Mirt Komel

*Detective Dante*

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

Girl on a Boat

I was just reckoning that with the *Paolo e Francesca* case this year’s crime quota for Nova Gorica had been reached, when, summer turning to autumn, Dante and I had a new case on our desk, one that I could never have imagined at the outset how messed up it would be – and even less how much it would mess up the two of us.

We drove off in our unmarked police car towards the scene of the crime – me behind the wheel, restlessly shuffling in my seat, straightening my sunglasses, him, slouching in the passenger seat with an unlit cigarette in his fingers, the silence almost deathly, the radio switched off, accompanied only by the hum of the engine and the occasional clicking sound of the indicators. In Kromberk we turned off the main street onto a ‘post-industrial’ estate, past a car dealer, past a fishing and camping equipment store, and beyond the Hotel Siesta, around a small parking area into a smaller road that took us past huge, grey halls accommodating all sorts of businesses, from offices of various small companies, to car mechanics, electricians and tyre repair shops, with the occasional empty shop in between, still awaiting some ambitious new entrepreneur. Right at the end of this run-down road, the shrubs growing alongside it occasionally interrupted with some piece of rusting equipment, broken pallets or abandoned plots… we eventually reached a huge car park with its asphalt emptiness opening up so harshly that it seemed for a moment as if we had landed on an entirely different planet.

We parked right next to a police car and van, both with their blue lights flashing silently, though they were barely noticeable in the blinding September sunshine. As soon as we opened the door, we were hit with a strong smell of asphalt, the forest, and the nearby bakery rising like some mansion above the parking area, and especially the moisture from the recent thunderstorms, evaporating under the scorching sun. Our uniformed colleagues awaited us in a quiescent hush; one of them pale as a ghost, looking as if he was about to throw up his breakfast; another, seemingly no better, sitting in the car with the door open, nervously dragging on his cigarette; a third, a policewoman, standing to one side, her hands in her pockets, shifting her weight nervously from one foot to the other, staring somewhere into the distance; a fourth, the eldest of them all – and probably because of this used to all that comes with our job – greeted us professionally and summarised the events that had unfolded until that moment, directing us a stone’s throw away to the unusual scene of the crime.

The body of a girl placed across the broken deck of a boat that had split right down the middle, as if the boat had fallen out of the sky or had been left there since the Flood that all the rest of us survivors had missed. Gradually I approached her, ever so slowly making my way past various pieces of rubbish, discarded plastic bags and tufts of grass pushing through the asphalt, while Tlomm continued to stand in front of the yellow tape with which the police had cordoned off the scene, attaching it to the remnants of the boat and the signs next to the long abandoned go-kart track marked out by tyres. How neatly she lies, I think to myself, as if she’s sleeping on what has remained of the damaged deck. Then I was suddenly overcome by a terrible feeling – I was witness to something unimaginable: the body of a girl – by the looks of it young, far too young – dressed in a pink dress that would have reached down to her knees were it not turned the other way, towards her face, with a handbag round her neck and shoulders, her hands tied behind her back, and a plastic shopping bag pulled over her head, apparently suffocated.

Only with difficulty did I control myself by relying on my mind and thought, procedures: if she was brought here by car there must surely be fresh tyre marks, but considering that the parking space is being used as a practice range for the local driving school, we needed to secure the entire area immediately. The place had only a single access road – the one we had just come down – and there might also be security cameras from one of the shops along the way that could have picked up the perpetrator. I looked up towards the bakers, praying that one of their cameras might be pointing down here, straight at the scene of the crime. All this needed to be checked out.

Tlomm, still standing there at the yellow tape, stared motionlessly towards the body and when I told him what I thought should be done, he simply nodded silently. As I moved back, across to the cars, and started giving instructions to the policemen – take photos of tyre marks, call forensics and the medical examiner – I noticed that my partner had already approached the body and was carefully leaning towards her, pulling a blue latex glove onto his hand. I reached him just as he was carefully removing the plastic bag from the woman’s head, holding it with his thumb and index finger, but before seeing her face I was overcome with horror, for somehow I already knew – yet I could not or did not want to believe it.

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The bora wind forecasting a renewed storm initially howled through the treetops, rustling loudly from afar, then engulfed the parking, blowing along with it the plastic cups, squashed cigarette packets, remnants of cardboard and other rubbish that had accumulated there over the years.

*Selina*, I knew that it was her as soon as I looked at her, nicely dressed, lying there on the split boat, her handbag across her shoulder, her hands behind her back, tied with a plain cable-tie – but at the same time I could not see, the image eluding me, her face avoiding my field of vision, as if she was some kind of blur that I could not or was incapable of focusing upon.

*Tlomm*, the only person I could see and mentally rely on, was crouching beside her, the shopping bag in his gloved hand. Using his other hand to smooth his head, he only removed the bag after nervously scratching the back of his neck; his usual calmness also vanished at this gruesome scene, at least compared to the cold-blooded manner with which he had approached our previous case.

*Hari*, get your act together, I said to myself. I was about to move to the other side of the yellow tape but he was already walking towards me – instead of sharing his first impressions with me, he merely handed over the plastic bag, saying, “This needs to be sent for analysis.” Then, as if I was not even there, he walked straight past me, leaving me holding the plastic bag – white and crumpled with the logo of a large supermarket chain – and I instantly realised that he had not even given me a chance to put on my glove; clearly not only had his calm failed him but also his professionalism.

I rather hoped that his mind wouldn’t follow as I saw him stopping at the car, taking out the holster with his duty Beretta and mounting it on his belt. As I too walked towards the car to place the shopping bag into a sealed evidence pouch, I noticed him walking across the parking area towards a truck parked at the far end where the asphalt reached a field full of allotments and garden sheds covered with hazardous old asbestos cement sheets. Sitting at the wheel, I watched him through the passenger window approaching a man dressed in very worn jeans and a red and white check shirt. They talked but, of course, from that distance I could not hear anything they said.

I got out of the car. Walking back to the split boat, still unable to focus my gaze upon her face, I turned towards the policemen instead. They were slowly dispersing to attend to the tasks I had set them. Turning my head back towards the lorry, I could see that my partner was still talking with the man in the check shirt and decided to make my way across to them – partly out of curiosity, partly also because I suddenly felt quite lost without my partner. Before I reached them, however, Tlomm was already walking away, somewhere past the crudely fenced-off plots and a beehive, along a wild path leading deeper into the forest. “What’s gotten into him now?” I said, half aloud, half to myself, as he disappeared into the thicket.

Acting as if that was the most normal thing in the world, I simply walked up to the man in the check shirt. I greeted him first, then lifted my police badge to his face, addressing him very officially, “Haris Izmail. Gorica Crime Department. What are you doing here?” – “What, again? What am I doing here? Can’t you see? I live here.” Indeed, only then did I noticed from the other side that the lorry had in fact been converted into a mobile home with a bed fitted above what looked like some kind of a writing desk, beside which was a small kitchen; outside, on the bare asphalt was a plastic table and two chairs next to which were parked a dark red Opel and a motorized bicycle, beyond these a kind of work bench with various tools covered with a plastic sheet. Basically everything seemed ready for some kind of post-apocalyptic camping, Mad Max style, in this even madder Kromberk post-industrial zone.

There was something odd about this guy, standing in front of me (his hands carelessly in the pockets of his jeans). He told me his name was “Braco.” (“Braco… what? – “Just Braco.”) He must have been around fifty and appeared not only drunk (he stank of alcohol – fruit brandy, if my nose wasn’t deceiving me), he was also nervous. He hid his nervousness with an exaggerated self-confidence that I needed to break through if I wished to uncover anything useful for our investigation. “Do you have a licence?” – “A licence for what?” once again he returned my question. – “A licence.” – “A licence that I don’t have enough money for a flat?” – “A licence for living on this plot of land.” – “I don’t live here. Just staying the night.” – “What happened to you?”- “What happened, he asked,” raising his arms and laughing cynically before continuing. “Well, what, capitalism, innit? They asked us if we wanted democracy, and we said, ‘Yes, of course, why not?’ and instead of the promised land of milk and honey, we got this market economy shit where we all slog our guts out. I worked all my life right here, in this very wood processing factory,” he pointed to one of the industrial plants nearby. “Right until the eighties, then in the nineties… puff!… total sell off throughout the whole country, the sale of our factory to some Italian firm that milked us for all our worth and then, just like that, closed us down. I lost my job, my family, everything. And you now want to tell me that I need a licence to live here?”

The guy had a point, I had to admit, and I obviously needed to change my tactics with him. “OK, listen, you know that I am not here because of you, but because of the girl…” Indicating by nodding my head towards the smashed up boat in the middle of the asphalt, surprised in my mind to find that it was still lying there (I admit, I quietly wished for the impossible, that the boat would just disappear, return back to the heavens from where it fell, or at least that a deep hole would open up in the middle of the asphalt and make it disappear without a trace.) Folding his arms, he replied with a smile, “I didn’t think you were here about the honey,” mirroring my previous gesture with his head, he indicated the nearby beehive which I only now realised was mounted onto some old horse wagon, similar to something out of an old Western. “What is this place?” I thought to myself and said something entirely different, “Tell me the truth so I can leave you alone – at least for the time being – did you see anything?” I maintained an air of formality (swearing to myself that if he repeated my question once again, I would have him arrested, handcuffed, put in the police van and taken to a cell until he sobers up.) Almost as if he had heard my thoughts, he answered my question directly for the first time. “No, unfortunately I didn’t see a thing. Last night I went down to the Crazy Pub and when I came back there was nothing there on the boat. At least I don’t think there was, I must admit that I was rather drunk and barely managed to drive myself back here.” – Well, at least he was honest, admitting drunk driving to a policeman. “What about in the morning?” – “Well, in the morning, when I woke up, I saw that she had just appeared from somewhere, so I immediately called the police.” – “When?” – “When what?” – here we go again. “When did you return last night, when did you get up, and when did you call us?” – “It was midnight, perhaps later, I don’t have a clue. In the morning I got up at a quarter past nine, made myself a coffee and sat out here at the table, then I noticed something bright pink down there on that white boat. It turned out to be something dead, so I called 3-1-1.” “You probably mean 1-1-3?” – “Yes, that’s the one.” – “OK Braco, listen… I will send over a policeman so you can give him your details and write an official statement, then someone from forensics who will check your… camp.” I wanted to say home, but the word in my mind somehow didn’t fit in with all this, and just as I turned to leave, he said, “Hang on. I said I didn’t see anything but I didn’t say I didn’t hear anything.” I stopped mid-step and clenched my fists. “Damn idiot, the girl is dead and you’re messing around with me!” I truly had the urge, not only to have him arrested, but to drive him around a few corners in the meat wagon before taking him to the station, knocking some sense into him – but when I turned and saw the terrified look on his face, I flinched and realised that he was being serious. “Well, what did you hear?” – “Hooting.” – “Hooting?” “The hooting of an owl in the middle of the night. And then growling.” – “Growling?” It was clearly my turn to echo what he was saying – “Growling. A kind of strange growling that first came from the forest but kept coming closer and closer.” – “A wolf’s growling? A dog’s? A lynx?” – “Yes. Well, not really. It was much louder and much stranger… I don’t know how to describe it… unnatural.”

He gazed somewhere into the emptiness towards the thicket, his eyes so frightened that they not only convinced me that he was not lying but even made the blood in my veins freeze. Unintentionally I remembered that strange conversation with Tlomm on the footbridge and the quotation that had at the time appeared before my eyes and now also appeared in audible form:

*Wa mā khalaqtu l-jina wal-insa illā liyaʿbudūni.*

Of course, Selina was not killed by some fantasy forest beast but I still could not shake off the impression that Braco was not lying when he described that “growling”, according to him coming from the Panovec forest, into which Tlomm had disappeared for reasons that were still not clear to me. He had still not returned – so the premonition of something horrendous, far more horrendous than the murder itself, diverted me from any sensible thinking. I moved back to the edge of the asphalted parking area, staring at the swaying treetops menacingly moving above me, and lit a cigarette. Once again I was forcibly overcome by the unpleasant feeling that someone – or something? – was maliciously observing me from a point not far away, somewhere beyond the reach of my gaze, beyond the thick branches, bushes and tall grass.

The *Jinn*. The damned, fiery jinn.

Once again I did what one has to do when something causes a mental block in such a way: I stuck to procedures. From the car I brought a second evidence bag into which – this time wearing gloves – I placed her handbag (the only item she had with her – apart from her dress, trainers, earrings and necklace which will only be removed and analysed when she is taken to the Institute of Forensic Medicine). I told the youngest policeman to get a statement from our currently sole witness (unreliable, as far as I could myself discern, but still), told the forensic to comb through his mobile home and its surroundings (you never know where you might find something useful), and told the others to secure the crime scene from the coming storm (using some plastic tarpaulin from a nearby abandoned truck).

There was a lull in the bora wind, which had brought thick, dark blue clouds, the calm before the storm preparing for its arrival before it hit with all its summer urgency just as our medical and forensic teams had barely started their work. The storm blew away like a lose piece of plastic the temporary tent that was supposed to protect the crime scene and even threatened to blow away not only the body but also the boat which now looked as if it might float away with the storm. In order to secure at least some traces of evidence for further investigation, I had Selina – her corpse – moved to the dry ambulance where the on-duty doctor examined her and evaluated the cause (“Asphyxiation, almost certainly, look at the tongue sticking out of her mouth, and her bulging eyes.”), the time of her death (“Fully developed *rigor mortis*, which means at least nine or ten hours ago, making it between midnight and one o’clock.”), and with my agreement had the body transported to Ljubljana to the Institute of Forensic Medicine for further examination.

Soaked, I sat in the car and placed the evidence bag with her handbag onto the empty passenger seat, next to the other bag containing the one used in the murder. “A bag in a bag,” I thought to myself, there was something anciently allegorical in this, and at the same time very modern consumerist that I could not get to the bottom of. I turned the keys and switched on the heating, lowered the window an inch, lit a cigarette with one hand and used the other to call my absent partner from my mobile: “The number you have dialled is currently unavailable, please try again later,” said the female voice that, goodness knows why, reminded me of Maša, whom I had last spoken to – if ‘spoken’ was even the right term in this case – that morning, when she called in an official capacity from the call handling centre. Certainly understandable, but it still hurt me incomprehensibly that she had managed to maintain her official tone when she called, as if we didn’t know each other. I mean, that’s how it should be, all internal conversations are recorded and her colleagues eavesdrop all the time… but still, she could at least have given me something, something that only the two of us would have understood (like *okavece*, the standard SMS code we had for sex).

I switched on the radio, trying to disperse any thought that were not assisting me at all at that moment, the local radio station, RadioRobin was playing David Bowie’s *Space Oddity* (*For here am I, sitting in a tin can, far above the world, planet Earth is blue, and there's nothing I can do*…) – I finished my cigarette and sang the end of the song to my own lyrics (“*Can you hear me*, Detective Dante?), then I ran the engine and swore loudly (“Fuck Tlomm!”)

I drove back down that road, windscreen wipers on maximum in the relentless rain. Stopping at each office and shop on the way, I was becoming more and more soaked as I held up my badge, asking then whether they had any security cameras. Nothing, nothing, nothing… once again nothing, and then… bingo! Some shop with security equipment, also selling CCTV cameras, of course also possessed one installed above its entrance. I almost ordered them to immediately send me all the footage to my work mail (had they known the procedures, they could have complicated things and asked for a warrant – but I had clearly scared the guy at the front with my detailed description of the body, that he immediately called his boss who gave him permission). After this optimistic impetus I also drove up to the Brumat Bakery where I first checked the fire escape that leads down to the parking area and saw that the firm had finally made the guys return to work (for the entire time we were on the scene, I could see them watching us from afar, supposedly on a cigarette break – but in truth just curious about what had happened right under their noses). As soon as I entered the building, I was happy to see that there were four CCTV monitoring screens in the security guard’s booth – my enthusiasm waned when I realised that none of the cameras were pointing towards the direction I thought they should be.

I went back outside where the storm was over but in its wake the temperature had dropped so much that I turned up the heating in the car on the way back to the station – the last thing I needed at this point was to catch a feverish cold that would knock me off the case. “No, I won’t miss out on this one – with Tlomm or without him – damn bastard, where has he disappeared to?” I kept telling myself as I drove on, to a background of pop(ish) songs that I had never heard before playing on the radio, cursing my partner with a series of other swear words that are better not put into print.

At the crossroads next to the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour with the Perla Casino Resort on my left, I stopped at red traffic lights, thinking as idly as the engine of my car was running idly, then, as I turned right, it fell into my field of vision the same time it came into my mind, the *Soča Graphics* print company. – “Oh, shit!” I said out loud, indicated as I turned into their parking, getting ready for perhaps the worst part of the investigation. At reception I asked for Bojan Humar, the secretary gave me a querying look but – when I showed her my police badge and introduced myself – she immediately dialled the number of the supervisor who appeared a few moments later with the man I was looking for. In his overalls, dirty from the machines and ink, his unshaven and drained face looked even more neglected and ruined than it did otherwise and now the unbearable task had befallen me to further ruin it – for there is no easy way to tell someone who has recently lost his wife and brother, that now his daughter has also died.

Before I managed to say a word, he collapsed – literarily, the instance he saw me, when he realised that the expression on my face bode no good, he fell to the floor and began crying, like a wounded animal that you cannot help, making the supervisor turn away as I leaned down to help him stand up or at least sit down on the seat at the entrance, next to the water dispenser from where I filled a plastic cup, though he did not touch it until the end of our conversation. “Mr Humar, I know this is hard for you, but I must officially inform you that we have found the body of your daughter Selina. My condolences.” He gazed at me the way he had done the first time, with such a puzzled look, as if I was speaking to him in a foreign language, so I repeated what I had said in slightly different words, “I am sorry, I know this is difficult for you, but we have found Selina’s body and we need to talk…” words heavy as rolling stones uphill, “…not necessarily right now, if you can’t manage it, we can do it tomorrow.”

He stopped sobbing and an emptiness set in in place of sadness, an emptiness I know well from other, similar situations. Without looking at me, he asked, “Are you certain it’s her?” – “Unfortunately it is. We found her in the Kromberk industrial zone. But I cannot disclose more on that at this moment. I’m sorry.”

“But… how? How? It’s not possible. Yesterday she came home at nine, and we agreed that she would… not go out at night during the week. I fell asleep in front of the TV… And in the morning I didn’t wake her up because she didn’t have lessons until nine o’clock. I was certain she was still in bed when I left home.”

Clearly not. I made a mental note and tried to find out more information, even though it was hard for him, “So you didn’t actually look into her room in the morning, to make sure she really was there?” But he could no longer talk, he just held his head with his hands and buried it in his lap, so I decided – at least for the time being – to leave him alone.

I also had a quiet word with the supervisor at the counter – and even though I was sorry to do so, my police mind told me to fit in the question, “At what time did Mr Humar come to work today?” to which he replied “Eight o’clock, as usual.” I asked him to allow the poor man to go home, something he was happy to agree to as all he had been doing so far was unsuccessfully trying to pretend that none of this was happening.

I offered to drive or escort Humar home and, although he raised his head, he continued to sit there in the chair, staring emptily in front of him. Only an eternal minute later did he speak, “Leave me alone.”

“I understand, I am really sorry.”

*I really am sorry.*