

Drago Jančar

**smrt**  
**pri mariji snežni**

Novele

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**Drago Jančar (1948–)**

Jančar is one of the most outstanding prose writers of the post-World War II generation. A child of the television age, he writes for that medium as well as for the cinema. His prose is straightforward and powerful, involved with the realities of Slovene and Yugoslav life of the 1970s, the last Tito decade, and the 1980s, the first post-Tito decade. His novel *Posmehljivo poželenje* (1993, "Laughable Desiring") has recently been translated into English. The following is the title piece of his short story collection *Smrt pri Mariji Snežni* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1985); the translation is from *Slavic and East European Arts* 2/2 (1984): 99-108.

## Smrt pri Mariji Snežni

*V velikem in strašnem letu 1918* bi mladi zdravnik Aleksej Vasiljevič Turbin kmalu izgubil življenje samo zato, ker je pozabil sneti častniško kokardo s kučme. O tem pripoveduje Mihail Bulgákov na nekem mestu v svojem romanu *Bela garda*. *Obstaja sila, ki nas včasih premami, da pogledamo z roba prepada navzdol, ki nas vleče v praznino*, pravi pisatelj. In tako njegov junak Turbin s kokardo, smrtnim znamenjem na čelu, stopi deset korakov predaleč v Vladimirovo ulico, namesto na Aleksejev klanec. V tem hipu se s Kreščatika, zavitega v daljno zmrznjeno meglico, spustijo proti njemu sivkasti ljudje v vojaških plaščih. Mladega zdravnika prešine nora misel, da bi zaigral miroljubnega državljana. Toda na obrazu vojaka, ki stoji pred njim, se pokaže najprej osuplost, hip zatem pa nerazumljivo, zlovešče veselje. *Za vraga, zakliče proti drugemu, ki medtem priteče in potegne zaklep, poglej, častnik*. Turbin ničesar ne razume, vendar se v hipu spremeni v divjad z volčjimi nagoni. Začne se strašen beg. Vsa ulica kriči in spodbuja zasledovalce, naj pobijejo častnika. Turbin enega od zasledovalcev ustrelj. Toda pregon ne jenja. Zadene ga krogla. Nazadnje ostane brez sape in upanja. Zadnjo kroglo prihrani zase. Ustreliti se hoče. *Zgoditi se ni moglo nič več... tedaj jo je zagledal kot v čudežu ob črnem, z mahom poraslem zidu*. Ko je torej slehernega upanja konec, ko se hoče pokončati, ga *Rešiteljica*, kakor pisatelj imenuje nenadno žensko prikazen, skrije na svojem domu. Videti je, da bo od rane, ki jo je napravila krogla, umrl, toda *v njene čudežne roke odtekla bolečina iz njegove glave*. Ranjenega zdravnika in častnika carske vojske skrivaj odpeljejo na njegov dom, toda zdravje se mu spet poslabša. Rani se pridruži tifusna mrzlica. Zdravnik ugotovi, da je upanja zelo malo. *Vsem je bilo pač povsem jasno, da je to pomenilo, da ni nikakršnega upanja*. Turbin umira. In še tretjič ga usoda, ki ga po svoji nedoumljivi pameti spravlja na rob smrti, odreši. Njegova sestra Jelena prižge svečo pred ikono Matere božje in poklekne prednjo. Plamen je vztrepetal. *Dolg žarek se je kot veriga podaljšal prav do Jeleninih oči. Tedaj so njene izgubljene oči razločno videle, da so se na obrazu, ki ga je obrobljala zlata tkanina, premaknile ustnice, oči pa so postale tako čudne, da se ji je od strahu in opojnega veselja skrčilo srce. Spustila se je na tla in ni se več ganila*.

V naslednjih dneh se Turbin izkoplje iz krize. V življenej se obudi z voščenim obrazom, z globokimi gubami ob ustnah in z zresnjenimi očmi.

## Death at Mary-of-the-Snows

In that great and terrible year of 1918, the young doctor Aleksei Vasilevich Turbin almost lost his life just because he forgot to take off the officer's cockades from his fur hat. Mikhail Bulgakov talks about this somewhere in his novel, *The White Guard*: "A force exists which sometimes lures us to look down from the edge of the abyss that pulls us down into emptiness," the writer wrote. And so his hero Turbin, with the cockades, that fatal symbol on his forehead, stepped ten paces too far into Vladimir Street, instead of up Alekseyev Hill. At that moment greyish people in soldier's overcoats came down toward him from Kreščatik Street, enwrapped in a distant, icy mist. A crazy thought came to the young doctor's mind, to feign a peace-loving citizen. But on the face of the soldier standing before him, there first appeared surprise, and an instant afterwards, an unintelligible, ominous joy. "To hell," he called to his companion, who in the meantime came running and cocked his rifle, "Look, an officer." Turbin understood nothing, but in an instant changed into an animal with a wolf's instincts. A terrible flight began. The whole street shouted and encouraged the pursuers to kill "the officer." Turbin shot one of them. But the chase did not end. A bullet hit him. Finally, he was out of breath and hope. He saved the last bullet for himself. He wanted to kill himself. "Nothing more could happen... Then like in a miracle, he saw her standing near a black wall, overgrown with moss." Thus, when he was at the end of all hope, when he wanted to put a bullet through his head, "a Savior," as a writer would call an unexpected apparition, hid him in her house. It seemed that he would die from the wound the bullet had made, but "the pain in his head disappeared in her miraculous hands." She secretly took the wounded doctor and officer in the Tsarist army to his house, but his health again worsened. Typhoid fever resulted from the wound. The doctor realized that he had very little hope left. "It was very clear to everyone that that meant he had absolutely no hope." Turbin was dying. But fate, which led him to the brink of death with its incomprehensible intelligence, saved him a third time. His sister Jelena lit a candle before the icon of the Mother of God and knelt before it. "The flame trembled. Like a chain, a long ray grew longer stretching all the way to Jelena's eyes. Then her astonished eyes distinctly saw that the lips on the face, edged with good fabric, moved, and the eyes became so strange that Yelena's heart contracted from fright and intoxicated joy. She collapsed on the floor and no longer moved."

During the following days Turbin pulled himself out of the crisis. He came back to life with a waxed face, with deep wrinkles around his lips and

Mladi častnik carske vojske bi moral umreti na strašnem begu pred zasledovalci, pred smrtjo in vrnil se je v življenje. Kdor smrti ubeži, ta tega ne pozabi. Za vse življenje ostane zaznamovan z njeno senco, z voščnim obrazom in zresnjenimi očmi.

Sedemindvajset let pozneje se tisoče in tisoče kilometrov proč, v nekem evropskem zakotju, ki ga ne najdeš na nobenem resnejšem zemljevidu, dokonča neka druga življenjska zgodba. V velikem in strašnem letu 1945 se nenadoma in po nepredvidljivem, za ubog človeški razum nedoumljivem spletu okoliščin osnovna situacija obnovi. Tu je ruski zdravnik, nekdanji častnik carske vojske, ki se zdaj imenuje Vladimir Semjonov, tu je bližajoča se vojska v sivih plaščih in tu je Mati božja. Vladimir Semjonov je zaznamovan z neko smrtjo, ki ji je nekoč ubežal. Pred nekom se skuša skriti in neki davni čudežni rešitvi je hvaležen. Nekaj let pred tem je postavil blizu svojega doma kapelico in jo posvetil Njej, v »večno zahvalo«. Z votlim in brezumnim pogledom išče na njenem obrazu znamenje. Ali terja novo milost, novo rešitev na svojem nenehnem begu? Ali pa samo skuša razumeti božji račun, po katerem je moral biti nekoč odrešen zato, da bi se toliko let pozneje znašel v istem brezupnem položaju. In nemara je resnična zgodba, ki sledi, izpisana v življenje Vladimira Semjonova zgolj zato, da bi jo igriva volja usode v drugem kraju, drugem času in med drugimi ljudmi zabeležila kot drugačno verzijo in drugačen izhod iz nekega brezupnega položaja.

Spomladi leta 1931 večkrat pride v kraje ob Muri neznanec, ki zbudi pozornost s svojo nenavadno jezikovno mešanico ruskih, nemških in slovenskih besed. Najpogosteje se ustavlja pri Mariji Snežni in nekoč tamkajšnjemu cerkovniku s skopimi besedami pove, da je zdravnik. Zanima se, kje bi lahko odprl ordinacijo. Mežnar mu svetuje kakšno večje mesto, toda neznanec z resnim obrazom, na katerem ne takrat ne pozneje cerkovnik ne najde sledu smehljaja, odgovori, da ga mesto ne zanima. Na deželi hoče delati in ko cerkovnik šaljivo pripomni: Bogu za hrbtom? mu trezno in rezko odgovori: Noben kraj ni Bogu za hrbtom. Ob naslednjem prihodu čudnega neznanca cerkovniku ne uide, da ga močno zanima velik Marijin portret v oltarju. Z nekoliko moške zadrege, znane v teh krajih, kadar gre za verske reči, mu cerkovnik pripoveduje, da se Marija Snežna tako imenuje zato, ker se je ob gradnji Marijine cerkve nekje v Italiji zgodil čudež. Neznanec ga pozorno posluša, to si cerkovnik dobro zapomni. Ne

somber eyes. The young officer of the Tsarist Army should have died in that terrible flight from his pursuers, from death, but he came back to life. One who escapes death does not forget that. And all his life he remained marked by its shadow, with a waxed face and somber eyes.

Twenty-seven years later, thousands and thousands of kilometers from there, in one European nook, which you could not find on a geographical map of any importance, another life story was coming to an end. In that great and terrible year of 1945, suddenly and after an unpredictable and for the human mind a completely incomprehensible set of circumstances, the basic situation repeated itself. Here was a Russian doctor a former officer of the Tsarist Army, who now was named Vladimir Semyonov; here were soldiers in grey overcoats, who were drawing near; and here was the Mother of God. Vladimir Semyonov was marked with death which he had once evaded. He tried to hide from it and was grateful to some past miraculous salvation. Several years before this he had erected a little chapel near his house and had dedicated it to Her, for "eternal gratitude." Now he searched for the significance in her face with sunken eyes and frantic look. Was he searching for another mercy, a new salvation in his ceaseless flight? Or, was he only trying to comprehend God's calculations, through which he once had had to be saved so that, so many years later, he could find himself in the same hopeless position? And perhaps the story that follows is true, written into the life of Vladimir Semyonov just so that the whim of fate, prone to play would record it again in another place, in another time and between other people, as another version and another way out of a hopeless position.

In the spring of the year 1931, a stranger, who caught our attention by his unusual mixture of Russian, German, and Slovenian words, came several times into the River Mura area. He stopped most often at Mary-of-the-Snows and, stingy with words, said to the local sexton that he was a doctor. He wanted to know where he could open up an office. The bell-ringer advised him to find some bigger place, but the stranger, with a serious face on which the sexton, neither then nor later, ever found a trace of a smile, said that the town did not interest him. He wanted to work on earth, and when the sexton humorously remarked: In a God-forsaken place? he answered him soberly and sharply: Not one spot is God-forsaken. At the next appearance of the strange man, it did not escape the sexton's eyes that the great portrait of Mary at the altar interested him. With something of the masculine embarrassment known in those parts when religious things were in question, the sexton related to him that she was called Mary-of-the-Snows because during the building of Mary's church a miracle took place somewhere in Italy. The stranger listened to him

spomni se več, katerega leta se je zgodil čudež, toda bilo je avgusta in nenadoma je začelo snežiti. To je pač legenda, reče cerkovnik, oni pa z vso resnostjo odkima in zatrdi, da se je kaj takega prav zagotovo zgodilo. Potem ga vse poletje ni blizu, toda jeseni, nekateri menijo, da konec septembra, jeseni pripelje iz Maribora avto, naložen s kovčki in skrbno povezanimi zavoji. Plavolasi ruski zdravnik, srednjih let, drobne postave, Vladimir Semjonov po imenu, ki je kmalu znano daleč naokoli, odpre v trgovčevi hiši ordinacijo splošne prakse. Ne mine leto in molčeči doktor postane najbolj priljubljen človek daleč naokoli. Molče se dotika njihovih ran in jih obvezuje. Diha vonj prepotenih teles, zadah po žganju in kislem vinu iz njihovih ust. Brez zlovoljnega nemira, značilnega za dohtarje, se ukvarja z njihovimi vročicami in strahovi. Kadar govorijo o njem, jim kmalu zmanjka snovi in besed. Še zmeraj o tem resnem človeku s temnim obrazom ne vedo ničesar. Jezik že obvlada, toda z ljudmi v svoji mehki slovenščini le redkokdaj spregovori več, kot je nujno potrebno. K mašam ne hodi, a vendar ga v samotnih urah pogosto vidijo pred oltarjem Marije Snežne. V prvih letih občasno prihajajo k njemu ljudje iz mesta, med njimi visoka, lepa ženska. Ponoči je slišati izza oken rusko govornico, ki se včasih dvigne v prerekanje. Potem obiski poenjajo in tudi Vladimir Semjonov vse redkeje hodi v mesto. Naslednja leta je vse bolj sam. V letih 36 ali 37 kupi na dražbi veliko tovarnarjevo hišo in vanjo spravi različne stare kose pohištva. Spodnje prostore preuredi v ordinacijo. S posebno pozornostjo se začne ukvarjati z boleznimi pljuč in dihalnih organov. Ponoči gori luč v njegovih oknih, pogosto ga vidijo, kako že ob prvem lahnem svitanju sloni na balkonu in molče opazuje vozove, ki se ustavljajo na njegovem dvorišču. Kmetje z otrplimi prsti v hladnem jutru popravljajo deke na svojih kolenih in z volnenimi ogrinjali zavijajo bolnike. Temu redkobesednemu in čudnemu človeku predajajo v roke svoje bolečine in bolezni z otroško zaupljivostjo. Nemara Vladimir Semjonov vidi v njihovih pogledih mešanico ponižnosti in temne mužikovske zvitosti, nemara opaža njihovo zvedavost, ko stopajo v hišo. A vse kaže, a ga ti ljudje ne zanimajo. Skrbno se ukvarja z njihovimi tegobami, ne pa z njimi. Njega zanima nekaj drugega. Zanimajo ga novice, ki jih prinašajo časopisi in v njegovi hiši vse pogosteje hrešči radio. Toda preden se zvrstijo dogodki, ki se naglo približujejo, opravi dejanje, ki se naglo raznese naokrog. Pozimi 1938 neki viničarski vdovi reši edinega sina pred gotovo smrtjo. Pljučnica je v teh časih in krajih bolezen, ki precej zanesljivo

attentively, that the sexton remembered well. He no longer recalled the year the miracle occurred, but it was in August and it suddenly began to snow. But that's a legend, the sexton said, and the stranger, deadly serious, shook his head and confirmed that something completely like that had definitely happened. Then he did not appear the whole summer, but in the fall, some thought at the end of September, a car arrived from Maribor, loaded with trunks and carefully wrapped parcels. The blonde Russian doctor, middle-aged, of short build, by the name of Vladimir Semyonov, who soon became known far and wide, opened up an office of general practice in a merchant's house. A year had not gone by, and the silent doctor became the most beloved man far and wide. Silently he cared for their wounds and bound them up. He inhaled the smell of their sweaty bodies and the stench of brandy and sour wine. He dealt with their temperatures and worries without the ill-humor characteristic of doctors. When they talked about him, they were almost lost for words. They still knew nothing about this serious dark faced man. He was already in control of the language but with these people he rarely ever spoke more than was necessary in his soft Slovenian accent. He did not attend mass, and yet was often seen standing before the altar of Mary-of-the-Snows at particular hours. During the first years, people from the town came periodically, among them a tall, beautiful woman. At night a conversation in Russian, which sometimes developed into a quarrel, could be heard behind the windows. Afterwards the visits became more and more rare and so did Vladimir Semyonov's outings into town. During the following years he was completely alone. In 1936 or 37 he bought a manufacturer's large house at auction and furnished it with various old pieces of furniture. The lower section he turned into an office. He began to pay special attention to diseases of the lungs and respiratory organs. At night his windows were lit up; he was often seen early at dawn as he stood, leaning on the balcony, smoking cigarette after cigarette, and silently looking at the carts which stopped in his courtyard. In the cold morning, the villagers, bare-chested, straightened out the blankets on their knees and wrapped the patients in wool cloaks. They delivered their aches and pains to this untalkative man with childlike trust. Perhaps Vladimir Semyonov saw in their looks a mixture of humility and suspicious peasant shrewdness, perhaps he noticed their curiosity while they were entering the house. But everything denoted that these people did not interest him. He was attentively occupied with their discomforts, but not with them. Something else interested him. Stories interested him which the papers carried, and in his house the radio crackled more and more. But, before the events which were quickly approaching took their turn, he did something which quickly spread around. In the winter of 1938 he saved from certain death the only son of a vineyard worker's widow. At that time, and in those



spravi človeka na oni svet. Zlasti pljučnica v viničarski koči. Vladimir Semjonov tisto zimo nekaj noči zapored bedi ob blodečem fantu. Ob njegovi postelji sedi, v vlažni in hladni iz ilovice butani bajti, med piskri in cunjami, skupaj z ihtečo starko. Ozdravljeni fant mu skuša poljubiti roko, ničesar drugega mu ne more dati v zahvalo, svoje čelo, še zmeraj orošeno s hladnimi kapljicami znoja, tišči v njegove dlani. Doktor ga odrine. Ne mara zahvale. Zahvali se naj njej, Mariji ona mu je vrnila zdravje. Potem se naj zahvali svoji materi, bedela je ob njem in zanj molila. Te besede mu nakopljejo skoraj svetniško glorio. Vaške tercijalke jo raznesejo naokrog in zgodba živi še desetletja po dogodkih, ki so sledili.

Prihajali pa so naglo in zanesljivo. Še istega leta se ruski obiski iz mesta obnovijo. Govori se, da ga obiskuje tudi kneginja Obolenska, vdova polkovnika Borisa Aleksandroviča, poveljnika posadke v Carskem selu. Nekajkrat pride k Vladimiru Semjonovu čuden človeški stvor v dolgi halji, z razmršeno brado in dolgimi, mastnimi lasmi. Piše se Fedjatin. Zdravnikova služkinja ve povedati, da vso dolgo noč bedita in da je zjutraj soba polna cigaretnih ogorkov in praznih steklenic. Ruski emigrantski obiski iz Maribora doktorju odvzamejo nekaj ugleda, toda njega očitno to ne vznemirja. Kljub temu pa je obiskov spet nenadoma konec. Ni jasno, zakaj so ti tuji ljudje nehali prihajati v tisti kot ob Muri. Ni jasno, kaj so se pogovarjali v dolgih nočeh. Jasno je le to, da je Vladimir Semjonov nenadoma spet sam. Nemara še bolj sam, kot je bil kdajkoli poprej. In videti je, da je takšna njegova volja. Sam hoče biti. Ljudje šušljajo, da se nečesa boji, da ima za seboj nekoga ali nekaj, kar mu ne da spati. Ta domneva se okrepi, ko spomladi osemtridesetega ljudje opazijo, da v bližini doktorjeve hiše rase kapela. Kapelica je postavljena v »večno zahvalo« Njej, Rešiteljici. Rešiteljici pred kom ali pred čim? Zmeraj bolj samoumevno postaja, da si Vladimir Semjonov teh krajev ni izbral zaradi svežega zraka. Izbral si je ta kot, da bi se skrtil. Toda kmalu po gradnji kapelice zanimanje za ruskega zdravnika uplahne. 25. marca Hitler priključi Avstrijo rajhu in na oni strani Mure se prikažejo nemške uniforme. Tudi ti zakotni kraji so preplavljeni z novicami in pričakovanjem. Aprila 1941 ruski zdravnik neprestano stoji na balkonu, kadi cigareto za cigareto in opazuje vojake, ki se prestopajo na njegovem dvorišču. Nekaj dni zatem

parts, pneumonia was a sickness which most certainly sent a man to the other world. Particularly, the pneumonia in the house of the vineyard worker. That winter for several nights in a row Vladimir Semyonov kept vigil near the child in delirium. He sat next to his bed, in a damp and cold dilapidated clay-house, among pots and rags, alone with the tear-stained old woman. The cured young man tried to kiss his hand; he had nothing else to give him in gratitude, but to thrust into the doctor's palms his forehead, still sprinkled with cold drops of sweat. The doctor pushed him aside. He did not like to be thanked. Let him thank her, Mary-of-the-Snows; she returned him to Snežni, health. Afterwards, let him thank his mother; she kept vigil over him and prayed for him. These words almost gained him saintly fame. The village devout spread this account around and it still survived decades after the events which followed.

And they came quickly and surely. Still in the very same year the visits from the town were resumed. It was said that he was visited even by Princess Obolenskaya, the widow of Colonel Boris Aleksandrovich, commanding officer of the garrison in Tsarskoe Selo. Several times a strange human creature in a long robe, with a tangled beard and long, greasy hair, came to Vladimir Semyonov. He was called Fedyatín. The doctor's servant used to say that the two of them kept vigil all night and that in the morning the room was filled with cigarette-butts and empty bottles. The visits of the Russian emigres from Maribor somewhat diminished the doctor's reputation, but he was obviously not disturbed by this. And in spite of that, the visits again suddenly stopped. It was not clear why these people stopped coming to this little nook near the River Mura. It was not clear what they talked about during the long nights. It was only clear that Vladimir Semyonov was again suddenly alone. Perhaps more alone than ever before. And it appeared that it was by his own choice. He wanted to be alone. People whispered that he was afraid of something, that he had someone or something in his past that kept him from sleeping. This assumption was substantiated when, in the spring of 1938, the people noticed that near the doctor's house a chapel was being raised. The chapel was erected as "eternal gratitude" to Her, to the Savior. To the Savior from whom or from what? It became more and more clear that Vladimir Semyonov had not chosen these parts because of the clean air. He had selected this small corner to hide. But shortly after the chapel was built, interest in the Russian doctor dwindled. On the 25 of March Hitler annexed Austria to the Reich and German uniforms appeared on the bank of the Mura. And these remote parts were flooded with news and expectations. In April of 1941, the Russian doctor stood endlessly on the balcony, smoking cigarette after cigarette and looking at the soldiers who

se vojska umakne, čez reko pridejo nemške čete in čeznjo prinesejo nemški socializem. Veliko ljudi, zlasti revnih, jih sprejme z zadovoljstvom. Nekega oktobrskega dne mu preiščejo hišo in odnesejo radijski sprejemnik. Vrnejo mu ga, ko sprejme pod streho dva nemška policista. Kadar se ga v vaški krčmi nalijeta, ga sprašujeta o Rusiji in o boljševikih. Vladimir Semjonov ne odgovarja. Poslej se zapre v svojo sobo, če sliši njune razvnete nočne pomenke. Policiste večkrat zamenjajo, štiriinštiridesetega pa zadnja dva odpokličejo na fronto proti Rusom. Poleti tega leta 44 neki pacient Vladimiru Semjonovu pove, da je Rdeča armada že na Madžarskem. Ob tej novici zdravnik prebledi in naglo odide skozi vrata. Zima je dolga, bolezni vse več, Semjonov živi od sčrnoborzijanskega mesa, ki mu ga nosijo za plačilo njegovi pacienti. Skoraj z nikomer se več ne pogovarja. Pogosto hodi k Mariji Snežni, videvajo ga, kako hodi tja gor čez zasnežena polja. Pred kapelico zmeraj gori sveča. Neko jutro ga najde služkinja pijanega, neobritega in s krvavimi očmi. Sedi v naslonjaču ob hreščočem radijskem sprejemniku. In tako napoči velika in strašna pomlad 1945. Od ust do ust gre novica, da so Rusi v Avstriji. Rdeča armada se približuje Muri, stari jugoslovansko-avstrijski meji. Čez madžarske ravnice se valijo neznanske množice boljševikov. V daljavi je slišati bobnenje. Hiša Vladimira Semjonova je hladna in zanemarjena. S svojih dolgih hoj čez polja prihaja z blatnimi škornji in z njimi lega v posteljo. Z nikomer se več ne pogovarja. Zdaj gori sveča tudi v njegovi sobi, pred ikono Matere božje, pred njenim bledim obrazom, obrobljenim z zlatim venčkom. Ponoči stoji na balkonu njegova negibna senca. Sam stoji tam in posluša grmenje topov ali nemara tisočernih korakov vojakov v sivih plaščih. V majskih dneh se po vasi potikajo krdela razpuščenih vojsk. Mešajo se govorice in uniforme. Oficir ob cesti ustrelil vojaka, rop ali dezerterstvo. Tisto truplo nekajkrat trzne in se zvali v jarek. Konec, še enkrat je vsega konec in še enkrat prihajajo.

16. maja priteče čez most domač fant v nemški uniformi, brez kape in brez orožja. Rdeča armada je samo še nekaj kilometrov od Mure, do večera bodo prve ruske patrulje v vasi. Opoldne tega dne Vladimir Semjonov naroči služkinji, naj očisti blato iz stanovanja, umije šipe, pobriše pajčevino in prah. Potem gre k sosednji hiši in naroči kosce. Nekaj časa jih opazuje,

walked in his courtyard. Several days later, the army withdrew, and across the river came the German troops, bringing German Socialism with them. Many people, especially the poor, met them with satisfaction. One October day they searched his house and took away his radio receiver. They returned it to him when he accepted two German policemen under his roof. When they got drunk at the village tavern, they questioned him about Russia and the Bolsheviks. Vladimir Semyonov kept silent. From then on, he locked himself in his room whenever he heard their stormy nightly conversations. They replaced the policemen many times, the last pair in 1944 were sent to the Russian Front. In the summer of that year a patient told Vladimir Semyonov that the Red Army was already in Hungary. On hearing the news, the doctor turned white and suddenly walked out the door. The winter was long, there were more and more illnesses. Semyonov lived off black-market meat, which his patient brought him as compensation. He spoke with almost no one. He often went to Mary-of-the-Snows; they saw him going up the snow-covered field. A candle always burned in front of the chapel. One day the servant found him drunk, unshaved and with blood-shot eyes. He was sitting in the armchair beside the crackling radio-receiver.

And so dawned the great and terrible spring of 1945. The news spread from mouth to mouth that the Russians were in Austria. The Red Army was approaching the Mura, the old Yugoslav-Austrian border. A multitude of Bolsheviks were moving through the Hungarian plains. There was thunder in the distance. And the house of Vladimir Semyonov was cold and neglected. From his long walks through the fields Vladimir Semyonov came in with muddy boots and, without removing them, stretched out on his bed. He no longer spoke with anyone. Now a candle burned in his room, before the icon of the Mother of God, before her pale face, edged with a gold wreath. At night, his immobile shadow stood on the balcony. He stood there alone, listening to the thunder of the cannons or perhaps the thousands of soldier tramping in their grey overcoats. Packs of men disbanded from the army roamed the village during the days of May. Languages and uniforms blended. An officer shot a soldier by the road—pillage or desertion. The body jerked a couple of times and fell into a ditch. The end, still one more time an end to everything, and still one more time they were coming.

On May the sixteenth a young man in a German uniform came running across the bridge, bareheaded and unarmed. The Red Army was only a few miles from the Mura, by night the first Russian patrols would be in the village. That day at noon Vladimir Semyonov ordered the servant to clean the mud from the rooms, to wash the windows, to clear away the cobwebs, and to brush away the dust. Then he went to a neighbor's house

kako s širokimi zamahi režejo čez travnik za hišo in puščajo za seboj svetlo zelene lise. Fantje večkrat odložijo kose. Govorijo o Rusih, ki to noč pridejo čez, ozirajo se tja dol po cesti. Vznemirjenje, nikomur ni do dela. Zdravnik jim mirno prigovarja, naj dokončajo opravilo. Zvečer pride iz hiše in utrujenim koscem prinese na mizo vina. Obrit je, miren, v svetli obleki. Nenadoma odide in jih pusti brez obljubljenega plačila. Okrog enajste ure zvečer cerkovnika pri Mariji Snežni prebudi trkanje po vratih. Ko odpre, stoji pred njim Vladimir Semjonov, z bledim obrazom in smrtno zresnjenimi očmi. Zaproši ga, če lahko za kratek čas stopi v cerkev.

Tako stoji Vladimir Semjonov pred milostnim obrazom Marije Snežne, čez katerega se spreletavajo trepetajoči žarki prižgane sveče in temne sence med njimi. Stoji pred veliko in blago podobo, ki v hladni cerkvi molče in z Jezuškom v naročju zre nekam čezenj in v temo za njegovim hrbtom. Čez mile poteze in rožnati soj njenega obraza to noč plahutajo sence. Semjonov ne kleči in ne prosi za milost, kajti Semjonov zdaj ne verjame več, da bi lahko karkoli zaustavilo veliko in strašno armado, ki je prišla za njim, stotisoče vojakov in bobnenje, ki prihaja z njimi. Svoje življenje pregleduje in prosi jo samo za to, naj mu pomaga razumeti ta strašni nesporazum. Pred očmi mu tečejo podobe njegovega norega bega. Samo podobe, nobene razumne misli, nobenega odgovora ni.

Nemara je, kakor Turbin, tekel s častniško kokardo, smrtnim znamenjem na čelu, pred zasledovalci, njihovimi kiki in streli. S kakšnim strašnim dejanjem ali s kakšnim begom se je začelo tistega davnega osemnajstega leta, da je potem brez odnehanja bežal iz kraja v kraj in se slednjič ustavil tukaj, ji v nekakšno »večno zahvalo« postavi kapelico in prihajal toliko let zret v njene milostne oči? Katero ledeno reko je preplaval, v kateri vlažni kleti je trepetal, ko so zunaj odmevali koraki, pod katerim drevesom je zamrzoval, pokrit s snegom, iz katere krvave jame je zlezel, kakšne okrvavljene zasledovalčeve oči je čutil za seboj, čigavo morilsko sopenje? In tako v hladni, tihi in mračni cerkvi pred Njenim obličjem odmevajo koraki, klici in streli, odsevi davnih požarov in sij daljnih eksplozij. Vrvenje tistega pristanišča, v katerem se potika ves hladni december še strašnejšega leta 1919. V ponošenem vojaškem plašču se mladi ruski zdravnik, častnik potolčene armade, potika po Odesi in misli na svojo ljubljeno, ki je nikjer več ni, na dom, ki ga nikoli več ne bo. Vidimo ga,

and ordered reapers. For some time he watched them swinging their scythes wide in the meadow behind the house and leaving light-green marks behind them. The young men set aside their scythes more than once. They talked about the Russians who would be coming that night across the river, and they kept glancing down the road. Uneasy, they, like everybody else, were not up to working. The doctor calmly persuaded them to finish the job. In the evening he left the house and brought some wine to the weary reapers. He was shaved, calm, in a light suit. Suddenly he went away and left them without their promised wages. Around eleven in the evening a knocking at the door awakened the sexton at Mary-of-the-Snows. When he opened the door, Vladimir Semyonov stood before him, a pale face and terribly somber eyes. He asked to go into the church for a moment.

And so Vladimir Semyonov stood before the merciful face of Mary-of-the-Snows, watching the rays of the burning candle and the dark shadows alternately crossing the face. He stood before the great and gentle figure, who just kept silent in that cold church and, holding little Jesus in her arms, looked somewhere over him, into the darkness behind his back. That night shadows swayed across the dear features and rosy radiance of her face. Semyonov did not kneel or pray for mercy because now he no longer believed that anything could stop the great and terrible army which had come after him, a hundred thousand soldiers and the thunder which came with them. He examined his past life and prayed to her to help him understand this horrible misunderstanding. Images of his mad flight flashed before his eyes. Just images, not a single rational thought, not a single answer.

Perhaps, like Turbin, he ran with an officer's cockade, with the deadly sign on his forehead, before the pursuers, before their shouts and shots. With what kind of terrible act or terrible flight had it all begun in that year of 1918, so that he later ran ceaselessly from place to place and, at the end, stopped here, erecting a chapel out of "eternal gratitude," and coming for so many years to look into her merciful eyes? Which frozen river had he swum across, in which damp cellar had he trembled while boots resounded outside, under what tree had he pulled himself out of, what kind of blood-shot pursuers' eyes had he felt in back of him, whose murderous panting? And so, in a cold, quiet, and dark church, before her countenance, steps, shouts and shots echoed, the reflections of long ago fires and the flash of distant explosions. The tumult of that wharf on which he roamed the entire cold December of that even more terrible year of 1919. In the worn-out soldier's overcoat, the young Russian doctor, an officer of a beaten army, roamed through Odessa and thought of the face of his loved one, who was no longer, of his home, which he would no longer have. And then we see

kako se 26. januarja 1919 vzpenja na staro in razmajano francosko ladjo z znamenitim imenom—Patras. Vidimo ga na norem kosu starega železa, polnem obupa in polnem ljudi z votlimi očmi. Z zavihanim ovratnikom gleda valovanje in pršenje surovega zimskega morja in ničesar ne razume. Nemara je prav blizu njega neki drug belogardejec, Ivan Aleksejevič Bunin, ki si zapisuje v spomin: *Mahoma sem se do kraja predramil, v trenutku me je spreletelo: Ja, tako je s to rečjo—na Črnem morju sem, na tuji ladji plovem ne vem zakaj v Carigrad, Rusije je konec, pa tudi vsega drugega, vsega mojega prejšnjega življenja je ravno tako konec, pa čeprav se zgodi še kakšen čudež in ne potonem v tem zahrbtnem in ledenem morju...* Vidimo ga v Carigradu, zadaj so kupole Hagie Sofije, o katerih so sanjali v svetih mestih Rusije in v mislih nanjo postavljali pravoslavni križ. In res je prišla carska vojska v sveto mesto in Semjonov z njo, a prišel je z njo kot neznamenit delček velikanske, zmedene, splasene množice. Vse je strašno in vsega sveta je konec. Toda živ je in star je petindvajset let. Za njim je rešitev izpred obličja smrti, pred njim so mesta Bolgarije in Grčije, kadilo srbskih cerkva, predmestja tujih brezbriznih evropskih prestolnic. Drugi ostajajo, zbirajo se v skupine, a Semjonov se ne zaustavi. Povsod, kjer so oni, njegovi bratje, tam je tudi dih neizprosni zasledovalcev. Ko ga eden od pljuskov v vrtnčenju, ki še dolga leta zatem razmetava množice belih Rusov po Evropi, vrže v te kraje, znenada odkrije to cerkvico v nekem evropskem zakotju, ki ga ni najti na nobenem količkaj resnejšem zemljevidu. Živeti znova in brez misli na beg in vrnitev, nikamor več bežati, nikamor se ne vrniti. Živeti med temi kmeti, kot kakšen Tolstoj, preživeti. Trenutki strahu in obupa se vračajo, ko prihajajo emigrantski obiski iz mesta, pogovori, mati Rusija, blazne iluzije in oddahne si, ko Fedjatinova rasputinovska senca izgine v hladno jutro. Nobenega bega, nobenega strašnega leta osemnajst in še strašnejšega devetnajst ne bo več. Preprosto in z vsem srcem zaupa v neko milost, ki mu je podeljena in naklonjena. Ko se v daljavi zasliši grmenje prihajajoče Rdeče armade, prvič zasluti grozo nekega velikega in nesmiselnega nesporazuma.

Čas in prostor razpadata. Sence trepetajočega plamena sveče bežijo čez njen obraz. Čez njene oči, ki so uprte tja v temo in čez reko. Tisoči kilometrov, ki jih je prepotoval in dolga leta, ki jih je še preživel, vse se razblinja med temi sencami. Nenadoma je spet na tisti točki, kjer je nekoč že stal. Na začetku vsega, na ničelni točki. Sedemindvajset let je starejši in sam stoji v hladni cerkvi. V njenih očeh išče znamenje, ki mu bo nekaj

him on January 16, 1919, boarding an old and shaky French ship with the famous name—Patras. We see him on that idiotic piece of junk, filled with despair and people with sunken eyes. With a pulled up collar he watches the surging and the breaking of the cruel winter sea, not understanding anything. And perhaps standing right there next to him is another White Guardsman, Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin, who later recorded in his memoirs: “Suddenly I woke up, in an instant I was completely overcome: Yes, so it is with this thing—I was on the Black Sea, sailing on a foreign ship, not knowing why, to Istanbul, that’s it with Russia and with everything else, the same with all my former life, even if a miracle were to happen that I not drown in this treacherous and icy sea...” We see him in Istanbul, behind the domes of the Hagia Sofia, which they dreamed about in the holy places in Russia and, in their thoughts, placed an Orthodox cross on it. And true enough, the Tsarist Army did come to the holy place, and Semyonov with them, but he too came as an insignificant part of a huge, confused, frightened multitude. Everything was horrible, and the whole world was done with. But he was alive and twenty five years old. Behind him lay salvation from death, before him the towns of Bulgaria and Greece, the incense of Serbian Churches, the suburbs of unfamiliar European capitals. Others stayed there, grouped together, but not Semyonov. Everywhere they, his brothers, were, the breath of his relentless pursuers reached as well. After having been thrust out of one maelstrom, which for many more years continued to scatter throngs of White Russians across Europe, and after having been thrown into these parts, he unexpectedly discovered a little church in one European remote place, which could not be found at all on a geographical map of any importance. To live anew, not thinking about flight or return, not to run anywhere, no longer to return anywhere. To live among these peasants, the way Tolstoy did, and to survive. Moments of fear and despair returned whenever there were emigre visits from the town—the conversations, Mother Russia, foolish illusions—and disappeared only when Fedyatin’s Rasputin-like shadow vanished in the cool morning. There would no longer be any flights, no terrible 1918 and even more terrible 1919. Naively and with all his heart, he came to believe in some kind of mercy which was granted and favorable to him. When in the distance the thunder of the approaching Red Army was heard, he sensed for the first time the terror of some great and absurd misunderstanding.

Time and space crumbled. The shadows of a swaying flame cut across her face. Across her eyes which stared into the darkness and across the river. The thousands of kilometers which he traveled and the long years he had still survived—everything dispersed among those shadows. At the beginning of everything, at the point of nothing. He was twenty-seven years older and standing alone in a cold church. In her eyes he searched for



pojasnilo ali pomagalo razumeti. Leden hlad čuti v prsah in gluho tišino, ki mu pravi, da je zapuščen od Nje in Boga, Njenega sina, da za njim ni nobenih let, nobenega spomina. Z mrzlo grozo razpoznava skrivnostno in nekoliko ironično pisavo usode, ki ga ni pripeljala sem, da bi ga odrešila in postavila piko. Sem ga je pripeljala zgolj zato, da bi zapisala drugo varianto zgodbe, ki se je nekoč razrešila s srečnim koncem. Vmes je usoda zazehala, ga pustila sedemindvajset let živeti in danes, šestnajstega maja tisoč devetsto petinštirideset začela nov odstavek z besedami: Lahko pa bi se končalo tudi drugače, v tistem hipu med življenjem in smrtjo bi se lahko odločilo čisto drugače.

Sveče so dogorele in Vladimir Semjonov v slabotni jutranji svetlobi še zmeraj zre v nepremični obraz Marije Snežne.

Sedemnajstega maja 1945 Vladimir Semjonov ob prvem svitu stopi iz cerkve. Njegov obraz je voščen in nerazumno spačen. Med križi na gričku se ustavi. Med križi na gričku pri Mariji Snežni stoji ruski belogardejec in s praznimi očmi gleda tja čez. Spodaj je reka in za njo široka ravnica, čez katero se vlečejo lahne meglice. Dolgo ne more odtrgati pogleda od te gluhe jutranje pokrajine na oni strani reke. Nobenega glasu ni, nobenega bobnenja. Gluho je in votlo, kakor globoko in neskončno brezno. *Obstaja sila, ki nas včasih premami, da pogledamo z roba prepada navzdol, ki nas vleče v praznino.* Uro pozneje ga sreča deklica, ki gre s svetlimi in pozvanjajočimi kanglami po mleko. Ruski zdravnik ji ne odzdravi, kakor da je ne vidi in ne sliši. Potem stoji ob reki in skozi vrbje gleda v deročo in temno vodo. Njegove slepe oči se prebudijo, ko na drugi strani zasliši glasove. Bobneča reka je čisto tiha, meglice so redkejše, ko njegove oči slišijo glasove tistih dveh postav na oni strani. Postavata sem in tja v sivih plaščih, s puškama čez ramena in z nasajenima bajonetoma. Prvi stopi k vodi in Vladimir Semjonov povsem natančno in razločno vidi, ko spregovori: Posmotri, reka kakája tjómnaja... mútnaja. Prvi hip ga oblije po temenu nekaj toplega in znanega in blagega, da bi šel kar čez in ju objel, ker sta slednjič prišla. Potem vidi drugega, ki pobere kamen in ga vrže v vodo, vidi ga, kako odgovarja: Oná nje mútnaja. Ona takaja glubókaja... óčen tjómnaja potomú čto glubókaja. Zdaj dokončno ve, da je stopil korak predaleč in v brezno, v praznino. Ničesar ne vidi več, zakaj zdaj sliši samo še sebe, kako se vzpenja po bregu, svoje glasno sopenje in razbijanje v sencih. Svoj nori beg, ki se spet brezumno začinja ali nemara kar nadaljuje, tako da ne ve, ali je leto osemnajst ali katero, ali je tam ali kje

signs, which somehow would explain to him or help him to understand. In his chest he felt a chill, and the deafening silence told him that She, and God, Her Son, had abandoned him, that there were no years behind him, no memories. With cold terror he recognized the mysterious and somewhat ironic message of fate, which had not brought him here to save him and to put a period to it all. It had brought him here to write a second variant of a story which once had been resolved with a happy ending. In the meantime, fate had dozed off, leaving him to live on for twenty seven years and today, on the sixteenth of May, nineteen hundred and forty five, it began a new chapter with the words: It could end differently, at this moment between life and death it could be resolved in a different way.

The candles had burned down, and Vladimir Semyonov still stared in the weakening morning light at the immobile face of Mary-of-the-Snows.

In the early dawn on the seventeenth of May 1945, Vladimir Semyonov went out of the church. His face was waxen and deranged. He stopped by the cross on the hill. There by the Mary-of-the-Snows stood a Russian White Guardsman looking blankly at the other shore. Below was the river and across was a wide plain, with the slow-moving mists. For a long time he was unable to take his eyes off that silent morning scene across the river. There was no voice, no thunder. It was silent and empty like a deep and endless chasm. A force exists which sometimes lures us to look down from the edge of abyss that pulls us down into emptiness. An hour later a girl met him, carrying bright, jingling milk-pails. The Russian doctor did not return her greeting, as if he neither saw nor heard her. Then he stood near the river and through the willow grove he gazed at the fast flowing, dark current. His blank eyes came to life when voices came from the other side. The roaring current was completely quiet, the mists were thinner, while his eyes listened to the sounds of two shapes on the other shore. They roamed here and there in grey overcoats, rifles with fixed bayonets across their shoulders. The first came to the water and Vladimir Semyonov clearly and precisely heard him speaking Russian: "Look, how dark the river is, how turbid." For a moment, something warm, familiar and pleasant, flooded over him, almost making him wish to cross the river and embrace them, because they finally came. Then he saw the second one picking up a stone, throwing it into the water, and saying: "It's not turbid. It's so deep, very dark because it's deep." Now he finally realized that he had gone one step too far and into a chasm, into emptiness. He no longer saw anything, because now, climbing up the river bank, he only heard himself, his loud panting and the throbbing in his temples; his mad flight, which insanely was beginning anew or perhaps simply continuing, so that he did not know whether it was 1918 or some other year, whether he was there or

drugje. Potem se znenada zaustavi. Ostra in jasna misel prereže ga, kakor rezilo. Nikamor več ne bo bežal, nobenega upanja ne bo več vlačil s seboj. Lahko prepotuje nove tisoče kilometrov in preživi novih sedemindvajset let. Tik pred koncem se bo znova vrnil tja, kjer se je vse v nekem praznem in brezčasnem trenutku med življenjem in smrtjo začelo.

Potem je šel gor in se ustrelil skozi sence. Imel je mirno častniško in zdravniško roko, kajti krogla je naredila le majhno luknjo in pustila za seboj debel curek krvi, ki mu je stekel čez voščeno lice.

Ruskega zdravnika Vladimira Semjonova so okrog enajste ure dopoldne našli kosci, ki so prišli po obljubljeni plačilo. Položili so ga na posteljo in se prekrižali. Fantje so spoštovali bližino smrti, a so se le ozrli naokrog, da bi kaj vzeli za delo, ki so v svoji kmečki nerodnosti z omarice v kotu prevrnili in razbili staro ikono v okviru. Eden med njimi ni ničesar vzel. Bil je tisti viničarski fant, ki je nekoč s hladnimi kapljicami znoja na čelu skušal zdravniku poljubiti roko. Pa vendar je bil prav on, ki je nehote z umazanim podplatom stopil na ikono, na zlati venček nad Njenimi očmi.

Ljudje, ki so imeli čudnega ruskega zdravnika radi, so ob vsej ljubezni pozneje velikokrat pripovedovali, da je storil veliko neumnost. In če je neumnost prehuda beseda za smrt in tak žalosten konec, potem vsaj nezaslišano nesmiselno dejanje. Kajti vsakdo ve, da vojaki Rdeče armade v svojih sivih plaščih sploh niso prišli čez reko, na oni strani so ostali. Vsakdo ve, razen njega. Odpustimo jim te besede, kajti naše preproste človeške pameti ne vodi razum, pač pa neizmerno upanje. In s takšno človeško presojo pač ni mogoče pomisliti na možnost, da je bilo vse že prej odločeno, že zdavnaj in da je usoda nemara hotela prav takšen razplet. Lahko se pritožujemo nad njeno kruto muhavostjo, nad ironijo in nesmisлом njene druge verzije, toda ona je izbrala tak konec, pustila ga je ležati s curkom tople krvi čez voščeni obraz in nič ne moremo zoper to. Znano je, da ta gospa v življenje izpisuje literaturo, ki nas zmeraj znova postavlja pred nerešljive uganke. Ona vidi tja, kamor naš pogled ne seže. Mi vidimo komaj čez reko, pa še to ne zmeraj, kakor pripoveduje ta zgodba.

[...]

somewhere else. Then suddenly he stopped. He did not want to run anywhere any more, did not want to drag any kind of hope with him any longer. He could have traveled another thousand kilometers and could have lived another twenty-seven years. But again, toward the end, he would have returned there where, at some empty and timeless moment between life and death, everything had begun anyway.

He went upstairs and shot himself in the temple. He had a steady officer's and doctor's hand, because the bullet only made a small hole and left behind itself only wide dripping blood which flowed across his waxen face.

The reapers found the Russian doctor Vladimir Semyonov around eleven in the morning, when they came to collect their promised wages. They placed him on the bed and crossed themselves. The young men respected the nearness of death, but, nevertheless, they looked around to take something for the work which they had honestly carried out. While they were moving about, in their peasant awkwardness, they knocked down and smashed an old framed icon which stood on the cabinet in the corner. One of them had not taken anything. It was that young man, the son of the vineyard worker, who at one time, his forehead sprinkled with cold drops of sweat, had tried to kiss the doctor's hand. And yet, he was the one who, accidentally, with his dirty sole, stepped upon the icon, on the gold wreath above Her eyes.

Later on, the people who loved the strange Russian doctor related with all due respect, that he had committed a great stupidity. And if stupidity is a very hard word for death and such a sad end, then at least he had, according to them, committed an unbelievably senseless act. Because everyone knew that the soldiers of the Red Army in their grey overcoats had not crossed the river at all; they stayed on the other side. Everyone knew, except him. We forgive them for these words, because not reason but boundless hope guides our naive human mind. And with such human understanding, it is not possible to think of the probability that everything had already been decided, a long time ago, and that fate perhaps really wanted such an outcome. We can complain of its crude capriciousness, its irony and the senselessness of its second version, but it chose such an end; it left him lying with the dripping of warm blood across his waxen face and we cannot do anything about it. It is well-known that in life Lady Fate writes out literature which again puts unsolvable riddles before us. She sees beyond our range of vision. We barely see across the river, and that not always, as this story proves.

*Mario Susko and Edward J. Czerwinski*