



I opened my eyes. Not much could be seen in the semi-darkness. An empty table and door of boards, planks above me, boards to the side, all clumsily fit together, gray, old, faded, as if they were made of wood left to burn in the sunlight for years. Through the window opening, a hole in the boards, seeped in a murky light. I rose up on my elbows. The bed was also made of boards, covered with a dark, dusty blanket. I sat up, looked around. A handful of greying white down fell to the floor from a hole in the plaid, worn, black-gray-whitish pillow. In the indentation where my head had lain a few moments before lay a few more feathers.

*Where am I?* In a wooden shed, obviously.

My mind was spinning, I couldn't calm my thoughts. Something caught in my throat, sending a sharp, strange pain through my neck. I raised my hand, touched my neck, head, chest... Nothing. The pain stopped, as if it never was.

*Was it ever there?* It seemed to me that it was.

There was no one in the shed except me, nothing but the bed and the empty table. I thought of food, of drink—not even knowing why... Rubbed my throat once again... And then realized I'm neither hungry or thirsty. Not in the least. I strained to recall what I did last. My mind was blank.

I got up slowly, to a step and carefully turned toward the door two-fingers ajar, just enough for the light to make a trace slightly lighter than the greyness of the thick layer of dust on the floorboards. Those boards answered every step with a creak, as if I were squeezing the last drop of life from them.

I went over to the door, opened it gingerly. The cold washed over my face. Through the opening a scene appeared. Strange. Gloomy.

From the grave before me, a headstone poked up from the dark earth and from the grass, gray, lifeless, like a cinder from the ashes. I stepped outside, looked around. The surroundings were somehow familiar to me from somewhere. *I know this place! Even though...*

My head was throbbing.

Then it occurred to me. I must have gotten good and drunk last night. Who knows what came to my plastered mind. Or, it was those scoundrels who accompanied me here somehow. Or perhaps brought me here, so they could tease me later. *Why, you, you...* I realized I couldn't remember a single face or name. I looked around. I tried again to remember where I had been the night before, but my thoughts were still empty.

The clapboard hut I came out of didn't look familiar. At the cemetery, anyway, that was where the gravedigger's hut was, but made of thatching. This one looked nothing

like it. My head is still buzzing. I stumbled a bit, steadied myself against the plank wall with one hand, grabbed my head with the other. I closed my eyes and shook my head, expecting it all to disappear, hoping to wake up. I opened my eyes and was disappointed. A chill ran up my spine.

Still leaning against the hut with one hand, I recognized on the nearest headstone the names written out in slightly worn letters—Milojica and Savka. A little further away stood a cross with the name Milosav Dragojević. I recognized the path that ran from it, between the graves of the Petrović and Banović families, downhill to the exit, to a crooked gate hanging in an even more crooked picket fence. It was, after all, the village graveyard, but then again... It was somehow different. The grass between the gravestones was dark, dead, gray, here and there black, as were the trees whose leaves hung in lifeless clumps from knotty branches. Above them, almost lying on the boughs, grey clouds were looming, dismal and somber, as if at any moment they would descend, pour down on me, the hut, the graves, crushing everything before them.

*I'm dreaming*, I thought. I touched my neck again because it was tingling, and I remembered something else. I dreamt of a fight, shouting, of a Turk with a scimitar. *A dream within a dream?* Everything went blurry. The grayness of the restless sky, the lifeless dark grass, the headstones, all of it rocked and spun about me. I cast my eyes over the gravestones. *They look strange*. I couldn't figure out why.

I concluded that I must be dreaming. And now I was... At the cemetery.

*Where was I drinking last night?*

It was brandy-making season, I suddenly realized. Early and Naples plums. *Those damn scoundrels, they...* Still not a single name, a single face, came to mind.

I looked at the path before me that led to the gate. It was much narrower than I remembered. I set off slowly. After two steps I was taken aback when I saw someone around the corner, sitting on a stone next to the graves. I stopped.

*An old man.*

His back to me, leaning with both hands on a cane, wearing a gray vest, a snow-white shirt beneath, with dark pantaloons and pointy-toed slippers, a cap on his head, he sat ruminating, staring off into the distance.

“G-g... God be with you,” I said softly. Not knowing who he was, I added, “My good man.”

He turned halfway so that I could see only his eye and a part of his sallow, wrinkled face, but not far enough so he could look at me.

“If He wanted to, He would be with me already,” he mumbled quietly.

“Yes...” I uttered. I was not expecting such a reply. All words fled from my mind.

“And,” he added, “he would never let this place be here.”

“Well,” I said, “Folks die. Gotta be buried somewhere.”

He turned a bit more and looked at me from the corner of his eye, measuring me from head to toe. His face was familiar, but I couldn’t remember his name.

“But right here!” he said angrily and spat. “Frickin’ gotta. Frickin’ place. And frickin’ God who sticks us here!”

I laughed. "Okay, old man, who made you sit here? Go sit somewhere else."

"You crazy, or just stupid?" he asked. He turned all the way around on the stone. His eyes were flashing under his frowning eyebrows. His cane was now in one hand, squeezing tightly. I was afraid he would smack me with it, so I took a half-step back.

"I'm not crazy," I said, "I'm just sayin'. It's like, old man, someone is making you sit here. What are you doing here anyway?"

"I, what am I doing?" said he, his eyebrows raised, looking me over once again. "I? Well, I'm sittin' here waitin' my turn."

"C'mon, old man," I said, smiling. "Surely it hasn't come to that? Maybe you're here a bit early?"

"I certainly not, but you, *you* certainly are. Why are you here, young feller, poor guy? Huh?"

I started to answer. But I didn't know what. *Actually, what AM I doing here?* Again it occurred to me that someone was messing with me, and faces I knew began to pop up. Jovo, Sreten, Milinko... But I still couldn't remember what I was doing before I showed up here.

"You're too young to be here."

"True, but it looks like no one asked me," I said. Ratko, Milovan... More faces and names came to mind. *Bastards*, I thought. But where were we last night? It had happened that I would wander off when I got a bit tipsy, especially drinking straight from the still, but never like this. Once I woke up in the ditch next to the road, not a hundred meters from home, and once in Milika's barn in the hay. I fell asleep probably because I just didn't feel like going on drunk any further. And one other time in the barn. But every time I would come to after a minute

or two, but this time... *Bastards, they must've brought me here.*

"No one is asked when they want to be here," said the old man, smiling for the first time since we'd started talking.

"Well, now," I responded in surprise, "it's not like you have to come here. See, it looks like my friends brought me here without asking me, but waited for me to pass out, and took the opportunity."

"Well, they brought me here too, and nobody asked if I wanted to come." The old man again leaned heavily on his cane, crooked his head and squinted at me, almost disapprovingly.

I looked at him in wonder. "Com' on, old man, they didn't really bring you here by force!"

"And whadda you think, that I wanna be sittin' here?" Now he was looking at me in wonder, his eyebrows raised. "But, all right, I'm old and nobody asked me about life. But you... you're too young to hang around here. It's a shame."

"But I am... What do you mean shame? For God's sake, old man, I'm not staying here forever," I said, a little bit on edge now.

"You don't wanna, but nobody does. I don't want to either."

"Of course! C'mon, old man, let's get outta here. It's too depressing a place to sit and talk."

"Outta here?" asked the old man, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah, of course. I'll see you off wherever you want to go."

"My dear boy," said the old man, shaking his head. "More likely I'll see you off."

In the corner of my eye, I saw some movement to the left. In the distance, in front of some trees near a cluster of graves, a white, pale female figure in a vest and skirt, as transparent as a ghost, was standing there and looking at me. The next instant, she turned and slipped behind the trees.

“What are you staring at?” asked the old man, when he saw the look on my face. My knees almost gave out.

“Th-There,” I pointed at the trees stuttering. “There was... A woman. Some sort of apparition.”

The old man turned, not getting up. “Where?” he asked.

“She went behind those trees over there.”

“Oh, that?” said the old man smiling. “That’s just Cana.”

“Cana who?” I asked.

“From the Milković family,” he answered. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“I am,” I said. “In fact, I’m not, but I spend a lot of time here at my Uncle’s place. What is she doing there?”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Where else would she be? That’s where her family is.”

“Those are their graves?”

“Yeah, of course, theirs,” said the old man and turned to me once again. He looked at me unblinking with his piercing bright eyes. “Theirs,” he repeated, nodding his head in recognition. “And hers.”