

Jurij Hudolin

STEPCHILD

PROLOGUE

When Benjamin was twelve his parents split up. They hurriedly settled at court and, like two runners dizzied by the midday sun in the middle of a burnt out vineyard, both trotted away to find life's happiness along untrodden pathways. Valter Zakrajšek, Benjamin's father, an economist and a bon vivant, went off to heal his alcohol-weathered conscience in the arms of other women; his mother Ingrid was left with their son who was about to sink into adolescence. Basically, alone! Soon after, at some trade-union-organised trip for administrative workers, she met Loris Čivitiko, a wealthy pub and land owner, who bloated up like a toad and showed off his muscles on his property in Panule, a small Istrian seaside village on the Croatian coast, positively bustling with life in the summer and much like a dark hole in a one-way bottomless cavern in the winter.

In the mid eighties of the twentieth century, Yugoslavia was still a country. At a glimpse, it even looked quite reliable and, besides falling madly in love, perhaps this was also a reason that Ingrid packed up, withdrew Benjamin from his Slovene school, and, after a couple of passionate visits, moved to Mr Čivitiko's place on the Croatian coast. Benjamin cried the most; in fact, he was the only one to cry. No one asked him what he thought. A child is a child and is subordinate to the will of his parents. Even if this will is lined with sheer egomania, animalized instincts and simply waving off any need the child has for nurture or for someone to occasionally listen to him. At the time he was a fragile boy who, much like every twelve year old, liked to idealise things and was probably still too young for the staggering wheel of life's experiences to have taught him to recognise the devil in people's eyes, or at least sense its existence, so that he might have been able to help himself before he was clamped into the vice. Too young to know that when time awards the devil's handprint an iron mark, it never washes away.

So, I have to tell the story of Benjamin's life in Panule.

1.

Leaning on a pile of beer crates by the storeroom door behind the bar he showed off as he looked over his restaurant, his inheritance and, admittedly also something he worked hard for. He looked over it proudly and prophetically, as if he were the owner of the entire world and in control of all the fatal words the creator of the universe ever spoke. Senad, the waiter, was afraid to look him in the eye when wanting to ask him something; usually to do with the bills that Loris issued according to the degree of intoxication of his guests. He didn't flicker an eyelid when he ranted and hissed "more pepper", and Senad knew that the price of the services provided had gone up by a third on everything the guests had consumed. Senad's personal mental turbulence was how to justify this one and what lies to come up with if the guests decide to indulge in an unexpected financial dessert; Čivitiko only ever intervened if any one of the guests had to be chucked out head first through the revolving doors into the parking area. Everyone always paid. Loris had a hand the size of a shovel and cared not about the prudence of his stroke. He used it on his own turf and when Senad pleaded with him that there had been enough violence and that the bill-querying guest was barely showing any signs of life, he shouted: "Just don't make me humiliate him further and force him to eat cock on top of all this!"

On a stuffy August evening in 1987, with the Ferragosto drawing to a close and the overheated dusty air scattering about its energy of lowly instincts, the terrace of Loris Čivitiko's restaurant *Terens* in Panule was full of Italians. The night's 'black catch' filled the tables, with lots of acqua minerale, vino bianco, Pelinkovac and Amaro. Čivitiko always tricked the Italians. They were prepared to pay double, as long as the feast was properly laid out from the beginning. He didn't have to beat up Italians. In a way, he actually liked them, though he always sang "Amara terra mia" to himself when he saw the mess they left behind on the tables, under them and everywhere else on the property. Senad was nervous and worked up, barely managing to serve the twelve long tables on his own, with Čivitiko's eyes constantly hawked on the trays he was holding.

"Dio porko, hurry up Senad, are you made out of straw or what?" he would hasten him during the August holidays, while feasting on Italian swearwords. When Čivitiko returned from the kitchen where he was chucking slices of lemon into jugs of hot water, with Senad immediately taking them out to the tables so the Italians could clean their fingers after their scampithon, a fat Italian in hunting gear was waiting for him at the bar. Obviously into some kind of hunting tourism and inappropriately drunk for an Italian hedonist, he was furiously waving his arms around, spluttering: "Merda, merda, merda!"

His right hand was covered in blisters, redder than a cooked lobster or his scum-like face. After a brief discussion Čivitiko bellowed: “Senad!”, making the entire terrace shake and everyone turn round and stare.

Knowing that this meant all hell was about to break out, Senad came sidling up to the bar, cajoling like a weasel. Čivitiko grabbed him by the collar and pushed him past the crates into the storage room.

“You pig! You scalded the fat guy, and he's furious! And he ordered more drinks which you still haven't brought to his table!”

“Boss, it happens, I didn't want to get you involved in the disgrace, and I did forget the man's drinks. But I'm no octopus, I only have one pair of hands!” Senad, for the first time and to Loris' great astonishment at the sudden appearance of courage from his waiter, even raised his voice a tone. Čivitiko bent over the much shorter Senad, pressing his nose onto his subordinate's nose, instantly causing Senad's forehead to produce drops of cold sweat.

“You apologize to the fat guy or I'll have these,” Loris squashed Senad's balls so hard that he squealed like a dog that senses its final trip to the vet.

Senad poured out a generous shot of a strong sprit and stepped out to face the fatty fatso, who was fixing his Brilliantine-stiffened hairdo with his short sausage fingers, whining.

“Cameriere, cameriere,” the fatso nodded his head and waved both hands around like a monkey.

“Fuck you, pig,” Senad hissed as he placed the drink down in front of him, managing to spill a little over the edge of the glass.

It was a mistake. As he turned round, the huge shovel-like hand hit him so hard that he fell across the table, rolling off and under the next one, from which people were already getting up to leave.

“I'm the owner here! All this is mine! You are not going to fuck with me!” Čivitiko yelled, ignoring the presence of all the guests.

He grabbed him by the hair and dragged him off to the loos from where the sound of breaking tiles could be heard. It sounded like a ceramic tile cutter metronomically set to a semibreve.

When Čivitiko returned he was wiping his hands with a paper towel and seemed quite unruffled, physically and mentally. Singing “*Amara terra mia*”, he gathered up all the lira the Italians had left on the tables in the haste of paranoia, and poured himself a glass of mineral water at the bar.

Loris Čivitiko only drank alcohol on rare special occasions, and even then it was only a glass or two of Malvasia from his own vineyard.

Despite his six-and-a-half feet and muscular appearance, he looked as tame as a kitten when approaching the only remaining table of guests. He smiled pleasantly, apologized that life also brings with it a burden of conflicts that we all have to deal with tolerantly, but with a creature like Senad sometimes one has no choice but to use force. He explained that he had sacked him and swore he was only going to hire waitresses from now on. He went on to explain how the little Bosnian son-of-a-bitch must have lined his pockets with a whole load of his money in the two years he had been feeding him and allowing him to live in one of the holiday caravans. This would surely teach him that life is like a staggering wheel that can easily get stuck in the mud when you are ungrateful for kindness.

He kissed Ingrid who was trembling with fresh love, stroked Benjamin's hair and said: "Welcome to Panule."

2.

There were around fifty houses in the village, belonging to the native inhabitants of Panule and their relatives. According to the law of village logic they all despised each other and spat at each other when they met. If they did speak to another villager it was only to slag off another person and when they met this other person they would mock the first; however, at the first sign of a stranger stepping onto their patch, even if it was just a farmer from the next village, they all joined forces. There were around seventy Čivitikos in Panule, if they weren't Loris' brothers they were his cousins, nephews, aunts or uncles twice removed. The village might as well have been called Čivitikoham. No property was smaller than fifty acres and, to prevent one brother from striking another brother over the head with a hoe if one dared to plough a few inches into his land, all plots were precisely measured out and carefully fenced. Life's motto for all locals of Panule was:

"I'm the owner here!"

In September Panule locals changed from tourist workers to land farmers, cattle breeders and multifaceted business men, though Benjamin never understood quite what kind of business was actually involved. Normally cows, a few horses and some pigs don't get you a row of houses, your own caravan park and a holiday home right next to the coast a mile out of the village. Though Čivitiko brought his dinars into his safe in a crate in good tourist seasons, it is still hard to imagine that, in the three summer months, one could amass the amount of money the Čivitikos of Panule had. It later emerged that most of it was their inheritance. In a way this pleased the twelve year old Benjamin as it reminded him of Dynasty, which so fascinated him

at the time. It was like the Carringtons, not in a made-up soap or pulp, but in the real landscape, real story and real life of the local Čivitikos. There was no phone in Panule or in the neighbouring villages. The nearest post office was in Rakična, five miles away and only from there was one able to make a phone call unsuspecting of consequences. The local primary school was also in Rakična, attended by children from all the surrounding villages. The Headmaster there also had a telephone, one that would later become a source of shame to Benjamin and force blushes of unease into his cheeks.

Benjamin took the bus to school. It picked up all the children from the surrounding villages and settlements and was run by Nandu, a fat drunken professional driver who was an hour or so late at least once a week, and it was fairly obvious why. Sometimes he didn't turn up until round eleven o'clock and then honked his horn around Panule, with the standard cigarette in his mouth and a hip flask showing from the pocket of his ever unzipped overalls. The missed lessons never had to be made up for, and Nandu vehemently continued to cock about behind the steering wheel until the end of his life. He was at that steering wheel when he was washed away into metaphysics. At that time Benjamin was finishing secondary school, Nandu lost control over his vehicle on a straight stretch of road and drove straight into a stone house in a nearby field, wearing his overalls with the usual flask in his pocket of course. It was only later, with a touch of amnesia, that the cause of the sudden end to the driver's story was rumoured to have been a heart attack rather than his hip flask.

On the first day of school, a town kid came to school in Rakična, a child from another part of the country, a part that was throughout Yugoslavia, including Panule and the surrounding villages, considered the richest and most progressive. He was the son of the renowned Loris Čivitiko, whom everyone admired for his wealth and inheritance, a Slovene, and an excellent student on top of all this, with a school report stamped in a city school, Benjamin Zakrajšek. Loris himself drove up to the school gate with a dressed up and petrified Benjamin, who was by now already mastering the Croatian language, peppered with local Istrian phrases, that was the official language at the school. A sort of tangled up linguistic mixture where various Slavic dialects, as well as Italian influences, were bundled up in an articulation accepted, understood and spoken by all locals.

This meant no more streets, no more traffic lights, no more shops on every corner, no more old friends, no more football training, no more piano lessons, no more time spent waiting with Ingrid for Valter to come home for lunch. He was now in a village where cows grazed in front of the school, where the nearest traffic lights were twenty miles away and where the hub of relevance was the local pub; apart from this and animals, there was little else around. When

he had to introduce himself to the fifteen boys and girls in his new class whose fathers were all well aware that he had become Loris Čivitiko's son, Benjamin was overcome by a strange childish melancholy, topped with a bout of adolescent blushing.

In a village news spreads fast, but the truth is inclined towards the iron hand and money.

3.

Since Ingrid's main role now was as a housewife, lunch was usually already waiting on the table for Benjamin when Nandu dropped off the six school children from Panule in the centre of the village.

Čivitiko promised to pay her pension contributions, but it turned out a few months later that he had forgotten about his promise. A regime of absolute patriarchy prevailed in Panule. Finances were in the hands of men who dealt with their businesses and went to work; women were in charge of the kitchen, the animals and the fields. And they were beaten if anything went wrong. The shutters in the house of Loris' cousin Dejan – who had, just as Loris had done with Benjamin, adopted Benjamin's class mate Dalen in a package deal with a new wife – were always down. Dalen limped and never played football. Benjamin had never seen Dalen's mother. No one was ever allowed to visit Dalen since Dejan always kept the gate to the yard and all the doors in the house firmly locked. He could occasionally be seen on the tractor, stacking up the wood or on his way to muck out the pigsty. Dalen's toes were permanently stuck together by the blood that oozed out of them, flattened, squashed and battered like a marinated piece of meat before you stick it on the barbecue. For each mistake and every time he didn't finish his chores on time, he was whacked on his toes by the flat handle of a spade or an axe. People knew about this, but it was not something anyone would ever talk about. This was Dejan's speciality, his endemic gourmet dish, and only rarely did he hit Dalen on any other part of his body or in any other way, even when he was in a hurry. It was, apart from a few rumours, never openly mentioned at school and, of course, there was never a psychologist or social worker there anyway. It was not mentioned, so it wasn't happening. Except for Dalen. Benjamin thought it strange and often felt sorry for him, but he then always formed the idea that Dalen must be so very naughty that he deserved punishment. At the time, in his innocence, he accepted that this is the way some people educate their offspring or any strays they happen to be in charge of feeding. At lunch time Benjamin would get a daily list of tasks awaiting him as the day progressed towards sunset. Take the goats out to graze, clean out the pigs, chop up the wood, dig this ditch or move that pile of sand; Loris was forever extending the summer terrace or building something, just to show to the world that his property was continuously growing and

improving. In the evening there was the work in the restaurant known simply as the *Taverna* that Loris owned in the centre of the village, though the court case between him and his brother as to who was the true heir of this eating establishment was still unresolved. Farmers from surrounding villages would come here for sausages and wine, looking at each other with piggy eyes of suspicion, like some ruined demagogues. In the autumn and winter they would sit by the fire place and swear with lazy melancholy about the whole world and the injustices that politics kept throwing their way. The more lively ones would play briscola and, in their mental backwardness, would always argue passionately when doing so. Occasionally, Loris' brother Mauro would come around and argue with him over the real ownership of the place. Guests were used to this more than they were used to breathing in the sea air and always just waved it off, probably also because, so far, there was no real physical fighting involved. Benjamin poured out the wine and took it to the tables with the occasional comment from Čivitiko about how clumsy he was and how the best thing he could do was to become a lawyer. Čivitiko had no education. To the police and everyone else he declared himself a technician. Technician was the first thing he mentioned when he introduced himself; entrepreneur, restaurant owner and business man only came later. It turned out that Čivitiko's unusual kindness at the time came from the fact that Ingrid was eight months pregnant with his son. Despite two failed marriages, Čivitiko didn't have any descendents and really wanted a son. If any of the Čivitikos dragged a woman to Panule whom they then decided they didn't want, they just packed her bags, threatened her and made her leave. There was no compensation, no courtesy, no nice memories, nor was there ever any goodbye or good luck; there was no time for such things. They just had to obey. And give birth to a son. For centuries, land in Panule belonged to the Čivitikos, and to continue this tradition one had to have a wife to give birth to a son. This was the driving force and meaning of existence. Not just any child, an heir to your land.

Oh, such a damned, stubborn stock.

Of course, at first Benjamin didn't really understand all this, since for the first six months Čivitiko didn't really have any demands from him and would never beat him like Dejan did Dalen. He only beats up bastards and thieves like Senad, thought Benjamin and was even proud of Loris. Adolescence now truly had its grip on him, but unlike his town friends in Slovenia, he was left to his own devices and working in the fields. Besides school, where he never had any real friends, the only contact he had with people was work in the *Taverna*, where he would listen to the farmers, drunk more often than not, dreaming away about having a decent sexual experience. Dreams which, with the woman back home all haggard and useless, never materialized into even touching the sweet barrenness of the groin. These farmers never got any,

not even from the tourists in the summer, and even Loris would often bark at them that no woman would even come close to such vulgar slob.

Their deliberations were little more than just words, rancid and sharp, devout desires, a primary form of fiction, metaphysics on the lowest level. Masturbation and hatred. Because of their sorry wives they hated women more than they hated their messed up, wasted lives. In their primitive nature they never realized that they themselves cultivated the hatred and hyperpotency inside them and that the world around them was not to blame nor had any need for the submissiveness of their drained and languid wives who no longer possessed the will or the power to resist.

excerpt from the novel translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh