

Andrej E. Skubic: Even If a Bulldozer

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

*you follow me, I'm losing my breath running from here,
an immense desire consumes my fear,
one more step to the end of the street.*

*the heart beats wildly, I want you, I know that,
I wipe your tears, take you to the flat
while slowly lowering my gaze.*

*ooh-aah, yeah-e-yeah, now I follow your rhythm,
ooh-aah, yeah-e-yeah, this song, a new algorithm,
ooh-aah, yeah-e-yeah, if you want I can be
ooh-aah, yeah-e-yeah, your computer program.*

1984 song *Your Computer Program*
by Yugoslav synth-pop group Denis & Denis

You need to love someone, even if it's a bulldozer.

Ivo Volarič - Feo

Part 1

It is worth leaning right close to it.

Close up, the face is full of fascinating details. The pale forehead has a fine texture with a sprinkling of light-sand-coloured peach fuzz that you can only see from here. It is barely distinguishable because of the contrast with the dark brown, straight and not particularly thick hair that falls across the forehead, complete with a tiny lone speck of dandruff. Thin, radial lines that look like seagrass run from the dark centre across the slate-grey iris, a brownish tinge around its circumference. The pupil in the very middle glares with a terrifying blackness but this blackness does not draw you in because at this moment it seems almost absent, as if it is not even seeing me, as if the eye is more absorbed in itself than in its surroundings. The tip of

her nose is comically blunt, broad with a little dimple in the middle, like a miniature tea spoon, just like all three of her brothers; all four children get this from their father. A recognisable genetic Tomič family trait. The lips are pink, their cracked dryness barely noticeable, a few indentations along them and at the edge of one a tiny flake of peeling skin. There are no wrinkles on the cheeks around the nose and mouth, quite expected, after all, the girl is barely sixteen; the entire skin is peppered with minute pores, a small pimple just below her left eye, to the left on her chin a barely-noticeable birthmark. Such an abundance of benevolence.

I lift myself up slightly. Her head rests on the grey carpet with concentric rectangles of varying dark tones, specks of dust can be seen on it. We are both lying on the carpet; it is soft enough for what we are doing. And then this moment.

‘Can I kiss you on the nipple?’ I whisper in a voice that almost trembles, as it had then. Only that this time it is trembling for a different reason.

Her gaze slowly sharpens. Now she has me in focus. Such perfect working of the ciliary muscles.

‘That’s bold of you,’ she says slowly, almost patronisingly. But she can’t help it; the patronising tone is not entirely sincere, I can sense an uncertainty in the background.

‘Come one, only one,’ I say. ‘I promise.’

Right now I would promise her anything for this.

‘What do you think?’

‘You tell me.’

‘No.’

As long as I *know* that she doesn’t really mean it. Yes, she is a genuinely religious kind of girl, all her family is extremely pious and apparently there is some kind of sin in kissing nipples, for we are far from married, and even if we had been – I think Christianity doesn’t see any praiseworthy act in a man, long weaned from his mother, pressing his mouth to women’s breasts; if nothing else, her father would strongly object, and the opinion of one’s father and mother should be unconditionally respected if you want to extend your days on Earth. But something inside her wants this; her body hints that it just might be exciting. An almost necessary experience, worth trying. Although, what would I know about what she is

actually thinking at this moment. Despite all the advantages currently available to me, she still has the mind of a sixteen-year old, I that of a fifty-four-year-old pretending to be fifteen; this does not help me much, I was never any good at deciphering other people's thoughts. It is with retrospect that I imagine that this is what was going on in her mind.

So I just continue.

'Come on, I promise. Only one. One on each nipple. No more.'

'No.'

We embark on a staring contest. It is amazing just how many things can be achieved by staring, with a motionless gaze. Please, my eyes say. Pleeeeease. Pleasepleasepleaseplease. Just one. One on each. Come on. It'll be fine. Look, I'm fifteen and it's high time I found out what it was like. About time I see a woman's naked tits close-up for the first time.

'Can I?' I eventually say when it seems as if an eternity has passed and I now really feel how under my clothes in my groin something is swelling, something would explode. Her eyes narrow slightly, then she closes them. She nods ever so slightly.

This is for real.

It doesn't look as if she has any intention at all of helping me, so I hold the edge of her T-shirt and pull it up gently. When the fabric stretches, she does accommodate me by arching her spine enough for me to pull it beyond her lower back. Then further up, across her white belly with a small indented navel, across her pale ribs, to reveal her firm, medium-sized breasts. Another detail: on the skin next to her right breast she has an unusual mark, roughly triangular in shape with sharp edges, almost purple, as if marked there by something; it doesn't look like an actual bruise, more like a splodge from a printer when a poor cartridge has pulled the paper crooked. But the tits are the right stuff, real, with nice, dark and firm nipples, not those broad flat ones that almost put me off. These are real, just like I had dreamed of. A dream come true. I take a deep breath.

Tanya still has her eyes shut and I lower myself. First to the left, descending towards the rough, brownish-pink circle, pressing my lips against it. The skin is so soft that it yields almost without the lips sensing it. I remember that feeling, that doubt: would it be appropriate if I now stuck out my tongue and licked her? It would

seem incredibly intimate to me, or would it perhaps be too much like breastfeeding to be decent? Still, I wouldn't be feeding; in fact, what's the right way to do this? Just in case, I'd better only kiss her with my lips together. Then I move on to the right breast, the one with the unusual mark. What could it be? Did her father beat her? Mr Tomič? It's almost impossible to imagine, and she has never said anything, although, in a way, it might be possible if the girl had ever disregarded house rules. So I press a kiss on the other raised nipple. I hesitate briefly, then move my head enough to also quickly kiss the mark that, strictly speaking, is no longer on the breast, so it didn't represent a breach of my promise; for a promise I gave, and a promise needs to be kept. She is as soft as butter.

I lift my head. Her eyes are now open. She is staring at the ceiling. Even after I look at her for a few seconds, she is still looking at the ceiling, apparently deep in thought. I could swear that she is disappointed.

Disappointed also this time, forty years later she is also disappointed in the same way. Disappointed that I had kept my promise. Great. But Tanya, come on, woman, you're a Christian, for God's sake. I have really not had much experience with religious girls, just a lifetime of knowing that I had to respect their religious feelings; and when you gave me your permission only for a very specific thing, I stick to this agreement. Is that so hard to understand?

'Did it hurt at all?' I ask. That was now my attempt at sounding patronising. Yes, this is your lesson, things have turned around, I have finally got my way, you clearly haven't. So it seems from your gaze.

'No,' she said quietly.

This is becoming unbearable. I stop.

PAUSE & SAVE. A moment for reflection.

This went well. Chillingly well, raising the hairs on my shoulder blades, my heart thumping. Extremely successful, I think to myself within the limits of my memory; ha, I'm becoming good at this. Because it all happened without a script, we were led simply by my improvisation. A little like a scintillating dance tutor once told us before the school prom as, during our first rehearsal, he took a shy, rather clumsy girl from our class to the dance floor: if I lead well, she has to dance, she has no choice. I was

never a good dancer, but the power of memory apparently makes me into a decent lead character. All I need is memory.

I will never know for certain whether Tanya really was disappointed at that moment. It seemed so, but that gaze of hers could just as well have been expressing something entirely different. Merely a kind of post-climax, perhaps. Rationally she certainly didn't want anything more. But that is important, that moment: that moment of doubt. That is what my task is: the unpredictability, the complexity of the moment. The thing that cannot be determined in advance. The factor of chaos. This is something that simply needs to be experienced, that cannot be programmed, predestined.

All right, so far we haven't messed anything up. Now for the more fun part: time for what never was. That is the second part that enables me to do this stuff: experiments, checking out never-realised possibilities.

I take a deep breath. CONT. FROM HERE.

I continue staring at her for a few moments. Her T-shirt is still pulled up as far as her chin, her slender, warm torso exposed in front of me. I look her in the eyes, her gaze undecided. Then I suddenly move lower down, to her belly. I run my tongue across the soft skin. I slide down to her navel. Tanya twists.

'Gena! What are you doing?'

I dig my palms in either side to embrace her around the lower back. The skin is so white and soft. So smooth and slippery under my tongue, though unfortunately – nothing is perfect – without any scent or taste. Her hand is now on my head, and she grabs my hair. I move my face along her skin, my hand sliding towards her zip, and I start undoing the button.

'Gena... No... we didn't agree to this.'

We didn't agree, didn't agree, fuck it, what was that empty, disappointed gaze for then? Why was I always so terribly naïve in life, always believed everything word for word, respected every letter of what was agreed – never really checking what lay behind it, what the other person might be thinking, what their agenda was. And now, at this moment, we shall see what such behaviour leads to. And the button is undone. I stop for a moment to wait for a reaction. Because, if she resists, I will not continue. That's not what I am like, not even in this world, it's not what I wish to do.

But checking is simply necessary. Indeed, the hand in my hair is not pushing me away, it is just there, clinging onto my hair. I am overcome with a sense of relief. My tongue slides down the lower part of her belly, right above the hem of her briefs under which is a hint of dark hair. I stop again. I am savouring this moment. This is actually happening. And then the inevitable. Actually, it came too fast. But it's my own fault. It was supposed to happen right at the moment when Tanya got excited. It had to. It was staged.

From the hallway comes the sound of the front door unlocking. We both freeze, even me. The sound is so sharp in that room, where until now all that could be heard was our breathing and the beating of our hearts.

Tanya briskly pushes my head away.

'Run!' she hisses. I lift myself off her and for a moment stay lying by her feet. She frantically pulls down her T-shirt, scrambles into a sitting position, and then hurriedly stands up. 'What are you waiting for? Quickly, hurry, hurry!'

I jump up, cannot help but laugh, despite all the intense commotion of the moment. Tanya is already opening the back door, thank god for the emergency exit and the fact that it is summer so I have my flip-flops here and I didn't leave my shoes in the hallway, after all I did only come across the road, we are neighbours.

'Go, go, go!' Tanya sibilates as the sound of the door closing comes from the far end of the hallway and then some kind of shuffling; someone is taking their shoes off in the hall, undoubtedly Mr Tomič.

'To be continued next time!' I whisper bravely and rush into the garden and towards the gate. I run towards it but then just I stop; climbing over the fence would be completely unnecessary, this far is enough. STOP & SAVE.

I laugh. Out of breath, despite having run only about five metres, but with the scramble it was all so exciting, and I am not that young any more. It's silly, so cheap, at the end of the day, but I can't stop laughing. I am happy.

In actual fact, on that day she reckoned on and agreed to a fuck. But at the time I didn't really get the picture. I never did.

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Every time I watch him like this, moving around the kitchen, the living room, I am amazed. I am in awe. On the one hand this amazement is pride, it lifts the chest: look

at this, this is my creation! In awe of nature: how can something so beautiful, alive, strong, functional be created by a single, bailed cell that was once part of me and then in some moment of complete excitement, passion, settled in Maya's large, warm egg. This is our burgeoning. On the other hand, this awe is already rather frightening. For living in our house is an entirely new creature. One that is both totally familiar, down to the last inch of his skin, and at the same time ever more estranged. His world is no longer mine.

Within barely a year, Alex has totally changed. He became tall and skinny, elongated. The legs sticking out of his shorts are hairy. His hair is long, tied at the back, but not the pony tail falling over the shoulders that I used to once have, but folded over in a bun. His nonchalant stare befits a thirteen-year-old. His dick is bigger than mine. I mean, truly, and I'm not just talking about now. These days, mine looks a little like a shrivelled up stub, whenever I happen to catch a glimpse of it in the bathroom mirror; but even in the best of years it wasn't much to brag about. Not even in the years I kissed Tanya on the nipples. When, as kids, we measured our willies, mine reached thirteen and a half centimetres when erect, the local record in our settlement was seventeen. But I didn't ever worry about its size, I really didn't. Whenever it needed to, it always performed its task. Almost always. Perhaps a little less recently but that too doesn't cause me any traumas. Well, I wouldn't like to go into that, perhaps we will touch upon it another time. I am simply stating facts. The reality is that my dick is a wilted stump and Alex's – a proud dangling sausage. And yes, all that is normal in our species of vertebrates.

He is wearing a sleeveless stretch T-shirt with a slogan, mini earbuds in his ears. His phone is on the counter and he occasionally glances at it while unstacking the dishwasher. I am standing next to him at the sink, slowly rinsing the cups and plates we used at dinner, ready to go into the dishwasher once he empties it. This habit he has of staring at TikTok – or Reddit, or whatever it is he stares at – while he is working gets on my nerves; he does everything much slower than he could. I wait impatiently for him to finish, I want to get on with things and still need to take a shower. And I cannot help but feel slightly ignored. Not that I would expect much friendly socialising from him. He is, after all, a typical teenager, and even in the best of cases would not be prepared to explain much about his adventures - there really

are no adventures per se anyway. As far as I know. He maintains that 'nothing' is going on at school. At this time he also doesn't have much revision; when oral tests start again at school, we will once again spend a little more time together because he won't get anywhere without help at home. He is not interested in anything specific. His life is somewhere else. Even his social contact with school friends and kids in the neighbourhood is minimal; though sociable as a toddler, he is now rather grumpy and the months of lockdown merely exacerbated the situation.

(Lockdown. A minimal explanation for readers from other periods of human existence: it was a time when the universe shut down. A virus, a tiny bundle of RNA wrapped in a neat spiky protein a hundred times smaller than a grain of pollen, at some point engulfs the entire world like a storm. One day kids are happily running around, sitting around outside the shop, families go for trips, travel. The next day: virus, a pandemic, quarantine, months of closing yourself in your own home, you can only walk your dog in the neighbourhood if you wear a surgical mask over your face. Lives shatter in thousands of unexpected ways. Bars and restaurants close. Schools close. All non-essential shops close. Municipal boundaries close. There is a nine to six curfew. All that seemed unimaginable, impossible, suddenly becomes possible, becomes here and now. In a matter of weeks. Fuck, anything is possible. News of deaths. A call from the Covid hospital, 'This is Dr Janežič speaking. I am afraid... I have some bad news. I am calling because twenty minutes ago... your father died.' A deafening silence in the ear. Words that don't make sense, unnatural words. I will return to this when the time is right. Uncontrollable, incomprehensible reality. The virus got Father, got another good friend, and every few days you would hear of some other acquaintance who fell ill. The world as I know it came to an end just like that, with a snap of the fingers. This is not something you would expect, not something that anyone could easily believe. It is science fiction. But I cannot choose the time in which these events took place. That is what it was like and this kind of world is also possible. We should take this as self-evident and necessary.)

Basically, within a few weeks, all of Alex's social life transferred to social networks: Discord, Viber, Reddit, TikTok, all kind of things. What would I know? I only knew Facebook and Twitter, these virtual spaces for fossils. And even on Facebook I only accept as friends those I *actually* know in the flesh, not like the

younger generation who connect with anyone and everyone who posts anything anywhere. And three quarters of a year later, when with the onset of spring the pandemic abated, first a few shopping centres opened, a few weeks later also primary schools, kids getting together in the streets was once again allowed, things should in principle have returned to normal. But they didn't. The pre-virus lifestyle was forgotten, dead.

These days, if we try to get Alex to go out, meet up with friends, actual people in person, he looks at us as if we are sending him to the dentist. No, in the meantime he has found friends in America with whom he can meet late into the night on Discord, neighbourhood kids are boring. His best friend on the other side of the Atlantic is someone called Brandon, a sixteen-year-old from Indiana who has changed gender – meaning he was born a girl and now lives as a boy. Which is to my mind fascinating and interesting, because as a child I didn't know anyone like that; but when I ask Alex, entirely in the spirit of friendly interest, what Brandon's name at birth was, before his trans transformation, he looks at me as if I am from a different planet. He is not even interested or curious enough about his best friend to know that. What he does more or less know is what this Brandon does every day 'on servers.' He doesn't even know which town in Indiana Brandon lives in and what kind of a place it is; all he knows is that the time difference between them is six hours, so he can only reach him on Discord in the evenings. This means he can't tell me anything that would raise daddy's interest, compassion with the emotional tribulations of teenagers or perhaps even nostalgia. Or, if nothing else, even a little fear, in case they were up to any mischievous tricks but, these days, kids aren't even much good at that either. Just sitting at the computer without any kind of movement is... but no, sorry, that isn't quite true. There is some movement in Alex's life; at least once a day, when it is not raining, he does go out on his bike. But alone. When he returns two hours later, he says that 'nothing' happened on the way. In fact, I have no idea what he really does on these cycling trips. Apparently he goes to Koseze where we used to live until he was eight. As far as safe cycling goes, Koseze is a good destination and he seems to like the place; but he never takes any money with him so he can't really be doing anything much. He claims to never meet any of his

childhood friends; apparently he visits some kind of public trampoline. Perhaps he sits on some bench and stares at his phone? I really do not know.

But when did our parents ever understand us? And it was better they didn't know what we got up to. Hmm, perhaps I would even prefer to find out that he and his friends smoke in secret somewhere; at least I could say to him, hey, mate, I get you. I too was once a kid, and we got up to all sorts of things. Do you know that I used to hide studded leather belts and wristbands on some building site on the way to school, so I could don them before arriving for classes without my parents knowing? And, later, in secondary school, we sometimes even smoked pot, but you'd better not do that because, who knows, it can cause lifelong damage to some people. (I didn't need to tell him about how we used to steal the diazepam and lorazepam pills our mothers used, much like their counterparts in the Far East, and would then, at weekends, wash them down with wine and, stoned out of our minds, fool around in heavy metal clubs. That would be probably not be educational.) No, no chance. He is simply not interested. To him, that is the same as our parents and grandparents explaining to our generation how they had to walk barefoot to school across mountain passes and army barricades and that all they had to eat were boiled potatoes. Which were at least warm. When they were warm. Totally irrelevant and boring.

But I adore him, this boy. The way that someone can adore a complete mystery that still affects you in a somewhat fateful way. So, in my own way, I am afraid of this distancing that is happening between us, especially after this last year or so. As if, all of a sudden, someone else has moved into our house, no longer that gentle, sensible boy we knew. I am talking about a boy who at kindergarten where there was a girl with various problems who had a fit of uncontrollable rage, sighed, 'Only I can solve this.' This was what we were told by the stunned teacher, who was about to call the girl's parents: he sat next to her, not even speaking to her; he just waited quietly until she had calmed down and started taking an interest in him, only then did he also reassure her with words. This boy that surprised us and excited us. At his age, I would not have been remotely capable of anything like that; all I would have done would be to run away, sorrowfully worry for the enraged peer, and reckon that someone else would solve the problem. We knew this boy and he was

part of us: he was cool. We also liked to see ourselves as cool people, even though that was not necessarily true. But he was our offshoot. Whose emotional life we were already worried about before the pandemic began; if he was going to be too compassionate towards the troubles of others, perhaps this might cause him to suffer in life. I almost miss that worry, for now it seems as if there is no longer even any emotional life as such.

He is still a miracle of life, my life. Only that I don't understand him any more: he has a best friend on the other side of the world yet doesn't even know what name he was born with? It is more than obvious that he is showing compassion for the problems of a sixteen-year-old who was born a girl but is at the same time not interested in anything, anything at all, about how things were only five years ago? He exists only for this moment, for now. What frequencies do these kids operate on?

The observation is interrupted when Maya walks in with two mugs she brought from the top floor, from Alex's room.

'Damn it, put that phone away!' she loses her temper and throws the mugs into the sink in front of me. She is irritated, understandably so. She worked more or less from morning till evening, sitting in our study, doing stuff for work – despite the current lull in the spread of the virus, they are still working from home at the institute -, clearing up after lunch that I made, then ironing, combing the dog, then back to writing emails, now tidying up the bathroom; these two mugs that Alex should have brought down himself were just the last straw. 'You can't stack the dishwasher with one hand!'

'I'm not using one hand!' Alex objects. Which is true, his phone is actually on the counter, connected to his head by the umbilical wire. He has not saved up enough to acquire wireless headphones, so he has to put up with old-fashioned technology, freebies in kids' magazines. Only when he needs to carry a pot across the kitchen is he forced to place the phone inside the pot, walk across to the cupboard, drop the pot into the drawer and pick up his phone again, all this without taking his eyes off the screen. From some aspects, he is certainly resourceful. In others not so.

'You can't concentrate on two things at the same time!' Maya insists.

'It's not true that only women can do more things simultaneously,' Alex mutters. Which is also true, of course. He still manages to pick up from those Reddit posts all kinds of bizarre facts, responses and slogans which he also knows how to utilise at the right moment, that much must be said. The other day he was asking me whether it was possible to bite through another person's jugular with your teeth. I told him that probably not because the artery is too deep inside the flesh. He showed me a very detailed opinion of some web-expert who explained that this, while difficult, was not impossible, and also explained the process.

'But you don't say anything to him either?' Maya now turns her attention to me.

Maya has a much quicker and certainly more decisive sense of right and wrong than I do. She has somehow known from birth what she wants. That means that even in puberty, when we met – myself a student, freshly through military service, she still at secondary school – she didn't have any doubts about self-confidence, self-image, and all that. Instead, her basic intent was firm even then, and after puberty this became even firmer. With me, things went in the opposite direction. What I want to say is that, while our basic moral standpoint was the same from the outset and had it not been for this we could have not created a life together, when it came to decisiveness, my world has begun to soften somewhat with age. Everything, life and all that, is basically immensely complicated, much more than I used to imagine. I have become a challenge to myself. So today is pretty much foggy territory for me, one I need to take a good look around, think about and only then soberly express an opinion. The problem is that it is usually totally too late by then to have any immediate practical benefit to what is going on. Basically, the swiftness of her judgement is helped by the fact that her moral authority is not compromised by anything and that she has a more explosive character, while with me a kind of guilty conscience and reserve seem almost inbred. This is also why I later – even if at the moment it happened and decisions were made I somehow never got round to intervene with my judgement – I almost always simply agree with hers, knowing that it stems from what are also my own basic starting points which we matched back then, all those years ago, she that slightly more uncertain young woman, myself her slightly older boyfriend. This despite the fact that her methods,

this explosiveness and irrefutability sometimes annoy me. At the moment she utters it, of course we need to stick to the rules of solidarity, because the parental authority of one parent should never openly undermine that of the other in front of the child; this does no good to the mere notion of authority. But any later reshuffling of the judgement, when Alex is no longer present, is also rare, because once something is over, I would normally no longer be up to testing my own powers of discussion or feel any need for any additional conflict.

But this time Maya really is right. I too find this habit of his annoying, even if I normally don't say anything. I do feel that it would be better if we could, let's say, talk while working in the kitchen together. But what about? What's new at school? We know that anyway: nothing. What I did at the studio that day? Yeah, that's all I need. Of course I might fascinate him with this but still, the details, let's put it this way, aren't for him. Basically they are not for anyone. And nothing much else is happening to me right now. Yes, of course I am sorry that I am in general unable to get him to help more. Working in the garden, for example, or mending stuff around the house. Men's tasks! But I give up just by looking at the faces he pulls when he is supposed to help. And he mucks around so slowly that I lose my temper and prefer to do whatever we were supposed to be doing together myself. When I helped my father it wasn't like this. Of course, I wasn't exactly thrilled whenever he dragged me and my brother along to help with his building-carpentry projects, cementing walls, erecting sheds, and mixing concrete got on my nerves, but at the time that was all more or less inescapable. It was simply how things were, how things were done in the family. It was how in no time I learned how to use tools, a spade, a hoe, a drill, spanners and Allen keys, about which Alex hasn't the faintest idea. And I think that despite everything, I always tried as best I could. But watching Alex waft along like fog when he waves the broom about, stirring the leaves on the asphalt rather than moving them in any direction, he himself becoming more and more frustrated... That is stressful. Having a go at and maltreating children – I never took this to be my mission.

So, in actual fact, I admit that I prefer to let him do what he wants. I limit myself to acts of setting an example. If I did not care about the results or had nerves of steel, I might make a little more effort in trying to control him. But I prefer things

to get done the way they should, work get completed, and arguing uses up so much energy. Who wants to tackle such a large creature moving in an entirely different direction, away from me. I will be here one day, when he will be willing! When he will address me. I promise, I will. As long as he at least says what the hell it is that he wants.

‘Well, yes,’ I say. ‘The answers to life’s important questions are on TikTok...’

‘Yes, it’s easy to be cynical,’ says Maya, which is entirely unfair. This was no cynicism, it was irony. There is a big difference between the two. But Maya doesn’t insist either. She is clearly in a bad mood, not in the mood for arguing; right now there’s not much point anyway. Clearly anything we do right now will not make much of a difference to Alex’s upbringing, he is as he is, and there is little point in trying to educate me, at least not at this moment.

I lean against the counter. Alex has almost finished, and then I will be able to start making dinner for myself. And I can hardly wait for my evening séance in the studio in the attic.