

**Feri Lainšček**

**FEARFUL FOR BUTTERFLIES IN THE STORM**

I dreamed I was flying.

I savoured the wonderful sensation and the bird's-eye view of the townscape, allowing me to glide frequently through my dreams. This time, however, the streets below were unfamiliar, in fact there was nothing I could recognize at all. The church spires were Gothic, the stone-fronted buildings almost lead grey. I pushed against the cushions of air and tried to ascend further, my only hope of spotting something familiar in the distance that might allow me to orient myself. Scouring the surroundings, I turned round and realized that where my hands used to be I now had wings. Astonished, I continued flapping and looking around, wondering what was happening to me. I was not Peter Pan, of course, or Superman; my wings were not an accessory, they were part of me. I could feel how confidently I swept the air with them and how they obeyed me even as I wanted to change direction. I thought I might be a bird, but it wasn't so. My forewings were velvety and red, my hindwings silky, almost translucent. There was little doubt – I had been transformed into a butterfly.

The only thing that struck me as strange was that I was still me.

I was convinced this was not the manner in which it should have happened.

There must have been some mistake along the way, I began worrying. I had a butterfly body but not its insight, sense, probably not even its instinct, nothing at all which would give me an idea of how these creatures live. True, I was now part of their world, but I was clueless as to what drove them, interested them, excited them, their desires, what they even do, apart from fly, of course. This was why I was afraid that I might meet someone. Surely I would appear strange and they would easily notice that I was different, yet I would be unable to explain what had happened to me. I began to panic, flying lower and lower, wanting to reach the ground as quickly as I could. I was driven by a single redemptive thought, that it would be easier to explain my misfortune to people. After all, I was still a human who had, for some strange reason turned into a butterfly...

This too, however, was blind optimism.

My scarlet wings rendered me immediately noticeable and people thought I was something special so they tried to catch me. Things became unbelievably chaotic and set off an unrelenting chase with everyone desperate to get their hands on me. I fluttered above their heads, becoming entangled in snatching hands and using my last ounce of energy to save myself. But the crowd grew, I was losing my strength and it became clear I would not be able to rise up into the sky again. They would reach me, tear me apart or squash me on the tarmac, not knowing that they had in fact murdered a person. As I thought about it, the tragedy of this upcoming mistake terrified me and I wanted to cry. I flapped my wings enough to take one last breath of air and then resigned myself to the cruel fate, diving with a whirl into the sea of open palms...

"It's all right, it's all right, you were just dreaming," a familiar voice calmed me.

Mother sat on the bed, leaning over me with her dishevelled hair. I realized that she must have been trying to wake me up for some time, trying to save me from my bad dream, and was herself shaken.

"There, there, you're awake," she said again and stroked my hair.

I felt embarrassed – although we are close, it had been years since she touched me this way. I turned on my side and closed my eyes again. Explaining would be too complicated; after all, it was just a dream and, more than anything, I wanted to sleep a little longer...

"Come on, it's time," she spoke again.

"Just a little longer," I tried to cover my head.

"Sorry," she was not having it. "You'll miss the train..."

"The train?" I opened my eyes. "What train?" I was confused.

"Oh dear," she cried out. "It's today that you're going..."

"Today?!" I was taken aback.

"Yes," she somehow mustered before she was overcome by tears.

She was probably touched by the fact I was so unprepared. It had escaped my mind entirely even though I had spent the previous night packing and everything had been arranged. I dragged myself out of bed, swearing to myself, for this annoying day really had not gotten off to a good start. I was told it was a good nine hours to Belgrade, and Zemun was somewhere beyond it where the river Sava joined the Danube. That was more or less all I knew. I had never been

to Serbia. The only places outside Slovenia I had visited in Yugoslavia had been the trade union resorts on the Adriatic coast. Baška, Rovinj and Lošinj, and we once went to the island of Cres. Father never liked holiday lying around, so we always went to places where Mother could arrange everything on her own. Even then they would start quarrelling as soon as we turned the first corner and the trip would become a nightmare. We never knew for sure whether we would stay until the end or whether we would pack up after one of their more intense fights and sheepishly return home.

But why the heck was I thinking about this now?

There were far graver matters I had to face.

I took my time saying goodbye. Father kept stubbornly silent and Mother kept crying, crying, crying – most of all, this was definitely not a good sign. Knowing well the cyclic phases of her manic depression, I knew that she would not compose herself even when she eventually ceased. To begin with she would spend three days sleeping in longer, then she would start locking herself inside her room and they would fight about this or about something else, there would be a huge row, the woman next door would call the police and in the end an ambulance would cart her off to the psychiatric ward.

This was indeed more or less what happened later, but it was no longer my story.

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For the first time in my life I was going through a door from beyond which there was no return. The gates were guarded and the entire wall enclosing the barracks was protected. I was still entirely unprepared for this passage. Overcome by an almost stifling feeling of anxiety, I felt as if I was in a trap. Undoubtedly anyone whose freedom of movement is being restricted feels like this – so there is nothing else I can do but resign myself to the situation, I kept telling myself, a panic attack would be a really bad start. Somehow I just needed to calm down! Especially as it was becoming clear that the other arrivals did not appear to have such problems. They had come from all over; it was obvious from their clothes and, for at least a few hours, their fashion accessories bore witness to the differences in their backgrounds from whence they had all flocked here. I found it unbelievable how easily and more or less instantly they were becoming a herd.

A single order or raised voice was enough.

It was probably not even that – people become a herd sooner or later through their common fate, and ours here was precisely defined.

The first words of the officers that gradually penetrated through the membranes of my cocoon were promises, oaths and threats that they would make good soldiers of us. Then came lists of what being a good soldier actually means. It seemed you could only be a good soldier if you don't do any of the things that are not allowed or are inappropriate, and the list of prohibitions and rules not to be broken kept lengthening uncontrollably. I therefore immediately abandoned any thought that I could try to be a good soldier and decided I would try to simply survive. With my conviction at the time, this slightly alleviated my situation. I would only have to do what was essential and avoid everything else. Well, this might have been a well-thought-out strategy but, of course, any such hope was futile. Soon followed an endless litany of things that we should do.

In horror I began to realize I really was in a pickle.

The only space left with a semblance of privacy was the top metal bunk in the army dorms. It was the only place you could withdraw to and cover your head. Even though this was only allowed after dinner when it was time to rest and could only last until the wake-up bugle over the loudspeakers. In between was a short night that could never really bring tranquillity to a dorm of fifty restless souls.

Soon after the on-duty guard switched off the light and everything appeared to calm down with a sense of relief, the farting began, filling the stuffy room with a foul stench. This offensive barnyard odour seeped through to you no matter how tightly you wrapped yourself in the blanket. Everything was soaked in it. The gurgling of intestinal gasses was not the only sound from this sleeping human herd. Soon it was accompanied by snoring, then coughing, the grinding of teeth, groans, tearful sighs and lone screams. Amongst all this you might also have someone babbling or even speaking quite clearly in their sleep.

To me, this meant that others too were not so very resilient as they had appeared during the day, or perhaps this was just a little comfort. I sensed that most of them had in them some primeval lust or desire to survive, one I myself had not brought with me. I had to convince myself that I now needed it urgently and also needed to find it somewhere within. But how? It was clear that it had little to do with reason – more likely I would say that such a stance needed a fair measure of madness. Some, it seemed, were pumped up like oxen and gave the impression they could pull a cart along without protest if ordered to do so. Others seemed so tough and resilient you could tie the boats on the Danube to their moorings with them. Still others, weaker than me, were clearly prepared to sacrifice a part of their body for the rest of it to survive. What all had in common was that they would start running without a moment of hesitation.

Those were our orders.

That was how it had to be.

Here you were not supposed to think about it, just do it.

The only thing you did need to know in an instant was where you turned to the left and where you turned to the right. So you could step left into the circle or right into a straight line if ordered to do so. Such orders came all the time and persistently. And, as if I was under a spell, this was something that kept causing me problems. Partly because it was something I always had to think about first and of course even more so, because there was no way I could make myself concentrate enough.

“What is it with you, are you really an idiot?” Sergeant Galac kept asking me with ever-greater impatience. “Look at Private Seferi, the man can’t read or write, or even tell the time, but still knows his left from his right,” he held up the stout Albanian who was probably also a mental case as an example. “Your left

hand is here, on this side where everyone in the world has their heart, and the right hand is on the opposite side, you can't go wrong, we don't have three hands to muddle it up," he explained. "I'll make you get that into your head even if I have to wake you up at midnight and march you all the way up to Ruma and back until dawn," he became increasingly intimidating. It didn't help much. I turned the right way twice and the third time I was an idiot again. The result was undoubtedly disastrous, the chance that I would turn in the right direction barely greater than the statistical probability of tossing a coin. I understood that he was at the end of his tether, but somehow I still could not help him. I was drained and emptied, absolutely nothing we did seemed to have any purpose, I allowed myself to believe that none of it was really happening and that somewhere in my head was a hole through which all of this was about to evaporate and disappear.

Then Sergeant Galac suddenly spat.

"Now I get it," he hissed through his teeth. "You're taking the piss."

I stared into his tiny glaring eyes and realized that he really had seen in me the enemy. If until then I had been merely annoying and my scattiness got on his nerves, he now really despised me. I was no longer just a soldier whom he had to train to stand in a row and march along, but a louse that was making his life miserable. I felt that, if he could, he would knock me over and walk all over me. He grinned at me and only some invisible reins held him back, preventing him from actually doing it. But why, for God's sake? I was becoming more depressed. I could not comprehend why this group prancing was so important to him and why, for some army rules, he would be prepared to harm a person.

"Alright," he muttered through his nose when he clearly sensed that I was not afraid of him. "You'll come round to it," he threatened me again. "I'll make sure you'll come begging to me on your knees," he glanced briefly at the sky, probably swearing that he would never forgive me.

Then he assigned me to a corporal, so the two of us marched along alone.

We marched and marched, even when everyone else was resting.

The huge sun over the Sarmian Plain scorched the worn asphalt, parching my sweat into dry salt on my body and clothes. By evening it felt as if it would encrust me and slowly eat me away. Although I had learnt to turn left or right, I still made mistakes, trying before the end of this ordeal to once again weigh up my situation. It was barely comprehensible and also frightening; I was in a

parallel world. The world out there, beyond the high walls enclosing the barracks, warehouses and shooting ranges, was teeming with ordinary life, leading people in their everyday tasks that were probably not greatly different to those I had been used to until now. Yet here I was, on this grey island, marching around in a circle. Lifting my legs, tensing my muscles in pain, and turning resolutely upon orders was the only task and pursuit through which I could prove myself. Nobody cared whether this was what I still wanted or how it made me feel. Any questioning about purpose and meaning was strictly forbidden, for somewhere high, high, high up at the top of the hierarchy which began here with the corporal and the sergeant, there was someone who knew the truth and undoubtedly knew why all this was necessary.

But I doubted that this military god was even concerned with such details. If he really was so petty that he was interested in whether I tightened my belt correctly, did up my buttons or straightened my cap, then he was hardly a god worthy of respect. And this matter now – it was not exactly to his credit that he allowed something like this, unless, of course, as gods usually do, he was reinforcing his rule by inflicting ordeals...

“What is it?” the corporal asked all of a sudden. “Are you not feeling well?”

“No,” I shook my head. “I’m happy.”

“You’re happy?!” he stopped.

He was a guy my age, perhaps even younger. Big blue eyes without a hint of contempt, in fact, without a hint of anything. He was almost as hot as I was, but up to that point he had patiently carried out our joint task. Now I immediately sensed that he was worried and his eyes, empty so far, were filled with compassion.

“But are you alright up there, in the head?” he asked.

“In the head?” I pulled a face. “What has the head got to do with it?” I shook. “Surely a person can only be happy in the heart.”

He stared me straight in the eye and probably thought about what I had said. Of course one could debate where in the body we have the enzyme that triggers the sense of happiness, but this guy, a sheep who could be made a corporal, was not someone to discuss this with. In fact he was just a *kapo*, a soldier who was prepared to line up and bully others in return for a few privileges.

“You know something,” he whispered after a while. “If you really are crazy you’re fucked because they’ll crush you,” he said trustfully. “If you’re pretending, then you’ll get through somehow or other, so it’s no deal anyway.”

Then we began marching again.

I had stuff I was mulling over so once more things were not going well. I had not understood entirely what he had wanted to tell me. Until then I thought that at least the insane would be subject to clemency but this clearly was not the case. The only thing that mattered here was being resourceful, for only this seemed to be redeeming – but what the hell did this actually mean? Had I known the answer, my hope would undoubtedly have been restored, instead, soon after, Sergeant Galac announced before the entire detachment that until further notice the toilets would be cleaned morning and evening by privates Marko Hribernik and Sredoje Bradica.

This was, of course, imposed as harsh punishment.

Obviously I knew what I had done wrong, but I was not really even interested in what terrible deed my fellow sufferer Sredoje Bradica had committed. This was my third day in uniform, but I had not yet blended into the herd. I still marched alone. I was alone in the line, alone everywhere, crawling into my shell again and again. This was constructed of an invisible but hard-wearing mix of immense exasperation for even being locked up with all these oafs and, of course, a sworn vow that I could not give in until someone on the other side made a first step.

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“Comrade Commandant, private Marko Hribernik,” I saluted. “Reporting to your orders and informing you I am well.”

“Very good,” he replied.

“Thank you Comrade Commandant,” I was somewhat touched.

“See, it is possible,” he sat down.

“Yes it is,” I nodded.

“Good, good,” he waved his hand dismissively. “Now stop pissing about,” his voice altered, laying into me again. “You think you’ve resolved something, but you haven’t resolved anything at all,” he announced. “You’ve only just

become a soldier, this is only the beginning, and you'll have to be damn careful that you're not sent to report to me again."

"I'll be careful..."

"Stop pissing about, I said!" he barked. "I'm not some woman you have to slobber over," he said strictly. "I know damn well you'll never be a soldier such as I need in my unit," he was convinced. "Whatever, you're here now and for as long as you're on my list and in my division, I will demand of you all that I demand of others," he assured me. "And you, if you're clever, will always try and do more and, damn it, better than others."

I wanted to promise him I would, but didn't dare open my mouth again.

"You see, my dear intellectual, I will explain what this place is about," he walked up to me quite unexpectedly. "We will both, nicely and quietly, face to face, make an agreement which we will both adhere to and which will, in the long term, I believe, work for both of us," he said in a quiet but still dry and resounding voice. "I need only the best material from which I create the best soldiers, and I want to rid myself of rejects like you as soon as possible," he explained. "This is why I give you my officer's word that I will pass you on to someone else at the earliest opportunity, let them fuck with you, but in return you have to promise me that until then you will not cause any further problems."

It sounded promising even though I did not fully realize this at the time.

Of course I nodded and kept nodding.

"Have we understood each other?" he asked despite this. "Anything not clear to you?"

"All clear, Comrade Commandant, all clear, absolutely clear," I continued to nod.

"It is also clear that you will reach into that shit pit without making a fuss if someone orders you to do so?"

"Clear, Comrade Commandant, that's clear."

"And that you won't mention this conversation to anyone?"

"Certainly, quite clear Comrade Commandant..."

"You're a right shit," he brushed both his hands through his hair. "Begone, leave, leave now, before I change my mind," he then used both hands to shoo me away. "What have I done to have to dirty my hands with twits like this?" he

muttered. “You’d sooner make a soldier from a donkey than a wanker like this,” he kept on talking but I was no longer listening to him.

I moved backwards out of the office and carefully closed the door before daring to take a deep breath of air. The Commanding Officer of the First Corps, Captain Aca Jeftić really was a person who made the blood in your veins freeze at times. Even if you tried extremely hard to do everything you could to please him, something was certain to be wrong. The unit he commanded had to be constantly psyched up, more or less day and night, waiting and ready for anything he might come up with. He would appear at times when normally only duty officers remained at the barracks, snoop around, pester, pounce on trivialities and roar at everyone. He was never lenient, not even with corporals and sergeants, so it was no wonder they too became snappish and were all turning into little generals.

Yes, I was indeed lucky that he considered me so useless to him.

I had to bite my tongue hard, I really could not afford to lose such an opportunity.

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She was the girl from a boy’s dream, one that I never believed until then actually existed. Even less could I have hoped that, if by some miraculous chance I would meet her, she would ever look at me. But there she stood on that worn staircase of the Zemun Gymnasium, looking at me, looking at me, and, oddly enough, still looking at me even as I felt shudders down my spine. I suspected she was one of those cases you never meet in your life but when they do cross your path, the only salvation is to turn aside as rapidly as possible and certainly never expect anything. My head dropped between my shoulders as I dragged my feet towards the main door which was, thank God, wide open. With every step I was closer to passing her and getting out of the area where empty hope could still tempt me but despite all strong intentions, I could no longer make myself turn away entirely.

She stood there, still looking at me, looking at me, looking at me.

Her large eyes were blue like the clear sky above the Sarmian plains and Fruška Gora. But, however clear, the broad sky here is still just a sun-lit emptiness in space, whereas her eyes were filled with a much more mystifying beauty. How, for God’s sake, I kept telling myself, can you see in these eyes something that is

certainly not intended for you? What precisely it was that confused me, I could of course not explain. I thought only a laugh from the heart could be like that. Or perhaps the entirely innocent happiness of a child. But something else stirred under the surface of her bright eyes, something which confused me so much that it made me stop. All of a sudden it occurred to me that she was hoping I would not just go straight past her, she probably even feared I might slip away...

So I said, "Hi." And in the next breath asked her, "Can you help me? I need to find Comrade Headmaster."

"Of course," she nodded. "The old man isn't hard to find at this school," she pulled a face. "He's always everywhere he shouldn't be."

"I'm not sure I understand," I admitted.

"Nothing to understand," she smiled. "He fancies this as his home and thinks he can have everything under control," she explained.

"Oh, that," I sort of half nodded.

"Yes, that," she raised her voice. "But he hasn't," she shook her head. "God damn me, he certainly hasn't!" she smiled. "Son of a bitch, he can go to the dogs!"

Now this was something I had not expected to hear from her mouth and it had quite an unusual effect. I had been here for over two months and the worst army obscenities no longer bothered me, but this caught me off guard. It did not look as if she really hated this man, nor did it sound as if she really wanted him to go to the dogs, but from then on the respected comrade, to whom the warrant officer had sent me to discuss involving students in events at the barracks, was just a stooge.

"Ooof," she almost whistled. "Sorry," she then said gently. "How silly of me," she atoned herself with a reprimand. "I should have considered that you might come from a place where women don't fart."

"No, no," I shook my head and my entire body.

"No – what?" she asked, laughing.

"Well, in fact, yes," I immediately corrected myself.

"Yes – what?" she laughed even more.

"You know," I managed awkwardly and fell silent.

I realized that she was just so full of a joyousness and inspiration that I could not match at the time, and had to withdraw. Well, with this, I thankfully

only missed my first chance and my cloddishness was not fateful. Even then, in the brief moments that followed as I followed her up the internal staircase to the Headmaster's office, I was convinced I was pursuing a girl who was irresistibly seducing me.

There really was something enchanting about her.

She was from a different world and was clearly also a very different kettle of fish.

Her fleeting steps with which she shot up the stairs, two at a time, outlined a pair of legs and buttocks that could easily adorn any men's magazine cover the world over. But her sleek narrow back, raised shoulders and really full bosom would also get her there. At the same time this was not where her charms were at all. The secret lay in a particular grace or something which instantly made her unique. What this was, I was unable to pinpoint at the time. It had all happened so quickly and I felt I was being left behind, a bit like a snail during the general retreat into Noah's Ark. I survived, however, just as, ultimately, snails also survived the Great Deluge.

The very next moment I was standing alone outside the Headmaster's office, straightening my uniform for a long time, trying to remember what the officer had in fact instructed me to say. Although, only moments ago, I had arrived with trepidation and felt it was entirely irresponsible of the officer to leave such an important task to an ordinary soldier, I was now somehow certain that I would not make a mess of it this time. From now on I was someone whom Ljiljana had noticed and the comrade in there was just a puffed up jerk whose head a bird had happened to shit on.

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There was a symbolism in the unstoppable confluence of the Sava and the Danube I was unable to articulate at the time. In her language, Serbian, the Danube, *Dunav*, is of masculine gender, the Sava is feminine. I thought more about how the Sava flowed from home and how, to me, its waters could well be sacred, just as the sunset was sacred to Nazim Seferi. In any case, being here on the banks and embankments of this vast body of water where thousands of floating shells were moored, along the paths and among the bushes which were in many places

overrun by reeds, felt unlike anything I had felt anywhere in the world until then, for beside me was a girl whose proximity added a rainbow glow to everything.

I followed her as if under a spell.

Her buoyant swagger was silent in her light sandals; my army boots crushed everything I stepped on.

We must have been a noticeable couple, but here nobody paid attention to us. People's attitude to soldiers in these places was very different to what I was used to in Ljubljana where even as children we avoided them like the plague. Little did we care for their anguish or their wish that, at least when on leave, they might briefly find a taste of normality. I only thought about this when I found myself wearing a uniform, and the affability of people always surprised me. In it you could discern a kind of compassion, understanding and at the same time a respect for the fact that you are prepared to serve the motherland. Of course this was not the only thing that made people here different. Life at the confluence of the two great rivers had a very different pulse to what I had been used to.

"My grandfather Kosta was an *alas*, a fisherman," she said when we reached the water. "He slept in his boat all year apart from winter," she said in a state of bliss as she looked over the wooden boats in the quay. "I must have got this from him, the pull of the river," she pouted. "Believe it or not – until now I have never come to the quay without wanting to then just take off somewhere..."

"Is that what you want now as well?" I asked.

"Yes," she blinked. "Now even more so," she said with a barely noticeable smile. "I'd jump on some tow barge and just go wherever it was going," she dreamt. "Could be just as far as Pančevo, but it could also be somewhere very far..."

"And you'd leave me here?" I wondered.

"That depends on you," she looked at me. "Do you too feel the pull..."

I was not entirely sure I wanted to venture further into the unknown, but with her I would certainly go. "If you take me with you," I said. "If only this was some other opportunity," I thought aloud. "If only it wouldn't mean the army sending the exterminators after me."

"If only, if only," she mocked me. "If only never gets you far," she laughed. "But then Ljilja also never got anywhere," she turned serious the next moment. "All Ljilja does is come here and dream all the time," she became quite

angry. “She comes even though grandfather Kosta is no longer here,” she pursed her lips. “To take her across to Horse Island or to Ada Ciganlija on Sundays...”

I held my breath.

I thought she might start crying.

That was what she was like – never hid any emotions.

“Has it been long, since he went?” I asked more or less to break the unease.

“He didn’t go,” she replied. “He was carried away in the night,” she shrugged her shoulders. “He just wasn’t here in the morning,” she uttered. “All they found later were a few bits of wood and some of his things in the Iron Gates, and not a word from him,” she explained. “I hoped for a long time that I would meet him down there in the gut of the Terrible Dogfish, just like Pinocchio found his Geppetto, then Mother told me that there were no dogfish in the Danube,” the words stuck in her throat. “It was the most terrible realization of my life,” she looked at me.

“Yes,” I nodded. “Everyone has something like that in their childhood memories,” I tried to console her.

“But I’m not grown up,” she became upset. “I decided that I would never grow up,” she spun on her heel and flew round an invisible axis with her arms wide open. “Why should I?” she asked when she stopped. “What’s the point in doing so?” she opened her eyes again.

I stayed silent, not knowing what to say.

These probably weren’t questions I needed to say anything in response to.

That was what Ljilja was like – the next moment she was spinning again, her wavy hair falling across her face and her shoulders, her light pink skirt inflating and being lifted up, outlining her slim body with all its curves, witness that she had indeed grown up since then and become a charming young lady. I stared at her round buttocks, her arched waist and her prominent breasts as if I were watching a film in which the chance was that she would disappear in the next scene – but all this beauty was still here, still twirling, twirling, round and round, and somehow I comprehended that it was indeed within my reach. When she began to lose her balance and was merely shifting her weight drunkenly, I thought she was about to fall. I approached her and offered her a hand. She held onto me and, still staggering, leaned against me.

“What’s wrong with me?” she sighed somewhere close to my ear. “I used to be able to twirl like this all day...”

“Tell you what, I don’t believe you,” I laughed.

“Believe me,” she whispered. “Please believe me,” she shivered. “I need someone who will believe me even when I make something up.”

I reached for her and pulled her closer.

She looked up and stared into my eyes.

“Alright,” I sighed. “I believe you.”

“You’re nuts,” she whispered and closed her eyes.

“You’re the one who’s nuts,” I replied and also closed mine.

We kissed with our eyes closed – it was the first time I kissed with my eyes closed – and it felt as if we really did travel away, not carried along the river on the waves but into a loop in time and space where we were finally totally alone. All I could sense were her lips, her palms stroking me, her supple body that wanted to touch me, and I knew then that we would never again really return.

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Ljiljana, Ljilja for short, lived in Block number 23 in New Belgrade with her mother. It was the modern part of town built on the left bank of the Sava, and I never managed to find my way around the web of reinforced concrete buildings. Streets, blocks of flats, entrances, squares, parking lots and green areas, all looked the same everywhere, so the only way to orient oneself was by reading the numbers. In my mind New Belgrade, this great achievement of socialist construction, is even to this day a synonym for a concrete jungle though I have seen many others. Ljiljana also never really felt comfortable among these catacombs and this was probably why she was out and about much of the time. She sat about on terraces, wandered along the quays, studied for school at her school friends’ houses and sometimes even spent the evening on Belgrade dance floors, so in a way I thought that she was constantly on the run and only went home to sleep. The only thing that really bound her were our meetings. Whenever I could leave the barracks she always had time for me and was never late for a date.

“It’s because I WANT to be with you,” she told me. “If I didn’t want it so much, I probably wouldn’t manage to be on time,” she assured me. “I should value what fate brought my way,” she squeezed me so hard I could hardly breathe. “Apart from Grandfather Kosta, I have never before had someone who means so much to me and with whom I would want to spend my time.”

It was an unusual declaration of love. I believed it. It was said with such simplicity and resolve that it allowed no second thoughts. It helped me at least slightly understand this headstrong and unpredictable girl who in the middle of this limited world of hers swore only by love. As she said, it is either given to you in life or it just isn’t. Some people get to feel it and for others it never happens. They are condemned to dreaming, a desperate search and settling for compromises, they need to be content with delusions and solace, which, of course, is not the real thing... These seriously loaded thoughts surprised me at the time and kept amazing me even later. I asked her where this all came from, where she had picked it up, but she just laughed. “Don’t you agree that that’s how it is?” she asked me. “Do you think everyone in the world can find their pair?” she wanted to know. “Aren’t we just lucky that we both want the same thing?”

“That certainly is a huge piece of luck,” I would agree and usually ran out of words after that. I so wanted to tell her then about my feelings but there was no way I could get it off my tongue. Words seemed insufficient to describe my fascination and enrapturement.

“Are you aware that at this moment most of my school friends prefer to be squeezing their spots,” Ljiljana continued to deliberate. She, on the other hand, never ran out of words. “Though a few might be sitting by the window waiting for a Prince Charming to ride by,” she smirked. “One thing is for certain, none of them will kiss even a frog today, they don’t believe anything could ever happen if they did.”

“That’s a shame – they could try kissing a soldier at least,” I thought. “We’re a bit like frogs in a way.”

“Why are you like frogs?” she wanted to know.

“Well, we’re all green,” I told her. “And it’s impossible to know what the person hiding under the uniform is really like.”

“You can’t know what the person hiding behind the person is anyway,” she objected.

“This is certainly true,” I nodded and fell silent again.

There were moments when Ljiljana simply reached deeper.

At those times she seemed different again from the Ljilja I had become used to. Her relaxing joy and melancholy silences, her child-like effervescence and unexpected sadness, her rolling laughter and solemn deliberations, all made that summer more changeable than the weather. We liked it best when we were alone, yet still, something was constantly going on, she knew how to make sure that the world spun faster, and if it wasn't spinning faster, then it most definitely turned in a different way and things were interesting... “Tomorrow, you know, I'll start saving up,” she said. “I'll save up for a month or two and then have enough to go down to Zelenjak and buy you a pair of jeans,” she surprised me. “And I'll get you a T-shirt, perhaps borrow some sneakers from someone,” she pondered. “Then we can perhaps go somewhere without these,” she tugged the sleeve of my uniform. “Then you won't be a frog any more...”

“Hang on,” I froze. “You mean I would change out of my uniform?”

“Of course,” she shrugged her shoulders. “Wouldn't that be great?”

“But that's forbidden...”

“So many things are forbidden.”

“Strictly forbidden, really.”

“Everything is forbidden in the army anyway.”

“But – well, I don't know!” I still could not move. “If I'm caught then I can just forget about any leave. What would we do then?” I asked. “We'd lose all of this...”

“We won't lose anything,” she insisted. “We won't go where you could be seen,” she consoled me. “We could go dancing on Kalamegdan,” she beamed. “I can take you to my godfather Savić on Ada Ciganlija sometime, we can swim there,” she remembered. “And I can introduce you to Uncle Mušica who was a soldier with Grandpa Kosta on the Isonzo Front – you won't believe what a crazy old man he is,” she bubbled away. “I'll tell him that we'll soon invite him to a wedding, and he'll start dancing the *kolo* for sure...”

“Alright, alright, well – perhaps then,” I eventually gave in. “But you don't need to save up for it,” I added. “I'll write to my old man and ask him to send me the money.”

“Ooooooh!” she cried out with joy. “Will you really do that?” and she held onto me.

“I will,” I had made my mind up. “I will.”

“Oh,” she squealed. “I love you so much,” she kept kissing me. “I’m losing my mind with love,” she pulled on my ears and hair. “Oh my,” she tapped her feet. “I would do anything for you, give you anything, now that you’re like this...”

*excerpts from the novel translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh*