

Vladimir Jankovic

POACET'S LAST

FEAR

Vladimir Jankovic

Piaget's Last Fear

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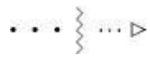
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Second edition: August 2019

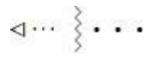
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Chapter 1

I Never Wanted to Begin

While I was waiting in line in front of an exchange office, I heard a story from two unknown men in dirty old military uniforms. They were standing in front of me with their backs turned, and I couldn't see their faces, but I clearly heard each and every word they said. It was the time of the bloody Balkan Civil War in the mid-nineties, a time which people from those regions will remember for many different reasons. And I, I will remember it for that very story.

Deep behind the enemy lines, a truly unique army unit was clearing the terrain around a village that had been abandoned by anyone who could. Its members, apart from being hardcore nationalists—those rare examples who volunteered for this war—had another thing in common: On their necks, slightly above the collar-line, they had tattoos of scissors and dotted lines, along with a defiant message to their eventual captors inscribed underneath—“Cut Here.”

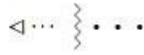
Slashing their way through the forest and wild shrubbery, they reached a clear area. A plain appeared before them, beyond which the contours of the rustic village roofs were visible in the distance. Getting to the first house, they jumped over a fence and slowly, one by one, entered a muddy yard where they instantly lay down behind the bushes growing along the edge of the property. With their fingers on the trigger and their eyes wide open, they began to scrutinize the area in front of them. The experience gained through mounds of severed limbs and dead comrades, urged extra caution and discouraged any rush. The time went by in silence and the soldiers with tattooed necks weren't moving a single inch from their camouflaged hiding place.

All of a sudden, a reserve captain, the oldest man in the group, turned his attention to the dying fire right in the middle of the yard. Above the embers, turning bright red with every breath of wind, stood an improvised wooden barbecue. Hanging impaled on a sharpened stick and lying atop of this contraption was a black cinder which was still, though just barely, smoking. Contrary to logic and his own instincts, guided by irrational curiosity, the long-bearded captain decided to leave the safety of his shelter and headed cautiously towards the strange sight. With each step he took, the image in the distance was becoming clearer, but it wasn't until he had gone all the way that the unfathomable sight distorted his facial expression into a grimace of terror.



Chapter 2

Patient Zero



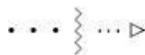
The rooms where the inmates of the Psychotic Disorders Ward lived were nothing like those in Hollywood movies. They didn't have white padded walls and a small opening in the door from which the doctors would observe the patients or shove them food trays. These rooms were more like dormitories; five or six bunk beds with lockers beside them for storing personal belongings. The bathrooms were shared and located at the end of the hallway, and showering took place in groups and was always organized at the same time, twice a week.

The very first set of rounds I attended started in room 14b, which was smaller than the rest and with only three beds, a closet, a sink and a mirror. Lying in the bed by the window was a young man of some thirty years, of average height with short, dark, thinning hair. He claimed that all the people around him were dead and were just "skin suits," underneath which were robots controlled by aliens. Sometimes, without visible reason, he would change this story and say that the dead bodies were handled by aliens like puppets, using invisible threads coming from the heavens. He had serious doubts that he was gay and often accused himself of "pederasty episodes," as he put it, but he would also quickly disclaim that story and unconvincingly play the role of a heterosexual stud. He was brought to the hospital by the police, after a clumsy suicide attempt when he cut his veins so poorly that only a few drops of blood ran out.

Across from him lay an older man who, it was clear at first sight, took good care of himself. He was always clean-shaven, and his hair was always combed. Over his pajamas and around his waist, he wore a girdle, similar to those worn by weight-lifters. To it he had sewn the ends of a leather belt, to which he added metal rings so that the belt could be locked with a large, uncomfortable padlock. He complained that at night, while he was sleeping, someone would open his stomach and take out his intestines—which they would then carefully clean with detergent, dry and return to his belly— just a few minutes before he woke up. On his thighs, he had similar straps which had suitcase handles sewn on to them, which he used for lifting his leg while sitting and when he wanted to cross his legs. He was remarkably polite and communicated with others in a serious, resonant voice.

I wasn't surprised that, during these rounds, I didn't feel the discomfort I'd had when watching Dejan. The change in settings, from the classroom to the hospital room, left an entirely different impression. The stories and behavior of these people did not have the dimension of a human tragedy, but rather of symptoms which needed to be treated. In that sense, the unsuccessful suicide victim and "suitcase man" were nothing unusual. Everything they said and did was almost stereotypically and well described in any psychiatry textbook. Nothing I heard surprised me or forced to think more profoundly.

For that, I only had to turn around and face the bed across from these two.



Chapter 3

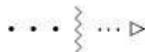
Irena

In the early eighties, a movement known as “The New Romanticism” emerged from the shadows of subculture street scene in London, UK. Two young men rented a basement of a deserted brewery in Covent Garden and without any drastic decor changes, since they could not afford it, began organizing weekly cabaret evenings. At first, the club was visited only by its few hard-core members and organizers’ friends, who received invitations by phone and word of mouth. Dressed in extravagant clothes, entirely self-made, they represented an artistic contrast to the dilapidated interior of damp walls and checkered tablecloths. Their shared evenings, made up of considerable amounts of booze, drugs and casual chats, were not something that would make them special in any way. What made them special was their insistence on elitism, which had absolutely nothing to do with money or material fortune, but exclusively with self-representation through a certain universal personal aesthetic. This Socratic paradox, which intertwined elitism with working-class kids living in flats with outdoor shared toilets, was the link that was missing on their journey to glory. It didn’t take long for the news about the novel underground place to spread outside the borders of Great Queen and Parker streets. Soon enough, everyone wanted to get in.

However, that was not easy. At the entrance was a doorman, the man who came up with the whole idea. A pompous figure with an imposing appearance and avant-garde hairstyle, who carried a long, ornamented cane in one hand and a mirror in the other. He was the main and only determiner of who, in the long queue outside the entrance, got to join the club and descend the steep staircase that led to the subterranean cellar. In no case did money, bribes or social status mean certain acceptance or a shortcut to this finish line. The one and only criterion was a person’s individual style reflected in their behavior, clothes, hairstyle or something else. A style which was noticeable enough to make the person stand out from the rest of the crowd. With all the others, whom he considered mediocrities and unworthy of crossing the threshold of his underground realm, the eccentric doorman would place the mirror right before their faces and quietly utter the words of implicit rejection: “Go home. Make an effort.” As a reminder or a warning to all the future or former sojourners of this exotic basement empire, on the door next to the club’s name was its motto written in red neon letters:

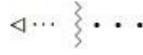
“Do not enter if you are ordinary.”

No other sentence could better describe my relationship with Irena.



Chapter 04

Three of a Perfect Pair



Only briefly did I stand there in the street before it became perfectly clear to me what I wanted and should do. I turned around, entered the building and climbed back up to the apartment, hurriedly taking two steps at a time. I knocked on the door and opened it before anyone from inside managed to answer. They were both in the living room; Viktor was gathering up the half-empty bottles from the table, while Irena was standing near the door and cleaning up things tossed upon the dresser. They looked at me questioningly, but not surprised, expecting me to say why I had come back.

However, I'd had enough talk.



Chapter 5

The Stranger

“If there be a hell upon earth, it is to be found in a melancholy man’s heart”—Robert Burton said a long time ago. I remembered his sentence the first time I met Aleksandar Hubert, a patient lost in one of the dead-end streets of our failed health-care system. The burden he carried on his shoulders was dark and truly heavy. To him, the heaviest possible.

Depression is a widespread, yet entirely misunderstood and unique mental condition, completely different from all other mental illnesses. This royal status of depression becomes most obvious in its treatment practice, because, unlike any other neurosis, only the psychotherapy of depression requires that the therapist be more dominant than their patient in every single way. Otherwise, a tragic twist could ensue for both participants in this mental duel. Instead of the doctor dragging their patient out of the quicksand of negative emotions and somber contemplations, an intellectually superior patient could take their unaware therapist with them into the depressing tar hole.

My opinion on depression was in total contrast to the theories written in psychiatry textbooks that we were to recite at length in our exams. I did not consider it a mental illness at all. I was sure that it just resembled one. Unlike all other neuroses, which are based on defense mechanisms and pathology, depression is entirely and fully founded upon reality. Its source lies in the hopelessness of human existence and the meaninglessness of human life—the original and natural state of each human being. Every search for meaning, happiness or specific goal—what we nowadays refer to as normal life aspirations—is nothing but an artificial bridge across the true meaninglessness hiding in the background of every single thing. And if neuroses really are, as psychiatry states, “reality twisted by the use of defense mechanisms,” then depression nihilism becomes the new standard of normalcy, and the search for goals and meaning is a matter of neurosis and pathology.

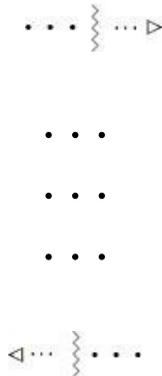
Treating depression thus comes down to the therapist’s ability to convince their patient, like a skillful lawyer would a tough jury, that life does have a meaning after all. At the beginning of this process, the psychologist mostly plays it safe. They seek the “lost” meaning in the widely accepted social ideals: children, love, family, or even work and hobbies. With a number of depressed patients, especially those who are intellectually inferior and prone to conformism, this story holds water. They cling to it like a drowning man grasping at straws and throughout their lives manage to, more or less successfully, keep themselves above water. However, not all children believe in bedtime stories. They serve to help one fall asleep more peacefully, that’s true, but every awakening brings with it the weight of a new morning that is summed up with brutal honesty in two Latin words: *Memento mori*.

Aleksandar Hubert was just an ordinary depressed patient. But as a suicide victim, he was one in a million.

All the people who have ever decided to take their own life can quite precisely be divided into two groups. The first, and larger one, includes those whose suicide ended as nothing more than a mere attempt. In their case, the very intention to commit suicide never really existed. Their only goal was to send a message, an appeal or a cry for help, to manipulate the people around them with their severe mental state. The second, a minority group, consists of those who “know exactly what they want.” Their single goal is to clearly and unambiguously cease to exist, and as a rule they succeed in that from the very first attempt, opting for efficient and lethal methods that cannot be prevented or survived.

Aleksandar Hubert belonged to neither of the two groups. He was strongly determined to kill himself—he had no doubts about that—but when embarking on that journey he set out two obligatory conditions, unusual for those committing suicide: The first was that he was to feel absolutely no pain at all. The second was to make his death accidental and sudden. At no moment was he to become aware that he was slowly disappearing and living out the last seconds of his life. Many would think that these conditions are instances of *contradictio in adjecto* to the very act of suicide, and that they are impossible to fulfill, but Aleksandar Hubert beg to differ.

He had a perfect plan.



I rushed down the long oval staircase to the exit and ran outside into the fresh air. I took a deep breath, then repeated that several times greedily swallowing the air like I was eating it. The first thing that crossed my mind was that I was still not in prison or in uniform. “All is not lost yet,” I said to myself, like a convict whose death sentence’s been postponed until further notice. I tried to keep it together, and before my eyes, plain as day, appeared the only remaining alternative in this case.

First, going to the war, to the battleground, was not an option. My demise and death itself, although I was in my early twenties, were not my main problem. What I could not stand was dying for the sake of someone’s profit, killing people I did not know just because somebody decided so.

Evading the military and desertion weren’t valid options either. In this case, the state and the army would get their bloody revenge on my family by torturing them with threats and night raids. My mother and father would in no way be able to survive such an ordeal, especially on top of the everyday plights and nocturnal bombarding.

The only alternative I had, was for the medical board to exempt me from military duty. But such a thing was not possible. Primarily because I had no physical flaws and simulating a mental illness wasn’t doable. The military doctors at the time were given an official order not to exempt from military duty even the patients with the most serious mental illnesses. On the contrary, they were to be sent to the front lines, where they would play disposable puppets, clearing the mine fields and attracting missiles. That is why passing the draft board, for me or anyone else, was almost an impossible venture.

But, like Aleksandar Hubert, I too had a plan which involved only two ingredients.

Unyielding determination to fight to the end, and a razor.

Chapter 6

In the Cut

I couldn't fall asleep the evening before I went in front of the draft board. Even though I felt an unbearable fatigue that kept getting stronger as time went by, sleep simply wouldn't come. I tried to doze off several times, trying all kinds of positions in bed, but to no avail. Several times I got up, sat in my chair and then returned between the sheets, going over all the possible outcomes in my head, but this compulsive brainstorming just made me more awake. The morning found me leaning on the sill of the open window from where, instead of counting sheep, I observed the rare passers-by walking down the empty streets. With the sunrise, which arrived unnoticed, the storm of thoughts in my head gradually dissipated, leaving behind only tiredness, strong enough to finally make me fall asleep. But there was no more time for that.

Only ten minutes remained before the moment I had been waiting for.

It was quiet in the apartment. No one had yet gotten out of bed, beside me. My mother and father were sleeping longer and longer since the war began, using the blessed tranquility of sleep as the perfect escape from the harsh reality. I was counting on that. Two elderly people wandering sleepily around the apartment would only make the fulfillment of my plan harder. I listened to the silence that filled the room, and once again questioned myself: "Do you have what it takes?"

I knew quite well that the draft board would not fall for any story, whether it was the absolute truth or a complete lie. Words alone were not enough to free anyone from the ball and chain of the deceit called "patriotic duty." The only language those army thugs understood was force, the only color was bloody red, and the only statement was that I would be equally useless to them whether on the front or in jail.

So, I sat on the edge of the bed, closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. I opened the drawer of my nightstand, took out a razor and peeled off the sterile paper wrapping. I stripped naked and firmly held the piece of metal with the fingers of my right hand, which began to gently tremble.

But my grip on the razor was as hard as stone.

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Chapter 7

The Banality of Evil

Although the winter of 1925 was exceptionally cold in Moscow, Doctor Brukhonenko's forehead was dewed with droplets of sweat. That very moment, he was getting ready to decapitate a dog lying on the slab in front of him. Using a surgical scalpel with a triangular replaceable blade, he made the first incision below the neck and on the skin that he'd previously shaved and sterilized. Having cut all the way around the circular surface, he isolated the two carotid arteries which supply the brain with blood and continued cutting through the neck muscles. Once he reached the vertebrae, he decided to separate them with pliers instead of using the regular saw, which at that moment seemed to him as a more appropriate solution. The sounds of snapping bones and ripping flesh covered in blood, marked the end of the "mechanical" part of the surgery and set the boundary of the scientifically researched territory. From this point on, the road that followed was utterly unknown.

Losing no time, Brukhonenko went on with the procedure of joining the two large blood vessels sticking out of the neck to the artificial arteries of the Autojector. It was a magnificent and revolutionary machine, built by the doctor himself and used for the first time on this very occasion. Its function was to ensure a continuous stream of filtered blood through the whole organism or one of its parts, thereby artificially keeping it alive for as long as necessary. Something of the sort was happening now before Brukhonenko's eyes and under his fingertips. From the moment the head was attached to the Autojector, the two body parts of the not-so-small animal were completely separated. The corpse was removed from the slab and thrown into a medical waste bin, and the bloody cover was replaced with a clean and sterile one.

In the middle of the operating room, fueled by the machine that throbbed above it, was the dog's head. With eyes wide open, it looked at the man standing in front of it.

Not allowing himself a moment's break, the doctor smacked the table, right beside the snout, and the head blinked as if scared by this sudden gesture. Brukhonenko then addressed it by name, to which the creature responded with panting. In the end and as the grand finale, he placed a piece of cheese before its snout—which the head immediately snatched with its jaws, chewed and swallowed. A moment later, the same piece of cheese fell out of the hole in the throat and rolled over a few inches away from the snout itself. Again, with reflexive bites, the head tried to reach this previously chewed lump, but without any success.

At that moment, Doctor Sergei Brukhonenko removed the mask from his face, turned his back to the operating table and put his hands up. All the lights in the room glared, and the audience, invisible until that point, greeted him with frenetic applause. The only thing that remained indifferent to this scene was the head. From the dark background and in the slow-motion of a strong sedative, it just quietly kept staring at the scene in front of it.

Many years had passed. The war remained far behind us, existing only in the form of an unpleasant emotion that would simply occur occasionally and out of nowhere. Its cessation marked the end of an era and left us at the threshold of an entirely new age. Socialism, once a powerful tiger but now old and ragged, was counting its last days. The people didn't want it anymore. Like an unfortunate *Mesopotamia*—

a doll made of hay that the residents of Dalmatian villages strike and burn as the sole culprit for a drought year—socialism became a sacrificial lamb for all the bad things that had happened to us from the Great War and later on. It was the main culprit for all the business failures, poorly chosen partners, and life mistakes. The escape from this darkness, that essential light at the end of the tunnel, took the form of a radical change—turning to capitalism and rose-colored tales of wealth, bliss, and the tempting promise of easy Hollywood life.

That is how the “transition” took place. The Balkan countries’ historic crossover from the socialist to the capitalist system. The initial accumulation of capital was achieved through spectacular design of thievery that included no guns or stocking masks, but dark lobbies, politicians, and parliamentary laws. The vast wealth and property of an entire country slipped into the pockets of a few; swiftly, cheaply, and most importantly—totally legally. Meanwhile, as the men with a plan took everything they had, the common folk was preoccupied with the “*Mesopust* burning”. Celebrating in squares, the mob stayed completely unaware of the fact that they just replaced one set of shackles with another, more uncomfortable and heavier to carry.

As usual, I kept my distance from such mass gatherings. Just like the people in the streets, I too was preoccupied with an entirely new era—the one in my personal life. My student days were over. I passed all my exams, and the defense of my graduation thesis was the only thing separating me from that ornamented piece of paper that was meant to “proudly” hang on some office wall. But even with that fairly simple task ahead of me, I was not in a hurry to take that last step and start working on the final exam. Instead, I preferred spending time at the psychiatric asylum, where I had been accepted for an internship and even compensated with some symbolic financial assistance. I was based at the Psychotic Disorders Ward, which I already knew well from my sophomore year and where I had taken my first steps into professional psychiatry. The work I did there wasn’t spectacular, not even interesting; I could use the psychologists’ and psychiatrists’ offices while they were off duty, and deal with the things that nobody else wanted to do. At first, that included “rookie” tasks which older colleagues considered repetitive and monotonous, like administering MMPIs, Raven’s matrices or any other tests assessed by pre-set patterns. With time, I started getting somewhat more complicated tasks, and after a couple of months I began having therapy sessions with my first patients. That increased my enthusiasm enormously, although I was still dealing with less interesting or difficult cases that other colleagues tended to avoid.

One of those cases was Mrs. Višacki. A tall woman in her early fifties, Mrs. Višacki was elegant, with an upright posture and a classic hairstyle, which seemed nice, although she’d been covering her grays with black dye. Even in her fifties, her stature and curves were still attracting men’s attention, which she discouraged from the very outset by the serious expression of her face. Our first encounter took place one late afternoon, when long after working hours she stormed into the office where I happened to be that day. She knocked only once and, without waiting for a response, burst in, out of breath and red-faced. Standing tall and looking down upon me, she asked, before I even had an opportunity to address her:

“Good afternoon. Are you a doctor?”



Chapter 8

Death of a Duckface



Maya was a frequent and regular member of many social networks on the internet. Her profiles were full of almost identical photographs taken in front of the mirror and always in the same pose: lips pursed, scantily clad, breasts prominent, and giving a backward peace sign. From time to time, she would interrupt this selfie monotony with picture posts from a night out or, sometimes, even with somebody's kid in her arms, thus trying to show her supposedly innocent, motherly side. Each of these worthless images supplied her the necessary ego fix, which spun the vicious circle of mutual compliments with her close girlfriends, who actually hated her guts. "You're the cutest, sugar" — "Thanks, sweetheart, you too!" All the way through, this narcissistic compensation was kept alive by a couple of thousand "followers," mostly poor male saps, who found some sort of satisfaction in praising her and commenting on her photographic escapades.

When Bogdan arrived back at his building, Maya was standing in the door blocking the entrance. Her back was turned and she was talking on the phone, paying no attention to the fact that her body was making it impossible for Bogdan to get through the one and only—narrow—entryway into the building. She was nervously smoking a cigarette and waving her hands wildly while talking to the person on the other end of the line.

"I totally wouldn't let you down, dude, ya know... I just can't believe you're sayin' that, dude. Ya know, I just can't believe it..." she screeched into the phone, staying put on the building entrance.

Bogdan coughed gently in an attempt to let her know that he was standing behind her and wanted to get in, but Maya paid no attention to him. Then, in a quiet voice, Bogdan asked her to move, but still didn't manage to get her attention. In the end, he had no other choice but to step inside by attempting to somehow slip by her, and this "bold" move made her finally notice him. Surprised, she moved to the side and yelled, "Why so pushy, jackass?" This made Bogdan feel ill at ease. He apologized and somehow wiggled past her, tearing his jacket on a piece of tin jutting out of the metal door. He continued slowly up the stairs, looking over his shoulder at Maya, who had already forgotten this inconvenience and returned to her meaningless phone conversation.

At that point, nothing was yet completely clear to Bogdan. But the rusty mental cogs, buried deep in his subconscious, slowly began to turn. With each new step, the answer he sought was becoming more and more clear. The scene from the entrance—that nasty, selfish woman blocking the door—was the trigger which shed light on the contours of his so-far vague idea and revealed it in all its glory. Completely preoccupied with his thoughts, Bogdan reached the top floor, went inside the apartment and sat on the couch.



Chapter 9

The Laboratory

In the heyday of socialism and not long after World War II, the basements in huge buildings like our Faculty of Humanities were reserved for a system of connected boiler rooms that provided them with heating. Big brass boilers were heated with coal furnaces and accompanied by kilometers of adjoined pipes that took up hundreds of square meters of subterranean rooms. The maintenance of this system required a special service, usually managed by a superintendent in charge of two technicians and several workmen. It was a time when rooms were warm and comfortable, regardless of how long or cold the winter was.

But time, that which turns the hardest rock into fine sand, was too strong of an opponent even for such a mechanical leviathan. The methane gas that traveled straight from Siberia, became a significantly more economical solution when compared to the expensive and dirty coal that heated the big subterranean boilers. It was inevitable that one day, a ton of cast iron, oval windings and glossy chrome boilers from the basement of our faculty, got dismantled and replaced with a single pipe connected to the district heating plant. The elderly superintendent went into well-deserved retirement, and his assistants were reassigned to different jobs. The machinery from the basement was disassembled and sold part by part for scrap at a local junkyard.

The basement of the Faculty of Humanities thus remained horribly empty.

The rooms, once full of life with the machinery that had pumped energy into the building like a beating heart, turned into a set of a low-budget horror movie. Those few who still dared to visit this nest of cobwebs and dust, did that for one reason only: to store away the old and useless things remaining after the spring cleaning of the offices and classrooms. That excess of things that nobody needed anymore piled up in the darkness of the old boiler rooms, and over time assumed the form of a strange maze dwelling under a cape of dust and oblivion.

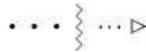
One day, a slightly unusual visitor entered this heart of darkness. A young doctor, just assigned a teaching position, was pushing his way through the layers of stacked cardboard boxes and fine dust. The reason behind his arrival was the search for a ceramic model of the human brain; a teaching prop that long ago someone had proclaimed obsolete and brought here to forever rot in a torn cardboard box. But one man's trash is another man's treasure. That is why the young professor, dressed in a tweed jacket, jeans and a turtleneck, cut every corner of the dark and impenetrable space with the sharp beam of a flashlight.

However, what he was looking for wasn't easy to find. Maybe that's why, as time went by, the young professor searched less and less, and observed more and more the gloomy space that surrounded him. Most people would have seen in it nothing but a gloomy and depressing scene that needed to be escaped from as soon as possible; however, a completely different image was flickering before the ambitious professor's eyes. The damp and moldy walls, where the plaster was in some places scraped off all the way back to the brick, could easily be fixed and covered with a layer of fresh paint. The concrete floor, blanketed in dust and damaged by heavy loads, could quickly be cleaned and overlaid with new ceramic tiles. Instead of the dirty Scotch-taped cardboard boxes there was room for a computer that could control the apparatus for measuring reaction time. Wherever he looked, wherever

he turned, instead of the opaque dark and desolation, the man in the tweed jacket saw beautiful machinery which would again turn this space into an organism full of life.

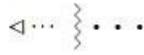
Who knows how long this rifling through the stuffy rooms and his own mind would have lasted if the flashlight hadn't, at one moment, lit a wrinkled object poking out of one of the cardboard boxes. It was a ceramic model of the human brain, precisely the one that he had been searching for. With a smile on his face, he took the object from the box and started wiping it with the handkerchief that he'd been wearing over his mouth. He kept polishing that piece of glazed clay, long and thoroughly, while getting completely lost in his thoughts. The memories of the unbelievable set of events that had led him to the Faculty of Humanities, his professor title, and ultimately that dark place where he was standing, ran through his head like on movie reel.

It had all begun many years earlier, when as a fresh high-school graduate, Predrag Strahinic, also known as Braca, barely managed to enroll at the faculty.



Chapter 10

In the Court of the Crimson King

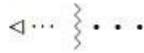


I just had to write the final conclusion and the abstract, do the grammar and spell check, and print the paper in three copies. The writing of these “final words” was indeed a serious business, but it didn’t demand more than a few days of hard work. So, one by one, I began to take my things home, being ready quite soon, and with a heavy heart, to leave the Laboratory and return my temporary pass-card to the secretary.

If something very strange had not happened to me one evening.

Chapter 11

The Proposal



Then he looked at me, his eyes shining.

“I don’t want to add new bricks to that wall, Vladimir,” he said seriously. “I want to tear it down.”

The silence coming from my side, as a reaction to everything he said, was certainly not without meaning. I was listening to him very carefully and waiting for the rest of the story, which I assumed was soon to follow. The professor recognized this and readily continued.

“How familiar are you with the work of Jean Piaget?” He began his story with a question.

“Really... How well do I know the work of Jean Piaget?” I questioned myself, causing an avalanche of memory that rushed through my mind in just a second.

Piaget was a big name in psychological science. According to the significance of his discoveries, he stood shoulder to shoulder with Freud, from whom he mostly differed by his incomparably smaller popularity. The obscurity that accompanied his person and work was a product of his specific writing style, extremely difficult to understand and with whom he could only be compared to Hegel and his famed *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. At my faculty, most of the psychology students didn’t understand a word they read of his books, and as a freshman I was no exception to that. At the beginning of my studies, I was convinced that I would never understand a single one of Piaget’s many theories; and like most other students, I learned them by heart, from a set of notes that were being passed around the Faculty.

To be honest, I was never in peace with that. During the summer break, I checked *The Psychology of Intelligence* out of the University Library. It’s Piaget’s most significant and hardest-to-read work that I intended to read slowly, page after page in my spare time. That was a bad idea, because already upon reading the first paragraph, I began to feel physically nauseous. From the content it was unable to understand, my brain defended itself by attacking the body. That still did not deter me from continuing to read, leaving aside the uncomfortable feeling that fluttered in my stomach. But, “butting heads” with your own mind had never been a smart thing to do.

I learned that lesson the hard way. One day during that tortuous and forced reading, I took a break to go to the bathroom to relieve myself of an excess of accumulated fluids. After I finished and flushed the toilet, I went over to the sink and turned on the faucet to wash my hands. But something just didn’t feel right. I felt a strange metallic taste in my mouth, so I gathered up my saliva and spit it into the sink. Instantly, I was overcome by a cold, sticky sweat. The spittle from my mouth, which the whirling water took down the drain, was blood red. I held on tightly to the ceramic sink, using my last ounce of strength to keep myself from passing out. “I have lung cancer,” was the first and only thing to cross my mind at that moment. I left everything as it was and rushed out of the building into the street, while the whole world collapsed right before my eyes. I didn’t know what to do. I started wandering aimlessly around the town, burying myself in thoughts and saying goodbye to my family and friends. I walked on for hours, blindly; I don’t know where nor for how long before I got tired of it all. Darkness had

already fallen when I decided to head home, lie down and sleep, at least in that way to escape the horrible reality that was suddenly looming over me.

As soon as I got home, I went straight to the bathroom, where once again, I spat into the sink. The spittle was still bloody, but this time I noticed something else. My lower lip had dried up and split somewhere in the middle. I pressed it with my teeth and from the split a little blood oozed out in drops and straight into my mouth. Then, the lightning struck me. "While I was reading the damn Piaget, I was unconsciously chewing on my lower lip! That's where the blood in my saliva came from. I don't have cancer!" I shouted internally with cosmic relief that almost made me piss in my pants.

But after the relief came the anger. I rushed into my room, grabbed Piaget's book and flung it against the wall. Once it landed on the floor, I kicked and stomped until it fell completely apart.

A few years later, I heard that a new assistant professor had appeared at the faculty. He had just finished his doctorate on Piaget's theory, and it was rumored that he was one of the most gifted experts in this field in the entire country. Since at that time I could schedule an appointment with any assistant at the faculty, I mumbled to myself, "What the hell," and resolved to try once again. Just a few days later, with a stack of papers in my hands, I knocked on the teaching assistant Ivan Baucal's office door. "Not that many people are interested in the details of Piaget's theory like you," he told me, because immediately upon entering, I heaped a series of questions on him that I had prepared beforehand. Their range, which only reflected the breadth of my lack of knowledge, did not demoralize him. To the contrary, the enthusiasm with which he approached our conversation was enormous. The answers he gave me were clear and systematic. He didn't lose patience while explaining the most basic things, nor did he aim too high when dealing with more complicated issues. The first few meetings were already enough for me to realize that Ivan was not only a top expert, but also a skillful teacher capable of getting complicated knowledge across even to weak minds.

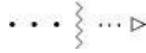
But it was all for naught, I didn't understand the word he was saying.

That didn't hinder me from further scheduling appointments, one after the other, hoping that after some time I would make some sort of breakthrough in this area after all. But, such an abuse of Ivan's time could not go unpunished. Flogging a dead horse, which is what our meetings had turned into, made his seemingly endless patience draw thin. Thus, at our last meeting, he announced that he was starting work "on a big new project" and that no longer had time for additional meetings with me. "I hope that I helped you understand Piaget's theory at least a little better," he told me instead of saying farewell as we parted. After that, things between us were never the same. He began avoiding me in our accidental meetings in the hallways; he would even change his route in case he saw me in the distance. If he couldn't avoid running into me, he would drop his head and look aside, or look at his watch and fuss with his hair. I never thought badly of him because of that. For this failure, like the last one, I blamed only myself and that damned Piaget.

One day, after a time long enough for me to forget the whole thing, I noticed on my bookshelf the abandoned tattered book that was somehow held together with Scotch tape. With a vague feeling of regret, I picked it up and started to read paragraphs of the text which I practically knew by heart. But this time I felt different. I had the impression that I was reading an entirely different book. I went on reading, and this impression grew stronger and stronger. What used to be unclear concepts and incomprehensible theses, now seemed completely clear and understandable. It was just incredible that I hadn't managed to comprehend something so simple in the first place. Ignoring hunger and thirst, the ringing of the telephone, and everything else that disturbed my concentration, I went on reading the

book like a boxer who feels the weakness of his opponent and goes for blood. I finished somewhere near dawn, when everything finally became crystal clear to me. Piaget's theory was original and flawless. It opened up entirely new horizons and changed my view about things which I thought I knew. At the crack of dawn, I forgot all my previous failures, the blood, the neurosis and the tears, and I felt joy that after all those years I had finally succeeded.

"I probably understand Piaget's theory a little better than the average student," I answered the professor with a dose of false humility, which he unmistakably recognized and dismissed with a wave of his hand.

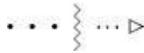


Chapter 12

The Monster

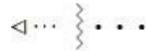
“I need a gun.” For a while this thought had been on Bogdan’s mind, but this morning he said it out loud the second he woke up.

“I don’t know how close the police have gotten to me, but it won’t take them long to connect all the dots that will lead them right to my doorstep. One late evening, they will storm into my apartment, shouting and breaking things, along with the journalists and TV crews. With sirens wailing and tires screeching, they will take me away in a patrol-car right to the main police station. The ensuing court procedure, along with its predictable outcome, will be totally irrelevant in this country that has become a fertile ground on which, like mushrooms after rain, mutants and freaks thrive. That seemingly endless trial will be suppressed by the headlines in the media that will feed the masses with cheap lies and primitivism. Anybody would say that this machinery is too strong and that it’s impossible to confront it, but I certainly don’t think so. A person can simply choose not to be a part of this circus, just as I plan to do. I will not be arrested and forced to act as a marionette in their filthy reality show. And that is why I need a gun.”



Chapter 13

Doggerly



“Those guys, Malthusians and Eugenicists... they’re idiots,” Irena said briefly, not wishing to go further into the polemics.

“Perhaps our Irena is the founder of a new revolutionary social theory. Maybe her followers should be called Irenians,” I tossed in jokingly, lying on my stomach and still staring at the computer magazine. Irena grabbed a cup holder from the coffee table and threw it at me, smiling, but Viktor continued in serious tone:

“Are you perhaps an anti-natalist?”

“You’re really stupid!” she answered him, making him laugh. “Anti-natalists oppose giving birth and assign it a negative value. I’m not talking about that...”

“Richard Stallman is an anti-natalist,” I said, more to myself, aware that Irena didn’t have a clue who he is.

“I’m not against giving birth,” Irena went on quickly with her interrupted thoughts. “You really don’t get what I’m talking about. Come on, explain this to me—in order to adopt a child, a married couple has to go through numerous rigorous tests and evaluations by professional oversight services. Why are adopting parents subjected to that procedure, but not those who are getting a child by natural means? What’s the difference?”

“I can answer your question,” I said, finally looking up from the magazine that I was reading throughout their entire conversation. “No country in the world can do that, even if they wanted to. Imagine for a moment that such a miracle did occur; that some country introduced the education and testing of potential parents. What would that lead to? First of all, the birth rate would decline drastically, because in that process, the poor who by rule multiply the most, would be the first to be disqualified. Second, let’s suppose that the few new-born individuals would grow into self-aware normal people— ‘quality people’—as you call them. That would destroy industry. Who would then work at the conveyor belts and at other stupid jobs that modern economy rests upon? In the enormous factories of China, for ten hours every day, one worker puts a single screw into thousands of telephones that pass by him on the production line. A cultivated individual would rather kill himself rather than work at a job that, in the overpopulated world, the simple man is glad to have. And last, but not least, this country of ‘quality people’ would sooner or later be occupied by a more populous neighboring country that would quite quickly turn it into a colony of cheap labor and send it back to its beginnings. It is a vicious circle. The possibility of the general emancipation of people in the modern world is simply not an option. Countries shouldn’t be blamed for their birth-rate policies, because they don’t have any other choice. There’s no alternative. The tragic truth is that the survival of state-size communities rests on two things: the quantity of people and their simple-mindedness. But that’s the reality we live in, and no one can change that.”



Chapter 14

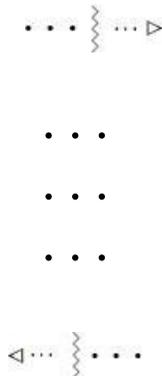
Lost and Found

The first blow caught me by surprise. The clenched fist hit the tip of my chin and sent me straight to the ground, like a sack of potatoes. The second blow, from a heavy army boot, ended up on my chest, and not knowing what was happening, I reflexively covered my head with my arms. Gasping for air, I cowered in pain in the fetal position, from which two almost simultaneous punches, like knife stabs, threw me out. First one smashed into my ribs and the second landed on the exposed part of my temple. The latter punch, much stronger than the first, began dragging me into darkness, even though I had gathered all my strength in an attempt to remain conscious. From that moment on, my body was overtaken by the primal urges and instinctively shrank, expecting another round of beating. That violent batch, however, did not occur. Instead of punches, silence ensued, which encouraged me to remove the elbows from my eyes and to finally find out what was going on.

What I was entirely aware of, even in this state of dim consciousness, was that this inexplicable aggression confronted me on the doorstep of my apartment. The sudden and lightning-fast attack took place right at the moment when, returning from the university, I inserted the key into the lock in order to enter. The first punch in the head caused my hand to release the keys, and they remained hanging in the door lock. The next thing I knew, I was in pain, laying on the ground and trying to understand just what was going on. I didn't manage to figure out much, though. All that my eyes, blurred with fear, could see were silhouettes of two young men in army trousers, standing above me with their arms folded.

The bigger one, with a mohawk haircut, turned the key and unlocked the apartment door. Immediately afterwards, the two of them grabbed me by the legs and hauled me inside with a single move, where the smaller guy kicked me again in the chest with his army boot. Coughing out the air pumped out of my lungs, I somehow crawled through the hallway and entered the living room. There, I lay in the corner with my back turned against the wall as I struggled to catch a breath. While checking my ribs with a trembling hand, from the hallway I heard the sounds of the door being locked from the inside. Immediately afterwards, two silhouettes loomed over me, assuming the same threatening position as before.

“Who are you? Why?” I hissed, clenching my teeth in pain.



At that moment, a mechanical beep was heard and the door of the safe automatically opened.

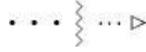
The two young men quickly moved their heads to the safe and looked inside with their eyes wide open.

There was no money.

Inside, there was a point of no return.

Chapter 15

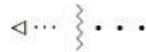
Point of No Return



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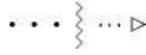
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Chapter 16

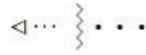
Disintegration



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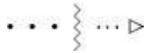
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Chapter 17

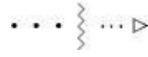
Rebirth

The man arose from an abyss so deep that it seemed he was plucked out of nothingness and born that very moment. He looked around and for the first time saw his body, legs, arms and the palms of his hands, which he turned toward himself and observed for a long time. All around him was an endless emptiness. A dark void, without orientation or direction, stretched out as far as the eye could see. Ignoring all that, the man started to move slowly forward. Step by step, he pushed ahead as though walking on a conveyer belt across the still and unchanging landscape. After a while, and that could have been hours or a whole eternity, he saw a small white dot flickering in the distance. He continued to walk toward it, gradually speeding up, and the white dot became larger and larger on the coal-black horizon. All throughout this timeless, spaceless journey, he tried to figure out what this whiteness represented, but couldn't comprehend it until the moment when the white mass was so close that he could touch it with his fingers. That's when he realized that the completely smooth white surface was the interior side of a human face—its flipside—and the man got the irresistible urge to lean his head against the insides of this strange mask. Suddenly, everything around him vanished, and out of the fog that slowly lifted, some other and entirely different reality began to appear.



Chapter 18

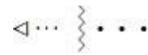
Shapes of Singularity



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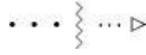
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Chapter 19

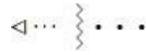
Piaget's Last Fear



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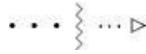
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Chapter 20

The Final Truth

I walked really slowly. Step by step—I could almost count them. I didn't rush or run as one might expect; on the contrary, I walked slowly. My destination was the psychiatric asylum where I had seen Marina for the last time, back in my student days. "Maybe she's still there," I thought, "after so many years. Who knows? If not, someone will surely be able to tell me where I can find her."



The End

For "lost" chapters and additional content, please share or like:
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