



MILOŠ K. ILIĆ

# THE CHILDREN OF NEVERVILLE

## **The Children of Neverville**





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Miloš K. Ilić

Translated by  
John K. Cox



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# **“It’s Like I’m Saying Something I Never Learned”: Writing the Children, Writing the War**

John K. Cox

Introduction to the novel *The Children of Neverville* (Miloš K. Ilić)

In downtown Belgrade, near the *Želeni venac* outdoor market and bus hub, there is an old piece of graffiti high up on a wall: *MI DECA IŽ RATA NE ŽNA SE KO JE TATA* (We are children of the war, but no one knows who our dad is). This rhyming stanza is similar to many others from Eastern Europe, but it conveys more profound content than most. Although the boys and girls in Miloš K. Ilić’s novel *The Children of Neverville* do not necessarily lack parents, the rift between generations could not be greater in this novel. And the war—this novel is not about the wars of the 1990s in the western Balkans, and yet it is—the war seeps into every nook and fiber and screws everything up. What if it didn’t really matter at all who your dad was, or your mom? In this teenage world, as self-absorbed and self-referential as all such worlds are, unprecedented social conflicts



appear. Combined with psychological pressures new and old, and weapons both vintage and innovative, but increasingly horrifying, the teenagers of the mid-sized Serbian city of Neverville produce and then try (and “try” is the operative word here) to survive a level of violence that their immature minds and overwhelmed relationships cannot handle.

This is a serious and tragic novel about young people in an exploding country. The questions it raises about how we raise our children, or, better, the models and modes of behavior we exemplify and valorize for young people in general, are deeply unsettling. Behavior has sources. Wars, but also violence in general, as well as bullying and groupthink and conformity, have their sources and their effects. This is not a political book. One could take interpretations of the novel in that direction, or towards a critique of materialism or the social contract or modern family life. But for this observer, the main point is that we do not live in bubbles. Generational connections matter, for better and for worse, and “grown-up” society thrusts onto young people far more challenges than their temporary “innocence” can handle. Ilić’s work manages to be entertaining in places, although we are never more than a few pages from an awkward glimpse of sexual development or a sobering act of violence. The book also reminds us of some of the peculiarities and emotional urgencies and even joys of youth, wherever it is spent. But the brilliance and coherence of this novel drops us before the opened, hypnotic door of the tragic. Tragedy is an overused word today, and everything claws for our attention everywhere, all the time. But the authenticity of this novel is beyond visual or lexical scrambling: we are at catastrophe. Welcome to ground zero.

## About the Author

Miloš K. Ilić was born in 1987 in Pančevo, Serbia. At that time, Pančevo was part of Yugoslavia. The country (as in, sovereign state formation) to which this sizable city belongs has changed twice since

then, as Yugoslavia shrank and Serbia renamed itself. Then as now, Pančevo is a proud industrial city located just down the Danube from Belgrade. But it has a separate identity from the massive nearby capital, and not just a geographic or economic one. It has long been the cultural hub of the southern Vojvodina (or, more precisely, the southern part of that Banat, the historical region that comprises the lion's share of what we now call the Vojvodina) and it remains a vibrant center for the arts; it has not (yet) fully become a bedroom suburb of Belgrade. Pančevo is intimately connected to the agricultural and multi-cultural life of the many districts and communities to its north, spread out over the flat, fertile Central European plains.

Miloš K. Ilić grew up in Pančevo, which serves as a model for the city in this rather autobiographical novel, and he studied Theater at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, part of the University of the Arts in Belgrade. His early writing was concentrated in theater and radio, but so far it is short-story writing that has brought him the most critical success. This is his first novel, but more long-form fiction from Ilić should arrive soon. His work in film, television, and radio is ongoing and is poised to expand. He regularly teaches classes on creative writing to teenagers in Pančevo.

Ilić has published extensively under pseudonyms, including Ivan Drnčula, Kosta Carić, Ana Miloš, Vladan Olgin, and Gordana Divjak. From 2020 to 2023, Ilić conducted a socio-literary experiment, in which he published under a female pseudonym. He also maintained a social media presence under this name, Ana Miloš, until he revealed the experiment in a book of nonfiction. His stated purpose was to explore the workings of the Serbian literary scene by testing its publishing practices and its prevailing standards of criticism. In addition to the published volumes below, he has many short stories, screenplays, radio dramas (that very Serbian public-media art form), essays and blogs to his credit. Some of his stories have appeared in English, French, and Italian translation. He has won five significant prizes for his published works.

Short story collections:

*Priče o pivu* (Beograd: Laguna, 2008)

*Umorni kao psi* (Kikinda: Partizanska knjiga, 2017)

*Kraj raspusta i druge priče* (Beograd: Booka, 2021; earlier version 2019)

*Knjiga štampana u nula primeraka* (Beograd: Plato, 2024)

Novel:

*Deca nedodina* (Beograd: Plato, 2022)

Edited volume of short stories:

*Mačka je mačka je mačka je mačka: Antologija savremene srpske proze o mačkama* (Beograd: Plato, 2023)

Poetry:

*Govori grad* (Beograd: Književna radionica Rašić, 2020)

Drama:

*Čovek bez mase* (Požarevac: Narodna biblioteka 'Ilija M. Petrović', 2017).

Nonfiction:

*Po zanimanju: Ana Miloš* (Beograd: Plato, 2023)

When asked why he writes, Ilić maintains that:

The answer [to this question] is almost always different. But there will be no answer like “because I have to say something important.” It is much more rudimentary or therapeutic than that. I am always writing a bunch of stuff. Some of it gets published or recorded or filmed or played and some of it doesn’t. But I truly believe that the most precise and honest answer that I can give is: because I feel relieved when I write. All the bad thoughts are gone, all physical and mental anxiety vanishes, [and] the world almost seems logical.

Ilić lives and works in Belgrade and Pančevo.

## About This Book

The beginning of my appreciation of this book, as a reader and as a translator, was the recognition that, in Rambo's attitudes and interactions, all the basic elements of childhood emotionality are present: fear, scorn, play, boredom with school, impatience with authority, search for belonging, etc. Then I realized just how carefully the author constructed Rambo's character. He is eloquent and honest in his youthful way, and only partially but still movingly innocent; he is sarcastic but vulnerable. Not much background is needed to understand this work, but the set of brief explanations below will help readers deepen their appreciation for Ilić's work.

### *Foreshadowing*

The author is adept at foreshadowing. Being aware of this technique helps the reader feel more sure-footed about interpreting the plot and emotional impact of the book. The children at the welcome-home part of Vera's son play with pistols, for instance, and the gangs' arms race that includes a pistol and bullets point us towards the last chapter.

### *Cinematic qualities*

The characters of the novel routinely refer to movies of many types and in every possible format, especially VHS. From *The Karate Kid* to James Bond and *The Exorcist*, the novel is replete with cinematic references. One doesn't necessarily expect Bugs Bunny and other Hanna-Barbera cartoons to appear in this novel, but there they are, delightfully, just as they were in Yugoslav and Serbian life a few decades ago. This reminds us readers not only who and what their cultural references are, but how visual their generation is. This transfers over to the style of the book, via its filmability (speed, simplicity, unity of action) but also through the frequent comparisons of actions or settings to films. It is no accident that one of the main scenes of father-son bonding in the book is the repair of a VCR.



## *Retention of Serbian terms*

Translators often debate whether to translate the names of specific material items or practices in the interest of accessibility, or to leave them in in the source language in the interest of authenticity or in the hope (à la Walter Benjamin) of influencing the target language. The context in which the following words are used in the novel make them understandable, but here is a guide to some of this vocabulary linked to Serbian culture.

*ferka*: public (organized) fistfight.

*rakija*: Serbian schnapps, usually distilled from fruit such as plum or quince.

*đavao*, *ruša*, and *devet-deset*: playground games for children.

*delija*: a fan of the Belgrade soccer team Crvena Zvezda (Red Star)

*grobar*: a fan of the other main Belgrade soccer team, Partizan. Both sets of fans are popularly associated with massive amounts of graffiti and thuggery.

*gibanica*: a savory egg casserole.

*slava*: a family name day that is the occasion for great celebration in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

*ajvar*: a classic Balkan vegetable spread of roasted red peppers, eggplant, and spices.

## *Yugoslav legacy*

As a translator who is also a historian I am naturally inclined to point out the things that might be considered “typically Yugoslav” about the story. The *Beograd* department store, Zastava automobiles, the old national anthem “Hej, Sloveni,” and the music of Bajaga will be familiar to anyone who grew up in Yugoslavia. And the origin of the all-important bandana is Yugoslav: it was one of the accessories issued to members of the youth movement known as the Pioneers.

The character of Grandpa, Rambo's grandfather, is of considerable interest here. He is an old Partisan, a veteran of the anti-fascist resistance in World War II, and in his old age he maintains (or has returned to) wartime habits of asking for passwords, referring to himself as comrade, discussing morale and morals, maintaining a blackout, and keeping his pistol handy and the memory of the Spanish Civil War alive. It is his disastrous mentorship of Rambo that gives the boy the means to do himself in; prior to that, even his easy grandfatherly neglect was not even completely benign, because his washing machine and no-questions-asked policy towards his grandson enabled Rambo's fighting life to assume major proportions. We are encouraged to ask: did the Partizans set up some of today's disasters?

### *Media*

While the airwaves were poisoned with violent propaganda in Serbia in the 1990s, that is not the focus here. Media mean movies (see above), music, and magazines. Most of the contents are of the action-adventure sort, but of course pornography is present, as well as the occasional high-concept film.

### *Homoeroticism*

The circle jerks will doubtless be embarrassing reading for some. In literary terms, though, the analogous references to wisps of white smoke leaving Rambo's mouth when he smokes the spliff with Boda and the positioning of the beer glass on the returnee's zipper at Rambo's aunt's party encourage us to read closely.

### *Literary comparisons*

The famous 1912 novel *The War of the Buttons* by Louis Pergaud is an especially apt comparison to Ilić's book, and it is even mentioned explicitly in the text. Pergaud's novel has often been compared to *The Flying Classroom* (1933) by Erich Kästner, and *The Otterbury*

*Incident* (1948) by Cecil Day-Lewis, and especially *The Paul Street Boys* (1906) by Ferenc Molnár. *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding provides another possible point of comparison, with the boarding-school or cadet sagas of Florjan Lipuš and Robert Musil comparable in a more limited way.

### *Intrusion of the outside world*

The sanctions on Serbia, imposed by the international community for the role of the government in Belgrade in starting and prolonging the bloodletting in 1990 and 1991, affect the characters continuously. There are blackouts and power shortages, and consumer goods are hard to obtain—hence the references to smuggling. Obviously, the war raging nearby, in Bosnia and Croatia, has a major impact on this city in Serbia. Spaceman's brother is killed at the front, and several other characters or their relatives are, or just have been, at the front. The single most important imposition of the outside world is the arrival of Igor, a Serb from Bosnia or Croatia. He is a refugee whose presence, as we know, catalyzes the plot and the development of Rambo's character.

### *Other works on the Yugoslav wars*

Serbian literature is, of course, still coming to terms with the manifold legacies of the breakup of Yugoslavia. The list of highly regarded works of fiction about the actual fighting and the immediate and home-front effects of the killing and dying is slowly growing, but these topics are probably continuing to receive more attention from Croatian and Bosnian authors and publishers. Serious writing in all the successor states of Yugoslavia deals regularly with the emotional legacy of the demise of Yugoslav ideals; this vein of writing is sometimes called "Yugo-nostalgia." There are other ways to write about the pain and dislocation and radically altered political discourse and redirected cultural affinities of these new countries, and there is a lot of such writing; one might say the shadow of the war

hangs over much or even most Serbian literary production today. Still, actual depictions of the actual conditions in 1990s remain less common than one would expect.

It is into this landscape that this unpolitical work, *The Children of Neverville*, emerges. It is definitely one of the very few Serbian novels about this period to have been translated into English, and it is the only one told largely from the point of view of children.

## About This Translation

Every translation makes its own demands. Most prominently, or most often discussed, are the demands it makes on the translator. Do we really “get” the book? Do we believe in it? Do we believe in its portability, or its relevance, esthetic or other? Do we have the keys to unlock its passions and peculiarities? Can we render it, somehow, as something—and this is where translation theory really begins—that preserves its nature or essential characteristics? Are we capable of bringing it into our language so that it provides an enjoyable, or at least coherent and maybe valuable, reading experience? That sounds like a lot. Maybe it is. It’s obviously far more than a lexical matching game (or—need I even say it?—a cut-and-paste into Google or AI), whether you believe that a translator is a co-author or not. I don’t.

But a translation imposes demands on the author, too: to trust us translators, to help us, and, in the most joyous cases, to let the magic happen sometimes, even when they don’t control it. And from you, dear reader, a translation demands trust, too. Here it’s not just about the fidelity of the pages we produce but about their value, including enjoyment, and in the little tiny hole they burrow in the wall separating us all.

Translating Milos K. Ilić, whom I have known for a long time and who is a good friend of mine, is a pleasure. It would be difficult to find any writer more generous with their help (schoolyard slang? old movies?) or confidence. Tricky was only the deceptively simple

nature of his prose, which is always purposeful and always expects of the translator—clarity. A minor difficulty arose with words for games or things that I have long since forgotten about or that might not exist in North America, such as paper poppers and hand blasters and Jeepers-Keepers.

Ilić employs deliberately a large number of short paragraphs, and sentence fragments, in this text. He does so for two reasons, I believe: to keep the action churning, rapidly, and to call to mind the way a (young) mind works in emotional or difficult situations. I preserved this technique of his. Typically I intervene in a text, usually in very small ways, to help render a text harmonious (if I believe that's what the author desires) or cogent, but I did not do so here. I tried to be faithful to the forward motion and confused energy of the writing, because that's what the book seemed to demand and because I was reminded of the "urgency" (probably just neurotic power) of things in my own youth. I do hope, though, that the translation pulls over and parks the reader just this side of frantic.

Words matter enormously in this book. This is because the worlds of children are limited, even small, and the material elements in their lives alternate or repeat portentously, almost claustrophobically. It's like the objects themselves conjure up meaning. And so the words I use in the translation are meant to be evocative also of strangeness, familiarity, desire, fear, and power. One way I found to load a necessary charge into these (repeating) words was to use synonyms. I call this technique "wingspanning," because I want my active vocabulary in a translation to be as close as possible to the impressive reach of Michael Jordan's outstretched arms on those huge old horizontal posters. Hence the all-important nightstick brings with it: blackjack, billy club, and baton. And the members of the gangs are also: a squad, team, crew, side, or just "guys." And the essential function of fighting comes out as: to throw down, fight, clobber, clock, whale, thump, smear, beat the crap out of, and get your butt kicked. Surprises or bad news can make you recoil, jump,

flinch, or start. Friends dap, give skin, high-five, and fist bump, authority figures drone, babble, bore you stiff, or ply you with mumbo-jumbo, and everybody hassles, razzes, taunts, or needles. There are quite a few other examples.

The words validate the functions. But the most important material object in the book, Rambo's red bandana, is only rendered one way. It's too important to be wingspanned. Thus there are no references to a headband, neckerchief, kerchief, scarf, or bandanna, though I initially played with all of these words in early sample translations.

## Conclusion

In 2014 my family and I, along with a good friend from Szeged, Hungary, found a shady spot in the northern Serbian city of Subotica to take some refreshments. I was eager for all the North Dakotans present to try Turkish coffee, or at least the soft drink called Cockta, and the quiet garden of a bookstore we stumbled across presented a perfect opportunity. It was a very hot day, and, fortunately, Subotica, or Szabadka as we called it, is a shady place. Anyway, after the drinks were ordered, I strolled into the bookstore. I believe it was a branch of the Plato chain, right downtown—now closed, although one of its successor enterprises, one might say, published the Serbian version of this book. All bookstores are wonderful, and although the selection in this shop was not huge, I pulled a book called *Priče o pivu* from the rack. I purchased it. Outside, everyone got a kick out of the title (*Stories About Beer* in English), because I am such a fan of hops. The author was one Miloš K. Ilić. Here's what Ilić says today about that book:

The publisher was not satisfied with the number of copies sold. I was happy with the book, and still am, because it put me on the Serbian literary map. It has a story or two that I still like to consider solid, so it had its purpose. I [once] found a copy of *Priče o pivu* at a flea market that has



a dedication written in blue ballpen that says something like “Hello from the county jail”, which is crazy—someone was reading my book while “inside,” and they liked it enough to buy it for someone else...

Little did I know that the author of that book, of whom I had never heard—this was his first book, after all, and there are a lot of excellent Serbian writers, past and present—would someday mail me another of his books, at his publisher’s suggestion but simply as a friendly gesture and, as far as I was concerned, out of the blue. A coffee ensued on my next trip to Belgrade, and since then the book discussions and book-jags have never stopped. And there has been some translating along the way, as my interest in Serbian fiction has deepened and evolved in some very specific directions. Most of those directions do not involve the literature of war. Again, this book is an exception.

One of the general things I have learned since I began reading and translating Serbian literature intensely is that sometimes conventional wisdom really is bullshit. The supposed lesson of literary criticism about “universal themes” animating some works of literature, while others are simply peripheral navel-gazing, chamber dramas, ethnography, or local color, is specious and silly. People waste so much time on platitudes of this sort. If a human writes it, a human can relate to it. If a human feels it, the feeling can be shared. If human culture produces it, it can be studied. Therefore, far be it from this observer to beg your indulgence for this modest novel from one of Europe’s lesser-known languages, a “minor literature,” by apologizing: “Read it anyway! I can’t find the place on a map either, but it’s got a universal theme!” or “It’s ok. There’s not too much confusing history or politics in it!” or “Don’t worry—there aren’t too many hard names!”

In fact, *The Children of Neverville* is a straightforward read, even if translating it, as I tried to demonstrate above, was not always easy. And the novel does nestle into a literary tradition, although

a thinly populated one (Serbian books about the wars, especially from a children's perspective) and it also does take up a perch adjacent to Western popular culture, considering all the Nike, Nintendo, and Schwarzenegger references, and the very nickname "Rambo." Unlike most of the books adopted (not adapted) and promoted (in a scholarly way) by this translator, one does not necessarily learn a lot about Serbia by reading this book. It cannot be recommended on these grounds, but I am certain that such was not the author's intent anyhow.

Before I try my hand at a formulation of the importance of this book, at establishing my grounds for recommending it and the ultimate significance I find in it, I need to back up just a bit into recent literary history. In late socialist Yugoslavia, there were several routes out of the spongy, buggy terrain of the unofficial prevailing practices and expectations of Socialist Estheticism. The Black Wave in cinema (of which Ilić is a big fan) and existentially themed novels (of which the translator is only a lukewarm fan) were important attempts at this. Fortunately, supreme practitioners of high modernism like Danilo Kiš and innovative rebels like Biljana Jovanović and Judita Šalgo were also there to forge new paths.

But over the past four decades, many Serbian postmodernists have committed themselves to reverse Orientalism by presenting fictional worlds that are slavishly indistinguishable from their Western counterparts, except that they are even more boring, or by grabbing random, decontextualized artifacts out of their own curiosity cabinets of history and expecting praise for their assumed symbolic worth. But, as in the 1970s, there remain exceptions, and pioneers. Memorable Serbian writers today, and fortunately there are quite a few, value emotion and plot and honesty and responsibility in their texts, and Ilić is one of these. I hope he will write many more novels.

*The Children of Neverville* is important because of the questions it raises about the boundaries of violence and the shared responsibility of raising children. The young people in this city spend a

great deal of energy imitating the adults around them. Let us recall the memorable scene at Rambo's house, when his friends visit and dress up and act like his parents. This is not always filial piety or an homage to their wise relatives and role models. Of course transgressiveness and subversion are present. But for me the most poignant scene in the book comes at the end of the penultimate chapter.

When I told him to lose the nightstick, I sounded like my dad making me go to my room. Now, when I demand that he give back my bandana, I don't sound like anything. It's like I'm saying something I never learned.

Of course this comment only makes sense after you finish the book. But Rambo has pushed out of the world of limits and boundaries and is spinning like a mad top in a tornado. He is as out of control as his dying country, which had never learned how to manage these things either, and the violence and humiliation he causes Sledgehammer overload his system. The next act of violence swamps everything. The causes of both acts are complex but apparently ineluctable. The boy might have a choice but he also has means; agonizingly, he has no recourse, no answers. The single shot on the playground ties everything together, even as it dissolves every bond and scatters every expected answer as well. The fatal shot was conditioned by the breaking of the other boy that preceded it.





# **The Children of Neverville**





## Chapter One

On the roster at school, my name is Ivan Drnčula, but everybody calls me Rambo. That's because I always wear a red bandana to the fights. My generation was the last to get those bandanas. Pioneer kerchiefs. When we started school in 1989, every first grader was also a Pioneer. I have no idea how I managed to keep it till sixth grade. Probably because my mom squirreled it away somewhere. The first time we went out to fight, I dug it out of the closet and put it around my head.

It looks good on me.

I adjust it so it covers my forehead, and it presses in the upper part of my ears and lifts my hair. I look dangerous, or at least I look that way to the other boys. I can tell by their eyes that they think of me differently.

I live right in the center of Neverville. All around me is at least a hundred meters of Downtown territory. In all directions. Nobody can touch me, unless the whole rival gang gets together all at once. That's why I follow the same route every time I go out to do battle.

I tell my mom that I'm heading out to play. I wear my normal clothes, like I do every day. Sweatpants, hoodie, jacket, and my Nike Air Maxes.

I can hardly wait to get out of the building. I run down the stairs, because one of the rolling blackouts might start. If I were trapped in the elevator, I wouldn't be able to get to the fight. They'd think that I had chickened out. I tear across the little square between the buildings and cut left and go to the trashcans. They're always pulled into the passageway behind the building. This is where the parking spots are, and cars, and junk. It always smells like piss and crap back there.

I keep my change of clothes hidden behind one of the parking spots. Wrapped up in two plastic bags that I keep in the little backpack I used in first grade. No matter how much it rains, or how much snow is blowing around, the rucksack and the plastic protect my things just fine.

Sometimes I carry my clothes over to my grandfather's place so I can wash them. Like all old farts, he wants to know everything. But since he's senile, he doesn't operate like my mom and dad. All I have to do is lock myself in the bathroom and start the washing machine, and he'll forget that I'm even in the house. When I come back out of the bathroom, he wonders how I just materialized there.

Behind the parking garage, there's a little lane. Only animals go down it. One time a cat had a litter right next to my backpack. She almost scratched my eyes out. She thought I was going to touch her kittens.

I check to make sure nobody's watching me. It's not just cats and grown-ups that are the problem. If any of the older Centrals, our guys from the center of the city, should see me, they would definitely give me a hard time. Or they would smack me around some, because they store their things back here somewhere, too.

I'm not interested in other people's stuff; I just come here to get mine.

After I check around for other people, I sneak between the brick wall and the tin siding of the garage. Something is always humming on the other side of those bricks. I grab my backpack

from a pile of leaves. I pull out the bags and untie them, and then I set one of them to the side. In it I stow the first layer of clothes I have on. My jacket, sweatshirt, sweatpants, athletic shoes. In the summer, that means I'm down to shorts and t-shirt. In the winter, the same. I don't leave my down jacket there. I don't want to get sick.

From the second bag I take out my clothes for the fight: old sweatpants, sweatshirt, t-shirt, sneakers. It's no big deal if the clothes are a little tight. But my feet are constantly growing. And shoes like this are a real bitch to find.

I change clothes. In winter I can do all of this in two seconds because I'm so cold. I do it right here, sandwiched between these walls.

I fold up the clothes I arrived in and put them into the bags, tie them up, and stow them in the backpack. Which I then zip up, cover with leaves or something else, so that it's not all that visible, and off I go.

I don't tie the bandana around my head right away. Everybody knows I'm Rambo from Downtown, but it isn't time for that yet.

I look around the area. I make sure once more that nobody's watching me, and I dash out of my hiding place. I go past the old church made of yellow bricks. In no time flat, I come out on Čopíćeva Street. That's one of the longest streets in the city, and it's full of small buildings.

On Čopíćeva Street I invariably run into some other guy from the Centrals.

Or Milica.

Like every city, Neverville is divided into neighborhoods. And they can't stand each other. The old farts don't have too many problems with each other. But everybody who's in school, from elementary to twelfth grade, knows where their place is. It's not important where you were born, who your mom and dad are, whether

you go to this school or that school, or what kind of shoes you wear. What's essential is where you live.

We Centrals mostly mix it up with the Shipyarders. Neverville is a runt of a city. The Shipyards are close to Downtown. Not even a kilometer away. The borders aren't precisely drawn, but everybody knows more or less where they're allowed to walk.

Downtown goes halfway out Čopićeva Street. From there, all the way to the Mirica River, is the neighborhood we call the Shipyards. The Shipyards take up the rest of Čopićeva out to the train tracks. That's where the other neighborhood starts. We call it the Brushes.

But I'm not going to drone on about geography. There'll be time for that later.

We always fight with the Shipyarders close to the old warehouse. The street there is usually deserted. There's nothing that would draw anyone to that place. From beyond the low concrete wall and the embankment comes the gross smell of the river. We're far enough away from it so that the people out walking don't disturb us. Plus, it's close to our territory.

We're all about the same age. Between ten and fourteen. Some of us are already strong enough to smack a grown man in the face. Nobody wants to mess around with twenty angry kids.

The first person I bump into is Needle. He is so tall that he looks like he's in high school. Although he's skinny, he knows how to punch.

"What's up, Needle?"

"Ciao, Rambo."

We pause long enough to high-five one another, and then we keep walking, like we'd been accompanying each other the whole way.

Soon the others are at our side: Cap, Spaceman, Bear, Slurp, and Slurp's sister Milica.

We're the main squad. We always go to the fights. We have other members, too, kids from Downtown who want to fight and be

bad-asses. But we haven't let them onto the team yet. Some of them have proven themselves, but their parents are too strict. They literally get locked into their bedrooms and aren't allowed to go outside. Their parents are afraid of the dark.

Our crew lives in various parts of the Center, but we can all get together in less than ten minutes. Our gathering place is always the fountain in the park, but we never say that. We always just call one another on the phone and say: "Go." Everybody knows where to go.

This time we didn't go to the fountain because we didn't need to. We aren't going to hash out details. We're going to throw down. It's that simple.

We quickly reach the open area by the warehouse. The rain hasn't let up for days. It's turned everything around us into a swamp. It's going to be pretty tricky, trying to keep our balance. It'd be better to go somewhere else.

But it's too late to even think about that. The Shipyarders are already showing up between these old military buildings. There are ten of them. We almost always have the advantage. Their gang is full of kids. Their leader, Sledgehammer, is the only one who's fourteen. But he's not the strongest fourteen-year old I've ever seen. I'm twelve, but I regularly beat the crap out of him.

As soon as I see the other gang, my heart starts racing. I stopped getting scared in fights a long time ago. I don't care if I get hit. Injuries are the best medals you can have in our wars. Everybody wears them with great pride.

I don't quite understand why my heart is pounding like this. I can feel it thumping all throughout my body. The rhythm is wild.

Now comes the moment when I tie the bandana around my head. As I spread it out over my knee and then draw it tight at the back of my head, I stand there in front of the others, watching them.

Some of the members of our gang watch me, and others keep an eye on our enemies as they arrive. They're keeping a lookout to

make sure the enemy doesn't come running up suddenly and surprise us, or sucker-punch one of us with a rock or a brick.

I turn my back on our enemies. I casually scratch myself on the ass, to let them know I'm not scared.

I take a look at our team and I know I'm supposed to say something meaningful to them, like in the movies. But I don't have anything to say. I nod my head, wink at Milica, and grab the first rock I see.

Everybody else does the same. The enemy, since we are closer to their territory, is already launching rockets. The hail of stones, bricks, and broken branches is reminiscent of a rain shower in summer. It doesn't last long and it doesn't mean much.

There are unwritten rules. No one can aim at your head on purpose. Projectiles are thrown up in the air, and you have time to move. Whoever clocks somebody else straight on is going to get messed up. He'll get the shit beaten out of him.

There is always some such moron around, though.

Bear is the first to stop and clutch his head. Blood is leaking through his fingers. I don't know what they hit him with, but I did see who did it.

"Everybody get Danny Boy!"

My command is loud and clear, but even without it the whole team would have descended upon Danny Boy.

We run out to confront the Shipyarders head-on. Hand-to-hand combat is unavoidable. Danny Boy wants to hide behind his troops, but Needle manages to snatch him by the arm. Everybody's pushing, grabbing at clothing, and pulling hair.

We all have to get to Danny Boy.

Needle gets a chain wrapped around his arm so hard that he yells, and the rest of us freeze for a moment as if we'd been caught in a game of tag. I don't know who brought a chain, but I quickly realize that all the Shipyarders are hiding weapons. A metal bar, a

cube-shaped paving stone, a baseball bat, a round faucet handle you could use as brass knuckles, a billy club.

They lay into us. Our punches, slaps, kicks, and chokes can't stop their tools.

"Screw you all!"

"Rotten pussies!"

"Fuck your mother!"

Our curses disappear into the air. More and more all you can hear is labored breathing, and groaning, and the thwacks on our bodies.

Something flashes in my head, and for a moment I can't see. I feel my entire body tingle. I can barely stay upright. With all my might I try to hold onto Sledgehammer's arm, so he won't hit me with his nightstick.

The pain in my head means that Sledgehammer is stronger than me.

I spit in his face. He grimaces and I let him back away and wipe himself off. I use that moment to whistle. Up till then I had never done that. I could scarcely utter the command:

"Run!"

A fight is pandemonium. Maybe if I were a bird, I'd be able to see everything that's going down. But as it is it resembles a jumbled pile of children shoving and thumping on each other. Nobody knows who's who, or exactly who is doing what, who's winning or who's losing. The fighting typically ends when the leader of one of the gangs gives the order to scatter.

The weapons changed the fight, and it's clear who lost.

This whole time, Milica was standing in the back next to Bear. He was in shock and could barely stand. He began running after us.

Victory intoxicated the Shipyarders. They chase us and quickly catch up to us. They thrash Milica and Bear, who were in the back of the pack. The rest of us stop in our tracks and sprint back towards them. We try to do flying kicks to knock the Shipyarders' legs



out from under them. We're able to drive back some of them, but Sledgehammer and three others won't stop swinging their bats.

Fortunately a woman passes by in the street, in the street, pushing a baby carriage, and we all run in different directions. You never know who might recognize us. Concerned neighbors, family friends, somebody's older sister or brother.

Every old person is either a threat or a narc.

Although we all scatter when we run, we reassemble at the fountain in no time flat. The fountain is a big stone rectangle in the middle of the park. I don't remember water ever gushing out of it. The weird sculpture in the middle of it is silent. Now it serves mostly as a place for kids to play. Sometimes people also take photos there before their wedding.

Although everybody knows that the Centrals are meeting here, we approach with caution. Nobody says anything to anyone. Slowly we tighten the circle. Today the Shipyarders used weapons. Who knows—maybe they also went around us and got deep into our territory.

We sit on the benches that are arranged in a circle around the fountain in three rows.

Bear's in the middle We aren't talking, just looking at his head. It's not bleeding at the moment, but there's still blood all over. Milica is patting the skin around his wound with a kleenex. She's grimacing the whole time, like she was crapping her pants.

"Where did it nail you?"

"How should I know?"

"Don't move!"

Milica gets scared when Bear shouts, and she jumps to one side. She gives him a light slap and then goes back to her patting.

"But I can't see anything!"

"That's because of the blood. The wound is above your eye. You're going to have a scar on your eyebrow."

Bear. As his name indicates, he's huge. He's fat and full of natural muscle, with a big ol' head and no neck. He lumbers around and can't run, but he hits like a grizzly. That's why he was the one who got nailed by the rock. You can't miss him.

Milica spits into the kleenex. She's trying to wipe the blood from his eyes, but Bear whimpers. She stops.

"You'd better go home."

"Nobody moves!" I say.

I get up and stand next to Bear, in the middle. I have my eyes on my crew. I look each one of them, individually, in the eye. They look like puppies that have done number one where they weren't supposed to.

I spit and then take off my bandana and soak it with saliva. Milica moves away and I clean Bear's face. With the blood wiped away, he looks better than he did. His skin's not so red anymore, and there's a big bump growing on his right eyebrow.

"What are you going to tell your mom?"

"No idea."

"You'll have to think up something."

"I'll tell her that I fell."

"She'll see right through that."

Bear shrugs his shoulders and stares straight ahead into space. At his mom and her yelling. I put the bandana in my pocket, pat Bear on the shoulder, and look out at the rest of the squad again. A ruckus is about to break out.

"What happened today can't happen again tomorrow!"

"Where'd they get the weapons?"

"What the hell. All we did was just show up. Without anything."

"At least we could've taken bricks from a construction site."

"Or a limb from a tree."

"I have a bike chain at home. You know how you can hit with that thing?"

“Next time, I’m going to bring a knife, and we’ll see who’s tougher then.”

“Those dumbasses!”

“Screw them!”

I let them blow off steam, and then I raise my right hand. The curses soon die down, along with the vows about who was going to do what to whose mother. I lower my head and try to sound as serious as possible.

“OK, it’s a simple thing. There are two solutions.”

“Which are?”

Spaceman is rubbing his right wrist. They worked him over him pretty thoroughly, too.

“Maybe we should complain to Boda.”

More pandemonium. And louder this time. Everybody sings the praises of Boda, a guy who’s about five years older than us. They also put his friends on a pedestal—they are the old guard of the Centrals.

“They’ll kick some ass!”

“But then the older Shipyarders will kick their asses. And ours. I wouldn’t get Boda mixed up in that.”

“I would.”

“Me, too.”

Spaceman gives me a furious look. He knows what the other solution is, and we’ll soon be done with this first one. The rules in our gang are clear: as soon as two people disagree with something, we vote.

“You haven’t heard the other plan!”

“Screw the other plan!”

Bear moans. He’s holding Milica’s bandana over his face as it grows larger and larger.

“How about we don’t fight among ourselves? Let’s vote. Who’s for calling Boda?”

Spaceman, Needle, and Bear raise their hands. Cap, Slurp, and I are against it.

“Three to three. What now?”

“What about Milica?”

I look at Milica, who is right beside me. Nobody can see my right eye, and I wink at her. She looks at me and stands stock still. She was going to vote for Boda. Her brother Slurp, as well as the leader of the crew, is against that. That’s why she’s hesitating. Reconsidering. Cracking.

“I want to hear what the other plan is. Then I’ll vote for one.”

“You know what it is.”

Needle stands up and walks over to a bush. He picks pyracantha berries and puts them in his pocket.

“The other plan is that we get weapons, too. Then we come back and mop up the floor with them.”

“And what happens if they beat us up again?”

“Then we’re pussies and we deserve it.”

When look Milica’s way again, she averts her eyes. She snorts and spits on the ground, and then with her shoe she smears the loogie around.

“I’m for the second plan.”

“Yes!”

Cap and Slurp give each other a high-five, and Needle pegs me in the chest with a berry. He grins, blinking at me over the top of his little metal peashooter. He continues filling it with berries. He pelts the sparrows and pigeons that are there, thinking that food’s going to fall out of our pockets.

Then we all agree. We’re going to get weapons, and then we’re going to rumble with those Shipyarders again.

“Where do I find a weapon?”

“You said you had a bicycle chain.”

“My dad would kill me.”

“And the Shipyarders are going to kill you. Better your dad than those scumbags.”

“What will the rest of us do?”

“Bring whatever you have. Just don’t show up with rolling pins, or they’ll laugh at us.”

Cap remembers something, and in his excitement he grabs my shoulder and shakes me.

“Hey, my old man isn’t home. We can raid his workshop. There’s all kinds of stuff in there.”

“Deal!”

We hang out a little longer. Talking about weapons and fighting. Then we curse those Shipyarders up and down and imagine how we’re going to whip up on them.

Soon we start saying our goodbyes. We dap each other and then everybody goes home. Spaceman and I walk in the same direction, while everybody else goes other ways.

He and I keep on swearing at the Shipyarders, and we also have a contest to see who can spit the farthest. Although I’ve got a lot of snot in my nose, Spaceman’s phlegm always travels farther. He’s always the champion in hocking loogies.

At the first intersection we come to, we high-five again and go our separate ways.

## Chapter Two

There's pretty much no one on the streets because it's a Saturday. And it's already late. The shops are closing. The wind is whistling across the long, wide street called Rakićeva. It pushes the leaves through the street and pulls them off the trees. I don't see any rain, but I hear it.

The building where I live is close, just a hundred meters down Rakićeva from the spot where I had greeted Spaceman. Our buildings are twins. Two grim concrete towers linked by a tunnel of green glass. There's the big department store, the *Beograd*. A store with empty displays and even emptier shelves, where there were once food and beverages.

I look around, because I constantly have the impression that somebody's watching me. Or worse: someone's following me so closely that I can't even tell. They're right on my heels!

I'm tired and angry on account of those Shipyarders. They're all I can think about. I don't even notice that I'm about halfway back to the apartment.

I dash over to the ground floor, repeat my route of the previous hour, and change clothes in the alley.

It's getting colder by the minute. The wind is blowing and it's going to be dark soon. Those two walls that protect me seem closer than usual.

I climb the stairs to the twelfth floor, since the electricity has gone out in the meantime. I pause halfway up. I let the neighbors pass. They always pat me on the head and ask how my mom and dad are doing. I don't hate the neighbors as neighbors, but I hate them because they're adults. It's in their nature and they just have to foul everything up, even the simplest act like climbing the stairs.

Out of breath, I enter the apartment.

The door is always locked, but for my last birthday I got keys. That made my life easier. I no longer have to think about whether I'll wake up my parents or whether or not they're even at home.

Both of them are there. Dad is drinking *rakiya* from a small glass and listening to a battery-operated radio. Mom's in the kitchen opening the door to the oven. She bends down, blinks, and tentatively pokes her fork at the contents of a pan. The aroma tells me that we're having *gibanica* for supper.

My dad looks at me. He waves his hands uncertainly and shrugs his shoulders. He says that the *gibanica* is probably ready. He curses the electricity restrictions. From the darkness that swallows everything in the apartment, I can't make out what is what: my mom, the stove, or the *gibanica*. And evidently both the old lady and the pastry are steaming.

I greet them evasively. My old man barely registers my presence, but my mom wants to know where I was and what I was doing.

Before the two of them can look me over, I slip into the bathroom, close the door, and turn the key in the lock. Locking the door was forbidden until I turned ten. The lifting of

that ban changed my life quite a bit because I now had a little piece of the apartment where I could be completely alone.

My face is a bit dirty. Nothing terrible. It looks like I've been playing, not fighting.

I put the plug in the sink drain. I pour water out of the plastic coke bottle and wet the bar of soap. I wash and scrub my face and then rinse away the lather. The water quickly turns cloudy. As does my reflection in the mirror.

It's already late, but in the bathroom there isn't a window that looks out onto the street. The only thing that saves us from shit smells is the little fan next to the toilet's water tank, which often doesn't work though.

It's not night in the apartment, but it's also not day. Everything is bluish. Like in the old films where they fake night-time. Dad told me what that trick is called, but I've forgotten. All the objects look illuminated, but blue. Sad.

The old boiler makes its familiar click and the indicator light turns on. The electricity is back and the dark blue bathroom abruptly turns yellow.

I look in the mirror again and rub my right cheek some more. It looks like I'm going to have a welt there. Super.

We live in an apartment of two and a half rooms. Dad and Mom use the living room as a bedroom, and I got the smaller room. In the second, larger bedroom, we keep all the things that they smuggle. Primarily from Hungary.

In my half room I have everything I need. Toys, a tv, a desk and chair, books, and the most essential thing—a VCR.

I turn on the TV and push the "play" button on the VCR. I watch *The Hunt for Red October*. My copy, although it's a good one, is so old that somewhere in the middle the tape is damaged. Green and white lines show up when you play it, the image starts to flicker, and in two or three places it looks like it's floating around on the screen. Then it settles down.



I've watched the movie twice since yesterday. Before that I'd seen it a million times. I know it by heart; I barely pay attention to it now. I gawk at posters from the Mickey Mouse Magazine. I think of how I'm going to wash my neckerchief and what we're going to do to the Shipyarders.

We voted. The issue's decided. It bugs me that now we're going to brawl with weapons. So there's no way to know who's stronger. Any old loser can turn himself into a giant, if he can get a chain to hold in his hands.

Sledgehammer was carrying a nightstick. His old man is a cop and I'll bet he stole it from him. Since they acted like the pussies they are, and came to the fight loaded with weapons, we're going to show up prepared next time, too. But I'm not taking anything from Cap's dad. I'm not interested in the things in his workshop. I want that billy club that Sledgehammer has.

As soon as I think of something that I like, I also always think of Milica. Although she didn't want to, she voted for my proposal. She knew that was the plan I wanted. That's why she did it. I'm sure of it. And she likes me.

But the sister of a comrade is sacred. So screw it. I'm not allowed to touch her.

Nobody knows what goes on in my room. I let down the blinds, and I roll the big easy chair over in front of the door. My rents won't be able to open it. I'll pretend I'm looking for something underneath the chair. I'll quickly put my underwear back on, cover up, and while I'm moving the chair back my dick will go down. I've done it a thousand times.

I go back to my bed. I push my gym pants and my underwear down to my knees. I lick my thumb and index finger and rub the head of my penis. I'm thinking of Milica. I don't know why, but whenever I think of her, I always see her in the classroom. She sits three rows in front of me, but her half-profile and black braid are enough. She twists her hair so tightly that it looks like it's going to

come up by the roots. She's skinny, but she has the ass of an eighth grader. I usually think of her ass in a jean skirt. Her fingers resting on her arms. She has long fingers and chewed nails. Although she often puts red polish on them, she picks and gnaws at them continually.

I can't explain precisely what it is that I think about. I've never gotten laid. Two or three times I've kissed different girls. This one girl named Tamara even let me French-kiss her.

As I say, I don't know where my mind goes when I'm whacking off. I think about Milica, but not about anything in particular.

On screen, the submarine is ready to fire its torpedo. Everyone's keyed up.

I stare intently at the end of my cock--is there going to be anything there, or not? There's still nothing coming out. A bit of whitish fluid. Boda said once: "That dick is broken." It's supposed to be white and sticky, like whipped cream.

My mom yells that the *gibanica* has been rescued, but no more white stuff comes out.



## Chapter Three

Autumn in the city is disgusting and colorless. People shiver in lines. Everything is closed. Dead. The sky is gray, filled with clouds that drip rain all day long. I feel perpetually damp.

Mondays are always the same. I don't feel like going to school. It doesn't matter whether I'm in the morning cohort or the afternoon one. Either I get up early, or I have time before my classes to do what I want. An uneasy feeling sets in as early as Sunday evening, when I have to take a shower and prepare my things for the next day.

My mom and dad watch their TV show. Then they turn off the television and turn on the radio. They listen to the news and random programs.

At times like these, I like to be in their room. Nobody talks. One of them is reading a book or flipping through the paper, and I flip through my reading assignment or do my homework.

Actually, I always just pretend to be working on something. I'm eavesdropping: there are voices from the radio and music from there, too.

This time, the VCR is messed up. It won't play the cassette the way it's supposed to. It bends the picture and stops the film.

Dad unplugs it. Wraps the cord around the device and tells me to put on my jacket and sneakers.

We don't take the elevator, because with the power cuts, you never know. We slowly go down the stairs to the basement.

My old man unlocks the metal door and two padlocks. He turns on the light.

The magical interior of the workshop gleams in the maw of the dark building. There's everything you could imagine down here. Even a metal sign with a skull on it and the words: "Danger! High Voltage!"

The basement is small, and the workbench, the pile of tools, and the remains of old appliances turn it into a mouse hole. But there is room for the two of us, plus the three or four spiders in the corners of the ceiling.

Dad shuts the door and cuts on a gray, metal space heater. The room fills with the stink of burnt dust and cobwebs. It warms up fast. I unbutton my jacket.

My dad has already unscrewed the housing of the VCR and is messing around with the heads. He tells me the names of all the parts, but they don't mean anything to me. The inside of the VCR looks like a labyrinth: gear wheels, screws, wires, some kind of coils, and plastic parts that poke out on all sides.

I do, however, know what the heads are, and I know they're usually the problem. A head is the big round piece in the upper left corner of the machine. There's this little tile that's attached to it, as well as a flat wire. And it can turn.

My dad wets a cotton swab with alcohol, and he rubs the square parts and the rollers that are located near the heads.

He picks up a little rag. Wraps it around his index finger and places it on the head. With his other hand, he spins the movable part. He does it gently, like when he gets an eyelash out of my eye.

He checks to see whether anything stuck to the rag. He repositions it so that the tip of his finger is now covered by a clean part.

He spins the head for another ten seconds and then puts the rag down. With a pair of tweezers, he moves the lever that lies flush right on the head. With a second set of tweezers, he takes out a small wheel. He cleans it, too, and then puts it back in place.

“What’s all that stuff behind there?”

I point at a cluster of cylinders positioned down the length of a big green board. Some of them are connected to the plate by thin wires, and some of them look to be growing out of it.

He explains it to me, even as he’s already closing up the unit and tightening the screws. He tells me to shut off the space heater, and he cleans the whole outside of the VCR with a rag. He holds it up to the bare light bulb. Blows on it a couple of times to get rid of all the dust. He smiles my way.

When we come back into the apartment, my mom looks upset. She tells my dad that they need to talk. He looks at me and then follows her into the bedroom.

Mom closes the door. I can see her walking over to him; her shape is all distorted from the grayish panes of glass. She looks like an image composed of a pile of small dots. Her movements are languid. Her colorful clothes leave a trail when they move.

I remain in front of the door and eavesdrop. They are whispering. They quickly forget that I can hear them, and I’m able to figure out what they’re talking about.

My mom had a talk with Slurp’s mom. She said they’re going to be transferring a student who’s a refugee into our grade.

I can’t tell if they’re talking about a boy or a girl. What is the name? When are they going to show up in our class?

I hear one of my parents moving. The floor creaks and I dash back into my room. I don’t close the door because I’m already pretending to be fully preoccupied with adjusting the VCR on top of the television set. I plug it into the wall socket.

Dad leans through the doorway into my room. He glances around and winks and then sits down on the bed. He yammers

something about refugees and how they're probably going to be in my school the next day.

I climb onto the bed, next to my father. I pick up the book that's lying open by the pillow. I page through *A Hajduk in Belgrade*, stop, and look at my father. I make a face that shows he's annoying me, and he tells me to be nice.

"All right, Dad."

He gets to his feet and walks out, and I'm relieved. He comes back. He pretends like he forgot something. He sits down next to me again. He places his hand on my leg and looks to the side, at the pillow. I know what he's about to ask me. And I have no problem with it. But it's always uncomfortable for him. And he always starts the conversation in the same way. We're just chatting about something totally nice, and then he remembers.

He strokes my head. He's not looking into my eyes.

I'm not rich. I'm not a banker. But I get money from our relatives in America. My folks get it, too, but when the moolah runs out, then they know that I've got a fair amount squirreled away. At least enough for gas to get to Hungary. And that's what he tells me. They are getting ready for another trip soon. They'll pay me back as soon as they can. Or they can buy me something up in Hungary.

I nod towards the box on the shelf where my books are. My old man smiles, jumps to his feet, and quickly opens the box. He takes the money out of it, puts the lid back on, and counts the money on the fly. He thanks me. On his way out of the room, he leans over the pillow on his arm and kisses me on the forehead.

Kisses are rare beasts in my family. Like the white whale that they're chasing in that movie. We exchange kisses only at celebrations, anniversaries, and occasions like getting As on the final report card of the school year.

And when we lend money.

## Chapter Four

School is school, and that's all there is to it. No sane person would go there if they didn't have to.

Music is far and away the most boring class. We're learning how to play little plastic flutes. We sing.

The classroom's filled with pictures of composers. They're just old xeroxes on bad paper. The green chalkboard is divided into two equal parts. One side is empty, and the other side has all these white lines that the teacher draws music notes on.

The thirty of us in the class are blowing into our little holes, and it makes a terrible racket. Somehow she can tell who's playing wrong. She admonishes us and then we start again from the top.

The singing of the national anthem is reserved for the end of class. Once a week "Hej, Sloveni" rings forth. Whoever acts the smartass and doesn't sing has to recite it by themselves, solo, in front of the whole class.

This time Bear, for some reason, doesn't feel like singing. The old hag picks up on this fast, and she makes him go up to the board.

Our flutes fall silent. Everything is unnaturally quiet. Even the rain outside the window goes silent.

Bear retreats into himself. It's like he was trying to hide, right in the middle of the classroom. Sweet, round Bear.



The teacher bitches about how we have to know the national anthem and always sing it. She leans on the podium, folds her arms across her saggy boobs, and looks at him. She orders him to sing the anthem.

Bear, of course, didn't know but half the words. And embarrassment made him hold his tongue. He was ashamed at being singled out and also at not knowing the song.

With adults there's no explaining things. Pushing back just leads to bigger problems. Deep down inside, Bear knew this, and the ticked-off look on that bitch's face reminds him that it's true.

He began, unwillingly.

"H-h-h-hey Slavs, you yet live, this spirit of our....um, forefathers..."

The teacher interrupts him. She tells him that it's not "yet live" but "live yet." Bear blinks hard. He doesn't understand what she's getting at. It all sounds the same to him. Then he makes a new mistake: "I mean, that's what I said."

She abuses him till the class is over. For a full ten minutes. Bear manages to keep it together. He realizes that he is supposed to say "live yet" instead of "yet live," but it's not worth it to him. Signs of sweat start to appear around the neck of his gray sweatshirt.

He tries to read our lips, to understand the signals we're sending. He squints in the direction of the first row of benches. The brown-nosers who sat there were actually being brave and showing him their notebooks where the words to "Hej, Sloveni" are written. It's no use. She gives him a big fat F in her gradebook.

Blowing into the little flutes and watching Bear suffer gets us pretty worked up, even though it's only the second class of the day.

We're furious at the way the teacher has mistreated Bear, so we pat him on the shoulders. We try to make him feel better, and we all take turns dissing that cow from the music class.

Bear doesn't move from his spot at the sink in the hallway. He washes his face and drinks water. Rubs his eyes. He had probably

started crying right there at the end, and so now he's trying to make it look like they are red and puffy from the cold water.

"So what are you whining about, Bear?"

"The national anthem took him out."

"You're sooooo sensitive."

"Bite me! I'd like to see you do it."

The bell announces the start of the next class. The crowd glides through the hall. We run to our classrooms. Some of the teachers are already standing in their doors. They are waiting for the last kids to come in so they can thump them playfully on their heads.

We're still hanging out by the water fountain. Bear, Milica, Cap, and me. When we see our homeroom teacher, we book it towards our room.

The homeroom teacher does our geography class. This time she doesn't start begin lecturing right away. She's coming down hard on Bear. It seems the music lady must have told her that Bear had acted up in her class, and that she had given him an F. Bear opens his mouth to say something, but then he remembers who he's dealing with, and he just hangs his head. He scribbles in his notebook and nods his head every time the teacher scolds him.

The homeroom teacher calls on me. In a heartbeat I have goosebumps all over me, because who knows what she's heard. It's never a good thing when the teacher addresses you.

She's curious to know who I sit with. Since I sit alone, on the last bench in the middle section, she smiles, nods her head, and stands up.

She opens the door and holds onto the doorframe with one hand. With one leg in the air, she hovers above the threshold and peeks into the corridor. She motions to someone to come in. Soon a boy appears in front of us. The clothes he's wearing are ratty and too small, and he has a red baseball cap on his head.

The teacher makes him introduce himself. He stares at the floor, clutching his left index finger with his right hand and squeezing it hard. His whole fist turns white. I try to read the logo on the hat, but the letters are too small.

“My name is Igor.”

Everybody looks at him silently. Silence, though, is never silent. Every movement turns into something very loud. Especially at a moment like this. Soon the classroom sounds like a rattlesnake’s tail in action.

The teacher whispers something to him, and Igor takes off his hat. He lets go of it and it falls to the floor. As he picks it up, the class giggles.

A little piece of paper lands on my desk. I look around and see Milica looking at me, and she nods her head at the rolled-up note. I flatten it out and read what it says. I turn towards her and shrug my shoulders.

Our homeroom teacher isn’t satisfied with this introduction, so she directs Igor tell us something else about himself. He says nothing, but she persists and asks him to tell us what his hobby is.

“I don’t have a hobby. I like soccer. My dad died a month ago. I live with my mother and grandmother.”

The teacher guides Igor to my bench. I’m thinking, as he draws closer and gets bigger and bigger, “So, this is what a refugee looks like.”

Igor sits down next to me. He doesn’t look my way but stows his backpack on the bench and leans on it.

He’s huge. Either he has been held back a grade, or he’s a wonder of nature. He’s not fat, but he looks like Bear. It’ll be good to have him on our side against the Shipyarders.

The teacher quiets down the rest of the class, makes a note of who is absent, and gives the lesson. I’m not listening to her. I pretend to be writing in my notebook, but the whole time I’m observing Igor.

Igor doesn't move. He just leans on that bag. And gawks at the teacher. He doesn't really seem to be here. Igor's waiting for class to be over. Like everybody.

The homeroom teacher is soon pointing energetically at a map of Yugoslavia. She taps it with a pointer made from the antenna of an old phone, and she pronounces every place name extra clearly.

Igor sits there like a statue. He finally flinches when I bang my knee against his hip. At first he looks down, as if somebody might be hiding under the table. Then he looks up. Giant green eyes, in a slightly elongated but round face. He looks at me the way he had looked at the teacher. I don't remember what I want to ask him.

I put my hand out in his direction, palm up, and quietly say my name to him.

"But everyone calls me Rambo."

Igor smacks my palm and then says that everyone calls him Bear.

"Aha. Well, that won't work. We already have a Bear."

I sit up straight on our bench and direct his attention to Bear. Igor doesn't move.

"How old are you?"

"Twelve. Why?"

"You look older."

"Everybody tells me that. No one believes me when I say I'm in the sixth grade. They think I was held back."

That's what I thought, too.

"I haven't repeated a grade."

"I get it. Don't freak out about it."

The homeroom teacher doesn't just look like a vampire—she also has ears like a bat, and so she busts us right away.

She warns us, and then she calls me to the board. She hands me the pointer and tells me to repeat what she'd just said.

I wasn't listening. No sign of that bell anywhere. I stand there with that antenna in my hand, waving it indefinitely around on the map. I'm making an idiot of myself.

The teacher snatches the weapon out of my hands, whips me across the butt with it, and chases me back to my seat. The class laughs. I stick out my tongue at Cap, Milica and Bear, who are smirking harder than the rest of them.

Igor's gotten serious again, leaning forward over his backpack and staring at the map of Yugoslavia. We spend the rest of the class period in silence.

Milica, Bear, Cap, and I are all in the same year. The rest of the gang is either in different classes of that same year, or in different cohorts or shifts, since we were not all born the same year. Our whole team goes to the same school because this is the school for all the children from the Center. The ones who come to the Dušan Vasiljev Elementary School from some other part of town have to be on their guard.

During the long recess, the danger of being picked on diminishes. Everybody wants to use those twenty minutes the best way they can. Go for a walk, eat a snack, finish their homework, shoot the breeze with our crew, hit the toilet or the library, or go steal some sweets. The older kids skulk in the corners and share cigarettes.

We usually run out to play the game called *ruša*, which is like "King of the Hill." I call over to Igor to join us. He and Bear will always be as evenly matched as all get-out.

The courtyard fills up with children.

The teachers on recess duty are already at their posts. The two of them stand at the exit to the school grounds and they monitor us from there. Living cameras. Usually they cup one of their hands inside the other. In it they hold their cigarettes vertically. They put them up to their mouths while they talk. They reprimand the kids who run past them or who spit on the concrete.

The courtyard is enclosed by walls that are at least four meters high and they are marked up with various children's drawings. They look creepy. There's not any kid anywhere who draws a person, a ship, or the sun like that. They must have been drawn by some old geezer, but they look childish.

We run to the very end of the yard. That's the point farthest away from the teachers on watch duty. They can hardly see us, once we've gotten as far as the service entrance. That driveway is at the bottom of an incline, and above the slope there's a little wall. I don't think it's any more than fifteen centimeters wide. Right up next to the little wall is an old house. All the plaster had fallen off its exterior wall, so that it consists only of old, reddish brick.

Our "King of the Hill" is played by everyone lining up against the little wall and knocking each other down the slope. The winner is the person who manages to reach the end of the wall, that is to say, the metal gate for cars. And he can also be knocked down. Especially if two people team up on him. But that's really difficult to do, because he can use the wall as support, and hold on to the metal door, too.

I post up first. Next to me is Bear, and right next to him is Igor. Nobody can do anything to us.

Igor doesn't realize right off the bat that, in *ruša*, everything is allowed. Yanking on clothes and ears, pulling limbs, and hitting someone in the chest or the nuts. The only rule is that no one who is off the wall can get involved. If you fall, you're out. You go back to the beginning and try again. Igor got the hang of it fast. He made his way back to Bear after getting knocked down the first time.

Somebody yells that a teacher is coming. I look across the courtyard that is teeming with colorful kids' clothing in motion. Through that kaleidoscope of color a tall, fat, ochre skirt and sweater are approaching.

She gets halfway across the yard before the bell rings, ending the recess. We all let go of the wall. We head towards the building.

But the teacher remains standing in the middle of the courtyard. She's judging us with her eyes, and we don't look at her. We get in a line. Two by two. We wait until everyone from the yard gets in formation, and only then do we go inside. The teachers on recess duty are there to organize everything. I saw something similar in a movie about the Germans.

Everybody in the classroom is quiet. They move slowly to their seats because their school supplies and books are already waiting there for them. The teacher uses homeroom class to go into more of this mumbo-jumbo about geography. She's not very interested in who's absent, who's having problems, and dumb stuff like that. She says it's better like this, since our classes have been shortened.

We are still all worked up from playing *ruše*. Panting, we don't even notice when the teacher slips us blank maps.

She explains to us that these have an outline of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but that now she expects us to fill in only the part that makes up the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. We have about ten minutes to write in the names of all the cities and big rivers.

## Chapter Five

The route home is always the same. A crowd races out of the big old school building and spreads out all through the park and surrounding streets.

Since it's raining cats and dogs, we don't stick around to play soccer or to hang out on the bench. Instead we go home. I walk with some of my team to the first intersection.

"Did he say anything at all?"

"No. All he did was keep his mouth shut the whole entire time. I even tried to talk about movies."

"And?"

"Kept quiet the whole time."

Bear finds a stick lying on the ground. He picks it up and pokes Cap in the ass with it. Cap turns around abruptly and grabs the other end, and they tussle over the little branch. Like dogs.

Milica is walking right beside me. Our shoulders are touching. Her face is so close to mine that I can see the soft whitish little hairs growing on the side of her jaw. I've never done anything like this before. I don't know why I feel this urge, but I'd like to kiss her on that downy spot.



We say goodbye at the park exit and everyone heads in their own direction.

In front of my building, I run into Boda. He's two heads taller than me and twice as beefy. He's wearing black jeans and a rustling, multi-colored windbreaker. The fanny pack at his waist looks jammed full.

"How are you, Rambo? What gives?"

We high-five one another.

"I'm just coming from school."

"Going home?"

"Uh-huh."

Boda turns and spits in the direction of my building. He knows where I live because he lives in the building on the opposite side of the street.

"Screw that. Come with us."

I don't see the others, but I know he's inviting me to hang out with him and the older Centrals.

He starts down the street, and I follow him. His stride is longer than mine, and he walks a lot faster, and it's all I can do to keep up with him.

"Where are we going?"

"To our bench."

The older Centrals get together at the other end of the park. They always sit on the bench beneath a gigantic chestnut tree. It has so many branches that even in its current leafless condition it protects you from the rain. Beyond the bench and around the tree is a clump of bushes. Mostly pyracantha. They stash their porn mags in there, and the weapons that, at first glance, are not weapons at all. Bricks, cobblestones, sticks. The bushes that are ten steps away from their bench are full of real treasure; that's where they hid knives, metal bars, tubes of glue rolled up in bags, and who knows what all else.

A group of five of them are sitting on the bench. They all know me, but they act like I'm a pain in the ass. They barely give me any skin.

Boda forgets just as quickly that I am there with him, and he starts talking up a storm with his team.

The zipper jams, and he can barely get his fanny-pack open. He looks around to make sure there's no grown-up or cop nearby. He opens the pouch. He pulls out a big can of automobile paint. He shakes it, and something inside goes "tk, tk, tk."

The gang is stoked. They slap Boda on the shoulders and give each other high-fives. They elbow each other and jump off the bench. They punch and shove each other in jest.

Boda tucks the spray can in his jacket and scans the area again quickly.

Kids are returning from school. People are taking care of business. Two stray dogs pass by and sniff at the trash cans and bushes. They pee here and there.

"Where'd you get the spray paint?"

"I stole it, while my dad was buying varnish for the floor."

"They didn't see you?"

"Hell, no. Gimme a cigarette."

Somebody takes out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and distributes them to everyone. They smoke.

"Hey, don't fuck around. Little Rambo is coming with us today."

They look at me without speaking. They frown. They don't think I should be there because I'm a lot younger than them. They think they're screwed because of me.

Boda takes the cigarette out of his mouth and sticks it between my lips. He takes a new cigarette from the packet for himself. Lights up. He thumps the head of the guy holding the empty cigarette pack.

“Why are you bogarting the cigarettes? You want Boda to take the whole carton?”

The guy crumples up the packet and tosses it behind him.

“I don’t bogart. But what the hell is he doing here?”

“He’s going to learn how to mark territory.”

I puff away at the cigarette. I realized a long time ago that there’s no way I can inhale the smoke all the way down into my lungs. But this way, it does look like I actually know what I’m doing.

We hang out at the bench until everybody finishes smoking. We toss the butts on the ground around the bench and light out after Boda.

We walk along the usual roads in the Center. We stop next to a building, where we form a semi-circle around him. He writes a big letter “C” with the spray paint on the wall, and we move on.

We’re moving in a pack. To the other pedestrians, we look like a heap of heads, arms, and legs of one body. Even I’m able to keep up with them.

The spray can isn’t in Boda’s hands anymore. It’s being passed from person to person. Everybody wants to do some tagging. Some of them just make a big “C.” Some sign their names. They draw tits, or a dick. Some scribble their initials. They write out curse words and threats to other gangs.

The spray can ends up with me, too. I’ve never used one before, but I’ve been watching the whole time to see how the other guys do it. They form the wall around me. Boda’s the only one that turns around. He gives me a smile and watches. I’m shorter than they are, and nobody can see me.

One of the guys gets impatient.

“Come on, you little egghead. Did you shit your pants?”

I shake the can. I squint, as if the automobile paint might get into my eyes. I stick my arm out even farther. I press down. Make a half-circle. A sloppy letter “C.” From the top of the letter, black

paint starts to run. It slides slowly down the wall. The “C” looks like a reverse “D.”

Boda turns around. He looks at what I scrawled and blows his top.

“What the hell, Rambo? You’re only supposed to write the one letter!”

We move on. Everyone is silent, although up till then we’d all been in a good mood. Or at least they had. Mostly I nod my head and laugh at the crap they’re giving me.

Boda comes to a halt by a new building and stops the others. He pushes me towards the wall. He thumps me on the head.

“That’s so you don’t chicken out!”

Boda’s smack hurts my head like a motherfucker. I have to get it right this time. I do the same thing as last time, only more decisively now. Faster. I don’t put the small white cap back on the spray can.

One of Boda’s comrades turns around and high-fives me.

“Fuckin’ A.”

The half-circle breaks up. Everybody takes a look at the big letter “C” that I’ve tagged this building on Ćopić Street with.

There aren’t many people around. The ones that pass by pretend not to notice what we’re doing.

Boda grabs the can, but i don’t let go of it.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m not finished.”

I don’t wait for them to say anything to me. At a small distance from our symbol, I wrote out my name in all caps.

RAMBO.

Somebody pats me on the shoulder. I grin.

“Hey, is there another cigarette?”

“There ain’t shit.”

“Then let’s go see Speedy.”

The gang heads towards my building. We cut across the square and dash across the wide street. People slam on their brakes, honk

at us, and curse. We show them with our fingers how much that bothers us.

Speedy is this old guy who hawks cigarettes in the middle of town. At kiosks and in the stores you often can't find anything. That's why the street vendors have everything.

Boda and the team surround Speedy. He's in a wheelchair. He's missing both of his legs below the knee. He keeps his black pants folded up under his thighs and rear end. He's wearing a puffer vest. He's got an army beret on his head. In front of him is a cardboard box that contains several packs of cigarettes.

"What's up, Speedy? How's tricks?"

The old guy waves dismissively. He tells us to fuck off and leave him alone.

Boda runs point. He distracts the dealer. He shakes his hand, but Speedy yanks his hand back. Boda smiles. He pretends to check out the cigarette packs, comparing their prices.

"So how much for these? Ouch! You're really expensive, dude."

While this is going on, one of the Centrals slips a pack out of Speedy's bag. Speedy keeps the satchel hooked over the handle of his wheelchair. Boda's buddy is skillful. The bag neither rustles nor shifts. He tucks the cigarettes into the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

Finally Boda drops the small talk with Speedy, puts his cigarettes back, and walks away. Speedy follows him with his eyes. Then he accosts us, saying he knows what we did. We turn around and play dumb. Boda above all. He holds his arms out wide and makes an innocent face.

"What? What did we do?"

We've already put at least fifteen meters between him and us. He's in a wheelchair. If we were standing right in front of the cardboard he sells stuff on, he still couldn't catch us.

Boda waves him off and heads down the street, and Speedy utters a name and says that Boda will be fucked if that guy hears that we've done this.

The gang stops. All of a sudden, it's like everyone just got their parade rained on. They turn around and look at Speedy. He's holding his hand out. Waiting. Boda nods to his buddy who had lifted the pack of cigarettes. This guy breaks away from the pack and goes reluctantly over to Speedy. He takes the pack from his sleeve and puts it in Speedy's hand.

We walk on down the street in silence.

Boda stops next to a parked Renault 4 and sprays a "C" on the hood.

"Now we'll have mobile advertising. Like the circus!"

This improves our mood. We run away from the car laughing.

We're drawing closer to the Shipyards. Boda and his team seem agitated. They're hopping around and spitting more and more. They plot what they will do if they come across the older Shipyards.

We're almost on enemy territory. Here, if we mark our presence with a black "C" in some prominent place on a building, we'll feel like kings.

We slow down. We look around more and more. We're able to reach the warehouse without anyone noticing us.

Boda tells us to wait for him at the intersection. We are tense. Some of the guys are in a half-crouch. Like springs.

Boda crosses a muddy field and stands by the middle of the warehouse wall. He looks up at the building. He looks like an illustration of David fighting Goliath, like in the children's Bible I have at home.

He shakes the spray can hard. The way bartenders do when they make that drink for James Bond.

He jumps up. He presses the nozzle. He lands. While in the air, he manages to spray a huge "C" across the middle of the wall.

The gang whistles and cheers. I join in.

“Bravo, Boda!”

Boda turns around. He presses his lips together in order to conceal his smile, but you can tell he’s really happy. His eyes have doubled in size. They sparkle.

He turns back towards the Shipyards. He flashes the buildings and then flings the spray can at an invisible enemy.

He bolts.

He blows past us, and we follow him. These guys are older, and stronger, with longer legs. I fall a meter behind, two, three. I’m losing them. I can’t catch up with them, so I stop.

I turn around and check to see if anyone is following me. There’s nobody there. Everything is peaceful. An overcast sky, pouring rain, and people who look like they’re made of the clouds above our heads roaming through the streets.

I tear down Ćopić Street to the corner that takes you to that yellow-brick church. Although I’ve caught my breath, my heart is still racing. I know that I have a crazy grin on my face, but that doesn’t bother me. The only thing that bothers me is how I’m going to get the black splotches off my fingers.

I run across the street and before I can head towards my building, I notice Igor.

He’s alone. He’s dragging himself along, scarcely lifting his feet off the ground. He’s so sluggish that he’s staggering in a zig-zag pattern. He looks drunk. His backpack droops from his shoulders. It seems too big and looks crammed full, even though on our bench at school today it looked deflated.

I open my mouth to call out to him, but for some reason I don’t. I decide to follow him. I’m curious about where he lives and why he’s coming back from school so late.

His slow pace bugs me because I can barely adjust my pace to his. I’m afraid I’ll catch up to him.

At the church he suddenly pulls himself together and starts walking normally. But it still seems like he doesn't want to go home. At least he's going in a straight line and I don't have to slow down in order to tail him.

He walks past the church, crosses the crosswalk, and keeps walking down the little street to the first stoplight.

We go back onto Čopić Street.

I hide behind a parked car. I'm thinking about how I'll fib my way out of this, if he notices me. Since he's not from here, I'll give him some bullshit about how I live nearby.

The little man on the pedestrian light turns green, and Igor uses the crosswalk. I follow him. I succeed in catching the green light. He keeps on hoofing it straight ahead.

At the next intersection he looks to the right and the left, as if he can't recall which way he should go. He goes straight for a bit longer, and then looks right, standing on his tiptoes. And off he goes in that direction.

We've already covered half of Čopić Street. Igor stops at another traffic light, but the red light changes quickly and he goes through the intersection and on toward the gray high-rises.

All of a sudden, I understand. There's no need to follow him any farther. All of a sudden, I'm not interested in what building he lives in, which entrance is his, which floor, whom he lives with. He has crossed into the Shipyards. The end.





## Chapter Six

You make the team if you're good enough. There's nothing more straightforward: you have to prove yourself. There are no clearly laid-out rules. It's more like in the movie *The Karate Kid*. The novice must listen to what is being said to him and isn't allowed to ask questions. The new member is supposed to endure whatever we think up, in order to prove himself. After that, he's one of us. A Central.

Rocket has been in orbit around my gang for a good month already. He brings us sweets. He lets us ride his BMX around the park. He does Needle's homework in math and physics, and he sometimes carries Milica's bag after school. He calls me Rambo and is constantly nagging me about how he's seen the movie and read the book. He recounts his favorite scenes to me and tells me over and over how he hates that fat cop.

Everything was clear to me right after the first time he stole a box of chewing gum in the shape of cigarettes. He handed out the gum to us, and we wet the ends with saliva like we were really smoking them. In the end we chewed on them for a minute, spat them out onto the ground, and walked away. Rocket came after us. So naive. I stopped the crew, turned around, and looked him right in the eyes.

"Where are you going?"

He had no answer. He gawked at me.

“If you want to hang out with us, you’re going to have to prove yourself more. Chewing gum’s a piece of cake. And you can’t just casually walk around with us. Understand?”

Rocket mumbled something, and we turned around and walked off. The next day he carried Milica’s backpack for the first time.

Rocket’s folks aren’t at home. His father is off doing who-knows-what, and his mom has a shop right downtown.

They’re rich. They have a cleaning woman, but she only comes on Thursdays, and today is Friday.

Right after our classes we go over to Rocket’s place, so he can prove himself once and for all.

The team quickly spread out inside his house. It was huge. Reminded us of a palace. It has one part that’s like a tower. There’s this small projecting balcony with a parapet and it looks out over the intersection.

We immediately mark our territory. We scatter stuff around, sit where we aren’t supposed to, play with figurines and statuettes and other decorations, open up armoires and cabinets. Slurp rides a porcelain elephant.

Rocket looks like none of this bothers him. He’s always mellow, anyway. As if he’s on medication, as my mom says.

Milica is standing in the biggest bathroom of the house, putting on makeup. She looks dorky, but she’s deliberately applying too much all over her face.

“You look like a witch.”

“And without your makeup, you look like a dick.”

She’s always teasing me.

The others disperse in all directions.

Rocket’s room is huge and stuffed with toys, video games, a small billiard table, a dart board, posters, books, and neat stacks of all kinds of things.

Needle is rifling through the cabinet. He drops clothes at his feet until he finds a t-shirt that he likes. He turns it inside out, looks at it from all sides, and nods his head.

“I’m gonna take this.”

Rocket shrugs his shoulders. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him wear that shirt to school. He probably doesn’t even know it’s in the dresser.

I shake Rocket by the shoulder and address him with as serious a face as I can muster.

“Have you learned how to make a paper-popper?”

Rocket nods. Grins. He goes over to the table and tears a piece of paper out of the middle of a big notebook. Moving pretty fast, he makes an awesome origami contraption.

We all try it out. We hold it with two fingers on its free ends. We wave our hands vigorously and the triangle pulls back and unfolds. Pop! He really is a master. Everyone except Needle praises him. Before this, he was the one who made the best paper-poppers.

Needle looks around. He spits into the embroidered rug that has a street, complete with houses, paved streets, traffic lights, a hospital, a police station, some train tracks, and road signs.

“Holy shit! Are you rich or what?”

“So what? Rambo’s not going hungry, either.”

“Neither is Cap.”

“But I’m not loaded.”

Needle spits again. As if by doing so he makes himself more right and his hatred stronger. He even says so, too.

“I hate rich people.”

Cap calls the foul.

“Ah, Needle, don’t pretend to be intelligent. He’s rich, and you’re a Catholic. Everybody is some shit or other.”

“I am not.”

“Of course you are. Your last name is Tabor. You’re a German. Catholic.”

Needle bristles

"I don't give a crap. My folks browbeat me into going to church."

"But you're still Catholic."

Needle suddenly goes over to Cap. Cap thrusts out his chest. It's obvious to everyone that he's about to get his butt kicked, but dogs love to bark, as they say.

"Well, Bear's Catholic, too. Fucking Hungarians."

Bear holds his arms out to the sides as if he's confronting all of us.

"And you're a bunch of knuckle-head Serbs!"

Cap jumps back in with: "Spaceman is a Gypsy."

"I am a Gypsy. Want me to kick your ass?"

Milica is standing in the middle of the room.

"Phooey! What does it matter who's what?"

"How could it not matter?"

"No, come on. Tell me, why does it matter?"

Milica is as stubborn as she is gorgeous. Her decisiveness unsettles Cap, who stammers: "Well, uh, they are shooting over there because some of them are one thing and some are another."

"Where's 'over there'?"

"Like, over there. Where Cap's dad is, and Spaceman's brother."

"Where exactly is your dad?"

Cap sits down on the bed. He adjusts his nuts in his jeans using his right hand.

"I have no idea where my old man is. But I'm a Serb. Eastern Orthodox. I know that. Take a look at this."

From out of his t-shirt he pulls a small wooden cross, hanging from a thin cord. Bear whistles.

"Well, fuck me. Orthodox. An original."

"Take a photo of it for the papers!"

"Even better—put it in the zoo. So that everybody can see it!"

Cap puts the little cross back inside his t-shirt. Bear and Rocket are laughing like crazy.

“We’re Orthodox, too.”

Slurp puts his arm around Milica, and she shakes it off. She grabs the thin string of beads on her right wrist. She spins it, like it was prickly.

“And how do you know what I am?”

They cool down. They’re looking at me. I have to elaborate.

“I don’t believe in God.”

Bear comes over and bumps me with his shoulder.

“You’re actually the worst of all, Rambo! You don’t believe in anything. I prefer these Orthodox and their yadda-yadda-yadda. They believe in something, at least.

“Who says I don’t believe in anything?”

Bear laughs.

“Rambo believes in aliens.”

“Dude, your mom believes in aliens.”

“So, what do you believe in, then?”

“In you. In all of you jackasses.”

After we finish storming the apartment, we go into the kitchen, where we pull loads of food out of the refrigerator and pile it on the table. We make sandwiches, stuff ourselves, and wash it all down with juice and Coca-Cola. Then we wolf down more, until we are sick of eating. Except that Bear isn’t capable of getting sick of eating.

“Got anything sweet?”

“Of course.”

Rocket opens the pantry and discovers shelves packed with desserts, breakfast cereal, chips and other munchies, chocolates, and candy.

We gobble up everything we see, and we put some of it in our pockets so we’ll have it later.

Milica runs out of room in her pants pockets, and she turns to Rocket and asks him nonchalantly:

“Hey, Rocket, where’d you put my backpack?”

“In the foyer. Why?”

“Oh, be a gem and bring it here—and fill it up with sweets. Okay?”

“Will do.”

Needle comes up to me and, his lips filthy with chocolate, mumbles:

“Aren’t we overdoing it?”

“Overdoing what?”

“I mean, his rents are going to skin him alive when they see all this. And they’ll skin us alive, too, if they come back while we’re still here.”

“What’s the matter with you, Needle? Feeling chickenshit?”

Needle swallows a big mouthful of chocolate, gags, and turns red in the face. He coughs. He wants to tell me off but just gives me the finger instead. I pound on his back and look around the kitchen.

A large glass door leads into the yard, with its neatly mown lawn. I’m not up on my tree species, but three trunks without leaves spread their branches in one corner of the yard. At the very back, right against the tall, white wall, there are a shed and two doghouses. The walls are covered with vines that’re losing their leaves. In front of them two Dobermans are lolling about. If it weren’t for these dogs, the yard would look like some kind of diorama. That’s how staged, empty, and dead it is. The dogs liven it up. The minute we swarmed into the house, they barked and came to see who was making the racket. Rocket didn’t let them in, and they quickly got bored with us.

“Do they bite?”

“What are their names?”

Slurp and Bear are pressed up against the glass, looking out at the black and orange beasts with cropped ears.

Rocket is in the process of closing up Milica's backpack, now filled with sweets and other tasty snacks.

"They do bite. But I'll call them now, and we can pet them."

Rocket comes up to the glass door. We're all pressed up against the big pane. We stand there quietly and watch, without even blinking, as if we had never seen pooches before.

"The one with the black collar is Ares, and the one with the red one is Athena."

"What dumb names."

"I think they're from mythology. And I think they had to call them that."

"Who?"

"The breeders."

We talk a little while longer about dogs and how Ares and Athena have won prizes. Meanwhile, Rocket fills two bowls with dog food. He takes them over to the door. He slowly moves the gate to one side, and the dogs immediately raise their heads and stare at us. Their eyes are black, like the balls that Jareth the Goblin King twirls with his fingers.

Rocket calls out their names and pushes their bowls out onto the grass, and the dogs jump joyfully to their feet and come across the green lawn. They wag their tails back and forth, shaking their rear ends around and wolfing down the kibble in the bowls.

"Don't touch them yet. Let them sniff you first, and then you can pet them."

The dogs are huge and they look totally badass. Their black fur glistens, their muscles stand out, and their cropped ears remind us of horns.

They eat every last piece of the kibble. They lick the bowls and sniff around to see if any kernels got away from them. They cozy up to Rocket and rub up against him, but when they realize there's not going to be anything else to eat, they turn their attention to us



Everything happens as Rocket said it would. After they smell us, they lick our palms and sniff our shoes, and they shove their heads into our hands so we'll pet them. Athena even rolls over onto her back and squirms, while Milica, Needle, and Cap all scratch her at the same time.

Ares rears up on his hind legs and licks Bear's face. He must smell the remains of the chips and the chocolate. It doesn't take long for them to get tired of each other, and they go back out into the yard. They find a spot of grass with a narrow beam of sunlight, and there they lie down, one draped over the other, and doze off.

Rocket close the door and looks around the kitchen.

"I have to clean up before my rents get home."

"When are they due back?"

"Around six."

"It's barely four now."

"And you still haven't been accepted into the gang."

Rocket looks at me. He seems about to cry. I understand. He shared everything he could with us. He let us mess up his house, take his clothes, ruin his mom's makeup, pet his dogs, and jump on the furniture.

"Does your dad watch porn?"

"Oh yeah. He's got a whole stack of VHS tapes."

"Show us."

Milica rolls her eyes and groans.

"Don't start jerking off now!"

I give her a frog punch on her upper arm. She doesn't hit back but instead grabs her right shoulder. She gives me a furious glance.

"We're not going to jerk off, but we're each gonna take a tape for later."

"I'm not going to."

"You don't have to. Besides, what would you want with a porn video? You're a girl."

Rocket leads us into his parents' bedroom. It's enormous. I think it's larger than my whole apartment. There's this gigantic closet with a sliding door, a television set, VCR, speakers, a king-size bed, and windows that look out over the yard.

Rocket shoves the closet door to the side. He pushes away some shoe boxes and pulls out a brown carton that was stuffed way in the back of the closet. He opens it up to reveal a stack of cassettes in their original packaging. Every tape is covered with pictures of naked guys and chicks. On some of them there are only chicks. There are black people and white people and Asians. On one of them there's a photo of a midget.

"This one's for Slurp!"

Cap holds up the tape that has the midget on it.

Everybody laughs, but Milica hits Cap in the ribs. He recoils and lowers his arm.

"It's for your mom, you dumbass."

We look through the tapes. We try to read what's on them, but the descriptions are mostly in German. Occasionally there will be one in English, but hardly any of us know what those English words even mean.

One word is obvious to all of us, though, and it makes us start to drool: "sex."

After everybody has selected a tape, Rocket puts the rest back in the carton, puts the carton back in the closet, and camouflages it once more with other things.

The team disperses around the room. Needle immediately whips out his tool and starts rubbing one out over the picture on his tape. Milica pretends not to notice. She leafs through a fashion magazine that she found on the nightstand. The others are cutting up: they jump on the bed and pretend to hang themselves with Rocket's dad's neckties.

Bear and Spaceman are having a competition to see who can burp the loudest. They divvy up a bottle of Fanta, gulp it down, and let it rip.

I look out the window and notice how the dog's ray of sunlight has narrowed. The hounds are cuddling with one another now and they look like one dog. They're snoozing.

"Hey, did anybody bring any *rakija*?"

Everybody smacks their lips, but they all shake their heads.

"I've got some smokes."

Needle continues to masturbate.

"Smoke my dick."

Rocket comes over to me and points to the shed outside.

"My dad has a slingshot he uses to catch fish. Want me to bring it?"

"For sure. And while you're at it, bring some more snacks."

Rocket, all smiles, hurries out of the room. We hear him going down the stairs. A whooshing sound indicates he has slid open the back door. We soon see him cutting across the backyard towards the shed. Athena and Ares perk up their ears and watch him, but they decide not to move. Rocket disappears into the shed.

"Hey, Cap, go get the marbles from Rocket's room."

"Why me?"

"Because I said so."

"Whoa, Rambo. You're a hard-ass today."

Rocket and Cap come back into the parents' bedroom at the same time. Bear takes a bag of potato chips from Rocket's hands, and Cap hands me a mesh bag filled with glass marbles. Rocket pulls the slingshot out of his pocket. The handle and the fork are made of red plastic, and the band and the pouch for the projectile are yellowish rubber.

He holds the slingshot out to me, but I shake my head.

"No, no. You're going to shoot it."

The whole crew gathers around us. I open the window and point my finger at the intertwined dogs.

“Hit one of them in the head and you’re one of us.”

No one speaks. I can sense that at least half my team is against it, but nobody dares say anything. I’m still number one. Needle and Spaceman both have dogs. This is probably particularly painful for them. So be it.

“Rambo. I’d kill them. I mean, my dad will kill me.”

I look Rocket up and down and then shrug my shoulders. I begin walking towards the door.

“Then you’ve got no place in the Centrals.”

I walk slowly enough for all to grasp what is happening and start following me out. We go down the stairs. All of a sudden, everything is quiet. The only noise is Bear, who hasn’t stopped crunching away on his chips. My hand is already on the knob of the front door when Rocket pipes up from the top of the stairs.

“OK. Fuck my dad.”

He stands there with his lips pressed tightly together and the slingshot in his hand. I look at the others. I indicate with my head that we should all go back to the bedroom.

We take our places at the window. The dogs are still in their same spot.

Rocket picks up a clear glass marble that has ribbons of red, orange, and yellow color through it. He places the marble in the pouch and watches Athena and Ares for a long time.

Still nobody says anything. Even Bear has stopped devouring his potato chips. We inhale and exhale quietly and wait to see what Rocket will do.

Rocket stares at the dogs for another full minute. Some of the team members have already started nudging each other, but I’m sure of what’s going to happen. I don’t move, but I slide my eyes to the left and right. From Rocket to the dogs and back.

Rocket raises the slingshot and takes aim.



## Chapter Seven

In the living room, my dad is smoking and sipping *rakija*. His after-work habit. A big late lunch, a bit to drink, a quick cigarette, a little nap. Mom reads the newspaper. She's curious about who I'm calling.

"Milica."

She puts down the paper and looks at me. I think about how many movies I've seen that movement in, and I have to laugh. Now she's wants to know what's so funny.

"Nothing. Man, leave me alone!"

I start dialing on the rotary phone. The dial gives off the sound of something winding up, and then it goes tik-tok-tik as it spins back the other way. Then the next number, four more times. It rings.

The telephone's cord is long enough for me to get away from my parents. I hold the yellow receiver between my shoulder and my ear. I use one hand to wrestle with the cord while I use the other one to take hold of the handset itself.

I leave the living room door slightly ajar sit down as far away as I can in the foyer, beyond the shoe rack. I'm aware of the fact that they can still hear me. But it's nicer being in another room. Especially when it's Milica.

Her dad picks up. I've been schooled so many times about how to introduce myself on the phone that all these exceptionally polite things come rolling off my tongue

"Hello. This is Ivan. Is Milica home?"

Her old man mumbles in the affirmative. He yells to Milica, to get her to come in from the other room. It makes my ears ring right away, so I shift the receiver to my other ear.

"Hello?"

"Hey. It's Rambo."

"Ciao. What's up?"

"I'm bored. I'm waiting for my parents to go to bed, and then I'm gonna wack off."

Milica makes a noise that sounds like she's vomiting.

"So classy of you."

"You're the one who's always bullshitting about jacking off. You probably don't even have a dick."

"Ask your mom if I have a dick."

"Blow me, Rambo."

"OK."

The line is silent for a moment. Nobody's actually angry here. She and I constantly go back and forth like this. But, you never know. I think that maybe she's a little angry now. I give in. Change the subject. To the reason I called her.

"How was it?"

"What?"

"Disneyland!"

"What?"

"The thing with Spaceman!"

"What could it have been like? It was a funeral."

"Well, I don't know. Never been to one."

"Seriously?"

“Yep. I haven’t attended one single funeral. Grandma died when I was three. I don’t remember it. For the time being, everybody else is alive.”

“That’s no excuse. You could have gone. For Spaceman’s sake.”

“I wanted to. The rents wouldn’t let me.”

“How come?”

“Mom said, ‘What business do you have at a Gypsy funeral?’”

“Mine were morons about it, too. Like all the others. Nobody was there. Slurp didn’t go, either.”

I stop talking. Mom’s on her way to the kitchen. She opens the door. The hiss of mineral water, a swallow, and the sound of relief. A burp.

“Hello?”

“Hold on a minute.”

My mom looks at me as she heads back into her room.

She grins and blows me mock kisses.

“Close the door!”

She pushes it carelessly to. Slam!

“Hey, Rambo, what’s happening there?”

“My mom’s giving me grief. Just go on. What was it like?”

“It wasn’t like anything. You’re all a bunch of pussies for not going.”

“Nobody went, for real?”

“No. Slurp didn’t want to, because dad said we’d be punished if we did.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Did you get punished?”

“Till the weekend.”

I think for a moment. Today’s Wednesday.

“Well, OK. That’s nothing catastrophic.”

“Easy for you to say. What am I supposed to do till Saturday?”



“Grab yourself by the ears and dance?”

“Blow me.”

“How is Spaceman? What all happened?”

“You really are an ignoramus. How do you think he is? He’s fucked up. Imagine if your brother died.”

“I don’t have a brother.”

“Well, I do.”

Things went silent again.

“Fine. Do you want to talk or hang up?”

“I want to talk. But don’t be a jerk about it. It was really sad.”

“Did you call Spaceman afterwards?”

“No, I didn’t. I went to the funeral. I picked up some flowers from another grave and put them by the casket.”

“What else happened?”

“Nothing. Spaceman and his family stood there next to the casket. In the chapel. Everybody expressed their condolences. They all kissed on the cheek. Touched the coffin. People left flowers and those round bouquets.”

I don’t know what else to ask her, but I think back to what my dad always says when he talks about funerals.

“Were there a lot of people?”

“Tons. His friends were there, too.”

“Which friends?”

“Army friends. Don’t know where they were from. They were wearing uniforms. But not the camouflage ones. The other kind, like suits. But they had their medals on and their berets and such. They fired their rifles.”

“No shit? When?”

“Before they put the coffin in.”

“Where’d they put it?”

“Down into the grave, for fuck’s sake!”

Now someone else picks up the receiver and is on our line. A harsh male voice interrupts our conversation. Then the man swears and hangs up.

“Hello? Milica?”

“Yeah. I’m here.”

“What was that? Is your dad hassling you?”

“Hell no. The other guy on our party line. What the hell is his problem? Sometimes he takes up the line for two hours.”

“Did he hang up?”

Neither of us says anything. We listen intently to the silence on the line.

“I think so.”

“Back to what happened.”

“Afterwards, I wanted to stay with Spaceman, but I couldn’t get over to him. There were too many old farts there. And he stuck right by his father’s side the whole time.”

“Did he even know you were there?”

“Rambo, you jackass. I told you I gave him my condolences.”

“I don’t remember that. You said you took flowers.”

She’s annoyed. She spells it all out for me.

“I stole some flowers. I went into the chapel. I put the flowers onto the other flowers. I expressed my condolences. I walked out of the chapel.”

“And?”

A sigh.

“Nothing. Those soldiers carried the coffin to the grave. The priest sang. They lowered the coffin. A crowd of women was wailing.”

“Why did they wail?”

“They were probably really sad about it. Spaceman’s dad had to pull his mom out of the grave.”

“Whose mom?”

“Spaceman’s mom! The woman threw herself into the hole. When they put the casket down in it.”

“Wow. Holy shit!”

I can hear her sniffing.

“Hey, Milica? Are you ok? Are you crying?”

Milica cleared her throat. She blew her nose loudly.

“No.”

Again, silence. Milica’s voice suddenly breaks up. I can see her like she’s right in front of me. Flustered and flushed, with her eyes bloodshot and puffy from crying.

“You guys are wimps for not going.”

She hangs up.

## Chapter Eight

I like to go to Cap's house. He doesn't have a lot of toys or a VCR, but they've got a big yard.

We're all there, Cap, Needle, Spaceman, Bear, Slurp, and Milica. Rocket is here, too. He proved himself like a boss, so now we're going to take him along to his first fight.

Cap's father is away at the front. He calls now and then, and sometimes he sends a letter. Cap says he's not afraid for his dad. He's the bravest man he knows.

Cap lives with his mom, his grandmother, and his grandfather. The grandmother and grandfather can barely move. They creep slowly around the house and never ask us any questions.

His mom is a real piece of work. She always wants to know what we're up to. She pretends to bring us water to drink, or she plies us with fruit and sweets. In fact, she bursts into the room, hoping to catch us at something. I don't know why. We are always just playing.

This time, however, it isn't all just a game. We wait for Cap's mother to go into the house, and we stay in the yard a bit longer, petting their two cats.

Cap sneaks up to the window to the living room. He peeks in and then swiftly turns around. He nods his head frantically.

“She’s watching the TV!”

We know where his pop keeps his tools and other such stuff. The shed is large and sits right up against the house. It has two huge windows. One looks out over the courtyard, and the other’s in the back, above the little garden patch behind the house.

The sky looks like the static on a TV when there’s no show on. Its weak light reaches the interior from the outside, making the workshop seem smaller than it is. All the stuff jammed into it make it even smaller.

The shed has two enormous tables. Cap’s old man made them out of the panels of old doors. The tools are all over the walls, on the floor, and on a bunch of improvised shelves.

There are: hammers, screwdrivers, wrenches, awls, carpenter’s pencils, pieces of chalk, hacksaws, drills, pliers, rasps, nails, screws, nuts, coils of wire, magnets, soldering irons, pipe wrenches, rulers, voltage meters, scissors, insulation tape, electrical tape.

And of course there’s a pile of rubbish here. The remnants of old radios, metal shavings, styrofoam, rags, pieces of metal that always come in handy for something, a broken faucet, and a busted picture frame. In a dad’s workshop, you can find anything you want. Cap’s old bike is also here, a heap of worn-out clothes, and two or three busted television sets.

We don’t know where to look or what to do first. I almost forget what we came here for. Bear soon brings me back to reality.

“Cap, what are we allowed to take?”

Cap does a slow 360 degree turn. He looks up and down, as if he is noting everything that’s there, and then he shrugs his shoulders.

“I don’t know. All of it.

“Your father’s going to kill you.”

Milica is worried, but Slurp’s already examining the short bike chain hanging on a metal hook.

"Except, he's not here. Who knows when he'll be back."

"What if he returns tomorrow?"

"No way. A letter from him came yesterday. He said he didn't know anything yet."

"Then everybody take what you want. We'll return it when Cap gets his dad back."

We root around through the tools. All of a sudden, Cap's mom appears. She's carrying a pitcher and a tray with glasses. She pops into the shed and announces merrily that she's brought us instant powdered orange juice. The pitcher is an unnatural yellow, and in the water you can still see undissolved bits of the powder she'd poured from the packet.

We stop our search for weapons. We play the innocent kids. We thank her for the juice, sip it, and wait for her to leave.

His mom wonders what we're looking for. She walks into the workshop and makes a circle through it, touching plenty of the objects with her fingers. It seems like her thoughts aren't really here. She shudders and goes outside. Then she calls back to us that there's more if we get thirsty.

"She's always doing that."

"A mom's a mom."

"She's gone now. Did you find weapons?"

Tools are lifted up proudly in front of me. I nod and smile, and I retrieve the bandana from my pocket. I put it on my head and tie it tight. I feel the pulse in my temples.

"What's the bandana for?"

"What do you think it's for?"

"Are we going to the Shipyards now?"

"It's too late."

"I have to go home."

"Me, too."

I don't like the way they all look discouraged. I look each of them in the face, one after another. I rotate my head from left to right.

"Whoever has to go home now to his momma, beat it. I'm going to the Shipyards."

"You didn't get a weapon," Milica piped up from the back of the workshop.

"No, because I don't need one. I'm going to take a weapon from them."

For a moment, I say nothing else. Then I turn and leave the shack. I don't look back all the way to the gate. I only make eye contact with the others as I'm pressing down on the handle.

The whole gang is just two steps behind me. I smile and go into the street. Then the rain starts to pick up.

The city is empty. Saturday afternoon. Everyone's sitting in their houses and apartments. They're eating, drinking, and chatting like there's no tomorrow. They're afraid of the rain.

The eight of us stride on as one. We pass the hiding place where my clothes are, but I am so sure of victory today that I'm not even going to change my outfit.

I'd like to run, but I'm saving our strength. All of us are needed for this fight. Especially Bear. And he'd never catch up to us if we sprinted.

We don't go down the widest street, but we cut across it and then turn up a little street running parallel to it.

From the windows of the low buildings, the old ladies lock their eyes on us.

Rain is falling, but it's not pouring. That means we might catch someone outside. I'd end up looking like a moron if I brought the gang, ready to fight, to an empty playground. I'd have to put up with teasing, and I can't stand that.

Soon we cross the imaginary line that separates the Center from the Shipyards. The intersection is deserted, and the traffic lights change for no reason.

We're in the Shipyards now, and all of our joking ceases. We are already close to the first set of buildings in the neighborhood. They are tall, and who knows who all has seen us? Sledgehammer's team is surely gathering, if they aren't already on some basketball court or soccer field somewhere.

We are on a muddy clearing with swings, see-saws, and a merry-go-round. With all his strength, Sledgehammer spins the round, metal carousel, and two little girls shriek because it's going too fast.

The remainder of their team is nearby. Some are swinging, some are up on top of the swing-set, and two of them are tussling over a deflated soccer ball.

Sledgehammer spies us first. He stops spinning the little girls. Hollers at the top of his lungs. Gathers his gang.

We still aren't charging. We are walking slowly. I can feel everybody pushing behind me. They're in a rush to try out their new toys. But this moment needs to last. We aren't going to attack until they pull out their weapons.

The nightstick is my signal.

A group of about ten Shipyards gathers quickly around the merry-goo-round.. Some of them have weapons, and some are empty-handed.

Verbal challenges fly our way. They are followed by rocks and other projectiles. We respond in kind but don't get too close.

Sledgehammer has gone off somewhere. I don't want to fight if he isn't there. We curse and spit at the Shipyards. They do it back at us. Projectiles whip past us. We aren't accurate either.

Finally Sledgehammer returns, and in his hand the nightstick beams black. I don't wait for him to stop in front of his crew. I go for him immediately.



Two or three steps, and then we run. Everything goes black for me. My ears buzz. I sense that my team is all around me, but I can't see them. I aim for Sledgehammer and his weapon.

Sledgehammer is scared shitless. His face is all distorted. He's not going to attack right away. He's having his guys clash with us first.

All of a sudden, my team's weapons appear. They pull them out of their pants legs, their sleeves, and pockets. The Shipyarders don't know what to do. They realize they're fucked.

Cap is waving a big wrench. He doesn't aim at people's heads, because he isn't insane. But I'd like to see your face when Cap nails you with that wrench on your shoulder or arm. Or on your thigh. It hurts like crazy.

The Shipyarders yowl, but they do not retreat.

Bear seems to enjoy their stubbornness. He smiles. He grabs one of them and wraps the bicycle chain around his neck. He turns the guy around so he's facing his teammates. He twists it. The guy starts wheezing and grabs for the chain. He squirms. Bear uses him as a shield against the others. He attacks his opponents and pushes their comrade towards them. With his other hand he swings at them.

Five more snot-nosed kids run up. They're younger than us; you can see that right away. They aren't carrying anything, and their muscles aren't for shit.

Milica is whipping around a long, rusty spring. The coil flops around and makes the Shipyarders howl. Even though she's only aiming for their legs and rear ends, Sledgehammer's guys don't know how to defend themselves. They use their fists and sticks to block our attacks. They don't have time to hit us.

Rocket is the only one who's in a bad way. Two of them are pounding away at him with their fists with all their might. Finally, he buckles over and falls to the ground. They kick him. They're not choosy about where.

Slurp helps him. He sprints out between them and uses a hammer to clear a circle around Rocket and himself. One of the Shipyarders screams. He's grabbing his face. Blood is flowing. He keeps yelling, but it's muffled by the blood and his own hands. He runs away.

The other guy doesn't try to lock horns with Slurp. Just in case, Slurp swings his hammer two or three more times, and then he picks Rocket up.

Spaceman has a metal bar in his hands. He's trading blows with four Shipyarders who have similar cudgels. Theirs are made of wood. They quickly splinter under the steel from Cap's workshop. Three of the guys soon break and run, and the fourth one Spaceman thwacks on the head, and he falls to the ground. He tries to stand up but he can't, and he falls back down over and over again. Spaceman shoves the pipe into the Shipyarder's ass. The seat of his pants quickly gives way. It looks like his underwear is ripped open, too.

Rocket is next to me, and Bear is close enough for me to be protected.

Bear releases his prisoner and then finishes him off with punches and slaps. The Shipyarder staggers and falls. His neck is all dark green with grease and blood. He's crawling through the mud, but Bear kicks him in the butt so that he can't hightail it away.

Rocket and I surround Sledgehammer. He doesn't know whom to attack first, and he's brandishing the nightstick energetically. First at me and then at Rocket.

Rocket clutches his screwdriver. He lunges at Sledgehammer, but he can't get him. Sledgehammer's arms are longer. And his weapon is longer.

I don't like the looks of the nightstick. I can still remember that big knot on my head. But I have to take it!

I decide it's now or never.

I leap on Sledgehammer. He's tired and isn't able to react very fast. He swings and hits only air. I'm on him. We hit the ground. And I stay on top of him. I grab him by the arms and hit him with my knees. He twists and defends himself with his thighs, so I can't rack him. He squirms, but I hold him firmly.

"Drop the nightstick!"

"Suck my dick!"

I stop hitting him. Little but little I move up over him. I've got him covered completely. I can feel him kicking at me with his legs. He wants to shake me off.

He grabs my bandana and tears it off. Rocket stands on Sledgehammer's hand. He pins it down in the mud.

Sledgehammer's done for, but he doesn't let go of the nightstick. I manage to get to it. I bite him on the wrist. I feel the metallic taste on my lips. It mingles with the taste of dirt. Sledgehammer screams.

His hand pops open. The nightstick falls out of it.

The great pressure in my body releases. I relax and slide off Sledgehammer. I catch my breath. Rocket kicks him and sends him running.

There's Bear's big smile above me. He offers me his hand. Helps me to my feet. There are no Shipyarders around. My crew is winded, dirty, shaken up, and a bit bloody. Everyone is laughing.

I pick my bandana up off the ground. Next to it lies the nightstick. I put the bandana in my pocket and raise the blackjack high into the air above me. I scream. The others follow suit.

All the Shipyards echo with our shouts.

## Chapter Nine

Whenever my parental units leave me alone at home, I call the squad to come over and hang out at my place. Especially when the weather outside sucks.

The gang's always interested to know why there are so many books in our apartment. Cap's the only one who isn't enthusiastic about them, because his parents also have quite a few books on their shelves. He claims they have even more than my parents. He also talks crap about how his dad has infinitely more albums than my old man. I don't particularly care which geezers have more boring books and records.

"See, I counted one hundred and fifty. And at my house, we have at least three hundred!"

I don't respond. Instead I turn my attention to what Milica, Slurp, and Rocket are doing.

They have the doors to the wardrobe wide open and they're rummaging through my folks' clothes. Slurp digs out a big straw beach hat and puts it on his head. He clowns around while he sticks it in our faces.

Milica and Rocket take out suspenders, shirts, and two baseball caps. They hitch up one another's suspenders and don the caps.

“Now we are your dad!”

They put their arms around each other’s waists, and then they walk around acting like one person.

“And I’m your mom!”

Slurp squeals, but Bear shuts him up fast.

“You’re a faggot, you dumbass! Those are women’s clothes.”

“The fag’s in your underwear, but I don’t even care.”

And it’s true that Slurp isn’t mad. This shows when he pulls a dress out of the closet. He takes off the hat, puts on the dress, and then returns the hat to his head and twists his body to the side. That’s how that babe with the big tits poses in the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*

Bear laughs at the way Slurp is parading around. He sprawls out comfortably over the two cushions on the sofa.

Spaceman digs out a record, saying that it’s one of his favorites; he puts it on the record player. He carefully opens the protective cover on the needle. He then moves the arm over the disk, keeping his head close to the stereo and holding his eyes level with the big turntable. Slowly he places the needle onto the groove.

When I hear that he’s playing Bajaga, I’m bored. Same with Bear.

“Come on, man. Surely we’re not going to listen to that!”

“So what would you play?”

“Just not that. Put on Lepa Brena.”

“Don’t have it. The folks won’t let me listen to her.”

“Did anybody bring a different record?”

They all shake their heads.

Spaceman smiles, opens up the album cover, and reads the contents. The performers’ names and the lyrics. Milica kicks me in the butt. She and Rocket are still tied together, shaking their heads and index fingers.

“You have to study, Ivan. Not listen to music!”

“Do what your dad says now!”

Slurp stays rooted to his spot. He pokes out his ass a little to the left and then a little to the right. Needle appears with a piece of bread in his hand. He nibbles at it and drops crumbs all over the wooden floor. Bear moves towards him so he can hock a loogie his way. Needle picks his nose and wipes the booger on Bear's sleeve. Bear frogs his arm.

"Buttwipe! You hit me hard!"

"No, I didn't. You're just a pussy."

Slurp, Milica, and Rocket link arms and limp over to the bed, where Bear and Needle are already wrestling. The bread lies on the floor, forgotten. The costumed trio shake their fingers menacingly and give the guys grief. They try to imitate the deep voices of adults.

"How dare you fight, children! That's not nice!"

I smile. I'm glad that I'm not alone in the apartment, that everybody has come over and will come up with something to do. This is how it always goes. They need to blow off some steam. Like animals, they love to upend everything in the house. Mark their territory. Afterwards they feel mellow.

Suddenly Bajaga stops his mumbling and we find ourselves in total darkness.

Through the windows there's also nothing to be seen except darkness. The only light that reaches us is from the edge of the city, where the refinery flickers. In the factories, the electricity didn't go out.

"Hey, what the hell?"

Our eyes adjust quickly to the dark. The cloudy, moonless sky doesn't offer us the slightest bit of light. We can scarcely tell what is what.

"Hey, don't grab me!"

Milica shouts and then shoves the boy closest to her.

"Who was touching you?"

Slurp gets mad instantaneously.

"I don't know!"

Everybody laughs. As soon as they calm back down, I tell them not to budge and not to touch Milica. I walk cautiously towards the kitchen.

I have candles.

We sit in the living room, lit up by four weak flames. I've seen my mom and dad do this tons of times. They take a little coffee saucer and light the candle and let a little wax drip into its center. They attach the candle by pressing one end of it into the wax, which hardens immediately and holds it in place.

We quickly burn through the topics that we've already chewed over in school. Standardized tests, reading lists for our written exams, roughhousing during the long recess, who has a crush on whom, teasing people because of who has a crush on whom, throwing shade at the teachers.

We are bored. We don't talk but just gawk at the white candles that don't look as though they are getting any smaller. The electricity is apparently never coming back.

Milica, Rocket, and Slurp still have their costumes on, and they keep us occupied for a bit by imitating grown-ups. But we've already seen that one.

I take a candle and go to my room. I carefully place the saucer on the floor next to my bed. The darkness under my bed has never been so dense and deep. But I stick my hand into it and grope around for what I'm looking for.

I go back to the living room and let the four porn magazines plop loudly onto the table. Rocket's dad's VHS is there, too.

The magazines have hardly touched the glass surface when they're already in the gang's hands. They flock by twos or threes around the magazines and tilt them towards the flames of the candles. They turn the pages and drool over the bare pussies and the guys who are banging them. They read the ads for whores and for books of erotic stories.

Milica immediately stands up.

“I’m leaving. It’s late. My mom’s gonna give me shit. Slurp, let’s go.”

“You go. I’m going to stay.”

Slurp is holding one of the magazines and is fighting with Needle, who’s trying to wrest it from his hands.

“Mom’s going to kill you.”

“See if I care!”

I take a candle and accompany Milica to the foyer. I aim the light at her shoes and wait for her to put them on. I unlock the door but don’t open it.

“How are you going to make it alone, in the dark?”

“Better alone in the dark than watching you guys jack off.”

She grabs my hand, squeezes it along with the door handle, and goes out into the corridor. The candlelight doesn’t reach far but I stop on the doormat and try to illuminate the stairs for Milica. She’s holding onto the railing with both hands and treading carefully. Stair by stair, makes her way to the ground floor.

I go back to the living room and everybody there has already whipped out their tools.

Spaceman and Needle are hunched over a magazine, jerking off. The others are doing the same thing, lined up over their magazines.

“Nobody better shoot onto a magazine!”

“Who’s going to notice that now?”

We all take out our dicks and masturbate as one, but we aren’t concentrating too hard on it. We jostle, we comment on who has what sized dick, and we make fun of Needle because he’s circumcised. It’s as if jerking off is what interests us least of all.

I’m standing over a magazine, together with Bear, Rocket, and Slurp. Nobody has a cock like Bear’s. Some of us have smaller ones, some bigger ones, but they all look equally pitiful compared to Bear’s mega-tool. He’s the only one that finishes like an animal. The rest of us dribble a little bit, or, while we’re whacking off a little



transparent fluid appears. Bear is the only one who has thick white semen that gushes out.

I watch Slurp. He's taken off the hat but is still wearing the dress. He drops his jeans and his underwear. He holds the hem of the dress tucked up into his underarms, and with his left hand he's pulling his foreskin back and forth, faster and faster.

It occurs to me that he looks like Milica. Especially in a dress, and in the weak light of a candle. It's just that Milica has a pussy, and Slurp has a dick. At that moment, the differences didn't seem like a huge deal to me. I tilt my head back down towards the magazine, but my eyes are still on Slurp. His eyes are squeezed shut. He's going to come soon. I can sense that I will, too.

Slurp clears his throat, and he slows his strokes more and more. Now he's rubbing his cock, and his body quivers. Like a flame.

I keep on pretending that I'm not looking at him. I feel something moving deep down in me. I realize I can't hold out any longer, and in that instant everything is over. That's how it always is. I came and then a second later it's like I hadn't masturbated at all. Seems to me that it all lasts a lot longer with Slurp. He's still squinting and massaging his head.

This time I can commend myself for the little drop of white semen on my palm.

Soon everyone has finished. Of course, some of the sperm and fluid has dripped onto the magazines, so I cuss my crew out. From the bathroom I bring toilet paper and try to wipe up the shitty mess they've made. But I only succeed in smearing it across the blurry black-and-white pictures.

"You guys have to buy me new magazines!"

The light dispels my anger.

No one moves. We look at one another with our dicks in our hands. Then all at once everybody laughs out loud. We look stupid, especially Slurp, since he's in a dress.

It's as if the light has ruined the entire evening. We talk again about trivial stuff..

"How can it be, Bear, that you haven't fucked anything with a dick like that?

"I fucked your mom, you know!"

And so on, round and round.

We get tired of this pretty fast, and everybody says they need to go home. It's late. Their rents are going to kill them.

I see them out and then lock the door. Turn the bolt twice. I also put on the chainguard, though it looks weak and I'm not sure it would stop anyone. I turn around towards the empty apartment. Total silence.

My mom and dad frequently leave me at home by myself. Although they have jobs, they make regular shopping runs up to Hungary.

One time I overheard them talking, and: we actually live by smuggling. I don't get why they keep on going to work. They're always telling me that school is my job. After elementary school, I'll enroll in high school, and then in university, and then I'll work, join the army, and find a wife. That's the kind of life my parents are preparing for me. It doesn't sound too terrible. As far as I know, their parents did things that way, and so mine live the same way.

I hope that no one will interfere when I want to go out to fight or when I want to watch movies.

The only thing that worries me is the job part. It seems like work takes up a lot of time and does nobody any good, in view of the fact that my folks have to go even to Hungary so we can survive.

The emptiness when they go is somehow different than when they're at work, or at the store. When they go out of the country, the silence that fills the apartment is much more serious. It's like the objects all around are focusing on me. The atmosphere is stifling. Thick.

There is, of course, the inevitable little note on which Mom wrote down where they had gone and when they'd be back. She also scribbles brief instructions on what I am to eat for the next day or two, and she leaves me the telephone number of her best friend. The letter always ends with: "Love, Mom and Dad."

"Yeah, I love you, too."

Although ten minutes ago we were farting around in the living room, I give the whole apartment a walk-through just to make sure nobody's there. I open all the closets and cupboards in which someone could hide.

Moving a door or pulling open a drawer is always a stressful event. Out of any one of these hiding places somebody could jump out and get me.

This time I am a bit less fearful because I have a nightstick. I quickly complete my check of the apartment, and I make myself a sandwich. I munch on two pieces of bread that I smeared with margarine, loaded with thick slices of salami and cheese, and clapped together.

My reward for being brave and staying alone while they go shopping—it's waiting for me next to the VCR. Three little black cases bearing the sticker of the video store. That means they'll be gone for two more days.

I devour the sandwich. With my free hand, I get the VHS boxes open, and I look at the white labels on the tapes.

I load *Predator* into the player and push play, and then I drop onto a pillow and watch the film.

I doze off before the movie's over. I rewind the tape and then watch the rest. Dutch beats the crap out of the alien, blows up his spaceship, and books it out of the jungle. The end.

I go into the kitchen and drink some water. The clock says 10:35. I should go to bed, but there's zero chance I'll be able to fall asleep.

Then something thuds in the living room! The noise doesn't come back, but I don't dare move. I stand next to the sink and carefully place my glass on the counter. Slowly, slowly I turn around and look into the darkness of the foyer. I can't see the living room. The light is on in the kitchen and from my bedroom comes the bluish glow of the television.

I don't know what to do.

But I decide that I will run to my room and close myself up in there. If worse comes to worst, my billy-club is beneath the bed. It'd be better to be there than here.

I count to five and then dash. I race through the foyer, trip over my tennis shoes and smack my head on the door frame.

Holding my head and gritting my teeth, I manage to get the nightstick out. I turn to the door.

Silence.

My breathing normalizes. I hold out the nightstick and cut on the light in the room. I feel my head. There's no blood and no knot. I got off easy.

I grip the blackjack harder and walk into the foyer. I turn on the light there, too. I look everywhere. I even check the corners of the ceiling. you never know where danger can lurk. Like in that *Predator* movie.

I approach the bathroom and flip on the light. Stepping cautiously, I look behind the door. Robes that hang there like deflated bodies.

There's still the living room.

I look carefully at every object there. The way T-800 does when he goes into a bar.

I enter the room and the wooden floorboards creak. I stand rooted to the spot. Once more I look around at everything. At the back of the room, something rustles. I recoil and keep my eyes on the easy chair that's by the radiator. There's hardly enough room for

me back there, much less for an adult. Maybe it isn't a grown-up but a demon or one of the Shipyarders.

That rustling again.

I make no unnecessary movements and walk out of the room. Cautiously. I turn off the light and close the door. I walk backwards while keeping my unblinking gaze on the door. Half of the panes are opaque, dappled glass. The darkness that creeps from behind it is more terrifying to me than burglars or monsters.

It's as if someone else is guiding my body. I put on my tennis shoes, pull on a jacket, and with the nightstick in my hand I unlock the apartment door and quickly exit to the corridor.

I lock the door and then turn on the light in the hallway. The building is empty. The echoes of my movements are the only noise.

I put my eye up to the peephole on the door. I expect a tiny bright dot to be looking at me from inside.

I don't wait for that to happen. Instead I fly down the stairs and almost wipe out on them. I grab onto the railing, but the nightstick flies out of my hands and bounces down the stairs. The noise it makes is unbelievable.

I pick up my weapon and keep running.

The street's empty. It's yellow from the lights that hang down in clusters from the telephone poles. A car passes. Then another one.

Since I don't feel like going back to the apartment, the only thing I can do is go over to my grandpa's. During daylight hours that's not a big problem. I cross four streets. I go through the little park, and I turn at the haunted house. Then it's briefly along the cobblestone street until I get to the church. Turn again there, into the narrow street, and in ten meters I'll be in front of Grandpa's gate. To me it seems like the other side of the world.

I hide the nightstick in the sleeve of my jacket. I hold it in place with my finger as I head across the first of four crossings.

The whistle of trains somewhere on the edge of town. The shouts and curses of two men. A car that passes nearby. Wind. Leaves. Steps. It's as if the echo of my soles ties together all of the sounds. The rain has stopped, but everything is wet. The asphalt looks like one big mirror.

I come to the second crossing. I look left and right, and I spy a cop car as it putters down the road. I get off the berm and slip behind the nearest shrub. I crouch there and look through the little leaves. The blue-and-white *Zastava* is scarcely moving. Thick gray smoke trails behind it.

Since there's no longer anybody around, I sprint across the street and don't stop running until the next traffic light.

I cross paths with a woman walking her dog on a leash. She's startled because I approach her too fast. The hound strains at his leash. He starts for me. Snarls.

Now I'm already a long way from them. I hear the dog barking as its owner tries to calm it down.

The third crossing is a piece of cake.. Nobody in view at all. I trudge across the street, but I still keep an eye out.

The fourth one's the biggest. It's a huge intersection, lit up by six streetlights. I have the feeling that I'll set off an alarm if the light of any one of them touches me.

I cut across on the diagonal. That way I get there faster, and I avoid the haunted house. We call it that because it's completely falling apart and no one lives in it. Its two busted-out windows and big peeling door make it look like the face of some kind of phantom.

I go past the big church with the two steeples that look like claws. They seem even larger because of the darkness. I don't let them out of my sight.

Right as I'm passing the church, the bells ring. They rumble and smash the silence of the city. It feels like every one of their giant claps gives me away. Like every peal leaves me shining in the blackness.

Just as I approach my grandpa's house, two shadowy figures appear at the opposite end of the street. They are laughing and talking.

I press myself up against the doorway to a building that is five or six meters from Grandpa's. The door is set back into the wall, and a thick layer of brittle wood shields me from view. If only they don't hear my breathing. Or my heart.

Just in case, I pull the billy-club out of my sleeve.

The two shadows are getting closer and closer, and I can start to make out their conversation. A boy and a girl. The guy has one hand on her butt, and with the other one he's holding her hand. They walk along clinging to one another, so they're constantly tripping each other up. Their voices and laughter are loud, but their faces are pressed so closely together that I can't figure out what they're talking about.

I stay in my hiding place until they're far enough away. My eyes are fixed on the guy's hand on her ass. What do you have to know to be able to pull that off?

Just in case, I look to see who else is around. Since the street is empty, I abandon my hiding place and move to my Grandpa's doorway.

It's an old building. The rain and wind have long ago washed the paint from the walls, and in two or three spots the plaster has fallen off and the bricks are showing through. The door's made of heavy wood, and I try several times to open it before I realize that it's locked.

I take a step backwards and look at it. Grandpa doesn't have a doorbell. There's a slot for the mail and a window that looks out onto the street. So the only thing I can do is call to him.

Grandpa is off his rocker, and it wouldn't do to wake him up suddenly. Who knows what he might do. Therefore I don't knock on the window straight away.

I go up to the slot on the door and look in through it. The inside of the letter-box on the other side is blacker than night.

Since I'm unsure of what to do, I stand with my head on the door, rest, and think.

"Halt! Password?!"

My body has already gone numb from fear so many times this evening that I feel nothing now. I feel like a penny with a hole in it.

I move away from the door and look at the window. The panes are open all the way, and my Grandpa is leaning out, wearing his pyjamas. He keeps his hand with the pistol held above the windowsill.

"Grandpa, it's me. Ivan."

"Say the password or I'll shoot!"

I stand in front of the window. I am lit up by the streetlight, which is suspended from the middle of a thick cable running over the street. He can see me fully. He just needs to remember me.

"It's me. Ivan. Your grandson."

Grandpa has heavy bags under his eyes. They are curved like half-circles. Even in this darkness, his eyes are blue, watery. He blinks. The left corner of his mouth is pulled to the side, and his cheek twitches. His grip on the gun aimed at me keeps getting slacker.

"You remember. Ivan. Your grandson."

Indistinct images from earlier that night pass by in my head. The barrel of the pistol looks infinitely long.

Finally he speaks up.

"You're from HQ?"

I shrug my shoulders. I look around.

"Yes. I'm from headquarters."

"Why didn't they tell you the password, goddammit? Quick, get in here!"

Grandpa puts the pistol down onto the windowsill, and he motions to me with both hands to approach the window. He scouts



out the street and tries to lift me up, but it's like he has no arm strength at all, and I'm no better.

"Grandpa, let me in through the door. Please. I'm tired."

Once more he casts a glance around the street, and then he nods his head.

"I'll open the door for you. You hold the pistol. If somebody shows up and doesn't know the password, shoot. Got it? It doesn't matter who it is. If they don't know the password, shoot."

Grandpa disappears into the interior of the room. I stand there and look at the gun. Now I have a nightstick and a pistol. All I lack is a badge.

I've known forever that Grandpa has a piece, but he's never shown it to me. He always said I was too young for that. He promised that he would teach me to shoot a gun for my tenth birthday. But then he got dementia. My folks wanted to take away his pistol, but he hid it well. He wasn't going to show them where he hid it, and they weren't able to find it. Since my tenth birthday, I haven't asked about the pistol. I only visit him when I wash clothes.

The pistol is warm. He must've been holding it long before I got here. Who knows what he was doing.

I aim down the street. Not at anything in particular. I don't even know how you are actually supposed to hold a pistol. I know it's not enough to just aim and squeeze the trigger.

Then the door opens and Grandpa appears. He waves me in, looking up and down the street the whole time.

"Anybody find us?"

"No."

"Are you sure? They can't know that I live here."

"Who can't know?"

"The Germans, man!"

He pulls me in and slams the door. He locks it and then pulls the heavy metal key out of the lock.

We're standing in a small automobile entrance. It's dark and I can scarcely see him.

"Turn on the light."

"You're crazy. The whole city is blacked out because of the bombing, and you want to turn on the light?!"

"But I can't see anything.

"Here you go."

Grandpa reaches out and clicks a small squeeze flashlight a few times. Light bursts forth, shines on us, and then disappears. Grandpa squeezes it five or six more times; it cuts through the darkness and bathes me in yellow light.

Although he has aimed the light at my eyes, I can see him. He's wearing only his pyjamas and a utility belt that has a holster for the pistol.

"Are you really from HQ?"

"Yes."

"Who sent you?"

I don't know how to answer him, and I bark at him: "The Drnčulas sent me. You're a Drnčula, too. We're relatives."

"But that doesn't matter now. This is a slaughterhouse the likes of which we've never seen. The fact that we're related doesn't mean anything. I need to see some proof."

He keeps on squeezing the flashlight this whole time and the tiny spool inside it spins and relaxes, like an annoying bicycle.

"Grandpa, please. I'm tired."

"Who's a grandpa? Don't you call me that. You're younger than me, but I'm not some old geezer."

"Sorry, Stevo."

"That's Comrade Stevo to you!"

Fatigue, nervousness, fear. Who knows how many feelings are mingling inside me, turning from a strange brew into a giant pain in the ass. I could very easily fall into his sickness.

"Comrade Stevo, I came to you for help. They're after me."

“Who?”

“The Germans of course.”

“Ah. Why didn’t you so say that immediately?”

I stick my hand in my pocket and pull out the red bandana. I hold it up to his eye level, and he tilts the flashlight towards it.

“You should have said right away that you’re one of us. Get in here, Comrade Ivan!”

It’s cold in Grandpa’s place. The stove in his large living room makes popping sounds and the coals in it give off an orangish gleam. But Grandpa has left the window wide open, and soon the whole place is cold.

“Do you want me to shut the window?”

“Absolutely. It could cause us problems because the shutters don’t close all the way.”

He reaches for the window that overlooks the street, stumbles over the stool, and falls down. He groans. Although my eyes have adjusted to the dark, I can’t tell exactly what’s my grandpa and what is furniture.

“Hey, Grandpa, are you all right? Can you get up?”

“Don’t insult me, comrade. Of course I can!”

I move close but don’t touch him. He’s sweeping his arms and legs around urgently as he looks for support. It seems like he has a lot more than two of each. He resembles a spider.

I put the pistol down on the bulky wooden table in the middle of the room, and I grab my Grandpa by the arms. I don’t squeeze him, but he does calm down.

We stand there like moths caught in the thin beam coming from the streetlight. We look into one another’s eyes. He’s unbelievably calm. Nothing major has changed about his face, but he looks totally different than he did five minutes ago. He’s squinting.

“Grandpa, are you ok?”

He nods. Says my name. He wants to know what time it is. He scans the room and, since he can't see anything, he pulls his arms free and pats down his pyjamas. He asks me where his glasses are.

"I'll find them for you. Do you hurt anywhere?"

He shakes his head. Tells me everything's ok. Just shaken up.

Grandpa holds onto the stool onto which he had collapsed. He stands up awkwardly and looks around again. He asks me to turn on the light.

I know that the switch is next to the outside door, and I feel my way to it and cut it on. I blink when the ceiling bulb illuminates the room.

A stove, television, table, and two chairs, his relocated bed, the carved wooden armoire, and the door leading to the kitchen. On the walls are the obligatory grandmotherly needlepoints and old family photographs. Two medals. One decoration.

"Here they are. On the table."

I show Grandpa where his glasses are. I stay near the door.

Grandpa leans over the table and paws around in his white surroundings. His hands land on his glasses; he puts them on, and stares at his pistol. He looks up at me, picks up the weapon and goes over to the cabinet. His lips part slightly. He opens the cabinet and rises up on his tiptoes, then sticks the pistol on the highest shelf, somewhere under the clothes and towels.

He wants to know where my parents are.

"They went away. To Hungary."

He wonders what they're doing there, so I explain it in simple terms.

"They're buying stuff."

He looks at me. I don't think he knows what I'm talking about. He bends over and picks up the squeeze flashlight from the floor. Puts it down on the table and heads to the kitchen. In passing he calls out for me to turn on the TV.

The clock shows 11:30. I think the electricity's going to go out soon. I watch Grandpa shuffle off to the john. He doesn't close the door, and soon I hear the gurgling of his first stream. Then three or four more short, weak spurts hit the water. A whoosh from the water tank.

I close the windows, turn on the television, and take a seat at the table. I watch the quivering image, the distorted outline of a woman.

Grandpa comes back into the room, checks to make sure there's wood in the stove, and drops onto the bed. He looks at the screen. He lifts his arm and points at the set. His arm slumps back down immediately alongside his body. He snores.

The room warms up quickly. I like Grandpa's heavy breathing, because I know I'm not alone.

I turn off the light and go over to the TV set. I poke at the grubby buttons and change the channels. On one of them, they're showing a porn movie. The picture's bad but it's clear enough to make me horny.

I turn towards Grandpa and look through the darkness at his face for a long time. I move out of the way, and the blue light from the screen falls on him. him. He looks blue. Dead. But he's still snoring.

I continue watching the guy and girl fuck. Every one of my grandfather's rustles alarms me. I think he's woken up and that's he's going to give me shit about watching a skin flick. It's a drag. I can't relax, much less jerk off.

With the TV lighting my way, I go to the toilet. Then it's back to the room, and I shut off the tube and lie down next to Grandpa. I hide my nightstick under the bed. Exhaustion and the crackling of the fire put me to sleep like a tranquilizer dart does to a rhino.

## Chapter Ten

A jolt wakes me up. Grandpa is mumbling something. I don't like the bright light in the room, and I turn over on my side. But Grandpa grabs me forcefully by the shoulder and won't let me keep snoozing.

He's still in his pyjamas, with his heavy brown coat thrown over his shoulders.

"On your feet, comrade! This is no time to rest!"

I sit up and look around the room. It's cold. The fire has died and the stove looks like that gray monolith that Obelix carries around.

"What's going on?"

"We overslept! It's a good thing that nothing happened last night. Otherwise our heads would be on the chopping block."

He's carrying his pistol again. At least this time he has it secured in its holster. He's wearing his heavy army boots.

He straightens my head up with his hand. Gives me an inspection.

"You look too young. How old are you?"

"Almost thirteen!"

"Oh, good grief! Now they're sending us children!"

During my grandfather's interrogation, I think back over the whole of the previous evening. My stomach feels like it has stopped working. I don't feel anything but a trembling in my limbs that's growing stronger and stronger. I want to get moving.

"Hey, Grandpa, I have to go home."

"Who's a grandpa? I'm Comrade Stevan. What's your name?"

"Ivan."

Grandpa draws his extended finger across his throat, as if he were slaughtering a pig.

"You're going to lose your head if you don't know the password."

"How am I supposed to know the password? But we just slept in the same room!"

He froze. As if he had become an object. I don't know how much time passes, but then he blinked slowly and blethers on:

"The new password is 'Spain.' Don't forget it!"

"I won't."

"Let me hear it. What's the password?"

"Spain."

"That's right. So you are one of ours."

"Yes, I am one of ours. And you're one of ours. Now let me go home, damn it!"

Grandpa opens his outstretched arms. It's like he's showing me everything in the room.

"You don't have a home anymore. Your family doesn't exist. We are now your everything. And don't let me hear you cuss anymore. That's not moral."

"What does 'moral' mean?"

Grandpa sits down on a chair. He puts his elbows on his knees and leans toward my face.

"Comrade, do you know what it means to be a human being?"

I shrug my shoulders.

"I guess, yeah."

“Eh, this is it. ‘Moral’ is when you feel like a human after doing something.”

I’m not getting this. All I want to do is go back to our apartment and watch a movie. This stuff Grandpa’s telling me doesn’t make a lot of sense.

“Come on. I’m going to help you. I’ll show you how to fire a pistol.”

With that, I’m won over. All of a sudden I’m not interested in a movie or our apartment or a nightstick. I’m going to shoot a pistol!

The next thing you know, we’re out in the yard behind the building. It’s surrounded on three sides by high walls of plain brick. In a few spots you can still see the mortar that used to be over the bricks. A shriveled tree is growing close to one of the walls. A little driveway leads out to a gate and then the street. Right by the driveway is the rickety eave of the building. Underneath it is a rolled-up garden hose, broken roof tiles, a prehistoric bicycle reddish with rust, empty bottles and cans, a car tire, a swing-blade, and a few other tools.

Grandpa sets up two or three bottles along one of the walls, and he goes and stands on the other side of the yard. He waves me over.

Then he pulls the pistol out of its sheath and presses it into my hand.

“There you go. Get used to its weight a little.”

As I had seen people do in films, I toss the pistol from my left hand to my right. Then I hold it firmly with my right hand and extend my arm, aiming at nothing. The thing is heavy. My hand shakes.

“You’re still too weak. Hold it with both hands. Put this one on top, here next to the magazine, and hold it tight with your other one. Yeah. Don’t ever keep your finger on the trigger. A lot of comrades have died that way. Always keep your index finger on the side. It can slide right over onto the hammer when necessary. You aim by lining



up these two marks. Understand? They're supposed to meet up with the one on top. Ideally you'd always keep the front sight a bit lower than this back one. But, ideal conditions do not exist. Is that clear?"

I don't say a word the whole time. I just keep nodding at his instructions.

"Okay, so now, in order for the pistol to fire, you've got to free up the mechanism. This little knob here is in the up position now, but it's supposed to be down. Move it. Like this. Now—you do it."

Although I'd seen this done a hundred times in the movies, I had no idea how it all actually worked. Grandpa takes the pistol from me and shows me where to grab it and how to hold it. He tells me I'm supposed to pull this one part back really hard and then let it go.

"Now everything is set. All you have to do is shoot. So, extend your arms. Stand still. Brace yourself. Hold it straight. Hold your breath. Fire!"

I pull the trigger for the first time in my life. There's no way for me to take in everything that's happening. The bullet has already buried itself in the wall. My ears are ringing. I'm shaking all over and I feel hot. The shot echoes through the quiet city.

"That sucks! Try it again. It's the bottle we want to kill, not the wall. Is that clear? Aim at the bottle. Fire!"

I try to do everything Grandpa tells me to. I pull the trigger and hit the bottle. It leaps into the air and shatters. The bottom of the bottle remains where it was. It's got these sharp pieces sticking up out of it still.

"Congratulations, comrade. You're going to make something of yourself after all."

I don't tell Grandpa that I didn't shoot the right bottle. In the final analysis, a bottle is a bottle. The color's not important.

He taps my shoulder and points his finger at another bottle.

"This time, try to hit the green bottle. But hit it right in the neck."

I nod and then I concentrate and aim as well as I can. I fire. I miss, but barely. The green bottle moves. Maybe my bullet grazed it.

“Take your time now. Aim, and fire when ready.”

My hands are tingling. I can’t hold the pistol the way I’m supposed to any longer, but I flex as hard as I can. I nail the green bottle and it blows apart completely.

I lower my arm until it droops next to my body. The pistol almost falls from my hand. Grandpa takes the weapon and puts it back in his holster. He stares at the bottle. I nudge him with my elbow to get his attention. It’s like he’s surprised to see me there.

“Well, comrade, let’s hope the Krauts have worse aim than you do.”

He stamps back into the house. I follow him with my eyes, but I can’t see what he’s doing, despite the fact that he left the door open.

I go over to the wall and the smashed bottles. I look around at the little pieces that flew across the grass. I raise two or three of the glass fragments to my nose to sniff them. They don’t smell like anything.

With my fingernail, I try to dig the slug out of the wall. It doesn’t work, but then I find a little stick that’s stiff enough to fish out the bullet.

The second bullet is lying in the clear, broken bottle. Cautiously, I insert my hand through the sharp glass edges and pull out the crumbled bit of metal.

I comb through the shards of glass on the grass, but I can’t locate a third bullet. It doesn’t matter. Two are enough anyway.



## Chapter Eleven

We're sitting in the park, near the fountain.

Milica gave me an old shoelace, and in the workshop at Cap's house we managed to drill holes in the shells. I threaded the shoelace through the closely lined up metal parts and made a necklace. The bullets land in the middle of my chest. Best collar in the city.

Of course I can't wear it in front of my folks or they will scalp me. I always put it on when I go outside. Now I'm a real Rambo. And I know how to shoot.

Bear and Slurp are playing slapjack with basketball cards. Slurp has smaller hands, and Bear is smearing him. Every picture sticks to his fat palm and is easily flipped in the air. Slurp will probably be a gambler when he grows up. Although he loses the entire time, he keeps putting more cards on the bench.

The others are passing back and forth the little balls of flint known as hand blasters. One person strikes them together two or three times, getting excited over the snapping sound and the sparks, and then they pass them along to the next person.

Milica raises her head suddenly, and she stabs her finger toward the entrance to the park.

"Yowza. They're on their way!"

We look where Milica's pointing. There's a gang of Shipyarders slowly drawing near.

Milica is not exaggerating. All the Shipyarders are here. Sledgehammer's in front, with ten of them following. They are all armed. But we weren't about to set aside our toys. We'll see how much Cap's family workshop is worth against a pack twice our size.

Our team's already up on its feet. They've their tools and are ready to meet Sledgehammer's knuckleheads.

There are so many of them!

Milica looks different than usual. I don't know what's the deal with her, but she just doesn't look like herself.

I give her a push with the nightstick.

"If you're chicken, beat it. We don't all have to get our asses kicked."

"You beat it, loser."

Sledgehammer and his gang are now close enough for us to grab whatever projectiles we can and bombard them. They return fire. They are well prepared. Every one of them has a stick or a metal bar and at least one rock. Waves of rockets rained down around us. They hit us but we shake them off.

They attack us at a run. It occurs to me that it'd be good if I had my grandpa's pistol. There are eight bullets in it. For sure I'd kill one of these guys.

Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!

Bear jostles me. He's staring at me.

"What do we do?"

"Nothing. We fight, and we see who's stronger!"

I watch Sledgehammer. I order the assault. I take the lead and run out among the Shipyarders.

The nightstick gives me power. I'm not stronger, and this isn't the greatest weapon in the fight, but there's something about this baton that renders me more powerful. Like Excalibur. Sledgehammer

knows this power well, and he feels it, too. That's why he wants to pay it back in kind.

Sledgehammer brought with him all the Shipyarders he knows. There are at least fifteen of them. There are eight of us.

They've decided to take away my nightstick. Everybody pounces on me. So I pull back and use Bear as a shield. Milica and Slurp are to my left. That means, I only need to worry about the ones on the right.

We trade blows like never before. We hammer each other with all our might and talk shit as loud as we can. I've never seen a fight like this.

Blood is flowing all over the place. We pull each other's hair, hit, kick, hurl rocks, twist body parts, wrestle, spit.

Some jerk bigger than Needle pulls his jacket up over his head. Needle can hardly extricate himself. He grabs the tall guy by the neck. Bites him ferociously on the shoulder. Vampire.

The nightstick has a hard time getting through their weaponry. That's why I hit them below the belt. I strike exclusively at thighs, knees, and lower legs. They aren't expecting blows like that. A fair number of them fall to the ground, grab their legs, and throw away their weapons. Two or three of them I nail in the nuts. They remain on the ground, whimpering.

It's clear this isn't a heroic story. We are getting our asses kicked.

Three of them are whaling on Bear. A pair of them knock Milica to the ground and are groping her. Rocket tries to defend her, but he's weak. Needle has flipped out and isn't letting that tall guy out of his grasp. He's pounding him while he bites and spits, too. Slurp, Spaceman, and Cap are overwhelmed. We are falling apart.

Sledgehammer comes towards me with two others. He's calling me names and spitting at me.

I don't want to order a retreat because I want to throw hands with Sledgehammer. I bob and weave as much as I can. I am trying to pummel Sledgehammer's guys, so that I can thrash him in peace.

Suddenly there's not just two of them with him, but three. Four. I'm cut off and don't know what to do.

I glance over at the others. They're all banged up, and wrapped up in their own fights. But Bear never lets a guy down.

He gets a running start and busts through the ring of people around me. He collides so hard with the Shipyarders that two of them are hurled to the concrete.

It's easier with Bear. He's swinging his chain, and I swing my nightstick. Somehow we drive them off.

"Rambo, bro, run for it!"

"No way!"

"Fuck this! Don't give them the nightstick!"

I said earlier that the nightstick has some strange power. Even Bear thinks it would suck if they were to take it from us.

The two jerks that Bear bowled over are still rolling around on the ground. They're just kids and they banged their heads pretty hard. I think they're bleeding.

I dash over and stomp on them. Sledgehammer tries to nail me with a stick, but he misses. I'm able to hit one of the kids in passing. I yell:

"Beat it!"

Rocket has managed to get one of the Shipyarders to attack him. I use my nightstick on the one who's still lying on top of Milica, feeling her up like crazy. The kid grasps his head and crawls away from her. I help her get to her feet, and we bolt.

Everybody comes after us.

Bear attempts to stop them one by one, but his situation is deteriorating. He's tired and wounded and has been winded for a long time.

They catch and hit some of us, but not all of us. The Shipyarders are tired, too. They're on foreign turf. They don't dare hang around for too long. They make the most of it before the older Centrals show up.

I sprint like never before. I have no idea where I am going. I just book it and use instinct. I come out onto the long street leading to my building. I realize I can't go home looking like this, and I blow past the entrance.

I run down big streets and little streets. I cut left and right where I can. Hide my tracks and hope that no one is following me.

Vomit. It bursts out of me and lands on my shoes and my hoodie.

I stop. I have trouble catching my breath. I toss my cookies again. This time on the grass in front of someone's house.

It seems to me that I'll never be able to inhale again. I drop the nightstick in the grass. The little puddle between my feet looks like apricot compote, but it stinks like sewage. I prop my hands on my knees. I wheeze. I cough. I am flushed. I breathe.

I pick up the nightstick and tuck it into my sleeve. I look around and realize where I am. The passersby aren't interested in anything I'm doing, so nobody bothers me.

I scrutinize the little street I came down. There's a slight chance that I didn't turn in here from that one, but I must have come from that direction.

I'm tense. My hands clench the nightstick. I'm expecting Sledgehammer, at least, to have followed me, and that I'll have to mix it up with him.

One on one. A throwdown. I would love it.

An old woman appears, all wrapped up in a scarf and carrying a cloth shopping bag in her hand. And other people. But there's no Sledgehammer, and no sign of his team. My guys aren't here either.



There are two ways I can find out what all went down. I can call somebody on the phone, or I can wait till they tell me about it at school tomorrow. In either case, I have to go home.

I take a look at my track suit and my shoes. Dirt, blood, vomit. I don't believe I'll be able to wash all that out.

I go up to a small, abandoned shop and look at my reflection in the display window. I put my nose up to the glass and the steam from my breath quickly hazes it over. Then I take a step to the side to get a better look at myself. Not even my face is presentable. It's bruised and grubby.

I keep moving fast for three more blocks, and then I slow down abruptly. The Shipyards have surely all left to go home, but you never know.

I stop, pretending to tie my shoelace at the corner. I put my left foot up on a round concrete post next to a building, messing around with my shoe while checking out the surroundings.

Since I don't see anyone I know, I continue on my way.

I repeat this maneuver two more times, until I reach my building. Here the street's pretty wide, and there's a big square. There's nowhere for them to jump me.

Just in case, I take a roundabout way, because I don't want any of the neighbors to see me.

Soon I come to the alleyway behind my building. Once again, I have to go home in my mismatched sweatpants and sneakers. That's better than explaining what happened to the clothes I'm wearing now.

And here I am cautious, too, although this is familiar territory and filled for the most part with Centrals.

No one's there, so I slip behind the garage. I walk through piles of wet leaves. Step on the backpack. I turn around and try to recall how many steps I had taken. I must have miscounted

I change clothes slowly because every movement hurts. Back in the park, it didn't feel that way. I didn't feel anything then, or

while I was running, or while I was returning to my hide-out. Now I'm throbbing all over as if I were running a temperature. Maybe tomorrow I won't have to go to school!

I cleaned off my things from the fight. My sneakers will be ok. I wipe them down quickly with dry leaves. The sweatshirt and the sweatpants I will have to take to Grandpa to be scrubbed.

I place the nightstick in my backpack and put things over it and then put the whole thing back under the leaves. It's hard to stand up straight. I walk slowly towards the dumpsters. I keep close to the wall, since my legs are uncertain. They tremble with each step. It's not because of fear, but because of the blows I took. Their problem is on the outside. I hope that bruises won't be visible on my body.

As soon as I step outside of my shelter, I freeze in shock. Boda and his girlfriend are standing close to one of the dumpsters. They are in each other's arms, making out, and squeezing each other.

They don't notice me, and I step slowly away from them. I have ten steps to go, to get to the freestanding garage I can slip behind. Then they won't be able to see me, and I'll dash off towards home.

Everything hurts. I am tired. I can feel that my face is one big knot as I try not to make even the smallest amount of noise that could betray me.

My efforts come to nothing, because Boda's girlfriend notices me. I hear her hoarse voice. And giggling.

"Look at that guy, Boda. A voyeur. He's jerking off over us."

I walk on towards the garage near the street my building's on. Boda's voice brings me up short.

"Hey now, kid—where are you off to? Can't you hear the girl is saying something to you?"

I turn around and look Boda right in the eyes. He's a Central, like me, but older, and friendships like that are not a given. He's in

middle school, and that means he's bigger and stronger than I am. Just look how broad his back is. Not to be fooled with.

Especially if you interrupt him while he's with his girl.

But: a smile.

Boda waves me closer, and he turns to the girl to explain who I am and where I'm from.

I stand close to Boda, because the girl has a funny look on her face. One minute she looks like she wants to kill me, the next minute like she wants to pet me.

"They call this kid Rambo. Imagine that!"

"They ought to call him 'Eewok.' You see how much he looks like one?"

They laugh and nudge one another. The girl turns serious. She doesn't take her eyes off me as she leans towards Boda and whispers something.

Boda's eyes dart back and forth. He glances at me and then glances at her. He moves his head like he's following some rhythm I can't hear. She stops whispering, and they move apart. Boda stands up straight. He props one of his legs against the wall and looks at me.

Seconds tick by in the silence. It's uncomfortable. I am tired. I don't know what he wants with me, and I shrug my shoulders.

"Ah, I'm out of here. Gotta be home for lunch."

Again laughter. They simmer down quickly. Boda wipes the snot from the end of his nose and smears it on the wall behind him.

"Who messed you up?"

"Ask him why he was jerking off over us."

"Hey, come on Sanja, cool it, you can see that somebody messed with him."

I don't want to tell them that it was the Shipyarders. I would have to tell Boda about everything that happened. And then maybe there'd be a brawl with them. Or with their older guys. Who knows

what might happen then? One spark and the whole city could catch on fire.

I shake my head.

“We were playing soccer.”

“It looks like you were playing soccer with clubs.”

“Hell, no! But it was muddy, and the ball hit me in the head.”

Boda turned to the girl and made a face.

“It hit him in the head, eh? What an excuse, for fuck’s sake.”

“Little dork. Why don’t you bash him around some?”

“You can see he’s bummed out. He doesn’t need trouble from me. And that’s little Rambo! I told you. He’s one of us. A Central.”

The word “Central” encouraged me to try, again, to lie my way out of there and get home, but Boda wouldn’t allow it.

“Fuck that lunch of yours. What are you being such a chicken for? Stay here with us for a while.”

I guess he noticed that I was turning around, glancing towards the street, and rocking from leg to leg.

“What’s wrong? You don’t like us? Is there a problem?”

I’m as tense as a bowstring. I decide to fake it.

“Hell, no. I can stay. Fuck lunch.”

From out of his black belt bag, Boda pulls a dirty white, folded envelope. It looks like it’s been soaked a hundred times and then dried out just as often. He unfolds the envelope and pulls out a small piece of paper, a piece of cardboard, tobacco, and weed. Using both hands skillfully, he makes a filter out of the bit of cardboard and rolls a joint. He carefully folds the envelope back up and returns it to the little bag at his waist. He turns to Sanja and snaps his fingers twice. She takes out the lighter from the pocket of her rustling jacket and lights the joint for him. Boda takes a long draw at it, holds it in, and offers the spliff to me, letting the gray smoke out through his chapped lips.

“Have you ever smoked reefer before?”

I shake my head.

“So then we’re enlightening you!”

Boda nods his head at the joint. I look over at Sanja. She’s looking back and me and smiles. Praying mantis.

I take the spliff from Boda and stare at it. I have no idea what I’m supposed to do with it.

“What’s wrong? Why are you such a wimp?”

“I’m not a wimp. I don’t know how to smoke.”

Boda’s laughter echoes between the garages.

“You just inhale, for chrissakes. What’s there to know?”

I gawk at the joint a bit more, and then I place the unlit end to my lips and suck in. Of course, that’s not all there is to it. I start coughing. My throat burn, and tears stream out of my eyes. I spit and wheeze. It’s not at all like puffing on a cigarette.

Boda and Sanja are enjoying this. They laugh and shout.

I can feel Boda take the joint out of my hands. Still red-faced, and with bitter mucous in my mouth, I try to focus on them through my tears. Sanja wrapped her arms around him, and Boda continues smoking.

“No more reefer for you!”

I stand up straight and stare at the two of them. I hock up a big loogie and spit it to one side. Sanja smokes and spits right next to my feet.

“Look at that little pussy. He’s still crying.”

I hold out my hand towards Boda.

“Give me another puff.”

He smiles.

“A cocky one! See there? That’s why they call him Rambo!”

Sanja smokes some more and then gives the joint to Boda. He takes a hit, and then he offers me the rapidly shrinking joint. He observes me, as if evaluating my every move. I clear my throat, cough a little, and swallow hard.

I inhale the smoke. Slowly. I barely place the spliff on my lips. Just enough so I can draw on it. The ember brightens and flames

up for a second, then it turns dark. Smoke keeps on rising up from it. I wait two or three seconds and then release the smoke from my lungs. That's good. Shows I got some in me. A thin, whitish thread comes hissing out of me.

"Congrats!"

But Boda still takes the joint back out of my hand.

"Next time I'll roll you a whole one."

There is still chaos in my mouth and throat. I feel nauseous. Everything stinks of grass, tobacco, and smoke. My head is spinning. As if my brain is swelling up and then deflating. Something like that. I spit two times, and Boda hassles me some more.

"So, you're not going to tell me who smacked you around?"

"Nobody, I swear. We were playing soccer."

"Aha. Who do you pull for?"

Fuck if I know who I pull for. My dad doesn't watch soccer; I don't watch soccer. The sport I like is kicking ass, and when we're in PE class, I tell them a lie about having diarrhea. However, I do know that Boda likes Red Star Belgrade, making him a *delija*, so I pick my favorite team accordingly.

He is satisfied. He pats my shoulder for making the correct choice. He tosses the doobie on the ground and rubbs it out with the toe of his shoe.

"It's good that you're one of us. If you were a *grobar*, a Partizan fan, God forbid, I'd have to work you over."

"If I were a *grobar*, I'd work myself over."

That amuses him. It makes Sanja roll her eyes even more. She looks bored. She whispers to him again. Boda steps to one side. He scrunches up his face, like he has just bitten into a lemon. Then he waves her off.

"No way."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to."

"Do it. If you love me."

Boda looks at her. He grabs her chin in his hand and pulls her savagely over to him. He kiss her for a long time. Their tongues dart in and out, they lick each other's lips, and they push their lips deep into each other's mouths.

When they finish playing tonsil hockey, Sanja licks her lips exaggeratedly, while Boda wipes his mouth and beard with the back of his hand.

"You can see that I love you."

"Screw that. I want a present."

Boda smacks his lips. That makes it seem like he really, really enjoyed that smoke and Sanja's spit. He takes the envelope back out and rolls a new joint.

"Say, Rambo, what size shoes do you wear?"

While they kiss and talk to one other, I feel paralyzed. I'm following their actions and not thinking about anything. That's why his question surprises me. I am genuinely taken aback.

"Who? You mean me?"

"It's sure as hell not me."

"He's messing with us.!"

Evidently it's my turn to say something, but I had nothing to add. Everything is obvious to me. There's a chance that, if I lie about my shoe size, then my shoes will be too small for that cow. Maybe I'll get to go home with my stuff.

"Did you hear what he asked you?"

I don't look at her. My ears work fine. I know what he asked me. Boda doesn't seem to be in a rush to go anywhere. He's licking a cigarette. He pats the rolling paper. Packed the grass and the tobacco to keep it from escaping from the little cylinder. He strikes his lighter as he shielded the product with his other hand. He takes the first puff with visible pleasure. To me he looks like a hero in a movie.

"Thirty-five."

"Bullshit. Look how big they are."

"Rambo, are you lying to us?"

Silence.

I look all around. There's nobody anywhere. No cars, no people.

Boda moves away from the wall. He takes the spliff out of his mouth, and with his other hand he slaps me. My old wounds sting even worse. My body is trembling, from my little toe to the top of my head.

"That's for your bullshit."

Sanja quickly piles on.

"And he was jerking off to us."

Boda purses his lips and smacks me again.

"And that's for whacking off.!"

"I wasn't whacking off!"

*Smack.* A slap.

"You'd do better to keep your mouth shut and take off your shoes, so I don't rip you in half right now like the pussy you are. Did you hear me? Take off the shoes!"

I open my mouth to tell him that we are both Centrals and that we shouldn't be doing this. I think better of it. In the movies Rambo never begged, and so I won't either.

I go down on one knee and remove my shoes. I'm left with wet socks on, and even wetter concrete.

Sanja commands me to bring her the Air Maxes. I do as she says. Boda gives them a once-over. He lifts them up before Sanja, as if they were fish he'd just caught. He brightens up when he sees they are originals. He tosses one sneaker over to Sanja. She catches it and quickly take off her worn-out knockoff Converse and puts on the first one. Boda asks if it bugs her that they are men's shoes. A devoted, attentive Central. Sanja tells him to give her the left shoe, too. She hops on one leg and removes her other shoe. Boda looks at the sticker on the tongue, and throws her the second one, too. Sanja's also a size thirty-eight.



She puts them on quickly, looks down at them, and walks on her toes like Dorothy. She squeals and hugs Boda. She thanks him and gives him a kiss. He plants one on her cheek and then turns to me. Nods his head. Gave me a flinch test with his shoulders. Orders me to get lost.

I look once more at Sanja, and at my shoes. She sticks her tongue out at me, and squats down to wipe the mud from the toes.

I head for home.

I can hear them cackling and chatting happily, until I get out of range around the corner. My head feels heavy, from the smoking. Maybe I imagined it. I only inhaled once.

I'm cold, I'm banged up, and I'm filled with shame. The people walking past gawk at my feet, which makes me even more nervous. What I'd like to do more than anything is to go back behind that garage, take out my nightstick, and go to town on Boda and his whore.

I imagine how I'd hit them. I'd ram the nightstick into his nuts so he bends over, and then I'd crack open his head with one stroke. Sanja would be standing there glued to the spot screaming the whole time. She was going to get fucked up even worse. I fantasize about beating her all over with the nightstick, the way the Shipyarders had pasted me.

Suddenly I'm in front of my building.

I grab onto the metal bar of the entrance. It's still not too late for me to go back there. I could sneak along the other side of the garage and get my nightstick with no problem.

Then I remember. The fact that I don't have any shoes on will make it easier for me to justify being so dirty. I'll lie and say I got ambushed on the street, accosted—and that they stole my sneakers. Anyway, I will get some new Air Maxes.

## Chapter Twelve

I can't stand gatherings, birthdays, and *slavas*, just like I don't like celebrations of any type that bring together relatives from near and far, and friends, and godparents.

I don't even know why I don't like such events. Probably because there are always old people there and they always outnumber us kids. I can feel them supervising us the whole time, even though they frequently get tipsy and act dumber than we do.

This time, it's an out-of-the-ordinary festivity. My mother's cousin has returned from the front.

Mom's aunt goes by the name of Vera. She's putting on this celebration in honor of her son who, as my dad said, has been rolling around in the mud and killing people to keep us safe.

I'm still not clear on what that means.

For this occasion, she makes me wear a shirt that I loathe. A white one, with bluish stripes, and over my right tit there's some fat embroidered mouse from *Cinderella*.

I don't have anything against that mouse. He's one of the best characters in that cartoon, but putting on this shirt always boggles me out. It seems fake to me. Why should I dress differently just because somebody else was born on such-and-such a date at some

point in the past? Or because somebody rolled around in the mud killing people?

My mom also can't stand my Air Max shoes, and she makes me put on proper footwear. They bought me this pair a hundred years ago, and they still chafe my feet. Not that this mattered back then, either.

Dressed this way, I feel like one of those horses they drive through the city in the fall. Totally gussied up and with metal bits in their mouths.

Mom and Dad also get all decked out. Pops unlocks the room with all their contraband in it. He hunts around a long time among the shelves and boxes. He finally surfaces with chocolate, a kielbasa, and a bottle of hard liquor.

Mom says he's overdoing it, but he pretends not to hear her. He locks up the pantry and stand by the outside door like a dog waiting for his master to put a leash on him.

We take a familiar route once outside. We turn left off of Rakićeva Street, pass the yellow church, and come to that long street known as Čopićeva, where we proceed all the way to the field of battle where we lock horns with the Shipyarders.

Vera and her heroic son live in the Shipyards. Indeed that is a way bigger problem than having to wear this shirt and the shoes that are a little small.

I have no weapon, and I haveno squad. Although I'm wearing a jacket, everybody can see that I'm dressed like a retard. I'll be fucked in no time at all if Sledgehammer or his comrades catch sight of me. The only thing that gives me some power is the red bandana I'm clutching in my jacket pocket.

I pick up a hat that I also cannot stand. It's red and it has ear flaps. But this time it will serve me well. I clap it onto my head so that all that can be seen of me is my eyes and the top of my cheeks. I button the jacket up to my chin and withdraw into it the best I can. My collar covers the rest of my face.

Acting this way gets on my mother's nerves. She asks what's wrong with me. Whether I'm sick, since I am so cold. She removes my hat, feels my forehead, and then makes Dad give it a try because her hands are warm. He squints into my forehead like he has Superman eyes and can see through skin and recognize sickness. Dad lays the back of his hand on my head and then waves me off.

I feel droplets of sweat soaking my shirt. We're drawing too much attention to ourselves on enemy territory.

Mom is anxious, but we're almost there so we keep on going. She commands me to tell her if I start feeling sick. She makes me promise.

I promise.

After we pass the first building, next to the playground where we usually fight, we come out onto the intersection where the tall apartment buildings and the real neighborhood begins. Built on the river embankment, the Shipyards consist of ten identical red-brick buildings. The roofs have a strange slant to them. They look like triangles just waiting to fall down onto us.

Between the buildings there is a grassy clearing that extends to the parking lot and the rest of the buildings of the district. But those ugly buildings are different. It's like they are all joined together and built of the same gray stone.

Vera's apartment is in one of the triangle-topped buildings, and it's a lot bigger than ours.

We ring the doorbell. She opens up and gives us all kisses. Vera has too much makeup on. Looks like a doll. You can smell the alcohol on her breath.

The foyer leads to the toilet, the kitchen, and two other rooms. It seems to me like the racket of people gathering together is coming from all the rooms. The bathroom is the only part of the apartment that seems empty and peaceful; its door is half open and the light's off.

My parents go into the living room. I can hear their enthusiasm at seeing Vera's son. They congratulate him on getting back in one piece. Kisses resound amidst the hubbub. My parents' voices quickly get lost among the others. Vera's voice overpowers the rest. She's wondering where I am.

Slowly I remove one of my shoes, and then the other. I slow down even more as I take off my jacket and hang it on the metal hook by the door. With lethargic, short steps I make for the room from which cigarette smoke is emerging.

Vera appears in the foyer and smiles. She beckons me forward and tells me not to be shy.

I go over to her, and she puts her left arm around my shoulders while her right hand raises a crystal glass to her mouth.

The whole room—glasses, plates, spectacles on people's faces, and the watch covers on their wrists—is shining and gleaming so brightly that I feel all jumbled. I can't tell people apart, or people from things or walls. They all look like one creature to me.

Vera yells that she found me. She does this super loudly, as if everyone has been waiting just for me. My mom shakes her head from side to side. She apologizes and explains that I'm probably sick.

One of the men pinches my cheek. It's funny how his moustache moves as he tells me how much I've grown. I don't know who he is, but I nod my head.

Vera bends down and tells me one more time that I don't need to be shy. I'm not feeling any shame; I'm just blushing. And then I catch sight of him. Igor. He's standing to the side, near the table with the refreshments. He seems dejected, like he's in school. But his cheeks are swollen and his pursed lips are moving, as if he's whispering something.

He sees me, too, and he raises his hand in greeting, but then he gets embarrassed. He still nods his head at me as he tries to choke down everything that's in his mouth.

I'm thinking about how everything has gone south. How Igor is going to pester me now, think that we're buds. And then, in school, he'll cling to me.

Fortunately, Vera propels me through the crowd and delivers me to her son.

The war hero, my great-aunt's boy, is sitting in a brown easy chair. He's got jeans on, white shoes, and a shirt with rolled-up sleeves. He doesn't look any different from a regular civilian.

Our eyes meet.

He takes a swig straight from his bottle of beer. He puts it down on the little table next to his chair and leans forward. He sticks out his hand and calls me by name. I'm amazed that he knows who I am. I've forgotten his name, but I shake his hand and mumble a greeting.

Vera has vanished. I don't know what to do. I stand there in front of her son, not saying a word. He doesn't say anything either, and he sprawls back in the chair, drinks his beer, and eyes the guests.

I scan the room. My mom and dad are shooting the breeze with various people. Everybody is talking to everybody. They stuff themselves with snacks. They drink and drink. Igor lies in ambush for me by the table. When he realizes I'm looking back at him, he averts his eyes.

Vera's son says something to me, but I don't understand immediately that he's talking to me. He pushes my knee with his foot, and I focus my attention on him. He points to a door on the opposite side of the room. Tells me that's where the other children are, and that I can go play with them.

"I'm not a child."

This makes Vera's son, my cousin, laugh. Briefly, oddly. In general, his movements are slow. Like when you dive into a pool but the water won't let you move too fast. He's like Jello, although it's obvious that he's tough.

Since I don't move, and nobody else comes up to him, he stretches over the arm of the chair and grabs a glass. He fills it half-way with beer, and he nods at me to move closer.

I stop between his legs. Vera's son lowers the glass to his zipper and looks over my shoulder. I also turn my head around slightly in order to look. After we verify that no one is watching, he offers me the glass with a nod.

I take it in both hands. I try to cover it with my hands as much as I can. I'm hiding its contents. Slowly I raise the glass to my mouth and drink from it. I frown, which makes him laugh, but I drain the glass. And belch.

Vera's son takes the glass out of my hands and rests it on the table. He tilts his head so that for a moment I think he has fallen asleep.

He tells me that I'm actually still just a kid. He says I'll probably turn out to be a cool grown-up. I take a hefty swig. He takes a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lights one up, and holds it up halfway between himself and me. He asks whether I smoke.

"Yep. But my parents are here."

Vera's son says it's better if I don't smoke.

We get separated by new guests coming over to see him. They hug him and give him kisses, pat him on the back and slap his shoulders. It's like they're checking to see if it's really him there before our eyes and not someone else.

I don't like the taste of beer in my mouth, so I go to the bathroom to drink some water. And there I'll be able to be by myself. On the way, my mom takes me by the hand, feels my forehead and cheeks, and asks another woman to do the same. The unknown lady is trying to persuade her that I'm only flushed.

I turn the key in the lock twice. I look around the bathroom. Everything gleams and smells like cleaning fluid.

There aren't many interesting things in a bathroom, but I open up the dirty-clothes hamper. I push aside two or three undershirts

and come across a pair of lacy underwear. I stare at them, but they're dirty, so I put them back in the hamper, scrub my hands, and then rinse my mouth out several times, as if I had just brushed my teeth. I take a long drink of water.

Somebody presses the door handle down and knocks. A muffled male voice calls out to me to hurry because he's about to piss in his pants.

"All right, all right!"

I fiddle around with the key and the lock and pull the door open abruptly. The person leaning against it almost falls on top of me, but he just manages to grab onto the doorframe. He looks at me, smiles, and wags his index finger menacingly. With his other hand, he smacks the back of his hand on my crotch and asks if I was whacking off, but he doesn't wait for my answer. He laughs, pushes me aside, and locks himself in.

I turn around and Igor appears before me.

"Aha, there you are. I thought you were in the room with the kids, but you weren't there."

"Uh-huh."

I nod my head and try to slip past him, but he's standing squarely in the doorway.

"Move, so I can get by."

"Do you want to play? Or do something else? I'm bored."

I look at him. He's a head taller than me, and his bulky body is strong, not flabby like Bear's. But still, he seems like a little guy to me. Like Tom Thumb. Or Mighty Mouse.

"I don't want to be seen with you."

I head straight towards him. My stride is purposeful in order to signal that he should get out of my way. Igor steps slightly to the side. We brush shoulders.

"What's your problem?"

I go into the living room, but then I turn around. For some reason. I don't hate Igor the way I do the other Shipyarders.



"I don't want to hang out with you, because you live in the Shipyards."

"Why does that matter?"

"Because I'm from the Center. We're enemies."

"I don't understand. Is this some kind of game?"

"Ah. Don't be such a drag. I don't want us to be friends, so don't follow me around. Got it?"

I'm muttering more than actually talking when I say all of this. I try not to look Igor in the face. Finally I look up and I realize that he's staring dully at me. He doesn't comprehend any of this, but he feels bad about it.

I think it's a shame, too, but I slip into the living room. I bypass my mom and dad so that I can get to the table where there are major munchies and bottles of drinks. I take a plate and put three slices of sausage on it, a big cube of cheese, half a piece of bread, and some *ajvar*. I think Vera's son is interesting, but there are people all around him once again. I don't want to be stuck with all the old people. Igor is staying between the living room and the foyer. Some woman comes over and strokes his head; she talks to him. That must be his mother.

I don't want to wait for her to talk him into coming over to chat with me, or for her to talk to me herself, so I grab a fork and go into the kids' room.

I don't know why I'm so bored when I see that there are only children in the little room. I guess it's because there are only little kids there.

Two little girls, wearing overalls bloated with diapers, crawl around emitting unintelligible sounds. They're playing with two big dolls. They take the dresses off of their toys and put them back on. They switch dolls with one another and change their clothes again. Their small hands do everything slowly. Their eyes are open wide the whole time. Their lips are parted. As if everything they are seeing fascinates them and fills them with enthusiasm. There's also a

baby boy in here. He's sitting off to the side and turning a water pistol around in his hands. He points it at himself, and then he smiles and squeals. He shakes his tiny hands in the air.

A boy's sitting in a corner of the room. He's pretty young—I'd say ten, which means that he at least knows how to talk. I don't like that he doesn't really notice me. He stays immersed in a thick book. I can't stand goody-two-shoes, and this one looks like a real geek.

I quickly recall how I look, but I decide to go up to him anyway.

I stand next to him and try to read the page he's on. The words are tiny, and I'm upside down in relation to the text, so I can't see anything.

I look up and over towards the living room. No Igor.

I'm eating continuously. I dip the bread in the *ajvar* and load it with kielbasa and cheese. My chomping has to be getting on his nerves. Especially because I'm right above his head. He pretends not to see me. He's good at this game. I chomp louder and louder, but he manages to go on reading. Or he's turning the pages randomly, just so I will leave him alone. He's out of luck, because I have nothing more intelligent to do than this.

After three or four breadcrumbs fall onto his page, he can't fake it any longer. He blows the crumbs away, closes the book, and looks at me. He has tiny eyes that are set far apart. Like an otter.

"What're you reading?"

He closes the book so that I can only see the back cover, which is blank.

"Why do you care?"

"What's your name?"

I take the book from his hands. There's slight resistance at first, but he quickly relents. I turn the book over. *The War of the Buttons*.

He's still not talking.

After I eat everything, I look around the room for a place to set down my little plate. This is the war hero's bedroom. That much is obvious, from the posters of rock groups on the walls to the clothes

that are thrown over the desk chair. There's also a bed in the room, a dresser, and a shelf with a slim selection of books. The small windows are placed high in the wall. This was the nursery, where Vera's son continues to live even after he's grown up.

I repeat my question.

"Miloš. You?"

"Ivan. How's the book?"

Miloš takes the book back, rests it on his knees, and covers it with his hands. He scrunches up his shoulders, which makes him seem smaller.

"Not bad. But I've read better."

"How old are you?"

"Eight."

"I'm twelve. Be thirteen soon."

The boy squints at me like I'm the sun.

He doesn't take his eyes off me. He relaxes and leans back in the chair. He lets his shoulder droop down and he takes his hands off of the book.

"You're from the Center, right?"

"Uh-huh. And where are you from?"

"From here. The Shipyards."

This doesn't surprise me. I'm on enemy territory now. I'm glad there aren't more Shipyards here. Especially older ones. Vera's son is permissible. He's definitely been in a bunch of fights.

Miloš opens the book back up. He looks for the page he was reading before I interrupted him. He runs his index finger over the lines of faint Cyrillic characters.

He's wearing a t-shirt that has a decal of a Ninja Turtle running. It makes it look like he's being chased off of the shirt. I had a similar one, but it got ripped up in a fight.

"Which Turtle is your favorite?"

"Donatello. How about you?"

"Leonardo."

Miloš locates the spot where he stopped reading, and then looks up at me.

“You’re Rambo, right?”

I smile.

“I am. How’d you know?”

“My brother told me. He fights against you all the time.”

“Who’s your brother?”

“Ostoja.”

“Sledgehammer!”

Miloš nods. He keeps his index finger on the sentence where he had stopped, but he doesn’t take his eyes off me.

“Is he here?”

I turn and look around the room. As if he might be hiding there. In the armoire, under the desk or bed.

“No. He’s sick. But he told me to watch out for you. That you’re from the Center and you’re a pussy.”

I’m not in the habit of scrapping with such a little kid, but I give him a hard thump on the top of his head. His haircut makes him look like a mushroom, and I aim right at the part in his hair.

“Who’s the pussy?”

Miloš rubs the aching spot and gawks at me. I look at the babies. They continue to play with the dolls and the pistol. They sit on the floor, passing things back and forth to one another. The boy aims at the little girls, and they offer him the dolls. And so on and so forth.

I stand in the doorway and hang out, looking at the old folks. I don’t feel like staying in there with Sledgehammer’s brother because there’s nothing I want to do that involves him. He’s too small for us to fight like men, and it’s no great accomplishment if I just give him shit or spit on him. On the other hand, I don’t feel like going over to Igor, either. And Vera’s son is still sitting on his throne, sipping his beer and smoking a cigarette. Maybe I can mooch some more beer. He looks like a mellow guy so I’m going to ask him for a whole

bottle. I can conceal myself in that bedroom. From what I can tell, nobody's going in there.

A blow. An unexpected one. I stumble forward. After a couple of unsteady steps, I stop and whirl around.

Miloš is standing in the doorway, right where I was a second ago. He's red in the face. His arms are in a semi-circle out in front of him, and each one has a fist at the end. He's breathing so rapidly that he's all shaky.

No one saw what had happened. I go up to him. I thrust out my chest as much as I can. I look down at him, the way Drago does to his opponents.

"You wanna do this? Huh?"

Sledgehammer's brother looks up. Again he's drilling his eyes right into mine. His face is contorted. I can barely see his pupils for his eyelids, and he's clenching his lips so hard that they have merged with his pale face.

I put my hand on his face and shove him. He loses his balance and falls backwards next to the chair he'd been sitting on.

"Don't let me see you here again. D'you hear?"

I look at him sitting there, staring daggers at me. I hawk a loogie and spit. It hits his shoe. Bummer. My aim's bad. I wanted to plant it right on his nose. He just sits there.

It amazes me that in me there is none of the fury, excitement, or energy that I feel when I fight with the Shipyarders, even though Miloš is one of them and it won't be long at all till he joins the fights. But he's a good bit smaller and weaker than me. This is not interesting.

I remember what I'd been intending to do with Vera's son, and I start across the room. He's still there, in his place, with no one around him.

Halfway across the room—a new blow on my back. Stronger, more decisive. So much so that I bend over and have to steady myself by pushing on the carpet.

I quickly lift myself up and turn around. Miloš. I think he kicked me on my tailbone.

Abruptly, every trace of peace that I'd felt in me a moment earlier was gone.

I stalk towards him and smack him with my open hand. He howls. I kick him for all I'm worth. I catch him on his right thigh. Both of his legs end up in the air. He falls. The snot and tears on his face leave traces on the floor, too.

"You little cunt. I'll teach you to kick me."

Sure enough, all of this draws the attention of the adults. The guests fly into a tizzy. They don't catch on right away to what is happening. From the crowd I hear my parents calling my name. Stupefied.

I feel a strong grip on my upper arms. Igor. He grabs me under the arms and pulls me aside. Someone stands between Miloš and me. A woman kneels next to him and wipes off his face, while he sobs and screams for help louder and louder. Like a siren.

"Get off me, dude!"

I try to free myself from Igor's clutches, but he doesn't let go. I hit him on the chest, but then I feel another powerful hand pressing on my shoulder. My father turns me around and slaps the fool out of me. Igor finally lets me go and moves away. My mom crouches next to me and squeezes my upper arm hard. She hisses and gets right up in my grill, but I don't hear her. There are too many people and too much noise around me, and Sledgehammer's brother won't stop being a crybaby. I can't concentrate.

A shout.

I don't realize at first that it's Vera, but all of a sudden the whole shit-show that Miloš and I have unleashed stops. Everyone quiets down. Even Miloš stops his whining.

Vera is saying her son's name over and over. She's asking for help, but nobody offers her any. Everyone, standing and sitting, is petrified. They're holding glasses and plates in their hands, as if

nothing is happening. As if we're posing for a photographer who is nowhere close to snapping his photo.

Vera's son is in the easy chair, shaking. His body is tense. You can see every muscle on his forearms. His neck is red. His face, too. His veins bulge out across his forehead and temples. And they are showing between the sinews on his neck, too. He goes on trembling. It's like some spirit has entered him and is fighting with his body. It's taking him over and it tortures him while it does so. He looks more horrifying than the girl in *The Exorcist*.

Two adults go over to Vera. One of them moves her away, so he can plant himself between her and her son. The other tries to calm the war hero. He takes him by the shoulder and arm. Still, the son doesn't relax. He clenches his fists so hard that they're as white as the ceiling he's staring at. Staring really hard.

The second man pours water from a pitcher onto his palm and sprinkles it onto the hero's face. He does this five times and then puts down the pitcher. Then he holds him and tries to restrain him. Without success.

But Vera's son does calm down. He stops shaking the same way he'd started—in an instant. He relaxes and turns Jello-like, again.

Vera puts her hands on his cheeks. She tilts his face towards hers. She says his name again and then calls out to him endlessly. A hundred times she asks if he's ok. Somebody splashes water on him again. He nods his head. Raises and then lowers his arm. One of the pair of men who'd been holding him brings a glass of water. The hero's too weak to take the glass, so they hold it up to his mouth and pour. They water him like a senile horse.

Several women go over to Vera. My mom is among them. They hug her, take hold of her, and pull her away from her son. They advise her to leave him be for the moment. They say one of the men will put him to bed. He has settled down. Everything is in order.

The pair of men do exactly that. They help Vera's son to his feet and make for the children's room.

He can barely walk. He's so listless that it seems like he's going to pour through their fingers.

The old folks are talking quietly. This is how people in the movies look when they are plotting something nasty. They don't move their bodies, but they try hard to turn their heads as much as possible towards each other's ears. I guess whisperers understand each other better that way.

They calm Vera down. They give her a pill. Stroke her head. My mom is sitting on one of the armrests. Another woman is on the other side of the easy chair, and a third crouches at her feet. Vera has six caring hands upon her.

All of a sudden, everything stops. The returnee has calmed down and wants to sleep. The two men who led the warrior to his room carry out the babies, who are gurgling away.

A hand closes the door to the children's room.

My dad keeps his hand on my shoulder this whole time. He's commenting to some woman about how terrible it is that this happened. He mentions that he's only seen scenes like this in war movies.

I wonder where Sledgehammer's brother is now, and what he's doing. I don't see him or the woman who was consoling him. That must be his mom. They probably gathered their things and left.

My old man is having an animated chat with the woman and doesn't look around at me. I use the opportunity to wriggle away and head out to the foyer. I check the bedroom and the bathroom. Miloš is no longer in the apartment.

Igor posts up in front of me again.

"Why did you beat him up? He's younger and smaller than you."

"Want me to beat you up, too?"

I get right in Igor's face, but my mom and dad—who've just materialized in the foyer—hold me back. They're furious and push



me toward the door. They remark that I am screwed once we get home, and that what happened to Vera's son was my fault.

"What did happen to him?"

They don't answer. They toss my jacket at me. Dad helps Mom into her coat, and they mumble about how disappointed they are with my behavior. Igor doesn't budge from his spot in the corridor. His face is expressionless, like always. I look at him from the corner of my eye while I'm putting my things on. I don't like the fact that he has also seen the shoes that I'm wearing.

We exit the building. My mom is in a real rush, and Dad can hardly keep up with her. He tries to give her a hug, but she brushes him off and goes on alone. Dad strides along next to her, barely keeping up with the rhythm of her high heels.

I'm not even trying to keep pace with them. I walk a good ten meters behind. I have again withdrawn into my collar and beanie so that nobody will recognize me. My shoes pinch even more now, because we are walking crazy fast.

We pass the warehouse, and I cringe. The bandana isn't in my pocket. I quickly feel the inside both pockets. I check my toboggan, too. Maybe it got caught up in there, since I had both of them in my pocket. It's not there.

Since my parents are not paying attention and are getting farther away from me, I turn around and run back. It's not on the sidewalk. Then I run towards my parents, who are standing in the middle of Čopićeva Street, waiting for me. They want to know what I'm doing.

"I lost my bandana."

My mom slaps my face and keeps going, while my dad watches me and then sets out after her. Two passersby make me feel even more shame at the blow.

We walk in single file, like strangers.

As for the bandana, one of two things has happened:

One: I dropped it at Vera's apartment. Mom will simmer down by tomorrow and will call her. At that point, I'll have to apologize. After that, I'll ask about the bandana, and Vera can bring it over the next time she comes for coffee.

Two: There will be blood.



## Chapter Thirteen

The long recess period is the only thing that makes going to school worthwhile. Especially when it's followed by PE class. That means that we have almost an entire hour for playing around.

This time we run out into the yard and we go over to the student entrance. I'll never understand why the teachers and the pupils don't come in through the same doors. Teachers use the main doors. That's where there are steps, a bust of Dušan Vasiljev, and the front desk where people like janitors and cafeteria ladies and various aides sit. And we slip in through the side door. It's actually a passageway for automobiles.

In this driveway where we students come in, there's a manhole, and we play a game called "*djavao*," or "devil" there. The devil is the person who stands on the manhole cover, and the others have to run away from him.

The devil is always the last one to get there, and that usually means Bear. This time, though, Needle was slower, because he needed to take a leak.

Needle stands on the manhole cover, lifts his right leg and grabs it with his hand. He hops around. Everyone runs away from him. Whoever he touches has to be the next devil. Then the whole group teams up on that person immediately. We kick him as hard

as we can, on his legs and his rear end, until he makes his way back to the manhole cover. That's home base. Now he's the devil and everything starts over.

Usually we gang members play devil by ourselves. We love it when the other boys razz us from the sidelines and bug us to let them play. It's usually the little kids who want to prove themselves, or older ones who think we're afraid of them.

Both groups get manhandled. We help each other, and we whale on them as if we were fighting for a soccer ball.

The bell rings and recess is over. We don't break off our game because we'll be staying outside anyway.

After a couple of minutes, Milica turns up. She motions us into the gymnasium.

All at once we balk. We barely move in the direction of the PE class, spitting and kicking the garbage left behind after recess instead.

The teacher is on our case to practice waltzing.

We all pair up with whomever we want, but since we immediately start to hit on the girls, the teacher separates us. I end up with tubby old Bear, and Milica with none other than the teacher himself.

The gym's a big place, and the ceiling is at least five meters high. From up there wooden beams and swaying cobwebs observe us. There's a huge echo in that large space. The music doesn't sound like waltzes, or anything else. Probably because the tape player is ancient.

We move in simple steps: one-two-three, one-two-three. Forward a little, then left, then give a little hop, back, and to the right.

I get bored in very short order. I'm not paying attention to Bear or to the steps. He's leading me across the hardwood floor.

"Hey, Rambo, put a little more into it!"

Bear grins, puckers up, and gives me an air kiss. He grabs me more firmly around the waist and tugs me towards him.

"I can't dance by myself!" We laugh and joke around. I let him lead, but all at once I make a turn. Bear pats my back in congratulations, and right away I peer over at Milica to see if she's noticed us.

She continues to dance with the instructor. There was an odd number of pupils in the class, so somebody had to end up with him. She looks up at the ceiling and down at her feet, trying to follow the rhythm, but she keeps getting mixed up. The teacher gradually comes to a stop. He strokes her hair when she messes up, and then they start again with him leading. His hand on her back is down too low and it bugs me.

"Don't you like the way I dance?"

Bear makes a pouty face and fakes a female voice. I shake my head and point to Milica and the teacher.

"Look what he's doing to her."

Bear gets serious, and he halts next to me and stares. They're at the other end of the gym, and we can't see them all the time, because of the other students who are twirling to the beat of the waltz and blocking our line of sight.

"What's he doing to her?"

"Well, he's putting the moves on her."

Meanwhile the teacher strokes her head again, and then resumes dancing. He tells her something and then laughs out loud.

"I'm gonna kick his ass."

"Hold on, dude. Why are you freaking out? He's just dancing with her."

"Why can't you see what he's doing?"

"That's all just talk. I think he's a faggot. He likes a good dance."

Bear grabs me by the arm; he wants to keep waltzing. I twist away from him and turn towards Milica and the teacher. Bear follows me closely. He blabs on, right into my ear.

"Are you going to try to beat up the teacher? He'll whip you to death, and then you'll get expelled."

“No, I’m not going to do that, you big dope. But let’s go dance next to them. So I can see better.”

I stand so close to Milica and the teacher that Bear and I bump into them three times, and that causes them to move away a bit. But not so much that I can’t still see everything.

The teacher does not stop being handsy with Milica. Once he even thumps her on the butt.

Bear and I stand there rooted to the spot. He shakes his head and sighs, while I am beside myself with rage. The teacher sees that we’re not dancing, and he tells us to keep on waltzing. My whole body is quivering. Like before a fight.

“Fuck it, Rambo. We’d better dance, or he’s gonna flunk us both. This phys ed class is the only thing that keeps my GPA up.”

Bear grabs the flab of his stomach and shakes it.

I pull away from him again and go over to the little goal set up for handball. In the net there’s a pile of balls. I pick up a basketball that’s partially deflated, which means I can hold it with one hand. I aim at the PE instructor’s head.

The ball misses but whizzes right past him. The teacher interrupts his waltz immediately. Then he strides swiftly over to the boom box and turns off the music. The gym is immediately filled with the squeaking of tennis shoes on the wooden floor. Everybody stops dancing. They look at the teacher and at me.

The perv demands to know why I threw a basketball at him.

“Because you’re a pedophile!”

With that, he descends on me. He grabs me by the ear and pulls me toward the exit. He orders me to go see the principal.

My shoes are the only ones in the whole gym that squeak. Everybody is gawking at me. I feel myself getting smaller and smaller with every step.

As I climb the stairs to the principal’s office, I vent some of my rage.

She chews me out for a couple of minutes. She tells me that no child should ever say anything like what I said. She's interested in knowing where I picked up that word, and she wants to know if I know what it means.

I say nothing, just shrug my shoulders. She gives me this load of crap about how kids are supposed to speak and behave.

Since she's not sure what to do with me, she takes me to see the school psychologist. She bores me stiff for half an hour about my relationship with my mom and dad. It's not the first time I've been in her office, so I give her the answers that I know she wants to hear.

My gaze is fixed on the large, green plant stalk held upright by a neon bulb that is stuck into some soil. Part of the flowerpot is broken. Finally, the psychologist repeats what the principal said to me. And she is obliged to tell my parents.

It wasn't a waste of time, that visit to the psychologist, because I got to miss a class. I get to the room just as the bell for the start of the next period is ringing.

From the hall, I give Bear a high five and blow Milica a kiss. She catches it and wipes it on her ass. I sit down next to Igor and look at him, but he's engrossed in something he's drawing in a notebook.

Our teachers are constantly going out on strike because of their low pay, and yet the classes only last half an hour. A teacher doesn't even have much time to lecture, especially when there are two nerds in the front row who cater to him. Although they are goody-two-shoes, we don't bully them, and we invite them to our birthday parties. They've simply succeeded in selling the teachers what they love. They give them props whenever they can. They've saved us from having to answer dozens and dozens of times. They're doing it now.

Bear tosses a paper popper onto my desk. Its tip, which is supposed to fly out and make it pop, is all torn up from heavy use. I shake my head quizzically, because I'm not sure what I'm supposed



to do, and he signals me to look inside. He has scrawled: "Igor is a Shipyarder."

I look at those four words for a very long time. I don't know what to do. I also don't know if Igor saw what Bear had written. I quickly crumple it up and put it under my bench, amongst the chewing gum, carved names, and swear words written in magic marker.

Bear, twisting around in his seat, watches me the whole time. As if he expects me to crawl Igor's frame right away.

I look over at my benchmate. He's still busy with his drawing. Even if he saw that message, his face betrays nothing. I have no idea what he is going on in that head of his.

The bell chases us out of our seats and out of the classroom.

While we trudge from one location to another, I run into other people from our gang; we trade hellos and talk for a minute. I realize that everyone has found out that Igor is from the Shipyards, and they are waiting to see my reaction.

Before the bell rings for the start of class, I tap Bear on the shoulder and indicate that I want us to step outside. Milica's already there. She's sitting in the window frame, chatting with two friends. I give her a wink and wave for her to follow us.

We wedge ourselves into a window opening with nobody nearby. I sit down on the radiator, and Milica settles in a little behind me, on the sill. Bear folds his arms over his chest and leans back on the other side. They're both watching me. I don't know what to say, and I gaze at a droplet of water that's forming at the end of the water spigot. It plunges into the drain.

"Hey, Rambo, I get that you sit with him, but fuck it."

Bear has succeeded in saying nothing and yet clarifying everything. There's a poet in there somewhere.

"What's happening?"

Milica seems to have no idea what we're talking about.

The bell.

I look down the hall in the hope that the art teacher will appear. Some kid's drinking water in there out of a cup. Then he wipes his mouth, crumples the cup into a plastic circle, and walks away.

The greasy paint on the walls.

Since I'm not saying anything, Bear explains to Milica that Cap had seen Igor shooting the breeze with some Shipyarders.

"Does that mean he lives in the Shipyards?"

"For sure."

"How do you know that, Bear?"

Bear pulls away from the wall, stuffs his hands in his pockets, and adjusts his junk. Milica grimaces.

"What do you mean, how do I know? Like, if you hang out with Shipyarders, then you're a Shipyarder."

"But in our school, there are only people from Downtown, right?"

Bear looks at me. He doesn't blink. He isn't grubbing around in his pockets. He doesn't get it.

"I'm thinking that maybe he only hangs around with Shipyarders but doesn't live in the Shipyards."

"I don't know."

Milica jumps down and then goes over to the spigot and drinks a little water. I look at her ass as she leans over. It's just like Slurp's.

Bear is insistent.

"Now look. Sledgehammer stole your bandana."

"It wasn't Sledgehammer. It was his brother."

"Man, that's even worse. That dude's a twerp."

I have nothing to say.

"That means you have no bandana and you sit with a Shipyarder. Boda and those guys were giving me crap yesterday about how we're gradually going to start hanging out in the Shipyards."

I hadn't even thought about word of that guy stealing my bandana getting around so fast. I'm surprised also about the effect of all of this on our gang.

"This isn't a joke. If the older guys are not going to defend us, then we are goners.

"I haven't heard anything. But I agree with Bear."

I hang my head. Take a deep breath and exhale through my open mouth. I'm thinking up something I can say to them. To calm them down.

"But we still have the nightstick."

"I mean, yeah, but they call you Rambo because of your bandana and not the nightstick."

Bear has apparently thought all of this through. He is calculating everything to sting so that he can get the better of me.

The tapping of heels of a woman's shoes. The teacher is climbing up the stairs. She huffs and puffs because it is so hard for her. She's old and fat.

We quickly slip into the classroom and make our way to the bench. Igor is still there, motionless, although I stare at him.

The teacher enters, closes the door, and asks the monitor to take roll. She plops down on a chair and tosses the class roster onto the desk so that it opens by itself. She flips through the pages. Makes notations.

Bear and Milica stare at me. I shift my glance over to Igor. He can't pretend anymore that he doesn't see me, so his eyes meet mine.

"What happened?"

This time I'm the one who stays mum.

## Chapter Fourteen

The kind of showdown we call a *ferka*, or fistfight, was always a big deal for everyone in the school. No matter what grade you're in—you're going to stay behind and watch the two guys fight.

Literally anything is allowed. The fight will stop at some unspecified time. Usually this is when the bystanders get scared 'coz someone's really getting his ass kicked.

The news that Igor and I were going to have a fistfight spread like wildfire through the school. For the rest of the day my head was just pounding. I couldn't think of anything else. It's not that I was scared, but I was overcome by a strange feeling that something wasn't right about this.

Igor didn't quite get what was going on. Bear, however, worked to avoid any surprises. He explained to him that he, Igor, was going to fight me after school. One on one. Igor looked at him but did not react. He seemed to be staring out into space during class, too.

After the final bell of the day, everybody swarms outside. Thirty boys and girls moved towards the park. I don't know how they settled on that place as the Octagon, but it'd been that way since I was in first grade.

I decide to go to the fountain, where we spend the majority of our time anyway. This is familiar territory for me; there's enough room to fight and the audience has places to sit.

I'm being egged on not only by the members of my crew but also by others I barely know or don't know at all. They are kissing up to me.

Igor is one of the last ones out. He drags himself along like that day I followed him to the Shipyards.

I take up my position beside the fountain. I take off my jacket and my satchel in one motion. I drop them on the ground. The only thing that's important now is the *ferka*.

An irregular human circle forms around Igor and me. It looks like it was drawn by an anxious child. Igor stands amongst the others in the circle. Somebody shoves him hard towards me, and he staggers.

Now we're like Conan and those saps he kills at the beginning of the movie, when they force him to fight in the pit.

Although I don't want to scrap with him, I feel the familiar, weird rush of energy before a fight. I am all tingly and I can hardly wait for it to start.

"Let's go, pussy! Take your shit off!"

The racket the other kids are making drowns out my insults, and I repeat, louder, my taunts. Plus, I keep on cussing at him.

Igor seems not to be seeing or hearing anything that is happening. He takes off neither his backpack nor his jacket. He turns his head to face me and looks me right in the eyes. He extends his arms and stretches his hands open wide. He shakes his head. He's confused. He mumbles.

"Why are you doing this?"

It takes me some time to answer that.

"Because you're a stinking Shipyarder."

"What does that matter?"

He is genuinely shocked. That cools me off. I absolutely don't want to fight anymore. Especially not with Igor. But everything is clear. My leadership is shaky, and I must prove myself. I'll show that I'm still hot shit, and then we can go back to the way things were.

I go up to Igor and shove him in the chest.

"Take off your jacket!"

The uproar around us doesn't let up. Some folks are even cheering. They're chanting my nickname. Others are laughing at Igor and taunting him. All around us are gobs of spit and phlegm that didn't hit their target—my opponent.

Bear approaches Igor and removes his backpack. Then he takes hold of Igor's jacket, but Igor twists away and pushes Bear. Bear staggers and collides with the wall of kids.

I don't want us to fight.

I don't feel like doing it, but what the hell. I bite my tongue and get a running start at him. I clock him. A right, a left, and then another right. My fists catch him on his head and shoulders, before everything goes black before my eyes.



## Chapter Fifteen

I blink, and it dawns on me that I am looking up at bare tree canopies. The branches and twigs look like circulatory system from our biology book.

I look to the left and to the right. I'm lying in Milica's lap, next to the fountain. Bear's above me. His eyes make him look like he's mourning a kitten that got run over.

It's quiet. All the kids have left. Igor's not there, either.

"What happened?"

"He coldcocked your sorry ass."

"How?"

"He just up and decked you."

I sit up. My head aches all over. My chin more than anything. I have the feeling that it's been shifted ten centimeters to the right.

I feel my jaw and the back of my head. I look at my hand. All clear. No blood. But also no pride.

"How long have I been lying here?"

"Five minutes. But everybody got bored and left. Oh, and you're not going to believe this. Igor burst out crying!"

Milica doesn't say anything this whole time. She has a strange expression on her face.



I've never seen anything like it. It's like she's sad or something. I don't know why.

"Why did he start with the waterworks?"

"No idea."

"Let's take this in order. What all happened?"

Bear's crouching next to me. He places a paw on my shoulder.

"Bro, nothing happened. He clobbered you one time, and you dropped. He literally knocked you out. Milica and I came over to see if you were all right. The others stayed for a few minutes. When they saw that you weren't dead, they scattered in a hurry. Igor stayed the longest. He wanted to see if you were OK. I chased him away."

"Why'd you chase him away?"

"Well, what do we want with some Shipyarder? And the guy knocked you out!"

"Fuck off with all this 'knockout, knockout' stuff! You're getting on my nerves!"

"OK, OK. But that's how it was. He sat next to you for a while, started crying, and then I ran him off."

"Why did he start crying?"

"How should I know. Probably scared shitless that he murdered you."

Milica pipes up.

"Are you all right?"

I shake my head, which feels like it is growing with every move I make.

"Hell no. But it's OK. He got lucky. If we'd fought longer, I would have broken his neck."

Bear keeps quiet. He hocks a loogie and slowly lets it descend from his lips. The spit hangs down a good twenty centimeters, and then he abruptly slurps it back up into his mouth. He spits it as far as he can, out into the fountain. Then he gets up.

"Hey, Ivan, we'd better split up now. I'm doomed when I get home."

I don't like it when he uses my real name.

"All right. See you tomorrow, and we can talk then."

"About what?"

Bear shakes his head.

"How should I know! About everything. Later."

He picks up his backpack from the ground, waves to us, and leaves.

Milica and I sit there. We eye the concrete and don't talk. I taste something metallic in my mouth. I spit and can see that my spit is bloody.

Milica stares at my spit and then gives me a kiss on the cheek. She strokes my hair and looks at me like she's expecting something.

Although the park is empty, I feel like all the people who pass by us know what happened. It's like every tree and bush has eyes that see the embarrassment that is consuming me. It's a disgusting feeling, and I don't know how to get rid of it.

"Do you want to do something?"

Milica's still there, although for a moment I forgot she was at my side. I shake my head and don't look at her. It's unpleasant for me to have to put up with anyone looking at me. Especially her.

"Let's go to the bridge. We can spit into the river."

"I don't feel like spitting."

The unpleasant taste in my mouth, however, makes me spit two more times. I'm getting accustomed to the blood. I swallow it.

"How about if we go to Cap's and get some screwdrivers? Then we can steal hood ornaments from cars."

"Don't wanna."

How about if we go to Bear's and play Nintendo? Maybe his parents are gone."

"Screw Bear. You can see that he turned out to be a little bitch."

Milica doesn't say anything to that. We both know perfectly well that at least Bear stuck around to talk to me. The other guys on

the team scarpered. It didn't even take a whole minute for them to forget me.

"Then you tell me. What do you feel like doing?"

"Nothing. I want to break something."

"We could go smash windows at our school."

Milica smiles, trying to put me in a better mood. I wouldn't be happy even if I blew the whole school sky-high.

I get to my feet, grab my jacket and bag, and walk aimlessly around the park. Milica follows me, spitting and whistling. She understands how I feel, and so she doesn't ask where we are going or what we're doing.

We go in circles and figure eights through the park, and then we come out onto the major street that leads toward the sock factory. We walk all the way to the factory, where in front of the entrance a guard is smoking a cigarette. His free hand is on his bent knee, tapping in rhythm. A mutt loiters around his legs. It's wagging its tail and hopping around, and the guard kicks an empty plastic bottle to rile him up. He stares at us, but the dog grabs his pant leg, and he curses and pushes the dog away. The mutt's persistent.

We soon come to the old houses that look like nobody lives in them, but the little white wisps of smoke spiraling up from their chimneys show that someone actually does.

We talk about how one could live in those houses, what there is to do in there, and whether they might have Nintendo or not.

"But they probably don't even have TV."

We walk on. It feels as though I'm picking up the pace more and more, as if I'm trying to run away from Milica. She manages to keep pace with me. She kicks my heels two or three times to try to make me trip. Since her last kick almost succeeds, I slow down.

We get carried away talking, and I don't notice that we've entered the large park that runs along the railroad tracks.

None of the trees have any leaves left, the grass is trampled and muddy, and the concrete paths and plazas are swarming with

gray pigeons. The sky above us is the same way. Like Mom's big tray for serving coffee. Gray and heavy.

We all used to play in this park when we were kids, but now there are no kids here. There aren't many grown-ups, either. Mostly people pass through here if they need to take the quickest route from the center of the city towards the Brushes. Lucky for us, that neighborhood is on the other side of the tracks and down the road a bit. Their team is a good distance away from this park, although, technically, we're on their territory.

Five or six older boys and two girls are messing around with the metal rocket, the merry-go-round, and the see-saw. They chase each other and roughhouse in the big sandbox.

"Come on. Let's roll."

Milica seems rattled, and this concerns me a bit, too. Especially given what just happened to me. The last thing I need is for those dumbass Brushers to come and smack me around.

We get onto the little path that encircles the whole park and is as far away as possible from the playground. The trees and bushes provide good cover. It feels like we are tiptoeing, even though we're practically running towards the exit.

The street here is a lot livelier than by the other entrance. A train rumbles by a couple of hundred meters from us, and the voices from the playground, which we can still hear, propel us down the street. We need to put as much distance between ourselves and those railroad tracks as possible.

We hoof it across two narrow streets, and then we come out onto the big intersection with the post office and the bus station.

We turn onto a street that gets narrower and narrower until it gets to a dilapidated little house. We push aside part of the ramshackle wooden fence. We worm our way between the walls with their decaying plaster that falls off at every touch. We come out in front of the marketplace. This is a secret passageway, an alley that only some of us are familiar with. If you don't know about it,

you have to make a big loop around this whole street to get to the marketplace.

From there, a ton of people are coming out with apparently even more folks going in through the main gate.

We merge with the flow and drift between the stands, crates, and cardboard boxes where people are selling fruit, vegetables, honey, clothes, flowers, meat, cheese, eggs, cigarettes, handkerchiefs. Right now the market is filled only with passersby and a few of the most stubborn vendors. Everyone else has already gone home.

The members of a religious sect give us flyers with some bull-shit on them about Jesus and the end of the world. Some old farts lie in wait for us and give us pamphlets for a political party. We take everything we're given. It will be good for paper poppers and paper airplanes.

Since we're not really talking, I don't notice that I've lost Milica. I look all around and stand on tiptoe. I search for her. I remember one time when I lost track of my mom while we were shopping at a marketplace, and they took me inside some building where a man used the PA system to summon her. I hope that I won't have to do that with Milica.

She jumps out in front of me, all hunched over. Her shoulders slump forward, and she has pulled her head back into her shoulders. She elbows me and keeps walking, but I quickly catch up with her.

"What happened?"

Instead of an answer, she offers me a smile and a mandarin that she removes from her jacket pocket. She takes out a second mandarin and then starts giggling. She bolts.

We exit the market at a run. We sprint across the street and slow down as soon as another park comes into view in front of us. No sooner had I forgotten everything that had happened when the park quickly reminds me of it all. I slow the pace, and then I just trudge along. Milica mirrors my movements and mood.

"Let's go to the fountain so we can eat in peace."

"I don't feel like going to the fountain."

"Hey, Rambo, don't be a wuss. It's not the first time you've gotten beaten up. And it won't be the last. What happened, happened. We fight on. Or are you chickenshit now?"

"I'm not chickenshit."

"Then what are you going to do? Avoid the rest of the team? Settle down? You aren't going to scrap anymore? Like, you're going to become a goody-two-shoes now and bring apples to class for the teacher? You're acting like a pussy. But now's when you need to be a total badass."

I don't say anything. Milica is silent, too, but she walks to the fountain. We have a seat on the bench and peel the mandarins. We have a competition to see who can remove the whole peel in one go. Neither of us manages it. We toss the orangish peels at the pigeons that are gathering around us. They think we have food. They peck at the rind two or three times and then run off in all directions. They come back when they realize there are seeds, too, but they don't like them.

From the distance comes, once more, the sound of a train.

"It's weird how you can hear trains in every part of the city."

"I always hear them through the window at home. My room looks out in that direction."

"Yes, and there it is again."

I shrug my shoulders. I'm making a paper popper out of the political leaflets, but it's too small. Makes no sound.

"Now that's a strong political party!"

"Give me the one with God."

We try it with the religious flyers, but they're no better. They're larger than the other pieces of paper, but they don't snap right. And they tear after just two pops.

So we make paper airplanes instead and throw them into the fountain. We compete to see who can throw theirs the farthest. Occasionally a burst of wind pushes one of the jets up, and then it

lands. It's rare for one of them to keep to a straight line. But still, Milica makes them better than I do.

"Do you know that we have a test tomorrow in biology?"

"Yep."

"Have you studied?"

"Like it matters whether I've studied. You?"

Milica shakes her head no. She stomps her foot on the concrete, making all the pigeons flap their wings and fly off.

"But I have to. My mom and dad will kill me. I have to have at least a C at the end of the semester."

"Mine don't hassle me about grades."

"Mine hassle me about everything."

We spit at the pigeons, but they return again and again. They flip over the mandarin peels as if they'd forgotten instantly that they had already done so.

"Who do you hate more?"

"At school, you mean?"

"No. At home. Your mom or your dad?"

I'm watching a woman I can see out in front of me, carrying a baby in a BabyBjörn on her chest. I imagine myself that small, in my mother's arms. On my dad's stomach. I feel nothing.

"I don't think I hate them."

"Fine. Who do you love more?"

"I don't think I love them, either."

"Come on, Rambo. I'm asking you nicely."

"And I'm telling you nicely. And you? Whom do you hate the most?"

"My dad. And Slurp. But I love my mom."

"Why Slurp?"

"Because he's a jerk."

"And your dad?"

She doesn't say anything to that.

I don't know what to say to her, so I stare at the pigeons that keep coming back, over and over. I think they're the same ones who've already tested the peelings and seeds. They're persistent, like the dog at the factory.

We sit there for a bit, without talking, and then Milica kisses me on the cheek. She stands up from the bench and flicks away a seed that's stuck to her jacket. She sticks out her hand to give me some skin. I dap her, but she pulls her hand away at the last moment and pretends to smooth her hair.

"Too slow, Rambo."

She laughs and leaves. I watch her until she disappears behind the big pyracantha bush. I can still see her for a moment as she runs across the street.

I sit there calmly, letting the pigeons come up quite close. I try to kick them. I don't manage to connect a single time. I hop up and go over to the bush, pick some of the berries, and go back to the bench. This time I don't kick at them, but I wait till they get close and I bombard them with the reddish fruits. They attack the berries with their beaks, but they don't like it much and they don't eat it. The pigeons that I hit spread their wings and shake their feathers, only to go back to pecking the pyracantha berries.

They are stubborn.





## Chapter Sixteen

I dream that I am mute.

And that's how the whole first part of my day is, too. My parents aren't talking and they just drag themselves around the apartment. After breakfast, however, my mom lets me chow down on some egg yolks with sugar.

I watch a cartoon before going to school. Actually, I just stare at the screen. By the time I walk to school, I can no longer recall whether I watched Wally Gator, Touché Turtle, Atom Ant, Bugs Bunny, Hokey Wolf, Bananaman, Beany and Cecil, or Inspector Mumbly the Super-Sleuth.

At school, Igor's the one playing mute, while I act like I don't notice him. We all pretend that nothing happened. Bear, Slurp, Cap, and Milica obviously behave differently, but everybody is in a hostile mood..

We endure the first two brief breaks without a word, spitting on the kids below the window. For the long recess, I assemble them at the big tree in the courtyard. I ask them directly if they want me to go on being the leader.

Eyes look away and glances are exchanged. There's spitting, the cracking of knuckles, and stretching. After all the hemming and

hawing is finished: it's OK with them for me to continue as the leader of the gang.

"But you'll have to prove yourself again."

Meda was scarcely able to look me in the eyes as he said that. Whatever.

I assure them I'm not an idiot and know that's a given. But they all look indifferent. They don't even ask me what I'm going to do.

The rest of the day is silent, too. We are all behaving like they forced us to be near each other. Like when you're at someone's birthday party and you don't know anyone in the room.

On the way out of school, the atmosphere is still funeral-like. Only Milica is in a better mood; the others keep avoiding my eyes, and to my wisecracks and questions they respond briefly or not at all.

Milica skips along next to me. She boxes my ears and tries to kick me in the butt, but I dodge it.

I can hardly wait to reach my apartment. My rents are at work and I can prepare in peace for what's coming.

I put on a brand-new white track suit with a big, red Nike logo stuck on the chest. I also clean off my new Air Maxes and lace them up tight. I retrieve the nightstick from under my bed and slide it up my sleeve.

In the mirror I look at myself from all angles. I raise my collar and unzip my hoodie so you can see my chest. I put on the necklace with the bullets. I look rad.

It's cold outside, but I'm so hot that I don't feel a thing. I go out wearing just my track suit because I look cool like this. I let people's stares linger on my clothes out on the street. If somebody should happen to come up to me and try to do what Boda did, they'd be fucked. I feel like I could break somebody's neck now with one smack.

I walk too fast, as if somebody else is setting the pace. In passing, I notice that my signature on Ćopićeva Street has been scrawled over. It still says RAMBO, but somebody added two dots to the letter “B” so that it looks like a pair of tits. There are also two horizontal lines through my name, but you can still see what it says.

I don’t notice when I leave Ćopićeva Street behind me.

The Shipyards surround me. I even see a crowd of Shipyarders hanging out at a bench, close to the first buildings. And they have noticed me, too. They look at me without moving. The way the lions in *The Last Oasis* regard their prey.

With my left hand, I pull the nightstick out of my sleeve and raise it as high as I can. I stride resolutely toward the team on the bench.

They stand up. They come into focus. Sledgehammer is one of them, and other members of his gang are there, too.

This is one of those November days when the air is really cold, but the sun is also shining for all it’s worth. I feel like I am shining, in my white tracksuit and white shoes. Like one of the Knights of the Round Table in *Excalibur*.

The gang moves towards me, but Sledgehammer stops them. They observe me. I come to a halt thirty steps away from them. Sledgehammer pulls the bandana out of his pocket and holds it up.

Cautiously, I approach him. You never know they will rush you.

But he doesn’t move.

At a spot about halfway to the enemy, I plunge the baton into the mud. Then I walk back.

Sledgehammer smiles. He runs up to the nightstick and yanks it out of the earth. He wipes it off with my bandana. He stuffs the bandana back in his pocket, and then he points the nightstick at me and whistles. The Shipyards move away from the bench and advance slowly. Or maybe it just seems to me that they’re moving

slowly. Everything seems slowed down. Except my breathing. I'm going to puke up my own heart.

The horde is getting closer. Now Sledgehammer is among them. He's the only one who has a weapon. He's smacking the nightstick on the palm of his free hand. He's seen that in some movie. And I've seen it in some movie.

All the guys on his side are astonishingly quiet. Sledgehammer's the only one who is cursing and threatening me. He says I'm stupid for coming there and he's going to give me a real drubbing.

I let them get close, so close that Sledgehammer is already raising the blackjack and is about to hit me. Just four more steps and he'll be in position to lay into me. It'll be easy enough for him to get to me after just three more.

Sledgehammer seems beyond happy. He looks like he has already won the fight. His face is all smiles and redness.

One more step and he's here.

I suddenly unzip my jacket. My hands pull apart the sides of my hoodie, the way the Man With No Name does with his poncho before he shoots.

Sledgehammer and his gang are rooted to the spot. I swear, some of them are literally gaping in astonishment. But they don't budge. Like the bottles in Grandpa's yard.

Calmly I pull the pistol out of my track pants. I cock it and point the barrel straight at Sledgehammer's head with his bigumbo ears.

It all happens fast, but to me it seems like time is sticky chewing gum that is stretching between the asphalt and the sole of your shoe.

I tell Sledgehammer not to move. I order his gang to beat it back to their bench. They walk backwards. They're afraid I'll shoot them in the back. Still, two or three of them dash towards the entrances of their buildings.

Sledgehammer looks around. He stares at the surrounding balconies and windows. Nobody is helping. People are accustomed to kids brawling with each other. From a young age, they teach us to play Partisans and Germans, Cowboys and Indians. They probably think that right now we are screwing around with plastic pistols.

I keep my index finger next to the trigger. The way my grandpa told me to, so that I don't fire by accident. I don't want to kill Sledgehammer. It's enough for me that he stands here like Pinocchio and waits for me to pull his string.

I order him to lose the nightstick. He lets it fall next to him. He's as pale as chalk. He's shaking. Tears are running down his face. His pants are turning dark with pee. A dark line spreads down from his zipper to his right knee.

I feel sorry for him. I wanted to come out on top of this. To take what was mine and get out of the Shipyards forever. I didn't want to humiliate him this way.

When I told him to lose the nightstick, I sounded like my dad making me go to my room. Now, when I demand that he give back my bandana, I don't sound like anything. It's like I'm saying something I never learned.

He barely moves his hand as he pulls my Young Pioneer bandana out of his pocket. It's muddy and full of crusty stain. They must have spit and jerked off on it.

I take the bandana, put the pistol back in the belt on my track pants, and tighten the belt. I zip up my hoodie and take off running.

I don't turn around to see if Sledgehammer's still there. I'm certain he's not chasing me. Neither he nor his gang. The Shipyards are so peaceful that it feels to me like a dragon has devoured them.



## Chapter Seventeen

I'm in school. I'm wearing the same white tracksuit and my Air Maxes. Since last time I've washed my bandana. Now it isn't red like blood, but it also isn't filthy. The only thing is—it's still wet.

As soon as I leave our apartment building, I wrap it around my head. I don't take it off for class. I'm also wearing the necklace of bullet casings, outside of my tracksuit top. The teachers razz me about it, but they don't hassle me much about taking either the bandana or the necklace off. I wouldn't do it, even if they told me to.

Bear, Cap, and Milica look at me and grin. They don't know what I did or when, but if Rambo has on his red bandana, that means that he has manned up.

I avoid them during the breaks between classes. I ignore their questions and shake off their pats on my shoulders and arms. They think it's weird, but they don't bug me about it. They tease me.

“He got the bandana back, and now he thinks he's a big man.”

“Till Igor busts his chops again.”

“Or somebody else does.”

“At least he got his bandana back. What've you done?”

That's Milica, defending people. And Bear—always screwing around.



“Bet he took the necklace from his mom.”

The bell rings for recess. The entire class dashes out of the room. They descend on the bakery on the ground floor and the bookstore on the third floor. In the bookstore there are sweets for sale, and after a big enough crowd has formed there, you can steal candy and chewing gum, which is stored on the ends of the counter.

I wait for everybody to leave the classroom. Only the class monitors stay behind to erase the boards and rinse out the sponges in the sink.

I go up to the display case where there are little bottles of powder, all kinds of chemicals and dead animals. I use the dirty glass to look at my reflection. I tighten the bandana and adjust it, so the knot is right in the middle of the back of my head. It flattens my ears. My hair sticks up. I look like a badass. I straighten out the necklace so that all the bullets lie between my pecs. I tighten both sets of shoelaces on my feet and yank the tongues of my shoes up. I feel like I'm ready for Seven Mile Road.

I walk out of the classroom and am swept up in the tumult of kids still zipping around out there.

They're sitting in the widow-sills.

They're checking books out of the library.

They're shooting the breeze on the stairs and plotting things under their breath.

They're kissing.

They're dashing back and forth and playing in the courtyard.

They're squatting under the tree and having snacks.

They're struggling to figure out how to poke the sharp end of little straws into juice packets.

They're drinking water from the fountain.

They're shooting hoops and playing *devet-deset*, a version of Jeepers-Keepers, on the short soccer pitch.

They're just walking around.

They're attempting to draw a hopscotch court on the wet concrete.

They're fooling around.

They're running to the bathroom.

They're playing devil and king of the mountain.

They're jumping rope.

They're gazing in front of themselves as they lean on one of the walls fencing us in, thinking about who-knows-what.

The disgusting labyrinth that is school.

The huge, concrete courtyard is plotted with lines. They outline the courts for handball and volleyball, and also two for basketball.

In one corner of the yard, there's a hole filled with sand. It's where we do the long jump during PE class. The sand in it always looks wet and cold and like it's been peed on.

The team calls me over to the tree where they've gathered. Milica has bought Neapolitan wafers and everybody's eating them. I wave them off. I don't look at them and I keep moving towards the middle of the courtyard.

I stop in the middle of the soccer pitch. I'm right in the center of the big white circle. I step onto the faded line that's about fifteen centimeters wide. It runs down the center of everything.

I look up.

The first thing I see is Igor's red baseball hat as he descends the steps into the bathroom at the side of the building. The rest of the yard then comes into focus in front of me.

Everything's the way it is every day. It's all the same.

Bear waves and yells in my direction, but I can't hear understand him above the other kids. Cap is hanging upside down from the crossbar of the soccer goal. He's eating cookies while he's hanging head-down like that. He also shouts something to me, and wafer crumbs tumble from his mouth. Rocket is scribbling in his notebook. I don't see the others. They're probably playing "devil."

Milica raises the package of wafers into the air and points at it. Her cheeks are puffed out.

Seeing so many children reminds me of that old movie, *The Seventh Continent*.

Actually, my perception of all this is that it's something outside of me. A movie. It's as if all of them are actors, and the school and the whole town of Neverville are the set. All I can think about is what grandpa told me, before he taught me to shoot a pistol. His words about morality are spinning around in my head, like when the priest repeats all that nonsense at a funeral.

All of a sudden everything in and around me goes peaceful. There's no more noise from the courtyard, no school, no team, no playground aides, no Shipyarders, no city, no old farts. Nothing.

I unzip my sweatshirt. Pull the pistol out of my track pants. I deactivate the safety. I put one bullet into the chamber and then into myself.

## **The Authors**

Miloš K. Ilić is a writer from Pančevo (Serbia) who has tried his craftsmanship in almost all media (radio, TV, theater, marketing, internet content) before trying, last but not least, good ol' book publishing. He writes under pseudonyms: Ana Miloš, Ivan Drnčula, Kosta Carić, Gordana Divjak and Vladan Olgin (for now). This is the first novel (also for now) out of his nine books.

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