

FACE TO FACE

A LOSS, AN UNEXPLAINABLE ONE

Bowie

VELIMIR CURGUS KAZIMIR



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We spent almost a year, I suppose, bed by bed. I learnt to recognize his snoring in the dark and the noise he made when turning in bed although there were some twenty grownup men around us. When I say "I suppose" I do not mean oblivion, rather occasional blows of astonishment and the feeling of being lost in what I am now living in. The contemporary times are, no doubt, of a completely different aggregate structure than those when we were just grownup men. In those times I was only distressed because of the place and circumstances in which I had found myself. I feel constant shiver because of the loss which I cannot explain to anybody. Being a conscript in the army is certainly one of those human situations and circumstances which are characterized as meaningless loss of time and life. Many years later, however, when cursing the waste of life we often manage to recall only the time in the army. As if all other days, months and years spent in routine work and earning money for the living, in drinking and time-killing, in long idleness on Sundays, had some deeper and nobler meaning. Was this year spent in the army the only loss in life, or was it simply some kind of shelter and justification for all other nonsense and waste in life which we had? When I give it a serious thought, you somehow look to me like the very substance itself, like pure concentrate – powder which transforms into the oil of failure and futility. However, what strikes me most is not what you could have made use of and had not, but rather your endless naivety and stupidity, the unbearable power of attaching yourself to people who were passing by and binding yourself to them. There was, simply, no chance at all for you to reach some discovery or at least some temporary fulfillment. I doubt that there was any event which could have bewitched you and leave a mark in you as a jewel of remembrance. Not only did you probably not know to turn to yourself, to search through your own memories and feelings, you also were completely incapable of getting hold of something that could be some kind of dream or vision. For you, the army was a compulsory experience, which one went through inevitably as through childhood. For me, it was a burden which I could not avoid. (And I was trying so hard not to go to the army).

But now, while am thinking of you, am I too not yielding to this dazzling feeling that, after all, everything followed its own path and that I have managed to reach a harbor, some kind of shelter, from where I can steadily watch what had gone by? Of course, this is just an illusion. Neither did I reach safety, nor can I look calmly into the past. What is gone by is painful and disturbing, not peaceful and invigorating. Regardless of whether it took a joyful or a sad path. I do not know why, but as I think of you, in my head echoes the name of a place of horror, which is both a place and an event. Potocari!

I have no physical evidence or fact to substantiate my fantasy. The only thing I know is that you were a Muslim from some small town in eastern Bosnia. However, not all Muslims from eastern Bosnia ended in Potocari. Far from that! If by some good chance you were from Kalesija... However, I did not contact the Red Cross, nor the agency for the missing persons, for the very simple reason that I do not know what I would have asked them, nor whom I would have discovered. We had never been friends in the sense in which this can be said for equal people, who are on an equal footing. Between us there had always been a gap in education, tradition, way of living, interests. We were unequal in both the intellectual and physical sense, but this was something that was most easy to bear. What I found much more difficult were outbursts of childish emotions, dog-like adoration, anger or feeling of hurt. When you develop some kind of parental relationship in regard to a grownup human being, and we were only seven or eight years apart, and everything was happening in a completely strange world for which the least I can say is that it was not exactly favoring us, then this makes a mark on the sole that is stronger and deeper than many of the turning points, fateful events which are usually linked to weddings, diplomas, the first job, the birth of the child, the death of the parent. No, I cannot compare events. Particularly if there were no events. If, however, he is still somewhere alive and healthy, if he fled on time to Germany or Austria, if he managed to reach the life-saving icy shores of Labrador, then this entire remembrance and the pile of messy, moist feelings would be needless. Would they? They would transform anyway, in the best of cases, into a cold shiver of transitoriness and oblivion. But to remember oneself as young and look at your current image in the glass is something completely different from anxiety and the feeling of guilt for what happened in your immediate vicinity, under the common roof, so to speak.

He discovered a lot of things in the army. Among others, also that there are new newspapers every day. Never before in his life had he seen either a tramway, or a trolleybus. Before he came to the army he did not know that one could listen to the music via earphones, and thus make it an exclusively personal event. One day I showed him a walkman and how it worked, and this transformed him into a different person. He discovered very quickly that he can listen endlessly the same songs. As if I were seeing him again, sitting in the shadow of a big acacia next to the volleyball playground, and moving his head slowly left-and-right. He was again listening to the "Little Ant" or "Spiders of the Mars".

He was sensitive and allergic to many things. Although he grew up in a small place surrounded by hills, forests and the wilderness, he was not a bit better adapted to life in the nature than we who came from the town. He would get burns in the sun, he caught cold from the first frost, green plums caused diarrhea, army tins provoked red spots. He was friendly, almost servile. He would withdraw when quarrels started. When he got permission to go to town he did not participate in booze-parties or in provoking incidents. I once took him to the cinema to see some national movie, I think it was "Fairy Summer". He was laughing like a five-year old child. But he did not ask to go to the cinema again. He was happy enough for having been in the "cinema", after which he strolled down the promenade and went to the town bakery shop. This is a kind of joy that you do not ask to be repeated. For a bet, he could eat ten meringue pies, after which he would be vomiting the whole night.

He had never got any letter. I asked him whether he would like me to write a letter for him, but he did not know the address to which he should be sending the letter. And he was also embarrassed. He had no money, if one does not count the little amounts that the army gave the soldiers as pocket money. I think that he also did not know too much about the value of money and what you actually do with it.

He was listening to us with his eyes wide open. He would rarely ask anything. Except for asking me to lend him my walkman so he could listen to the music.

Why, after so many years, does it haunt me that I did not give him the damn walkman as a present? I remember, when we parted, how he was looking at it as it was hanging around my neck. Was it the glance of someone who was asking in silence? After all, didn't I buy the tape with the "Little Ant" because of him? I could have given him the walkman as a present. There was no reason for which I would be particularly attached to the walkman. I could have lost it thousands of times, I could have equally put it in his hands when we said good-bye. But human indecision is something mysterious and at random like the different sides of streets we walk without even giving it a thought. When I put the earphones on his ears for the first time, the walkman played Bowie's "Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and Spiders from Mars". First he was paralyzed. Then he was delighted. He pressed the earphones more tightly to his ears and was nodding his head in the rhythm of the music. Later I was telling him about the different musicians and he was listening to me completely fascinated with the world of rock-and-roll. He liked to listen for hours about David Bowie. I gave him a few copies of musical journals and he carefully cut out all Bowie's photos and carried them with him everywhere he went. Did he dream of becoming Bowie? Maybe. Or, maybe it was satisfying him to be able to somehow follow Bowie wherever Bowie would go? Although he knew no English word, at night I heard him whisper in an invented language. In the morning, when we were alone, I would ask him confidentially: where you speaking last night with Bowie, and he would confirm by nodding his head, not without some pride.

When I once got two days off for some exams, he seemed to be completely lost. I was not able to explain to him that I would be coming soon and that I had to leave. When I came back he seemed to have completely forgotten that he had been offended. He took me to the dormitory to tell me that he had been guarding my bed. As the time in the army was nearing its end, I was feeling ever more the pressure of his devotion. I asked him what he would be doing after returning home, and he did not know how to explain to me his everyday life even if he had been only dreaming about it. Whatever I had been asking him, he was lying. Is he going to be fine? He was. Was he going to finish school? He was. How do you feel at home? Fine. Once he told me that he had three sisters and that he was the youngest one at home. He had a dog and a cat and a number of animals, either on the farm or in the woods. Each animal had its name and he claimed to be able to reach it with his voice regardless of the distance at which it might be.

I have probably forgotten a lot of unimportant, now so essential things which happened while we were saying good-bye. I know that I had given him my address, my phone number, our common photo in front of the cinema, a little money to have underway, and – a tape with Ziggy Stardust. He took the tape, as if completely bewitched, his moves were slow and shaky. He asked: is this forever? I only nodded my head. He swore that his uncle from Austria will certainly bring him a walkman. We did not smoke on this occasion. Neither he, nor I, were smoking at that time. I began to smoke some five, six years after the army. He was so pale and skinny. And he got easily tired. I sometimes was wandering how they had allowed him to the army at all. But these were times in which everybody was allowed to the army, they never had enough young, scared and lost sons.

When war started, the first thoughts related to him. If he was alive, he must have been over forty. But I was still imagining him as a beardless, lonely eighteen-year old who never learned how to shoot and disassemble the rifle properly. In addition, I thought that if he had a family when war started, he probably had at least one son completely like him when I had met him. And from this duplication of the past, the concern and sorrow for something that, maybe, never happened, I felt such sorrow and burden as if I had been carrying inside me for years some difficult and agonizing secret which will soon reveal as an end of everything with which I have been living and in what I have been believing.

Whenever I was watching war news from Bosnia, I seemed to have been afraid of recognizing his face somewhere. I couldn't imagine him being in some army, carrying some weapons, being politically active. Everybody could have mobilized him, but nobody could have made him a soldier. He was the ideal victim. When I hear that another tomb was found, I think that the next moment some smart guy will show David Bowie's tape as a particularly bizarre evidence of something. I no longer have the idea what could somebody draw as a conclusion. That Bowie was an Islamic fundamentalist.

If, by chance, you are still alive, do you remember our friendship? What has remained, despite the fresh traces of misery and evil? Did I become for you some kind of vague diabolic face which had many, many years ago been driving you crazy with stories about strange creatures, which was contrary to everything you had been hearing before that? Was I just some usual light-minded town bloke who does not know what is real, true life? Or was I the herald of general disaster, a fellow bringing bad luck who was sent by a plan to take you away from your religion and tradition?

If he is not with us anymore, if with his son, or sons, he ended there – at this place, whose name I will mention no more, where people were piled up like logs, on one side the heads, on the opposite side the legs, then alternately, had he, while he was watching the rifle bores rising towards him, did he remember Ziggy Stardust. Of course he did not. I do not know why I think that while leaving he was thinking of me anyhow. Maybe because of the language which some armed people were using. And this is haunting me much, much more often than Bowie whom I can't listen any longer.