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Introduction to Floating

Novel

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Into the depths, into the underworld

I would like someone to explain what happens to the time we spend on the road, or to us during that time. To a man sitting on a train or a plane, or waiting in a train station or an airport, a minute lasts far longer than an hour, and an hour is literally endless. But if, on returning home, he tries to restore that time through recollection, he will see that it has flown, like thought, faster than any moment in normal time. It is much the same with time spent at home under exceptional circumstances, like, for example, when carrying out major works, or when someone in the household is sick, or settling in guests who have come to stay for a while. That is how it was for us those first few days after Peter came to stay – each hour lasted an eternity, but, now, as I try to remember them, they feel shorter than one hand clapping against the other. I know there were things to agree and organise, like working out where he would sleep and work, where we would put his things, or find the furniture needed for him, whether I would stay in the attic, and what we would do with my things if I did. I also know that, after long conversation and consultation, I freed up one of the two rooms in my garret apartment for Peter and that we brought up a sofa from the ground floor for him to sleep on, as well as a small table, and I know that I lugged some of my own things down to the ground floor and how chuffed I felt when Peter praised my library (I understood he was exaggerating when he said he'd have everything he could possibly need for his work amongst my books, even if he were to stay a full year, but I was still pleased, almost bursting with pride, to hear him say it). I am

fully aware of all this – these are the facts, they are what had to happen to make our coexistence in the house possible, bearable – but I don't actually remember any of it, I can't reactivate in my memory those conversations on the best place for Peter, nor can I actually see myself separating out the things I could do without and lugging them all down to the ground floor, any more than I can recall what Peter and I talked about as we carried the sofa up into the attic for him to sleep on.

But I do remember well the sorrow that flooded over me on rereading Peter's book, *Anthems of the Dark World*. It had occurred to me it might be clever to take advantage of his presence to translate that book too. Conversation with him, his advice and objections, the chance to ask him what certain places I had perhaps not properly understood meant or to check my interpretation, all these are precious to any translator, which made me think this an opportunity not to be missed. But on rereading, I was left dumbstruck and bewildered, like each previous time. Peter had succeeded, in every one of his poems, in establishing a miraculous balance between ecstatic and calm speech, between abrupt, powerfully rhythmic, musically-motivated lines and logically-ordered, calm, clear ones that expressed the thought but not the movement or feeling. His gods, who, in the first part of the poem, shriek in pain and joy as their followers tear at their flesh and rip entire limbs from them, bite into them, themselves screaming in joy and pain at ingesting the Divine flesh and power, these same gods speak calmly and rationally at the end of the poem, ever so convincingly celebrating and representing order. The transition from ecstatic moaning and groaning to the calm, one might almost say dry, discourse of an Orphic hymn that instructs the soul in how to behave and conduct itself in this world is carried out so masterfully as to appear entirely natural. But the same god who screams in pain and joy in the first part of the poem, as his devotees kill him, ripping apart and devouring his body, knows that it is only from his own death that he can be born again and, through his rebirth, renew the world, that same besotted, unhinged God, fully immersed in the ecstatic moment, at the end of the poem, offers the soul setting off for this world his counsel, not to slake its thirst at the clear lake in the shadow of the cypress (or was it spruce?), but to hold off and only drink its fill once it has come to an unprepossessing stream that oozes past a hazel shrub. He offers this advice in the tone of a teacher completely unacquainted with ecstasy, concluding at length that whatsoever comes from God is ordered, insofar as order itself comes from God. How is this possible? It isn't, except in the poetry of Peter Hurd, but there, in his poem, that alone seems possible. How was I to achieve this in translation, or even approach it?

I complained to Peter that there was no way I could achieve it in translation, as our language hasn't the expressions needed to paint the ecstasy of his hymns, and he just laughed and explained that every language contains every expression and every name, that it is people who generally don't have what they want or need, and that that is the main difference between language and people. "Language contains everything that can be, whatsoever exists and everything that doesn't but that could, and the individual sees in that limitless supply what they carry within themselves. Don't blame language for what you lack or just can't do." That is more or less what Peter responded to me, wryly mocking my belief that our language hasn't the resources to express unhinged ecstasy and forcing me to recall our folk dances, which are often forms of pure self-forgetting.

Shortly after this conversation, Mother Ljuba ruined breakfast for the third day in a row, grumbling that there was no water and asking herself and the two of us how she was supposed to wash the dishes and the clothes without water. Which put me in mind of Ibrahim, a former foreman at *Geoistraga*, who it was said could find water in a desert, and who Papa Dimitrij had shared a workshop with (Ibrahim's ribbing of him, heard so many times as a boy of seven or eight, still rings in my ears: "My dearest comrade Dimitrij, I am, as ever, just that bit ahead of ye"). I knew that he lived somewhere in Aneks or Švrakino Selo, so I suggested finding and asking him to reopen the old well in garden that had been closed up when our house was connected to the city water supply. Mother Ljuba, of course, explained she didn't like being reminded of *Geoistraga* or the human flotsam that had worked there, and that her life would certainly have been better and her marriage happier if her much lamented Dimitrij had not worked or associated with those people, but she nonetheless assented to my proposal because even she realised that was the only way to get any water.

It goes without saying that Peter came with me, delighted at the chance to get out and meet new people. We passed the veterinary faculty, taking a left at the Omer Maslić Health Centre, and then along the blocks of flats in Čengić Vila, all the way to the wooden foot bridge. The other side of the river, right beside the bridge, is where my favourite pie shop, *At Zuhdi's*, was. I had liked it because it had the best spinach pie in town, but also for the owner, a man well worth getting to know and then meeting from time to time. Zuhdi was a gentleman in every sense of the word, one of the few people I can say that of without the shadow of a doubt or fear of exaggeration. I have never met so calm an individual or one so sure of being where he was supposed to be. I have little to say of kings, but I am quite sure no king ever sat so calm and

sovereign on his throne, so sure of being where he was meant to be, as Zuhdi stood in his little shop, behind the counter at which he sold his pies. He had an infallible sense for which of the people who came in there to eat he should perhaps place a little more than ordered on the plate, whom charge a little less, or accept payment from, only, after fussing briefly at the register, to return it, as though he had charged them in full. Zuhdi shared as much as he could of his own modest good fortune, giving as a real gentleman does, calmly and naturally, in much the same way as he perspires or breathes. Giving so that no one notices, just as one breathes so that no one notices. And expecting just as little gratitude for giving as for breathing.

The door was open. Zuhdi was sitting at one of the three small tables, surrounded by books, just as calm, sovereign, and secure that he was where he was meant to be as when he had stood behind his counter selling pies. He greeted us brightly, calmly, asked us to sit down, peruse the books, there might be one we wanted to buy and take home. He explained there was no longer any point in running his pie shop, even if he could, so he had decided to sell books, records, various souvenirs, keepsakes, and other knickknacks of the sort people like, collect, treasure, but were now ready to sell to help themselves through these troubled times.

– And who, may I ask, is selling this?! – I demanded, puzzled, pointing at a biography of Jimi Hendrix and a record by Eric Clapton, *Layla*, two things I would never have associated with Zuhdi or his circle of acquaintances.

– The kid – Zuhdi replied, then yelling out – Fadil!

Out from the back room, where they had rolled out pastry and baked pies, stepped Zuhdi's son Fadil, a tall youth, too skinny for his height, which made him look a little unstable.

Fadil explained that his friend Sead had died eight days before, probably of an overdose, and that he, Fadil, had made sharpish to remove anything from the apartment that Sead's mum might have connected with drugs and so wanted to chuck out.

– An overdose? – Peter exclaimed, looking at me and repeating in English as if to check: – An overdose?

Yes, sir. An overdose – Fadil confirmed, using the English word, a little unkindly, and not overly concerned to conceal the absence of kindness.

– Now? Here? – Peter asked, amazed.

– Why not? Our supply of drugs is irreproachable. We are short of bread and water, medicine, electricity increasingly, but no one can complain they can't get drugs, if they have money. Any sort and any quantity.

– Really? – Peter asked, with an excitement I didn't quite understand.

– See for yourself, sir. That costs nothing – Fadil suggested to him, dryly, before stepping back into the back room.

We found out from Zuhdi where Ibrahim lived and went on our way. I regret to this day, more and more every day, not having bought the Hendrix and the Clapton. I don't suppose one can really miss what one never had, and I don't know why I didn't buy poor Sead's book and record from Fadil that day, but I do know for certain that I will never forgive myself for not having bought them then.

In Prijedor Street, the Dženadije family's once beautiful house was burning merrily and threatening to transfer its flames to that of the Pavlinov family, which stood close by, albeit now with a massive hole in the wall facing the street. I hope there was nobody in the house when the shell made that hole and that the Pavlinovs still had cousins in Czechoslovakia to go to, when our troubles began. (When did they come to Sarajevo at all, and why?) The hole and the flames were probably the remnants of an explosion we had heard that morning at breakfast time.

We found Ibrahim at home ("and where would you expect to find me at my age and at this time?" was how Ibrahim responded to my expression of joy at his being at home). I am not sure whether he was more delighted at the fact that it was his colleague Dimitrij's son or that I was calling him to "sort out a well", as he put it.

– Sure I will, why wouldn't I? – was his unthinking reply, when asked whether he would sort out our well. – Having something to do is better than just sitting here and praying for the shells to miss my house, even if it means they hit the neighbours. But not like that, my friend, that'd be too dangerous for me and for you too. No, we'll have to dig a new one – he added, after a short pause.

– How will we know where to dig? – I asked, worried.

– Where Comrade Ibrahim's heel marks the ground, there's water a plenty to be found – Ibrahim reassured me, promising to come the next day, in the morning, and remarking that we would need all sorts of things but that he would bring with him what he had. "We'll make do for the rest, somehow."

We were having breakfast when Ibrahim appeared the next day in the company of a pair of strapping middle-aged fellows, likely closer to 50 than 40 years of age. They were happy to join us and "have second breakfast", as one of the pair put it, while Ibrahim took the opportunity to explain at length to Mother Ljuba why there was no question of saving the old well. The space between the water down in the well and the surface was full of toxic gases, making it dangerous and possibly fatal for him, Ibrahim, to lower himself down to the water. And the water itself would not be good, in any case, as it was stagnant. It would all have to be emptied out and run-off, the sides and bottom thoroughly cleaned, and then you'd have to wait for the well to fill up with fresh water. The water in the well had gone bad from standing, and all sorts of undesirable lifeforms, bacteria, algae, and God knows what else had hatched in there and all that was dying and letting off new gases that were rising off the water, and then hatching again and letting off even more gas, and those gases were all stuck down there in the well, above the water, because they were heavier than air. If you were to open it up now and wait a year, then the concentration of those gases might, just might, reduce a bit.

We tend to forget that water is full of the seeds of life and that all life originally came from water. Anybody who has ever poured water into a container and forgotten about it will have seen something a bit like what happens in a closed well. Let that forgetful chap look at the water in his container after some time has passed and he will notice a sort of greasy film to it, a distinct layer of a somewhat gelatinous and repulsive matter forming on the sides of the container that can be removed only with great difficulty. And the water he poured in will have

come from the water supply, treated with chlorine and God knows what else, to kill what lives and does its business in water.

– It's a big mess, young lady-of-the-house – Ibrahim said to Mother Ljuba – more than we can follow, as first one thing dies or hatches into something else, and then something else dies to hatch back into that first thing, or into some third thing. What we can be sure of, though, is it's not a real well any more, and you have Comrade Ibrahim's guarantee that there's no saving it. So, let it get on with its life and look for fresh water for yourself elsewhere.

That breakfast brought two surprises, neither of which could be said to have been particularly pleasant. The first was Mother Ljuba, who changed utterly with Ibrahim's arrival. Was it because Ibrahim talked to her as his workmate's young wife, as the woman he had once known (he continually referred to her as "the young lady-of-the-house", as he no doubt had then, half in jest, half seriously), or was it because meeting him again revived in her memories of a time long past, perhaps even revived the young woman she had then been? Or, perhaps, because, after so many years of peace and quiet, there was work going on in our house, construction work, that, by bringing life, noise, and activity back into the house, had got her moving again too? Or was it for some other reason which I couldn't or didn't want to see and, for the same reason, won't or can't register even now? In any case, that morning there was in Mother Ljuba's behaviour no trace of that nervous fussing, bordering on impatience, of the sense of hurt she couldn't quite manage and sometimes didn't even try to hide, of everything that had surfaced in her since the war began and that was no doubt an expression of her fear. Not even a trace of her insupportable habit of sighing and remarking in a mournful voice the vanity of human effort, the inevitable miscarriage of everything we try or put any effort into. Instead, from the moment Comrade Ibrahim, as he called himself, had appeared, she was vivacious, bright, and chatty, as though she had rewound 20 years from her clock and found in herself the life that she had carried with her then. The second surprise was Peter's decision to go into town. No notice, no explanation, no reason given. Where was he going? Why? To see whom? Nothing to any of these questions, just the decision and that he was going. As though Ibrahim's arrival had returned him to better days too, days with, if nothing else, more life.

Ibrahim took his time exploring every corner of our little garden and explaining to Mother Ljuba why the new well would have to be just a bit off from the old one. Then he took a forked branch, which he had brought with him, and holding it in his hands paced the entire garden,

step by step, in every direction. At one point he dug into the dirt a little with his foot, to mark it, and then continued his survey of the garden with the forked branch, and, when he'd finished with that, returned to the place he had marked and started to examine the ground carefully, measuring the distance from the old well, examining the colour of the leaves on the plants around that spot. He squatted, snatched a little soil, and began to make a ball out of it, rolling it in the palm of his hand, smelling it. At last, he stood up, knocked a spike to which he had attached a rope into the earth and described a circle with a diameter of some three metres using a piece of rope with another spike connected to its other end. He took a shovel and, standing beside the line inscribed in the earth, declaimed: "Whether you won't or whether you will, Comrade Ibro says let's dig this well". He inserted his shovel into the earth and tossed the extracted earth outside the circle he had inscribed. Then, with a curt "let's go guys", he addressed the pair who had come with him, explaining they would have to dig a hole two, maybe two and a half metres deep and the width of the inscribed circle.

The pair set to digging, while Ibrahim explained to Mother Ljuba that they would have to make a ramp of some kind to extract the earth they were digging up and, eventually, the men digging the hole or well, too. "It'll be two to three metres down, which will take some doing." It would be best to knock together a couple of planks and then lower them into the hole to pull the wheelbarrow filled with earth back up them. And then, they would have to find some stones to cobble the bottom and secure the well footing, and, after that, enough stone, brick, or, worst case scenario, some planks to line the walls of the well with. I remembered a pile of bricks and rocks from God knows when behind the house, so I called Ibrahim to come and take a look at it and see whether there was enough and, if not, how much more we might need.

– Need a hand there, neighbour? – Our neighbour Josip Šimunović asked over the fence, having no doubt noticed that something was going on and come to see what it was.

My attitude to our neighbour Josip is a perfectly clear example of what irrational and unreasoning brutes human beings can be, in my case at least. The man has never said an unkind word to me or anyone related to me and, whenever the need has arisen, has invariably stepped up and given whatever help he can, but, for all that, I avoid him persistently, like the plague. From early childhood, I have understood that I avoid him because the irises in his eyes are particularly pale, almost colourless, so that his eyes look blind, or, worse, just empty. Over the years, encounters with Josip, who I have never managed to avoid entirely, have convinced me

that his eyes see perfectly well and that they are, accordingly, neither blind nor empty, but even today, a simple glance at them fills me with a deep uneasiness, a sort of quiet panic. So just try and persuade me that I am or am supposed to be a rational being!

Ibrahim told Josip what was going on and how he could help, and he in turn was just as delighted as if he had received truly excellent news. He clapped his hands and, exclaiming "let's get to it!", off he went, to return, in less than 10 minutes, driving a huge builder's machine, a digger I think it's called. He set off on that machine into our garden, right at Ibrahim's pair of helpers. He then explained to them how to get to his yard, where they would find some large baked clay blocks, which they were to bring back with them using his wheelbarrow. To be of some use, I began bringing rocks from the pile behind our house I had been trying to show Ibrahim when we had run into our neighbour Josip.

In less than an hour, Josip had reached wet earth, so Ibrahim had one of his helpers let himself down into the hole along the ramp of planks he had knocked together in the meantime. He didn't want to risk the rough belts of the excavator causing the watercourse he had found to recede. His helper opened it up with careful blows from a crowbar and water began to fill the hole nicely and quickly enough. He shovelled the excavated earth into the wheelbarrow, then we pulled out first the wheelbarrow and then him, and, finally, Ibrahim lowered himself into the future well.

Ibrahim called for what he needed from down below and we lowered it down to him, either in the wheelbarrow along the ramp or in a bucket on a length of rope. First were the larger pieces of rock to go around the edge, at the bottom of the well, and so create a footing to carry the wall or well-shaft. Then came smaller stones, which he laid across the bottom, taking care to leave the opening free and let water into the well. There followed the complicated process of lowering the large heavy baked clay blocks to be used for the well's walls, for the shaft lining to prevent soil tumbling in from the sides and gradually silting it up and muddying the water over time. Finally, Ibrahim used more of the blocks to fashion a fine mouth to the well, while his helpers packed earth in around the shaft, so that the new well looked like some sort of baked clay pipe that had been planted down in the depths of the earth and then grown up through the surface.

All the while, Mother Ljuba and neighbour Josip amused themselves in conversation. He told her how he had taken some expensive machinery and as much building material as he could fit home from a nearby building site that belonged to the major construction company, *Hidrogradnja*, where he worked. He was, in fact, boasting about it, presenting it as a sort of achievement, insisting the whole time on how he had actually "rescued" the machines and the material.

– Well – Mother Ljuba remarked – given the number of shoes you rescued from the Borovo store, isn't it only right you should rescue this from your own company too?

Joseph was probably no better able than I and quite possibly than Mother Ljuba herself to tell quite to how much in earnest his partner in conversation was, or mocking him, so he decided to press the matter with her from another perspective.

– We have to protect what's ours, to rescue what we still can – Joseph explained. – But instead we just do nothing, we look on like fools, while those thugs run off with whatever's left and we mutter after them, under our breath. That's very little, neighbour, by all that's holy, very little, too little. We really should do more, more than a little bit of muttering, which does us no good and them no harm.

With that, Joseph placed me on the horns of a dilemma I haven't managed to get off to this day, and I'm not even a millimetre closer to an answer I find at all satisfactory. How should one behave during that period of time after order has broken down, when it has become a general free for all and looting is the rule in the community? What should one do when one sees those thugs, as our neighbour Josip called them, looting the property of people who aren't there or of the community as a whole, property that belongs to us too? If I were to take, that is "rescue," what doesn't belong to me but is lying there, at my feet, I would just be joining the thugs. On the other hand, if I just look on at this general looting and do nothing to prevent or at least mitigate it, am I not just their, those thugs' passive accomplice? Am I really a fool for not taking what I do actually need or could at least use, when it's just lying there, in front of me, and the owner's nowhere to be seen? Is the solution really to hold back and deny myself, the path the old masters and teachers celebrated and insisted on as best for honest men? How did it come about that society in Sarajevo divided up so radically during those days into those who snatched, looted, rescued, and acquired, and those who took such meticulous care not to end

up with even a cigarette in their hands that wasn't theirs? How was it that there weren't even three people in the whole town who mediated somehow between these two groups?

Neighbour Josip shifted the stones and the mounds of clay with his digger over to a corner of the garden, just behind the old well, while Ibrahim's pair of helpers used their shovels to spread the earth out across the garden and level the area around the mouth of the new well. They thus removed almost all the traces of digging and, when they eventually put down their shovels, Ibrahim clapped his hands together noisily and exclaimed:

– May the water bring you luck, young lady-of-the-house!

– It's a shame we haven't a rooster, or something better, for an offering – one of Ibrahim's helpers remarked.

– We could open the throat of a bottle of brandy, maybe, I should be able to find at least that in the house – Mother Ljuba suggested.

– The very thing – agreed neighbour Josip – what could be more fitting? Let water flow into the well, as freely as our liquid offering, God willing.

Mother Ljuba hurried like a young girl into the house and soon came back carrying a bottle of brandy in one hand and a tray with glasses on it in the other. She handed me the tray to hold, opened the bottle, poured the brandy into the glasses, lowered the bottle to the ground, took the tray from me, and presented it to each of the company in turn to take a glass. We clinked glasses, drained them, and placed them back on the tray, which Mother Ljuba was still holding in her right hand.

– Those whom the angels smile upon, clap once and their work is done – Ibrahim announced triumphantly and with relief.

Mother Ljuba had put the tray and the brandy bottle down by the mouth of the well, inviting her guests to serve themselves, and skipped back into the house to rustle up something to eat. We headed into the house ourselves, soon after her departure, as it was getting cold.

Mother Ljuba had just set the table for our repast, to serve as both lunch and dinner, when Peter appeared. He smelled of alcohol too, but unlike us, was out of breath and visibly flustered. With a wave of his hand, he rejected the offered brandy, sat in one of the two free chairs, and took a couple of deep breaths, as though breaking down by the force of his breath some sort of barrier that was preventing the passage of air.

– Five children killed off beside Daire – Peter told us, when he had caught enough of his breath to be able to speak. – And an old gentleman died off too, bitten through an artery...

Confused and, for some reason, a little angry, I asked myself what the devil had happened to Peter, of whom I would never have expected something of this sort under any circumstances. To come into someone else's house in so seemingly unseemly a condition – not exactly drunk, but certainly not sober. To announce at the dinner table, a totally inappropriate context, things that should be uttered only haltingly and with discomfort. The great poet and thinker was speaking like a retarded child, in fractured half sentences. He was speaking a language of which he was a perfectly respectable master as though he had just begun to learn it.

The next day we learned the whole story, which went some way, at least, to explaining Peter's bizarre behaviour. An older man had been standing, with five children, in front of what had previously been the Daire restaurant, which now served as a clothing depot for Merhamet, a humanitarian organisation, no doubt waiting in line for summer clothing. (It turned out that three of the children were his own grandchildren and the other two belonged to a next-door neighbour). While they were waiting, a shell had landed right beside them and floored them. Miraculously the man had survived. When he came to, he had looked around himself and, when he saw the children's fragmented bodies, made a gurgling sound in his throat. He had stayed there, lying, and had started biting at his own hands, presumably in the hope of coping with the spiritual pain better if he felt sufficient physical pain instead. Or maybe he didn't do it in hope of anything at all, but under the influence, at the dictate, of some instinct, a reflex, of something that resides deeper down in the human self than any hope or reason. In any case, the poor fellow, biting his hands, bit through a blood vessel on his right hand and bled out before the ambulance got there.

Silence ruled for some time after Peter's outburst. Nobody made to even touch the food, as though everyone at the table were afraid of the sound that chink of spoon and plate might make.

At some point, Ibrahim reached for the brandy bottle, filled his glass, and drained it in one. I got the impression he struggled for a bit with something inside himself but had in the end decided to embrace his satisfaction at a job well done, a meal to be enjoyed in good company, and a day in which everything had bordered on normal.

– Your friend there sounds just like Geza the Hungarian – Ibrahim at length addressed me, breaking the silence that lay on us all like a burden – you get the gist of it, alright, but without really understanding any of it either.

– Leave off, would you! – I retorted – Given the twelve languages he does speak and write fluently, surely he has a right to speak one poorly.

What in God's name made me say that?! Was I defending Peter from Ibrahim because I myself felt a hellishly strong urge to strangle my role model and teacher with my own hands? What was this bitterness pouring up out of me? And at Ibrahim, of all people? Fortunately, he continued on down the road he'd taken. He steadied himself, grimaced to show profound regret, and placed his palm to his forehead, as people do in moments of severe grief or worry.

– Alas, alack, beyond uncouth, Comrade Ibrahim has opened his mouth – Ibrahim declaimed after his manner, and everyone around the table burst out laughing, except Peter and me.

– Who is that Geza the Hungarian? I don't know who he is – our neighbour Josip asked, attempting to keep the conversation going along the lines Ibrahim had started it down.

– Geza was a watchmaker, a true craftsman – replied Ibrahim. – He used to work for that fellow Kapidžić, who had a small shop a bit below the Bristol hotel. That is, Geza worked, while Kapidžić had his side hustles and played the big man. But the things he would say!!! – Ibrahim exclaimed, after a short pause, lifting his hands, the palms turned away, calculating, no doubt, that this was the best way to express the depth of his amazement.

– I knew him a bit too, but I never noticed anything particularly funny about how he spoke – commented Mother Ljuba. – A little different, maybe, but nothing much.

– Of course he did, young lady-of-the-house – Ibrahim interjected – a right spectacle! He came over once, under our window, and started calling out for our neighbour, Faruk. I hadn't fallen asleep yet, so I wasn't bothered, but the fool woke up my late father, who, poor man, had just dozed off and had to be at the bakery by four. Dad tossed to one side and then the other, hoping for the shouting to stop so he'd be able to get back to sleep. But it didn't stop, it just got stronger, as Geza stubbornly went on calling, Faruk!, Faruk!, Faruk! So dad gets up, mad as a polecat, and I thought he was going to jump through the window at him.

– Who're you banging up in the middle of the night, you ass? Can't you see what time it is? – Dad yells through the window into the silent night, loud as he can.

– What're you sticking yours in for? – answers Geza calmly. – It's not you I'm banging, I'm banging Faruk. You can stick yours in when it's you and me banging.

– Would you ever? – was dad's shocked reply as he closed the window and went back to bed.

– What will the neighbours think?

There was general laughter at the table, with only Peter looking blank, totally absent. If I had not still been upset, I might have asked what had happened to him.

– Is that really how he talked? –Mother Ljuba, who hadn't laughed so much in 20 years or more, asked.

– Exactly like that, young lady-of-the-house, I swear to die – laughed Ibrahim, evidently enjoying his success. – One time, Kapidžić came back to the shop from somewhere, and Geza said to him, "There was some masculine came seeking you, as darkly as tonight." It was Kapidžić's cousin, Enver, who is a little sallow and does have very dark hair, and it was him I heard the story from directly.

Again laughter and then attempts to imitate Geza's way of talking and then more laughter because of the failed attempts, since no one can speak their own language badly enough to be truly funny. Around about 9 o'clock, when it was time to get going because of the curfew, as the guests were saying goodbye to us and to each other, Ibrahim put the finishing touches to his story about Geza the Hungarian

with a deep intake of breath and a declaration: – He was a craftsman, though, the devil! In just one hour or two he could take apart and put back together any watch you brought him without a mistake.