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National Theatre

A Novel

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COMMEMORATION

It all began with the death of the lead actor. He died a few days after the New Year. The city was high on the list of the most polluted in the world, and the snow around the theatre was black, just like the Uniqlo turtleneck of the artistic director, who was sitting in the front row of the stalls in the main hall. Exactly thirty years before, when the artistic director was born, the lead actor played the main role in a socialist soap opera, and her pregnant mother went to see the first episodes in the cinema. He played a newcomer to the capital, a lawyer in an enterprise familiar to Yugoslavs in the late eighties. At that time, people in Yugoslavia were either working eight-hour shifts or going on strike. In front of the TV at home, they channel-hopped between warmongering propaganda and the wrangles in the lawyer's office. The artistic director identified with the iconic figure of the lawyer: neither she nor he were born in this city, where the soap opera took place, and where this commemoration was now taking place, and where she, while still so young, had now achieved such incredible recognition: to be an official representative of that institution and sit in the front row, to work in a team so similar to the lawyer's, and, in the scope of her work, to watch the photos being projected onto the white screen. They showed the actor in his native town, in a newspaper article, on the street, in a tram and in his home theatre – the National Theatre – in whose hall she was now sitting and contemplating the life that had passed. Thirty years earlier, those gathered at the commemoration had been nibbling Domaćica biscuits and dropping crumbs on the couch as

they breathlessly watched him act out what they were living: the disintegration of the state, their enterprise, the TV programme, the ground under their feet and everything they had known until then. Now, too, the photos that the actor's family had chosen for this formal farewell evoked such an intimate fascination that almost no one noticed there was no condolence book at the ceremony. No one had requested it because death wasn't expected in the theatre. The artistic director had allergic rhinitis, but she was not the only one in the hall to be sniffing. People coughed, too, to conceal their distress at the physical absence yet spiritual-artistic presence of the great thespian, at the same time heralding another flu season and the impending winter holidays. Republic Square in front of the theatre was decked with excavators due to an unfinished reconstruction project.

One of the many former general managers of the National Theatre, in the second row, leaned forward and whispered in the artistic director's ear:

“Who was your backer?”

That was far from clear to her either. She just smiled, half-turned in the red, plush-covered chair, and whispered back:

“Believe me, I wonder too.”

There were several theories about that in public discourse at the time, at least in the theatre community, made up of tabloid prattle, attempts at analytical journalism, whisperings in the corridors of the National Theatre, as well as the lobbies and canteens of all the other Belgrade theatres:

- her dubitable sexual orientation
- connections with the government
- a moment of lucidity on the part of the general manager
- links with certain other powerful women in culture.

The artistic director herself tended towards the theory that she had been given the position by the woman she couldn't see just then in the stalls or up in the general manager's box. When she glanced up at it a third time and saw its edge covered with the same red plush for the general manager to rest her hands or prop her chin on, she thought she glimpsed the silhouette of a man hastily departing the box.

She turned back around and looked at the screen, which now showed a scene from the soap opera. The lawyer was at a meeting with the female staff, who wanted to use the money in the union fund for a Women's Day excursion to Trieste, and he spoke:

“When a farmer's cow is dying, there's no carousing or music in the house – they do everything they can to get the cow back on its legs.”

The staff got the message: the cow was a metaphor for the production plan and orientation of their enterprise – its programme – and the artistic director was forced to think about her own production plan and programme, about the repertoire decisions for the theatre, not about the image of the women workers as airy-headed spendthrifts.

“Goodbye, dear Bingo,” the female lead actor farewelled her colleague, addressing him by the lawyer’s nickname instead of his real name. She played his partner in the soap opera, a high-school music teacher who suffered from frequent migraines. She too was a *ne plus ultra* in this theatre. She was wearing black from head to toe, as if playing the lead actor’s death. After the abrupt end of filming for the soap opera, they never spoke again for a reason no one in the theatre remembers. But she had to be at the commemoration. Their soap marriage at the core of the 107-episode series was remarkable as a testimony to social mobility and the reality of inter-class marriage in socialist Yugoslavia. We could bring ourselves to say goodbye to Bingo, and also to our common homeland, but never to the repertoire. The cow died, all production ground to a halt, but the repertoire was upheld even in “the worst years”.

THE WORST YEARS

People went to the National Theatre in the nineties, the worst years, because the heating still functioned there. Politicians, directors of state and private companies, church dignitaries, members of the royal family who had just arrived in the country, borne by *the wind of change*, who now wanted to apply their alleged experience with market economics in South and North America to their native country, and the remnants of the honest intelligentsia all sat in the hall of the theatre every evening and warmed themselves – not with words from works of the classics or with laughter evoked by fine comedy but with the theatre’s temperature regulation system, which was still well financed and maintained. One hundred and fifty tons of fuel oil were used annually to heat the National Theatre, reminiscent of a large theatre in a country of the former Soviet Union (thank the Orthodox God for its passing!) or the Middle East (God forbid!). That was *very bad* for the health of the staff, as well as those who lived near the theatre. But for all other residents of the ice-bound city in early winter, who were starving and freezing due to the embargo, it was *very good*.

The audience opened their programmes and went straight to the back page full of the logos of sponsors. These were giant cows breathing their last, socialist enterprises similar to the

lawyer's one in the soap: Inex, Beobanka, Energogas, Mašinoprojekt and Jugometal, which aspired to present themselves under the bright lights of the theatre. But not even the perfume-drenched fox pelts around the ladies' cold necks could disguise the stench of rotting cow, the smell of factories faced with privatisation and insolvency. In the foyer during the breaks, everyone was in disbelief at the axing of budgets. The state succumbed to the weight of expenditure for "emergency measures" – waging war and dealing with the sanctions – so sponsor-cows had to step in and aid the theatre if people were to warm their bones here.

The audience philosophised:

"Living in this country is like playing a role in theatre of the absurd."

"No, this is pure black comedy."

"Well, let me tell you, the director of this drama of ours is an *import*, a person with little relation to theatre, and from *the West*."

"And we're not the audience – we're just characters in *their* conflict on the world stage."

"But the antagonists. The villains."

"They've made us that, too."

"But they don't tell us who the protagonist is, who's in charge."

*

The worst year was 1992, and one day someone stuck a gun in the mouth of an actor with a Muslim name. An extraordinary meeting of the Association of Dramatic Artists was convened, and arguments flew:

"The media are being shut down."

"It's unbelievable what happens in this city."

"And no one writes about it."

"It wasn't always like this."

"We can't put on any more shows now."

"WHAT?!"

"The day may come when I say: I'm not going to perform any more. But it's not today. Nor will it be tomorrow or the day after."

The lead actor from the soap, still the biggest Yugoslav star, drew a map of his fame: "I've performed on mountaintops, on stages large and small, from Slovenia and Croatia all the way to Montenegro and Macedonia, and I'm going to keep at it. The politicians are dividing us,

our country is falling apart, and that's why we should cancel at least one evening performance," he proposed, rubbing the others' noses in his fame.

So as not to appear vain and jealous, his fellow actors approved in unison:

"That's right. The curtain will stay down!"

"Just for one day, to draw attention."

"Colleagues, please! If we all speak at the same time no one will hear anyone."

"But what about the time our prima ballerina was slapped by an actor who volunteered for the war, and none of us reacted?"

"He came back from the front for a rehearsal, and he landed her a slap."

"Who knows what he's been through – he might be traumatised."

"Meaning it's OK to slap a ballerina? Great."

"A *prima* ballerina."

"She up and resigned."

"That's a symbolic gesture for you!"

"We can't have any resignations. But not performing is still an option – under the condition that the curtain stays down in all the other theatres too."

"That's it, all out! General strike! Only a strike can dramatically change the state of things."

"Just one night. What's wrong with you people? It won't be the end of the world."

"Not for you. You're not even on that evening."

The female lead – the lawyer's partner from the soap opera – stood out among the dissonant voices:

"I have a sacred obligation to pursue my vocation, and as far as I'm concerned that dramatically changes the state of things."

The soap was discontinued. Social and political events were accelerating at such a pace that every episode would have been outdated by the time it was broadcast. The plot could no longer keep up with the rapid denouement in their socialist homeland, and that put a major dent in the female lead's household budget. She didn't support the male lead's strike, and the two of them got into an argument.

"But yes, we're duty bound to perform," a voice spoke out in support of the female lead.

A compromise emerged:

"But when we're not on stage, we should all still be in the theatres and sitting together."

"Do you want us all to hold hands too?"

The general managers of almost all the Belgrade theatres agreed to commit heresy, to break that theatrical commandment, cancel performances, grit their teeth and lower all of Serbia's plush red curtains to the boards, which might really have meant the world at the time. All of them except the general manager of the National Theatre, who snarled: "You've agreed not to work? We'll see about that!" One young actress, who had firmly resolved not to perform that evening, in spite of the general manager, handed in her resignation and booked a one-way intercontinental flight. The lead actor from the soap told her at their parting: "'If you want to punish an actor, don't let them perform,' they say. Now you've punished yourself, my dear. If nothing else, promise me you'll keep watching *Life's a Lottery* in your new country."

*

The worst year was 1995, and one day Dina, the future artistic director of the National Theatre in Belgrade, went with her mother to the Children's Theatre in Banja Luka. Dina was a skinny, buck-toothed, shock-headed child, but she came to develop her own understanding of culture amid the decay of the system. When the play ended, Dina longed to touch the blue snow scattered over the stage, which was actually crumbled polystyrene coloured with a navy marker. There she realised theatre could be something palpable, going there was a tactile experience, and you could build a relationship to it. She went up the steps onto wooden stage and felt the artificial snow, and no one stopped or rebuked her. Heartened by this, she confronted her mother and her ignorance of changes in society:

"No one alive says 'Comrade teacher' any more, Mum, you've got something mixed up."

*

The worst year was 1998, and the staff on their way to the National Theatre raised their heads, craned their necks and looked into the sky every day, trying to find the answer to the riddle: "Are they going to bomb us or not?" Then the announcement came that a big *Cinderella* opera was to be produced, and a world-famous Italian creator was coming to the theatre as costume designer; all the staff, as one, stopped raising their heads and looking into the sky because that production was the sign they had been waiting for: a foreigner was here, so there would be no bombing.

*

The worst year was 1999, and one day they noticed in the theatre that there was not a foreigner to be had for love or money. The staff did not have to raise their heads, strain their necks and look into the sky because the sudden, eerie and complete absence of foreigners was a sure sign that they would be bombed. The soap opera was being broadcast again, the bombardment had begun, and the lead actor was performing in *The Persians* by Aeschylus in front of the theatre on Republic Square – a drama that “depicts the inevitable collapse of a powerful and arrogant conqueror in battle with a small, proud and brave people that defends its country and freedom”.

“As far as I know, America has crushed many small, proud and brave countries, and it still exists,” the lead actor reasoned, but he still accepted the role of the Messenger, who in the best ancient tradition announces an impending downfall.

*

The worst year was 1991, and one day a woman gained the position of general manager for the first time in the 122-year history of the institution. She sneaked behind men busy with the emergency measures, i.e. dealing with the sanctions and preparing for war. The first female general manager of the National Theatre allowed the bearded leader of the nationalist opposition up onto the *first balcony of the Serbian Revolution*, on the building. She opened the door of the theatre for him, though she herself remained in the background. She made sure he was escorted through the corridors, could ascend the balcony, put his hands on the baluster and shout:

“Serbia! May God bring us the dawn of freedom here in our homeland. Let us recall the words of our pan-Serbian wise man, Bishop Njegoš: ‘Everyone is born to die once.’ Storm the Bastille of the state broadcaster RTS!”

Et cetera. The leader on the balcony observed the para-theatre of the mass meeting: his audience – the people – and his special audience made up of regular and plain-clothes police. A voice called out from the crowd:

“It’s unheard of. A woman takes over the theatre and helps *you* climb up there and yell at us like this?” but the leader was too high to hear.

“In all the years of Communist terror, this balcony never shone like at our rally here against the Red Star,” the leader now intoned, gripping the baluster.

Water cannons and tear gas dispersed the crowd on Republic Square, and people fled, but they soon gathered back to study the lists of performances on the repertoire.

*

During the years of revolution and liberation struggle after victory in the Second World War, the balcony of the National Theatre was adorned with a huge curtain embroidered with the slogan LONG LIVE 27 MARCH. Marshal Tito stood and spoke to the people:

“Comrades and citizens, I did not imagine I would be speaking here at this glorious assembly. But, since this is a great day, the anniversary of that historical turning point in the darkest era when German fascism had overwhelmed almost all of Europe, a historic day when, here on the streets of Belgrade, the people of Serbia, the people of the other parts of Yugoslavia, Croatia, Slovenia and others resisted and said *NO: Better a war than a pact!* That turnabout occurred on 27 March 1941 because the people, from below, wanted it.

IT IS NOT A MATTER OF INDIVIDUALS, OR OF A SMALL GROUP. IT IS A MATTER OF THE WHOLE PEOPLE.”

In the early nineties, the worst years, a turnabout occurred – because some individuals and small groups wanted it. War and national disintegration, imposed from above, became the matter of the entire people. Do individuals know, do small groups know, does the people know what the National Theatre is?

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL THEATER (1)

Narodno pozorište (National Theatre) is the debut album of the Serbian rock supergroup Familija released in 1995 by the record label PGP RTS. The styles range from electronic and ambient music (downtempo), through pop/rock to ska, with echoes of neofolk and post-rock.

The album includes the hits “I Love Sex” and “Baltazar”.

After *Narodno pozorište*, Familija released the album *Seljačka buna* (Peasant Revolt) on the label Komuna in 1997.

THE GLOW OF A PAST LIFE

“Consider me to be like Irene the Cursed,”¹ the general manager said to Dina. The secretary-cum-tea lady brought two glasses of tomato juice into the office and, as she left, the vibrations of her impious steps made the icon of Saint Petka fall off the general manager’s desk; Dina bent down, picked it up and returned it to its place. For the suspicious general manager, this served as an indication of the speed with which this likely new artistic director would stab her in the back. “It won’t be on the spot,” she thought.

Dina took the general manager’s first phone call as she was coming out of the Yugoslav Film Archive after watching Bertolucci’s *1900*, in which she unwittingly rediscovered some older men she knew, in the figure played by Burt Lancaster. The man hangs himself in the barn, weary of life when he realises that his penis, which has been at his service for decades, along with the large estate, no longer supports an erection, not even when he commands a fourteen-year-old maid to fondle it. While she was watching the epic, Dina managed not to think about young Narcissus, whom she had known for barely a month, for a record length of time, seeing as old men were on her mind. And then the general manager’s call forced her to think about her own future.

“I need you to come straight away, my dear... No, not in half an hour – now! The sooner the better. For me, the theatre... and you.”

Before Dina knew it, she was sitting opposite that woman as big as a haystack, who had donned something in between a cape, coat, dress, cloak, clown suit and overalls. Whatever it was meant to be, it was black. She wore a ring with a large precious stone on every finger except her thumb, and she didn’t look Dina in the eyes as she spoke, but peered at her face blankly. She only had the cognitive energy to process one impulse – her own words. Her expression changed solely in tune with the effect they had on her, the speaker herself.

“I’ve devoted myself entirely to the National Theatre. It’s bizarre and fascinating here.”

“And... difficult?”

“There are much harder jobs than running the National Theatre. And you... if you decide to follow my lead, you’ll have to immure yourself like me, like Irene, a female sacrifice... You have to incorporate your body, mind and – yes – even your libido into this building,” the general manager declared and gazed around as if disoriented. She knew, rationally, that she was much

¹ Irene Kantakouzene (1400–57), ruler of Serbia. Legends credit her with building several fortresses. She is said to have been ruthless with her subjects.

smaller than the theatre she claimed to have incorporated herself into, but she had the awkward feeling that her body was bulkier than the building.

“I have to think it over.”

“No you don’t. There are hundreds of people in this city who would *kill* for this position. If you can be Richard III or a Russian anarchist in the theatre, why can’t you be the artistic director? Get back to me by tomorrow evening.”

Dina said nothing. Only now, at the age of thirty, was she learning to listen.

“*Them*, it’s always *them* against *us*, against me and you, and that’s how it’s always been. The Theatre’s management is mired in corruption. But if you and I devote ourselves to each other and to the theatre, my dear, if we just let go and allow ourselves to be drawn in, we can break *their* cycle of advantage. We can create new concepts that will make *them* cringe with envy, so that one day everything will be based on effort and merit. You DESERVE this.”

The general manager avoided saying what Dina’s merit actually was. But the truth is that Dina found the argument convincing. As long as she could remember, she had diligently studied, done exercises and assignments, excelled at art and arithmetic, vaulted and jumped in PE, copied inorganic chemistry formulae, as well as being exemplary in her behaviour. Ever since she discovered fiction as a teenager, and the possibility of authorial control over it, she worked endlessly on phrases and commas, like some people devote their time to others around them. And now she felt that all her effort, the lack of sleep and her neglecting of family and friends had all paid off and that it was she – of all those who put a similar amount of effort and work into the theatre but, as the general manager now explained, had nothing exceptional – who would be propelled into the centre of public attention; she didn’t just like to deal with the lives of others, through gossip and writing, but enjoyed it when others dealt with hers. She felt that if she didn’t seize this opportunity now, no one would ever offer her anything like it again and she would never have that experience. And she lived on bizarre experiences.

The general manager’s phone rang, and Dina tried to leave the office to the rhythm of the ring tone *I’m your biggest fan, I’ll follow you until you like me, pa-pa, pa-pa-razzi* – without toppling the icon.

“Yes, good fellow, she’s still here with me... Yes, she’s all but agreed... You’ve got something about her, you say? Of course. Up you come then,” the general manager bellowed into the phone.

Dina went out onto the square of loose slabs and found a path through the scattered hazards of construction material and wire fences, which blocked access to the nearby streets. The renovation of Republic Square was long over schedule. She couldn’t think calmly about

what she had just been offered because the low ebb of her bank account was pushing her to incorporate herself into the building so she could settle her debts, pay all her bills and keep on buying organic food and cosmetics; but her hopes and plans for her vocation were pulling her away from such incorporation. Instead of making a decision, and so as to stay sane in that battle between vanity and anxiety, Dina rang her friend Dica. Craning her neck to press the mobile against her shoulder, because she kept forgetting to buy earphones, she told Dica all about her crazy msg texting with young Narcissus the previous weekend – before the general manager asked her if she would like to be her artistic director.

“I wrote to him now after a whole day of resisting the temptation, and asked him, like, ‘Got any plans for tonight?’ He tells me he’s going to a concert in Cetinjska Street, and I’m like: ‘OK. But how can it be that it’s me who has to call? This is the fifth time in a row.’ You know, Dica, I really feel I’m too demanding for him and that he wants to do other things, which is fine, and I write him what, and I know what you’re going to say, and I think the same: ‘How is it bloody fine, when it’s not?’ Why the hell am I lying, why did I tell the general manager I had to think it over when I know I’m going to let myself be immured... That’s right, she asked me to be the artistic director at the National Theatre, holy shit, just imagine... never mind, we’ll talk about that later, let me finish the bit about young Narcissus; but it’s true, I can hardly wait for everyone to read about my appointment, and I love to imagine the golden couple of our theatre, of our age – the actress not employed at the National Theatre and the dissident director – when they hear of the decision to give me, me of all people, what was withheld from them. Anyway, I wrote to him: “Now I’m thinking that if you don’t want us to see each other, just say it, and it won’t be the end of the world,” so I know I’m lying, Dica, I know it’s the end of the world, such an apocalypse that I’m going to become part of that hulking great building with the damned general manager... No, she said herself that she was cursed. I’m going to let them wall me up, with no opening for my eyes, nose and mouth, in one of the side walls... Just a sec, I’m putting you on loud, and now I’ll just read it to you, him-me-him-me style:

“It’s not that I don’t want to see you – That’s sure what it feels like – I’m just low on energy – Where does that leave me? – I need to see more people to motivate myself – Because I’m such a drag? – It’s not that – I’m just trying to work things out – OK – I’m so pissed off – I didn’t want to argue about this on the go, and yes, I still need to see more people – Without me around? – Depends, it’s got nothing to do with you – Let’s call it quits then – There’s no point seeing each other any more, I don’t get you one bit, and you don’t understand me, I’m going to block you, not even my mother throws me off track like this.”

With superhuman effort, Dica managed to halt Dina's rant about young Narcissus. With great focus and a knowledge of the beyond, she said: "Enough, Dina. Stop talking, reading aloud or whatever you're doing. I opened a Celtic cross while you were rambling, but it's clear to me even without it. The poles of your life are..." and here she made a pregnant pause before continuing: "Creativity and loneliness. Now two people have turned up – the general manager and Narcissus – who you MUST emancipate yourself from. Now listen carefully: you'll also choose the type of mother to emancipate yourself from. It can be the general manager, but it can also be something subtle and inanimate. It's for you to decide. He'll tear you away from loneliness, she from creativity. If you want my advice: don't contact either of them any more."

"I don't think you really paid attention, Dica. You were busy with the tarot. In the end, he sent me 1975's "Sincerity is Scary", and I didn't react. Oh, sorry, I have to finish, the general manager is on the line," and Dina took the call.

All this time, the general manager had been talking in her office with the Head of Security, Risk Prevention and Special Situations, whom the staff dubbed "Mr Security". The general manager was convinced of a positive outcome. She was sure that one of the *seven brothers' heads* that Despotess Irene incorporated into Smederevo Fortress after they refused to labour for her – one of the heads that was ritually installed in the theatre building every year on Theatre Day – would be Dina's. Mr Security delivered her the information he had obtained.

"The person we want to hire for the position of Artistic Director of Drama for the Central Stage, Dina Š., has been thoroughly vetted. Two insights would seem to stand out, Madam: firstly, that she loves women, and secondly that she is an agent of the European Union. I immediately asked the service if they had hard-and-fast evidence. They said they did and handed me this," Mr Security explained and placed a document on the general manager's desk, which was laden with papers and flowers, and then continued his report.

Mr Security was a heavily built man with a cigarette holder between his lips, his fringe neatly slicked forward, and in a dark Hugo Boss suit. Just twenty-three minutes earlier, he had been standing at the main entrance chatting with outward casualness about the Premier League results with several junior staff: the doorman, the ticket seller and two security guards. Despite his nonchalance, he was observing the movements of a bowlegged female figure in jeans and an adidas tracksuit top, who was laughing and talking loud on the phone: Dina. When she disappeared from his sight, he zipped down the front steps and on towards the building site of Republic Square, but he could no longer see her anywhere. He glanced back at the theatre, and in one of the large upper windows leading to the balcony he thought he saw a shape vanish

behind a curtain. He looked again, but the shape was gone; the lights were off – unusual for the theatre in the evening.

“The person under observation left the building twenty-five minutes ago, and I saw her in the flesh for the first time. I can tell you she’s much more photogenic than what I’ve seen so far, and although she’s supposed to be into women, she herself smells like one. She walks like a woman, she has that deliberate, discerning feminine step, and a gentle smile. And in terms of the West, Dina Š. is motivated exclusively by personal benefit.”

Mr Security saw the West as an amalgam of identity politics, feminism, capitalism, war and hypocrisy. The benefits that the future artistic director derived there were, firstly, the opportunity to experiment in her dramaturgy, and secondly, to use the money from that work to buy clothes in chains such as COS, Uniqlo and & Other Stories.

“Here are a few photos of Dina wearing items of the brands mentioned. And she always has this... thermos of coffee, tea or water with her. She lets it all hang out – that’s Europe for you. We are an institution with a neglected system of values, and she...”

At that, the general manager raised a threatening finger fused with amethyst and held it up to the man’s nose because she would not let her theatre be talked about like that. Mr Security corrected his statement:

“What I mean is, she should be given the opportunity to present a play on Republic Square, you know?”

“You forget that the Square is having major works done.”

“I don’t mean literally now, but metaphorically – she should be given the opportunity of an open-air production.”

“What they call a *site-specific performance*.”

“Whatever. Firstly, she undoubtedly has intellectual potential, and secondly, she radiates joy; though malicious tongues claim she’s just a protégée of ambitious parents, a sugar daddy or a political godfather.”

“She was born for the position. We can learn from her what it means to be a seeker.”

The general manager wanted everyone around her to believe as much as she did that Dina was her own, perfect choice. The truth is that she had no choice because all the other young and successful candidates, whom she asked before Dina, turned her down.

“I’m going to call her now, and you can tell her why she should work with us.”

“Hello?” Dina crooned.

This is the tack Mr Security adopted to persuade her:

“Can you hear me, kid?”

An *uh-huh* came from the general manager's phone.

"Listen to me: you had two blessings in life. Firstly, that I didn't run into you in the forest – got that? And secondly, that you work in the creative sector and have the chance to gild your neuroses."

Silence. Only the sounds of the traffic around Dina could be heard.

"Have you ever been scared? Frightened?"

"I'm frightened now, to tell the truth. What was that about running into you in the forest?"

"It's what they call hyperbole, kid."

"So, if I don't accept... I shouldn't go hiking?"

"OK, we're done."

"See you soon, my dear. Hugs and kisses," the general manager added.

"Just one more thing: you're damn hot for a lesbian, you know."

Mr Security checked the call was over and Dina was no longer listening, and then he gave the general manager some advice on handling Dina:

"You mustn't be too full-on and institutionalise her because then she gets kind of panicky, and she could feel overloaded and withdraw."

Mr Security treated people as objects, seldom as subjects and individuals, although love was an awfully dominant thing in his life. It all began when he was given a copious dose of it in mountainous Montenegro from his great-grandmother, grandmother and mother, who sang him lullabies in breaks from their hard work; in those songs, accompanied by a one-string fiddle, he was a baby and a hero in one. That's why he had a soft spot for the narrative monologue that the general manager also preferred, though he would have been even happier if she spoke in epic decasyllabic metre; his female progenitors had imparted him a weakness for strong women that continued far into middle age. She held out her hand, and he kissed the jade ring on her finger.

Dina arrived at the art space and club Kvaka 22² with her nerves frayed by these two phone calls. She pretended to be surprised that her legs had taken her there all by themselves, without the influence of her brain, which was busy analysing her correspondence with Narcissus and the information gathered about her by the secret service. It was in that club that she had met the young man one month earlier. If you went to places like this, you would now see her

² A *kvaka* is a doorknob, door handle, latch or, figuratively, a catch. The building belonged to the Yugoslav army but was later abandoned. When squatters moved in and started renovating, they allegedly counted a total of twenty-two doorknobs; *Kvaka 22* is also the title of the translation of Joseph Heller's famous novel *Catch-22*.

scanning Kvaka's "living room" from the door in search of Narcissus, but you are the audience of the National Theatre and have little time to frequent the city's independent culture locations.

"I've never been on the balcony of the National Theatre," Dina said with a tipsy drawl, sitting on a stool and leaning against the railing of Kvaka 22's terrace. Narcissus was one of a group of young enthusiasts who squatted the premisses, which officially belonged to the army. They declared entertainment the most desirable form of human sociability and turned the address into one of Belgrade's most exciting club-galleries.

"Haven't you?" Narcissus nodded with a smirk, and a cute dimple formed on his cheek, revealing a certain satisfaction that there were things Dina still hadn't experienced, though she was older and from the world of theatre. In a nervous rhythm, they put their drinks down on the railing, picked them up again and sipped them even faster: she gin and tonic, because a nutritionist recommended she only consume clear beverages, and he an affordable lager. Dina pretended they didn't break up the previous weekend, and Narcissus pretended they'd never been together. The terrace of Kvaka 22 where they were sitting was an anti-balcony of the National Theatre. It enticed you to sit and spend time there; it didn't face the street or, Heaven forbid, Republic Square, but the inner courtyards between several buildings. Houseleek, aloe and African violets thrived in massive terracotta pots on the terrace, which was a shared, communal space.

Ten minutes later, Dina, was smooching with a waiter two years younger than Narcissus in the toilet, its walls plastered with stickers. She wanted to prove to herself that she could do it. All young people in this city are waiters on the side unless they're Russian immigrants or fourth-generation natives of downtown Belgrade, whose chutzpah puts them above this kind of work. Narcissus was also looking for a job in that field. Dina kept her eyes open – she felt it wasn't her in that toilet, it wasn't her in her body either, and she rivetted her gaze on a sticker with just one word: D E A D.

Young Narcissus was still out on the terrace in a little crowd of other young people, and he didn't care who Dina was in the bathroom with or how old that person was. He told them the story about how he went to the supermarket to buy some milk and lost his driver's license, so he couldn't drive the band on a mini-tour to Zagreb. "I just bloody hung around at home and listened to 'Borderline' all weekend. First the synths, then the percussion, then the vocals, and

so on... Bro, no mix or producer can hide the fact that we live in an era of slow decay, of music and everything else.”

“How sweet and easy it would be if I were really a lesbian, as the service sees it,” Dina thought, and just as she was going back out onto the terrace her eye caught on a doll-head for wigs impaled on a metal rod. And for a moment, after her fourth gin and tonic, she no longer knew where she was. She could have been in one of the National Theatre’s costume workshops, where many polystyrene heads like this were used for storing wigs, checking the shape of hats or making headgear, or she could have been on the terrace where this one head served as a terrifying decoration. Wherever she was, it announced that she would be decapitated and her head mounted on the building on Republic Square as a decoration.

“I’m to be the artistic director of the national theatre,” drunken Dina heard her voice speak these words, but she didn’t know if they were meant for young Narcissus, the even younger waiter, herself, her parents, the golden couple – the non-employed actress and the dissident director – or the entire talking shop of the theatre.

“What are you on about?” young Narcissus drew attention to himself again and returned Dina to reality. As a follower of opposition-minded and influential Twitter accounts, Narcissus couldn’t be happy for her. Maybe he saw something she didn’t, and he muttered:

“Talk about ambitious! It’s like you don’t care what could happen.”

One of his female friends, amused by Dina’s very idea that a relationship with Narcissus might be possible, defended her:

“Come on, what can happen? She worked, worked and worked... and finally struck lucky.”

“Yeah, but no one there cares about her,” young Narcissus pretended to be smart.

“And I suppose you do?” the even younger waiter butted in.

“Tell me, are you from Pančevo?”

“No mate, why?”

“Just pretending it was important,” which caused a cackle of laughter. “I’m telling you, they’ve just put you here to be a sacrifice.”

“What sacrifice?!”

“Like a sacrificial lamb. They just want to put you here as a kind of dummy in a training exercise. In case it hots up.”

“What’s going to hot up?” Dina was bursting to know.

“When the authorities bring all the institutions into line.”

“Every damn government does that,” an older partner from his band chipped in, remembering other regimes the country had seen.

Narcissus respected the older musicians, but now he chose to torment Dina a bit more:

“Yes, but if Dina takes the job she’ll enter direct confrontation with the Political – the opposition – and with its narrative. It was all on Instagram: about the government extending its reach and the institutions falling one by one.”

“Just a training exercise, bro, sure thing,” someone from his circle agreed.

“You could still have applied at the theatre,” Narcissus’s likeable friend suggested.

“Are you kidding? There are no applications. All power lies with the general manager – she’s the one who appoints people and gives them legitimacy,” Dina tried to justify herself.

“At the same time, there’s the option of not getting involved, not accepting the job, because things like that can flip at any time and have very nasty consequences,” Narcissus tried to seem uncompromising.

“Just like there was the option of not getting involved with you.”

Dina was afraid her brave front could collapse under the desire to have Narcissus in her bed that night. Now she abandoned that argument and focussed on chatting up the waiter, whom she steered from the terrace into the living room.

He knew Dina’s work and praised it:

“Your play is wicked, I’d go and see it again,” but the same didn’t apply to Dina, whom he would never contact again after that evening. Nor she him. The episode that had begun with kissing drew to a close.

Dina studied the large-format drawing that hung near the entrance. The artist had reproduced private photographs of a civil engineer, one of the great builders of postwar Yugoslavia. It showed a group of people holidaying at the Adriatic in the late 1940s. The men and women were playfully pushing and hugging each other; they were all dressed and buttoned up, despite being at the beach, but it was a different era, the years of revolution and liberation, and none of them were alone; they had seen the horrors of the twentieth century, survived them, and were building a world that the young people now dancing to a house remix of “Bella Ciao” in Kvaka’s living room didn’t get to know. Letters had been cut out and pasted onto the protective glass over the drawing to make up a message, and Dina was trying to memorise it.

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She felt faint due to her chronically low blood pressure, now combined with abundant oestrogen at the peak of her period, and also because she had imbibed far more clear liquor than recommended. Before passing out, she repeated:

*This collective will never again allow
Injustice, hypocrisy, lies, humiliation and hatred*

Dina soon came to, but she stayed lying on the floor with her eyes closed. She had a vision of a perfect repertoire that would inherit the classics and myths, which have always explained the human condition, everything that has happened to people and all that will happen to them in future, including things like her fainting, but it would also be a repertoire that staged contemporary plays telling stories about the complex present with multiple narrative strands. She saw the National Theatre transformed into an institution similar to Kvaka 22, only with much better structural and financial support, and not based on exploitation. She saw the repertoire tapping into the wellspring of an unknown Yugoslav engineer, and the National Theatre becoming what it should be: a people's *agora*.

Worried Narcissus watched the girls from his circle help Dina up off the floor, give her a gentle slap and bring her sugar water, but he didn't help them. He knew he would stay friends with this loose cannon of a woman who was about to sell her soul, as he managed to do with each and every one of his ex-girlfriends; after all, he had Venus in transit in Sagittarius, which made it all the same to him; and he knew that nothing, not even being friends after a breakup, could be hard for him in this earthly life. It was all a compact whole: synths, percussion, him, his ex-girlfriends, the synth pedals he couldn't afford yet, the houseleek from this terrace, a collection of special stones, the ocean he hadn't seen yet, his cat, Zoran, his mum who brought home-made cake to Belgrade every birthday, and his grandmother, who, for pocket money, made him promise to finish his degree in tourism, which logically he would never go into, nights when he unwisely mixed LSD and ecstasy, and was one great, all-encompassing perfection; and if you love that person (well, not exactly capital-L love, but you're fond of them,

you wish them no harm), that person who's just come round and is heaping kisses on the girls who helped her, and who now squeaks: "I'm going to be the artistic director at the National Theatre, it's true" – then she loves you. And there's nothing more you can say about that.

"I love you," Narcissus said to Dina as he seated her in a taxi and waved.

"I love you too, I do."

Then her head spun once more from that ultimate declaration of love and the way the driver accelerated up to intersections.

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