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»The Bus to Gajice«
(from *Teach A Dog Tricks*)
Translation: Masha Belyavski - Frank

»Are you coming with me to Zaprešić?¹« Vedrana begged us, coming out of the tram at the last stop, Črnomerec.

“Let me just check the schedule,” Robbie walked over to the Zagreb Transport Črnomerec signboard with the bus schedule.

Some teenagers were standing around the signboard. I looked at them. Because I’ve stopped going out and am just a drone, I think about it, and make a game of guessing their age. Like my old friends. Jealous or not, they always comment on the young squirts. Twenty-six isn’t a big number, but it depends. It depends on how I view life. Tonight, old and tired, I’m waiting for the bus to Črnomerec.

»No, our bus for Gajnice is coming in five minutes, so we won't go with you« said Robbie and looked over the heads of the teenagers.

He always sticks out in a crowd. The person whom I’ve fallen in love with is taller than the rest of the world. Perhaps that’s why I married him. He’s not at all like other people, but he’s really like me.

“Ah, well, fine,” said Vedrana, with the face of a cute dog.

“Let’s go check your bus schedule!” said Robbie in a caring voice.

We walk across the turn-around for the bus to Zaprešić. Robbie is now checking another bus schedule. He loves numbers and precise computation, unlike me. I’m sure that he would like work which I do at DPP at CTV. DPP is Daily Program Production, and CTV [Croatian TV], ... well, you know.

Everything that I have to do is just what I hate. Work for three shifts, numbers, being precise, exactitude. I sit in a dim, air-conditioned space, without the rays of the sun, next to a lot of television sets, a mouse and an old monitor. I enter into the Pentium computer something which doesn't concern me. The time between each show. The time between a show and an ad. Then the total time of shows and ads. By all means, I have to know how long I hold the chart with the overview of the shows. That can be also calculated by memory, my colleagues tell me, while I look at them in a slow-witted funk. I have to know how long the ads run: this one with the kids runs for 58 seconds, the one with the the crocodile, leopard and the voice of Relja Bašić, 36 seconds, etc.

When someone messes up, then the DPP world collapses. Sometimes it happens that a DPPer has half an hour to find a ‘beta’ tape with specific content, and it isn’t anywhere to

be found. The corridors at CTV are long and dark, with rickety floors. They meander; there isn't any order or logic to them. What has happened the tape? Time is running out, the air is bad, it stinks, there's dust...and in those moments the producers of the show need anyone, anyone at all, who can help them. In meetings to analyze the failure in the final airing of shows looks bad. The one who is to blame is the director of shift changes. The boss knows only one thing: the show wasn't aired at 6:35. And it was supposed to last for 35 minutes on Channel One of Croatian TV. And for her, the whole world stops here.

Everyone at CTV is always complaining, and there are always problems with the hosts. Because every host is replaceable. Someone will be fired. It's not her fault. It's just the way it turned out. We have young people whom we've hired. I calculate the time, and I think about the end of my shift. Robbie and Vedrana startle me out of my thoughts.

"Your bus will come in 45 minutes," says Robbie.

"Well, what's it to me? That means in an hour. Once I waited three hours for the bus, and I went over to tap on the window here to ask for some water, because I was dehydrated," she points to the dirty windows of the café. "I thought that I was going to faint," she says with a smile.

She can stand a lot. Her spirit is still strong as ever. Mine isn't. Only when I'm with Robbie, and sometimes I torment him. And I also felt bad when I worked at GMC, Good Morning, Croatia. One of the editors didn't want to accept my stories, and the other one never wanted to air them. That first year I was told that my topics were too heavy for a morning program. A journalist colleague, and at the same time a student, said that it's ninety percent work, and ten percent talent. During a meeting, I whispered to Sandy in editorials that it's fine to work at GMC, but that I can't live without money. She answered me that I should try flipping something in my brain, and start living from solar energy. She downloaded a picture and text from the Internet who made this switch. She showed me the picture as proof, and said: "Then you won't need anything, not even food, and you'll look fabulous!"

Vedrana doesn't have a problem with authority; that doesn't interest her. She does everything that she had to, and gets everything done on time.

"The worst thing for me is that the train isn't moving. If the train would just get moving, then I'd get to Zaprešić in twenty minutes. , but they haven't introduced routes after midnight. If I had arrived five minutes before midnight, I'd be home by now,« she said.

Robbie is silent. He's sorry, but he doesn't want to give in to her story. It is her problem, for our bus is coming soon.

»I'm so tired. The worst is when I fall asleep in the train or bus, and then I get out at Savski Marof. And what am I going to do? It's okay, you'll get used to it,« -- she looks at me with red eyes.

The thought that I'll have to leave for work at four-thirty AM to arrive on time for my shift, and air the first show which starts at seven AM, makes my stomach clench.

»Here's our bus!« says Robbie, and races off.

»Bye, Vedra!« I say, and I think that at least she won't fall asleep at the station.

I race after Robbie. I jump onto the last night bus. The next one comes at five o'clock in the morning. I sit down on the raised seat, and next to me by the window is Robbie. Opposite us a girl is sitting, with her stomach sticking out, pink hair, a pierced nose, and her head shaved above her ears. Next to her is a young man, and behind them another couple: a girl with a pierced nose and with black eye-line is right by my feet. A young man with mascaraed eyes is standing next to her.

»Hey, sorry, but does this bus go to the athletic field at Gajnice?« His question sounds vacant.

He's ugly, but unique. Maybe I'm ugly, too, in my red Chinese silk coat with its cheerful butterflies. A beautiful coat on a cold, dead body. I look at him right in the eyes:

»Yes,« I say, and can feel my breath.

»Is that where Ponikve is?« he asks, and raises his eyebrows.

He has big white teeth, and a bony face. His girl with pink hair watches me quietly.

»I don't know, I'm new to the area. Ask him« I say, and point to Robbie.

»Ponikve is two more stops after ours. So when we get off, go two more stops,« Robbie explains, and the two of them listen to him with great concentration.

»Hey, are you riding on the dummies' bench?²« asks the girl near my feet, the one with the shaved head of the boy next to her, who is sitting on the raised footrest behind the upper seat in the bus.

»Yes, I'm riding on the dummies' bench!« the boy says with a frightened smile.

This young man wearing make-up, with a bony head, and narrow hips looks at her and laughs. The pink-haired girl and the boy with a bony face laugh loudly.

I examine their faces. The rest of the bus is seething at the four of us, the atmosphere is a bit keyed-up, as though nothing is under control.

Interesting people didn't operate this way in the Editing Department. Just the opposite. The people from Editing would have fitted into the bus very nicely, and wouldn't have evoked such tension.

While it wasn't all the same to me to arrive for the shift, and listen to the sad tales of the shift boss and the 'mixer'. »Mixers« are those who work at the control desk. Mirna, the boss, was telling how she got mixed up with Tony, a mixer and in rehab for drugs, but otherwise a good guy. It was just that he was a little unstable and unsure of himself. Tony got mixed up with Emina, but she was in a relationship with another guy at the time, a rich and powerful man, so he was just someone to lean on for her. But what really disappointed Mirna was Tony and Vlatka, the new driver's, affair. She meddled in their relationship when it was just developing, and now Tony and Vlatka had been sleeping together for a while. But Mirna knew that Tony was well-disposed towards her, for he continued to borrow money from her.

»Anyway, Tony was pissed off because I reproached him. He said that he was going to slap me, and that I should leave. I didn't want to go, so I ignored him. He got up and slapped me, then grabbed me by the leg and dragged me into the hall« she spoke through us, and stupidly smiled.

Tony was sitting next to her, and gulping kebabs, which she'd paid for, and said:

»She was talking bullshit and bothering me the whole time. She wouldn't stop, and I slapped her because I was going crazy! Then she got up, and I slapped her again. She sat down, then she got up again. I smacked her again; she sat down, and when she didn't get up again, then I told her that that was the way to behave. Be quiet!«

While he was talking, I saw satisfaction and pride in his eyes. His ears were made more prominent by his bald head, and through the space made by his broken teeth, his tongue darted in and out.

I drink in each word. I know where they are going, to Ponikve, where there is a techno and punk concert. Drum & Bass, loud music, the smell of freedom and love in the dark. Dew falls after a hot day, it's hard to breathe, but the forest is refreshed. Music and great happiness carries me away, and faith in oneself and hope that the future will be better than this dance where I don't touch the ground.

»Are you going to a *party*³?« I ask

»Yes, Drum & Bass,« he says, and gives me a penetrating look.

»And is it a punk concert?«

»Yes,« he says, satisfied.

»Some special occasion? Why in the suburbs?« I'm beginning to feel foolish.

»I know that I went out earlier to Ponikve, and that we cleaned up garbage there...« my voice died.

»Aha, what do I know? We're going to a *party*« he says, as though I were worrying.

»Aha, that's great,« I say, and look at Robbie.

»Hey, put your feet down! Let me not see you with your feet up! It's rude!« She turned to me, and raised her eyebrows, seeking approval.

I nodded. The girl with the shaved head was teaching politeness to two young men who had put their feet up on a seat.

The bus halted at our stop. I got up, and they looked at me, as did the rest of the bus. Because of my unusual coat.

»Have a good time,« I say.

»We will. And you have a good time, too.« he says in that same tone, with a little sweet spite.

»We're going to sleep, because we're old folks,« I spoke that sentence as though it were the biggest lie.

The bus doors closed, and I looked into Robbie's warm brown eyes. I know only one truth. Happiness is an individual thing. I take his hand and smile; my white teeth shine in the dark like a single sun in Gajnice. Robbie kisses the tip of my nose and says:

»Let's go home and f_&k.«

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¹ Zaprešić is a town to the west of Zagreb, and Črnomerec is the western region of Zagreb.

² In Croatian, literally 'donkey's bench' is a bench at the back of the classroom where the worst students in the class are sent. Here, it also refers to the last row of seats on a bus, which seats five.

³The English word is used here, instead of the Croatian.