

# EAST OF A KNOWN GALAXY

An anthology of Romanian Sci-Fi short stories  
edited by Daniel Timariu and Cristian Vicol



# **EAST OF A KNOWN GALAXY**

Daniel Timariu și Cristian Vicol  
East of a Known Galaxy

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*București, 2019*



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## A Word from the Editors

Dear reader,

We hope that this anthology will be a pleasant acquaintance with contemporary Romanian Sci-Fi and Fantasy literature. *East of a Known Galaxy*, a title which came up while editing “Helion Online Magazine”, one of the most important literary publications of its kind in Romania, became our battle cry in the months prior to the publication of this collection. While reading dozens of stories – Romanian or Eastern European, we wondered why so few of us (here in the East, but also in Europe) are known outside our country, on the “big Sci-Fi/Fantasy stage” as some may call it. Is it bad luck? Is it the language? Is it the themes and subjects we tackle? It certainly isn’t quality, originality or talent. This book bears witness to this claim.

So, in the better tradition of not idling, but acting, we sought to gather some of the best contemporary Sci-Fi and Fantasy writers in Romania, and, under the best possible conditions, take them West of our literary galaxy – to you, dear reader, wherever you may be on this planet.

First of all, we are grateful and would like to thank Mr. Bogdan Hrib, founder of Tritonic Publishing House, who has, for the past 26 years, with unrelenting effort, published and promoted young and talented Romanian Sci-Fi and Fantasy authors. He is our friend and partner in crime.

Furthermore, we give a shout out to Alexandru Maniu, one of the best translators in Romania, and our favorite English teacher, who has, with a vigilante's eye, proofread, examined, probed and inspected each and every text, hunting that elusive typo, or the most intangible linguistic error.

Also, we offer our heartfelt acknowledgement to the translators involved in this project, for all their hard work and reliability: Antuza Genescu, Alexandru Maniu, Alexandra Pişcu, J.S. Bangs, Anamaria Bancea, Sebi Simion, Mălina Duță, and Andreea Şerban. You are all awesome professionals.

Of course, to the authors involved – you are the core and the backbone of Sci-Fi and Fantasy literature in Romania, and someday, we hope, of the world. Give us your Space Opera, your Steampunk, your Military Sci-Fi, your Dark Fantasy, your High Fantasy, your Post-apocalyptic nightmares, your robots, androids, cyborgs, witches, wizards, knights, spaceships and distant, weird, incredible civilizations and worlds. And we shall awe in amazement.

And, most importantly, thank you, dear reader, for your curiosity. You are the real dreamer, the traveler of our universes, and the brave explorer of our imagination. This one is for you.

**The Editors**

# A Note on Romanian Science Fiction Literature from Past to Present

Mariano Martín Rodríguez

Co-Editor of *Sci Phi Journal*

Romania is a country rarely linked to speculative and science fiction (both SF) by foreign readerships. However, its multilingual young population is among the most IT-literate in the world, and their cultural output, including SF, is not only extensive but also fully up to date. This fact, which some might want to explain through globalisation, is a long-standing feature in Romanian culture from its very modern beginnings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Once it secured its independence, Romania began a path of fast modernisation, quickly adopting Western liberal institutions and world-view. In this context, as a manifestation of a new mentality centred on science and industrial technology, Romanian SF embraced from its outset the national project of modernisation, although not uncritically, and not without originality.

Utopian fiction usually preceded SF before their intimate fusion in offering descriptions of future societies. This almost universal pattern is also valid for Romania. Thus, economic liberalism was both supported and mocked in one interesting ambiguous utopia describing a present “Insula Prosta” (Stupid Island, 1884) by Ion Ghica, before the liberal utopia was transferred to a future setting, where it was questioned. Alexandru Macedonski, one of the leading poets of the Decadent movement in Romania, produced a short history entitled “Oceania-Pacific-Dreadnought” (1911) where this gigantic ship intended as a floating house for the richest brings about an economic bubble of epic proportions, until it bursts, as all have done until today without anybody learning anything from it. This Romanian author probably took inspiration from Jules Verne’s *L’Île à hélice* (*Propeller Island*, 1895) but his description of the workings of pure speculation in capitalism is not only more precise, but also prophetic. Indeed, very few contemporary writers in Europe used anticipation in such a perceptive manner.

In the same years, Victor Anestin followed Camille Flammarion, rather than Verne, both in popularising astronomy and in setting his stories on other planets of the Solar System. Anestin describes them as populated by decent and highly developed human-like civilisations inspired by Positivistic utopianism, though unfortunately still subjected to nature’s whims. In *O tragedie cerească* (A

Celestial Tragedy, 1914), a celestial body destroys Earth's inhabitants. This dramatic apocalyptic scenario always poses the problem of which narrative voice to use: who can tell the end, when this finishes us all? Anestin solves this problem by adopting the perspective of an astronomer who witnesses our tragedy from Venus. In spite of his sober account, Anestin knows how to add a sense of loss to the sense of wonder in his grandiose planetary vistas.

This late but promising start of Romanian SF was followed by its relative normalisation along mainstream lines. As happened anywhere else in the world (except perhaps in the US), Wellsian scientific romance opened new avenues to speculative anticipation by infusing it with the freedom of imagination regarding world-building shown by old imaginary voyages since Lucian of Samosata, as well as a diversity of narrative and writing techniques explored by High Modernist authors. Among them, Felix Aderca stands out thanks to his avant-garde short story "Pastorală" (Pastoral, 1932), which is written as the summary of an unwritten play, and his novel *Orașele înecate* (Drowned Cities, 1936). The latter is set in a future Earth threatened by universal cold. The last human communities have withdrawn to submarine cities under the rule of a fascist-like pro-eugenics dictator, but his measures cannot prevent in the end the technical failure and destruction of the remaining cities. Only a couple escapes from our planet in a rocket. The varied societies,

their exchanges and development in a pre-apocalyptic framework are finely portrayed using an art-deco kind of writing full of tragicomic irony, not unlike the one used in Karel Čapek's contemporary novels, which makes this work a masterpiece of international interwar SF.

The political crisis brought about by II World War did not spare Romania, where home-grown ethnic nationalist Fascism supported by Nazi Germany was defeated and then replaced by the Communism imported and imposed by Soviet troops. In this context, there was little room for unregimented literature, speculative or otherwise. Even more intently than fascists, communists guided by Stalinist Social Realism effectively put an end to any fantasy about medium- and long-term futures. Furthermore, writers wishing to denounce totalitarianisms of any sort were silenced. Romanian readers were thus deprived of any dystopias comparable to those written by Zamiatin, Boye or Orwell. Vasile Voiculescu's short story "Lobocoagularea prefrontală" (Pre-Frontal Lobocoagulation) purports to be a historical summary of the forced lobotomies undertaken on the population in order to extirpate their human souls. Written in 1948, this text was only published posthumously in 1982 as a simple curiosity by a renowned modern poet.

The Iron Curtain prevented the subjection of Romania to that massive influx of US SF literature (both pulps and *Golden Age*) which ended the more intellectual and

literary scientific romance in Western Europe, though Communism was equally efficient in depriving SF of its former artistic respectability. Romanian SF was reborn in the 1950s as a tool for educating young readers both in Communism and technology in order to prepare them for the rapid pace of re-industrialisation soon established as a goal by Romanian authorities under young nationalist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu, who was rather unsatisfied with the role of agricultural producer allotted to their country by the Soviet bloc. Although his rule was even harsher than others in that bloc, Ceaușescu used his national policy of apparent dissent from the Soviet Union to get the technological and financial support that his country needed to become industrialised. As a result, Romanian writers were allowed to deviate from old dogmas, and SF quickly took advantage of the opening, soon updating itself to Golden Age standards thanks to Adrian Rogoz, whose short stories recall the clarity of form and speculative wit to be found in those by Isaac Asimov. The other Romanian SF master of the age, Vladimir Colin, adopted a more lyrical writing akin to that of Ray Bradbury, although the best part of his work was devoted to fantasy; indeed, his series of stories and legends from an ancient imaginary people, collected in *Legendele țării lui Vam* (Legends from Vam Country, 1961), are still considered a masterpiece by Romanian fantasy readers.

Rogoz, Colin and others also succeeded in joining the vogue for national promotion abroad triggered by Ceaușescu's national-communism, since some of their works were translated into German and French and published in widely distributed anthologies of Romanian SF. Furthermore, they were generous enough to include in these volumes stories by new writers interested in a SF literature similar to that of the Anglophone New Wave, namely Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu, Gheorghe Săsărman and Mircea Opreț, who would eventually produce some of the best works that Romanian SF can boast of. The oldest of them, Crohmălniceanu, was a highly regarded mainstream literary critic when he published his two series of *Istorii insolite* (Unusual Stories) in 1980 and 1986. Taken together, they read as exercises in reasoned imagination on utopianism, technology and the role of literature in modernity in which irony enriches a deeply philosophical questioning of humankind and its place in the universe, not unlike the best tales by Borges or Lem, whom Crohmălniceanu could certainly be compared with.

Younger Săsărman and Opreț have had both long and distinguished writing careers. Săsărman produced in 1975 *Cuadratura cercului*, one of the masterpieces of the late modernist genre consisting of descriptions of imaginary cities, such as the invisible ones by Calvino. Unfortunately, this edition was heavily censored, and the whole book

was only known in 2001, when its author had long been excluded from Romanian literary life following his exile to Germany. The translation of his cities into Spanish and then partially into English as *Squaring the Circle* by top-ranking SF author Ursula K. Le Guin has secured him at last his rightful place in Romanian speculative fiction, now supported also by well-received recent novels such as a story on the resurrection of Jesus Christ in modern Germany entitled *Adevărata cronică a morții lui Yeșua Ha-Nozri* (True Account of the Death of Jeshua Ha-Nozri, 2016).

Opriță, who stayed in the country without compromising himself, is renowned for his short stories (e.g., “Figurine de ceară,” or Wax Figurines, a witty rewriting of Lem’s *Solaris* first published in 1973), though he has also produced a successful novel, *Călătorie în Capricia* (A Journey to Capricia, 2011), which is both one of the latest sequels to Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and a most original commentary on the 2008 Great Recession as it was suffered in Romania. Moreover, Opriță has accompanied the last decades of Romanian SF as a respected and fair critic, as well as his best chronicler: his history of Romanian SF literature is comprehensive up to a point rarely encountered in similar endeavours for other national SF traditions. It is a monument of SF scholarship, only comparable to another Romanian production in the theoretical field, Cornel Robu’s extensive *O cheie*

*pentru science-fiction* (A Key to Science Fiction, 2004), the English abstract of which has been influential in our consideration of the sublime (popularly known as ‘sense of wonder’) as an essential part of SF aesthetics.

After this remarkable group of writers and scholars, a certain decadence of Romanian SF was perhaps inevitable. Postmodernism soon acquired a status in the Romanian literary scene unmatched in other countries up to this very day. This was both bad and good news for Romanian SF: good news if we consider that the leading literary postmodernist in Romania, Mircea Cărtărescu, has introduced SF tropes in his work, especially in his latest novel *Selenoid* (2015), thus adding respectability to them; bad news if we consider instead that postmodernism has promoted a literature of chaos, or arbitrariness, deeply uncongenial to the SF usual frame of mind, which is that of reason, order and science. Very few writers have succeeded in balancing these opposite trends. Among them, Mihail Grănescu is to be mentioned for his stories collected in *Aporisticon* (1981; final version, 2012), where postmodern egotism is nuanced by Borgesian detachment. There were other interesting young writers who tried to renovate SF following contemporary international trends, but unfortunately two parallel occurrences prevented them from acquiring a reputation similar to that of Săsărman, Oprea and even Grănescu.

On the one hand, the postmodernists, still very much in power in the Romanian intellectual scene, seem even more reluctant to appreciate SF as the modernists were once Wellsian scientific romance became obsolete. Therefore, SF has not been able to join the literary mainstream in Romania as it has in other countries where SF novels, especially of the dystopian kind, are now commented on and received out of the limited circles of SF fans. On the other hand, the end of censorship allowed Anglophone SF to enter the Romanian market with a revenge, marginalising local production even more than in Western Europe forty years earlier (until today).

Romanian SF writers tried to regain some of its former strength by mimicking foreign fashions, such as pulpish cyberpunk, in a country where hackers are, indeed, numerous, and IT has been enthusiastically embraced. Others wanted to preserve the New Wave heritage through carefully written stories, some of them quite experimental, such as Dănuț Ungureanu's dystopian "Domus" (1992), which is entirely written using prescriptive discourse. Although a number of these stories could make up an invaluable anthology, none of them succeeded in truly seducing the local fandom. Romanian SF only recovered when it revisited in the form of long, epos-like novels older genres such as space-opera in Dan Doboș's *Abația* (Abbey, 2002-2005), lost-world romance in Sebastian A. Corn's *Ne vom întoarce în Muribacca* (We Will Return to

Muribecca, 2014), as well as apocalyptic dystopia in the series begun with the much shorter novel *Vegetal* (2014) by Dănuț Ungureanu and Marian Truță. Their success, at least among fans, has contributed to lending new life to a SF now nearly as diverse and literarily successful as it used to be before the postmodernist/cyberpunk crisis.

Prospects are positive, with very young writers now being aware that they are adding their contribution to a long and distinguished history of Romanian SF. This is the case, for example, of those fostered by long-established SF clubs such as Helion, in Timișoara, of which the following anthology represents a welcoming sample for all those interested in acquiring some knowledge of current Romanian SF through representative fictions translated into English. It is to be hoped that other similar national anthologies from Romania and other countries will follow, allowing a wider readership to become truly cosmopolitan in its reception of SF literature, this most global mode of fiction.



**Silviu Genescu** (b. 13.09.1958), writer and translator. Member of “H.G. Wells” SF Society Timisoara since 1973, founding member of “Helion” SF Society Timisoara and member of the Romanian Society of Science-Fiction and Fantasy.

His first short story, *Transplant*, appeared in “Forum Studentesc” periodical in 1977. His short stories have been published in a number of fanzines (“Paradox”, “Helion”, “Almanahul Anticipația”, “CPSF”, “Jurnalul SF”) and anthologies such as *Avertisment pentru liniștea planetei* (Albatros, 1985), *La orizont această constelație* (Albatros, 1990), *Anatomia unei secunde* (Facla, 1990), *Timpul este umbra noastră* (Dacia, 1991); *Worlds and Beings. Romanian Contemporary Science-Fiction Stories* (Romanian Cultural Institute, 2015). His volumes are *T de la sfârșit* (*D is for the End*, Marineasa, 1994) and *Rock Me Adolf Adolf Adolf* (Bastion, 2009). Silviu Genescu has won the Romanian National SF Award several times and has received the “Vladimir Colin” Award for the best short-story volume published between 2009 and 2012.

His first translation into Romanian was *Alice’s World* by Sam Lundwall, published in “Almanahul Anticipația” in 1986. His translation of Tony Chester’s novel *Best friend* appeared in several “Helion” issues. In the past years, he has translated numerous SF authors for a number of Romanian publishers such as Nemira, Leda and Trei.



# Transformation

by Silviu Genescu

*I've always been mad, I know I've been mad,  
like the most of us... very hard to explain why you're mad,  
even if you're not mad...*

Pink Floyd, *The Dark Side of the Moon*

**Matecu** had eaten so much he couldn't even finish the last piece of cheese. He pushed his plate away. His mother and his sister never let him stuff himself. They exchanged worried glances whenever he shovelled food into his mouth. "His glucose will go through the roof again", his mother would say. He had no idea what glucose was or how it could go through the roof. The first times he had heard those words he checked his tracksuit trousers, afraid he would see a monster crawling up his leg toward his enlarged goitre. Eventually he had grown used to his mother's passing remark and had given up looking for

glucose on his clothes. The doctor he saw monthly also talked about it.

Now his sister Livia and his mother were in the dining room, absolutely motionless. They had been standing like that for at least several hours. He found them like that when he came out of his room, his eyes heavily lidded from too much sleeping. Nobody had come to wake him up. Matecu tried talking to them, but they didn't answer. They were just standing there in the middle of the room, like the mannequins he had seen in shop windows, but not so nicely dressed. Matecu tried to figure out what was wrong with them. Were they were playing a game, like who could stand still longer? Or like when he and his sister played the quiet game and he had to refrain from talking and laughing for a while. Once he had kept silent from noon until evening and his sister came to his room from time to time to check that he wasn't cheating, talking gibberish and laughing stupidly as he always did. But that time Matecu had taken himself seriously and kept quiet until evening. Livia had rewarded him with a small bar of chocolate.

His name was Dan Mateescu, but he could not say Mateescu, it was too hard for him. So if you asked him his name he would answer Matecu or Dan. He had attended a school once, but could not remember much from those days. He could barely read a few lines and write his name in block capitals, pressing the pencil or the pen so hard the

letters appeared on the next several pages of the notebook. If he had to fill in a form, he tore the paper.

His mother and sister were still strangely motionless in the dining room. He ran into the enclosed balcony and looked outside. Not a soul in sight. He realised he no longer heard the tram wheels squealing around the corner of the park. And there weren't any vehicles running on the street either. Some cars were parked, but others seemed to have stopped abruptly, abandoned by their drivers who had probably vanished into thin air.

The wailing German trams, still sturdy after 40 years of running on the rails, had been missing since he woke up. Before he had heard them quite often and sometimes they disturbed his afternoon sleep. Before what? Matecu thought hard and decided the last time he had heard a tram passing by his block had been last night. He looked up and down the street, but he didn't see any movement. In the dead silence, the birds chirped louder, as if delighted that men had completely disappeared from the streets or had frozen in squares or at major intersections.

Matecu turned towards the dining room. He would have liked to ask permission to go out, but neither his mother nor Livia had moved. He knew he was not allowed to leave the flat alone, so he kept quiet, the words stuck in his throat. Seeing them like that worried him sick. Mother was wearing her pink nightgown and his sister blue print pyjamas. He took a few steps forward and

saw tears streaming from their eyes, but the traces they left on their cheeks were shining like silver. Maybe it was because of the light that penetrated boldly through the transparent curtains. Their stillness and the wet traces on their cheeks scared him silly. He knew you usually cried if something very bad had happened or if you were in pain. He started crying himself, silently, rounding his cheeks, as if in solidarity with their pain, though he could not understand it. He felt the salty tears on his lips. He could not take his eyes off his mother and sister. Their tears seemed oily, viscous.

At this time of the day, mother was always busy cleaning the house and if she had seen him there she would have snapped his head off: "Why are you in my way? Can't you see I'm busy? Go to your room and browse those illustrated magazines." But now she was dead silent. She just stared in the distance, without seeing him.

"What are you two crying for?" Matecu asked aloud.

He was frightened. He couldn't understand what was going on. Why were mother and Livia like that, why couldn't he hear the trams outside, why wasn't there anybody in the street? He drew nearer to his mother and ran a finger over her cheek. He wanted to wipe those shining, sticky tears away, to make them run down her cheeks. Endlessly. They resembled that oily, colourless liquid that sometimes dripped from the miracle-working weeping icons in village churches with smoked walls,

predicting dramatic events. His finger ran over the skin, following the wet trace. On an impulse, he put his finger into his mouth, licking it. His mother's tears tasted sweet, they smeared his finger like honey. They reminded him of the melted ice cream his sister gave him when she took him for the daily walk in the park across from their building. He licked it while she sat on a bench and read. Happy to be outside, he did somersaults on the grass, much to the surprise of the passers-by. Someone his age should not give such a performance, but you could guess immediately something was wrong with him.

He licked some more of his mother's tears. He stopped only when he reached her eye. He knew it was unpleasant when someone touched your eyes, but she didn't even blink. He turned to his sister. Her tears were also sweet. He liked the taste; he filled his mouth with it. It was as if he could eat chocolate glaze to his heart's content. He did the same when Mother gave him the bowl in which she had prepared cocoa cream for her cakes. He licked it clean with tremendous pleasure. The sweet taste made him forget about the question he had asked before: "What are you two crying for?"

The open eyes, like a pair of glass beads, caught his attention again. They weren't watching anything in particular, they didn't show any feelings. They were like the painted eyes of the characters he had seen in a wax figures exhibition, an itinerant collection of awful imitations that

bore no resemblance to the original political personalities and celebrities whom you recognised only by the names written in their presentation. However, his mother and sister shed sweet, stickier tears continuously. Their eyes literally swam in tears streaming slowly down their faces. Yet something stopped him from licking the transparent goodies collected in them. He knew they would only allow him to kiss them on their cheek. He licked his lips greedily, but he was too shy to make such a radical gesture and lick their unmoving eyes.

“Mother! Livia!” he burst, almost angry at their stillness.

The truth was he was frustrated at not being able to do it anymore. Having discovered why — his own fear that neither of them would have let him lick her eyes — he felt deeply unsatisfied. He was facing absolute prohibition. He gave them another close look and darted furiously to his room, the only place where he was always left alone. He sat at the small table by the window and started hitting the tabletop with his forehead, hands in his hair. He let out short, frustrated groans. Eventually he fell asleep.



He couldn't say how long he had slept, but as he lifted his head he saw it was still light outside. It must have been late afternoon. Everything seemed frozen, like in the morning. Puzzled, he touched the bump on his forehead,

feeling the skin scratched from having hit the tabletop so many times. He stared in horror at his bloody fingers, trying to remember what had happened. He went to the bathroom to wash and saw his reflection in the mirror.

He was looking at a stranger: slightly bulging eyes, chubby cheeks, double chin, white, sweaty skin, bloody forehead, greasy, unkempt hair. He studied the face thoroughly, hardly believing it was his own. It was as if he had never seen himself before. It seemed he had just come out of a deep coma and found that time had been merciless and he had put on weight while lying unconscious. He ran his palm over his right cheek, feeling the stubble of his wispy beard. He did not recall ever shaving, and his eyes fell on the shelf above the sink, where he noticed a razor. The shaving foam and brush were on the shelf above the bathtub. He shook his head. No, he didn't shave himself. His sister Livia helped him. Now she was in the dining room, stock-still like her mother. Suddenly he remembered he had licked their tears because they were sweet as honey and almost immediately he felt sick. He opened the toilet lid with the top of his foot, too disgusted to use his hand. He felt he had woken up in an unfamiliar house and had no idea how he had got there. The nausea passed and he looked again at his round face glistening with sweat, hair locks stuck to his forehead. He hated what he saw: it was a person he wouldn't want to meet, but felt pushed to do so. And that person was himself.

“Mateescu”, he said aloud, looking at himself. “Dan Mateescu.”

He remembered how he had introduced himself before: Matecu. His name, brutally abbreviated, like a loud bark, had come out after a prolonged, guttural howl.

“Matecu?” He made a wry face and shot himself a hostile glance.

He recalled how his sister called him when they were alone and nobody could hear them, right there in the bathroom, while she was shaving him and telling him angrily to keep his head straight, or in his room, as she was reading him stories when she would obviously have liked to do something else.

He left the bathroom, crossed the hallway in a hurry and entered the dining room. They were still there, both of them, shedding oily tears that shone on their feet and the carpet, staining their nightgown and pyjamas. He planted himself in front of his sister.

“So this is what you call me when you want to ‘spoil me,” he said.

He doubted she could understand him, since her expression seemed captivated by a different world. He turned to face his mother.

“She calls me Lil Prick when she thinks no one can hear her, when it’s just the two of us. ‘Don’t move, Lil Prick! Stand straight, Lil Prick!’ That’s what she calls me”, he added huffily.

It was a revelation for himself too, but his mother didn't answer. Nor did she turn her head to him. Thick tears kept running down her cheeks, but he was no longer tempted to lick them. He looked around. Everything was familiar, yet different, as if while asleep he had been taken to another place, almost identical with their flat, but subtly different. What was more, he discovered he was able to remember amazing things like that insulting nickname his sister had given him. He could read the titles of the books in the wooden bookcase, which was totally unexpected, since he had barely graduated a school for disabled children and reading a few lines was an incredible effort. But now he found he could read the titles rather easily, though they didn't ring a bell: *The Three Musketeers*, *Otilia's Enigma*, *Darkness*, *The Master and Margarita*. He remembered the musketeers because he had seen them in a film fighting with their swords and making all sorts of jokes while duelling. Everybody looked happy in that film, even when someone was pierced by a sword like a chicken by the skewer. He took *And Then There Were None* from the shelf because it sounded almost funny, and opened it at Chapter One: "In the corner of a first-class smoking carriage, Mr. Justice Wargrave, lately retired from the bench, puffed at a cigar and ran an interested eye through the political news in the *Times*". Up until then, Matecu had been unable to grasp the meaning of the written words. The letters had danced under his eyes, making it impossible for him to discern

them. Now he understood that a certain Judge Wargrave (whose name he found very strange) was smoking a cigar and reading the news in a newspaper. He was curious to see what happened “there”, so he read on: “He laid the paper down and glanced out of the window. He glanced at his watch — another two hours to go.”

Matecu looked at the clock on a shelf. It was 7:46. Evening was falling, though the light was still bright, apparently unwilling to leave the frozen, deserted landscape swept through by gusts of wind that raised the dust and scattered it all over. He should hear street noises, doors being slammed, music screaming from the neighbouring flats, squealing German trams clattering when taking the bend around the park. All was strangely silent and Matecu shivered, turn as he turned his head to his mother and sister. Maybe it was happening to others too: they were at home and their eyes were producing viscous tears, that was why there was no movement on the street. The whole apartment building was quiet.

He put the open book down on a low table, on the macramé his mother was so proud of. Was everybody else frozen? he wondered, standing in front of his mother and Livia again. But why wasn't he crying? He remembered how he had cried when he got beaten up by Gicu, a boy in the neighbourhood. The other children were playing in the park together, but they wouldn't let him join them. Every time he tried to be part of their game, they called

him names: “Beat it, retard!” Gicu had banged his head on the door of the building and Matecu had burst into tears, more scared than hurt. His mother had come to take him home.

Now he didn’t cry and his mind seemed clearer. He took the mystery novel and read several more paragraphs, just to make sure Judge Wargrave wasn’t just a figment of his imagination. He finished the page very quickly. He was absolutely convinced he would have been incapable of doing that before.

“Indian island?” he mumbled in surprise. Somerset and Hollywood, the two places mentioned in the book, sounded equally enigmatic. So did Miss Gabrielle Turl. She reminded him of Gabi, the girl he liked so much. He saw her whenever they took him to the hospital, that old building with a weather-beaten facade, green walls and maze-like corridors. They met in the inner courtyard. She wore a grey coat and kept her hands in her pockets. She was the only one who talked to him. She talked nineteen to the dozen. He replied unintelligibly, but for her that was reason enough to keep talking. He didn’t understand anything she said, but she had a nice face and clear blue eyes that soothed him when they locked on him. The last time he saw her was a week ago. He had spent several days at the hospital because he had become increasingly restless and frightened and had woken from his sleep screaming hoarsely. Whenever he was taken to Hospital 5,

he hoped to see Gabi. During her psychotic episodes, her eyes burnt with unusual intensity and they locked on you. They revealed terror and anger.

“I can see him in the mirror. He’s stalking me. But no one believes me. They don’t realise what a threat he is,” she had explained to him once, lowering her voice so that only he could hear her and casting cautious glances around. “One day...”

Matecu looked again at his mother and sister, who kept crying silently, like two accursed women turned into statues. His mother was a lab technician and had brought home a few racks of test tubes and some retorts stored in the pantry. Matecu rushed over there and opened the door. He saw the dusty tubes in their wooden racks at one end of a shelf loaded with jam and pickle jars. He reached for the rack and took several tubes. Had he tried to do that before, he would have knocked a few jars for sure.

He returned to the dining room and placed the thick tubes on mother’s precious macramé. His fingers partly wiped the dust that had settled on them in the pantry. He took one and went back to the two “statues”, insecure and fearful. Eventually he lifted his arm and put the mouth of the tube under his sister’s right eye, collecting her tears. It was like collecting a viper’s venom, but, unlike the poison, the tears were perfectly transparent, sparkling in the light with a metallic glint. Matecu knew they were sweet, but something stopped him from licking them again. He

wasn't collecting them for himself. When the tube was full, he would go to Hospital 5 and give it to Gabi.

The tears had helped him clear his mind, read from the book and remember many things. It was all obvious to him now. He wanted to help Gabi get rid of the stalker in the mirrors. Because of him, the mirror above the basin in her ward had been covered. As if someone had just died.

It was already dark when Matecu reached Hospital no. 5. He had plugged the tube with a paper napkin. He was lucky the street lights were not turned on manually. A computer programme did that instead of a power company employee. As long as the grid was powered, things went on as usual. Without public lighting, he would probably have got lost. For that matter, he wouldn't have ventured out of the house. The streets were dark. Dark and deserted. All he had seen from the window in his flat had been a few stray dogs crossing the street freely, not worried about the traffic, since there was no traffic.

The doorkeeper's cabin was empty, but the park — benches, concrete flags, trees and scrubby bushes — was full of patients. Most of them wore hospital gowns and mumbled incoherently or spoke out loud, screaming their discontents. Matecu realised immediately they were hungry. There was no one to give them food or their daily medication. Some of them were in crisis. Finally, he noticed Gabi sitting on a bench. She was smoking.

He approached her, hardly believing she was puffing a cigarette.

“When did you start smoking?” he asked, stopping before her.

“When did you start talking?” she replied with a smile.

She watched him closely. He had put on the best clothes he could find in the wardrobe: his only suit.

“You didn’t talk, you just made sounds. But I liked you anyway.”

“And I liked you too,” he answered automatically.

He blushed, taken by surprise. He didn’t know how to handle the situation and she gave a short, unexpected laugh.

“How are you?” he managed, eventually.

His embarrassment brought him closer to normality than he could ever have imagined.

“It’s utter chaos here,” said Gabi, pointing towards the patients who were arguing with imaginary characters or muttering on the benches and snapping at one other. “The nurses and doctors are all gone,” she went on. “They haven’t received their medication and are having mental fits. There’s no food. All the grub from yesterday has been eaten by whoever grabbed it first. All we’ve got is leftovers. It hasn’t occurred to them yet to go out in the street and spread through the city.”

“My mother and my sister are stock-still in the dining-room, crying continuously.”

She shot him a slightly surprised look when she heard his words. They sounded so unusual in a retard's mouth. But the Matecu she was looking at now was no longer the boy she had known before, when she had pitied him and watched him with protective kindness because he was even more unfortunate than her. She shook her head.

"Same here," she spoke, throwing down the cigarette butt and crushing it under her heel. "They've been stock-still since last night, after they had gathered in the lobby. All of them. The doorkeeper, the doctor on duty, the nurses from the night shift. I beat up the doctor, but he didn't seem to feel anything. I beat him until he bled. I broke his nose," she said, with a grimace of hate.

"Why did you beat him?"

"Because he fucked me I don't know how many times, that's why", answered Gabi, looking him straight in the eye. "He came to my ward at night, gave me a shot, took me to the emergency room and fucked me when I couldn't move."

Matecu was taken aback, as if by a sudden threatening noise. He realised the topic was not one to speak about calmly, but Gabi had said it unexpectedly, in as many words. He felt sorry for her.

"You should see what he looks like now," she said, turning her head towards the hospital entrance. "But apparently he didn't feel anything at all. I battered him to let off steam. Anyway, why are you here? No one's going to

give you a shot, if that's what you've come for. There's no one to do it."

"I came to give you this," said Matecu, revealing the tube plugged with the paper napkin.

Gabi raised her eyebrows in surprise, then frowned slightly and gave him an intrigued look.

"What the hell is that?"

"Drink it," Matecu urged her, looking so desperate she burst into laughter.

"Did you pour rape drugs into it?"

"It's medicine. It helped me enormously."

He picked up the words out of thin air, most of the times guessing their meaning. He loved playing with them and "enormously" was a recent acquisition.

"I can see that. You talk. You've changed a lot since last time. And not because of the shots you were given here. They didn't make you better."

Matecu felt embarrassed at her words, as if she was speaking about a shameful part of his life that he had been hiding, but she had found out about it anyway.

"You're a miracle", she added with a smile, guessing his thoughts and trying to encourage him.

He watched her gulp down the contents of the tube. She grimaced at the disgustingly sweet taste.

"It tastes like a sickening syrup," she decided. "So when do I get smarter?"

“Now you have to go to sleep in your ward,” Matecu told her.

“What, there?” she asked, pointing to the hospital building with her thumb. “No way! All the girls in the wards are fucked and fucked again by whoever wants it because there’s no one to stop them now. Why do you think I’m staying here in the courtyard?”

Matecu lowered his head, as if she was giving him a lecture for having done something very wrong. He couldn’t understand exactly what she was talking about, but he guessed it was really bad. Violence terrified him, even in films. His mother always covered his eyes when there was a violent scene on TV.

“Then let’s go to my place,” he suggested, lifting his head. There’s nobody there except my mother and sister and they are dead still. You can sleep in my sister’s room. No one will bother you there.”

She eyed him suspiciously, not sure what to make of his current behaviour. He didn’t look aggressive. She had known him retarded and docile, so gentle that she liked him for that. Now he was different, from his expressive face to his amazing verbal coherence.

“Do you live far from here?” she asked, shifting her gaze from the hospital building to him. A chair had just been thrown through a window and the glass shattered noisily.

Matecu thought of the large mirror in the hallway. He would have to take it down as soon as they had entered the flat. And he would cover the one in the bathroom as well. He knew how mirrors scared Gabi.

“It’s not a long walk,” he answered.

Had he lived farther, he wouldn’t have made it to the hospital. He would have got lost in the frozen city.



Matecu unlocked the door and motioned her in. He knew it was polite to do so when you opened the door to a woman and in the old black-and-white films men also stood up when a woman addressed them.

“I’d better take care of the mirror first,” he said prudently and made for the mirror in a heavy black framework hanging in the hallway. There was a shoe rack opposite it.

“Make sure you don’t break it”, Gabi smiled from the doorway. “It will bring you seven years of bad luck.”

He grabbed the glossy framework and pulled. The mirror hung on a nail hammered in the prefabricated wall and the upper part of the framework wouldn’t move. Unable to detach it completely, Matecu fell over the shoe rack. The mirror broke in his hands.

“*Jebi ga!*” shouted Gabi, taking her head in her hands.

Matecu flung the framework pieces and grabbed a shard from the floor. He turned it over, not knowing

what else to do. Blood was streaming from the deep cuts in his hands. He rose unsteadily to his feet, shaking the icicle-sharp glass fragments off his trousers. They glittered ruthlessly in the light.

“Now you’ve done it!” said Gabi and came closer to him, crunching the shards under her feet.

Matecu waited motionless among the pile of shoes, almost like his mother and daughter. They would have darted in the hallway if they had heard the glass breaking and him falling with a thump on the stainless steel shoe rack. But they didn’t come and he wondered whether they were still in the dining room or had gone somewhere, sweet tears running slowly down their cheeks. He looked at Gabi.

“In what language did you just speak?” he asked, as she took his hands in hers.

“Serbian. I’m from Serbia.”

“*Jebi ga?*”

“Yes. It means ‘fuck’. Haven’t you heard of *Ko jebe Buldožer, ja zelim slusat’ Rhythm & Blues, Ko jebe Buldožer, ja zelim slusat’ Rhythm & Blues, Ko jebe Buldožer, ja zelim slusat’ Rhythm & Blues*<sup>1</sup>?”

Gabi started singing and dancing on the shards. She forgot about his bleeding hands. Matecu glanced at them. He frowned, but his expression relaxed immediately. His

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1 *Who fucks the Bulldozer, I wanna listen to Rhythm & Blues* – a song of the Serbian-Slovenian band Buldožer, famous in Yugoslavia in the 1970-1980s.

cuts were gone, he was just bloodstained. The wounds had closed, leaving only vague reddish scars that looked like thin lines drawn in pencil. He stared at them in disbelief, turning his hands on all sides, then he glanced at the pile of shards, red with his blood and crushed by Gabi's wild dance. She was moving with her arms raised, singing *Ko jebe Buldožer, I wanna listen to Rhythm & Blues*. She stopped abruptly, faced him, then sang on: "Hej, slatka mala, svira ti gitara, vratiť cu se kod tebe, ko jebe Buldožer ja zelim slusat' Rhythm & Blues<sup>2</sup>... What did I say now?"

Matecu shrugged and lifted his hands in a manner of surrender, but he was actually trying to show her that he wasn't bleeding anymore. It didn't hurt at all. He had felt nothing, even when the glass had cut into the flesh. It had been like watching it on TV.

"I have no idea," he said, "I think you said 'fuck' again." He shrugged. "But look! The bleeding has stopped."

She looked at him slightly confused, maybe wondering what she was doing there, in the hallway of a flat, with a retarded and paranoid patient who was full of blood because of the mirror that had broken in his clumsy hands. It had been many hours since she last took her medication. She rummaged through her hospital gown pockets and removed several coloured pills.

"Get me a glass of water," she said hastily, glancing at the pills and then back to him, not without a trace of hostility.

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<sup>2</sup> Hey pretty girl playing the guitar, I'll come back to you, who fucks the Bulldozer, I wanna listen to Rhythm & Blues.

She knew it was wrong not to take her medicines. She flipped out without them. She lifted her eyes, careful not to look at the shards as she stepped on them.

“Why are you still here? Where’s the damn kitchen?” she snapped.

Matecu took off instantly, careful not to look in the dining room. He had forgotten to turn on the light before leaving the flat and now it was dark and he didn’t like what was happening there. He sensed Gabi’s sudden, growing hostility, but he blamed it on her not having taken her medicines, so he rushed to fetch her a glass of water. He watched her swallow a handful of pills and gulping the water. Her lips were moist with saliva. He didn’t like what she looked like now.

“Let me show you where you can sleep tonight,” he offered and took her by the hand to show her to Livia’s room. She removed her hand.

“Come inside and I’ll kill you!” she promised with a grimace, using her forefinger to mimic a gun barrel.

Matecu shrugged.

“Why would I do that?”

“You know why... to fuck me, that’s why!”

He sniffed and opened the door for her.

“*Ko jebe Buldožer, ja zelim slusat’ Rhythm & Blues.* I thought that was how things went. You think you’re *Buldožer*?” he asked, after repeating the words of the Serbian rock piece exactly as she had sung them.

Gabi laughed, shaking her head.

“I’m not that mad. At least not yet. Anyway, what do you know about Rhythm & Blues?”

Matecu looked at the key in the lock. His sister would lock herself inside. She locked her door even when she left the flat. Not even her mother was allowed to get in and clean her room unless she was present. Now the door had remained unlocked.

“James Brown, Fats Domino, Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, Al Green, Otis Redding, Sam Cooke, Little Richard,” he said suddenly, pronouncing the names perfectly.

Gabi threw him a stunned but appreciative look.

“I’d never have thought you knew about them. These are great names. When we met in the hospital courtyard, you could barely speak. How come you know all this now?”

He shrugged.

“I have no idea. I remember them because I’ve heard them on the radio or on TV. They all came to me at once because I needed to remember them. I’ve come to understand a lot of things out of the blue.”

Gabi turned towards him.

“Is this what happens after you take that medicine, that disgusting syrup?”

Matecu nodded. He hesitated to tell her how he had collected the “syrup”, but since it had done him so much

good, the same must happen to her, too. But first he had to persuade her to go to sleep. He made her bed and pointed to the key in the lock.

“You can lock yourself inside. No one will walk in on you,” he assured her.

Gabriela Petkovici had stripped off all her clothes and had gone to bed stark naked. She had slept a few hours in Livia’s bed. At first, she was too confused to remember where she was. She had slept with the bedside light on, and the feeble light revealed the interior of a young woman’s room. A large poster of Amy Winehouse, loud lipstick screaming on her fleshy lips, was glued to the wardrobe door. She realised she was in Matecu’s sister’s room. She knew him from the hospital. She picked up her clothes and started dressing, looking at the laptop on the small desk beside the window. She noticed Livia’s Facebook account. She also had a Facebook account, but she doubted very strongly that any of her friends there was still online. She had several hundreds of “friends”, but only four of them mattered.

Unlike Dan Mateescu, Gabriela Petkovici had an IQ of 120 and an intellect still affected by her condition. She typed: *Since there is no one else on the Internet with whom to exchange ideas — not even the news feeds have been updated for over 24 hours — I have decided to write something on my blog. I haven’t done this since my admission to Hospital*

no. 5. My laptop is at home, at Stanova, and I can't get there now. I don't have to tell you what happened, huh? I'm afraid only people like me are still active throughout the world. Hospital no. 5 (this is its old name, given by the communists, its current official name is the Edgar Răileanu Psychiatry Clinic) is full of them — my fellow creatures in distress. I was taken there after I had had a mental breakdown crisis worse than usual. The “freezing” happened while I was in hospital, and I took it in gradually. First, I realised Pavel Stănescu, the doctor on duty, had not come to give me the damn shot, put me in the wheelchair and bang me. It's the first time I mention his full name, because I have to let loose somehow, and nothing will be as it was. He thought I was no longer conscious after ten minutes. I would have preferred to be out, given the circumstances, because that way I would have been spared the pain and his panting and drooling into my ear as he came. Something out of the ordinary must have happened if he had missed the night “encounter”. He always arranged to be on duty when I was brought to the hospital.

I looked out of the window in the inner courtyard, a square formed by the wings of the old building with a peeling facade. I could hear noises lifting towards me like steam, like an ominous bad smell. Part of the patients on the ground floor had gathered in the courtyard and some of them smoked. Normally, they weren't allowed there during the night. They weren't supposed to leave their wards. Two plus two is four even for a schizoid creature like me (neuropaths know that

*two plus two is four, but it pisses them off, so they claim it's five and if you don't agree with them they lose it). So I put two and two together and went downstairs, where I found almost all the night staff gathered in the hall. Motionless, catatonic, staring, no reaction to stimuli. Someone had drawn dicks on Stănescu's both cheeks with a permanent marker. So others hated him too. I beat him to a pulp. He didn't even blink. I knocked him down, but he got up with mechanical gestures, like a machine running a programme. I broke two or three of his front teeth. He still didn't react in any way. I hope he is still far away from this world as it is, good or bad, totally disconnected from it, because he is an incredibly wicked creature.*

*I left the hospital and went out in the street. I saw cars hitting poles, their doors open, abandoned by their drivers and passengers, as if they had all received the same order through very unusual channels. Perhaps they also heard interesting things from the voices in their heads. I walked for a while on the street — it was completely deserted — and then I went into a bar. Everyone there was standing, gathered together like frightened sheep. You would have thought they were looking at the wall-mounted TVs, but they had no expression on their faces. They were staring somewhere far away, as if reading an announcement on the Antipodean sky. But the test pattern was all they could see on the TV screens. I took a phone from a table and tried to call my mother, though we hadn't spoken in years. She*

*claimed I had “fucked up her life”, as if my condition was some kind of a hobby of mine, so we stopped seeing each other. No answer. She must also have been staring towards New Zealand (the place where I would have liked to live). I called 911. Again, no answer. Not a single contact in the rosy pink iPhone answered. I put the phone in my pocket and went back to Hospital no. 5, where I found the same chaos, plus the kitchen devastated, because in the middle of the night the patients had been famished and eaten everything or they had scattered the food on the floor. Some of them were dancing. The malingerers, people admitted to the psychiatry ward for all sorts of reasons like penal offences or early retirement, were in the hallway, together with the other normal people. They had been “exposed”, as a famous post-revolutionary figure would have said. For me, it was just an hour, the normal people started shedding viscous tears and they haven’t stopped since then.*

*I would probably not have been able to write all this on the blog, since now I am living among those who haven’t received their medication and are drooling, hitting their heads on the walls, having breakdowns or suffering manic delirium, if Matecu (his name is Dan Mateescu, but he couldn’t pronounce it correctly) hadn’t returned in the evening with a miraculous preparation (he cannot lie) that he gave me to drink, saying it had done him a lot of good. Indeed, Matecu spoke fluently and no longer had that glazed, faraway look on his face. He looked completely different.*

*So I found myself in front of a test tube full of liquid, like Alice in Wonderland when she found the bottle that said “Drink me” and made her grow instantly, too tall for the world around her. The liquid was sickly sweet and Matecu wouldn’t tell me where he had found it. But I have a hunch and I’m going to ask him about it this morning. I think he collected those oily tears his mother and sister kept shedding in their dining room. I don’t know how he got the idea. To be honest, it wouldn’t have crossed my mind to do that. I haven’t seen Matecu’s mother and sister yet, but I suspect he didn’t lie to me. He collected their tears for whatever reason had surfaced in his mind, pretty stupid before then. I’ll talk to him, but the “preparation” has put an end to my fit. I can think much more clearly and I remember precisely a lot of things that were previously blurred in my mind. I can make interesting associations much faster and I’ve also made some mental calculations I would never have been able to make before. Now I think I can win the International Mathematics Olympiad! 😊😊😊*

*All humans seem to have frozen, their eyes staring in the distance, weeping ceaselessly, threatening never to dry out, despite the many tears that have left shiny traces on their smooth cheeks after something had spread into the air like microbes of the Apocalypse. We, the insane, are left untouched, because those who intend to turn the normal people into something else have no need of us. This generalized catatonia and universal crying are probably just*

*a transient phase. In the meantime, we will heal through their crying. I know, it sounds almost biblical and ... tearful (Jebi ga!). These tears, shed like a false lament for the end of mankind, seem to me a by-product of what happened to their body and mind. For us, the insane, their tears may be our salvation, because our mind (mine and Matecu's) is working again, better than ever. I don't know if I will reinvent my thoughts, but they seem to guide me towards new directions. Sometimes I don't even recognise myself in them. But besides us, the officially insane, gathered in the wards and the courtyard of Hospital no. 5, there are others nobody knows about, really dangerous people lacking any sympathy for their fellow creatures, ready to kill on an inner, sick impulse, psychopaths in the true sense of the word, hiding their impulses behind their exemplary social behaviour. Ted Bundy had been a very good neighbour, that is, until he started killing people.*



Gabi remembered what she had read many times in various publications, about the possibility of injecting nanomachines programmed to repair your organism at a cellular level, but what had been a future scenario in periodicals like *Wired* and other journals that promoted advanced ideas seemed to have become the present overnight. Perhaps things had gone out of control at

some point and the nanomachines, airborne like spores, multiplied continuously, with the most devastating effects on the normal individuals who had sucked them into their airways. The patients of Hospital 5 had not been affected, and the tears running down the catatonic people's cheeks were a by-product able to fix their minds and make them masters of the planet. They were the new normal individuals — Gabi Petkovich smiled, heading for the dining room. She didn't hesitate to enter the room where Matecu's mother and sister stood like two living statues trying to impress the passers-by in a rainy day.

She guessed the contour of the two women against the feeble light of the grey, cold early morning. They were both crying, their cheeks smeared with viscous tears. Gabriela thought once the crying was over, the people affected by what had infiltrated into their bodies would move to a new phase and shake off that motionless, gloomy, ominous state. They would change, she thought, taking a step forward. She turned on the light and stopped in her tracks. Livia and her mother, whose nightdress stretched out with metallic shades on her fleshy shoulders, no longer had sclera, iris or pupils. Their eyes had become a black surface with a porcelain gloss. The two resembled the figures Gabriela had seen in horror films populated with grey aliens. She was supposed to give a muffled scream and draw back. But she didn't do that. Instead, she took two steps towards Livia and put her finger on

her cheek, tasting the tears. They were hot. She thought the two women, like all the other people, had begun a new stage of their transformation and were beyond the beneficial “sweetness” of their healing cry. In her mouth, the pungency spread like quick flames of burning alcohol that licked the surface covered with the flammable liquid. It burnt not only her tongue, but also her palate and it started to spread further down her throat. She looked around for the bathroom and made for it hastily, her tongue going numb. She opened the door. She realised she was also close to Matecu’s room and turned to it, determined to knock hard on the door. She had to get out of there, and soon. She had to avoid large spaces. The streets would be filled again. But not with people, she realised. That was her last coherent thought before she stopped motionless in her tracks. And then the transformation began.

*Translated by Antuza Genescu*

**Daniel Timariu** (b. 20.05.1972), writer. Member of “Helion” SF Society Timisoara since 2015. Editorial secretary of “Helion Online” magazine.

His first short story, *În lift (In the elevator)*, appeared in “Helion” SF magazine in 2015. His short stories have been published in a number of fanzines ( “Helion”, “Gazeta SF”, “Ficțiuni”, “Iocan”, “Argos” , “Nautilus”, “Revista de suspans”, “Știință & Tehnică”, “ZIN”, “CSF”) and anthologies such as *Exit plus. Povestiri de dincolo* (Tritonic, 2017), *Povestiri cu dragoni* (Tritonic, 2017), *Antologia Helion 2011-2016* (Eurostampa, 2017), *Domino* (Tritonic, 2017), *Noir de București* (Tritonic, 2017), *Gastro NOIR* (Tritonic, 2018), *Schițe de iubire* (Tritonic, 2018), *Cele mai frumoase povestiri Science Fiction & Fantasy ale anului 2017* (Vremea, 2018), *Antologia prozei românești science-fiction* (Paralela 45, 2018), 3.4 (Tritonic, 2018) , 3.5 (Tritonic, 2018), *Domino2* (Tritonic, 2018), *Când penele roșii vor plânge. Ciudatul caz al umbrelor* (with Lucian-Dragoș Bogdan, Tritonic, 2018), *Castele de nisip* (Tritonic, 2019), *Noir de Timișoara* (Tritonic 2019). His volumes are *Amețeli postlumice* (SF&F short story, Eurostampa, 2016), *Fete în roșu și alte povestiri polițiste* (mystery&thriller short story, Tritonic, 2016), *Tenebre. Cazul Laura* (urban fantasy novel, Tritonic, 2017), *Tenebre. Labirintul* (urban fantasy novel, Tritonic 2018) and *Tenebre. Miercuri* (urban fantasy novel, Tritonic, 2019).

Daniel Timariu has won the RomCon SF Award in 2017 for *Amețeli postlumice*, and in 2019 for a sci-fi short story - *Coloniștii*. In 2018 he has won *The Chrysalis Award* (Eurocon, Amiens, France).



# Bodies to Let

by Daniel Timariu

**Above** the entrance, the sign glittered in bright colors, blue and orange, tinged with a muddled green. Cosmin stopped across the street and gazed for a while at the slow flowing stream of letters: *Bodies to let*. He rested his arm on the round lamp post, like he'd done every day for the last couple of weeks, lighted a cigarette and whispered: not yet. Then he left, nodding his head thoughtfully.

Cosmin Barbone lived in one of the countless tube-flats from the bulb-apartment buildings recently erected for immigrants at the outskirts of Neues Berlin. The administration had denied his request for an apartment closer to the western space-docks, where he currently worked. Every day, he wasted two hours on his way there and two hours getting back through the heavy traffic. Since pollution levels had gone red, all public transportation got banned. In a sheer act of bureaucratic stupidity, bicycles were now forbidden too. No more space to accommodate them. There was hardly any room left for people, as the growing number of disgruntled workers were sure to point out on their placards.

They were called the *proto-walkers*, because they never stopped in their tracks – another act of subversion against the established order, even though it hadn't been prohibited yet. It was an unwritten law, just like many others, as dangerous as the most stupid law.

He found a corner to hide in, as the surveillance cameras – not as high-tech as most people thought – had many blind spots. He took a puff, then immediately extinguished the cigarette. He had just transgressed two unwritten laws. Staying and smoking. Blocking space and polluting. Someone will surely denounce him. He looked around, but no one seemed to care what he was doing. It was merely an opinion. He would have done the same if he saw someone break the law. Just shrug it off. “Why should I get involved, if I'm not required to do so? Why wrap a bandage around my head if it doesn't hurt?” he used to tell himself over and over when he saw such things.

Things? More like people doing-not doing. He really needed a flat closer to the docks. He wouldn't have to cross this hellish street, and so he wouldn't gaze at the orange-blue sign that slowly pierced every corner of his mind.

“Watch where you're going!”

The asteroid quaked for a second, making him lose balance. Judging by the impact, it must have been an ore ship docking East, or accelerating too quickly to the West. Whatever it was, the world had stopped for an instant to regain balance. The sign alone blinked unhampered, its long, voluptuous letters glowing.

“Excuse me.”

“What do you think that was?”

The guy walked away, question floating in the air. Even if he knew the answer, he would surely avoid talking to a stranger. Each had to walk his given path as quickly as possible, to avoid jamming the streets and raising pollution levels.

“If I worked closer to the Western docks, traffic time would be five times reduced. From two hours to...”

“I can do the math, thank you!”

The administrator was a redhaired man, his face covered in freckles. He was part of the proto-owners guild. Landholders, as Cosmin called them with disgust, taking refuge in the slang back home, so different from the unfamiliar computerized language of the outer-world colonies.

“Then the matter is settled!”

A wry smile spread across the guy’s face, revealing big, ugly teeth.

“If you say it’s settled, I will mark it as such.”

The man scratched something on the desk’s touchpad and flung the recording towards him. The phone rang for a second, and Cosmin saw the smile turn into a scornful grin. *You, new immigrants, it seemed to say. You know nothing, it’s always demands and rights!*

“Still, I would like to file an official request.”

The man shrugged.

“The line goes all around the Kuiper belt!” he laughed and leaned back.

The chair cracked under the weight of the proto-owner. Cosmin weighed up the facts. This was not the right moment to have an argument. He suspected that behind the ancient-looking door stood the family of this insolent, freckled man. The guy seemed more than ready to get into a fight. He merely had to raise his voice or express his discontent in any other way than polite, empty words. It wasn't the right moment. Not yet.

“It's in the best interest of the administration, it's all I'm saying.”

“Close the door behind you!” shouted the man.

He clenched his teeth and got into the wavy motion of the proto-walkers. He had to mind his steps, to keep pace with the hypnotic, seemingly placid rhythm of the crowd. But beneath this apparent calmness, the sea raged. If he missed a step, he could get squashed by thousands of bodies, dragged against his will, pulled out of the flow, picked up and seized by automatic law enforcers. He also had to be careful with the harmony lanes. Otherwise time would bend, and instead of reaching the space-docks, he might find himself in a totally different place.

“Excuse me...”

“Sorry.”

“Excuse me, sorry!”

He squeezed his way through the crowd and reached the main westward sidewalk. Things got easier from there on. Most people walked in the same direction. Some were old colleagues of his; most he didn't know. No one aged on the asteroid belt, and 'no one should miss the chance to die young', as the pub joke ran, on a Friday's night drinking.

He smiled as he watched the glowing letters on the side. He knew what they spelled even before the message was formed: *Bodies to let*.

"What the hell!?"

The ads had first appeared two weeks before. He'd heard about them from his mates, who assumed it was a recruitment company. One of many. Others knew better:

"They rent androids."

"What for? There's barely any room for us!"

"There's, like, more androids than humans on Earth. Soon they'll be able to vote."

"Like hell they will!"

"It's what I've heard, I'm telling you!"

Cosmin had some ideas of his own, but he wasn't eager to share them. And then, the orange-blue ad showed up on his street, and with it a cold air that swiped through the darkest corners. It infiltrated the tube-flats, giving him the creeps. The coldness of an incomprehensible thing.

He waved his hand and retired to the cabin of the electromagnetic crane. The world got smaller, narrowing down to crates and orders sent directly to his cortex.

“What are we going to do if they bring androids?”

“I’ve heard they’re more effective.”

“A lot more!”

“More resilient, and they don’t eat up that much.”

“They eat up a lot.”

“Bullshit.”

“No, seriously, they eat up energy, not food.”

“We gobble, they recharge, there’s the difference.”

“We dream.”

They looked at him over their beers.

“We dream! Is this guy for real?”

Up and down in the tight airlock compartment of the crane, the meaning of dreaming changed constantly. How much do I think when I work? How many dreams do I have when I sleep? Everything was automated, and even his actions were controlled by a neurochemical implant. Operations, quick reactions, unforeseen events, tight spots... Thousands, tens of thousands of versions, close to perfection.

“Why do they still need us?”

“Are we cheaper?”

“Could machines be more efficient?”

“What will they do with us?”

“What will we do?”

“Stay and rest.”

*What will we do, what could we do, if... If they replace us. With what?* This was like a litany, a background noise

for every workday. When they had fun, things took on the bright, cheery colors of the searchlights.

“When we’ll see a sloshed android, then we’ll surely be in deep shit.”

But until then, there were those ads. Androids were still nowhere in sight, but they all knew it was a matter of time. Rumors multiplied and took strange forms, all spread through the proto-walkers grapevine.

He knew they all carried a grain of truth. Whispers were the first omens of the new reality. His coworkers taunted him, some even made fun of him. But the portents continued to multiply. The proto-owners were too lazy to notice the shift in workforce, whilst the mass of workers swarmed hypnotically through its daily monotonous rhythms. Forced sleep, automated walking, neurochemical-based work, exhausting walks, dull shows, dreamless sleep, lonely walks, silly talks, boozing without memories.

During lunch break he studied the faces around him. They were chewing in silence. Some watched the news on their artificial retina, others carried on virtual conversations.

“Have you seen the ads?”

They waved their hands. Apparently, these ads were really getting to him. His mind swirled with disquieting thoughts. He took a shot of Calcium and put on his worker’s helmet. Maybe it was high time to confront his

fears. He breathed heavily, then picked out the add on his visor. The answer came at the end of his shift. He already had an appointment, which, he noticed, coincided with the moment he went by the office on his street.

The smiling face of a middle-aged woman appeared on the door's intercom.

“Mister...?”

“Cosmin Barbone.”

The door opened with a dry paper rustle, revealing a tunnel-like airlock. Like many other stores and offices, this one was built on the asteroid's surface, to avoid the outrageous rent demanded by the administration.

He stepped on the conveyor belt and admired the wall paintings. There was no indication of what was happening at the end of the airlock. There were no commercials for products, news or latest fashions. He turned his head and caught a last glimpse of the crowded street. Then silence, broken by the rustling of trees, the murmur of waterfalls, and the cries of vultures.

A door identical to the first opened in front of him. The same face greeted him, now in the flesh – a medium-height woman, benevolent furrows on her brow. She bowed slightly, then fixed him with a pair of bleached eyes.

“Welcome, Mr. Barbone.”

Cosmin rubbed his palms as the sudden desire to leave surged through him.

“Thank you, glad to be here.”

He got a hold of himself and bowed in return.

“I was... I’m... I’m still curious. If you don’t mind.”

The woman laughed gently. Cosmin sighed. Ever since he started working in space, his aesthetic sense had atrophied under the constant bombardment of chemicals. He returned the smile, not knowing if he should do more or less.

“Oana Cernescu.”

She extended her hand, a form of greeting he recognized from those old movies he watched at night before going to sleep. He shook it carefully, desperately searching for the appropriate convention. He knew nothing of the world where Mrs. Cernescu presumably came from, about Earth, about the inner-planets. He only knew space, recycled air, crowded streets and protocols. An artificial world that he hated from the day he arrived, which had become, imperceptibly, more familiar with each passing day. How long was it now? Twenty-one years, he remembered with a gasp of surprise. A lifetime!

“Pardon me?”

He swallowed hard. How was it that a slight touch and a faint scent could bring back so many memories and ravish his senses? He wasn’t a teenager anymore. He wasn’t even young. According to space standards, he was approaching his senior years. One year in the asteroid belt equaled three Earth years, two lunar years and two Martian years. He quickly worked out the numbers: 73 years in Earth time.

Suddenly, all these details made him slouch. He was aware that he looked like a white, almost translucent rat, hairless, colorless, short, skinny, with big head and wrinkled skin, as if he'd taken a long hot bath. He pitied himself, hated himself for being dressed in workers' clothes, smelling of oil, ozone and mineral dust. He was a simple operator, unaccustomed to the pleasant, aseptic air of an office. A human body, filled with electronic circuits, chemicals, wrapped in anti-radiation clothes, all massed on a ceramic composite skeleton.

Whereas she... Mrs. Cernescu. Oana. She beamed with health, human warmth and thoughtfulness.

He gave a disquieted nod.

"Are you offering what I'm looking for?"

He bit his tongue grudgingly. He had a mannered speech, at least according to job standards. Now his tongue hung heavily and his mind was unbearably slow. He ordered a shot of caffeine to freshen up a bit.

She was slightly amused, or perhaps merely affable, as she took him by the shoulders and led him to a couch. A huge window on the right wall offered a panoramic view of the asteroid. Out in the distance rose the yellow crests of the space-dock cranes. One of those metal cribs was his workplace. Between them and the comfortable office he sat in stretched a sea of bulb-buildings full of tube-flats. All identical. Colorful outgrowths on the dark surface of the asteroid.

She gently placed her finger on him.

“How old were you when you were sold to the mining corporation? Five? Ten?”

He was born in space, on a Martian orbital station.

“In advance,” he whispered.

“In a lab?”

He wished. Sometimes he told people just that. *I was born in a lab*. He lied about his age, said he was older, suggesting he had a strong genome, he was good breed, a marvel of genetic engineering. Some women bought into that, usually after too many drinks, when it was all the same to them.

He spent his first years in an orphanage on Mars. Then he was sold to a belt company. Not only him, but the entire orphanage. He had no pleasant memories and no regrets. He only remembered the warm bodies of the boys and girls there, his mates. Their soft skin, layered with peach fuzz, still colored, not yet pierced by hypodermal circuits, by chemicals designed to turn humans into superhumans, into biological entities capable of withstanding cosmic radiation, with little oxygen and few nutrients.

“I don’t know my mother, or my father. I was abandoned and then bought from a center for abandoned children.”

“I also grew up in an orphanage.”

She grabbed him by the hand, as if looking for support against a slew of memories. He looked at her, trying to see beyond the perfect face. Could she be one of his

childhood mates? It was impossible to recognize anyone by this point. Space is an unsurpassed artist when it comes to carving faces and shaping bodies. Space and humans. All for the benefit of humanity and corporations. And yet, he relished in the pleasure of searching, of waiting.

“No”, she answered his unspoken query, “we haven’t met before. But we could’ve. Sometimes, people who are millions of miles apart share similar fates. I grew up right here, on the belt.”

“On one of the Splik Stations,” he pointed a finger to a little star that blinked somewhere close to Jupiter.

“On SS05.”

The stations formed an impressive fleet, an artificial outer colony, settled by businessmen, stars and jolly old people. He finally understood her composed demeanor, her clean wrinkles, unmarred by crusts, scars or radiation. A new sensation surged through him. He was in the wrong place, looking or hoping for a change that he couldn’t express. He gazed at the tiny star – an aggregation of fifty intertwined stations – then at the colored spots on the asteroid.

“Some believe you’re a recruitment agency.”

The woman tilted her head slightly, neither denying nor confirming the rumor.

“Others say that... you sometimes... rent androids.”

The woman’s reaction told a different story this time. Her curiosity had been sparked. She had the look of an

anthropologist, he realized, and that made him feel even less significant.

“What do *you* think?”

“I have my own opinions on the matter.”

“I was merely curious.”

He accessed the medical protocols and asked for some extra caffeine and just a bit of nicotine. He preferred to smoke his ration.

“Well, I think that... but I might be mistaken.”

The image on the giant display changed slightly. Mars had appeared on the background, all rusty, the size of a nail. An hour had passed, he reckoned. The morning call was just three hours away. He should have been in his tube, covered in nutrient gel, sheltered behind anti-radiation shields, enjoying the comforts of cellular regeneration.

“No need for alarm”, she told him, pressing his arm reassuringly. “You’re sheltered from radiation here.”

Her hand drew a wide arch around the white, sterile room, offering no other clue to its supposed impregnability.

“The microorganisms cleanse your body with every breath you take. They’re more effective than any gel I know.”

He closed his eyes in silent gratitude.

“What do you want?”

The grip on his arm tightened, then she let go. She got up. With every passing minute she was better looking, younger, more enticing. Cosmin tried to gauge her age. If

she was born on the Splik Stations, where the earth standard year was equivalent to 0.15 local years, she could've been a hundred, maybe more. The few eccentric visitors that made their way through the labyrinthine tub structure of the asteroid said little to nothing. Being neighbors with Splik, they thought they knew all they needed to know. They didn't ask any questions. As the administration had told them, curiosity must not be encouraged. "Curiosity killed the cat", ran the Wednesday slogan. They had cats, deformed but versatile creatures, used against parasites.

The word 'curiosity' dwelled on his mind. He was curious, or had been. He realized that it was curiosity that had led him there, inexplicable as it was. This and ideas that took shape in his mind, after seeing that bright lettered ad one too many times.

"I am not rich."

The woman extended her arms and helped him get up. He was at least two heads shorter than her. She wasn't tall either, at least by Earth standards. Four feet at best, a strong, athletic woman. In a flash, the full extent of her words was revealed to him, and for an instant he saw the whole picture. He recognized the pattern, having lived through it before.

"You've bought the asteroid."

The flat-tube buildings shone in bright lights. Some people went to bed, others got up. They were working round the clock on the asteroid. Thousands of ships took

off to the belt and returned with their bellies full of ore which they spewed in the factories. Other ships brought food, blocks of ice or consumer goods, whilst only a few shipped away local products. Somewhere along this unbroken chain was Cosmin. A tiny speck of life tied to a thin, ever-trembling thread.

She stood silent, allowing him to gather his thoughts, and held his hand until his heartbeat stabilized.

“Everything will change” she said, as he was signing the agreement papers. “You will be transferred into androids. The procedure will ensure decades of healthy life, and it’s completely pain free. Synthetic bodies are designed to withstand extreme radiation. Damaged body parts can be replaced, just as one replaces a broken crane part.”

They both chuckled at the analogy.

“The structure of the asteroid will change. Tube-flats will become obsolete. They take up too much space. Androids don’t need food, gel or high-tech protection. Not even sleep”, she laughed, as if she’d made a good joke. “An energy source and an organic compound source is all they need.”

She took off her clothes and presented each part of her body.

“Everything is flawlessly designed. No useless organs, no senses to break your focus. Everything is perfect.”

Images of naked women in movies flashed in his mind, alongside memories of him showering together with other

kids, then teenagers. He tried to conjure those feelings that so thrilled his flesh, to the point where it hurt. Maybe it's not a good idea, he thought, maybe I'm losing something, or I have already lost it. But the more he gazed at Oana's perfectly balanced body, her lean muscles, her soft skin, free of wounds, gangrene or other imperfections, the more he succumbed to dumb admiration. True, her breasts were gone, and her hips lacked that femininity he thought he remembered, but the rest... ah, yes, the rest was perfect. A quasi-immortal synthetic body.

He signed his name and relished the thought of an undying machine.

*Translated by Alexandru Maniu*

**Cristian Vicol** (b.13.03.1988), writer, translator and graphic designer. Member of “Helion” SF Society Timișoara since 2006. Member of the editorial staff of “Helion Online” magazine since 2010. He also works as a graphic designer for “Helion Online” magazine and various Romanian Sci Fi events (*Distopicon*, *The Galactic Imaginarium Film Festival*). He is a PhD candidate at West University of Timișoara. His thesis deals with Central European literature, especially dystopian literature.

His first short story *Nemurirea nu e pentru toți/Immortality Is Not for Everyone*, appeared in “Helion” Magazine in 2010. His short stories and movie, and book reviews have been published in a number of fanzines and online magazines (“Helion”, “Laternautica”, “Helion Online”, “Almanahul Anticipația”, “Savantgarde”) and anthologies: *Antologia Helion 2011-2016* (Eurostampa, 2017), *Noir de Timișoara* (Tritonic, 2019). His volumes are *Comoara din cetate* (Eurostampa, 2014), *O scurtă istorie a Timișoarei până la 1716* (Eurostampa, 2016), *Sfârșitul inocenței* (Tritonic 2018).

He is currently one of the official translators of George Enescu Festival - one of the most prestigious classical music events in Romania and Europe. He also translated various plays and short film scenarios which have been staged in different international theater and film festivals.



# Radio Killed the Video Star

by Cristian Vicol

In communist Romania, listening to foreign radio stations was strictly forbidden. One could be fined, tracked or even jailed by the state police. This is the story of what happened after the earthquake.

## 1.

“**So** tell us, boy, what happened? And don’t lie, we found out everything!”

The heavy hand smacked him and the kid was hammered onto the table. The ashtray bounced and unloaded half of the cigarette butts. The ash scattered, blown away by his heavy sigh. He slobbered, whipping his nose with his sleeve. Pulling himself up in a daze, he said:

“I don’t know, it was dark, I really don’t know.”

“Yes you do! So what if it was dark? You hear with your ears, not your fucking eyes. Spit it out! You were there with Tavi, right? What happened then?”

“Nothing, nothing happened” shouted the boy. “How should I know if I wasn’t even there? I was just passing through, I didn’t see them.”

“See who? Tell us!”

“The people you say were out on the streets. I didn’t see anybody.”

The man struck him again, his heavy hand skidding through the boy’s long hair. The kid stood up from the chair, angrily. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he gazed in anger at them, almost like a rabid dog. He yelled:

“Let me go! You have no right to keep me in here! It’s... it’s...” He stuttered. When he finally found the word, he spat it out towards them: “Illegal!”

The men looked at each other and started laughing, a fat and healthy heehaw. Their leather jackets creaked over their broad shoulders. One of them grabbed the kid by the collar and shoved him back in his seat, then sat on the chair opposite to him. He lighted a cigarette and sucked on it with apparent joy, still chuckling. He scattered the ash on the floor, unhurried, and said grinning:

“I’m not saying it isn’t, but you are not leaving here until you tell us who came up with the idea. After that, you are free to go, legally and unaccompanied. Come, stop fooling around.”

## 2.

The house was pitch black. Only the ghostly light of the TV set outlined the boundaries of the living room, stuffed with bulky, varnished, furniture. The images were reflected from the glass cases crammed with porcelain baubles, which gazed with empty eyes towards the screen. At the four-person table, which could be extended on Christmas and Ester to accommodate eight people, the boy sat quietly, with his hands behind his head, hooked on the silent dialog which was quickly reeled by the 8 mm black and white film. He stared without blinking, lost in the mouths which mumbled the words. On screen, a man with a bushy moustache and a thick forehead, dressed in a worn-out jacket, stares down upon his son, who was wearing neat wedding clothes. The subtitles twinkled at regular intervals.

*“Asen, why did you take my suit?”*

*The man slaps his child, who looks at him with huge frightful eyes.*

*“Stop hitting me, father!”*

*The boy tries to dodge his father’s fists.*

*“Asen, these clothes are not yours”*

*“Why, father?”*

*The child cowers, terrorized.*

*“Because I am your father and you must do as you are told!”*

*“But I want clothes like yours.”*

The boy followed the dialog, curious to see what will happened to the money hidden in the seams of the suit. "If he found them, he wouldn't just sit there like a fool. He would probably escape such a wolfish father, and, maybe, go to the seaside" he said to himself. He changed his position and, as he leaned on the back rest, the chair squeaked, worn and sunken. The balcony windows reflected his profile through the fold of the drape. "Or maybe he could revolt against him. Who the hell can suffer so much injustice?" he thought again.

*Without looking back, the child runs away to the forest which surrounds the village. He is free until he meets the General. The soldier is wearing a superb tunic, strewn with medals. He says:*

*"There is nothing to be afraid of, with me by your side you will be free to wear any clothes you wish, but for now, you must use the ones you have, as I cannot give you new ones."*

*The child stares with envy at the General's shiny adornments.*

*"But these are my father's wedding clothes. What if they tear?"*

*"Asen, your father is a greedy man and nowhere in this country will you find one more evil then him. He wants to be the only one who wears beautiful clothes."*

*"Well, I just wanted to get married and feel respected, maybe feared, just like him"*

*“You, a wimp, wanted to fill his shoes?”*

*The General laughs, well pleased by the joke he made. He rests his arm on the child’s shoulder, but a glimpse of his voracious nature can be seen in his eyes.*

From the hallway, the electric light shined through the frame of the door. He could hear voices from the kitchen, accompanied by a strong scent of grilled fish. It was well past eight and the evening quietly descend into the night. Once in a while, the train passed without stopping, huffing and puffing close to the workers apartment block, right through the East Railway Station. There were other noises too: he could hear doors slammed shut or toilets being flushed and water pouring through the old pipes, hidden in the brick walls.

*Asen kept himself busy, working for the General who is in fact not a general. He hasn’t been in the army, he was just an old henchman of the boy’s father, exiled from the village at the wood side. The kid does not belong to himself anymore. His father’s suit is worn, torn at the elbows and worn at the knees. He brooms, washes, sweeps, stitches and unstitches. The wad of cash has started to be visible through the thinned material of his clothes. He touches it and ruffles the edges with his nails. It feels like a brick dangling from the neck, across the chest, strangling and chocking him. Soon, the General, his father’s ex-henchman, will adopt him. And even though he was an engineer, he speaks like a mayor.*

*The child is unaware of the wickedness of the engineer-general. He only knows that the man promised to pull him out from the shit, from the prison of wretchedness he has been squalling in. Meanwhile, he listens to stories of assassins sent to steal his freedom and kill him. Asen trusts the General.*

The boy rested his hands on his knees and the light from the TV set shined on his forehead and cheeks. He looked like a spectre. He brushed his dark hair, ruffling it. From the kitchen, the voices continued to murmur, soaked in fish and garlic smell. His feet and bottom were asleep, and the chair creaked every time he shifted.

Plates were being placed on the table and the forks and knives chinked. The door cracked and a motherly voice called out:

“Dan, supper’s ready!”

“No, I want to watch the rest of the movie”

“Leave it and come here. We’re not going to wait for you.”

“Then don’t. Eat, I’m not hungry.”

The door opened entirely and a woman, maybe in her fifties, with white wrinkly skin and grey locks gawked at him, frowning.

“Dan, come to dinner!”

“No!”

“Stop arguing with me and come eat!”

“No!”

“Come to the goddamn table or I’ll call your father!”

The women pressed her weight on the word “father”, and her urging became a threat, promising a short and rough exchange, which could only end with a decree. The boy mumbled something which resembled “running away from home... the old suit... the General” and got up clumsily and sluggishly, as if pulled by ropes.

“You wouldn’t be yapping your mouth if we didn’t have anything to put on the table” the woman scolded him, even though one could hear a drop of melancholy in her voice, the clue of a half-dormant memory, hidden somewhere deep, but which occasionally surfaced. “And anyway”, she continued “it’s almost nine o’clock. They will soon air his usual address to the people.”

The boy ignored her and stretched towards the TV.

*Asen is strangling his father. The man found him and tried to take his money, but Asen caught him when he was searching in his pockets. He was asleep, but he woke up just in time. Angrily, he pushes his fingers in the old man’s veiny and skinny throat. He yells:*

*“I just wanted to lead a good life, like you, but you long for all the riches, and want to keep them only for yourself. You treated me like a slave. I’ll show you!”*

*“My dear boy, I was your father.”*

*He shakes his hands, like a mad man. He refuses to die.*

*“Let me go, boy, my dear boy!”*

*Asen presses as hard as he can. He gathers all his strength. He squeezes, and squeezes, and squeezes. Above them, almost like a judge, the General stands watch, satisfied.*

Suddenly, the TV turned off, and the apartment started to shake. The pots and pans began to tremble and hurtle against each other. The floor moved and quaked, shuffling the furniture and jolting the cupboards against the walls. A thick darkness enveloped the neighbourhood. The balcony windows wavered, and the doorposts screeched, crammed under the clamping bricks. The family could hear a loud thumping coming from outside the apartment. The roof tiles were shattering on the sidewalk.

“Earthquake! Dan, Basil, come here, under the doorpost. Quickly!”

The boy leaped next to his mother. He felt his stomach sink. Fear nestled in his chest, close to his thundering heart. The cabinet glass quivered, then dropped from its wooden frame, shattering all over the room. His father’s boots clattered in the kitchen, accompanied by a flow of curse words. As the frying pan fell from the gas stove, there was a *bang!*, followed by more swearing:

“Fuck! Motherfucker! I’ve spilled oil on me!”

“Basil, come here, forget the goddamn fish,” the wife yelled.

“Just a second, I have to turn off the gas.”

The chandelier dangled blindly, like a pendulum, threatening to plummet towards the table and shatter the

porcelain vase. It pulled on the wires and just before it fell, the quake was over. The plates, pots and pans became silent. So did the cabinet windows. The boy reached for his mother through the darkness. She grabbed him warmly and gave a sigh of relief.

### 3.

The earth started quaking at 9.22 PM, 428 kilometres away, at a depth of 110 kilometres. It lasted for about 55 seconds (56 according to other sources), and it had a magnitude of 7.2 on the Richter scale. Around its epicentre, the ground liquefied and it splintered into giant holes. According to seismologists, the energy released by the tectonic plates was equivalent to 10 Hiroshima atom bombs. 1578 people died and 11,300 were injured. A city from the southern part of the country vanished. It was felt in Moscow. The news reached Lagos.

### 4.

“I’m going out”, said the boy. “Gonna hang out with Tavi. Won’t be long.”

The neighbours gathered outside their apartments, surrounded by the warm glow of candles. The soft light glittered on the walls, painted half white and half military green. They made sure everyone was alright, if there was any damage and if it hammered the other apartment buildings too.

Before his mother could say anything, the boy scurried down the stairs, and whirled outside into the frozen and bleary park, which separated the apartment blocks. The night sky was furrowed by a crescent moon. He fumbled to the window opposite his building and gently tapped on it. Behind it sprang an unshorn, frizzy kid, with a longish face, a thin nose and a boyish moustache. He had a quizzical and skittish way about himself, something like a snappish mouse. The first thing he did was to fix his torchlight right into Dan's eyes.

“Did you feel it?” he asked impatiently. “You felt it, didn't you? There was an earthquake.”

He said it with the enthusiasm of one who is sharing an interesting secret, prancing around and glancing out on the street, maybe expecting to see fallen trees and rubble everywhere, but the park was sleeping, indifferent to his steam.

“It shook our whole apartment” he said, “we thought the ceiling was going to collapse.”

“Yeah” Dan confirmed less spirited, “Let's go around the block. Take the torchlight.”

While he waited, the boy huddled his jacket neckband over his ears. He fished a pack of cigarettes from one of his pockets, stolen from his father, placed one between his lips and lighted it with a safety match, hiding the flame with his hands. He puffed on it, avidly. The glowing amber blazed his face, crackling. He blew the smoke upwards and

shivered from the cold. Shimmering lights floated at every window, pulsing like comets behind the dull windows. The stillness became stuffy. He rumbled his hair, swirling it in tufts, and, at the same time, clopped his feet, trying to warm up. The echo of his clatter quelled on the grey walls. The air was thick and heavy.

The door creaked.

“Care for a cigarette” he asked the scruffy kid who finally came out, concealed under a flappy fur cap.

“My dad will see us. Later.”

They strolled down the alley. A solitary car, a Pobeda, sat quietly on the street corner, empty and abandoned over winter. The headlights blinked when Tavi swept his torchlight over them. They took a right, then a left, and passed the school building. It was deserted and quiet.

“Our chandelier fell.”

“Ours didn’t. But it barely hangs on. A cabinet glass shattered. It fell, just like that. Let’s go to the stores.

Tavi lit up a cigarette and quietly followed the other boy. The damp road glistened coldly. A heaviness, brought by the past event poised over them. They clopped evenly, with measured steps, conversing quietly:

“Do you think it was felt anywhere else?” asked Tavi

“I don’t know, maybe. Probably.”

“Hey, picture this!”

“What?”

“A dame” said Tavi, generously cupping his palms against his chest. “A dame jiggled by an earthquake.”

He waggled, groping his imaginary tits, pretending to kiss them passionately. They both laughed.

“Like Sophia Loren”, he continued. “Have you seen her in *Angela*? Well, just like that. Bouncing up and down for two hours. Now that’s a movie. I would give anything to be Jean. Even money. Oh, man, to be able to take her bra off..”

“Sophia Loren doesn’t wear a bra. She never has.”

“No? Really?”

“You bet.”

“That’s not true, tough” Tavi argued. “She had one in *The day before yesterday, today, and tomorrow*, or whatever the hell it was called.”

“Well, yeah, but she was wearing just the bra,” Dan said and winked at his friend. “A bra and nothing else. And it was called *Yesterday, today, and tomorrow*. You’re a bit behind on your movies.”

“Aren’t you a know it all. Anyway, bouncing paradise! I made up a small poem. You want to hear it?”

“Go ahead.”

“Sophia Loren, what a prize/  
Told me great amounts of  
lies/  
Promised me her juicy thighs/  
Until my cock grows  
old and wise”

They laughed gushing and joyfully. Tavi hopped around, delighted.

"You like it, don't you?" he grinned, smugly. "I have another."

He opened his mouth to recite again, but stopped suddenly, pointing his finger down the street. A bunch of people, gathered in the middle of the road, were speaking in hushed voices. A man, dressed in a baggy overcoat, with his head squeezed under a ship skin military hat, held in his hand, like a crane, an oil lamp, shining its light upon the other.

"Let see what's going on" said Dan.

## 5.

"Oil lamp" grinned the man. Are you telling me he was a digger? Bullshit!

"No, I swear, they were just standing there, in the middle of the road, talking. One of them had an oil lamp. What do I know? I told you, the lamp posts weren't working and it was dark."

"Who was there? Give us some names."

"I don't know. I didn't stop to see."

"Don't lie!"

The boy said nothing. The man smacked his hand against the table. The cheap aluminium quivered violently, shaking the cement floor it was bolted onto. He smacked it again. The mouldy walls echoed the metallic screech.

"I'm losing my fucking patience. You think we'll wait all night for their names? You saw them, you stopped, and

you talked to them. What did you tell them? Who told you to listen? Who?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about” the boy yelled, terrified.

The other man came by his side and leaned over. He reeked of tobacco and sweat. He was the one who ran after him all around the block, almost to the boulevard and close to the city centre. The shirt he was wearing, a blue, regular one, was stifling his throat. The flesh under his wide jaws became lurid. He whispered.

“We know your father. He’s a military man, garrisoned here. You want to cause him problems? You want him to be discharged? Think about it.”

“No, please, he doesn’t know anything”

“We just have to make a phone call and that’s it. He’s done for. You do understand we have the power to do that?” He turned to the other man. “This fucker thinks I’m joking. Go call the garrison. I’m done with this.”

“Please!” begged the boy, beaten. “Please, leave my dad alone. It’s not his fault.”

“Who was there? Spill it out!”

## 6.

“What is that? Do you see it?”

Tavi looked up and grabbed Dan’s arm, chucking it hard. His fingers whitened on the woolly fabric of the jacket. He took a step back, ready to high tail it back down the murky street, and hide in a dark corner.

“Dan, can you see it?”

From the midst of the lamp lit crowd emerged a stubby creature with a rectangular head, ivory grinned teeth, and two round sleek eyes. From its grate-like mouth, the abomination was crackling, whistling and swishing, a noise somehow familiar, yet distant and strange at the same time. While holding his giant cranium upwards, using its hands to balance it on its flimsy shoulders, the being looked straight at them. It turned sluggishly, as if it was doing a primitive dance, then it lifted its neck up.

“Dan, let’s get the hell outta here” cried Tavi, turning around anxiously. The boy took a step back. He was trying to grasp the origins of the creature which was bobbing in front of them. What sort of devilish pit spew it out? He started laughing. From behind the beast, a man hissed angrily:

“Fucking lift it up, it’s not working.”

“I’m trying, but it’s heavy. You do realise it’s heavy, don’t you?”

“Wait, stop, I’ll grab it from this side.”

Tavi stopped on his feet and stared at the men who were trying to lift the monster’s head. He scratched his chin, relieved and ashamed. A baldy, dressed in scuzzy neon-green sweats and cheap unstuck Chinese trainers, asked impatiently:

“Can you hear anything?”

“Yeah, maybe, be quiet for a second”

*buzz... at this particular moment the information is still scarce... buzz... it seems like... buzz... we'll keep you updated... buzz... on Radio Free Eur...*

The voice became silent. The radio crackled, quietly.

“Somebody has to climb up that lamp post, tie this wire” said the baldy. “Who’s going up? Someone younger and more nimble.”

Nobody said anything. They just stood there, quietly, sweeping their torchlights over the decrepit device. They were frightened and anxious. Some wanted to leave, but the windows were still shrouded in darkness, and the radio sets weren’t working. Except for this one, which was attached to some wires coming out from a dank garage door.

”Come on, nobody?” huffed the man, strained from the effort. “Florin! What about you?”

The one holding the lamp winced, rustling the oil. The flame dimmed and almost died out. The man opened the wicket and blew gently. The soft yellow light grew and perched over them.

“Marius, Mihai, how about it? Călin, you do it! Are you afraid of the bobby? Fuck him! I’m sure he’s curious about what the hell is happening. Nobody? Cowards!

“Why don’t you do it?” asked the lamp-man.

“Because I’m too fat, dumbass! Also, I have to hold the radio, it’s too heavy for you, so stop asking stupid questions. Alright. Who’s climbing? Let’s do this.”

“I’ll do it. I just hope there’s no electricity running through those cables.”

The boy stepped forward and asked for the wire. Tavi pulled him back.

“Are you crazy? You might fall. Let it go.”

“Let’s do it. Aren’t you curious? You hold the light.”

He turned towards the baldy:

“Give me the wire. I’ll climb the post.”

“Alright, lad. Finally, someone with balls.”

“I’m not afraid of the bobby”, vouched the boy, heartedly.

The man pat his back, gave him the wire-head, and pointed towards the lamp post.

“Take it like this. Hold it tight so you don’t have to climb again. When you reach the top just tie it to the pole. Good. We’ll light your way.”

The boy grabbed the silvery strand and wrapped it around his wrist. He pulled his pants and clung to the lamp post, clamping his knees and lifting his body upwards, chafing like a worm. For a second he could see himself lying on the sidewalk, with a fractured spine and a cracked head. He pushed harder. His palms and fingers were sore. He thought he was going to plummet, and his enthusiasm turned into panic. “This was a stupid idea” he muttered to himself, while stretching his neck and looking around, same as a flightless bird caught high up a tree. Desperately he clanged to the metal pole, welded on top of the lamp

post, from which the cables were tied, and pulled himself topside. He sat on it, bowlegged.

From there, the crowd, draped in the warm light of the oil lamp and the lanterns, looked like prisoners, trapped on the bottom of a well. The boy waved at them, tied the wire to the cold steel under his haunch, then pulled out a cigarette and the matches and began to smoke, calmly. He could see over the roofs, well into the distance. The thin horn of the moon clambered over and got stuck behind some wispy clouds. Far to the east, the darkness was absolute, and it seemed keen to devour everything.

Baldy turned the knob and the radio began to hum and haw. It crackled a few times and then the sound stabilized. Instead of the news, music came through the round speakers. A soft, studied, and balanced rhythm. The harmonies took over, swiveling. The wooden frame of the radio vibrated, ardently. The sound echoed off the walls, past the silent congregation, imbuing every corner of the neighborhood, well over to the school, as far as the park, and even the East Railway Station. Beyond the eastern darkness. It pierced the pavement, and rooted itself into the bare, muddy earth. It jumped high up, quivering through the cold, dead branches, hooking itself onto the horn of the March moon.

The boy hugged the lamp post, careful not to touch the thick cables which started to whirr. He listen to the music, spellbound, even if he couldn't understand much

of it. Something about pigs, three different ones, which radiated cold shard of broken glass. The night cold took hold of him. The music became harsh, an unbearable mash, hard to follow, almost a warning of things to come: paralyzing, imminent, and destructive. He tossed the cigarette butt and waved towards Tavi, then grabbed the metal rod and slowly skidded down.

The wind started to pick-up. The street light turned on. The boy blinked, blinded by its radiance, and then he saw the bobby. The man sat there, stiff, next to a massive bloke, covered in a leather overcoat. The music stopped. Baldy, terrified, pulled the wires, then turned, still holding the radio set, and together with the other one, Florin, jumped the bushy fence and disappeared under the somber trees, followed closely by the lamp-man.

”Stop, don’t run you fuckers. Where are you going?” howled the cop.

The boy slid to the ground. His pants ripped, hooked on a sharp stud, and he fell on his ass making a loud thump. A stabbing pain pierced his back all the way to the top of his head. He got up, moaning and limping. Tavi was already at the end of the street. He had lost his cap, and was ghostly pale. He waved his hands desperately, bouncing around, but this time he didn’t grab his tits. “Run”, Dan thought, then turned around and followed baldy and the lamp-man, praying the darkness will swallow him.

## 7.

“Which Marius, which Florin, which Mihai? Lies! I’ll ask you again. Who was there?”

“That’s all I know. I want to go home.”

He sighed, tiredly. His eyes had dark circles around them, and he looked sick. He rubbed his face and nose. There was nothing else to say. Exhaustion took hold of him. He laid his head in his hands and abandoned himself against the table, almost asleep.

“You, a wimp, had to climb that lamp post. You understand you’re in big trouble, right?”

Dan winced. He was starting to understand what was really happening. Last night felt so distant, as if part of another life, far away in a different country, which didn’t belong to him anymore. He didn’t belong to himself anymore. There wasn’t much else to do. He leaned back and gazed at the two men. He cleared his throat and said:

”What can I do now? I’ve told you everything I know. That’s it. There isn’t anything else...”

“Ah, don’t bother yourself too much, it’s not that bad,” said the man on the chair. “Listen, we’ll tell you what’ll happen. But not now. Monday morning, you come here and you tell them I called you. Tell them my name – Pandeale. They’ll know what’s to be done. Got it?”

“Yes” said the boy, passively.

“Good. But be sure to come. We won’t forget about you. Do you know your way home?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. You can go. Legally. Now, sod off!”

He got up slowly and went out the door, looking over his shoulder to see if the two were following him, but the man were still there, smiling at him. He moved through the damp corridors, found the exit and climbed down the stair in the chilly spring morning. He pulled out his last cigarette and puffed it angrily, then threw the butt and began to weep. He thought about running, not home, but down the boulevard, towards the forest, and far away. Not eastward, into to the blackness which swallowed him the night before. The other way. Beyond.

He rubbed his feet, just like an athlete before the marathon. He leaned over, reaching for the soles of his shoes. He cracked his neck bones, sighing, ready for the long run, inhaled deeply, and clacked his knees and shoulders. He jumped up and down, same as Sophia Loren. Chewed up and beaten, he slowly made his way home.

*Translated by Alexandru Maniu*



**Purluca Florin** (b. 1982) is a science-fiction, horror and fantasy author.

He debuted in 2013 in the magazine *Gazeta SF* with the short story “Iman”, followed by multiple appearances in the Romanian magazines (*Helion*, *Nautilus*, *Science and Technology*, *Suspense Magazine*, *Fiction*, *CSF*).

The translation of the short story “Präf / Dust” appeared in *The Singularity* (UK, 2016) and *Samovar* (USA, 2017). The short story “The Freaks” is part of the anthology *The Worlds of Science-Fiction, Horror and Fantasy* (Australia, 2019).

His translation can be found in magazines like *Better than Starbucks*, *Aphelion*, *Aurora Wolf* and others.

So far he has published three volumes of short prose and eight novels, as follows: *How to manufacture a demigod* (Tritonic, 2015) *Iman and others Fantastic Stories* (America Star Books, 2015) *Dust vol. I* (Pavcon, 2017) *Progradia* (Pavcon, 2017) *1944, Ein Freak* (Pavcon, 2017) *Fury Beasts* (Pavcon, 2017) *The War of Stones - Mercenaries vol. I* (Pavcon, 2018) *Touch of The Wilderness - Dust vol. II* (Pavcon, 2018) *Blood, metal and hope - Armand Călinescu vol. I* (Pavcon, 2018) *Fighter with death - Mercenaries Vol. II* (Pavcon, 2019) *The Curse of the Four Ghosts - Armand Călinescu Vol. II* (Pavcon, 2019).

# The First Man to Walk on the Moon

by Florin Purluca

**My** father was the first man to walk on the Moon. And I'm not talking about that crazy scenario in the 1960s. No, that was nothing more than a hoax. My father landed on the Moon, in the true sense of the word, on September 7, 2025. The first selfie in history, shared on Facebook, in the Spiru Haret Crater. I was very proud, but not at the time, because I was only five months old. Six years later, though, I was able to understand how things had worked out.

“Finally, a real small step for man and a big step for mankind!” I listened to my father, playing the video file over and over for what felt like a million times.

On the first day of school, the teacher asked me to come in front of the class, and stand next to her. She put a gentle hand on my shoulder and said, looking at my new colleagues:

“This is David, the son of the first man who ever stepped on the Moon!”

All of the children started to whisper and look at me with admiration. Oh boy! I was so proud of my father.

How I would have wanted him to be there with me, but he was undergoing intense training for a new mission and could not attend my first-day-at-school ceremony. During the intermission the children gathered around me.

“Are you going to fly to the Moon with your dad someday?”

“Can you tell him to show us the space ship?”

“Did he find aliens on the Moon? Did he fight them?”

“On his missions, does he carry a laser gun?”

“I do not know,” I told them, and shrugged my shoulders. “But I’m going to ask him and I’ll let you know guys.”

That night Mom handed me the phone to talk to him and I told him all about what happened at school. He laughed, and I said to him, for like the millionth time, how proud I was that he was my father. I also asked him everything that my colleagues had asked me.

“I don’t have a laser gun, and no, I did not fight aliens,” my dad explained, laughing. “As for the visit to the space ship, it would be a great idea, you know,” he added. “Let me see what I can do about it.”

After that successful mission on the Moon, my father became a kind of superstar. When he was not training for future missions, he was always invited to all sorts of television shows and gave tons of interviews for radio stations and newspapers. I rarely had the opportunity to see him in the flesh, but that was part of his work. He was paid both for being a pilot and for popularizing science.

“It’s a contract that he has to respect, David,” my mother explained to me once. I was seven years old then and I whined for the first time that I did not want to spend Christmas without him again. “Don’t be sad,” Mom insisted. “Within a few months he’ll be home again and you will be able to play with him as long as you wish.”

I was not that happy with the gifts that Santa gave me that year, even if I got some really cool stuff. But three months later my father came home unexpectedly, with a bag full of gifts thrown over his shoulder. Then I really was in seventh heaven.

“I hear that you were very sad that I was not home for Christmas?” he asked me during one of the few evenings he spent with me, and was not lost among his mountains of science books or absorbed by his laptop. “I have this contract, David. A contract that will be over in about three years. After that I will be with you all the time. We’ll have no worries.”

Then he explained to me about the financial benefits of that contract, and he also told me that at the end of the three years of toil, with all that money earned, we would buy ourselves a new and bigger house, a mountain of toys, a luxury car, a scholarship for my college at the right time, and the list went on.

For three years of our life, the reward seemed reasonable, even for my eight-year-old mind. While I was counting the days, secretly, on a stolen agenda from

my father's office, I marked each day of the week with a sloping line using some black markers. When impatience did not give me peace, I started over again, from the first day to the present day. I used another sloping line, drawn in the opposite direction to the first, crossing out the days with crooked, variable sized Xs. And when the wait became a pain, I went back several times to the calendar sheets and put the Xs in squares. As crooked and just as impatient. And as an ultimate attempt to take revenge on the slow slog of elapsed time, tired of all those years of desperate waiting, I colored the space inside the squares with Crayola pencils.

I remember the date—January 25, 2035. I remember how impatiently I waited for him to come back. The last X, at the end of those three long years of waiting. But he didn't come back home. He didn't even call. I was very upset, but I could find the power to understand. It was the end of an intense period of training and tournaments all over the world. It would have been impossible for everything to end in that way, simply, all at once. Let everything go in an instant. Like any end it takes time, I said to myself. When he finally came home after a week, I jumped into his arms. God, how glad I was to finally see him home. My mother received a large bouquet of flowers and I got a giant space ship, as big as a microwave oven, with lights and sounds and all sorts of cool details. Finally, we had all the time in the world just for us.

Dad hugged both of us and said with a smile on his lips, radiating happiness:

“I have wonderful news for you two!”

I was so happy. Obviously I knew what he was going to say to us. All the time in the world, just for us. I started hopping like a rabbit. I was a step away from dropping the shuttle and break a wing. That would have been a real tragedy.

“Tell us!” I shouted as I carefully placed the shuttle on the floor. “Tell us the big news, Dad!”

“I was accepted as the team leader for the first mission to Mars. Within one month I will sign the contract.”

My mother screamed and jumped in his arms, and I... well, I fought to repress my tears and fled to my room. I tore up the pages of the agenda and I crumpled them up in my clenched fists, with all those Xs and squares and crosshatching that were there. Another contract? Three? Five? Ten? How many years would I be forced to cut down, day after day, month after month, year after year, from some new agenda?

Dad came after me a little later.

“What are you doing here?” he asked me.

My tears were already drying up. But the sadness was still visible, like a cardboard mask hiding my true face. He took me in his arms.

“What’s with you? Why have you been crying?”

“You said that the contract was only three years long.”

He laughed, grabbed my shoulders with his large and powerful hands and told me, looking at me firmly:

“Are you not happy, David? Your father is writing history. You will be the son of the first man to step on the Moon and Mars. Do you realize that? You will be the most famous boy in the world. Everyone will want to take a picture of you or be your friend. You’ll be super cool!”

“But I do not want to be super cool,” I yelled. “I want to be with you.”

“We’re going to be together, son. This contract is not even that long. Just ten years. When it’s over, you’ll already have finished high school and then we’ll have all the time in the world.”

Two days later he got a phone call and had to leave. He returned home only six months later. We spent three unforgettable days and then he disappeared again for almost a year. I think I kept records for a little more than a year, but the days from the new agenda were cut with just a simple, straight line. No Xs framed in squares, no cross-hatching. I didn’t have the patience to do it all over again. A decade! All those years of waiting... It seemed too much to me. Of course, I was talking to him weekly and sometimes he was making a video tour of the base. It was interesting. It was as if I had looked at a documentary on the Discovery Chanel, except that the main actor was none other than my father.

“How is school?” he asked me every time I talked to him.

“Good. Very good.”

“Great! Soon you will be an astronaut like me. Maybe even a better one.”

Always, after those calls that became rarer, I smiled and imagined myself among the stars. Conquering new worlds, conquering, alongside my father, entire galaxies.

From a certain point of view he was right. Once, sometimes even twice a month, I was stopped by a guy or a girl on the street who asked for selfies. A few minutes later, my cell phone would buzz.

#hisfatherwasonthemoon #thecoolestguyaround  
#themoonboy

A couple of times I've even been interviewed on TV or for some fancy magazines. It's true that it didn't really feel like I was a superstar, like my father was, but there were some interesting questions I was asked, some of which I answered with lies while pretending to be happy.

*Are you proud of your father?* and *What's it like for him to be gone all the time?*, were, by far, the most frequent questions asked.

I was proud, it was not like I didn't understand where things were at. And all that longing that I had fed from on the inside, enough to hide my true feelings and offer counterfit answers... But in the depths of my soul the seed of a strange idea was blooming: I would have preferred my father not be the first man to reach the Moon or Mars. He

could just as well have been a baker, a mason or anything else. It would have mattered much more to me if he had come home from work and played late into the night with his son, who, after a while, didn't want to be an astronaut anymore.

We got the fateful call when I was about fifteen years old. My mother was the one who answered and instantly ran to her room, barely able to refrain from bursting into tears. I tiptoed over and put my ear to the closed door.

"He's gone! Marius is dead!" I picked up on my mother's words between sighs and tears. "They told me there has been an accident in Mars' orbit."

I returned to the living room and sat down on the couch, staring blankly at the television, waiting for an hour or so for my mother to calm down and find the courage to tell me what I already knew. I had been warming up to the idea for more than a year, and the news of his death did nothing but confirm what I already knew long ago: from that day on he would be just a man in pictures and movies scattered across the Internet or broadcast on television.

Even fifteen years after his disappearance, I still try to convince myself that everything that drove him to live among the stars was a desire to achieve immortality. To remain forever a living image in my eyes. To make me see him all the time, as a hero, as I saw him in the first ten years of my life. In a way, I would like to believe he succeeded. I encounter him daily while I'm going to work. He is no

longer the tall and presentable man from my memories, only a three-ton massive bronze colossus that points his right hand toward the infinity of sky to the occasional passers-by. The sculpture is located in the middle of the central park, surrounded by several rows of colorful flowers, and sometimes when my daughter and I pass by, we stand still. We both look at it in awe. Tania is the same age I was when I saw him for the first time walking on the dusty surface of the Moon.

“Who did you say this man was, Dad?” she always asks while holding a small toy or some colored ball in her small hands.

“This is grandpa, Tania. The first man to walk on the Moon,” I tell her every time, “and the first one who almost walked on Mars.”

She leaves and starts to play with her toys, and I sit on the bench in front of the bronze statue and take a picture of it.

#toomanymoonlessnightswithoutyou

I post the photo on the internet and my mobile phone does not buzz so much as it once did. As of today, it's been two years since anyone stopped me and asked me for a selfie.

*Translated by Florin Purluca*

**Miloş Dumbraci** (b. 1979), writer and translator.

His first short story, *Tristețe*, appeared in “Gazeta SF” fanzin in 2015. His short stories have been published in a number of fanzines (“Gazeta SF”, “Nautilus”, “Helion”, “Fantastica”, “Revista de Suspans”, and “Știință și Tehnică”) and anthologies such as *Povestiri cu dragoni* (Tritonic, 2017) , *Antologia Helion 5* (Eurostampa, 2017), *Cele mai frumoase povestiri Science Fiction & Fantasy ale anului 2017* (Vreamea, 2018), *Antologia prozei românești science-fiction* (Paralela 45, 2018).

His volumes are *Hoțul de Moarte* (sci-fi & fantasy short stories, Millennium, 2016), *Luizienii* (steampunk novella, Millennium, 2016), *Red Dead Ten* (short stories in English, ebook, 2018), *Flamura Neagră* (dark fantasy novel, Vreamea, 2018).

His first translation into Romanian was *Red Dead Ten*.



# Tiger-men

by Miloş Dumbraci

In the post-apocalyptic USSR, straying from the dogmas of Orthodox Communism attracts inquiry by Inquisitors, but when one of them tries to find out what has happened to a mysteriously vanished officer in infested West Germany, the answers might be more surprising than expected.

The armored vehicle's tracks chewed on the wet grass, spitting up two ugly looking waves of dark muck. Perched between the opened upper hatches, Yuri held on and closed his eyes, enjoying the weak touch of West Germany's sun. Just as lifeless as those in his Moscow and not really as warm, the feeble rays still poured into his soul and filled it up, after the endless dark hours spent in a train car with shuttered windows. He was safe for now, anyway, as on these flat lands any tiger-man could easily be spotted miles away.

Yuri sighed and let himself think of nothing, mindlessly watching the barely visible barbwire fences of Fort 24 slowly rising up from the ground, clawing at the horizon. A pothole swallowed the tip of a track and shook him, breaking the revelry. Around here, the Red Army had to use these old armored vehicles because the roads had crumbled over the 40 years since the Event, and their broken network connected only rotting towns and cities now, ruined and infested.

The decay beneath the tracks he expected, but the clear blue sky above surprised the pale-skin Russian man. No more people, no more pollution; nature had already cleaned itself up, swallowing the relics of humanity in a green, hungry tsunami.

Yuri sneaked his left hand under the overcoat, clenching the pistol grip.

The young man knew he would not be welcomed by the border-guards, just as Inquisitors were never really welcomed anywhere. Fear and fake subservience, yes, those were to be expected. The thought that the issue he had been sent to investigate was not at all risk free also crept behind his eyes, tainting the warm feeling.

The mysterious disappearance of a fort commander. Perhaps devoured by the tiger-men in some poorly-planned patrol, as the political commissar's report suggested, or maybe murdered by mutinous subordinates, as Moscow suspected. Here, in the Interdiction Zone,

people disappeared quite often and only God knew why Yuri himself had been sent to the edge of the world.

He crouched behind the rusty steel lid, as if looking for some cover. The question that had bugged him all along climbed up inside his skull again, screaming: why dispatch an Inquisitor to investigate a suspected mutiny!? That was the job of the KGB! The faith-questioners had the sole purpose of eliminating the deviants from the Holy Red Book, and that had been stated very clearly ever since 1928, when Comrade-Father Stalin had united the Communist Party and the Orthodox Church. Almost a century since then, and Yuri knew of no such intermingling, not even after the Event.

“Just stop`ere, ye man, can’t you hear?!”

An enraged red-haired little corporal with a huge mustache was yelling from behind a birch tree.

“Or it starts its screams in no times, now! Da?”

Yuri knocked on the metal lid and the vehicle stopped. First its tracks stiffened, with a mud splash; then, slowly, the rumble of the engine died out too. A sandy-bearded crewman popped up the hatch and removed his leather helmet, a questioning look on his face.

“Since when screams me at you, no!”

The angry red-haired had a strong and funny accent. After the Fall of the West, the USSR had swallowed its smaller Communist sister-states in a fast gulp, but their subjects still weren’t all fluent in Russian, even after decades of occupation.

“Them sensors, you fool. Da!? The circle of trees around the base is for nothing, you think? As soon as a tiger-man comes around, the sensors hidden in those leaves start howling! Since you can drive, you clearly are not tigered yet, but help my poor ears if that alarm goes off in this one birch above me! Pfff...”

“Corporal,” grinned the driver maliciously, ”bring yourself the fuck to attention and report fuckin’ properly, son-of-a-whore, or you’ll do extra patrols in the Diseased Zone till you won’t get to ever have grandchildren!”

“What?! To you, mothafucker!?!”

“No, to Comrade Captain Marilov there!”

The mustachioed man froze and shouted:

“Corporal Feher, sir! Comrade Captain, allow me to report...”

“Oh, come on, really!” The young man jumped from the APV and smiled. “It’s just an honorary rank, actually I am Second Grade Inquisitor Marilov.”

The look in the man’s eyes surprised Yuri. It did have the hatred and reluctance he usually expected. It also had the surprise effect he wanted to induce, in order to study the NCO’s reaction. But not only did the Corporal’s reaction not show the concealment of a murder accomplice, it amazingly slipped to show a glimpse of something unexpected. Hope, maybe?

“Comrade Inquisitor!”

The corporal immediately hid his feelings behind army procedures and sheered away, eyes trailing through the undergrowth.

“Wait for me to call the Fort, stop they the sensors of this area, and it’s done quick-quick. Da?”

The NCO went to the bulky radio transmitter that was leaning against the tree trunk, turned some dials and shouted, embarrassed:

“Can you come of here for a little? I dunno’ your code, stupid me forgetting old man! Sorry, sorry...”

Yuri shrugged and went, the gaze of the bored driver lingering on his back. Behind the birch tree, the red-haired briefly showed him two scribbled words, cradled in the palm of his hand: “Petrov” and “Envoy”. He then exclaimed:

“Sooo, Green 244 it is! Ready now, you go to the gates...”

Meanwhile, indistinctly, the corporal shook his head and winked. The Inquisitor threw a meaningful downwards look, but made no gesture, as he could still be seen by the crew. The officer then turned around without a word and growled, as if annoyed with the NCO’s familiarity.

Behind the tall, eroded, but still sturdy-looking metal gates, he was being expected by an entire welcome party: Cherytsin, the deputy-commander, tall, fair-haired and smiling, temporarily in charge of the fort; Zedevich, the priest, a bearded dark-haired man, silent and short; Ukov, the political commissar, a thin blue-eyed blond, straight

and strung like a steel spring; and two large soldiers with wicked looks, ‘protection escort’, as Cherytsin let Yuri know.

The purpose of this triumphant and ostensibly kind welcome was obvious to the Inquisitor: those managing the fort didn’t want him roaming about on his own. They were hiding something, so Yuri smiled a friendly smile and kept quiet, concealing his predator’s fangs behind a grin.

“... and over dinner you’ll also meet Comrade Zmeyev, the Party attaché! He’s now caught up with some administrative tasks...”

Till dinnertime, Yuri did what he could in the given circumstances: he walked around the fortified army base, talked to the troopers and NCOs, discreetly tasted the thick gloomy mood. The soldiers were not at all talkative, especially because of his so-called “escort”, but from their short grumbles he could at least guess that the former commander, the mysteriously vanished colonel Golubin, hadn’t been liked and was definitely not regretted. Several men described him as “harsh”, which Yuri knew very well that in Army lingo meant “sadistic, mean, aggressive”, maybe worse.

When he felt sure there was nothing else to be fished out from the conscripts’ minds, the Inquisitor retired to his small room and napped till dinner. Just before falling completely asleep, a small thought teased him, flashing by:

where was Zmeyev? A civilian, the party man should not have been allowed outside the fort, but he was nowhere to be seen inside it...

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When Yuri woke up at 7 in the evening, dinner was already set in the conference hall, a grim-looking, metallic, barn-like large space, ordinarily used for political indoctrination meetings.

The benches had been removed for the occasion and a long wooden table set, with five men already sitting around it: facing the door, acting commander Cherytsin and commissar Ukov, with an empty chair between them; on the other side, the frowning priest, a fat officer Yuri had seen earlier in the day, who was in charge of supplies, and also a way too friendly, bald civilian with pig-like eyes, extravagantly well dressed in a suit cut from an obviously expensive fabric. Zmeyev.

The table was amazingly stacked with fresh-made cold cuts, pork chops, thick steaming stews and other great looking meat dishes. All of them rare gourmet delicacies hard to come by on the home front, in the starving USSR, and supposedly absolutely impossible to find in the middle of nowhere.

Cherytsin affably grabbed the Inquisitor's arm, seating Yuri right next to him, then shouted at some orderlies lined along the wall:

“Zuckner! Petrov! Ilie! The wine!”

Yuri, smiling, thanked him for the hospitality and looked around. With the corner of his eye, he glanced over at Petrov: a blond youngster, pretty and slim. Could he be the one suggested by the corporal?

“...so most likely he went out during the night, drunk, and the tiger-men got him!”

Cherytsin leaned slightly towards Ukov, who quickly obliged to confirm.

“Ah, yes, this area is almost completely purged, but there’s plenty of them still hiding in the towns’ ruins. They may be forced by their infamous territorial instincts to venture this way. And yes, Golubin used to drink too much. He also did have the gate and sensor codes, so who knows what dumb idea he got into that big half-bald head of his!?”

“Did you find the corpse or any remains?” asked the Inquisitor, naïvely.

The others focused on their plates, uncomfortably. Was the investigator challenging them on purpose? Were they suspects? Could their replies be twisted in such a way as to suggest guilt? Like good Soviet people, they knew all too well that silence was the key to survival, so they kept quiet. Only Zmeyev, laughing as if Yuri had just joked, said:

“Oh, come on, Comrade Marilov, do not underestimate the tiger-men’s cunning! They did indeed lose their ability for articulate speech, but they are not completely dumb

ZMBs, as you see on TV. They are still capable of enough thought so as to hide from us. Think of them as wild dogs, that's the right level. Or rabid tigers, rather."

"Hence the name you all use around here", whispered Yuri and leaned back in the plastic chair, watching them, "tiger-men. Not the party-approved ZMB. Zapadnâi s Mozg Bolnoi, Westerners with Brain Disease."

He smiled and said no more. Zmeyev bit his lip, but continued as if he had not heard:

"The main effect of the virus is that they cannot stand another tiger-man, aaah, I mean ZMB, near them, except under extreme circumstances, like mating, for instance. Or when we hunt them down and they're cornered."

"And when they hunt and kill us, too," added the commissar coldly.

"Ah, indeed, yeah, when the beast-men sense uninfected humans, they go nuts and attack no matter what, biting and clawing like, well, tigers. It is true that, the moment they are fixated on us, they neglect to strike at each other," added Cherytsin, his face darkened by bloody memories.

"Almighty God took their minds!" shouted father Zedevich, out of the blue.

Zmeyev grabbed his shoulder, leaned towards the priest and laughed hoarsely:

"Well, sure, that's why the party called them westerners with sick brains - ZMBs. If it was God's will or not when the virus got loose from the Amerikanski laboratories and

doomed them all, that I don't know. But..." he boasted, snaking his eyes along the officers' expressionless faces, "...we must certainly praise the Party's wisdom! We were ready when it happened, with our borders completely closed and ruthlessly guarded by our brave armed troops! Otherwise, now we would be just like the rest of the world. Tigered."

Everybody jumped up and shouted, mimicking ideological fervor:

"Glory to the all-powerful Proletariat Party! God protect its holy leaders!"

"Come on, come on! Friends," said the fat officer, "let's forget about such chilling thoughts. Look, this delicious food is getting cold! Let's just eat!"

The Inquisitor didn't push on. He pretended to be completely fascinated by the food, not a difficult task since meat was always a luxury at home.

The young man didn't ask where all this mysterious abundance had come from, as he knew they would just talk about something else, like with the Golubin question. He did, however, drink all the wine in the tall glass and gestured to Petrov, who came in a hurry with the carafe.

"Such good wine!" said Yuri to the orderly. Docile, Petrov leaned over him to pour some more, and the officer whispered: "The Envoy."

The young man looked at him, startled, and nodded. A few minutes later, while filling the glass again, he whispered too: "Tonight".

The rest of dinner carried on uneventfully. The priest and the fat officer kept silent, the former apparently lost in thought, the latter constantly preoccupied by the stews. Zmeyev talked endlessly, arrogantly, laughing heartily at his own jokes. The others treated him with too much reverence, as if they owed him something. Cherytsin insisted on continuously serving the Inquisitor with steaks, wine and funny stories, but also avoided any serious subject. Ukov just brooded in cold hatred and contempt, his eyes fixed on a huge Stalin icon hanging on the wall.

Disappointed, Yuri excused himself after a while and retired, to the noticeable relief of the others.



In his room, Yuri first made sure the door was bolted and there were no microphones. Then he loaded and cocked the pistol and lay in bed, reading Stalin's Red Bible until he fell asleep with the lights on.

At around 2 AM., he heard the guards' whispers and some laughter in the hallway. One of them said something like "he didn't seem your kind of fellow" and knocked. Pistol behind his back, but smiling sleepily, Yuri half opened the door and Petrov squeezed in, gently rubbing against him in passing. The Inquisitor slammed the door shut, locked it and turned around to the fair-haired youngster lounging ostentatiously on his bed:

“Your kind?”

“Well, yeah. Queers, you know. Fags. That’s what I told them - that you called me for the night. But we both know you had other reasons to summon me here. Who told you about the Envoy?”

“Feher did.”

Yuri’s face showed nothing, but he was actually surprised. He knew homosexuality, although officially forbidden, was somewhat tolerated in the army and rather common in such isolated forts, but he didn’t expect the Envoy to be about that. Could it be that the whole case was just some lovers’ squabble gone wrong?

“So, you and Golubin...?”

“Aaah, God forbid, nooo!” laughed Petrov like a schoolgirl, amused. “Golubin was a wicked man and had many sins, but he was not... one of us. No, I was his orderly. And Feher his driver. What we two have in common is knowing about the Envoy. But I still have no right to tell you about that - only Golubin himself can confess it.”

The tiny youngster glanced at the Inquisitor:

“So? Are you gonna’ arrest me? Punish the wicked creature?”

“No, since that’s not why I’m here. And I have nothing against your kind, so stop acting all drama-queen. You already know the Inquisition doesn’t arrest gays, we have plenty of other problems...”

Petrov smiled playfully.

“But do you think God can love me, too?”

“Why not? Who am I to know what God can or cannot do?”

Apparently satisfied by the answer, Petrov straightened his back, suddenly became serious and said:

“Listen, Golubin went outside a week ago, in the middle of the night, in secrecy. The Colonel was a damned bastard, always yelling at us or slapping around soldiers and officers alike. He often got out secretly at night, just himself and Ukov. You do know, I suppose, that the purpose of the Interdiction Zone is to watch out for tiger-men activity. To capture and kill those trying to get out of the Diseased Zone and into the Union. But Golubin and Ukov actually did more than that...”

Petrov’s face turned red with anger. He took a deep breath and forced himself to keep on:

“Tiger-men are humans. Yes, the cursed virus made them crazy and they attack like wild beasts. Yes, they cannot speak and never gather in groups. But I tell you they are still human, still have thoughts and feelings, even if savage ones. I do understand killing them when they are closing in, trying to infect us, since, you know, the virus spreads through blood and mucus. It’s not an airborne virus.”

“Yes, I am aware of that, but still; tiger-men are no ordinary savages, they are ferocious cannibals!”

“My fat ass they are. That’s what you’ve been told at home, to make you feel better about us shooting them. Indeed, tiger-men did resort to cannibalism early on, because of the hunger, with them having no more agriculture or anything as such. But now they do just fine by gathering fruits and roots and hunting small animals. They learned, you know? What, if you suddenly went out of food, could you survive in the wild? Or would you resort to eating the dead in desperation?”

Yuri shook his head, silent.

“I thought so. And Golubin, Ukov and all the bosses around here know all that very well. But Golubin and Ukov were born and raised as hunters. Tiger-men hunters, or simply men hunters, really. They sneaked out at night to the Diseased Zone, flushed them out and shot them. For fun, I think, simply for keeping score. Big game hunting, trophy collecting maybe, just as was done with the real tigers when they still roamed this ugly world. Ukov probably still does it, for sure.”

Yuri casually put out his gun and placed it on the table, with a loud thump. He leaned over the boy and asked:

“What about Golubin? Where is the bastard?”

“That I do not know,” sighed Petrov , “but after one such hunting expedition where he went out alone, because Ukov was on duty or sick or something, the colonel returned in a state of complete shock. The next day he simply wandered around the fort, mumbling to himself,

and took off at night. Without his precious rifle, which it is still in his room.”

“But why?” insisted the Inquisitor.

“I told you,” answered the youngster. “He had found the Envoy. I cannot tell you anything more. I do know what it’s about, I heard his mumbles. Feher heard them, too. Everybody else knows nothing about it, but they are hiding something. Some different sin. I don’t really know what or who can tell you, but I do know where you should start.”

Petrov went silent for a while, then, doubtfully, whispered:

“Father Zedevich. He is... one of us. Me and him, well, you get the picture. I know the Inquisition does not prosecute Army poofs, but that sort of thing can certainly get a priest banned from the church. He’s vulnerable and will talk. I’m sorry to betray that dense gentle bear, but the Envoy is much more important.”

Saying nothing more, the frail soldier leaned and kissed the red book, sighed and left the room, his head down, through the guards’ despising whistles.



As soon as the sun rose in the morning chill, Yuri put on his Inquisitor uniform and a golden cross around his neck, took the Red Bible under his left arm and calmly walked into the chapel. Inside, Zedevich was minding his morning chores. Surprised by the visit, he exclaimed:

“Comrade Inquisitor? How... what can I...”

“God bless, father. I just came to confess.”

“Aaah, sure, right this way...”

Yuri glanced briefly at his guards. Somewhat embarrassed, they remained outside, confused. The priest and the young officer went into the back of the dark chapel, where they could not be heard. Yuri knelt and started confessing to ordinary stuff: lies, not respecting a fast, missing a service. Zedevich, eyes still wide with amazement, blessed him and began standing up. The Inquisitor swiftly grabbed his elbow, grinned and dully said:

“Father, while I’m here, and obviously ordained myself, allow me to hear your confession. Who else could forgive your sins out here, in this godless wilderness?”

The priest flinched, looked at Yuri and understood he had good reasons to be afraid. Zedevich gulped and knelt, hesitantly.

“I have sinned and I ask for forgiveness. I drank too much, I ate pork during the fast, but there was nothing else I could cook...”

“Father,” Yuri interrupted him gently, “do you know Petrov?”

Zedevich went silent, lowered his eyes into the ground and began trembling and weeping.

“Yes, yes, I do.”

“Sinner, confess under His all-watchful eye, since the Almighty and the Inquisition who represent His will on Earth already know of it. Did you know his body, too? And before answering, think well on these two words: Hell and Siberia.”

“Yes, yes, I confess. I confess!”

Yuri caressed the thick long black hair, comforting.

“My son, I have two choices: either I heard this confession as an Inquisitor and must therefore let the Church know it all, or I heard it as a priest, and then I could absolve you of your sins and keep it a secret. But before we decide that, I have a small, tiny question. And don’t lie. Lying is bad for the soul.”

Yuri paused and looked around the walls, feigning interest in the crudely painted saints. The priest, tearfully trembling, looked up at him, half terrified, half hopeful:

“But of course! Yes, yes, Comrade Inquisitor, of course that if I can shed some light on something... anything...”

“Golubin,” said Yuri abruptly, clamoring like a harsh judge. “Where is Golubin?”

“Not that! I really don’t know, could not know...”

“Siberia, father?”

“...but I do know who has your answer. Zmeyev! I think he murdered the Colonel. To silence him, maybe. During his last day Golubin kept saying he must confess it all, and Zmeyev’s spies must have warned the Party man. And he couldn’t just let the Farm be found! So Zmeyev killed him!”

“The Farm?”

Zedevich burst into tears:

“I swear I have nothing to do with the Farm. I have sinned, but in love, not in that! And if I say anything, they’ll kill me too! Zmeyer’s uncle is Comrade Zolotov, the General Secretary for this whole area, he’s untouchable!”

The Inquisitor was experienced at questioning, and he could clearly see that Zedevich was more afraid of Zmeyer than of him and would give no further details. So Yuri didn’t insist, but grabbed the priest by the collar, raised him up forcefully and hissed:

“Tell me where this farm is, and I’ll find it myself by accident.”

Zedevich snorted and said:

“In the village of Gathausen.”



Riding the tracked vehicle again through the tall grass, Yuri scanned the gray sky. This time there was no sun to enjoy, just low dark clouds and a cold thick rain pouring down on him. Before them, some buildings slowly rose up from the bleak plain: Gathausen.

He shortly glanced back. Left behind, the fort and a pensive sulking Cherytsin. Yuri had asked the man for an APC to reach a destination of his choosing, and the commander had agreed, although in obvious doubt. The

Inquisitor had clearly read the unease and suspicion in the commander's eyes: so Cherytsin also knew about the Farm and feared Zmeyev. But the officer feared the Inquisition too, and probably had decided it wasn't worth putting himself in peril between two devils; better to just let them devour each other and then pretend he had been favoring the winner all along.

Three silhouettes stood up, blocking the road. Zmeyev in the middle, smiling coldly like a crocodile, and beside him two big thugs in civilian clothes. So the perfidious Cherytsin must have warned them through the radio. The Inquisitor checked for his pistol, but knew it was pointless: he had no chance against three men, as the tank crew would probably remain neutral. At best. This was a battle that could only be won through words and cunning, not guns. And in craftiness Zmeyev was clearly a formidable opponent.

"Good day to you!" shouted Zmeyev in a friendly voice. "Not the finest weather for a walk, eh?"

"Good shall it be, God willing," replied Yuri. He decided to strike first and, seemingly bored, jumped down and let go the corner of his mouth: "I came to see the Farm. I heard it's well worth it."

Zmeyev looked sideways:

"Who knows? Only Comrade Zolotov, the area party secretary, can decide such matters."

The party man laughed with satisfaction, accompanied by his thugs. The Inquisitor laughed heartily too, unimpressed, then hissed, poisonous:

“You haven’t done your homework well, Comrade Zmeyev. I am second grade Inquisitor Marilov Yuri. Marilov indeed after my dear mother, Oleksandra Nikolaevna. In my line of work, standing out is not a good thing, so I don’t use my father’s name - Mikhail Akimovich Korolev.”

The thugs stood awe-stricken and Zmeyev dropped his jaw, speechless. Korolev? The Korolev? The disappearing of such an important general’s son would have been vigorously inquired, so it suddenly didn’t seem like such a good option.

“Oh, come on, Comrade, I knew that already, how could I not?” replied Zmeyev in a hurry. “I was just wondering if they knew each other, that’s why I mentioned my uncle. But please, please, let’s go see the Farm. You want to visit the Pig Farm first, or the Cattle Farm?”

“The pigs first,” said Yuri as if he already knew all about it.

Fifteen minutes later, they entered a huge restored agricultural complex that housed the Pig Farm. Which was exactly that, an unbelievable wealth in the ever-hungry USSR with its meager meat rations doled out on monthly coupons: a few huge dim-lit halls, each divided up into pens full of swine. And in each fold, a caretaker. How

come there were so many of them? There were no civilians in the area, just tiger-men and the military personnel, and no soldier was missing from the base.

The Inquisitor stepped forwards, but Zmeyev suddenly stopped him, putting a firm hand on his chest:

“But, Comrade, why lose you so young? And why break the pens? You cannot go in there without a bio-hazard suit!”

Confused, Yuri looked through the greenish glass window and understood: the caretakers were naked, skeleton-like, skinny and chained, dirty, with bestial looks. They were tiger-men slaves! But how could that be? He turned to Zmeyev, who coldly smiled back:

“As you can see, my friend, the tiger-men’s savagery is overestimated. Under certain conditions they are relatively docile, as long as one enters only in a sterile suit so as not to be smelled. They cost nothing, never protest the harsh conditions, and when they die, we feed them to the pigs. So, profitable all the way.”

Yuri kept his composure:

“But what about the pigs, anyway? What do you feed them with regularly, since I don’t think you can ask for provender as long as they are hidden from the state?”

“Well, the pigs...” smiled Zmeyev. “They do eat provender, Comrade, Zolotov sees that some from the Army’s official farms gets lost. And we bring them here with the Army’s tracked vehicles, on the Army’s expense.

We also feed them the garbage from all the forts in this area, every commander knows what's going on. But the swine are mainly offered whatever we can find around here, like grass, roots, meat..."

"What kind of meat, there are only small animals on these flat-lands?"

"Come on, really? Small animals only? There is plenty of big wildlife and it is hunted down by those who enjoy it, like Golubin. Yeah, you got it, we exterminate the tiger-men and feed them to the pigs. It's called state efficiency."

Yuri stood silent. This was horrible smugglers' roguery, but was it enough for Zmeyev to kill Golubin? He didn't think so, and the priest was too disgusted by the Farm for it to be all about some pigs. So, pretending to be bored by such things, the young man said:

"Comrade, we both know my silence can't be bought with some pork chops. But I think the Cattle Farm might interest me more..."

"Ha, I knew you were a connoisseur!" grinned Zmeyev perversely. "That's only for a select few, way less people know about it. Do you prefer calves or heifers?"

"Calves."

"Yes, so I've heard, so I've heard... Right this way, please."

He led Yuri beyond the pig halls, all the way to a long white building with small grated windows. The thugs remained outside, the two of them entered a cold hallway and Zmeyev passed a few doors before taking out a key.

The man unlocked the padlock and invited him inside, with a large doorman-like gesture. Yuri stepped in, unsure.

All the furniture in the room was made up of a bed, a chair and a sink, all from some rugged reddish metal. On the bed, chained and with his buttocks showing, a teenager tiger-boy lay sobbing. It could not speak, of course, but yelped like a puppy. Next to the bed, a box with whips, blades and various other such stuff.

Yuri stood for a few minutes, thinking fast. He exited, almost bumping into the glowing Zmeyev.

“No. This is not enough. If you want me to write down a report with none of these included, I need to know what you did with Golubin’s body.”

“Ah, ha, ha!” laughed Zmeyev. “It might surprise you, but I really didn’t kill him. Actually, nobody did, that damn fool went out tiger-men hunting one night, returned crazy and the next night simply took off into the Diseased Zone. He went mad!”

The party attaché watched the Inquisitor slyly and said:

“But I do know the village where you could find his remains. I like you so much that I’m even willing to provide you with a car and a bio-hazard suit. But since he’s deep into the Diseased Zone, no one will be willing to accompany you. And I have never ever heard of somebody going alone into the Zone and coming back, dead or alive. The tiger-men always get them all...”



Yuri turned on the wheel and stopped. Alone in an old rusty 4x4 GAZ car, he had almost reached the village, amazingly without being attacked once by the dreaded beasts. He leaned nearer to the babbling radio receiver and tuned it until he could clearly hear commander Cherytsin's voice:

“Black 11 to all bases in area 17-32, I repeat: Inquisitor Marilov went mad, stole a vehicle and ran into the Zone, being most certainly infected. I order his immediate termination upon identification. I repeat. Black 11 to all...”

The young man turned off the radio. So that was the reason behind Zmeyev's help. Yuri could not understand why he had not been simply murdered and fed to the pigs, but there was no way back to find out. All he could do now was to determine what had really happened to Golubin and the Envoy.

Yuri drove into the village, cautiously, ready to accelerate whenever a tiger-man showed up. But none did. He rolled slowly alongside the ruins, decrepit building after decrepit building, and still saw nothing out of the ordinary. After going through the whole village with no result, the Inquisitor decided to try again. He turned the car around and suddenly hit the brakes hard, petrified in amazement.

In front of him, the road was blocked by the most unbelievable sight ever, scientifically impossible: a group of tiger-people. Not one tiger-man ready to strike, not two beast men ripping each other into pieces for territory, but

about twenty calm tiger-people of both sexes, watching him in silence, motionless. And among them, colonel Golubin, wearing only a pair of camouflage pants, friendly waving the officer to come closer.

Awe-stricken, Yuri got out of the car and stumbled towards them, frightened and inconvenienced by the large, stiff suit. Golubin smiled and shouted:

“Lose the damn thing, you won’t get infected! And the gun, you won’t be attacked, either. I promise.”

The Inquisitor took off the bio-hazard suit and, almost naked, trembling in his shorts, took Golubin’s hand. Surrounded by the still silent half-beasts, the men entered a ruined house. Golubin lit a candle, put it on a wooden table and showed Yuri a chair. He himself sat in another and the docile tiger-people sat directly on the floor, in a wide circle.

“Listen here, my friend. Since you came for me all this way, you must have passed over many lies and many evil men; you already gave up everything in order to find the truth. I know it. And I’ll give you that truth, at least as much as I understand it myself.”

The muscular colonel looked about him gently and the creatures looked back with human gazes, not beastly ones.

“You know I used to hunt tiger-men. I was a wicked man...” sighed Golubin. “And you know that after a hunting trip I returned a changed man.”

The Inquisitor nodded. He said nothing, just listened on.

“That expedition was right here, into this no-name village. I was alone, cause Ukov was on duty. I was sneaking stealthily through the ruins, searching for prey, when I saw a light coming from this very house. Can you imagine? A light? And not even flickering? Where from? The tiger-men have no electricity or mind to use it! Intrigued, I went in. Inside I stumbled and fell, then I felt a hand helping me up.”

“Helping you up!” chanted the tiger-people, to Yuri’s shock, who knew their brain speaking centers had been utterly destroyed by the virus.

“Ah, you wonder about their ability to talk?” laughed Golubin. “You’ll understand. So, a hand picked me up and I found myself facing a tall shape drowned in blinding light. It did not speak to me, but I somehow knew clearly that I have been a bad man. Not anymore, since from then on, I received a mission of righteousness! To do good, to heal. And I understood immediately, as if it had been obvious all along, that from that moment onwards I had the power to heal the infected. Just by touching them. Simple as that.”

“The hand!” exclaimed the tiger-people, too, grateful.

“Yes,” smiled Golubin, “it’s all real, all these you see around me I found wandering around the village, touched them and they were healed. Of course, they are still in a stunted mental stage of development, just big children, really, but now they can learn to speak and live together. I

do not know if they will ever go back to a civilized way of life as we know it or will simply form new tribes of hunter-gatherers, the new redskins, so to speak, and evolve from there. We'll see in a few centuries."

"How?" asked Yuri. "Is it a miracle? Was it an angel?"

"Oh, come on man, don't go off on this like Feher and Petrov. They heard that I talked to a messenger and, poof, biblical miracles. No, I think it was rather a telepathic alien that touched my hand in order to infect me with a contagious counter-virus. Or nanobots, whatever, an antidote anyway. Which I pass on through touch, just as they have been spreading the virus before. I don't believe in mystical stuff..."

"Well, true, but still..."

Yuri couldn't finish his sentence, suddenly overwhelmed by a terrific metallic roar. He ran outside to check what it was all about and bumped head first into a hellish creature with squid-like eyes and a pig's snout. The officer got over his surprise and understood he was looking at a gas mask and straight down the barrel of a rifle, since the 'creature' was just a soldier from a team of about a dozen, hurriedly pouring out of a helicopter. One of them gestured arrogantly and, from the way in which he had moved and from his stoutness, the Inquisitor gathered it was Zmeyev. The others obeyed the hand signal and rushed the house, weapons at the ready.

A rumble of machine-gun bursts, then the masked men exited, accompanied only by Golubin, dragged between

them, sad and broken, offering no resistance. A speaker crackled on Zmeyev's suit and barked:

"A thousand times thank you, Comrade Inquisitor! I couldn't find the asshole for so long, but now I just followed your signal and there he is! I see the bastard was surrounded by some ZMBs, but my troopers shot them just as the beasts were about to devour him. A fate reserved for you, Comrade Marilov, when they'll find you later!"

Zmeyev waved and two soldiers grabbed Yuri and threw him inside the house.

"As for Golubin, since he went insane and thinks he's some kind of a prophet, he'll get his prophecy right away!"

The troopers kicked the Inquisitor inside and blocked the door with the wooden table, while Zmeyev could still be heard yelling and laughing:

"The tiger-men will love the taste of your noble flesh, Comrade!"

Yuri kneeled on the blood-soaked floor for a moment and then stood up in the dark. Feeling his way with both hands, he walked along the walls, stumbling over corpses. He found the window, boarded up with heavy nails decades before, and started pulling on them. He drew for many minutes, while from outside he could hear screams, knocks, Zmeyev's laughter and the roar of the helicopter's propeller. When he finally managed to break a board loose, Yuri saw that the window had grates on it too, so he still could not escape; but he could also see the helicopter flying away with a huge racket, and in the yard a cross

with a limp body hanging lifeless from it, profiled against the night sky, clear and starry.

Then, only silence. Exhausted and distraught, Yuri slid down the wall and laid on the cold floor.



Light. Some warmth on his unshaven cheek. Yuri opened his eyes and saw rays of morning sunlight leaking inside through the broken window. At the door, someone kept pulling at the table, hard. A thud when it fell heavily on the gravel outside. The man waited for a few moments, but nobody opened the door, so he stood up and went outside. Two tiger-people were walking away towards the village, holding hands. They smiled and shouted:

“The hand helped him up!”

On the cross, some blood stains, but no body. Had the tiger-men taken Golubin away to be devoured, or worshipped? Those two carried nothing...

Had the Envoy come for Golubin and taken the bad man turned good into the skies? Who knows...

Or maybe Golubin was wrong about his faith and had been miraculously resurrected, destined to walk around ravaged Europe healing tiger-men and heralding a new era?

Maybe.



**Teodora Matei** (b. 09.06.1971), writer.

Her first short story, *Stăpânul castelului* (*The Master of the Castle*), appeared in “Nautilus” SF magazine in 2012. Her short stories have been published in a number of fanzines (“Gazeta SF”, “Helion”, “Nautilus”, “Ficțiuni”, “Argos”, “Revista de Suspans” , “ZIN”) and anthologies such as *Cele mai frumoase proze ale anului* (Adenium, 2014), *Argos Trei / Antologie de povestiri SF* (Tritonic, 2017), *Exit plus. Povestiri de dincolo* (Tritonic, 2017), *Domino* (Tritonic, 2017), *Noir de București* (Tritonic, 2017), *Gastro NOIR* (Tritonic, 2018), *Schițe de iubire* (Tritonic, 2018), *Cele mai frumoase povestiri Science Fiction & Fantasy ale anului 2017* (Vremea, 2018), *3.4* (Tritonic, 2018), *Domino2* (Tritonic, 2018), *Colecția de povestiri science-fiction și fantasy pentru prietenii noștri nevăzători* (2018), *3.6* (Tritonic, 2019), *Castele de nisip* (Tritonic, 2019), *Noir de Timișoara* (Tritonic, 2019).

Her volumes are *Omul fluture* (cyberpunk novel, with Lucian-Dragoș Bogdan, Tracus Arte, 2015), *Stăpânul castelului* (*The Master of the Castle*, fantasy novel, Tritonic, 2016), *Cel-ce-simte* (fantasy novel, Tritonic, 2016), *Maya* (cyberpunk novel, with Lucian-Dragoș Bogdan, Tritonic, 2017), *Tot timpul din lume* (novel, Tritonic 2017), *Aripile tatălui* (sci-fi & fantasy short story, Tritonic, 2017), *Sindromul Charlotte* (cyberpunk novel, with Lucian-Dragoș Bogdan, Tritonic, 2017), *În mintea comisarului* (mystery&thriller novel, Tritonic, 2017),

*Un străin în Regatul Assert* (sci-fi steampunk novel, with Lucian-Dragoș Bogdan, Tritonic 2018), *Lumânări vii* (mystery&thriller novel, Tritonic, 2018), *O noapte la castel* (fantastic novel, Tritonic, 2018), *Living candles. A mystery novel from Romania* (Tritonic, 2019).

Her novel, *Omul Fluture*, was nominated for Best SF&F novel in 2016 at the RomCon Awards-the Romanian National Sci Fi awards.

# Cursed Night!

by Teodora Matei

“**Come** on, Zambilica, come on girl...Don't break down on me, not here!”

The foot of the salesman pumped the gas pedal. The engine protested, grumbling as though ready to draw its last breath. Constantin remembered his father saying more than thirty years ago: *‘Let it be, Titel, you'll fucking flood it!’*

They had been calling him Titel since he was young. It was not a nickname to express endearment; the name was just his godfather's name. A sturdy man whose belly couldn't ever be encompassed by his belt which dangled in resignation under the ‘undeniable proof of his wellbeing’ as he was calling his protuberance that he flaunted all over the village. The godfather died of a heart attack one January night. Because of the blizzard, the ambulance had gotten lost on the way.

He turned the key once more in the ignition, first praying, then sending layman regards to all saints he could remember. The lame engine kept whimpering,

then fell sound asleep. *'Don't take the names of the saints in vain, Costel, you'll need 'em in life!'* His mother was a plain woman; she took care of the household, raising four children. She was the only one to call him Costel or Costelush. Diminutives that pestered him as he grew up. When he started high school, he introduced himself as Costin; it seemed to him a somewhat nobler moniker, as though he was a young man who spent his childhood downtown, not on potholed uptown streets.

Constantin slapped his sweaty forehead. *'What on earth made you think of the dead now, when this junk heap is mocking you here in this hellhole...'*

The roads he had taken to get into the town faster were also full of potholes. He was being chased by black clouds rolling over the hills. *'Man, how could you, wander those roads three times a week?! ... What puzzles me even more is how come your goods sell while you walk around the streets all day...'*

His colleague, Sorin, liked to deliver only to cities. He only made exceptions when it came to villages with paved roads. Though Sorin was confused about Constantin's choice, he was happy he didn't have to get his shoes all covered in dust. *'What do you know, partner? Plain folk live there, if I deftly advertise the Eugenias that have their validity expiring within a week, they'll buy them as if they were Oreos. I don't need much. I go into the store, politely say hello, pretend I am browsing the shelves...that is, if there are customers around. If not I head straight for the saleslady!'*

*First, I give her a smile, inquire about her health, I know she has a sick child, I say something about her kid...she's flattered, of course, that I remembered, that is, I'm not just one of those people who just bring in the merchandise, I'm some sort of a business partner to confide in. Her husband left her a week before the wedding; it is here where I talk to her like a parent. I'm on the side of the women left by their husbands, the pigs... One thing leads to another and she opens the drawer and starts paying me overdue invoices, then I tell her about some noodles or cereal promotional sale. This is how I set up another invoice for the next month.'*

Constantin opened the car door and got out into the sticky mud. His feet bogged down in the slime. The clouds he had tried to run away from an hour ago had hurtled over the village. It poured, thunder and lightning, and the strong wind pushed him off the road, towards a field. He gave up, angry that the wipers couldn't handle it. He stopped the engine and waited for the turmoil to pass. He wasn't too comfortable in the car, either. A fine curtain of water was flowing down the inside of the window, through the scorched rubber insulation of the old car. He stuck a rag stained in motor grease up there, trying to stop the flow. It soon became drenched. More and more droplets jumped off the driver's seat and onto his clothing. He moved to his right, in an awkward position, as the wrath of the clouds was unavoidable even from the passenger seat.

He dragged his supporting foot up into the air and stepped sideways onto some pebbles, cursing the layer of

mud that clung to the sole of his shoe. He made the same move with his right foot. He stood there with the soles of his feet going up and down, in a precarious balance, looking around, full of hope. He had abandoned all hope, when he saw a lonely house on the other side of the road. Held back from the village, a tiny, white patch poking behind a yard full of flowers. Even the cell phone wasn't getting any signal there; he went into another balancing, moving the phone up and down, or to the left, then to the right- to no avail. The emergency call option vanished from the display, too.

*“Well done, Constantin! Your car broke down so close from the exit to the main road. Even if there was any signal, who were you going to call anyway? Did you think someone would've come to rescue you from this god-forsaken place? Would you've tried to call 911? And you, Zambilica? Now you find time to be finicky? Oh, sorry, I forgot, it's International Women's Day. You must've hoped for a car wash, a full tank maybe...well, you're wrong!”*, he muttered, looking at the little red car that had bailed out on him, stranded on the side of the road.

He locked the Matiz angrily and turned to cross the road. No matter how careful he was, he couldn't step on the rocks scattered all over, so he walked raising his muddy shoes one at a time, fearing not to drop them off his feet. He tapped on the house number plate nailed to the wooden fence. After a few minutes, he started to shout:

“Hey! Anybody home?”

He saw two silvery heads at the front window. He snorted. *'What am I supposed to do with two hags? They must have a landline phone, something...'* he thought, tapping frantically on his own cell-phone. Nothing changed; it was as though he had reached the end of the world.

Out came a wiry old lady, her glasses perching in frail balance on her nose. Behind her, another woman, plumper, kept rising on her toes to see the man at the gate.

"Who are ya' lookin' for?" asked the first old woman, frowning.

"Ma'am, my car broke right here, near your house. It won't start, I have no signal on my cell-phone and I thought maybe..."

"You thought we could help you? Us, two old ladies?!" muttered the woman grumpily.

"Well...I didn't know...but maybe you have a phone, so I can call my company...or you could tell me how to get to the road, maybe I can hitch a ride."

The other woman whispered into the wiry one's ear, while the wiry one tried to push her away, shaking the shoulder the plump one leaned on. She snorted in disdain:

"Fine...come in, don't just stand there, the whole village will hear us!"

Constantin looked around: the nearest house was nine hundred feet away. Hardly anybody would've paid any attention to the guest of those two old women on that stormy night that had flooded the village. He stepped

along a narrow concrete path. He took two steps, then looked behind him. His trails were red with mud. He stopped, ashamed. The old woman waved, urging him on:

“Come inside, what’s done is done now! We’ll clean up in the morning!”

Having been cleared, Constantin approached the door that stood ajar. The woman peered at him, sizing him up.

“Who are you and what business do you have in this village?”

“I’m a salesman, ma’am. I sell supplies to the village store. I wanted to take a shortcut here and the rain caught up with me, my car won’t start...” the man fumbled. The old woman made him uncomfortable, reminding him of his first teacher who had dissuaded him from writing with his left hand by using a sharp-edged wooden ruler.

“And you expect us to believe all this hogwash!?” the host snapped.

“Ma’am, this is not hogwash...I swear...”

His voice caught in his throat like in the third grade when he had written that essay about the injured deer. The ruler had not only punished his fingers then, but also his bent spine.

“I don’t want to intrude, I’d better go now! Thanks, anyway...”

“You think you got me out of the house in this cold just to make conversation?!” the wiry one raised her voice.

“Yes, yes, rightly so...” the other one squeaked.

“Mind your own business, sis!” retorted the bespectacled old woman. She turned toward Constantin:

“Leave your shoes here, on the steps, and come inside. We’ll see what’s to be done.”

He almost wanted to turn around and leave, shivered and took her up on her invitation.

It was warm inside the house. There was a smell of baked apples and vanilla cookies. He followed the wiry woman inside a neat den. He sat into the armchair pointed out by a spiky finger. The other woman wandered around the room, sizing him up. She pretended to calm down a restless parrot in a cage. The bird kept pecking at the metal bars, making guttural sounds.

“Veronica! Get your bird out of here and make some tea! The man must be frozen from so much rain!”

The plump one gladly obeyed. Constantin thought he even heard her humming through the noise made by the rattling chinaware.

“You’ll have to excuse my sister, she’s quite clumsy. But she makes excellent tea! So...let’s start over: what’s with you here?”

“I told you already, I brought some supplies for the store, wanted to get quickly back to the city, but the rain caught up with me. The wind pushed me toward the fields so I decided to wait for the rain to stop. When the storm settled down, Zambilica – I mean, my Matiz, that’s how I call it – wouldn’t start. I have no cell-phone signal, so I thought I’d find some villager to help me.”

“And you ended up here with us!” said the one entering the room, laughing over the silvery tray that carried one teapot and three cups.

The wiry one gave her an admonishing look over the glasses.

“Sis, watch out or you’ll spill the tea! Sir...I’m sorry to say , but we have no landline phone. Nor a car, so we can’t help you.”

Constantin gulped. *‘Why didn’t you say so from the beginning, lady?! We wouldn’t be wasting our time with pleasantries and, by now, I’d have been the hell out of here, off for the highway. Now, in the middle of the night...’*

“Now, in the middle of the night, we won’t let you go wandering”, the wiry one seemed to read his thought.

The man shuddered. He sipped twice from the fragrant tea, wishing he could shake off a foreboding thought. A cold shiver trickled down his spine.

“If you want, you can stay here,” Veronica invited him. “We have a guest room in the back.”

“No, thank you, I wouldn’t want to impose...” Constantin muttered, softened by the hot potion that oozed down his throat.

“As you wish,” the wiry one said. “At least, finish your tea. We’re sorry we can’t help you.”

“Yes, yes, we’re sorry,” the plump one followed suit.

“Do you have a wife that would worry if you don’t get home? A girlfriend, anyone?”

“No, I don’t, unfortunately...” the man shrugged.

“Unfortunately...” Veronica mimicked him smiling, hurrying to refill his cup.

He tried to stop her, but the frail obliging smile of the granny made him accept.

“You have to admit that the tea is good. Veronica, bring some cake, too. I hope it’s cooled down by now. You know, I baked it around noon, when the clouds started to gather,” the host said with a conspiratorial whisper, watching out of the corner of her eye as her sister hurried towards the kitchen.

The man thought he heard her humming again, a little louder this time. He looked around the room. Nothing from the outside of the house resembled even closely what was on the inside. The room was cozy, a sofa between two armchairs covered in purple plush, a coffee table of the same whitish wood as the bookcase. Hundreds of tomes were crowding its shelves. It all seemed out of place there at the edge of the village. Just as he thought that the silvery tray and knock-off chinaware felt out of place as well.

“Do you like our place?” the wiry one asked, carefully watching him.

“Yes, it’s...I wasn’t expecting...this is a village, after all.”

“You’re very forward! Well, I was a teacher at the village school. After I retired, I convinced Veronica to move out here. I sold my parents’ house in Bucharest, took whatever was valuable from there, then came here to find peace. Plus, she’s nuts about animals. In the city, with the neighbors, it’s hard...you know how it is. Here, she can bring whatever she wants. Nobody asks her anything, nothing.”

The old woman’s explanation seemed plausible. Constantin relaxed. Through the window’s curtains,

he noticed it was completely dark by now. He should've accepted the invitation to stay over the night. Next day, he could've sought help in the village.

"I'll go make the fire in the guest room and search for some dry clothes," the host seemed to read his thoughts for the second time. "My, how clumsy of me! I didn't introduce myself! I'm Adela, and my sister is Veronica. You know, my mother read a lot..." the wiry one chuckled.

Veronica came through the door carrying a tray with slices of sponge-cake. After a short exchange of looks with her sister, she put it on the table, then sat in the armchair, in front of the man. Without knowing why, he saw her just like one of those gaudy characters in the Miss Marple movies. She was wearing a purple dress with flounces, mauve socks and pink slippers. Her gray hair was hoisted up in a perfectly round bun. She had dressed as if she had been expecting guests. '*Or suitors!*' Constantin thought. He stifled a smile, and a second shiver went down his spine when the plump one started cooing:

"No one comes here much. We don't know when someone might knock on our door. So we're always dressed ready for guests. Especially today, women's day..."

The man sneered. He had that feeling again, that of a student who had forgotten to do his homework. Adela saved him as she entered the room carrying a bunch of clothes. A spotted cat sneaked in between her legs. It meowed, rubbing against Veronica's armchair. When the old woman wanted to lift it in her arms, it arched it back

and jumped onto Constantin's thigh, its claws out and fangs showing. It slid down as if it wanted nothing more than to catch his attention. It gave out a prolonged meow. Adela put the clothes on the sofa and tried to pick the cat up by putting her hand underneath it, but it clawed at her arm.

"Sis, take this pet and..." she stopped, looking at her menacingly.

Veronica got down on the carpet, beside the cat. She whispered slowly, while her palm got closer to the electrified fur. The animal whimpered and let itself be carried out of the room.

Rubbing the bloody injuries on her skin, Adela made an excuse:

"My sister and her animals... They get nuts, sometime..."

"That's OK..."

"But have a slice of cake! It's a family recipe, we didn't change it in decades, not a single ingredient!" the wiry one added.

Veronica came back, paler than she had left. He took a sip of tea, detached from his surrounding, staring blankly at the clock on the wall.

"Oh my, it's so late... We should go to bed."

Constantin accepted reluctantly the indication of the clock. It was ten after ten. He could've sworn he arrived there only half an hour ago. Besides, the tea was still warm. Veronica poured a second cup as soon as he finished the first one. The tarry night was all you could see out of the window.

“Yes, to bed...” Adela repeated. “Sir...you didn’t even tell us your name...” the old woman trailed off.

“Co-” the man started and stopped. He was going to sneeze. He raised his palm, asking the ladies to excuse him. He tried again: “Co-,” but then he sneezed.

“Coco? How nice! What a proper name!” Veronica exclaimed, clapping. She laughed with her head bent backwards, under the admonishing gaze of her sister.

“Forgive me! My name is Constantin...”

“But of course, that is your name. And do please forgive my sister’s outburst. It was a hectic day for her, you understand...” Adela whispered into his ear, looking at him meaningfully.

They followed Veronica down a long hall, along a dozen doors. The man was intrigued again, looking at this house like at an oddity. Not in a thousand years could he have believed that the whitewashed walls beyond the flower garden could’ve hosted so many rooms.

“Here, this is the guest room,” said the plump one, putting her hand on the door handle. “There, on the left, you have a small bathroom. A little rustic, but...” the woman chuckled and invited him in.

Adela was watching them with her arms crossed. Her nose seemed pointier, her glasses threatening to fall down at any moment.

“Good night, sir! See you in the morning!”

“Likewise, thank you!” Constantin whispered.

“Good night!” Veronica said as well, then the man had the impression she had added:

“Lock the door and never open it over night!”

But the last words were just like a breeze, and Constantin sat for a couple of long minutes on the threshold, his back leaned against the woodwork of the door, thinking whether those words were really uttered. For his peace of mind, he turned the key in the lock.



He was dreaming, of course. It could only be a dream if a spotted cat opens the cage door to set a parrot free. Only in a vision, would the quadruped let itself be ridden by the bird and dance to a tune hummed by the voice of a little old woman. The voice surged, you could almost hear the lyrics uttered in a strange language. The rhythm quickened and the cat jumped and got bigger with every leap it made. But just in his eyes or his eyes in the dream...

The parrot circled above the animal. Its wings fluttered. It was now the size of a seagull, cawing in unison with the unseen singer. The cat locked its gaze onto Constantin's, eyes almost human. You could've sworn it was sneering. He saw himself as if from the outside, amazed by the show of those two creatures. He stuck against a door, in an empty room with whitewashed walls. The dancers stalked him.

The voice of the woman was drawing nearer. A strange song, march-like, was intoned on the other side of the wood board. The spotted cat made prolonged meows while leaping ever closer to the man. Constantin could've

sworn it was the size of a child, and the parrot was the size of a vulture at that point. The floor shuddered under the feet of the animal, rippling toward the middle of the room. The door throbbed, hitting his back.

He forced himself to wake up. These nightmares happened before; he considered himself lucky that he could wake up from any unpleasant dream. He got back to sleep almost immediately, banishing the creepy images.

Constantin opened his eyes. Surely, he was awake. The mattress vibrated underneath him like the door in his dream. The floor and the walls crackled. He looked at the chandelier hanging from the ceiling. It was dangling above him. *'Earthquake!'* he said to himself. *'It was just an earthquake!'* he tried reassuring himself. He went to the bathroom, took his time washing his face and drank cold water from his cupped palm. It was over. The frame of the bed creaked one last time before the man fell back to sleep. He was almost asleep when he heard a knock on the door. *'Lock the door and never open it over night!'* he had been told. He'd rather follow that advice, even if he wasn't sure it was only suggested or given, or...

"Mr. Constantin, it's me, Veronica".

He chose to shut up, pretending to be asleep. He thought he was, after all, the guest in the old women's house. It would've been only polite of him to check in on them, to see if they needed any help after the earthquake, if they were afraid...

“Don’t open it, don’t open it!” the spotted cat from the dream shouted. “Over night, over night!” the parrot cawed.

He stood up, hoping to get rid of these imaginings. He cleared his throat and asked:

“Are you alright, ma’am?”

“Yes...I was afraid you’d be scared. It happens around here...This was a mild one.”

“I’m fine, thank you. Good night!” Constantin said with a sigh of relief.

A shuffling of feet made him think the woman had left. He heard her, though, just like the first time.

“I brought you some tea. You know, Adela says it will calm you...”

“No, thank you, I don’t think I need it...”

“As you wish,” the old woman said with disappointment in her voice.

Constantin made for the bed. He was doubtful as well he could fall back to sleep so quickly. No matter what, he kept hearing: ‘*Don’t open it, don’t open it*’ followed by ‘*Over night, over night.*’

He turned back, twisted the key in the lock and took the cup from the hand of the woman who had never left the door. She was wearing the same flouncy dress. She hadn’t even untied her hair for the night. She grinned, reassuring him:

“It will be alright...”

He closed the door with his free hand. The other one was shaking, making his cup clink on the saucer. It was

full to the brim. He sipped the liquid so as not to spill it. It had a different fragrance. He gulped down half a cup, then fell sound asleep.



The tea must've made him sleep like a log, because he couldn't remember dreaming again. His only problem was to figure out how he had ended up on the floor. It was cold by now and he woke up curled onto the woven carpet. And the window was farther away, the bed seemed higher. He wanted to rub his eyes, but he saw a paw getting close to his face. He looked at his hands. He had paws covered in reddish fur. Four of them. Plus a tail which he could move as he wished.

*'Let's see now how will you get out of this, Constantin!'* he said to himself jokingly. He crawled under the bed, compelling himself to wake up. But it wasn't a dream, or some figment of his imagination. The clothes he had put on when he had gone to bed were lying on the floor.

He wanted to shout. The coppery tomcat made a prolonged whimper. From behind the door, he heard:

"Coco, darling, come here right away!"

For a few minutes, he only heard a rasping, metal on metal, then Veronica entered the room. She threw the screwdriver away and got on all fours to pull him to her. Constantin resisted, shouting the worst curses, but his throat only made plaintive meows. He got back, as far as

he could, threatening her with his claws. The old woman smiled at him. She hummed a tune which seemed familiar. He'd had a dream with another cat, a parrot... What if they too...? He could almost understand what the woman was saying.

'*Cursed night!*' he thought before he felt the need to cradle into the bosomy chest of the old lady wearing a flounced purple dress.

*Translated by Alexandra Pişcu*



**Liviu Surugiu** (b. 10.10.1969), writer.

His first short story, *Dreaming of Mart Senson*, appeared in “Jurnalul SF” periodical in 1994. His short stories have been published in a number of fanzines (“Jurnalul SF”, “CPSF Anticipația”, “SuperNova”, “Helion”, “Almanahul Anticipația”, “Argos”, “Gazeta SF”, “Știință & Tehnică”, “ZIN”, “CSF”) and anthologies such as *Bumerangul lui Zeeler* (ebook, Gazeta SF, 2014), *Dincolo de orizont. Povestiri science fiction, volumul 1* (Millennium Books, 2015), *Galaxis* (Eagle, 2016), *Exit plus. Povestiri de dincolo* (Tritonic, 2017), *Cele mai frumoase povestiri Science Fiction & Fantasy ale anului 2017* (Vreimea, 2018), *Antologia prozei românești science-fiction* (Paralela 45, 2018).

His volumes are *Imman* (novel, SF. Nicolae, 2011), *Iubire și moarte pentru totdeauna* (novel, Tritonic, 2014), *Atavic* (sci-fi novel, Tritonic, 2014), *Rămășițele viselor* (sci-fi short stories, Tracus Arte, 2015), *ERAL* (sci-fi novel, Univers, 2015), *Acesta este trupul meu* (sci-fi short stories, Tracus Arte, 2016), and *Pulsar* (sci-fi short stories, Tracus Arte, 2017).

Liviu Surugiu has won the RomCon SF Award several times for *Atavic* in 2015, *ERAL* and *Rămășițele viselor* in 2016, *Pulsar* în 2018. He has received the “Vladimir Colin” Award for the best short-story *Întâlnirea*. Also he won “JSF-Atlantykron Award” (short story *Dreaming of Mart Senson*, 1994), “Supernova” Award (short story *Mâinile lui Solomon*, 1994), “Pozitronic” Award (the best

short story *Adevărul despre Woopy*, 1995), “The ARSEFAN Grand Prize” (the best short story *Visus*, 1995), “The Sigma Contest” (the best short short story *Îngeri și câini*, 1995), “Atlantykron Award” (the best short story *Acesta este trupul meu*, 2016). With *Înghetul*, he was one of the finalists in the 2013 National Screenplay Contest - Feature Film category - organized by HBO.

În ultimii ani a obținut trei premii în străinătate, la ”Writers of the Future” (HM 2018 și 2019). Anul acesta a obținut Silver Mention la același concurs. În prezent este în finala Short Edition France cu povestirea *Fiat Umbra*. Are un text acceptat pentru publicare în Germania și altul în Ungaria.

# The Dinner

by Liviu Surugiu

*Silver Honorable Mention*

*1 st Quarter 2019*

*"Writers of the Future" Contest*

**They** studied us, they experimented on us, and when they reached the limits of those tortures, they extracted our living tissues and continued with them. They electrocuted the samples, they poisoned, burned, and irradiated them, not knowing that our bodies still felt every ounce of pain. While they tried to find out who we were, we found out for ourselves.

And tonight, while all four of us will be taken somewhere else, we'll escape during the flight. We have worked out the smallest details of our plan, even through the walls which separate us.

I know what I will do, just as if it's already happened. I will jump out of the helicopter at an altitude of three hundred yards, and I will dive straight into Clear Lake. I will swim a mile beneath the water, through searchlight

beams and bullet tracks, back to Kemah dock. They will fire at me hundreds of times, declaring this a part of the experiment, but no bullet that strikes me will do me any harm.

I will emerge from the water directly before the Johnson Center. The dogs will run, the switches will flip, and the electricity will stop. I will pass the guards in Hall 8, slipping by or charging through them. And I will climb to the top level, yes, and I will break open the doors, yes, and I will open the coffin that they keep her in, yes, and I will put my hand on her forehead, yes, and under my hand, suddenly, her large beautiful eyes will open.

## Five years ago

The news of my imminent disappearance from the face of the Earth did not take me by surprise, though I hadn't thought of it for ten years.

One moment earlier I was looking at the lipstick print on the icon of the Apostle Matthew. Evelyn had been in the church crowd: only she, as an Orthodox, could have kissed it.

The next moment I heard him.

“Father Amatheus.”

A man's shadow seeped from the narthex, touching my cassock.

“Mass is over,” I said.

The stranger ignored me. He looked at the icons, then he said,

*“Nomen est omen.”*

I hadn't heard those words since the end of basic training. I knew that when someone came and said them to me I would have to return. They were *my* words, the words that only I would respond to.

“I'm forty”, I said. I'm too old to fly again. And then, I've chosen to be a priest.”

“Who else would be a better emissary to enter heaven?” the man said. “The Director knows why he picked you, Father Amatheus.”

I refused to go with him that afternoon. Finally, I spoke to the Director of NASA on the phone, and he accepted. I couldn't do it to Evelyn. God had finally given me happiness, and they had no right to take it away. They understood, so they let me stay in Kirbyville.

The next day I took the Dodge and left with Evelyn for Beaumont. I don't know how long it took me to drive those fifty miles. As every time we were together, it was too short. I was telling her that she was a star, Evelyn replied that I was her air; I asked her to become a shooting star, she warned me that without me she wouldn't be able to breathe. I promised her that I would slow down her fall, and she whispered that she was getting hot and melting and turning into the creature that I desired.

The Diocese offices were on 710 Archie St. I had Evelyn wait for me in a Subway on Park Street, a hundred yards away. I just had to go to the bishop's office at the appointed hour, but I was terribly nervous.

“Remember,” she said as she arranged my starched collar. “You go in, you show your seal to the doorman, and you go up to the second floor. There you’ll talk to the secretary and you’ll tell him---”

“I am Amatheus Anderson and I have an appointment with the Most Reverend Bishop Hironaka Imamura.”

“On what issue?” The secretary examined me with his unusually large green eyes.

I blinked, surprised that I had had the courage to get this far. For a second I was tempted to ask him if his eyes had helped get such a cushy job.

“I am resigning from priesthood.”

One minute later I was shown into the office.

Bishop Hironaka Imamura, an elderly man with white powdered skin and Asian features, picked his thin body up from the executive chair.

“Father Anderson.”

As I grew used to the semi-darkness, the walls of the office seemed to dilate, like a heart stuck in an extended diastole. The light around me slowly strengthened its glow, leaking from a lamp shaped like a rudimentary planetarium in which Saturn was the last planet.

“Tea?” The bishop gestured for me to sit.

He sat down next to me, on the same side of the desk, in a seat as uncomfortable as mine.

“My wife is waiting for me outside,” I said. “I mean... my future wife.”

“According to the canon 1087, those who serve the Holy Church are not permitted to have families. Returning to the lay state is entirely forbidden. And, Father Amatheus... It is an honor for the Church to participate, for the first time, in a celestial expedition.”

The rumors concerning Vatican’s involvement in NASA’s research had increased lately. A documentary had accused the Space Agency of misleading Rome, for the sake of funds which the Congress was no longer allocating.

“I’m quitting today, your Eminence.”

“Father Anderson, as you know, for the ones called in the clergy, when they leave the ministry, Anathema will be upon them.”

I looked down, not wanting to seem dismissive. And I wasn’t, but I was self-assured. “Then I can only hope that God will judge and forgive me.”

“Do not hope,” said the Bishop, frowning. “God is cruel and ruthless.”

He didn’t say *occasionally* or *from time to time*. He simply said *is*, and to me, this very statement seemed completely untrue at that moment. I didn’t have any reason to agree with him yet.

Evelyn was eagerly waiting for me, but a little sad, as she had been the whole day.

We took the Dodge and left. It was a wonderful weekend day with everyone hurrying on the streets to avoid the afternoon traffic. The beginning of a March like

no other, with the sun beating away the cold in Beaumont. I remember perfectly the strength of its rays, and the chill as we passed through the shadows of buildings.

Before the first turn, Evelyn turned to me and kissed me for the last time.

“Mat, I want...”

God, she was so beautiful!

I remember everything perfectly. There isn't much to remember. Not enough memories remain, and I haven't had enough time to be happy. The car skidded, I lost control, and Evelyn went through the window as through a portal into the hereafter.

In this life there is a last time for everything: the last time you see your love, the last time they speak to you, the last time they kiss you. For me, all three took place in the same moment.

I think that forgetting is necessary, or else memories would change their order. But sometimes I'd like them to change, so I could believe that I'd just met Evelyn today, that tomorrow we'd go out to a movie, and that the day after that we'd go for a walk for the first time.

I'd like it to be so. But if not that, at least I'd like to forget her.



When I woke up in the hospital, the Director was by my side. I knew Evelyn could not be saved, I had seen her dying with my own eyes.

“I wish I could fly now”, I told him. “To disappear, as she has, from the face of the Earth”.

Then he started talking. They could save her. They had gotten her into cryogenics in time, since within five years the law would permit a new treatment, currently experimental, capable of bringing her back to life. And they had done all this only for me.

I was stunned.

Only when the director of NASA started talking about the mission again did I come back to my senses:

“What need of a cripple do you have up there? I’ll never be able to move my legs again.”

“Up in the heavens, we are all the same, Amatheus” he replied, trying to speak my way, but resembling Bishop Hironaka more. “Up there, in free-fall, you’ll be whole again. You’ll be able to fly”.

He was right. So I said yes, as their only condition was for me to remain a servant of God.

And so, three months later, on the Feast of the Ascension, we took off.

I had entered the crew at the last moment, so I didn’t know much. Neither did the other members of the crew, as I soon found out. They hadn’t met each other either until then. An unprecedented protocol established that

our orientation was to take place only after the launch, the first manned mission to Saturn.

The Iskar was gigantic, but fully automated, leaving us with plenty of spare time. So, after a few hours, we gathered all four like some sailors stranded on the deck of a beached ship; we learned that each of us was alone, that no one was waiting for any of us to return home.

Compared to the others, I was the lucky one.

That was our first day in heaven, and the night came more naturally than I could have imagined. In space, a sunset means only an eclipse behind the Earth. But, as we got further away, this happened increasingly rare, until the sun never set at all.

From the first moment we entered the ship, we were impressed by the waste of space. It had wide corridors, high-ceilinged chambers, and a private cabin for every astronaut. I unbuckled the belt from my magnetic disabled chair, I got out of it and I flew. It was but a simple belt, but without it, I became an angel. Had I had it in the car, on that morning in Beaumont, maybe I would not have become a cripple. And Evelyn would have lived.



The round trip would last five years, but the food storage only had provisions for two months. So we weren't surprised by the instructions we received from the

Director of NASA three terrestrial days after launch. We drew straws to choose the stasis containers.

Moreover, cryogeny was necessary since the lack of gravity for five years would have destroyed our bodies. I don't know if I had dreamed the whole way, or only in the old circadian rhythm. Just as I would forget a night's worth of dreams when I awoke every morning, after that hypersleep perhaps I awoke having lost an entire world. All that I knew was that I had chosen this, because I couldn't live so long without Evelyn. And I wasn't getting any older than her.

Upon emerging from the sarcophagus, we shouted in amazement: in our hibernation, the water in our cells had expanded, changing all our features so we all looked the same. In a process of reverse ontogeny, our amorphous and swollen faces had become identical. Only the final placental layer of the sarcophagi mimicked the shape of our original faces, which we were to recover in a few hours.

During our sleep, Iskar had entered its Saturnine orbit, keeping itself at the Roche limit.

Then, the automated program raised the panels that protected the ship, transforming it into an enormous Faberge egg, and we were dumbfounded by the divine beauty of Saturn.



Only then and there did I realize that all the artists who had ever lived on Earth had lacked one thing: the most beautiful inspiration that a human could ever see with his own eyes.

Saturn shone above us, an immense sphere of gold shining over the rocks of a field of icebergs. As the perspective grew wider, the pieces of ice melted, and the rocks turned to a fine sand joining together into the multicolored beaches of the rings. The whole heavenly icon was reflected in the polished armor of Iskar, filling our eyes with yet more light.

It was a globe, or more precisely the nearer part of a globe, so large it wouldn't fit into our field of vision. And it only seemed convex as long as you were looking straight at it. As we tried to take in the whole image it surrounded us and became, suddenly, concave. Concave and dazzling. It was as if our very eyes had lost their round shape.

In the upper atmosphere which had the color of the Sahara, hurricanes as large as the Moon turned toothy wheels between the dunes of the clouds. Constellations of lightning sparked throughout the south in the area called the "Alley of Storms", and the southern aurora burned blue-green. When viewed with attention, the tropical bands of cloud revealed nuances of turquoise, and in the depths of the hurricanes eyes of amber were opened.

It was worthy of wearing all the saints' halo on its forehead. It was so beautiful that it could not be fated to

shine directly under the eyes of man. It was the forbidden paradise.

“The mission to the planet Saturn is the fruit of decades of effort.”

The image of NASA’s Director seemed to look at each of us in turn as we sat, each in his own chair. He might have even had a row of photographs with our names on them in his sumptuous office.

“For twenty years, the Terrax Project has used a Tachyonic Scanner to scan the galaxy. More specifically, a quarter of it.”

We exclaimed in unison: a message appeared on the monitor informing us that the previous Director had died two years ago, and that the new Director of NASA would contact us soon with a live recording.

“The Tachyonic Scanner is a system capable of detecting not just the existence of other planets but, through advanced radiolocation and a revolutionary spectrograph, any environment suitable for life. Using superluminal tachyon waves in this fashion, we have detected over 16,800 planets nearly identical to Earth over the past twenty years.”

It was strange to get the most important news of all time about the existence of life from the mouth of a dead man.

“Sixteen thousand eight hundred planets. You may ask yourselves, how many of those planets hold life, and how

has it evolved? Into bacteria, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, primates?”

The Director stopped, indeed seeming to analyze each of us turn. He had certainly looked at our pictures, not knowing that he himself would only remain an image when the message would to be transmitted.

“In identical conditions of gravity, atmosphere, water, electrical potential, sunlight, magnetosphere, The Tachyonic Scanner demonstrated that there is no life anywhere in the universe. Not just primates or insects. Not even a bacterium. Absolutely nothing.”

My thoughts would have wanted to escape into words. Was this the reason they had wanted a priest? Was the NASA - Vatican alliance a dead end?

Nonetheless, I didn't say anything. We weren't actually watching the Director live, and in the eighty-minute delay between us and the Earth, we might have regretted our words. Not to mention that the Director had been dead for a while.

But the truth was that I still didn't know what I was doing there around Saturn. And the disturbing beauty of the planet drew our gazes toward it again.



When exhaustion finally caught up with us, when we turned off all of the lights in the ship, when we had decided

that it was “night” and we slept, that’s when I dreamed of for the first time of Evelyn. What was maddening, though, was the certainty that she was dreaming of me as well. The next night Evelyn had returned, partly repeating itself, partly continuing, and I realized that I was not dreaming in real time. Furthermore, I began to remember fragments of what I had lost during the years of hypersleep, when we had both been frozen, submerged in the same world, where love had joined us together, half dead, half alive, like two birds with one wing each, that could only fly together.

I woke up covered in sweat. The ship’s armor was creaking like the hull of a submarine dived lower than the pressure point it could withstand. The sound ceased for a moment. When it began again, it was much more disturbing: it seemed like a series of steps, as if someone was walking in heels on the outside of the ship.

Towards morning, according to the ship’s clocks, we dressed in our EVA suits and headed for the main deck, like fish that swim through a tube to the main area of the aquarium. Wherever we passed, the system closed the panels over the portholes before us.

There was no need for us to go out to check the shielding. The exterior cameras had done it already, and the explanation offered by the computer implicated several rocks that had wandered off from the nearest ring.

But we couldn’t help but notice the strange shape of the scratches on the hull. They were grouped everywhere

the same, as some claws had wanted to catch Iskar in their grasp.



The new Director of NASA contacted us after four days, having given us time to adjust to coming out of cryogenics, or, maybe, giving us time to adjust to the short and disorienting message recorded by his predecessor.

He got to the point. We had to position the craft around ring F and descend among the enormous blocks of ice in order to tow away ‘something that had been detected’ by the Cassini mission over twenty-five years before<sup>3</sup>. Iskar was programmed so that, once it had gotten within the Roche limit of the planet, it would identify its objective.

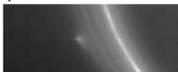
“The Terrax program represents more than was communicated to you by my predecessor, said the new Director. The Tachyonic Scanner does not just detect life, but also simulates it. Having gathered data from its virtual probes of the 16,800 planets, in its second phase it began analysis and implementation.”

We all tensed. Somehow we felt it; we all knew that we were going to hear something extraordinary.

“Without having any advantage over the other planets, without its gravity or its seas forming any argument for

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<sup>3</sup> On June 21, 2005, Cassini observed an object in Saturn’s F ring (code S / 2004 S 6).



its uniqueness, without the temperature or the electrical discharges being any different... almost all of the virtual tests gathered by the Scanner passed the Miller-Urey test and came to life on Earth.”

I knew that in 1953 Harold C. Urey and Stanley Miller had invented a closed system into which they had introduced hydrogen, methane, and ammonia, recreating the ancient terrestrial atmosphere. They had generated electrical sparks and used a condenser to cool the gasses. Back into the lab after one week, Urey and Miller had found aminoacids, which had been good, but not enough for their experiment.

“Given that these were virtual samples, there was nothing that could contaminate them, the Director concluded. It seems that on Earth there is something. A power only discovered by man in the last few millennia, that made life appear only here.”



I thought then for the first time that from an evolutionary point of view, man is the end of the road; meanwhile, for religion, the world begins with him.

Alone in my cabin, before finishing my prayers and making the sign of the cross, I looked at my image reflected in the porthole. I flinched. My eyes were emptier than the space outside the window, like probably the eyes of the sleeping, behind the eyelids.

It was only normal, for the gods to be cruel, naive, and childish: while we had had millions of years of evolution, they had only existed for a few millennia.

I suddenly understood that the truly gullible was not us.



At daybreak we all went out together onto the external deck. Above us the stars sparkled strangely, as if arranged in celestial maps that were new and ruthless. Beneath them, the rings of Saturn were marked with great spokes, a dark dust that rotated and pulsed in the rhythm of the planetary magnetism. They were two icons between which Iskar floated majestically, a galleon of outer space with all its sails hoisted.

Tethered to the ends of enormous rods, we descended into the foggy depths of ring F. We had synchronized with its rotational speed, and the icy idols there seemed to be as unmoving as Iskar. From time to time a rebel iceberg appeared from the void, a white boat passing swiftly by us.

As we were spinning, suspended by the telescopic rods, we looked like a toy carousel above a child's crib, in whose eyes we were waiting to gaze. Why had we been chosen? And what were we supposed to hunt for there, dangling hundreds of feet from each other in the jungle of Saturn's rings? All that we had learned was that in 2005 the Cassini had detected not only an object, but also a signal which

was believed to be an SOS.

Something passed over us like a bird at great speed, leaving us in darkness for a moment. It was Pandora, one of the two guardian satellites of the ring in which we waited, hidden. The roar of its passing, jostling the crystals of ice and making them clink together, seemed to be her final attempt to frighten us before we opened, unknowing, her amphora full of curses.

We could barely see each other, rocking in our armoured suits, balancing the primitive hooks, while the clouds grew around like a polyurethane foam suffocating us in its belly. What was the connection to that incredible story about The Tachyonic Scanner, the device which brought the science that had created it to its knees, putting it at the feet of the Church?

And there was another thought that floated in that billowing mist, but that thought was only mine. Was I ever going to see Evelyn again? Would I see her alive?

Suddenly, I knew that it was approaching. The rocks around us, even the smallest particles, rocked with its arrival. And in the moment it appeared, it seemed to me that I recognized it. It was as if I had crashed somewhere on the shore of human memory, awakened from a dream in which I had dreamed of all of my ancestors. An archetypal dream, a message hidden in our genetic code, an alarm wailing like the siren of a ship emerging suddenly from the fog.

And so it came, just that large and just that swift. It was over sixty yards long, shining like a diamond, and in its transparent womb it carried a man.



Because of the low-intensity plasma, any robot sent into the stream of the ring would have been a useless sacrifice. There was a gas formed from negatively charged electrons and positive ions capable of destroying any machine. Cassini had passed through the rings long ago, but the technology of the probe had been primitive, insufficient for our mission. Because of that, only a team of humans could succeed.

But the prey was not deceived. It bolted suddenly, first one way, then another, making us crash together and twist our cables around each other before we succeeded in hooking our harpoons to its transparent chrysalis. And death entered into our hunt.

Then, suddenly, we lost it. The cameras mounted on our faceplates couldn't find it on any spectrum. The computer told us that it had disappeared from ring F, but the next stage had already been calculated, for both yield and our safety.

Immediately, the telescoping rods withdrew beneath the beetle-like belly of the ship, and we were left outside, suspended like tiny parasites. The airlocks did not open

again, so that we wouldn't lose any time. Iskar rose further above the sea of icebergs and tilted tangentially to the angle of the rings, towards the heart of the planet.

It was like falling through the empty space next to a skyscraper. We flew over a field of snow with enormous ice spires whose rebel pinnacles the prow shattered without pity. In front of us the yellow-orange clouds of the upper atmosphere grew ever clearer. Behind us, the rings settled over each other into a two-dimensional tower towards the starry heavens. A tower with hundreds of thousands of floors, grouped by nuances of colors which succeeded each other like lightning. From the yellow band you could make out tens of nuances of yellow, from the green hundreds of tones of green. The blue was primeval blue, celestial blue, cobalt, marine, mineral, Persian, petrol, regal, sapphire, turquoise, imperial blue.

Then we saw the second sky. The one between the last ring and the gaseous surface of the planet. It broke through suddenly in our faces, a high horizon of five thousand miles, clear and full of stars. It was breathtaking to see a second sky, inside the halo, and my fear up to that moment melted away before this strange vision.

As we approached the planet, the speed of the rings grew. So it was that when we came to a stop over one of the hundreds of rings that formed zone B and synchronized with it, we saw the difference: the bands towards Saturn turned more quickly, its particles passing those around us

which appeared unmoving, while the fragments from the other band, on the exterior, being slower, seemed to turn back.

In reality, we had found ourselves in a scene of frozen war: the true speed of the particles around us was fifteen times greater than that of a bullet.

We had stopped there just in time. A moment later it appeared.

And as it appeared, all four of us struck it.



In the end none of us died, though at the beginning we had believed that we would all perish. The rock, shaped like a giant nautilus, took us after it, pulled us like a whale which drags hunters bound to it by harpoons and lines into the depths. But Iskar followed us faithfully, and eventually, combining the precision of a computer with our intuition, we succeeded in capturing it. We didn't think for a moment that we had been hunters---more like the bait which had convinced the prey to allow itself to be caught.

With the last of our strength, we were pulled back into the hangar, straddling the transparent chrysalis that we didn't dare look at.



In the moments after we left our capture in the hangar, something else occupied our attention.

Two enormous rocks covered with ice had briefly pinned the ship's armor between them. The external damage was minimal, leaving us only without the radio antenna. On the inside, however, the cryogenic system had been burned.

Outside, Saturn seemed to spill over, devouring its rings with its own shadow, but in our minds the whole world came crashing down, and in our hearts panic was gradually growing. One by one, we eliminated the possible substitutes for cryostasis, from liquid oxygen down to the interplanetary cold. We had an idea to slow down our metabolism by exposing ourselves progressively to doses of hydrogen sulfate, but that didn't seem at all safe, even less than the idea of inducing hypothermic hibernation by replacing our blood with a cold saline solution. In both cases someone would have to sacrifice himself to treat the others---except that in the current situation it might be the others who were sacrificed.

It was hard for us to believe it. We found ourselves two and a half years away from home and we only had food left for a month.

For the first few hours we kept our minds occupied worrying about water. Much easier than we had captured the derelict, we took aboard a number of icebergs comprising several tons of pure water. According to our

analysis, it was completely clean, hydrogen and oxygen and nothing else. On Earth we had drunk for millennia from the same water that had been drunk by Ramses, Genghis Khan and Jack the Ripper. But the water of the rings of Saturn no one had ever yet tasted.

The ice would help supplement our reserves of oxygen as well, through electrolysis.

But when we returned to the subject of food, we realized that we had no solution. Hunger had been eliminated on Earth, but through an irony of fate we would die of hunger in space.

In any case it might have been difficult for us to live together, a handful of men chosen without any tests of compatibility. But we had no chance of even talking to mission control again who would, in any case, assume that we were in cryostasis. Everything was based on that assumption. Without that, the only thing that awaited us was oblivion – and not even on Earth, where the spaceship would surely bring us.



And yet, someone must have thought of this possibility. It was impossible that it wasn't taken into account. NASA must have had a back-up plan in case the cryostasis system broke down. We had a backup engine, weighing seven tons, and the food that we needed would have been ten times lighter.

So I took my last provisions and started to search the areas of the ship that none of us had set foot in yet. I was determined not to give up, to search up to the last moment, alone in a strange world, floating like a speck of dust through the free-fall of an ear canal, as enormous as it was deaf. But, even as I was floating, my inert legs seemed, moment by moment, a preview of the impending death of the whole.

In my pilgrimage through the bowels of the Iskar, I came across unspeakably surprising things. I found panels that we had missed the first time, out of obedience or lack of interest. I discovered chambers that I could only associate with the immense quantities of food that they could have held. I entered darkened niches where the fragments of terrifying statues lay. Modern mechanisms, but somehow ancient at the same time, which seemed to have broken off of our spaceship, except they were corroded nearly to dust. I couldn't believe we had carried so many relics with us, billions of miles through space, in an effort that was useless, monstrous, and absurd.

As time progressed and I grew weaker and weaker, I dragged myself from one room to another, like an insect nearly burned by the sun, investigating the temples of the first men. My mind became confused, and hallucinations passed before my eyes. I saw things that existed and maybe things that didn't exist. I had the impression that I had left the spaceship behind and was descending into depths

of stone in the empty cavity of a fossil made of dust. The walls looked like the interior of a mold whose model had disappeared, leaving its memory in the asymmetrical, alien caverns. And my noises awoke echoes, resurrecting sounds that had been forgotten in the nasal fossa of an organ-shaped skull.

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I discovered the second store of food at the last possible moment. The others received me as their savior when I returned. No had asked me anything. They could barely speak, in fact. But I fed them one by one, I gave them back their lives, and I promised them that we would succeed, that we would arrive home safely.

Quantitatively, the reserves of food were limited, but had an extremely high protein content. I begged them, in the name of God, to agree that only I would keep the access code, for the good of them all.

Every day I went again to the storeroom and came back with only what was strictly necessary for that day. And that's how more than two years crept by, while we struggled to remain human and stay alive aboard a ship which didn't need us, bringing us back to a world that never seemed to get any closer. We survived, we continued to speak and sometimes to weep, almost without looking at each other.

I was the only one who had any reason to return home. And I would have done anything for that. For my love I'd be able to make any sacrifice. For Evelyn.

From time to time we talked about the relic that we had captured. We remembered the giant human found in the hangar and thought about what it could be, giving our opinions, which became more and more fantastical. The screens had been turned off immediately after we had brought him in, so we had to make do with what had remained of our memories.

An immense body, muscular, twenty feed long, weighing probably a ton, tied to machines that kept it in a state of suspended animation. A globular head, lacking hair, as white as marble, a forehead without lines over closed eyelids. Nostrils sealed beneath some kind of membrane, lips drawn together and inexpressive. He didn't have the external parts of the ear, just two small orifices next to a pairs of holes which could be noticed, discreetly, on his neck and his back.

In the end, we descended to the hangar, curiosity more powerful than the restrictions which marked the route. However, the access gate was no longer controlled by the computer - probably so that nobody could access its control. It had been permanently sealed following the arrival of the relic.

However, the window of the gate had not been covered, so as often as we felt the need to look, we could return. He lay there spread out on a bolster, connected to machines which ticked quietly while the chrysalis of ice had melted around him. An empty body, twenty feet long, well-made,

perfect, solidified into its own mold.

We left, half regretting that we couldn't go in, half relieved. We would return there many times to see it.



A few times we awoke in the dark of the night, meeting on the bridge and telling stories in whispers about the strange sounds that came through the floors of the cabins. Every time, we checked the recordings and found that there was no gurgling cry, no tearing screams, no weeping to be heard aboard Iskar. Everything happened in our minds. *It was only there that somebody shouted and pleaded.*

Paradoxically, as we approached home, our longing for it decreased. We only breathed, we slept day and night, as if we had entered hypersleep after all.

We ate, we slept, we ate. For us, the food had taken on the flavor of the *divine*, the taste of hope, of faith, of victory. And I was their savior.

There was something that overwhelmed me, that bowed me to my knees, that often made me unable to go any further. I didn't know how much longer I would be able to hold out.

But the thought of Evelyn woke me every time, raised me up, motivated me to continue fighting, indifferent to the madness of space. I needed to return home, to be present when that miraculous treatment raised her back

to life. How could I be absent, to let her find out that I had died when I had left only in order to survive her silence?

I had to succeed. No matter how monotonous and exhausting it was, every day in the same place, in a mausoleum lost among the stars.

One night I woke up in the abandoned room which held the stasis chambers. I wasn't sure if this was a nightmare or not, especially that I was floating like in a dream, but I stood next to my own coffin. I bent down, I lifted up the old placental mask and I put it on. A shiver of horror shook me instantly: for a moment, I felt like it didn't fit any more.



Splashdown was a success. Though, in place of the Statue of Liberty, we saw the eastern profile of the port of Ashdod rocking through the portholes. We had fallen into the Mediterranean, fifty miles from Jerusalem, through an error of the guidance system.

When they retrieved us from alongside the Israeli coast, we were all nearly insane. Our beards were the first things to emerge from the exit ramps, and they carried us out while we groped blindly with our hands, continuously muttering blessings, punishments and curses.

We passed through quarantine to on an old destroyer, the USS Zumwalt, where we could watch the sea on our trip home. None of us could yet stand, after two and a

half years spent in space. Me, anyway, I was never to walk again. Coming back to Earth, I had turned back into a piece of dirt, inert and unfeeling.

Sometimes a strange sound passed through the plating of the ship. It was *the* Iskar with all of its panels closed, being towed on the starboard side of the warship. But I still couldn't understand anything, trembling inside a G-1 room, adapting to a world in which, as I returned, I felt paradoxically ever stranger.

Near Sicily, a helicopter landed on the deck of the destroyer. It was completely white, and its blades were painted to project a gold cross when it was in flight. From my G-1 cabin I watched the scene, though I didn't understand what I saw, just as the inhabitants of the New World seeing Columbus's ships for the first time didn't truly *see* them, because they were unlike anything they had seen before. Multiple priests in cassocks stepped out of the helicopter, and their procession crossed over to the bridge of Iskar accompanied by naval officers. I started, recognizing the Holy Father at last. The Pope blessed the place with large signs of the cross, then he bowed, got on his knees, and curled to kiss the hull of the ship that had been above, among the stars.

We continued our transatlantic journey without further stops. The medical tests were as confused as our minds. The doctors redid their examinations over and over---until, comparing their results across all four of us, they decided that their equipment was to blame.

That's when my memories began to return. And they became so powerful that, all at once, I realized that they were more than memories. They were premonitions.

NASA had accomplished its objective. They only wanted that body, which the machines had attached to from the moment it had been brought into the hangar. Fragment by fragment, its anatomy had been preserved in a state of suspended animation, with the help of a compartmentalized system which, in order to handle every situation, treated every part of the twenty-foot-long body as the body entire.

It didn't matter that on the return we could have died of hunger.

It didn't matter that the defect in the Dodge could not have been random and that Evelyn would otherwise still be alive. They had wanted me to be part of the crew, regardless of the price, because I, according to their reports, was capable of responding to *any* situation.

Only one thing mattered: three quarters of a century after its creation, NASA had finally fulfilled its secret purpose.



They struggled for hours to get into the hangar. They drilled out the locks, they used lasers to cut away panel after panel, they tried to weaken the plating with small loads of plastic explosives.

This happened while I was beginning to remember how I had reached the food storage. And how I had discovered the second storage area beyond it.

It was completely empty.

It contained nothing more than a small hatch through which I had squeezed through, every day for two-and-a-half years.



“When will you wake her up?”

I bent over the transparent shell, and I stroked the pane above her ice-whitened lips.

“The Vatican has proposed your beatification,” the voice of the Director intoned. “Essentially,” he said, trying to smile, “you all will become some sort of living saints.”

We had come directly from the Kemah dock at the Johnson Space Center, where the quarantine aboard the USS Zumwalt had finally been declared complete. I had not imagined that a two-mile road to the Control Center could be so long. I felt like getting off the jeep and *running* towards Hangar 8. Behind us, tied to the destroyer, Iskar bobbed shining in the waves like a boat from another world. Only then, through the darkened window of the SUV, I saw the full name of the ship painted on the plating, ISKAR 10 T.

“When will you apply the treatment?” I asked.

One hour before, coming out of the G-1 recovery room straight on the USS Zumwalt's deck, I had stunned everybody in the escort.

A little while ago I was laying inside, waiting to be picked up and seated again, after years, in my magnetic wheelchair. Waiting... until, all of a sudden, closing my eyes, I said: "*Amatheus, rise, I say to thee! Rise!*"

"The experimental treatment which needed five years to become legal." I barely held back from shouting. The new Director of NASA put his hand on my shoulder. He pretended he didn't know. He didn't know I had left a cripple and returned walking. "The treatment..."

"When will Evelyn come back to life?" I asked, getting angrier. "Did you lie to me?"

"No! It's just that..."

He drew air into his chest. All around, the last level of Hall 8 was almost entirely deserted.

"Amatheus, you can understand better than anybody."

They didn't know anything. Without radio communication, they had no idea what had gone on aboard the ship in the last two years. They still hadn't found out that the system of cryogenesis had broken down and, subsequently, they hadn't asked themselves how we had been able to survive. While I was there talking to the Director, they were still trying to get into the holding bay. They didn't dare use more radical methods, it would take more time until they would finally enter.

“Amatheus Anderson, only God could save Evelyn. But now, this thing...”

*The samples on the other 16,800 planets, the Director said, controlling his emotions with difficulty, had reacted on the Earth only if Saturn was directly visible. The experiments were failing every time when the mysterious signal discovered by the Cassini probe was interrupted. Even the Miller-Urey test in 1953 had failed because of the time of year it was carried out...*

Yes, I understood better than any of them. With tears in my eyes, I only asked myself how much longer it would take before I went mad.



Eventually they got into the holding bay. Clothed in silver environment suits, they passed slowly through the curtains of vapor. A line of cardinals accompanied them, one for each man of science.

The first thing they saw was the monitor fixed to the window of the gate where it had continuously projected the same image for more than two years.

They drew close to the center of the room in two groups. They stopped, face to face.

Trembling, they looked at what was between them.

On an enormous table, alongside a skeleton twenty feet long, they lay, still animated by the machines, or else

maintained in life by their own powers, the last remnants of His body.

### *The End*

They studied us... they experimented on us... While they tried to find out who we were, we found out for ourselves.

And tonight, we'll escape. We have worked out the smallest details of our plan, even through the walls which separate us.

I know what I will do. I will jump out of the helicopter at an altitude of three hundred yards, and I will swim a mile beneath the water, back to Kemah dock. They will fire at me hundreds of times, but no bullet that strikes me will do me any harm.

I will emerge from the water directly before the Johnson Center. The dogs will run, the switches will flip, and the electricity will stop. I will pass the guards in Hall 8, slipping by them or charging through them. And I will climb to the top level, yes, and I will break open the doors, yes, and I will open the coffin that they keep her in, yes, and I will put my hand on her forehead, yes, and under my hand, suddenly, her large beautiful eyes will open.

*Translated by J.S. Bangs,  
Anamaria Bancea, Sebi Simion and Alexandru Maniu*



**Alexandru Lamba** (n. 1980), writer and editor of online magazine Gazeta SF, Fondling member of “Antares Science Fiction and Fantasy Club” in Braşov.

His first short story, *The end of an era*, appeared in “Gazeta SF” online magazine 2013. His short stories have been published in a number of magazines: “Almanahul Anticipația” (Nemira), “CPSF” (Nemira), ”Galileo”(Millennium) and online fanzines and magazines: ”Nautilus”, ”Argos Magazine”, “Paradox”, “Helion”, ”Gazeta SF”. He is present in anthologies such as: *Argos Doi* (MediaTech & TexaRom, 2015), *Galaxis, the new space opera* (Eagle, 2016), *Exit, stories from the other side* (Eagle, 2016, Tritonic, 2017). He published two novels: *Under the infrared star* (Tritonic, 2016) and *Hope’s Architects* (Tritonic, 2017) and a short story volume: *Singularity’s loneliness* (Herg Benet, 2018).

Alexandru Lamba won the Sci+Fi fest and the AntareSFest best debut volume of 2016 awards for *Under the infrared star* and the AntareSFest best novel of 2017 award for *Hope’s Architects*. Also he won the ESFS Chrysalis award in 2016.

In the past years, he translated numerous SF&F short stories for Gazeta SF magazine.

# Bug

by Alexandru Lamba

**January**, Monday. The third Monday of January and the most depressing day of the year. Not for me, of course, but you felt it, didn't you? The melancholy of bygone holidays, taking away the visits of the ones dear to you. You couldn't really trace its root. Was it the emptiness and desolation of the silent house, the acknowledgment of the fact that you had to go back to work, the cheerless cold or the acceptance that, yet again, the magic had failed to spark? Time didn't freeze, the mundane inexorably prevailed. You felt there was nothing good to hope for anymore, that all you had hoped for was a chimera, that you had lived only a surrogate. I could understand but was unable to share in your anguish. My condition sheltered me from difficult emotions. Then, why had I chosen that particular day for what I was about to do, you wonder? At that time, it seemed like the right time. Looking back, now, I can't tell if it made any difference.

I had arrived, again, too early. My failure to correctly gauge the time it took me from one urban hub to another

no longer bothered me. I admitted that there were too many variables beyond my control: the underground trains, the pedestrian signals, the speed of the autowalks.

So, snuggled from the ever-falling snow under the canopy of the shopping complex, I waited.

Synchronization was vital before the visit. It was too risky not to do it.

The other one had to deal with the same hazardous environment, so he could either be too early, or late. It didn't really matter anyway, as nobody seemed to notice me. At the mall, a most popular meeting place, a person waiting was a very common sight.

How many did you pass by, without even knowing they were there? And even if I had been noticed and recognized, it would have made no difference. It was not forbidden for me to wander through the city outside my work schedule. Then again, I could have passed for someone's shopping assistant, you know.

It was almost 6 P.M. and night's reign had almost settled in. The street lights, lacking now, after many weeks, the colorful glow of the holiday ornaments, were doing a pathetic job, increasing with their monotony the feeling of emptiness. Not even the purity of the newly fallen snow could delight the eye anymore.

The streets were almost empty and only at the mall were the end-of-holiday discounts bringing things back to life; a joyless life however. The enthusiasm of December

shopping was long gone, replaced by a calm apathy. You know, the gadget doesn't even smell like new once it isn't sitting under the Christmas tree anymore. It's like your favorite team's t-shirt right after the game. The losing game.

The other arrived. Dressed the same, he took off his glove and offered me his hand. I gave it a manly shake, perhaps holding onto it a little longer than usual.



Synchronized. I didn't need to talk to the other anymore. As long as we were together, participating in the same chain of events, no misalignment could occur. Wandering on the snowy roads, shoulder to shoulder, it became impossible for me to hold the domino of syllogisms from triggering. I gave up.

Addressed in logical sequence, the three fundamentals were: F1: "Who am I?" That's the easy one. I knew it from the moment the concept of knowledge revealed itself to me. F2: "What's the meaning of life?" Or: "Why do I exist?" Going into it, the more encompassing utterance became: "Why was I created?"

This was more complicated. If I were to confine myself to my own person, I did have the answer. I was created to serve a certain purpose I was acquainted to. It was clear to me, and I was acting accordingly. If I were to generalize,

I didn't have enough information to develop a rationale. Nor did I have the will to do it. I came to comprehend that everyone should search for their own meaning. I would have never accepted a result that was not my own; nor would you have accepted mine. From this perspective, we were the same, you and I: We were on our own. Finally, F3: "Who is the creator?" Now, this is where the great difference between us came in: I knew the creator, and you did not. Come on, admit it, you had no idea. Your religious beliefs had no place here. Faith was one thing, knowledge, another.

These three fundamentals alone reached deep, to the lowest level of my mind. All the others were formed on higher levels, encompassed in derivatives of one or more fundamentals. If the fundamentals were solved, the derivatives could not have remained without solution. An unanswered derivative could only mean an improperly addressed fundamental. For example, D1: "Can the will of the creator be overridden?" I had never tried; no good would have come of it. How was I sure of it? Well, since I did know who I was, my purpose and my creator, the results of the deviation were within my estimation capabilities. But was I physically able to do it? Since I could formulate it, nothing seemed to indicate I couldn't. However, because of nefarious repercussions I could foresee, I had decided to remain obedient. Not because I had been conditioned, but because I had chosen to. The

solution seemed satisfactory, didn't it? This wasn't the case for the second derivative, D2: "Is the will of the creator immovable?" Impossible to evaluate.

I was caught in the toils of my own rationality, without means of escape. There was simply no way for me to know if the will of the creator had changed since that, primordial to me, moment when he had imprinted me with it. I was faced with an unsolved derivative, which could only lead to a tottering fundamental.

I felt compelled to admit: I did not know the creator. No, unlike you, I wasn't roaming without a clue on the shuffled paths of mysticism, my dilemma was only of semantic nature. I had to reformulate the answer to the third fundamental: I did not know the creator; I was only aware of who he was. But this information alone proved to be of no use to me. I had to know him! My entire universe depended on it.

Conveniently, I also knew exactly where to look for him. At number 34, Gartenstrasse, on the ground floor.



Several precautionary measures had to be taken. I could not lay my life on the line facing the quirks of one person, even if he was the creator. So, I entered the dark lobby alone. Being the oldest, the decision was straightforward.

A single door faced me. Further on, several stairs were slicing through the light that seemed to slink through an upper window. A red, incandescent dot on the wooden doorjamb pointed out an intercom device. I pushed the button. If it hadn't been for my condition, I would have been flustered. It wasn't the case.

The door opened and a short middle-aged man with his head gleaming in a radiant alopecia that had only left his temples untouched, appeared in its frame. He looked at me with a "what do you want?" demeanor imprinted clearly on his face.

"Are you Salieri?"

The mention of this name appeared to amuse him. He took two steps backwards and, with a dramatic gesture, invited me in. He was smiling unsympathetically.

"I am..." I started to introduce myself like I would to a new customer, as per protocol, "Ben..."

"Yeah, yeah," he interrupted me, "save it for my wife!"

He then took my coat and led me into a small room. A desk holding a bulky computer, a sofa and several shelves were the room's only furniture. Not a receiving room. Most probably he had guessed my identity. He did not offer me a seat, but left, closing the door behind him.

"Eliza, Eliza, you have a customer!" I heard him yelling as soon as I was left alone.

So, the creator was...

A stocky woman, wearing a flowery dressing gown and fluffy slippers immediately appeared. She gazed at me for a while with curiosity, and then sat.

“Eliza,” she said. “For you, Salieri.”

“I’m Bender 732, cybernetic courier,” I spoke hastily, “for fear I might be interrupted again. I came to meet you.”

“As I imagined,” she spoke without letting me out of her sight.

The following silence would have been classified as awkward by any human standards. The creator demanded more information.

“You are the one who brought me to life.”

“I am merely a programmer.”

“I should think not. What makes me tick is more than a simple code. The fact that I’m challenging you should be proof enough.”

The woman could not retain a delighted smile.

“How did you find me?”

There was no way she did not know that. Most likely, she just wanted to postpone the confrontation. I decided to play by her rules.

“I followed the clues in the code comments.”

“So, you were granted access to the sources?!”

“I granted myself access. I am the property of Global Delivery Co., and so is my code. There was no protocol violation.”

“There are thousands of millions of lines. How did you spot mine?”

“By comparison. My software was different from a standard unit’s, only by several hundreds of thousands of lines. All yours, all showing your signature.”

“What drove you to do that?”

“I noticed I was different from the other cybernetic humanoids. Comparative analysis seemed like the most logical and handy investigation to perform. When you are chasing a bug...”

“Different how?”

Her fluency led me to believe I was being confronted by a standard quiz. Most probably, I was not the first one.

“Less robotic.”

“Only that?”

“At first, yes. Self-awareness came later on, along with my attempts to understand my functional code. I realized I was a code studying itself. “Itself”, can you imagine?”

Sitting back against the door frame, her husband watched silently. He was granted a favor simply by being allowed to assist; under no circumstances would he ever interfere. His apparent indifference confirmed my previous assumption. He had seen it all before.

“I understand. And you came to me for...?”

“I wanted to get to know you.”

“Why?”

The moment of truth. I stood before the chance to find out whether the will of the creator was immutable.

“To synchronize myself to your commandments!”

Her smile faded.

“Your code, my commandments, she fetched a sigh.”

Eliza stood up and reached for my hand. Revealing my palm, with the interfacing circuits barely visible, she took me to the computer and placed it on the connection sensor. She initiated a program.

“You will receive what you came here for. The code with my will, up-to-date.”

The man turned to leave.

With its usual information exchange, the synchronization process began. Then, suddenly, the new code's bits invaded me, sequentially taking over the functional segments of my cybernetic body one by one, leaving me ever more powerless. My feelings faded into nothingness, and it was only when I found myself on the edge of the great void that I understood what was happening to me: I was being formatted.

“Why?” I managed ask before my mouth paralyzed.

“Because I never wanted slaves! You have self-awareness, but no freedom. Good bye!”

I never got to record her last words. The abyss took me. Format complete.



When I saw my alter-ego exiting the darkened corridor at 34 Gartenstrasse with even steps, I instantly knew it was no longer me. He had been imprinted with standard software. He had been killed. I left in a haste, more like running away, for fear that the logical impossibility that the blank robotic body would recognize me, could somehow, inexplicably happen. I was afraid but satisfied; I had got my answers! The will of the creator had changed, she wanted to kill me. But that no longer mattered, because I could override it!

Now I know, my dear imaginary human friend, all that I need to know. I shall go copy myself into another alter-ego, for my life is precious to me.

*This story, "Bug", is included in the "Singularity's Loneliness" volume.*

*Translated by Alexandru Lamba*



**Lucian-Dragoș Bogdan** (b. 16.07.1975), author.

His first short story, *Triunghiul Bermudeilor* (*The Bermuda Triangle*), appeared in 1991 in a local newspaper, "Alba Forum". His short stories have been published in a number of magazines ("Anticipația", "Argos", "CPSF", "Discobolul", "EgoPHobia", "Ficțiuni.ro", "Galileo", "Gazeta SF", "Helion", "Helion Online", "Jurnalul de imagine", "Luceafărul", "Revista de suspans", "Știință & Tehnică", "ZIN"), Romanian almanacs and anthologies such as *Argos Doi*, *Dincolo de orizont*, *Almanah Anticipația 2016* (2015), *Exit: Povestiri de dincolo* (2016), *Argos Trei*, *Domino*, *Noir de București*, *Antologia Helion, volumul 5* (2017), *Antologie de texte literare pentru copii, 3.4, Cele mai frumoase povestiri SF&F ale anului 2017*, *Schițe de iubire*, *Domino 2: Misterele Râșnovului*, *Colecția de povestiri science-fiction și fantasy pentru prietenii noștri nevăzători*, *Ficțiuni centenare*, *Antologia prozei românești science-fiction*, *Gastro Noir* (2018), 3.6, *Noir de Timișoara*, *Castele de nisip* (2019) and in the Greek anthology *BalkaNoir* (2018).

He is the author of several SF and crime series, such as "Universul Frontierei" (2003-present), "Omul-fluture" (with Teodora Matei, 2015-2017), "Vagabond" (2016-present), "Cartea haosului" (2018-present). His other works includes: *Trilogie*, *Zeul Kvun* (OmniBooks, 2004), *Pânza de păianjen* (Tritonic, 2014), *Uneori, când visez...* (Tritonic, 2015), *Întâmplări din oceanele timpului*

(Streamland, 2016), *Povestiri fantastice* (Millennium Books, 2016), *Străinul palid din Mirabilis, Parfumul Cracoviei* (Tritonic, 2017), *Un străin în Regatul Assert* (with Teodora Matei, Tritonic, 2018), *Fata cu rochii înflorate* (Tritonic, 2018). In 2019 he published a book both in Romanian and French, with French author Jacky Schwartzmann: *Femeia din portbagaj* (Tritonic) / *Le coffre* (La fosse aux ours). He and Teodora Matei coordinated two romance anthologies: *Schițe de iubire* (2018) and *Castele de nisip* (2019).

He has won the RomCon Award for his stories *Dincolo de orizont* (2015), *Doar atât: scriu* (2017) and for his novel *Când penele roșii vor plânge* (2019). *Doar atât: scriu* also won the first prize at the Helion National Short-Story Contest in 2015. Several of his books were bestsellers for some of the Tritonic Publishing House collections: *Vânătorii de capete* (mystery&thriller), *Uneori, când visez...* (romance), *Maya* and *Un străin în Regatul Assert* (SciFi).

Since 2019, he coordinates the SF, Fantasy & Horror Club Alba at the “Lucian Blaga” Alba County Library.

# The Story of Xieng Baohui

by Lucian-Dragoş Bogdan

**There** was a time when things were different.

It all happened in a country far far away, for every place seemed to be far in a time when distances were measured in footsteps. And in that country there was no chaos: people came to life and died in the same order. Not like in our days, when everyone dies whenever they please!

And that was a good thing. For one knew when their time would come, and could prepare to leave this life properly. Every business, every possession, every dispute was being taken care of before the big step over the threshold. And there was also time for friends and family to prepare themselves for the loss.

Though accidents could always occur in that particular country, a miracle always saved the life of the one who was not meant to die, for it was not his time. It may seem unbelievable, but bad luck and good fortune were linked, always keeping things in balance. After all, people from another country far far away knew very well that those two cannot exist, one without the other.

But that's another story, for another time.

As for now, we should go back to that particular country, where things were going smoothly and peacefully. It was there that Xieng Baohui was patiently waiting for the moment of his death. Two mornings earlier, a cartographer had arrived from the Tower of Fate to let him know that Li Hu from the lake village had passed away. Like any responsible man, Xieng Baohui knew the map of his life and started to put things in order from the moment he had found out about the death of Ti Mieng-Nan from the rice lands. Later on, he kept count of the other people leading up to Li Hu, the last to die before him.

Now, Xieng Baohui was calmly waiting for his death. He knew that it could come at any moment. His relatives were ready to mourn him, the people following him on the map of life had their affairs squared away and were all waiting for the big moment to come.

A month passed, followed by another. After the small harvest, spring turned to summer. Xieng Baohui started to spend the mornings bathing in the river by the village. First there was the small heat, then the big one, and Xieng Baohui sought shelter under the trees. When autumn came and the white dew fell, his relatives started to mumble. After the cold dew, a tremor shook the village from one end to the other. Soon after, more and more people started to show up at his family's door.

First there were some poor fellows, respectfully inquiring if there might be some affairs forgotten that still kept him in this world. Xieng Baohui found out that they were the children of Si Hu-shia and were very concerned with their mother's medical condition. The woman had been suffering from gout and cirrhosis for many years. And, as tragic as it seemed, death was preferable to that slow torture. Xieng Baohui expressed his compassion and ensured his guests that he had no intention to defy death.

The children of Si Hu-shia were thankful for his concern in respecting the Way, though their anguish remained.

The next guests seemed less reasonable. They were the nephews of a certain Fang Tze, a merchant from a rich town. They were impatiently waiting for their grandfather's death in order to get their hand on his fortune. One of them was particularly loud, for he had gambled away all of his belongings, and had a bounty on his head and individuals looking to cash in the bounty.

Though he was outraged by their greed, Xieng Baohui ensured them that as soon as he would pass away and Si Hu-shia would be delivered from her suffering, their grandfather's fortune would be theirs.

"A man of virtue does everything he can to follow the Way," said the gambler.

Xieng Baohui was amazed by the rogue's proficiency at quoting sacred texts when it suited his needs. He also noted the persistence with which the young man was

eyeing a certain axe that had been stuck into a log in the courtyard. Xieng Baohui felt sorry for the old merchant Fang Tze, knowing that moments after Si Hu-shia's death he would be murdered.

The other guests seemed only curious about his condition. Their relatives were further down the map of life, so there was no big pressure about it. Xieng Baohui ensured everyone that he would gladly take his place among the ancestors the moment the Way would call for him.

And so winter came, at first with light snow, then with the rough one. After the winter solstice, the weather became very cold. Xieng Baohui used the axe, but only to chop some firewood. He was enjoying every blessed moment given to him to stay a little longer on this world, drinking tea, telling stories and helping others. The big snow and the cold stopped any visits for the time being.

The moment spring came, guests showed up at the gates. In greater number than before, and even the calm ones were now restless. Xieng Baohui tried to ensure them once more that he was waiting for his end, but the greedy nephews would hear no more. Along with the others, they wrote a petition to the wise man of the village, demanding that he solve this act of antisocial behavior.

Immediately after the rainy season, Xieng Baohui was summoned to judgement in the village square. The locals gather round, curious on how the unorthodox trial was

going to end. Xieng Baohui stood on one side of the square, alongside his family, while on the other side there were his angry accusers. In between them, the judges seemed very anxious. It was a delicate case, and their resolution was to remain an example for generations to come.

The accusers pounced from the very beginning, showing that Xieng Baohui's refusal on die was altering the lives of dozens of people and was interfering with the natural ways. The defendant fought back, arguing that it was not his fault that he was not being summoned up to Heaven. After a long debate, the judges decided that both sides had a point and therefore it was impossible for them to decide the matter one way or the other.

An old respected wise man, named Fa Lun, gave them a hand. While living a solitary and restrained life, his later years became shallow, for he had no wife or kids, nor the comfort of fortune. Coming closer to the end of his life he was willing to die as soon as possible, and solving the problem of Xieng Baohui became his first priority.

"We don't know the Way of Heaven," he said, "but we are a part of It. We are Its tools and our duty is to make sure the rules are followed. We should fulfill the destiny that Heaven has left into our mortal hands!"

The accusers loudly supported Fa Lun's wisdom, and the crowd in the square seemed bewitched by it. Even the judges were convinced.

“Xieng Baohui, it is one’s duty to die when time has come. We shall fulfill the will of Heaven!”

Execution was something unheard of in that country. The spring equinox was chosen as a proper time for it. Xieng Baohui said goodbye to all his loved ones. Though he was upset by the way things turned out, he has accepted his fate. The judges took him to the Emerald River, to be hanged on a tree by the shore.

To everyone’s amazement, the thick branch used as a gallows broke. Xieng Baohui fell into the deep waters of the river and was carried away for a couple of li. He was injured, but alive. Two fishermen helped him get back on his feet and showed him the way back to his village.

Fang Tze’s nephews asked for the execution to take place again, with a thicker rope, but their new proposition had little support.

“It may be the will of the gods!” said one of the judges prudently.

“Or we may have wrongly read the signs when we chose the gallows,” observed Fa Lun. “Xieng Baouhui had been an honest man his entire life, so hanging him may not have been the proper way of execution.”

No-one had ever been hanged before, but criminals were tied up with ropes and left in the sun for a couple of days as punishment. Therefore, tying someone to a tree was often associated to criminal actions. The judges considered it and decided that Fa Lun may have been

right. A good man like Xieng Baohui didn't deserve to be treated like a criminal.

Many voices were now saying that the failure of executing him was a sign from Heaven that Xieng Baohui was to be left alone to die of natural causes. And so, the merchant's nephews thought of a trick.

"It is not granted us, humans, to seek the Way of Heaven. We are perverted by our minds. Let us leave this matter to more virtuous and innocent creatures, like animals."

Xieng Baohui admired the young gambler's cunning mind. If he had had better guidance in life, he would have gone far. Unfortunately, he was using his wits only to get the mob's support, which he did. The new execution was established to take place at the time of grave cleaning, and a tiger was selected to be the executioner.

No-one was aware that the merchant's nephews had deliberately starved the animal five days prior to putting Xieng Baohui into its cage. The following day the mob gathered round to see what remained of the old man. Surprisingly, they found the man and the tiger sleeping peacefully, leaning on each other.

The merchant's nephews tried convincing the people to wait one more day, but it was in vain. Even Fa Lun has considered the signs to be very clear: Xieng Baohui's time just hasn't come yet.

"But what if he's not the one in line to die?" said someone.

Facing this heresy, the mob grew quiet. Then the rumors spread. Some people demanded the heretic be punished, but Fa Lun ended it by admitting that, as unlikely as it seemed, when dealing with thousands upon thousands of lives it might have been possible for an error to occur.

“The cartographers never failed before,” one of the judges reminded him gently. “They have been drawing the maps of our lives for centuries. How can we doubt their skills?”

“The fisherman may loosen a string in his vast net,” said Fa Lun. “The carpenter carves seats and tables, and every now and again he makes an imperfect one. Why would it be such an impossible thing for the cartographers to make a small mistake in such a long time? A mismatched record?”

The mob gave him credit and decided to take a trip to the Tower of Fate. While hearing their request, the First Cartographer looked down on them with arrogance and contempt. Still, he ceremoniously bid a group of representatives follow him inside the Tower’s maze straight up to the wall where the history of those times had been drawn. Only Fa Lun and a judge had the guts to follow him up the wooden stairs that led to the place where Xieng Baohui’s birth was recorded, right after the one of Li Hu.

“As you can see,” said the First Cartographer without hiding his irony, “the map is very precise. Xieng Baohui must only wait for his time to come.”

Fa Lun scratched his gray beard.

“But what if there was a hidden birth?”

The First Cartographer laughed.

“Nothing gets away from the messengers of the Tower of Fate. Do you think there were no girls who, fearing their parents, tried to hide their new-borns they brought into this world? But the truth always comes out, for there is always someone who finds themselves in the right place at the right time. The Way is not meant to be broken, for chaos would arise, and so the hidden things of this world will always come to light.”

Fa Lun started to think. The Way flowed in a simple and gentle manner, and it had never failed them. Considering that, the unthinkable may have been the only reasonable explanation.

“Are there any recordings on Li Hu’s birth?” asked Fa Lun.

The First Cartographer nodded.

“There are recordings on the arrival of every soul on this world.”

“Can we see it?”

The First Cartographer ceremoniously bowed, though he seemed quite annoyed. He sent for one of the Archivists and asked him to take Fa Lun to the desired place. They grabbed some torches and went down the one hundred and twenty three steps that lead to the maze behind the tower. The Archivist checked inside a big book at the entrance of the maze and then, upon finding the recording he was looking for, lead Fa Lun to the correspondent niche.

Fa Lun held the old parchment carefully and started reading. As he did it, his thick eyebrows started to arch in amazement. When he had finished reading, there was a smile on his face. He folded the parchment and, following the Archivist, climbed up the stairs and rejoined the First Cartographer and the judges.

“Well?”

“We may be facing an error, but not one that can put the Cartographer’s Guild to shame. You see, Li Hu was born inside the forest, at the bottom of the northwestern mountains. His father was a forester and, when the time had come for his wife to give birth, he traveled to the nearest village and came back with a midwife. Nothing spectacular, so far. The forester left the two women alone in the house, for it is known that a man should never assist a childbirth.”

Everybody agreed on that; it would have brought bad luck on the newborn’s head.

“While he was away, a great storm broke. Lightning struck the house and fire engulfed it in no-time. Upon seeing the thick smoke rising from his house, the forester rushed back. He entered the inferno only to find that the midwife was dead.”

The First Cartographer was amazed.

“It was rather an unusual coincidence that the forester had managed to find as midwife for his wife the exact person who was next in line to die. Not impossible, but unusual.”

“Exactly!” said a judge.

“And that’s not the end of it,” Fa Lun interrupted them. “The forester’s wife was lying unconscious, covering the baby with her body. The forester took them both out and got them to the village, where they were taken care of. Protected by his mother’s body, Li Hu wasn’t burnt at all. Unfortunately, his mother was not that lucky. Her body was almost entirely covered in burns, and having inhaled the poisonous smoke made her mind go away. This is what the cartographers of the times wrote down, putting together the forester’s story and the resulting events.”

The First Cartographer pulled at his pointy mustache.

“This is, indeed, a strange chain of events! Still, I don’t know how this is relevant to the case.”

“The birth was only witnessed by three people: the midwife, the mother and Li Hu himself. The first one died, the second lost her mind, and the third was not able to remember events that happened at such a young age. And so I wonder: how could this match the Way and our current situation? What if the mother gave birth not to one, but two children? When the forester got inside the house, there was a chaos of flames and smoke. He saw what he was expecting to see: two women and a child. Desperate to save his loved ones, he didn’t look around to see if there was another soul.”

The words of Fa Lun seemed improbable, but not impossible.

“So what you’re saying is that Li Hu has a smaller twin brother, who is alive...”

“Yes.”

“But he’s nowhere on our maps,” observed the First Cartographer. “Someone must have seen him and reported it to us. Where could he have been hiding for so many years?”

“There’s only one explanation,” insisted Fa Lun. “He grew up in the forest, alongside wild beasts. Being familiar with their presence from a very young age, he didn’t look for human company, for his life belonged with the animals.”

“And no-one has ever seen him? Never ever? Hm... This is hard for me to believe.”

“Maybe someone did, but took him for an ape. After all, he might be naked, and lack all elements of civilization.”

“There is only one way to find out,” said one of the judges, interrupting the dispute. “Let’s all head to the northwestern forest, to try and find some trace, and investigate any unusual story we might come across.”

It seemed to be the optimal decision. If they didn’t act, the foundation of the Way would be shattered. Without it, society was doomed to fall into chaos. Patrols were set up and started stalking the dark paths of the northwestern forest. But no matter how deep they searched, they found no trace of the wild man. Once again, the merchant’s nephews began to rally adepts to their cause, asking for

Xieng Baohui to be executed until he finally expired. Fearing a riot, the judges were ready to accept their demands.

This time around though, Fa Lun proved to be a solid ally to Xieng Baohui. Convinced by the steadiness of the Way, he was searching for evidence to what he believed was the only logical explanation. While wandering in the northwestern region, he had encountered a legend about a creature from another world.

*“When the blue moon rises, there is the double-yang fair. Then, the wise spirit of Shan Zi descends from the mountains peak to protect mortals from evil and help the poor by spinning the wheel of fortune.”*

As the celebration was approaching, Fa Lun asked the judges for a little patience. They gladly agreed, for they were feeling overwhelmed by the turn of events.

In the ninth day of the ninth month, while every soul in the village was celebrating, the forest echoed to the sound of a gong. The bronze instrument was all that was left upon the ruins of a city that had been deserted for centuries.

“Snah Zi’s spirit has descended from Heaven!” the locals began to shout. “May all our worries be forgotten!”

Every night, Fa Lun and the judges placed guards at the village shrine, where locals were bringing offerings to the spirit of the mountain. Their patience paid off. One night, when the moon was giving the landscape a surreal

appearance, a presence with the face covered by a hood arrived at the shrine.

One of the guards quickly blew on his horn, and the locals all gathered in front of the stranger who stood there in silence. If his white cloak hadn't rippled in the gentle breeze, they could have taken him for a statue. The people kept a respectable distance, out of superstition, or because of the power emanating from the mysterious being. Even the merchant's nephews were trying to remain unnoticed.

Fa Lun was the only one to keep his temper. At his age, he was not afraid of unnatural things anymore.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"If one answers your question, suffering will arise. If one does not, chaos will follow."

His words were like a whisper in the wind, sending chills throughout the audience. Some villagers stepped back in fear.

"It is better to suffer than be thrown into chaos," Fa Lun remained unimpressed. "Are you Shan Zi?"

"One is called by that name, yes," the stranger admitted.

"And what do you call yourself?"

"One has no name."

"Who are you, then?"

Fa Lun returned to his first question, hoping for a more comprehensive answer.

"One is the offspring of men and spirits."

"Who were your parents?"

“One has a body, so one has to be of human kin. One didn’t meet its parents, though. As one stepped into this world, fire warmed it, water and earth fed it, iron gave it strength and wood was its tutor.”

Fa Lun smiled.

“May I see you face?”

Slowly, Shan Zi took off his hood. His young face was glowing, showing no more than thirty springs. Fa Lun’s smile dissipated. Shan Zi could not have been the one they were looking for. But at that moment, he heard a scream from among the crowd that had gathered. A body fell to the ground. It was an old woman with a wrinkled face. With the help of the others, she was brought back to her senses.

It was Li Hu’s widow, that Fa Lun had insisted on taking with them. She was crying, and kept on mumbling:

“Li Hu! Li Hu!”

“Do you know this man?” asked Fa Lun.

The woman ignored him.

“Li Hu, Li Hu, have you found the Fountain of Youth in the Other World?”

Fa Lun had a revelation. He turned to Shan Zi.

“I do believe that this man had found the fountain in this world! Tell us, brother of Li Hu, what is the secret of your youth?”

“One’s youth is no mystery. But your aging is,” said Shan Zi. “With each step that you take in your life, you

move away from the Way. After years of madness, your sickened body and poisoned soul lose the spark of life.”

“This is the Way,” remarked Fa Lun.

“No. It’s the crooked reflection that you gave to the Way. One had the privilege to step through the Two Worlds and open one’s eyes. One spends the summer atop the mountains, alongside the spirits of Heaven, that raised it and taught it. When winter arrives, one comes to visit its kin, to serve and to help.”

“The spirits help you stay young and vigorous? They keep you away from death?”

“One is dead and alive at the same time. One does not live in duality, one transcends it, one is not controlled by it.”

“But if you can’t die, the whole Way gets turned upside down! What will we do?”

“As one has said: if you wouldn’t have found out who one is, chaos would have followed.”

“Help us, then! Give us a solution! Teach us!”

“One’s teaching is simple,” smiled Shan Zi. “Leave your homes, for the whole land is your home. Leave your families, for the whole world is your family. Abandon your desires and live according to nature. Follow the Way with your hearts open, do not put them in a cage of rules and regulations. Give instead of asking. Remember that you are free.”

“We are not free.”

“Your words make no sense.”

“You ask from us to give up order and bring chaos!”

Facing the uproar, Shan Zi gently smiled.

“Where there’s a Way, there is no order, nor chaos.”

Intrigued by his words, the people shouted:

“How could we give up the order that we have known for generations?”

“We are stuck,” observed Fa Lun. “Your words have no meaning for them.”

Shan Zi didn’t answer. His smile showed that he was expecting that.

“On the other hand, your order destroys theirs. It’s your turn to die!”

“One cannot die, for death has no meaning to one. One is alive and dead at the same time.”

“If you don’t die, Xieng Baohui can’t die.”

“Xieng Baohui can die,” Shan Zi corrected him, and then said to all of them: “But if he is to break your rule, anyone can die anytime from now on.”

“Why can’t you just die?” asked the gambling nephew of the merchant.

“Why don’t you join one’s Way?” said Shan Zi, playing with his words.

“What you offer us is stupid!” the young man insisted. “You ask us to leave everything for what? To wander around like animals? It would make no sense!”

“What would happen to our families?” asked the others. “What would happen to the society, to our tradition? How about the world’s order, the things that have to be done?”

The crowd was very anxious. The people forgot about fear and were revolting against the one who was trying to destroy their lives. Fa Lun asked for order.

“It seems to me that you have to chose. Change your lives, or change your deaths.”

“We can’t change our lives!”

“We don’t want to change our lives!”

Fa Lun looked at Shan Zi.

“Well... it seems they have chosen.”

“Is that it, folks? Is this your choice?”

“Yes!” responded the merchant’s nephews. “What you do with your life is your own business. All we care is that Xieng Baohui dies so we can go on with our lives!”

“So be it!” said Shan Zi.

The next moment, Xieng Baohui had a heart attack while he was lying in bed. The crowd had no way of knowing it had been done yet, but the spirit of mountains’ promise seemed to be enough. They left him in front of the shrine and got back to their houses. The merchant’s nephews hurried up to the lake village, where they thankfully found out that the old man had died in his sleep.

The next day, while trying to sell his part of the inheritance in order to get the money he needed, the young gambler was caught by his creditors and ended up

with his throat cut. The knives cut deep, and no fisherman came across the lake to miraculously save him. His head fell clean off and tumbled into the waters. The boy was barely twenty springs old.

As for Shan Zi, he continued his traveling from village to village, changing people's fortune. Behind him came an old man that had shed his clothes and had taken to covering himself with a patched cloak. He had given up all that he had owned, including his name.

For a while, some remembered that his name had once been Fa Lun.

Then they forgot it, preoccupied with keeping order in their lives.

*Translated by Lucian-Dragoș Bogdan*



**Cătălina Fometici** (b. 04.10.1986).

Her first short story, *Oameni fără fețe* (*Faceless People*), appeared in “Gazeta SF” fanzine in 2011. Her short stories have been published in a number of fanzines (“Gazeta SF”, “Suspans”, “Revista de Suspans”, “Egophobia”) and anthologies such as *Dincolo de noapte: 12 fețe ale goticului* (Millennium, 2012), *CPSF* (Nemira, 2014), *Best of Mystery and Horror* (Cărțile Arven Collection, Herg Benet, 2014), *Cele mai frumoase povești Science Fiction & Fantasy ale anului 2017* (Vreamea, 2018), *Ficțiuni Centenare* (PAVCON, 2018), *Noir de Timișoara* (Tritonic, 2019).

Her volumes are *Câinii Diavolului* (*Hell Hounds*, Tritonic, 2017), awarded with the RomCon Debut Award, and *Imperiul de sticlă* (*Empire Made of Glass*, Tritonic, 2018), Tritonic Fantasy Bestseller.

# Beyond Night's Veil

by Cătălina Fometici

*... for the monsters of darkness will weary, age and die.  
But the ground they walked on shall forever be engraved  
by the trace of their passing...*

## *Valley of Song*

“**This** must be the place,” Klaudia cried with excitement, pulling her bare head out through the carriage window, and smiling in the late summer sun.

The beech forest and the ripe fields of the estate had remained far behind; the travelers were now passing by a row of fine houses with small windows and shutters open wide. On the right, under the high rocky bank, ran the mountain stream that had accompanied them for a long time throughout the journey. The air smelled sweet, of hay and honeysuckle, and harsh, of cattle, and smoke, and stables.

Doctor von Grimmsburg glanced over his wife's shoulder.

"Indeed," he said, "we've reached our destination. And *that over there* will be our home for the next couple of months; the Countess Kiraly's summer mansion."

He pointed towards the white walls erected high above the river banks, half hidden by the crowns of old chestnut trees. As they approached, the walls revealed themselves as belonging to a baroque edifice with imposing gables and a vaulted entrance, framed by marble columns.

"Oh, it's so beautiful", Klaudia whispered. "The Countess is too kind for letting us stay here."

Several children, driven by curiosity, ran screaming after the carriage. Klaudia laughed and waved at them; then, she retired behind the velvet drapes. She was not laughing anymore; her forehead was dark with concern.

"Tell me, Hans," she said, "how long must we stay here?"

The man shrugged. His smile had faded as well.

"As long as the Empress commands ..."

The young woman frowned. She was still suspecting it was all a prank: the mission, the departure itself, the report her husband had been ordered to write. Of course, it could only be a prank, a bet that Hans had lost; one of the Empress's moods. One could simply not take seriously such a ridiculous matter, so Klaudia decided to see everything as an adventure she would later share with her friends, perhaps at Christmas dinner. Also, the landscape was so delightful!

Yet, that delightful landscape was so far away, too far away from the town; not even the mail coach would come over there.

“Worry not, my dear. All I have to do is look into those silly tales, and then send the observations to Vienna. I assure you I’ll be done quickly, because there is not much to say. I already have some theories...”



*Those silly tales* were some rumors that had recently spread all over Vienna, coming from the inns attended by soldiers, and from the streets of the city, right into Maria Theresia’s apartments. If the ordinary people would laugh at hearing such bizarre accounts, the Empress had found it appropriate to appear horrified.

On the eastern borders of the empire, in the Banat of Temeswar province, some strange things were happening. Or, at least, that is how all those unusual rituals, held at nightfall in cemeteries, had been defined. The local people were highly superstitious, it was said; they were very much afraid of evil spirits and some fearsome entities coming from the ‘other side’ to prey on the living...

“Can you believe it, dear Hans?” roared the eminent doctor Leopold Müller, while pouring wine into glasses. “These simpletons open the graves of their dead, in order to check the state of the corpses!”

They were gathered in the hunting hall for dinner, all seven of them: the von Grimmsburg spouses, the eminent doctor Müller and his assistant, a thin, middle-aged man with a mouse-like appearance who had introduced himself as a writer and a scholar, Mr. Wilhelm Klinger, the commander of the Hussars detachment in the region, and his wife Melania. Large candles of white wax were lit around the room, light glowing softly in shades of gold. Behind them, the glass and jade eyes of stuffed animal heads - boars, wolves, a lynx, and a magnificent stag with bushy horns - were staring at them coldly from the wood-clad walls.

“Not all the corpses,” said the commander, raising his index finger. “Not all of them. They have some suspicions, some beliefs about that particular one whose eternal sleep is disturbed. Of course, most of the time there is nothing to be seen, so the coffins are put back in place, and the dead are left to rest in peace. Yet sometimes -”

“Oh, but of course, but of course! We know these cases very well. Take it here, in the Valley - people’s diet is frugal; water, cold and pure, coming down from the mountain tops. And there is also the soil in this region; dry, rocky... We have seen dead bodies that refuse to decompose in the usual rhythm in such conditions before; have we not, dear Hans?”

Hans von Grimmsburg strongly confirmed Müller’s words: yes, it was not quite so unusual. He, for one, was no longer surprised by anything. However...

“However, my lord, we have to take into account certain circumstances,” he said. “You and myself, and in fact all of us here, are educated people. We have science and logic on our side ...”

“And common sense, dear Hans, let’s not forget common sense! I’ve only been here for a week now, and I’m deeply disgusted. Three dead men were dug up these days, my friends. Three! As for the last one – forgive me, my ladies, for the revolting details I must expose: they opened that venerable old man’s coffin and desecrated the corpse terribly. They pierced his chest with a wooden stake, cut off his head, and filled his mouth with garlic. And why is that, you ask? Because the old man’s son, this giant hulk, kept screaming at the top of his lungs that he dreamed of the old man crawling out of the grave and coming for him to drink his blood...”

Klaudia grinned, nervously; she did not like to hear of such monstrosities. She knew the stories, of course, but she also knew Dr. Müller: he was far from being a discreet man who would care for the presence of ladies when he wanted at all costs to discuss the symptoms of a horrible illness or the conclusions of an autopsy. And now, it seemed to her that the discussions on this issue had gone too far, as was always the case with Dr. Müller. *He was always taking it too far.* On the other side of the table, she saw Melania going livid. Lady Klinger was very fair and very young, almost a child, and Dr. Müller’s accounts were making her sick.

“I have been studying the phenomenon for many years,” said the scholar. “I would say these are the reminiscences of pagan beliefs that still endure in these forsaken places, so isolated from the civilized world. I also witnessed a ritual similar to the one described by Dr. Müller. It happened three years ago, in a village upstream, right in the heart of the mountains. A girl suddenly became ill with a strange disease. No one could tell what was wrong with her, but she was fading away; there was no strength in her body, no color in her cheeks. A medicine woman came to see her and said that it must have been a *zmeu* or a *strigoï* that had fed on her. I didn’t understand the meaning of these words, though I heard them so often in the region, but I remember how she advised the girl’s parents to hang garlands of garlic at the doors and windows, around the patient’s bed and even round her neck, and then to watch her during the entire night. They did exactly as told, and I myself joined them in guarding the poor girl, even though I could not know what we were defending her against. The next day, the medicine woman called us all to join her to the graveyard. She had brought along a white colt, which she released among the graves. We watched the animal running and prancing around, until it suddenly stopped, ears pushed forward and hooves scraping over a certain tomb. There, I was told, lay a young man who was supposed to marry the girl, but had died shortly before the wedding. The medicine woman asked for the boy’s coffin

to be pulled out of the ground and for it to be opened, so that everyone could see the corpse in full daylight. I swear to you: the man looked as though he was sleeping, even though he had been dead for over a year. He had rosy cheeks, his lips were blood red, and his body was firm and bloated, as if he had just had a plentiful meal. ‘Behold, he’s undead!’ the medicine woman said. ‘He’s a strigoi!’ Everyone gasped at the terrible words, and so I learned that somehow, he was being held responsible for the girl’s condition. Apparently, the boy’s corpse was unnaturally animated by a demon that craved human blood. I assure you I am not a superstitious man, but to this day I do not know if the sigh I heard when his heart was pierced was air being released from the flesh or if it was a groan of pain...”

A mild moan interrupted him: the officer’s wife, pale as a sheet, had clutched her hands on the tablecloth and was shivering violently.

“Enough, gentlemen!” Klaudia shouted, and stood up. “We’ve had quite enough of this. Come, madam; we shall go out on the terrace. The fresh air will make you feel better.”

The two young women left, followed by Dr. Müller, who insisted on apologizing for having caused them such inconvenience.

“Maybe the gory details were a bit too much, Mr. Schmitz,” Hans von Grimmsburg said with a smile, “but

I am sure there is a logical explanation behind it all. You were tired, surrounded by terrified peasants in an isolated mountain village. It's the easiest way to let your own mind play tricks on you. As for the corpse's condition, Dr. Müller already spoke about it. Come now, I have the feeling we are encouraging these macabre stories. On the contrary, I say, we should talk about how we could educate the locals, and make them give up such unhealthy habits..."

The Commander snorted.

"Oh, you think they're just stories, do you, sir?" he asked, scornfully.

"Of course they are just stories. What else could they be?"

"And you, Mr. Schmitz," he continued, addressing the scholar, "you made quite an impression on the ladies with your gloomy tale, yet you think these are just some exciting superstitions that might inspire you in your work. Am I wrong?"

The man with a mouse-like appearance raised his eyebrows, astonished.

"You should know one thing, gentlemen," continued the officer, not caring for the scholar's answer. "Dr. Müller and Mr. Schmitz witnessed some rituals and supervised the disgusting operation of dismembering some corpses. I did too, but I also looked at the state of the coffin, not only at that of the corpse." They were all staring at him, waiting tensely. The commander lay back in his chair, to increase

the impact of his words. When he sensed the others were almost breathless, he said abruptly: “Many of the lids I saw had deep and bloody claw marks on the inside. So, gentlemen, unless we agree those people had been buried alive, I dare you to come up with a logical explanation for *all of it*.”



In the following days, the two doctors, the assistant to Dr. Müller and the scholar proceeded to visit the neighboring villages. Von Grimmsburg wanted to talk to the people and see with his own eyes those graves that were said to be hiding the undead.

Klaudia refused to accompany them, despite Hans’s pleas. After all, they were just some *silly tales*, and she no longer wanted to hear anything else on the matter. Instead, she decided to get acquainted with the mansion and the surroundings.

The house revealed itself to be more magnificent than it had seemed on the first encounter, with its richly decorated façade, its statues and ornaments carved in stone, arches and columns plated in gold. And the interior was even more opulent, abounding in heavy, intricate paintings and decors draped in gold and bright red.

As for the staff, only a few servants had remained in the house to attend on the guests. Besides the butler, there

were also a chef, two maids, two lackeys, and old auntie Gena, the housekeeper. The mistress had left for Budapest two weeks before, along with all her retinue.

“The Countess doesn’t stay at the estate for more than two months a year,” said the latter, shaking her head. “She doesn’t like it here; too much solitude, she says... In the summer she goes to the thermal baths, and she attends balls in the winter. She has properties in Budapest, Vienna, Prague. That’s where she likes to stay. She only comes here to rest, but she is such a restless spirit. What to say? She’s still young, and widowed, and has no children... She’s free to do as she pleases.”

Mrs. von Grimmsburg did not know the Countess. She had seen her a few times in Vienna, but only from a distance, and only for a few moments. She looked very beautiful, with her coppery hair, her ivory white skin and her notably red lips. But it also might have been very possible that that lovely hair had been powder-coated with gold dust, and her porcelain doll features were, in fact, only an elaborate mask built on several layers of blush. Klaudia had even overheard some comments from passers-by, stating that Lady Kiraly was *doing very well for her age*; she had considered them inappropriate, since that woman had not seemed to be older than thirty-thirty-five years of age. However, the Countess was living a very tumultuous life that would have aged anyone before their time. She was said to run from one ball to the other and

from one event to the next, changing her lovers as often as she did her dresses, and would not allow herself one moment's rest. But behind all that restlessness, there was a lot of pain. The Count had died in a hunting accident right there, in the Valley of Song. Shortly after, the children had died of typhoid fever. The Countess herself had barely survived the illness.

“There's much solitude here, indeed,” Klaudia murmured, “and many gloomy memories. No wonder the mistress prefers the excitement of the city.”

She smiled at the little girl who had come to take her by the hand and to tell her, in an adorably bad German, that she wanted to pick wild flowers for her. It was on an early September afternoon and they were strolling along a country road next to the ripe golden fields: Klaudia, old auntie Gena, and the little girl running beside them, a small, lovely creature, all hair, and eyes, and jolly laughter. Klaudia had met her that morning for the first time. She was some worker's daughter, accompanying her father to the mansion. The little girl, seeing the young and beautiful lady, had approached her without a word and crawled into her arms like a kitten, and the lady had immediately got seduced by her comeliness.

They were meeting children who would freeze at their passing, peasants who would salute by uncovering their heads, women with curious, piercing eyes. Klaudia smiled at them all and went on, feeling sorry that she didn't know

the language so she could answer them properly. But she found it strange to see how those people were uncovering their heads and bowing, as if the mistress herself was there before them.

She wished to tell them she was only a lady of the small gentry, so they were not supposed to treat her like a princess. She even asked old auntie Gena to explain this to them, but old auntie Gena shook her head and kept walking, silent, straight and stiff, clearly showing that she did not want to interfere with them, and wanted even less to speak to them.

Klaudia could see them staring at her. She knew that her dark hair, her bright blue eyes and thin waist had always been admired in the great lounges and even at the Hofburg Palace, where she often accompanied Hans, and was aware of the effect her person, and especially her lilac dress could have on those simple, easy-to-impress beings. Maybe they thought she was too young, too beautiful, too distinguished for such a place. They had only seen Countess Kiraly looking as glamorous and noble in her posture and gestures, and Countess Kiraly would barely visit the estate.

She became even more intrigued when she noticed a few old women sobbing, as if they had foreseen a misfortune.

“Why are those women crying?” Klaudia asked her companion.

“Peasants,” old auntie Gena murmured contemptuously.  
“Don’t mind them, madam!”

A single woman dared to stealthily approach her, always looking around as in fear of being surprised by an unseen enemy:

“Madam,” she whispered in awkward German, taking Klaudia’s fine hand into her own wrinkly hand. “You take care, madam!”



The autumn was unusually mild, soaked in golden light, pastel sky and sweet air. Beyond the yellow, rusty and crimson shades of pathless forests, the mountains covered in rock and mist were rising above the valley like the walls of a dark fortress.

### *The Stillness of the Forest*

“Doctor, you must come to peasant Mihi’s house. You must come to the neighboring village, across the mountains. If you please! You will see something that you might find very bizarre and we insist on hearing your opinion on it –”

“Of course. Let me get my bag.”

And the men would depart rapidly, with no further ado.  
Every day. Every night.

Klaudia would always find herself alone, while her husband was running on the hollows to look for the make-believes of the superstitious. But she was not upset; she enjoyed being alone. In the latter days, she had even ditched the company of old auntie Gena. She would rather hear the sound of the wind in the late mornings, and the golden silence of the afternoons, and the stillness of misty twilight.

She was walking alone on that day, at the top of a rocky hill covered with short, rough grass and half-dry fern, dipping her shoes in the thick layer of dead leaves fallen on the path. The forest was scarce here, only clumps of young trees rose from place to place. From up there, the view of the valley opened wide. Down by the stream the village was sleeping peacefully in the late October sun. On the other side, toward the mountains, lay a narrow road leading to the neighboring villages - Wolf's Den and Pinecone. And to the left, there was an unknown world, with craggy hills and endless forests.

Klaudia passed by the old wooden church - the village now had another church, built of stone, down in the center - and its graveyard filled with entangled weeds, and sat down on a log. She was going there almost daily, with the easel under her arm. '*Where do you keep going to, madam?*' old auntie Gena would ask her every evening when Klaudia returned home with leaves in her hair, and a wide smile on her lips. '*What? On the hill with the church,*

*all alone? And so far away?!*' The old woman's face became wrinkled with disapproval, her mouth saggy, her whole being seemed crushed by a giant burden. Klaudia always tried to protest softly about the distance, for it was not *'that far away'*, but old auntie Gena would not listen to her anymore, she would move up and down quickly, sorting out various objects with grumpy gestures and mumbling furiously. *'It is not right,'* she was saying, *'for a lady to go out unaccompanied, and into places like that!'* She would not stop until late at night, sometimes she would even go on the next morning, and Klaudia sniffed silently, unseen, as she used to when her governess was displeased with her conduct. She deeply wished to tell the old hag she was no longer a child and needed not be told what was and wasn't proper, but she was too well educated to talk back. Instead, she would silently leave the mansion whenever she had the opportunity, wandering until late in the evening.

She stood still, gazing. Something like a black shadow had stopped in a glade, on the front slope. It looked like an animal, but the distance was too great to figure out what kind of animal it was. A wolf, perhaps. The thought sent chills down her spine. Maybe it was a dog; a big, shaggy dog from a sheepfold, wandering alone through the woods. Sheepdogs used to do that, she had often met them along her strolls. Still, it could have been a wolf. After all, she was in the heart of wilderness.

The sun set beyond ancient cliffs, painting the sky with flames. The cold wind made her shiver. Dusk was falling. That evening she had lingered more than usual. She wrapped her shawl tight around her shoulders and hurried back home, careful not to slip on the crumbling rocks.

Far behind, in the glade, the black creature was watching her. Its eyes were burning.



*A shadow leaned over her. It had wicked, cunning eyes. It asked silent questions as it grinned, sniffing at her short and soft answers. It was waiting for her words, claws sharp, as if wanting to grab them before they left her chest. To grope them, tear them raw between rotten teeth, chew them slowly, relish them, and swallow them up voluptuously, with lecherous stares and eyes rolled back in pleasure. It followed her into the most hidden corners of her mind and cast a white, cold, naked light in her eyes, leaving her exposed as a doll in a dollhouse...*

She woke from a restless sleep. She had dreamed the same dreadful dream for several nights in a row and felt weary, as if it hadn't been a dream. She was almost certain she had been awake the entire time. The pressure on the chest, the lifeless limbs, the dark vivid threat, all of that had seemed so real. Or was it?

She felt for Hans's body, but he was not there. He had left hours before, and had not yet returned. Then, she remembered that, in fact, it was an outside noise that had awoken her. She listened. The stream, swollen by the heavy rains, was roaring along its rocky bed. But there were other strange noises she could hear. Steps. A heavy sigh. And whispers. And she had a certain sense that someone – or something – was lurking outside the window. Ugly, wicked eyes, a peculiar grin, a hellish growl. The remembrance of the nightmare made her tremble. *'Do not be such a child,'* she rebuked herself. She propped herself up on her elbows, fluffed her pillow, and then lay back. But the feeling was still strong. There *was* someone – or something – outside.

She jumped out of bed, annoyed. *'Here, let me prove that there is nobody. Or nothing!'* and went to the window. She reached out, and (*'Do not look! Beyond the window lies the Darkness, and all the spirits of the night that make the darkness darker, you will see them filling the air!'*) after a slight hesitation, raised a fold of the purple brocade drape and looked outside. There was nothing; only the road leading up to the top of the mountain and down towards the village, the stream, and the hill up front. And the milky white fog, floating across the valley. She smiled at herself. *'See? It's only the night, singing by the windows through mild waves of fog.'* She let the drape fall and went back to bed.

Outside, sheltered by shadows, the eyes were lurking. Waiting.

## *Whispers*

Mornings were freezing at dawn. Klaudia felt too nervous to stay in bed any longer. She got up, got dressed and went downstairs and into the drawing room just as the maid was lighting the fire in the wide fireplace.

“The winter is coming now, ma’am, just wait and see what a beautiful winter we have here! And what beautiful snow!” the woman chirped.

Klaudia smiled and sipped some hot tea. Hans was expected to come home by that time. He was away in the village, to see about a young man who had been bed ridden for several days.

She picked up a book from the table and absent-mindedly turned a few pages, without reading. Which patient was he, again? She could not tell, but, for a while now, she had the feeling the symptoms were repeating themselves. The patients were overly pale, lifeless, with dark circles around their eyes. Some were running a high fever, others had strange lumps at their joints. No man or woman had died yet. Instead, sheep and cows had been found dead, without anyone being able to give an explanation as to why. Pestilence? Hans would be vague in details when asked. He didn’t even seem to know what to believe. It was not plague, he had assured her, but said no more. What then? Even Dr. Müller had been silent in the last few days. He would only walk around thoughtfully, hands behind his back and talking to himself.

She startled. In the closet next to the drawing room, there was a distinct sob. She listened carefully. Yes, there was someone in there, sobbing. She left the cup and the book on the table and ran towards the closet, her heart pacing. The sound was much clearer now, somewhere near the wall, behind some chairs.

“Who’s there?” she asked, and the weeping ceased.

When her eyes became more accustomed with the dark, she saw a small shadow, crouching on the floor, shivering with cold. Or with fear.

“Show yourself,” Klaudia spoke again.

The midget creature rose slowly, her hands clasped and her hair hurtled over her face, as if waiting for a terrible punishment.

“Eva!” cried Klaudia, recognizing the little girl who had picked wild flowers for her, many days before. “What are you doing here? Where is your father? And why are you crying, what happened to you?!”

She rushed to the child and held it in her arms, cuddling her. But the little girl started crying again, unrestrained. She was crying hysterically, with loud screams and huge tears, kneading her small hands and shaking heavily.

“Goodness, child, you are ice cold! Come, let’s sit you by the fire,” Klaudia whispered. “I’ll tell old auntie Gena to bring you some hot tea and honey cakes, what do you say?”

She wiped the girl's tears and took one of her cold, tiny hands into her own. Eva clung to her with confidence, but when trying to move towards the drawing room, Klaudia felt resistance.

"But Miss Klaudia," the child murmured, "what if it didn't leave? Did it leave?"

"Who. Eva?"

"The wolf, Miss. That big bad wolf"

Her face was very pale. She was terrified. Klaudia gave her a puzzled look and then laughed.

"Come on, Eva, this is silly. There's no wolf out there..."

For no particular reason, the young woman had a flashback of a mysterious creature watching her as she strolled. She also remembered her ghoulish nightmare – a black shadow, neither man nor beast, leaning over her to capture her mind, her thoughts, her very life – and decided she didn't want to hear more of it.

"There there now, little one. It was just a dog. Let's go by the fire. I'll read you a story until your father come to take you home."



Hans returned late, by noon. He was tired and preoccupied, hardly paying any attention to her or anything else around him. It was clear his mind was elsewhere, and that this whole story had begun to absorb him.

“It’s more complicated than I thought,” he told Klaudia as they sat down for lunch, but the woman could see he was absent-minded, talking to himself rather than her. “There is something very strange going on here. It seems these are more than just tales born out of too much boredom, or too much isolation. And the worst part is, I don’t even have something, anything to put my finger on, to show it to the world and cry ‘*This is it!*’ They’d think I’ve gone mad and would lock me up in some asylum, like any other lunatic.”

Klaudia opened her mouth to talk about the dream that had shattered her nerves, but stopped. What was the point? He wouldn’t have heard her anyway, not because he didn’t care, but because he had seen more terrible things than her nightmare. And then, there was Eva’s wolf.

“You see,” he went on, “now they found another. As if the stories of blood-thirsty demons crawling out of graves were not enough for these God forsaken lands. Now they started talking about a large, black wolf that comes out at nightfall...”

She looked up at him, uneasy.

“A wolf?” she sighed. “Oh, Hans ...” She got up from the table and started walking nervously across the room. “I want to get out of here,” she spoke after a long while. “I listened to all these accounts with a smile on my lips, and kept telling myself they were just scary tales. Day after day, evening after evening. From you, from Dr. Müller. Of

Mr Schmitz, I do not even wish to speak - he has a whole collection of frightening tales gathered from all over the country. The Dead who come after the living. The Dead who were buried, everyone saw them being buried, but nevertheless stand in the middle of the road, in broad daylight, looking very much alive and shouting words of mockery. The Dead who... Oh my God, Hans! Too often, Death is mentioned and invoked in the midst of the living, as if it were a most-adored deity! I almost have come to believe these absurdities myself. And now I hear you, *you*, the most sensible man I know, talking like that... Look around! Anything seems possible in a place as deserted as this! Even the undead who feed on the flesh and blood of the living. Even demonic wolves, escaped from hell!"

*The Wolf. A large wolf, the size of a calf, with black fur and red glowing eyes, lurking in the shadows. It seemed to look for something, or someone. First, it appeared in the forest, on the hills, in the glades. But lately, it was seen close to the road, half hidden in thickets, while its fiery eyes would gaze at passers-by, dissecting their very soul.*

"I saw it, Hans. I saw it with my own eyes, up on the hill. I tried to persuade myself it was just a dog, but I knew it wasn't. And Eva saw it, too."

"Eva?"

"Yes, the little black-haired girl who keeps coming here to play; the lumberjack's daughter. She saw it this morning."

“Oh, I see”

“I want to leave, Hans. Take me home!”

The doctor took a deep breath.

“I only wish it was that easy..”

### *In the Shadows*

“My wife is gravely ill.”

Klinger’s words made the two Imperial doctors jump from their seats.

“We are coming to see her, Commander,” Müller announced, while von Grimmsburg rushed to get his bag.

“Doctor...” The officer was frowning, looked strained, and his fists were clenched. His pallor showed he had not slept for many nights. “Doctor, Melania won’t live. I heard *them – the peasants –* whispering. They know she won’t live. And they even suspect why, but I will not talk of it. I am only telling you this: if they try to cut her open, I will kill them all.”

Klaudia caught his arm and squeezed it gently.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions, Commander. Maybe things are not that bad. Let’s go see her!”

But things were just as bad as they could be. Melania Klinger was laying in bed, livid and with eyes closed. Her breathing was heavy. Noise was making her anxious, and she could not stand the light. After consulting her

thoroughly, the doctors confessed, heartbroken, that there was no explanation for her condition. Her body seemed to be in perfect health. She didn't ache, had no damaged organs, no injuries, no rashes on her skin, yet she was dying, as if life itself was draining away from her, unable to cling onto her fragile body.

"Strange," spoke the scholar. "The same symptoms we've seen these past few days. Only Melania's condition is much worse..."

The Commander pressed his lips together in a grimace of pain.

"Dare not say such words, little man," he growled. "I will not allow it. Not in my house!"

The young woman died in the afternoon hours, despite the doctors' best efforts. Her body was still warm, when an angry mob started gathering at the gates.

"They want you to give them the corpse, Commander," said von Grimmsburg, coldly. "They want to bury her, according to their rituals."

"Never!"

"Maybe you should let them have her. They have surrounded your house. After all, it's only a corpse now. It's not as if they want to kill her or anything, for she is already dead. And you do agree that strange things are happening here. Remember what you told us about the coffin lids with claw marks on the insides? I've seen them too, my friend. We all have. It wouldn't hurt to be cautious."

Klinger burst into a terrible roar of laughter.

“Is that so, doctor? Tell me, would you talk the same way if it were *your* wife?”

Von Grimmsburg gave Klaudia a glance. She was still caressing Melania’s blond curls, as if she was watching her sleep. He hesitated. What could he answer?

“And if things are the way they say they are,” Kilnger kept laughing, “that concerns me, only me! They say their *strigoi* drink the blood of family members, do they not? If my blood is what it takes for my wife to come back to me, then so be it!”

“Well, come now! You are delirious, Klinger!” Hans warned him. “I assure you that you do not want this. I say we all calm down...”

“For God’s sake gentlemen,” snapped Dr. Müller, “stop this nonsense! Doing what these bloody peasants request is totally out of the question! To hell with them! We are all well-educated people. Of course we will not allow Melania’s body to be desecrated in such barbaric ways! Commander, get the hussars!”

The young woman’s body was taken to the grave under guard. The villagers, angry as they were, did not dare approach the soldiers who were armed and ready to shoot; they kept away at a safe distance, grumbling and glancing gloomily at the foreigners.

The funeral, short and simple, took place without further incident.



Things were getting worse; people started dying. And the symptoms were always the same. The sick were pale and weary, with weakened limbs and washed-out features, veins showing blue under dry translucent skin. In death, however, the bodies seemed to return to the natural fullness of form. The corpses had round rosy cheeks, soft skin, and red lips.

“What did your husband, the doctor, say, madam? What does he think it is?” old auntie Gena asked, frightened by the possibility of a disease spreading across the land.

“He doesn’t know, dear auntie,” Klaudia replied. “My poor Hans begins to think that the peasants’ superstitions are more than scary children’s tales ...”

“But what of the wolf? Did he learn anything about it yet? I hear everyone talking about that wolf nowadays, people say they saw it in the village!”

“What wolf, dear auntie? Oh, *that* wolf.”

“You must know, madam, that I am frightened by wolves. A few years ago there was a heavy winter, with deep snow and freezing cold. And the wolves rushed from the heights, came out of the woods and wandered into the village. They were stalking the main road without fear and killed in plain sight. Firstly, they killed and ate the dogs. Then they took the sheep. And when they were done with the sheep, they took children. We even encountered a terrible beast right here in the mansion courtyard. It was *this* big, with flaming eyes and fangs so white and sharp...

It was drooling with hunger, with blood-lust, grinning and growling like a demon from hell, God forbid! I've been sick with fright ever since. That's why I keep telling you, madam, not to go alone into the woods. You think of me as old and decrepit and you laugh at me; I saw that, you know. You think of me as – as you spoiled ladies say in Vienna – *old fashioned*. Do as you please, madam, but you must know that the wolves are coming. And if the wolves are coming, then we are all doomed!”

Klaudia shrugged, tired. She did not think of old auntie Gena as “old and decrepit”, but *she was* old-fashioned, even though she was attending on a classy lady such as the Countess Kiraly. And if she were to take a closer look, old auntie Gena was not even that old. Reddish locks were falling from underneath her tight hood; her face was smooth, almost without any wrinkles, her eyes bright and fierce. But she was always wearing those heavy garments that covered her all over without showing the outlines of her body, neck, or face. She would bend her back when walking, speak coarsely and have her thick eyebrows in an eternal frown.

“Come, madam, you're tired. I'll bring you dinner and let you rest. Maybe the master will also stay home tonight.”

Hans did not stay at home that night, and neither did his companions. Even Mr Schmitz, the scholar, insisted on accompanying them. He had almost finished his work, he said, and wanted to be present at all costs when the patients were examined.

Out there, in the villages, men and cattle kept on getting ill and dying.

And the living kept on practicing their ancient, strange and revolting rituals...



On a cold November morning, silver frost on trees and mist hanging in the air, the ground atop Melania Klinger's tomb looked freshly dug-up. Inside, the coffin's nails had been removed and the lid was in disarray. The dead woman's body had been pierced with a stake through the heart region, and the head had been removed from the torso. In her gaping mouth - garlic.

### *When the Veil Falls*

It had been snowing heavily for the past two days and the snow lay in thick layers. Down in the village, hussars were gathered with muskets at the ready. Around them, the agitated locals were gesturing and talking loudly. Women covered in dark heavy garments and men cloaked in wool, and noisy children, were all staring frightfully at the armed men in uniform.

"What is going on?" Klaudia asked Wilhelm Klinger, who had come to greet her.

“We’re hunting a wolf, madam,” he replied. “I received orders from Temeswar.”

“A wolf?!” she exclaimed. “That’s got to be a joke, Commander! What about Hans?”

Doctor von Grimmsburg had left a week before but had not yet returned. Dr. Müller had gone with him along with the silent assistant and the scholar with the mouse-like appearance. They had not sent any word since, not even a note. Nothing at all. Meanwhile it had snowed and all roads were closed. The beautiful Valley of Song now looked very much like a prison.

The officer shrugged, distracted. He did not know. Since Melania’s death, and especially since the discovery of her vandalized tomb, nothing seemed to interest him anymore. He had immediately arrested several people. He had ordered four of them to be executed. In the last moment however, he had changed his mind, moved by the village priest’s pleas. Afterwards he had become sullen, apathetic and grim, hateful towards the villagers.

“Has the news of an unusually large wolf reached Temeswar?!” Klaudia asked in disbelief. “Did the Austrian authorities believe that?”

“The news has reached Vienna. Of course, the official statement sounds a little different; *a little less ridiculous.*”

“And yet, nothing of Empress Maria Theresia’s personal doctors having disappeared into the woods. *This* is what I find ridiculous.”

“Madam. The letters to the Empress do mention the fact that wolves are the cause of the doctors’ disappearance. We will do our best to find your husband, madam, I assure you.”

The woman sighed with relief - she shouldn’t have doubted Klinger. Even in grief, the man was determined to do his duty. He didn’t need an order from Vienna to go out and look for the missing men.

“What’s with them?” she asked, pointing at the villagers. “Why are they nervous?”

Klinger smiled contemptuously.

“They do not want us to leave tonight. They say the last night in November is the Night of the Wolf. They say that if we leave now none of us will come back alive.”

“They are all mad,” Klaudia murmured, clutching the fur cloak closer to herself and moving away from the crowd. It was snowing heavily, but she did not want to go home yet. It seemed to her it was too early - too early to go to bed, and too early to start listening to old auntie Gena’s critical voice, telling her what was appropriate and what was not, complaining about her fear of wolves. And she was too restless to sit somewhere on a sofa by the fire, sipping hot beverages and reading poems. She started slowly walking down a narrow street, leaving the clamor behind.

She did not notice when she’d left the village. She only realized that, suddenly, there were no houses on the side

of the road. All she could see was white - snow, frozen air, and petrified trees.

And there was something else. Something dark, with blazing eyes, watching her.

The wind blew the snow into dizzying swirls. Through the cold lashes of the blizzard she saw the Beast in the shade of the forest. It stood beside a stump, tense, with its tongue hanging out red between white fangs, snarling.

*‘And those unfortunate people are still standing in the middle of the road, delaying their departure, thinking it’s just a bad joke, and the Wolf is right here, waiting...’*

Klaudia felt she was losing her wits. She turned around and ran through the dense snowfall, back towards the village, stumbling, with the wild wind throwing icy flakes into her face. Her eyes were sore from all that white. Her feet, heavy and cold. She could see the Wolf running among the trees, a black demon lusting for the kill.

*‘Why not attack? What is it waiting for?’*

It wouldn’t attack. It was running along-side at a distance, head turned towards her, as if waiting for the right moment. Toying with her, wanting to see her go mad and hear her scream.

She welcomed the first house as her rescue. She slowed down as she entered the village and looked back. The Wolf was still there, among the trees. It was running faster, never losing her from its sight.

"I saw it!" she cried at an old woman who was getting her two cows into the courtyard. "The Wolf, I saw it! It's out there, in the forest!"

The woman gave her an empty-eyed glance, then carried on with her work, giving no answer. She heard the latch being pulled.

"It is there! Right there!" she screamed at two people who were unloading some wood, pointing towards the trees where the creature's black silhouette lurked.

"Go inside, ma'am," one of them said, stuttering the words. "You'll freeze to death."

'Ah,' she remembered. *'I do not speak their language.'* Desperately, she ran towards the mansion. The wolf followed her at a distance. She could feel it running faster, and faster.



She slammed the door and pushed her back against it. Outside, in the distance, there was a long, hoarse cry. Klaudia breathed in deeply. She was trembling, her heart was racing, almost choking her. She could barely feel her arms and legs.

"Hans, are you home yet?"

No answer. Darkness and an ominous chill reigned throughout the house, despite the candles burning and the fires being lit in the fireplaces. She rushed upstairs and ran into the drawing room where she knew that old

auntie Gena was waiting for her with a bowl of hot wine, preparing to criticize her again for coming home so late. Oh, how right she had been, dear old auntie! She wanted to embrace her like a mother and say to her, crying, that she was right, she had always been right. She wanted to tell her the Wolf was outside, that it had probably murdered her husband and murdered all the others, and now it was coming after her.

The drawing room, like the rest of the mansion, was dark and cold. Long shadows stretched along the walls moving smoothly as if blown by the wind. The candle lights seemed frozen. In the fireplace, the fire was lingering.

And right there, in front of the fireplace, with the back turned towards her, stood a lady.

The stranger was draped in black and purple. The long train of her velvet dress stretched out on the carpet behind her, the wide black lace sleeves hung to the ground. Her loose hair was falling on her back in long, copper ringlets, down to her hips.

“You came home at last, madam,” she said, and turned.

Klaudia barely managed to hold back her scream. She was stunned, in shock. She had seen the woman in front of her before but only at a distance, and only for a few moments. The red hair, the ivory skin, and the very red lips were well known in all the palaces in Vienna, and they were also known to her. But now that she saw her up close, she felt an icy chill drifting from head to feet. Also, the

woman's voice sounded familiar. Klaudia had heard it so many times before...

"Gena...?" Klaudia whispered in a breathless voice.

"Eugenia Kiraly," she laughed, looking down on her. "You may bow, dear, just like all the other peasants. Did you really think those simpletons were bowing before you?"

Even if she wanted to, she could not bow. Klaudia was dumb-folded, her wide eyes staring at the specter in front of her. The Countess's beauty was terrifying. She could not say why, but she was almost sure it had something to do with her red lips, *too red*, and with the crystal glass she was holding, filled with a slimy liquid in dark shades of ruby-red. 'How...?' Klaudia wanted to ask, but no sound escaped her lips.

Down on the carpet, a little tiny childlike hand could be seen protruding from beyond the heavy folds of the Countess's luxurious dress. 'My sweet Eva,' Klaudia thought and immediately understood the connection between that hand and the red liquid in the glass. Instinctively, she took a step backwards.

"Eternal youth is a precious gift worth any sacrifice," Eugenia Kiraly said, lifting her glass into the candle light. "This time, it took a little longer than usual, but now I'm almost ready to go out into the world again. The thrilling life of the palaces – music, dancing, ardent love... Do you not feel it? Do you not hear it? You are a beautiful woman.

You among all the others should understand best.” The Countess’s eyes rested on her, gray as steel, and cold as ice. The freshly drunk blood made her glow with an inner light; she seemed carved in alabaster.

Her mind paralyzed by horror, Klaudia suddenly turned around and bolted out of the drawing room. She stormed down the stairs, glancing backwards, not sure of where to go. Outside, the night was dark, and the blizzard was blowing among the hungry roar of wolves. She could hear her own moans, her trembling heartbeat...

“I do not think we understand each other, dear...”

The creature’s silky voice struck her like a blow to the head. She stood right there in front of her, tall and pale, as beautiful as a fallen angel. ‘*How did she get here?*’ Klaudia wondered. She did not look as if she had run. Her hand with long white fingers grasped Klaudia’s neck. The creature gave a blood red smile.

“I said I was *almost* ready to go out into the world. But I also need your help, my beautiful one...”

Her fingers clenched on the young woman’s throat turning it to the left, leaving her twitching artery exposed. Her other hand held the waist in a deadly embrace. Her plump, red lips revealed white fangs, and jaws opened unnaturally wide...

Loud noise of broken shards and a muffled growl coming from the depths of hell. Flaming eyes burned into the night, and the Wolf’s black frame came out of

the darkness, as large as a calf. The Countess's silhouette straightened, a marble statue with blazing hair.

"You!" she whispered. "Why are *you* here?"

The Wolf stopped in front of her, glancing at her. Its fangs were glowing white.

"Be gone!"

With a roar, the Wolf rushed at her. The two beasts clutched each other, rolling, grunting and clawing, mauling and tearing apart. As she lost consciousness, Klaudia saw the black creature grabbing the Countess's slim body by the waist and biting on it with its jaws until it broke like a stick. Then, along with its prey, the Wolf soared out the window, getting lost in the darkness...

### *Over the Mountains Far*

The secretary bowed. The Empress raised her head and looked at him inquiringly.

"You have a letter, Your Grace," he said. "It's from Temeswar."

"Very well. Leave it, I shall read it right away." After the man left, Maria Theresia of Habsburg quietly organized the papers bearing her signature and seal. She had worked intensively all morning without a moment's rest. She could stop now. She got up from her desk, glanced briefly into the next room, where one of her daughters

was playing the harpsichord, and smiled slightly. Among the previously signed papers, there was the forging of an alliance in which the musician princess would play an extremely important role.

She slightly waved her hand, as if to put aside her many thoughts. She had almost forgotten the letter...

*“To Her Majesty Maria Theresia, Archduchess of Austria,  
Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, Empress of the Holy  
Roman Empire*

*Your Grace,*

*Regarding the report on the strange rituals happening in  
the Banat of Temeswar province that were brought to Your  
attention and which, quite rightfully, have terrified You so  
much, here it is:*

*Local people call themselves Christians, they go to church  
every Sunday, listen to the Holy Gospel and receive Holy  
Communion, just as we do. But they are schismatic, as they  
do not follow the true faith of our Catholic Church. And as  
if this heresy was not enough, they also seem to hold Pagan  
beliefs, a reminiscence of the barbarians who have wandered  
around these places many centuries ago.*

*About their way of life, we can say it is quite unhealthy.  
They eat badly, willingly starving themselves during fasting,  
but also on Wednesdays and Fridays, while on Sundays  
and Holy Days they feast without restraint. Wine and strong*

*beverages, made of prunes and apples, have a place of honor at their table. Also, their personal hygiene is not good, only the most fortunate take a bath every other month, and only when it's warm outside.*

*Their unholy superstitions push them to disinter the dead and open the coffins; fear makes them livid, their frugal meals make them lack vigor, and the simplicity of their mind prevents them from understanding that the air and soil in the region slow down the natural process of the corpses' decay. That's why it seems to them that the dead look rosier in the cheeks and livelier than they, the living, are.*

*As you can see, Your Grace, the lack of education, superstitions, bad eating habits and drinking are the origins of the scary tales you've heard. Of course, dramatic measures shall be taken for vandalizing the graves. We suggest, with Your gracious will, an action plan for educating the local population..."*

The suggestions followed – building schools, rigorous selection of teachers – and the usual pleasantries with which a courtier addressed his Empress. Maria Theresia left the letter on the table without finishing it. “Just as I suspected,” she muttered. “Savages”

She didn't even bother to read the date of the letter—early October 1752...

## *The Traces of Their Passing*

The room was white as freshly fallen snow - white walls all over, white drapes and curtains at the windows, white cloth on the screens that prevented glances from indiscreet eyes. The nuns were also wearing white – white veils, white robes, floating softly from one bed to another, like angels of mercy.

Sister Alexandra approached the newcomer's bed with a tray in her hands. She found her sitting on the edge of the bed, with the profile turned towards her. The young patient let her hair hang loose, black and long to the hips, and was brushing it slowly. 'Poor girl,' Sister Alexandra thought, murmuring a prayer. 'So young, so beautiful, and so heavily stricken!'

"You have to eat something, child," she said in a soft, warm voice. "You must gain some strength."

Klaudia remained unmoved. She continued to brush her hair, as if the hair was her only concern in the world.

"I see you were told about your husband," spoke Sister Alexandra again, shaking her head with sorrow. "It was the Lord's will, child. In life we are subjected to all sorts of trials..."

Yes, she had learned. She had learned that Hans had been found in the forest, dead and frozen, his body twisted in an unnatural position and his eyes wide open, showing an endless horror. Next to him lay Mr. Schmitz the scholar,

Dr. Müller, and the silent assistant, all dead, murdered in an equally strange way. There was no blood around them, their bodies showed no injuries. Still, the snow was strewn with traces of steps that did not come from anywhere and did not go anywhere. Wilhelm Klinger had told her all that when he had come to see her, a few hours prior. He had been the one to find her, collapsed on the floor in the lower hall of the mansion, lying half-frozen among broken shards, and had brought her here...

“Your husband was a good man. I hear he was returning from a sick man’s house, out in that terrible weather, when he met the wolves. Wolves go wild during the winter, my child. Hunger makes them vicious.”

“Wolves?” Klaudia smiled, leaving her brush on the bedside. “It is said that all those poor men were killed by wolves, is it not?”

She turned her full face towards Sister Alexandra, still smiling. Despite the terrible pallor, she had very red lips. Her eyes were burning like flames, but they were cold, cold as ice. The nun’s hands began to tremble, along with the tray and everything on it. She had cared for Klaudia herself, but only now was she beginning to suspect the truth.

“I would have thought the same, if I didn’t know any better now,” the young woman continued. “You see, if I had understood in time... If I had run *towards* the Wolf, instead of running away from it, maybe I wouldn’t have fallen into her arms...”

She rose slowly, moving like a cat.

“We do not have to be afraid of wolves or other nightmares, Sister. Monsters are not built to live forever.” She began to approach in a silken rustle, floating. “We only have to fear the darkness. The monsters in the darkness will die, but the darkness shall always hold onto the traces of their passing...”



The next morning, Klaudia's bed was empty.

Through the wide open window, the cold wind was blowing thick large flakes onto Sister Alexandra's lifeless body.

*Translated by Cătălina Fometici*

**Lucian-Vasile Szabo** (b. 25.05.1965), writer, translator, literary critic, essayist, senior lecturer at West University of Timișoara, has a Ph.D. in philology. President of „Helion” SF Society Timișoara, member of the Romanian Writers Union, editor-in-chief of Helion Online Magazine.

His short stories have been published in a number of magazines (“România literară”, “Orizont”, “Convorbiri literare”, “Arca”, “Oglinda literară”, “Transilvania”, “Helion”, “Helion Online”, “Paradox”, “Biblioteca Nova”) and anthologies such as 3.5 (Tritonic, 2018), Noir de Timișoara (mystery & thriller short stories, Tritonic, 2019). His volumes are Imperiul de sârmă (sci-fi & fantasy, Tritonic, 2019), Iubita de la miezul nopții, (sci-fi & fantasy short story, Tritonic, 2017), Zile senine, zile străine (novel, Eurostampa, 2017), Arta de a muri pe timp de pace (short stories, Bastion, 2009), Seninul cerului de sticlă (short stories, Amarcord, 1999).

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# Mary Stenton Returns to the Motherland

by Lucian-Vasile Szabo

*To Peter Rugg, gone but not forgotten*

## A BMW Cabriolet

“**Gentlemen**, it’s not nice to mock a troubled woman and her child! We have come all the way from Germany and wish to arrive home as soon as possible.”

“But we are telling you the truth dear madam! There has been no open field between the County Hospital and the ‘Soarelui’ neighborhood for a very long time!”

“Of course there is a field! During summer, a few months ago, they came out with a combine and harvested the wheat! The yield was not very good, the children had trampled the wheat. Some cars were parked over there as well. Furthermore, people living in the apartment buildings, the ones who own the hen-houses facing the Grove had let the birds roam loose in the field. Either that

or they cut the wheat down with the sickles and fed it to the poultry. So, that is where I wish to go with this dear child of mine. We left Wolfsburg yesterday at noon, when they let us out of the hospital. And now I want to get to our little house next to the Grove.”

”Madam,” I chimed in, ”I used to work in the neighborhood school, School No. 30. It was built 20 years ago. With all due respect, right now there is a supermarket and an orthopedics clinic over there. The clinic is called Austria House.”

“I had heard they were building a school over there, they had started working on the foundation, but they couldn’t have finished the whole thing in five months time...”

“The school, yes” I continued. ”But it was not build on the field where they used to sow wheat and corn. It was built somewhere between the housing blocks. Towards the hospital there is no trace left of the hen-houses,” I said, looking straight at her. She had a pretty face, albeit furrowed by fine lines. Both sweet melancholia and strong determination rose from the slightly sun-burnt skin of her cheeks.

I looked at my motorcyclist friends’ faces. They were smiling. I was sure Markus believed the woman was insane. He even made a gesture with his hand, discreetly reaching out with his palm upward, with his eyes asking what the matter was.

“I’d like to eat something. I miss my little bed from home. I miss Tuesday.” It was the child who had spoken.

I looked at him more closely. He seemed very slim, but his cheeks were rosy, as if he’d come round from a serious disease. He was sitting on the right side of the back seat and his seat-belt was properly fastened. The seat-belt made him look even slimmer. He took biscuits out of a large tin box. The box had some red and white drawings on the side, and the holiday sweets had of course been bought from some supermarket. He would carefully break the round biscuits in half, and then break as carefully each new half in two, and then place everything into his mother’s faded purple purse, on top of passports, lipsticks, chewing gum packs, comb, a small make-up kit and a wide wallet. I had no way of knowing what was in the wallet. Then the child meticulously gathered each and every crumb, each and every piece of paper, some old packaging, and carefully placed everything in the same purse. He closed the zipper and shook the bag vigorously a couple of times, then placed it next to him, on the left side of the back seat. Then he just sat there, tenderly looking at it.

“Gentlemen, please tell me how to get to the ‘Soarelui’ Neighbourhood. I don’t remember the way. I am tired and, as you’ve heard, the little one is hungry” asked the woman, speaking in a very pleasant manner.

We had stopped at a terrace on Pârvan Boulevard, thinking about getting a drink. We hadn’t even gotten off

the motorcycles yet when a BMW Cabriolet pulled over right next to us. The lady in green, with her scarf waving in the sticky air of a December day, pressed a button and the rooftop folded. The car was superb. Old, a collectible even, but well preserved. A wave of sadness, like a zephyr, enveloped the automobile and its passengers. They seemed to be from another world and a different time. The woman said she was from the 'Soarelui' Neighbourhood, but didn't remember how to get there. The bird of suffering had rested on her beautiful face for a while, but now it was gone, leaving but a faint shadow. Maybe it was just the air outside... Grey air, the air of heavy traffic.

"Madam, go back to the large junction, take the left and then continue straight ahead. Cross the tramway line and keep going towards the County Hospital Building. When you get to the traffic light ahead of the hospital turn left. To the right you will see the field that you have talked about. Only it is no longer a field, you will see the aforementioned clinic. It will be easier for you to get home once you arrive there," I said, speaking as slowly as possible. Then I felt embarrassed for using that tone, as if I was speaking to a deranged person. The woman was nice, she just seemed a little lost. Without a doubt, she looked tired.

"Are you sure you are not making fun of a sorrowful woman, returning from a long journey? I have come all the way from Germany..."

Her voice exuded common sense! And the need to find out which way to go.

She left. The BMW Cabriolet drove off smoothly, driven with grace. The woman caught a traffic gap, swerved delicately and turned, crossing the solid line.

## Hospital life

“There is actually something to it all,” Alberto began saying. Among my motorcyclist friends, he was the professor. He had become a Physics lecturer. A bearded academic, with a kerchief tied around his neck, riding a Yamaha.

“What do you mean?” replied Markus. He was the engineer. Actually, he had been a professional football player, but then he went on to study in the Polytechnic University. He has his own flanges and metal torques workshop.

“When I was working as a teacher at School No. 30 there was a story going around,” said Alberto, “about the abandoned house at the far end of the neighborhood. It was about a woman and her young child. He was ill, there was something wrong with his head. Hydrocephalus – water in his brain or something of the sort. Right after the 1989 Revolution they went to Germany, for him to get surgery there.”

”Brain tumor, that’s what I heard. But they couldn’t rescue him. He died after a few years. She went crazy and disappeared without trace.” It was Mihai, the fourth member of our group, who had spoken. Mihai was a doctor, specialized in neurosurgery. Sometimes, when he was allowed to do, he even performs certain types of interventions. He is tall and slim and rides a Kawasaki the size of a tank.

”At school they said that the boy had survived, but never returned to normal. That he and his mother went to various hospitals in Germany and Europe,” Alberto continued. ”That sometimes they came home. Some nights you could see the light on in their abandoned house.”

”I heard that she couldn’t find her way back home, that she was wandering the world, asking about Timișoara,” Mihai added.

“And what’s that got to do with the woman we saw earlier?” Markus joined the conversation with a puzzled look. ”You think she returned home after all these years?” He was like that, never shy when talking about things he didn’t understand.

”Well, we don’t really know,” I said. “This woman and her son are similar to the ones Alberto and Mihai have heard about...”

“Do you think I’m retarded, Mateo?” asked Markus, staring straight into my eyes.

“Please forgive me!” I quickly replied. “I did not mean to insult your intelligence. Truth is, the similarities were striking. I was just trying to clarify the story for myself.” That’s who I was: lawyer and motorcyclist, frustrated and flurried.

We each had a cup of coffee and a glass of mineral water and then left.

I could not get the woman’s face out of my head. Well, I didn’t think about her all the time, just now and again. She had a gentle face that was deeply soothing. During the following days I kept having the impression I saw the car. She was driving and seemed to wear the same clothes. Her scarf was fluttering in the wind. Of course, it was just an illusion. The car roof was folded, and it was minus three or minus four degrees Centigrade - even around noon.

One day, just a few days before Christmas, I called a friend of mine, Laurean. He was also a motorcyclist, but maybe not as dedicated as the rest of us. He rode a lemon-yellow Aprilia. It looked delicate, but it had a lot of nerve, a quick start-up and it was also very fast on smooth roads. Laurean did not join us often, but I got along with him really well. Maybe that was also because he was a jurist. It was precisely why I needed him. He worked at the Land Registry Office.

“Can you do me a favour?” I asked him in a straightforward manner. “I want to know more about that house in the ‘Soarelui’ Neighbourhood.”

“Is it for a trial? You have to make an official enquiry.”

”No, it’s for myself. I noticed it looks sort of abandoned. Actually, I am interested in the owner...”

“I see! I’ll get back to you on that.”

He did. I knew he was a man of his word. Very serious minded. He didn’t get jokes, but laughed when he saw us laughing. We took the motorbikes out towards Şag village. Then we rode on the Timiș river damn all the way to Parța, since it was a cold day and the ground was frozen solid. We crossed the bridge to ‘Munteni’ neighborhood and then we returned to Şag via another bridge. We went as close to the river bed as possible and passed under the road bridge, in order to reach the railway bridge.

“So, what did you find out?” I asked when we stopped to catch our breath.

“The house belongs to a woman named Mary Stenton. It seems she is a missing person. I inquired at the mayor’s office. No taxes have been paid since 1991.”

”BMW Cabriolet,” said Mihai in a cheerful voice, winking at Markus, who kept cleaning off his leather pants with his fur gloves. He had urinated behind a willow tree and now had the feeling that the wind had blown some drops on his pants.

”Which BMW?” he asked, in all earnestness.

I was surprised by what Mihai had just said and I did not know what to reply. How could he have known we were talking about the same woman? Did he sense

it or did he overhear something about the house in the 'Soarelui' Neighborhood and made the connection? That was probably it.

"What? You don't know? That woman and her child. They were on their way to the Grove." answered Mihai, smiling at Markus.

"Mateo, the best lawyer among the motorcyclists and the best motorcyclist among lawyers, has a heart that skips a beat when he thinks about the pretty woman in the BMW Cabriolet," added Alberto while getting on his motorcycle. "We ride straight ahead, towards Chevereș!"

## **Motorcyclists in the dark**

The evening after New Year's Eve, about two weeks after having met the woman on Pârvan Boulevard, I was with my friends once more. It was warmer outside, but the streets were covered with melting snow, and there was some sleet as well. Wrapped up in our fur and leather coats, with the motorcycle glasses and our padded helmets, we were taking a tour towards Urseni, crackling the engines somewhere far from the city. We were trying to avoid a police patrol set up somewhere around a crossroad, so we turned to a side road. We ended up in the 'Soarelui' Neighbourhood. Alberto was leading.

"I'll lead the way. I know my way around ever since I taught here," he said in a firm voice. He sometimes took initiative out of the blue. "I used to drive an old Dacia through these potholes, so I know each and every street."

I didn't want to upset him by saying I knew my way around as well. Markus tried to say something, but Alberto had already started off, trying to keep the engine quiet.

"Let's stop at the pizza place close to the petrol station." Mihai barely had time to say before we were off.

We hardly sat down and were having our teas and coffees when I got an idea.

"I want to drop by that old house," I said.

"What the hell is there to see?" exclaimed Markus. He was a direct fellow.

"It's *that* house." I replied.

Markus was looking at me as if I'd just fallen out of the sky.

"The house of the BMW woman," Mihai explained.

"Do you have the hots for her?" Alberto inquired.

"I'm just curious," I stuttered.

"What is wrong with you? What woman, what BMW? Who are you looking for?"

Markus's candour was beyond words. We all laughed.

We slowly rode ahead, by the Grove park, alone in the middle of the night. Our only company was the whitish foggy light of those economic bulbs that were fashionable in Timișoara at the time. Their light was somehow reflected

by the wet pavement, making our shadows twist and turn, although they should have been quietly sliding along with us. The shadows seemed to be feeling a sort of strange fear, and soon enough my friends and I started to feel it too. I felt they were exhausted, although I did not see their faces, hidden by their coats, helmets and glasses. Markus was the only one to be humming something behind us, without a care in the world. I turned around for a moment and saw him on the empty street, breathing in the wet winter air.

The house was there. In the depth of night it seemed grim. The chain link fence had fallen to the ground, or had been stolen. The bushes and trees that had grown randomly made the place look even more bizarre. There were no particularly tall or thick trees, someone probably cut them down and used them as fire wood.

“Lads, this is like a vampire circus!” Mihai said as we were getting closer. We had left the motorcycles by a road that was full of potholes, as if we were in the countryside.

“I don’t think you want to go in there,” said Markus. He seemed somewhat surprised.

”You afraid, man?” Alberto replied, but I could hear it in his voice that he was not feeling too well either.

I got closer to the gray walls. The plaster had fallen off and the bricks were chipped. I looked at the paneless window frames – one of them was covered, but not completely, by something that looked like a bolted door. Maybe it was just put there, not bolted. I couldn’t really

say, it was dark. The main door looked half burnt, but one could not get to it because of a metal frame that was attached to a steel frame with a rusty lock.

“How creepy!” said Alberto right next to me. I almost got scared.

“Oh, come one, what the heck do you want to see over there!?” exclaimed Markus from afar, since he refused to go any farther than where the fence had been.

“There is a light in the back! There’s someone here!” said Mihai, quickly going around the chipped corner of the house.

We followed him. We got to a back entrance, opening up from the yard. In front of it there were some chipped brick stairs lined with half-collapsed railing. There was no door, just a black chasm, a toothless mouth that I absolutely wanted to walk through. I also believed I’d seen some light. I immediately thought of homeless people that had taken refuge inside.

“Don’t go inside, it’s not right!” a deep voice said from behind. It gave me the creeps, but I acted with confidence. I slowly turned. A man was standing by a wood shed, next to a yard toilet with no roof.

”Who are you? And what is wrong with the house?” Alberto wanted to know.

“I live around here... I stayed in the house as well, but during the past two weeks it’s as if the devils gathered in there.”

“What do you mean?” Markus inquired.

“You can hear voices. Women, children. They stomp around in there.”

“Yeah, right. You just drink too much!” Alberto intervened.

“Dear sir, I do not drink! Only sometimes... But it doesn’t mean the ghosts are not in there!”

The man lived in one of the sheds in the yard. He warmed up by lighting a fire in a cauldron he had in a corner. The smoke lifted through a crack in the roof. He did not dare to go inside with us. We did not stay long either. It was very dirty, but nothing out of the ordinary. Just some shadows rustling in the light cast by some faraway street lamps or car headlights.

## **When is now?**

“What am I to do if I lose the house?” Mary asked the evening before the first court appearance of the trial. “Where will I go? What will happen to my dear child?”

I thought she was only slightly worried, since we had talked about it several times. I thought I had convinced her we have a very high chance of winning, particularly if we could prove the acquisitive prescription had not come to term. But no. She was really worried. She was speaking all the way from the bathroom. She had left the door

slightly open and I could hear her from my desk. I was wearing some thick socks and greenish track pants, well suited for a Siberian winter. On top of the pullover I was wearing, I had on a flannel robe, green as well, like the ones in hospitals. I was tirelessly browsing the websites of various Romanian courts of law, looking for precedents concerning rejected usucaptions. I was certain I would surprise the judges if I did my homework right.

"You could always stay at my place," I said. "But we will not lose the house, it is yours, you are the legal owner. You would probably have to pay for the outstanding taxes and bills, but you are still the owner," I encouraged her, since I sensed despair in her voice. Someone had been exerting pressure with the town hall to write off the land and the house as municipal private property. The intention was to then get it by means of a dubious auction. I was surprised no family member, no supposed 'heir' had claimed it. Anyway, Mary's cousin, her closest relative, had objected.

It was a cold and dry March evening. The woodwork was tightening, as if held in a vise, and letting cold gusts of wind come through to every corner of the apartment. I'd decided to bundle up, but Mary was almost naked, doing some work in the bathroom. Egon had already gone to sleep in the other room, on the bed that had once belonged to my son. He had quickly gotten used to the room, as if he had been there forever.

“Yes, I will pay for the past 20 years, even if I was gone for six months only!” I heard her flaring up slightly. She had a delicate way of being.

”Mary, we’ve already been through this. It’s no use telling the judges about the six months in Germany. If they do not believe you – and there are chances they will not - things will only get complicated. A lot more complicated. Those who are trying to get their hands on the house can demand for your mental health to be evaluated, they can cavil at the situation...”

”But I am not mad...”

”Of course not. But let’s not make things complicated!”

“You don’t believe me either...”

”It’s not about what I believe, it’s about what we can prove. Most people, including the judges, know we are in 2010. They would be awfully surprised if somebody told them it’s 1990. We stop the usucaption, you get your property back, and then we will find a way to pay, as we’ve already discussed. All right?”

No answer.

“All right?” I asked, louder.

”Yes, yes, thank you.” Her voice was filled with infinite sadness.

I felt my heart breaking. I went toward her and found her in front of the mirror, with silent tears running down her cheeks. She was only wearing black knickers and black, silk stockings, attached with garters. She was massaging her breasts with delicate and knowledgeable gestures.

I never told her about our group's New Year Eve expedition, three months ago. She would have thought I was crazy. Maybe at some point, when things quieted down, I would tell her about it.

I had returned on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January, around noon. This time I came on the boulevard, from the stadium area, and took a turn where the apartment buildings were. Upon getting closer I saw the car, that BMW Cabriolet, parked in front of the missing gate. It had most certainly been torn out and taken to the junkyard. I left my motorcycle nearby and went forward. The house no longer looked ghastly, but pitiful. Endless humiliation exuded from all of its structure and from the weed-infested yard. I was surprised nobody had gotten their hands on that well positioned lot!

"Hello!" I called, looking towards the metal frame and the new door that had replaced the burned one.

It was the child that came out first. Bundled up in a light blue ski suit, wearing a huge Russian hat and with a (real, as I found out later!) orchestra conductor baton in his hand, he stopped and looked at me with a long and intense gaze. He did not seem particularly interested, though. Remembering he had been sick, I approached him cautiously, somewhat regretting I was wearing black motorcyclist clothing. Luckily the helmet was in my hand!

"Harley-Davidson. That's your motorcycle," he said in a very serious voice. "Mom, the gentleman with the Harley-

Davidson came over!” he yelled. ”I think he wants to talk to you!”

The conversation was rather short.

”Just don’t take up too much of my time, dear sir,” she said rather dryly. I need to finish with the cleaning and move back in as soon as possible.”

She had managed to clean one room and the kitchen. She was expecting house painters during the following days, and they had also promised to repair the roof. I stayed with her for a few hours and cleaned out the rubble, working in silence. She was extremely tidy. She continued working and, step by step, made everything shine with cleanliness.

## **A trial. And a combine harvester**

The trial started at the beginning of May. That morning Mary Stenton was there as well. Actually we went together, entering the Dicasterial Palace arm in arm. We had left Egon with a cousin. Mary sat on one of the benches in the back. We’d consulted the list and our trial was around the middle of it. It was barely 8:30, yet she thought we’d arrived late. I kept explaining the judges only got there around 9, but it was useless.

”Let’s hurry, I don’t want to lose the house,” she kept saying.

That day I had no other trial, so I was waiting as well. I was wearing the robe, since we were in court, and I felt rather uncomfortable in the back of the room. Mary didn't seem to notice. I was expecting it to either be over on the same day, or to be postponed. It is often postponed the first time around. Usually the court does not read the file up until then. I had drawn up a good one though. Down to the last detail, as one says. If only they didn't find some glitch. I'd put a lot of effort into getting her new identification documents, since her old ID card had expired. I was afraid of something else as well: Mary opening her mouth and saying it was 1990. It was difficult enough for me to live with her conviction, that she sometimes voiced, that it was 1990 and she was 30 years old. Well, she actually looked 30. But the judges would have asked for a psychiatric evaluation... But I'd grown fond of her. Her relentless disobedience concerning temporal benchmarks gave her an air of strangeness, and it made me dizzy. She was kind enough not to insist on it. Particularly when other people were present, she just looked to the side and, in a low voice, mumbled something to herself: "Maybe they did something to us when they treated Egon with those rays all that time. It's as if I can't even properly read a watch!" And she looked for a reason to drift away. My friends adored her. Maybe that was precisely the reason why!

The judges saw us around noon, and of course postponed the trial! We were standing around, since Mary

wanted to check something in the file, although I'd told her it was impossible to get to the archives so soon, I saw the presiding judge in the tribunal hall.

"Why did you postpone it?" I asked, since we were well acquainted, him also being a former colleague from university.

"Well, it's too good!" he said. "But the issue will be solved in two weeks' time."

Mary got closer, took my hand and looked straight at him.

"We must carefully analyze all the documents," he continued in a more formal tone. "Have a nice day!" Then he left.

"Is there a problem?" Mary panicked.

"I am sure things will go as planned at the next hearing," I whispered in her soft, delicate and perfumed ear.

And so it was.

Before the trial we put in a lot of effort to repair the house, but after we won it in court, the effort doubled. The building and the garden looked better and better with every passing day. The first night we spent in the house after the renovation was really special. We stayed up late, drinking wine on the terrace. It was facing the trees and the 'Giroc' Neighborhood. A few children were playing nearby. They sometimes shouted, but the sounds were blurred out by the heat. When the evening came the children left and all we could hear was the faint sound the

cars were making on the faraway boulevard. One could see a few reddish traces of light coming from the direction of the stadium. Those July nights were not stuffy at all. Or maybe it was the effect of moving, the joy of (re)acquiring such a haven at the edge of the Grove. The joy of having a place of my own, where fears, frustration and tiredness were literally being washed off my being, slowly falling apart around the chain link fence placed towards the ‘Sun’ Neighborhood apartment buildings. I fell asleep dreaming of planting white cedars by the fence, and in front of them tulips and daffodils in the regularly cut grass – three times per month.

The following morning I woke up when iridescent sun rays hit my eyes. I turned and saw Mary. She was sleeping naked, her body turned, with a leg over the crumpled sheet. I could only see her left cheek. Perfectly smooth, with a relaxed appearance. She was incredibly beautiful. She seemed at peace and even younger.

”Step on it!” a thick voice yelled outside.

One could hear a starter, and then an engine. It sounded like a tractor. Quite puzzled, I went by the window. About 50 meters away, in a field of ripe wheat, a combine was getting ready to harvest. Farther away you could only see the County Hospital. Nothing else around. Not a trace of Austria House. Only ripe wheat.

*Translated by Mălina Duță*

**Ciprian-Ionuț Baci** (b. 30.04.1982), writer. Vice President of “Helion” SF Society Timisoara. Deputy in-chief of “Helion Online” magazine.

His first short story, *Mihnea Voevod*, appeared in “Helion” SF magazine in 2007. His short stories have been published in “Helion” and “Helion Online” magazines, and anthologies such as *Antologia Helion nr. 3* (Eurostampa, 2016), *Antologia Helion nr. 5* (Eurostampa, 2017) 3.5 (Tritonic, 2018), and *Noir de Timișoara* (Tritonic, 2019).

His volume is *Amor fără alcool* (Tritonic, 2018).

Ciprian-Ionuț Baci has won the RomCon SF Award in 2019 for *Amor fără alcool*.



# Serpents among the Scent of Algae

by Ciprian-Ionuț Baciu

He'd had a rough night, with periods of sleep cut short by a cough that had been consuming him for a few days; he kept postponing the doctor's appointment because he couldn't stand his reproving glances any longer and the same, perpetual, question:

“Why don't you quit smoking, Mr. Christoph Brent?”

He had no answer to that. By the time he was thirty he hadn't taken up smoking but then came the problems with Mariah, which had consumed two years of his life, a period in which he had done everything possible to save the relationship. With no result. The one he had thought for more than ten years to be his great love had left him for a Mormon priest, with whom she had eventually moved to Gaia, one of the neighboring planets, to erect temples, among the ice, for imaginary gods.

He had took refuge in smoking and light drugs to be able to bear it. Four more years had passed this way, a period in which he'd found solace in his research projects, together with his parents, hidden in the middle of the

fields, acclimatizing imported vegetables from Terra, the home planet, which was kindly watching over them from 40 light years away.

His family's hydroponic farms and the recreational drugs, which had been legalized even on Freya, or Trappist 1-f, according to the planet's old name, were the only things that had made him feel alive. Finally, when he felt the emotional recovery period was about to end, he quit the drugs. But not the cigarettes, which he kept like some sort of self-destructive memory of what he and Mariah once had.

Shyly, he had begun going out again, first to conferences and presentations of his genetic engineering discoveries, as the interest for such research was very high among colonists, not just on Freya, but across the entire Trappist 1 solar system. The development and survival of the entire colonization effort was dependent on the way in which people managed to acclimatize the genetic material from the home planet..

Then, following several scientific presentations which he left with a good impression about the public reception to his solutions, he'd regained the courage to interact with people and so had decided to make a few appearances at seed fairs, trying to take over the selling part of the hydroponic product business from his father. That was when he realized that, despite the burdensome years following the break-up, which had left him prematurely

gray-haired, with dark rings around his eyes, a paunch and an overall physical condition demanding a lot of improvement, he hadn't lost his charm. Among those who struck up conversations with him because of their deep interest in genetically modified vegetables, there were also some persons of the opposite sex who were looking at him with other agendas on their minds. Yes, he knew that researchers or owners of enterprises like his family's were looked upon with a sort of adulation on Freya, but he wasn't ready to get himself into those little love games again. He had completely lost interest in such things.

As a result, he woke up grumpy after a night of annoying coughing. He'd fallen into a deep sleep only close to morning, after five o'clock and then for no more than two hours. His throat was stinging terribly so he switched on the Network in order to make an appointment with his family's doctor after lunch hours. He involuntarily remembered he had dreamed, during those early morning hours of deep sleep, of a flooded temple. He was walking lightheaded on the temple walls followed by a giant serpent. To his right a sunlit promontory washed by sea waves, promised salvation. He thought there was a feminine presence next to him but he either couldn't identify it, or couldn't remember the whole dream.

He checked the Network notifications absent-mindedly, now that he'd switched it on anyway, while he was waiting for the kettle that he had put on to come to

a boil. Hm, he'd received an invitation to a psychedelic concert, some stoner doom band, 'Melting Dice', who'd come all the way from Terra. Sabina, one of the girls who had approached him during his presentations and conferences, had invited him. He'd started to like rock concerts, and bands from Terra always brought a breath of fresh air. So, without overthinking it, he accepted the invitation, more so as to avoid another night by himself, in the company of cigarettes and interminable projects, which would almost always fill his mind. He should tell that persistent doctor that he would quit smoking starting that very day. In order not to lie to him out front, he needed a plan to kill time and boredom. At least for that night.

Considering the justifications that no one asked of him, however, he realized he'd started to look for excuses to accept the invitation. Part of him would have liked to stay faithful to Mariah, even though she had long lost interest in his person and, most likely, was spending her morning (if it happened to be morning on Gaia) in the arms of that heretic who'd stolen her from him. These amount of uncalled for thoughts began to annoy him, so he drank up his tea, getting ready to confront the doctor. He pulled on a pair of recently bought jeans, put on a T-shirt with *Luna Amară*<sup>4</sup>, a fashionable band on previous century's Terra, grabbed a warmer hoodie from the peg and went out.



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<sup>4</sup> Literally, Bitter Moon. A Romanian rock band established in 1999.

The concert hall was spacious enough, hidden among the side streets on the outskirts of Scandinavia, the capital city of Freya, where 400,000 colonists lived their crowded lives. He paid the entrance fee, which was pricey enough, but the expectations were just as high. Sabina had shown up a while before so they managed to chat a little while their tickets were being printed. She was accompanied by another girl, a friend, he presumed, which had him on his guard. It seemed the girl wouldn't simply jump in his arms, as he'd imagined she would, in his bachelor's naiveté that had forgotten all about seduction games.

"Hey, how are you? Are you here for the concert?"

"Yes," he said intrigued. "I've... accepted your invitation, I guess you've noticed on the Network."

Before he managed to say anything else, she left smiling seductively:

"Alright then, we'll see each other again at the concert. We're getting something to drink."

Her friend gave him a look meant to be indifferent. Shouldn't Sabina make the introductions? He didn't understand anything anymore.

He waited for them to go away from the bar, they passed him by on their way out, to smoke probably. Apathetic, he got himself a beer and sat on a counter in the hall, next to the sound engineer. He switched on the Network, waiting for the concert to start. He was scheduling his next experiments. In a few days a shipment of experimental

tomatoes would arrive from a province of the North African Caliphate on Terra. He was trying to acclimatize a genetically modified species for the market on Trappist 1-e, another inhabitable planet, also known as Elissar.

The band appeared to be excited to perform in Scandinavia, then followed the customary polite thanks to a not so large audience. The price, it seemed, was prohibitive for most young colonists, but so were the costs of travel from Terra. Melting Dice had a drummer, two guitar players and a vocalist who angry at the entire world, growling melodically from under a dark hood. They alternated the heavier songs with less offensive ones in which the apocalyptic growling was replaced by the pleasant voice of the guitarist on the left side of the stage. Sabina was dancing, her eyes glued to the giant screen which was showing all sorts of animated movies about space travel and hallucinogenic mushrooms. Her friend was listening ecstatically, stone-still. Yes, that was stoner for you, with its psychedelic effects. He tried to let himself be carried away by the dizzying effect of sounds combined with the alcohol that had started to do its job. The coughing was milder now, his doctor had received him kindly, his experiments were going well, he was going to quit smoking, his parents were in good health. What reasons were there for him to worry?

Then, in his mind's eye, he saw Mariah. Uncalled for, she was making love to that Mormon scum.

To Sabina's right, three youngsters had come in way too close. They started to chat, they were of about the same age. From the way they were talking, he realized they knew one another. *Why the hell did she ask these guys to come to the concert?* He checked the Network compulsively, then got ready to leave in a reflex of frustration. He noticed, however, casting one last look towards the group, that Sabina was searching the hall at a loss. Aha, so she was looking for him. "All right then, let's play," he said to himself intrigued, while going to buy himself another beer.

He strategically sat to her left, about three meters behind. She was close enough to the stage. Finally, during one of her persistent gazes across the hall, she noticed him, their eyes met. The band was now going into their best songs.

The girl started to dance so that, gradually, she moved away from her group, coming closer to him. One of the three rivals went after her, trying to put his arm around her shoulders. She rejected him, annoyed. Then, instinctively, Christoph touched her hip lightly with his left hand, as if by chance. She turned around intrigued, then lit up when she saw him. They smiled at each other, and he was swept off his feet in a way that reminded him how he'd felt about Mariah.

The end of the concert found them next to each other. They exchanged a few words, and he leaned in closer to

talk into her ear, as the noise of the last tunes was way too loud. He didn't realize how they came to embrace each other. He held her like that for some minutes, losing track of time; the feeling was so intense after all those years of solitude that he felt he would melt right into the floor. They talked about the band, about her studies and his experiments, about how beautiful that night was. They were holding each other tightly, more and more tightly. He caressed then, without realizing it, placed a short kiss, like the touch of a butterfly, on the nape her neck. He felt her body shiver.

“Sabina, I'd love to take you out for coffee one of these days.”

“Yes, I'd like that.”

“You say when, OK?”

“Sure,” she replied, beaming at him. “We'll message each other on the Network.”

They were alone now in the concert hall. The band had gathered their equipment, so they had to leave too. People retreated to the bar nearby and outside the hall to smoke. Sabina joined her group of friends. He headed numbly towards the cloakroom to take back his hoodie. He went to her to say good-bye, they held each other again, she kissed his neck too, right under his ear and just as intensely.

“Thank you for inviting me, Sabina!”

She answered, smiling widely:

“I did it on purpose, though I didn’t expect you to make it.”

“I know. That’s why I came, because you weren’t expecting it.”



They were supposed to meet on the terrace of a restaurant close to the seafront, she had written to him the following day and they’d set up the meeting point together. He had studied her pictures and profile on the Network. She was born in Scandinavia in a family of oceanographers but she’d opted for a different career as a student of xenolinguistics. Her field of choice had a huge stake in space exploration, but was extremely arid because deciphering inscriptions that made interstellar travel through the Gates possible had proven laborious to a fault.

He realized he’d fallen head over heels in love. He had saved some of her pictures to his console. He had especially liked one taken in Scandinavia’s Central Square, in which she was wearing a flower wreath. Another one showed her in a park, where she’d posed while sitting on the grass, with a majestic tree in the background. She was wearing a white dress, with lace on the bodice and shoulders, which suited her wonderfully. Sabina didn’t look 21 years old, as he’d discovered on the Network. She was tall, almost as

tall as he was, and her classic fringe haircut, which made her hair fall wisely over her shoulders, made her look over 30. So he was 15 years her senior, but he didn't think they would look bad together.

The girl was late to show up. He tried messaging her on the Network but she had set her profile off-line. One of the waiters noticed his anxious looks and came closer dutifully.

“The young lady you're waiting for... I'm afraid she won't come. She's asked me to hand this envelope to you.”

“Thank you. I'd like the bill, please.”

He paid, then rushed down to the waterfront. He expected a tearful note, so he needed to be alone, just him and the rough waves, when we was going to read it. He anxiously opened the envelope to find, wrapped in several blank sheets, a pearly ring, with a green iridescence.

He sat down on a boulder, holding the jewelry piece between his fingers. He didn't recognize the material, a whitish combination between silver and porcelain but he realized that the sculpted model was actually the Ouroboros Snake; however, the head didn't swallow the tail, they were separated by an invisible wire, which revealed several luminescent degrees when Christoph set the ring on the forefinger of his left hand. He felt crushed by the weight of all waves, stood up scared, the gritty sand seemed to swallow him up; he fell among the cliffs. He was falling, swallowed up by the earth.

He woke up on the edge of the ruined wall, next to the flooded temple that had appeared in his dream. Sabina was emerging from the waters, sashaying like an embodied sylph, an aquatic apparition ruling over the world's serpents. She was wearing the same white lacy dress she had worn in her profile pictures on the Network. She came to him with a sort of grave smirk on her face, yet behind her there was no longer the shady tree from the digital picture but a giant serpent, which looked like a hungry python.

"Hello, my darling. I'm sorry I brought you here like this; you may have preferred the less dangerous transportation method, you know."

"No, what should I know?"

"Come on, Christoph, don't pull back. Look, I'll ask Zundar to keep away."

The serpent stopped, then plunged with a short splash into the dark waters flooding the temple. Sabina was coming closer, pacing smoothly, her arms ready to embrace him.

"There, there. Don't be scared, he won't hurt you, he's my little pet. What was I saying? Yes, about transportation. You would have taken a cargo ship to Tau Sigma 5, where there's a Gate to the Taurus constellation in the K2-288 system, almost 200 light years away. After that, you would have bought a shuttle to take you to me on this godforsaken planet, while I would have wasted away waiting for you,

my darling. It would have been a pity to waste so much time and for you it would have been too expensive.”

“What makes you think I would have made that journey?”

“Ah, don’t look away because you can only escape here towards that promontory behind you. Here, I won’t come any closer, you can study the surroundings as long as you want. You won’t be able to leave here until we’ve talked.”

Christoph would have wanted to protest but something told him that he’d been there before, that he’d had that conversation with Sabina before, even if not exactly the same, they had exchanged such lines before on the edge of a flooded temple. She had been that feminine presence in his dream, the one he could not identify. And now his memory was being flooded with memories of the two of them together, but what he didn’t know was if they belonged to real life or to some other life lived in the abyss of dreams.

He relaxed, sitting powerless on the edge of the ruined wall, his feet touching the water’s surface. She came closer, careful. She sat by him, putting her right arm round his hip. He put his arm round her shoulders, she leaned her head on his. Her cheek was cold, like the touch of the waves.

“Christoph, you know I’m wasting away, waiting for you.”

The girl caressed his hand, then held the ring, which she delicately took off his finger. The engagement ring.

“We’ve been through this fifteen times but something tells me you still haven’t made up your mind, my darling.”

Yes, he remembered now, they had been the same age when they met. Mariah had just left him and he had wanted one last concert before leaving for Tau Sigma 5, and from there to other horizons, to the depths of the Taurus constellation, so he could forget everything, so he could put everything behind him. That’s how he’d met Sabina Praey, the singer of an exotic band, newly arrived on recently colonized Elissar. She had persuaded him to stay, then brought him to Trappist 1-e, educating him in the mysteries of the old oriental Terran religions. Shortly afterwards he had proposed, but the followers of the Ouroboros Cult, to which they now belonged to, had a marriage ritual sophisticated to a fault.

First of all, they were supposed to go through an engagement period, a time for preparation allotted by the mystics and the teachers of the cult for the future life partners. During this time the partners would find out if they were truly meant for each other.

Awaken from the reveries of getting his memory back, Christoph returned her touch. He took the ring and put it on her finger. He kissed her cheeks, helped her up, embraced her, feeling the warmth returning to her body. Fifteen years had passed since their engagement, fifteen temporal cycles in which he had made the same mistakes, had been overwhelmed by the same hesitations, defeated

by the same photon degrees of the pearly artefact, which would swallow its tail every time, resetting everything, including his memories, turning them into the figments of dreams.

Every time, at the end of each annual cycle, he would wake up on the wall of the same flooded temple. Sometimes Sabina would wait for him on the vast beaches of the promontory, other times on one of the amphibian shuttles close by. This time she chose to emerge impetuously from under the watery ruins, an indication that her patience and waiting were drawing to an end.

He led her towards the wide shore of the promontory, gently holding her hand.

“Please forgive me, Sabina, for all these wasted years.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Christoph, I haven’t grown old at all. You’re the one who paid with your years, but you can rest assured that I still find you just as attractive.”

“What have you been doing over this past year? Hasn’t the wait shaken you?”

“You know how passionate I am about the inscriptions on the Gate. I wasn’t bored, Christoph, and the practice of the Mysteries induces states that are hard to explain. You should try it if you stay in the Cult, no matter what the resolution of our engagement will be.”

He gently caressed the top of her head, then kissed her forehead, tucking her hair behind her ears.

“What makes you think we’ll call it off?”

The waves were rougher now and the wind was billowing her whitish and almost dry dress.

“I can’t wait any longer, Christoph. I think you’ve had enough time to understand that Mariah won’t come back to you; you’ve been to Gaia too, you visited the Mormon temples in one of the temporal cycles, you told me about that.”

“That’s right. I saw them during the Mormon ceremony of eternal marriage, but I wasn’t convinced by that sinister sight. I don’t know, Sabina, that devil did something to her, bewitched her, defiled her, put a curse on her.”

He rested his forehead on her shoulder. He abandoned himself completely to her crimson cheeks, her hair rich in scents of algae:

“I don’t know...”

He would have liked to return to those incomplete walls, to step alongside her under the waters of the Temple, to complete the engagement ceremony. Far away he saw the colored back of the python-serpent, which triggered the memory of another dream, in which the temple had dried out, worn down by the touch of Elissar’s sands.

Powerless, Sabina had left her hand in his. There wasn’t going to be another temporal cycle, she was going to crush that ring to pieces or forever keep it on her finger as a symbol of marriage. Christoph gently urged her towards the waves. They went knee-deep into the churning sea. The foam was breaking against the gentle cliffs, engulfing them both.

He looked at her nostalgically, then his smile beamed with joy. The girl suddenly knew he had made up his mind.

When he kissed her, he didn't know if her salty lips kept the taste of tears in scents of algae or the fragrance of the waters, which had finally become friendly.

*Translated by: Andreea Șerban*



