-denial, back into the abyss of acute apathy. Marta returned to the refrigerator. After three gloomy weeks she had regained her original weight, but the pain still did not cease. However, after two months, when she reached the imposing figure of 275 pounds, her fat tissue, like a sponge, soaked up the last drops of depression. She contentedly bit into the last piece of pumpkin pie and concluded that life, if you looked at it the right way, was not altogether bad.

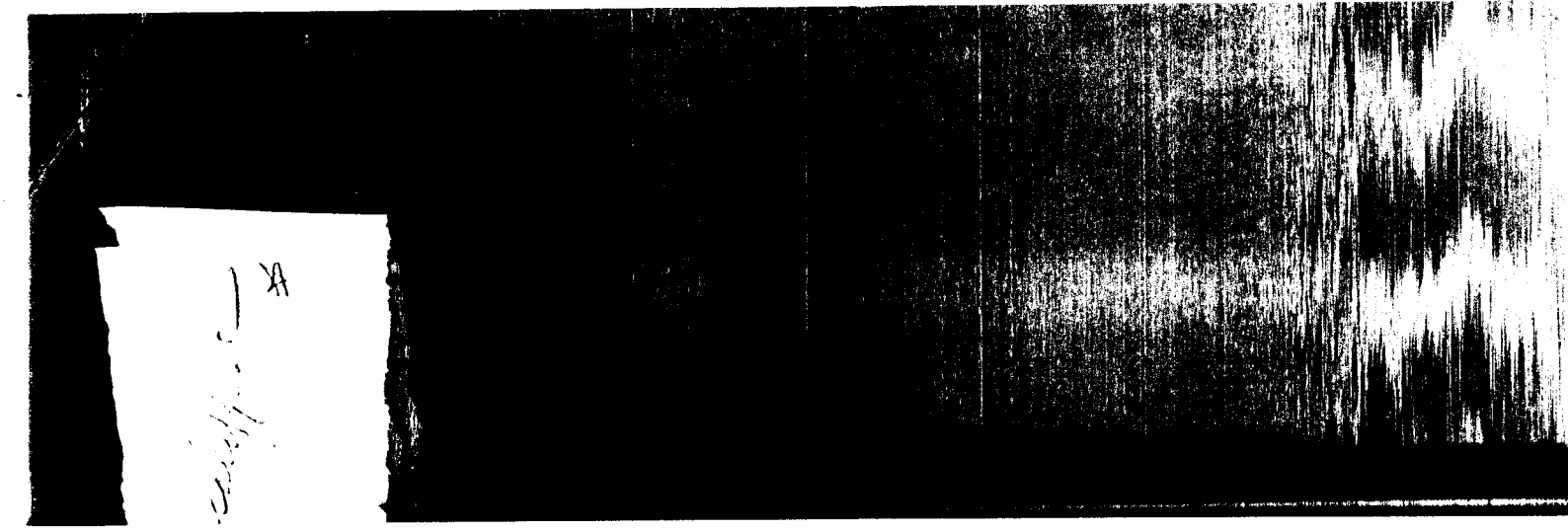
In the closet she discovered her graduation dress, which for sentimental reasons had escaped alteration during the »hungry months«. She let it out a bit and went with her girlfriends to a dance at the »Palace«. There she met a very attractive, very heavy blond fellow and danced with him all evening. Seeing their faces, lit up with happiness, no one could be upset that they were taking up space on the dance floor that could easily have accommodated four lesser couples.

Later, during the moonlit walk to her house, they talked about all sorts of things. His name was Damir, he worked in a meat-processing plant, in the sausage division. He asserted that he weighed 225 pounds, not without a certain bashful pride. She felt a stab of pain in her heart, but didn't let herself hesitate in the conviction that any dishonesty in such questions could bring on another catastrophe. She admitted that she was heavier than he was, and was prepared for the worst. Instead, he hugged her tenderly to his belly; it was their first kiss.

When their lips parted after a long, sweet moment, Damir whispered in her ear that her luxuriant abundance awoke certain other appetites in him, which he proved a little later, in the doorway.

They got married a week later. »We would have done it sooner, if we'd found a proper lamb right away.« Damir still joked. »I told her: Marta, marry me, whatever happens, there'll always be a sausage in the house!«

Zorica laughed to herself, ate one more of the potato's brothers, sister carrot, and bit off a piece of uncle bread with auntie paté. As soon as she recalled Marta's pointless sufferings, any sort of restraint



would seem to be an unpardonable sin against herself. She was suddenly awakened from her day-dreaming, however, by a vague sense of emptiness. She looked down at the table and saw that it was bare. She had eaten up the whole potato family.

»Am I satisfied?« she asked herself. »I'm not hungry. But is satisfaction simply the absence of hunger? After all, we aren't animals. Satiation is the absence of enjoyment. We feel the relaxed fullness of satiation only when food no longer offers us enjoyment; and then we top it off with one last slice of good cheese«.

She moved towards the refrigerator. White cabinet, she thought, what fine things are you hiding in your cold den? The glow of the little light, which is always on inside, illuminated the food in its multicolored forms.* Hm, hmm – how to begin?

There, first a ham and cheese sandwich, so a person has something to eat while cooking. Then oil in the frying pan, and – voilà! – four fried eggs. »And there's grandpa cucumber!« she said merrily and chopped it up. Once she had eaten that, in order to have something warm in her stomach, she put cousin sauerkraut from yesterday on to heat, and in the mean time munched on great-uncle bacon and onion. And along with the sauerkraut – lots of bread.

That, altogether, was the whole refrigerator, if you don't count the mustard and ice cubes.

»Well, that was – really nice«, she said to herself, enjoying her capacity for enjoyment. If only it could be like this all the time, she thought. Who knows. . . willpower is important. Willpower is the only way to vanquish any sort of self-styled physical limitations.

In the pantry were the canned foods, which she ate with pasta, rice and pickles. The time came to go on to desert. The jars of jam, the chocolate cakes, the bon-bons went past one by one. She felt a great sense of power, as if a flower of perpetual delight was opening within her. But desert had at the same time awakened associations with completion, with some sort of climax, which frightened Zorica.

There remained only the raisins, and the bag had already been started. She ate them more and more slowly, and then in a moment of panic stuffed them all into her mouth. Was this the end? She looked all around with wide-open eyes.

»Contentment is the embodiment of Good, contentment ennobles the soul, contentment is the only

guidepost!« she cried. »If a person feels contentment, then he is contented, and that is evidence that he feels contentment, which proves that he is contented. . . But what is this? I ask you, oh empty shelves! How vigorously I aimed towards my goal; what a super-human effort I invested in moving the frontiers of my capacity for the allures of enjoyment towards infinity itself! And now, when I am ready to consume everything – to eat forever with constant endeavor (I alleviate the horrible truth with a jest) – there's no more food. I mean, is that fair?«

The empty shelves were mutely silent, as if they could be silent in some other way.

»But what's this I see?!« Indeed, on the lower left, under the bottom shelf, there was a basket sticking out. Zorica peered into the basket.

»Who else could it be? Why, it's the potato's little brothers! Could there be any more appropriate means to complete my enterprise? Since your dear brother gave me the original impulse, so you shall provide the final charge, which will lift me into a state of all-inclusive ecstasy!«

The little potatoes trembled in the basket.

»I shall cook you and eat you with mustard!«

At that moment something stirred in the pantry, below the carafe of vinegar.

»No you won't, Zorica«, came a deep voice.

»Who's that talking?« she shrieked furiously, interrupted in the final phase of her exaltation. »Is it some hidden smoked ham which has been maturing in a cool, dark place for the plate of a gourmet? Or is it merely a tin of domestic sardines which are likewise well-known abroad? Come out into the light, shy victuals, for the time has come for you to fulfill your original purpose«.

Out of the darkness rumbled a gigantic tuber, covered with cobwebs and mildew. It was a yard in diameter and was entirely black, except for the eyes, which gleamed with a yellow radiance and suddenly began to grow thick green sprouts.

»I am Daddy Potato«, said the potato, »and I've come to get you«.

Zorica tried to run away, but the pantry door had become too narrow for her bulging body. She pushed and pushed but couldn't get out. Soon it was all over.

* It is widely believed that the light goes off when the refrigerator door closes. This is refuted by certain recent experiments.

HAND ON HAND

(Cajger na cajgeru)

There exists a triangular area where tulips grow, and in the center stands a clock, the street model, maintained by Đ. Pogača.

Dunja was walking around the triangle and looking at the tulips. The triangle, depending on Dunja's position, was sometimes isosceles, but most often scalene. The tulips were more or less uniformly arranged, but that, as far as they were concerned, was the extent of their mathematical orderliness. »If these people waiting for the streetcar weren't giving me funny looks, I could stare at them for hours«, Dunja thought to herself. »Then again, as far as the people are concerned, I could be waiting for the streetcar too. So if they're waiting for number nine, number nine comes, I'm waiting for number twelve, they get on number nine and so long. If they're waiting for number twelve, number twelve comes, they load up, I stay behind and so long. And what they think to themselves while they're holding the bars is their problem«.

»And what are you waiting for, number thirteen? It doesn't come through here. You'll have to hoof it to Tuheljski spa. Good thing you have a ladder, at least you won't drown. And if you're short of cash, you can easily go over the wall«, she said to a man with a ladder, who was persistently not taking advantage of public transportation service, regardless of the number.

»I am Đ. Pogača«, said the man.

»Don't tell me. . . You are the mysterious Đ. Pogača, protector of public clocks, whom no one has ever seen? I thought you were only a mythological personification of the symbol of the self-sacrificing clock-altruist, and now you appear, flesh and blood, in broad daylight, before a rather large audience, whose wait for the blue vehicle has suddenly and without extra charge been transformed into an encounter with the legendary repairman? Now they'll all dash over, fall to their knees on the ground and ask for autographs«.

The mysterious Đ. Pogača smiled mysteriously. The people waiting kept right on waiting, motionless, heads turned to the left, gazing into the unknown.

»They don't see me«, he couldn't resist saying. Dunja started trembling.

»You're trembling?« Đ. asked with concern.

»I have only now realized the pregnancy of this moment«.

»The best antidote to that is mindless small talk. Say something, fast, just by the way«.

Dunja, however, remained mute and vibrating. »I can't think of anything spontaneous«, she confessed. »Are you, uh, going to repair that clock now?«

»Ah, my heart could fail at such a question, but I don't let emotions get the better of me while I'm on the job. Listen carefully. The difference between repair and maintenance is so great that they have practically nothing in common, so to describe the difference is practically pointless. I'm aware of the fact that people set much more store by an ordinary, banal, mechanistic-causal Repair, while regarding Maintenance (which, in my opinion, is possibly the sole application of the technique of Equalization of Perception and Action, in other words the realization of the theory of Individual Omnipotence) as just as insignificant as, e. g., Hygiene. Why is that so? It's only one of the bitter fruits of the general human tendency to consider the incomprehensible unimportant, at least as long as the TV work, and when it goes on the blink they hit the side of it. If that doesn't help, then comes the next phase, in which the unintelligible is seen as intelligible, i. e., they bang it on the top. Is that better?«

»I think it is.«

»Well, then I'll get to work«, announced Pogača and leaned the ladder against the clock.

»Can I go up too?« asked Dunja.

»My sincerity has no limits. It would be, namely, a pleasure«, said Đ. gallantly.

Dunja sat on the clock and looked down. »It's equilateral after all«, she remarked.

»Yes, that's one of the advantages of working in high places«, agreed Pogača and grasped the clock in his hands.

»What are you doing now?«

»Maintaining, as the word itself says. You see, I constantly maintain all the clocks I maintain (which, anyway, is written on them) from a distance, but the nature of the job requires occasional physical contact, similar to love«.

»Then why are your clocks always wrong?«

1 X
87/2

»Wrong, right. . . It's funny how people don't understand the elastic nature of time and insist on thinking of it as a ruler with seconds instead of inches. They couldn't imagine representing time as a plate of spaghetti! That's why I withdrew from public life. Hell, an ordinary clock-maker would know how to set a clock! What I do is something entirely different«!

And Dunja, being seated on the clock, felt that something entirely different was happening to it. Pogača's forehead was beaded with sweat. She wiped it with a tissue. He glanced at her gratefully. And then, if it hadn't already, something began to stream through them.

It was love.

The hand on the clock began to go round in unusual directions. Time was wandering, à la Milanese.

»Now I have to go. I still have work to do«, said Đ.

»Go? Work?« Dunja's thoughts still hadn't rearranged themselves into the designated compartments.

»I want to give you a present«. He took a little black box out of his pocket and put it in her hand.

»A present«? Dunja suddenly pulled herself together. »Fuck the present! Love, just like clock maintenance, requires occasional physical contact! Will I ever see you again«?

However, the defender of public clocks, the self-sacrificing clock-altruist and legendary repairman had already vanished.

Dunja opened the little box. Inside it was a small silver woman's watch in the shape of a tulip. And on the dial it said, in tiny letters:

Maintained by Đ. Pogača.