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Mila and the Stranger

The boy was playing alone on a dusty road, not far from the big door of the courtyard of his house. O[1] n a day other than a market day or a holiday, the road would be peaceful, almost deserted, but the boy would always harbor a hidden hope that the road might produce something new, rare, and exciting. On that day the road brought nothing for quite a long time. At one moment the boy raised his eyes. High overhead he saw someone coming down the hill.

The slopes of that unusually steep hill rose above the town almost perpendicularly, evoking in the boy's mind the image of a school blackboard. The precipitous surface of the hill was streaked by a dusty white road that disappeared behind low, rocky and sparsely vegetated mounds with a well-trodden shortcut the color of clay stretching between them. High above on the hill the traveller emerged as a tiny figure whose clothes or age could not yet be discerned. The boy saw him disappear behind the rocky mounds and then appear again, coming out of every bend bigger and clearer than he had been the moment before. The boy kept a close watch on him until the man appeared on a small plateau, where the reddish shortcut merged with the dusty road, and the road descended almost straight as a waterfall in front of the first houses on the outskirts of the town. The boy's house was one of them.

It was not unusual that a stranger, a highlander, or a Gipsy vagrant would come to the town from far away. They would beg, earn, or steal something and then continue with their vagrancy, leaving by the white road that started down from the far end of the town. They were strange and exciting, and each provoked in the boy superstitious fear and curiosity as well as infinite pity. Although such unhealthy interest in vagrant strangers and beggars, the maimed and the wretched in general brought him a lot of scolding at home, he tried, whenever he had a chance, to be in their vicinity so he could study and observe them.

The stranger that had just come down the hill was a young man of imposing stature and strength, all covered in a heavy, gray layer of dust; only his face was strangely clean, as if he had just washed

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it. The striking features on his tanned young face were two sharp and deep wrinkles. They were not the regular, arched wrinkles that stretch from the bottom of the nose to the corners of the lips, but carved straight across the middle of the cheeks, stretching from the cheekbones to the chin. Those wrinkles made him appear fierce and wild. He was untucked and torn, wearing unmatched pieces of clothing and shapeless shoes, white as lime and dried from the heat and walking. His dark, lush hair hung down in sweaty wisps underneath a grey hat which was pulled backwards. He had an almost empty linen bag on his back and a big gnarled stick in his right hand.

The boy raised his head, trying to catch the stranger's eye. The man had a look that a master's child could neither understand nor know, the look that no one wished to meet. It came from the eyes of a man who had starved a great deal and who was again hungry; it was a look that yearns, digs and seeks, always in want of everything. The stranger's eyes lingered on something beyond the boy, and he turned and saw Mila at the courtyard door. The boy ran towards her, but she did not notice him at first, since she was also looking somewhere beyond him. Her look went towards the stranger on the street. Although he could not have known what the looks of adults meant, the boy noticed them. His aunt was standing there with a bunch of flowers in her hands and she realized that he was there only after he pulled at her sleeve.

The boy stayed by the busy girl's side for a long time after the stranger went on his way, asking her everything that came to his mind about the vagrant stranger. Mila answered his questions softly and distractedly.

Aunt Mila was one of the boy's great joys. Later in life he remembered her as a vigorous and strong girl of mature beauty and grace, all firm and smooth, like a cliff, and entirely suffused with an indescribable, intense scent. Her bright smile and sonorous voice made him happy, and as soon as she was no longer around he would become sad and sulky. He adored aunt Mila and yearned for her presence. The boy was nine, and she was about twenty-two. She was known as a girl much desired for marriage, with a good reputation and a big dowry, but also as a chooser and already beyond the proper age for marrying.

Mila was familiar with many games and crafts, and the boy thought that nothing could resist her white, strong hands: neither silk, nor metal, nor fire. Once touched by them, everything would become remarkably new and yielding, joyful and beautiful. It was her lush hair that especially

remained in his memory; she combed and wore it differently from other girls, and tossed it back with a special movement of the head, abrupt and exciting, like a natural force. In the years to come, whenever the conversation turned to the constancy and serenity of the immortal Greek gods, the image that came to the boy's mind was that powerful and yet harmonious movement of the head and the play of tufts and curls that rearranged themselves in a new way every time. The boy enjoyed her presence, looking upon her as if she were a divine creature of intransigent beauty, happy and proud, inhabiting a world in which eternal bliss reigned.

He would follow her to church on Sundays. Once after the service, a tall and pale young man with a clenched jaw and a fez over his eyebrows spoke to her entreatingly and admonishingly: “Mila, why are you so proud?”

The boy couldn’t understand any of it, but such words would fill him with incomprehensible joy for the rest of the day. On their way back from the church, the boy would hold two fingers of Mila’s hand and, enraptured, lean his face against her shalwar made of rich satin, full of folds and movement. He understood nothing, but he felt with all his being that these were some weighty and complex matters in which aunt Mila played a majestic role, as it became her.

Although she lived with his uncle’s family, they practically resided in the same house, divided only by their gardens and a low garden door that was always open. She would spend entire days and a good part of nights in the house of his widowed mother. And whenever he could, the boy would be close to her. Eating without her presence was difficult; falling asleep impossible. The boy would lie, half awake, on a double mattress, in a darkness as warm as blood and as dense as porridge, observing a short stripe of light resting upon something that he could not discern. He couldn’t tell if it came from the sun or the moon, or if it was some narrow passage from the darkness into another world made of light itself. And while the two worlds overlapped and their borders shifted in his childlike consciousness as he drifted into sleep, there was one thing that was sure and constant: Mila’s presence.

Later in life, in the most direful of circumstances, it was the thought of beautiful Mila that would eventually send him to sleep. He could still feel her presence, as if this wise and powerful woman, the kind that makes a man look forward to the next day while closing his eyes to sleep, was watching over him from some invisible place.

Although the boy's yearning for Aunt Mila's presence and the joy it brought was constant, he was reaching an age when things other than her were starting to interest him. He was curious about things that happened in town, and about people, especially the new, unfamiliar, and strange ones. He could not forget the dusty and torn young man that he had seen coming down the hill. He was driven by insatiable curiosity to find out if the stranger had found accommodation in town, where he was now, and what he was doing. The boy was thinking about the stranger all day, when, on the same day, he saw him in the center of the town as he was coming back from school in the afternoon.

The boy kept his eyes on him. Looking the same as when he saw him arriving into town, the stranger was knocking at the doors of the town's stores, one by one, stopping in front of eating houses, boza and cake shops, looking for[2] food and employment. Eventually he stopped at the end of the street and, leaning against the parapet at the beginning of the bridge, continued observing everything around him with a sharp, searching eye.

It happened that the vagrant homeless stranger found employment as soon as the next day and stayed in the town.

This came about at around the same time that higher authorities issued an order that the municipality should hire a man to catch all homeless dogs and "kill them in a way that does not insult the feelings of citizens." Of all the measures that the new authorities had proscribed for the well-being and protection of citizens' life and health, this was the hardest to implement since it seemed to people to be meaningless and inhumane. No one could see the relation between the town's health and the hairy, spotted dogs lolling around the butchers' shops and taverns, looking at passers-by with lazy eyes in which sleep struggled with distrust and caution. There was not a price high enough for anyone in town to take up the task; regardless of how easy the job was, not a living soul showed interest. The Gypsies all declined. Two or three drunkards, ruined people without home or source of income, made up excuses saying that their hands were too shaky. That was when one of the municipal officials mentioned Ćorkan's name, but nothing more than that, since everybody immediately agreed that he was no longer fit for any kind of work.

The boy knew Ćorkan by his dancing in the street and the jokes that the craftsmen made at his expense. Ćorkan was a tired old man, one of those creatures that attracted the boy's attention and

filled him with pity and fear. He was the illegitimate son of Aša the Gipsy and an Anatolian officer that had disappeared even before Ćorkan was born. A drunkard, struck by passionate amorous yearning most of his life, he had spent his earthly days as a deliveryman, a musician, and everyone's servant. When the circus came to town for the first time, he was the man who fell madly in love with a German tightrope walker, which caused him many glorious moments, a lot of disgrace, and a heavy beating.

They had started to forget about him in town lately. But, on that very day in May, which was the last day of Ćorkan's life, his name was mentioned again, and it was in connection with an ugly and difficult undertaking that no one wished to take up.

On that bright day in May, Ćorkan got himself up the hill above the town and occupied the place in the ruins of the old town where he used to sunbathe.

He had been ill for a very long time. He could barely drag himself along. The clothes he was wearing, which had not been tailored for him in the first place, were becoming looser and looser by the day. A greasy, skull-shaped cap that he no longer took off was glued to his bald head. A colorful scarf was bandaged around his ears, collecting a discharge of pus. His blind eye was even more sunken and covered in dirt while the lid on the healthy eye was swollen and heavy. But that one eye still had room for all the sunshine there was in the world. The rest of the face was hidden in the disheveled, grizzled beard and moustache without shape. His mouth was shapeless, invisible, without teeth. He had lost his teeth the previous winter; they had fallen out all at once, like palisades in the times of flood. His torso was still strong, but invisible, underneath the layers of cloth he was wrapped in and a military jacket that no longer displayed the rank or service. The jacket was tucked into trousers with a loose bottom. The bottom of the trousers, worn and torn by a master taller than himself long before he had got to wear them, was dangling down to Ćorkan's heels now; young puppies and angry ganders, which were especially ferocious and aggressive that spring, more to the powerless and the ragged than to the strong and the well-dressed, would bite and tear at the already ripped bottom. The trousers, finally, disappeared in a pair of large boots. Ćorkan had found those boots at the officers' garbage dump and wore them as if he were wearing fetters. He had had to make crescent-shaped holes with a little knife in the boots around his swollen ankles, to make them more comfortable and to alleviate the pressure.

Ćorkan hadn't been working at all for a long time now – he was no longer even to be laughed at. He'd been living on charity, and the charity didn't have to be big, since he ate almost nothing, while as little as a thimble of rakija would make him delirious. He was utterly preoccupied with the faint stream of his thoughts and his exhausted and deteriorated body that he exposed to the sun every day. His body was growing weaker; everything was jumbling and disintegrating inside of him.

With each day that went by, Ćorkan waited for glorious death to come and take him. Once it came, he would lie down for the first time in a bed that was not foreign, that was made just for him. He would not have to open his mouth, to eat or to speak anymore; he waited for the damp clay to cure the heartburn that plagued him, and once and for all stop the painful hiccups that made him shiver.

He was sitting on the remains of a wall that had been pulled down to the foundation. He was singing quietly. His singing was in perfect harmony with the rays of the sun coming from the sky – the melody that he sang with infinite repetition was interrupted only by his hiccups; the sunlight obscured only by little clouds, irritating as flies. He sang, almost without words, only the beginning of a song, the rest of which he'd long forgotten:

Akşam … geldi …

He would spend entire afternoons without uttering anything but those two words, turning and twisting them for hours, as if they were two decades of the rosary. While singing, he would slowly crumble the plaster and gravel from the ruined little wall with his right hand. He would play distractedly with every stone, and then throw it away to one side. On this day, while crumbling the pieces of plaster, all of a sudden he felt a round and flat object under his fingers. He moved it a bit away and looked at it intensely with his one healthy eye. It was an antique copper coin, gone green with age.

Ćorkan could not see well lately; all the lines in front of his eyes appeared double and blurry, and distinguishing small objects was a great effort for him. He carefully removed the plaster covering the coin and blew at it a few times to remove the remaining dust. Now, he was able to discern the shape of a woman's face on the coin and some unfamiliar letters. The woman was a queen or a goddess.

Ćorkan was slightly moved by the generosity of the antique wall. It bestowed a modest gift on him, but it made the world seem most wondrously structured. There, Ćorkan thought, money sprang from stones – even if it was just a coin forged in the times of some old empire. It was enough to be born into this world, and there was no end to all the things that could happen to you.

On the barren stone of a nameless ruin, the ignorant pauper was holding an antique coin and, basking in sunlight and contemplating the sudden revelation of the balance existing between things lost and things found, between what is and what was, he was ready to die. Ćorkan threw away the money with a slow movement of the hand. The coin got lost in the gravel on the slope. He resumed the song that he, lost in thoughts, had interrupted for a moment:

Akşam ... geldi ...

The two words that he sang repeatedly were so few. They were just two out of so many billions of words, spoken and unspoken – he uttered them with almost no breath and without any movement of the lips. It was nothing. That singing equaled, almost entirely, the unchanging and solemn silence of a dead man.

Many times in his life, with his blood burning with alcohol and a solitary tear in the corner of his healthy eye, he would open his arms and shout deliriously: "Die, Ćorkan!" – provoking laughter and amusement in half-drunk masters. The masters laughed, Ćorkan drank and shouted, but in the end all jokes came true – death lurked behind them, bringing silence after every laughter.

Absorbed in these thoughts, sitting on the low decrepit wall under the spring sun, the withered Ćorkan felt that he was finally becoming what he had always fantasized and longed to be: a grand and lonesome man, a lover and a hero. Who would dare to approach him now and offer him some low and dishonorable employment? To the man who had become *this* ?

Would anyone even think of it? Where were the people that approached him with such offers now? From the sunlit wall where he was sitting, the farthest miraculous city of the Far East with its towers, women, and heroic deeds felt closer than this handful of scattered houses at the confluence of the rivers Drina and Rzav.

Even if somebody had approached him, Ćorkan would not have gratified him with a response,

because, by the time the sun began to set below the horizon he had already parted with his soul. He no longer sang *Akşam ... geldi ...,* but he remained in an unchanged position, half lying down.

A shepherd passed, driving the city dwellers' cows, sheep, and goats from the pasture, when he saw Ćorkan lying on the wall. The shepherd was carrying a feeble lamb in his arms, and, beset by his worry for the lamb, he did not bother to stop. The sun went down on Liještanska Kosa, darkening the surface of the earth and the color of the sky. A thin, sharp, crescent moon appeared together with the morning star. Ćorkan's short and motionless body was still lying on the wall, calm and redeemed, forever freed from the greatest of all human miseries: waking up again.

The next day in the early morning, the same shepherd was driving the city dwellers' cattle to the pasture and, after noticing Ćorkan in the same position, approached him. He called his name in vain for some time, and when Ćorkan did not answer he informed the closest shopkeeper about what had happened. By noon, municipal officials had arrived with the Mullah and the good people of the town had arranged the funeral.

The children were coming out from the school. The boy noticed that somebody's funeral procession was coming down from Mejdan, so he stopped at the bridge to wait and watch it pass by. Right there he saw the stranger again. Just like the day before, he was leaning against the parapet where it curved at the end of the bridge. Like a bird, he always returned to the same place, the boy thought.

The stranger was looking down and holding a big loaf of bread. He'd split it in two and, with one half in each hand, he bit into them by turns, deeply and avidly. It was a special kind of soft yet slightly tough German bread, as white as lime, the kind that the poor dreamed of and the peasants bought for their children as a delicacy. Every time he got ready to bite into the bread, his strong, white, and regular teeth would appear. For a brief moment it would seem as if he was going to smile. However, his face remained gloomy and motionless.

After he had eaten the first half, he poured a little bit of salt from a piece of paper onto the palm of his left hand and started dabbing big pieces of bread into it, then he shoved them into his mouth and swallowed after brief chewing. While he was eating, his face seemed fuller and his eyes smaller,

but the moment he'd stop eating his face turned hollow, with the evil lines on both sides, and his eyes became wider and began to search.

The boy got onto a flat capstone of the bridge parapet from where he could observe both the stranger, who, leaning against the parapet, ripped the white bread with his teeth as if it were prey, and the people who were carrying Ćorkan to the cemetery. That was probably the reason why, in the boy's consciousness, the image of the strange young man remained forever tied to Ćorkan's name, to his death and burial.

Perhaps there is not a single religion that buries their dead with more composed and serene seriousness and dignified, moving simplicity, than is the case with Muslims. That is why the difference between the burials of the rich and the poor in Muslim communities is not so striking. Nevertheless, Ćorkan's funeral was both dismal and unattended. There were still a few people in the streets who approached the procession in order to help carry the coffin with the deceased, but on the way from the bridge to the cemetery only five or six of them remained, together with the Mullah, Ibrahim.

The Mullah was a religious and ignorant man with a heavy stutter, which was the reason why only people with a lot of time and patience could bring themselves to talk to him. His prayers were voiceless, because otherwise they would have been endless. The boy remained on the bridge for a long time, waiting to see the people come back from the graveyard. They smoked while walking back, with shovels on their shoulders. Skinny, tall, benevolent Mullah Ibrahim, with eyes always smiling from words that he failed to utter, was leading the way.

As soon as the boy got home he informed all the household members that Ćorkan had died and that he had been buried. Someone exclaimed: "Wretched man!" His mother said: "He has found peace at last." Their words were very difficult for a child to understand, but the strangest thing of all was that all the faces displayed something that resembled a light smile. Failing to comprehend, the boy looked at aunt Mila, who was the source of all wisdom and had the last word in everything for him. It was the same. Her lips were slightly stretched, and she had a pitying smile in her eyes: poor Ćorkan!

As the day went by, the boy tried several times to engage others in a conversation about Ćorkan. He asked all sorts of questions about his life and death, but nobody wanted to talk about these things. The boy then sat next to aunt Mila, and, holding on to her shoulder, he strongly pulled her head close to his and spoke into her ear. He asked who Ćorkan really was, if he had a wife, children, home. But Mila just put her hand on the back of his head, pulled it through his long, blond hair, and ruffled it forward. The hair hid the boy's eyes and face and he fell on her lap giggling, forgetting all his questions about Ćorkan. She would always do that when she could not or did not want to give answers to his questions.

However, life made the boy ask more and more questions every day. Asking adults to provide answers proved to be either difficult or pointless, but having unanswered questions simmering deep down inside of him was even harder.

As soon as the day after Ćorkan's funeral, everyone in town and at the boy's school heard that the young stranger had made a deal with the municipal authorities to catch and kill all homeless dogs. The boys who lived in town already knew the man's name and where he came from. His name was Mile Prelac, and he was from somewhere in Lika. They told strange and exciting stories about how he would catch dogs by slipping a wire noose fixed on a long stick around their heads, and how everyone in town, especially children, hated him for that. A man who made a living by catching and killing innocent dogs was seen as the lowest creature on earth. Boys threw rocks at him whenever they could; they hid and defended the dogs whenever they had a chance, and shouted after him, incessantly and in unison, the cruel words: "Prelac, Prelac, the dog-catching scavenger!"

As the boy lived on the outskirts of the town and could not take part in these adventures, all he could do was listen to his friends talking about them. But, there was another way for him to get closer to the man who had aroused his interest so much. The boy's uncle was the mayor of the municipality, a great honor which entailed few responsibilities. Actually, he had only one responsibility; the boy, however, did not know what it was. It was a word that adults often used, and it only applied to them. The uncle went to the town hall only when town meetings were held or on special days when he had some signing to do, and the boy went along whenever he had a chance. No other walk could compare to the one with his uncle. Thanks to him, the municipal clerks

and attendants would always receive him nicely and let him roam around. All sorts of unexpected thing just awaited discovery.

The big room in which the town meetings were held was always stuffy and dim. On the long, green-felt-covered conference table, there was a big bottle of water and a few glasses placed on a black tray. In the closet, which did not have a key, there were some old files, boxes with feathers and pens, as well as a ball of yellow-red thread and all sorts of seals. All this variety of things made the boy come back to the closet as if it were some secret treasure. When he began to feel tired of searching the closet, he would sit on each of the fifteen chairs and each time say a different word that he had just invented. Finally, he would have a sip of the stale water that smelled of chalk and metal, as if it had come from a magic well.

The municipal stables and sheds, in which there were various tools and handcarts, axes and fire-extinguishing buckets, were also wildly exciting for the boy. There were also all sorts of things that the boy did not know the purpose of, which made them even more appealing. During these excursions, the boy would often meet Prelac who would bring in captured dogs and lock them in a dark, long-forgotten basement under the town hall. The basement had a very low door and was green with damp moss.

In a state of tremendous excitement, as if witnessing something forbidden and terrible, the boy would wait on the rampart behind the town hall for hours to see Prelac bring yet another dog with the noose around its neck. The dogs would bark and growl in despair, while the noose would become tighter and tighter, interrupting the sounds that they made. After Prelac had taken them inside the basement, the boy would hear horrible sounds of barking and squealing. That was when the boy, overcome with fear and excitement, would lie flat on his stomach and, pushing his chin against the sharp edge of the rampart, wait for the door to open. Prelac would come back from the basement with the wire noose over his shoulder, and then go to town to search for another homeless, masterless dog.

All this reminded the boy of the stories that his grandmother Smiljana sometimes used to tell him. He enjoyed listening to them, but felt fear the moment he was alone waiting to fall asleep. After observing Prelac and his dogs, the boy would run home, making sure that he did not stay alone in the dark for one second. He would not dare admit to anyone at home what he had seen nor ask

anyone for explanations, although he was tortured by many questions. Instead of answers, which he could neither find on his own nor get from others, the boy would go again after a couple of days to wait in hiding for Prelac, and observe him carry out his heinous task. So he went again that afternoon, when he was to understand – if a child *can* understand – really was.

The sun had already set, but the town still basked in a warm, reddish shimmer that came down the surrounding hills. The light seemed trapped in the valley, where it changed color as it burned slowly, first resembling fire, then amber, and finally ashes.

From time to time, in the summer, the town and its dwellers would experience a magical moment, when all things lost and dead would suddenly come alive, and every living creature would become strangely surrounded by an aura of energy and light, formed around their hard and rigid everyday selves. That was when people who sat in front of their houses and smoked in silence could see the apparitions of the departed in the tobacco smoke, and read the signs that make one's blood run cold and heart stand still.

While lying on the warm grass and waiting for Prelac, the boy's heart pounded hard; he could sense the pressure in the temples and veins in his neck. The young man finally showed up. He was better dressed. He was wearing linen trousers and a new, white shirt, unbuttoned on his chest and with the sleeves rolled up. He had a gaunt, black dog on the noose of his snare. The dog growled quietly, trying to sneak rather than force his way out of the noose. The bolt on the low basement door, which got stuck in the ground every time somebody opened or closed it, made a loud thud, and Prelac and his prey disappeared behind it. There was silence, brimming with excitement. The boy heard a few dreadful growls and some human screams as well; then the door opened. Prelac came out, staggering sideways, supporting his left hand with the right one. His whole left hand was covered in blood, which gushed out and, bathed in the evening light, seemed glorious and joyful, as a flower bud. The blood oozed onto his healthy, right hand and trickled on the ground.

For a moment, the young man observed the wounded hand, and then raised and tossed his head, turning his face towards the sky. That was when he began saying the most terrible curses that the boy had ever heard, before or after. He spoke them with a clenched jaw, his face contorted; he spoke directly to God. He uttered his blasphemies in the way people utter fervent prayers in the hardest times, when they know that nobody is watching. The blood continued to trickle down his

hand; the drops disappeared in the dark summer soil as the young man kept on with his bitter, incomprehensible cursing. One moment he spoke quietly and quickly, almost whispered, as if casting spells on his wounded hand, and then he changed, speaking out loud in a short and abrupt manner, as if trying to get even with his enemy, at least by cursing if striking a blow was not possible. At moments he became overcome with caustic laughter and choked sobbing. Enraged and heated, face to face with the invisible enemy, he could not notice the tiny face of a child who was observing him from a hidden spot, his eyes wide open with fear and horror.

The boy managed to get on his feet and escape, without knowing where he was going. The picture of Prelac's face and the sound of his words became etched on his mind forever.

The boy spent the next few days as if in a terrible dream. It was impossible to forget what he had seen and heard. It was impossible to let anyone in on it, but it was unbearable as well to hold it inside, unspoken and unexplained. The boy felt horrible, and guilty. Nothing could calm or soothe him. He retreated into seclusion, feeling heavy, bleak and cursed. He saw himself as a keeper of an awful truth, not only about Prelac's true self but about the world and people in general, and tormented by the secret, he felt not only distanced from other people, but somehow raised above them in a peculiarly painful way.

Even Mila's presence soothed him only slightly and just for a short while. As always, she would sit on a low chair, which would disappear entirely under her voluminous shalwar of light satin. She would take the boy between her knees, and he would hide his hands in the folds of her shalwar and put his head on her bosom. Overcome with happiness, he would close his eyes. But it would not last for long. Mila's cold and hard golden brooch under his chin would suddenly feel as if it were the stony edge of the wall on which he lay watching Prelac. It would be the moment when Mila, the house, his mother, life as he knew it would vanish, and Prelac's face, distorted with pain, anger, and the terrible curses that came from his mouth, his bloody hand, and his head raised towards the sky, would appear before his eyes.

The stories told by his friends meant nothing to him; he found them dull and uninteresting, as he knew other, greater, and more important things. The boy dreaded meeting Prelac somewhere in the street, but he found out a lot about the stranger's life and what he was doing. He heard that Prelac was still carrying out his detestable duty although the adults and children alike did their best

to make it harder for him. With each day that went by, there were less and less dogs in town. Children said that the dog-catcher got drunk every night and slept in the municipal storehouse.

However, one day, which was all strange and extraordinary, the boy saw Prelac one more time. A heavy, cold rain had fallen the day before. All the streams rose and the river became turbid. The sky above the town was overcast with clouds, and the day that broke was cold and wet, as if it were not the middle of the summer. The school felt dark and stuffy that afternoon, with the smell of children's damp clothes pervading the place.

When the children went out of the school, they saw that a lot of people had gathered around the town hall, at the brink of the river. All the children ran boisterously in that direction, with the school bags on their backs making thudding sounds. When they climbed the steep and narrow street that led to the plateau where the town hall and the adjoining stables stood, they encountered a bunch of people that had formed a circle around some invisible sight. The boys quickly found their way among the adults.

Squeezed between some of the town's men, the boy saw the dog-catcher Prelac's dead body laid on the grass. He was half naked; his head was tossed, his neck strained, his face turned towards the sky, and his hair glued to his head, resembling a helmet. He had a bloody, red mark stamped on his strong, protruding torso as pale as lime, made by a boat-hook the men had used to pull him out of the water. The white linen pants were still on his body, glued to his legs. A police officer was standing next to the body along with two Gypsies who were wet and breathing heavily, exhausted from the search. The people who had gathered spoke a lot, trying to explain what had happened.

It was simple. Prelac, who had been denied entrance to all the taverns there were in town, would bring rakija to the river fort and drink there. The same thing happened the previous night. Many people saw him there before the sunset, but as it started raining heavily when it grew dark, he went down from the fort, heading back to his refuge. That was when he must have slipped and, drunk as he was, fallen into the river. He had, in fact, drowned at the very edge of the river, in the shallow waters, but since the water was high and turbid, it was not until in the afternoon that the Gypsies who were fishing caught sight of the body. That was, at least, the explanation of the whole matter offered by the gathered citizens.

The boy, who had never seen a dead man before, observed the straight and elongated body of the vagrant stranger carefully, in the same way that he had observed him the first time he saw him in front of the house, and later from the bridge and the rampart. The boy observed him with curiosity and fear, with repulsion and compassion. A compelling need to get to him so that he could study him closer clashed inside of him with an urge to run as fast as he could from Prelac and everything that he represented.

The boy would have remained that way, observing the dead stranger for God knows how long, had a German police officer not arrived and scolded the Ottoman policeman called Suljo for having allowed the crowd to gather around the drowned man's body. The school children were the first ones he chased away, harshly and commandingly, and then the rest of the crowd. The image that remained imprinted on the boy's mind after he had walked away was the stiff immobility of the dead body, laid down and quiet, with the tossed head and protruding ribs in the middle of the agitated crowd gathered around it.

The boy headed home down the muddy road. The sky leaden with clouds appeared lower than usual, threatening new showers. The fog obscured the pine forest above the town, and the day grew darker although the sun still had not set.

As soon as he entered the room that smelled of coffee, oranges, and aunt Mila's presence, the boy felt an irresistible urge to tell everything he had previously witnessed. He choked on words, trying to say everything at once. They could hardly make him take a slice of bread with some cheese. He went on talking while chewing, sitting between his mother and aunt Mila, explaining with his arms, his head, and his whole body how the dead man had been laid down, what the police officer did, and how the crowd behaved. He spoke incessantly, without looking at those he was talking to. At first his mother and aunt Mila interrupted him with questions, which made him tell his story even more excitedly, but at one moment he realized they had been silent for a while, and it made him stop.

Holding the unfinished slice in his hand, the boy raised his head to see the expression on aunt Mila's face. He noticed that her eyes were lowered and her face strange; it was different in a way he had never seen before. The room was getting dark. In order to see her face more clearly, the boy stood up, took her head in his arms and turned it towards the window. She pulled away from him

forcefully, violently even, in a way she had never done before, and moved her head to the other side. For a brief moment, a glimpse of light from the window reflected on one of her cheeks, and the boy saw a moist, shiny trace of a heavy tear.

Repulsed, the boy backed away and ran off to the bedroom. He shivered, without knowing why. He only wanted to be alone, to shiver freely, without being seen and having to witness the shedding of that shameless tear. He hardly knew why, but he felt that the shame of that tear was as heavy as a rock, weighing entirely on him.

He could not explain what was happening to him or why, but he knew that it could not be fixed. Something evil and burdensome had fallen on him, and there was not a woman in the world that could have changed it – not even Mila, nor all the angels sent from heaven.

He had always thought: if I was big and wanted to get married, aunt Mila would be the one that I would choose. He did not know what it meant, nor why he thought that way, but sitting in the courtyard of his house with this thought in his mind meant not being alone, being overcome with a sublime feeling of infinite pride and sadness. Now that thought was gone forever. It was as if an old friend had abandoned him. Now he knew: if he was big and wanted to get married, he would not take aunt Mila; he could not, because she cried for Prelac. The wrongness of her act plagued him; in some strange way, he felt humiliated, and was inconsolable and in terrible pain. The feeling of angry repulsion made him want to break away from all of them, to run to some faraway place and die there, alone.

The tolling of bells on the church in Mejdan, uniform and quiet, interrupted the boy's thoughts for a moment. He recognized the sound at which women always made the sign of the cross, praying for the soul of the departed. Through the window facing the courtyard of their house, the boy heard one of the servants saying: "It's from the money that he'd left behind."

The boy could not understand the relation between the money that Prelac had earned working for the municipal authorities and the bells that tolled for the peace of his soul. He assumed that bells always tolled when somebody parted with his soul, and that the tomb simply opened for the deceased. But he could not dwell on the church bells or Prelac for long; all he could think about was aunt Mila. He could not help but feel that, each time the bell struck, Mila fell deeper into some

dark abyss from which she would never get out, hidden forever from the light of the sun. Darkness was devouring her; instead of burying that despicable man, they were, in fact, burying her, and all her glorious beauty, deep in the ground.

Wanting to hide somewhere, the boy staggered to the closet in the wall in which sheets and mattresses were put during the day, opened the colorful closet door, thrust his head into a folded mattress and cried bitterly. He cried from anger and shame, from love and jealousy, from an indefinable sorrow of his tender years.

The smell of wool in the mattresses, moist from his tears, and the dull tolling of the bells that he could still hear with his head in the sheets remained in his mind for the rest of his life as a grey wasteland, devoid of joy and meaning.

That was all. It was just this sound and the smell that would sometimes bring the vague and torturous memories back from his childhood; everything else was long gone and forgotten.

The summer vacation came soon after, and the boy went to the family's estate in the country where he spent a carefree summer with peasants' children, surrounded by new people and experiencing many new and exciting things. In the same year, sometime in the autumn, they married aunt Mila to a gloomy and pale merchant called Mate.

Their house was on the other side of the river. She hardly ever came to visit, and when she did, she would have quiet conversations with the boy's mother only. She changed a lot after the marriage. She became ill with a disease that caused her body to swell. Three years later, she died.

The boy attended her funeral. Again he was on summer vacation; he was twelve at the time and attended the second grade of grammar school. He listened indifferently to the tolling of the bells from the church in Mejdan. The clanking of the bronze bells was in no way similar to the tolling of the bells on that fateful day when he had cried with his head in the mattresses. He did not shed a tear, and he felt repulsed and embarrassed seeing his mother get choked on tears. Prelac did not even cross his mind.

[1] I would like to thank my friend Ciarán Doyle who critiqued the drafts of this translation.

[2] Turkish fermented drink.