

September 2007

At the time of writing I am forty-six years old. My name is Duro Kolak.

Laura came to Gost in the last week of July. I was the first to see her the morning she drove into town. From the hillside you have a view of the road, one of the three that lead into town: the first comes direct from the north, the second and third from the south-east and the south-west respectively. The car was on the road that comes from the south-west, from the coast. An early sun had burned off most of the mist and on a day like this the deer might be encouraged to leave the woods and come down the hill, so I'd turned back to fetch my rifle even though it was not the season to hunt.

I'd chosen my spot and laid out my breakfast. On the branch of a tree a collared dove rested out of view of the falcon soaring above. I trailed the bird lazily through my rifle sights and that was when I noticed the car. A large, newish four-wheel drive, being driven very slowly down an entirely empty road as though the driver was searching for a concealed entrance. I lowered the gun so that I had the vehicle fully in my sights but the angle and reflection of the sun made it impossible to see who was driving.

An hour later I was on the road home carrying my gun and an empty bag. Instead of cutting through the long field I kept to the

road until I reached the blue house. A row of trees grew on the verge in front; over the years I'd watched three of them reach and exceed the height of the roof, the fourth had died some years back. Nobody to cut it down and so it remained standing next to its living companions, branches like bleached bones. The overhang of the roof cast a deep shadow on the walls of the house, stains flowed from the windowsills down the whitewash, buddleia sprouted from a high gutter: a slow slip into decay. Nobody had a reason to go there, not even children for whom there was no shortage of empty houses to play in and anyway this one was too far away, beyond the boundaries of the town.

The door of the house rested upon its hinges, the shutters were pushed back and one of the windows (glass darkened with dirt and crossed with silvery strands) stood open. Parked up with two wheels on the grass was the car I'd seen earlier in the morning. From inside: voices. One, a girl's: young, high, hesitant. The other was older. They spoke in English (from what I understood, it had been a long time since I'd heard English), they were talking about something they'd lost. I was listening to a mother and daughter. The daughter said she'd go and look in the car.

I slipped out of sight around the side of the building where the old ladder hung. I waited, leaning against the wall, and listened to her footsteps, the heft of the car door. Only then did I realise I wasn't alone: a boy of sixteen or seventeen was standing at the other corner of the building. He wore a checked shirt, jeans, black-and-white baseball shoes and stood with his eyes closed and his face tilted up to the sun. He had his hands cupped over his ears as he listened to music through his headphones, lost to the sound and unaware of me. I retreated softly to the road.

At home I considered all the possible meanings of what I'd seen while I did my exercises: twenty-five pull-ups from the bar over

the door. Twenty-five squats. Twenty-five crunches. I did press-ups until the muscles in my arms burned. Afterwards I started brewing some coffee. I'd only taken a single cup before I left the house, but then I changed my mind and set the pot back on the stove. I decided to go into town and have coffee at the Zodijak instead.

Outside the Zodijak the chairs and tables were already out. I nodded at a couple of the guys – one of them worked in the garage next door. Fabjan had hired a new girl for the summer, who smiled at all the customers, which here is as disconcerting as if she walked through the streets singing. She told me Fabjan was on his way in. I ordered a coffee. Someone else called for a Karlovačko. We sat in silence and watched people passing in the street.

It was close to nine by the time Fabjan showed up. Fabjan drives a custom-sprayed BMW, meaning nobody else has one in the same colour and so he doesn't need to bother to lock it. He was wearing a new suede jacket, something like the colour of butter, and freshly laundered jeans, faded and tight around the balls. Fabjan's put on a few kilos over the years and the waistband of his jeans cut into his gut. He wore a year-round tan and the beginning of jowls.

Fabjan joined me. He didn't have much choice; I'd taken his table, which is something I do to annoy him: a small pleasure in a quiet town. He put his car keys and Marlboro Lights on the table, called for a Karlovačko and rummaged in his pocket. Lately he'd been complaining of a toothache, but he hates dentists and so took two pills with his first gulp of beer. Fabjan's gums are receding at the same rate as his hair, one of his front teeth is broken. I knew how he'd broken it and when; in all that time he'd never had it fixed. A gold glint in the back of his mouth provided the sole

evidence of dental work. I wondered if Fabjan was sleeping with the new girl.

‘What’s up?’ I said.

Fabjan shrugged and sipped his beer.

We sat. I finished my coffee and called for another. The postman arrived, climbed off his bike and leant it against the railing at the front of the café. ‘*Dobar dan*,’ he said.

We nodded. I said hello. My father used to work at the post office and I knew a few of this man’s colleagues, even if he himself had only arrived ten years ago or less by which time my father was dead. The girl came from inside to take the mail and smiled at him. The postman cycled away. Minutes passed, but I am a patient man. I ordered a third coffee. Eventually someone spoke and it was what I’d come for.

‘New people in the old Pavić house.’ It was the guy sitting with the one who worked in the garage. He was jug-eared and fat.

Fabjan grunted, cleared his throat and sucked his teeth. Nobody spoke.

After a minute or two the same man spoke again. ‘English. English.’ And because he knew he had our attention, he continued, ‘Not visitors. They’ve bought it.’

The man worked in the municipal offices. I’d dealt with him a few times when I went in to pick up building permissions. Fabjan stared ahead of him into the street and cracked his knuckles as if the news was of no interest to him. He called for the girl to bring over the post and made a show of being busy. I waited to see if the man had any more to add and, when I decided he didn’t, I paid my bill and left for home.

Next morning I woke before sunrise. I worked through my exercises and since it was still early I drank a coffee and waited. At eight thirty I went out. I let the dogs out of the pen so they could come

with me. They ran ahead, noses to the ground. We walked in the direction of the blue house.

In the road stood a woman. She wore a denim skirt and espadrilles, her face was hidden by her hair which fell loose either side. She was bent double, inspecting something at the side of the road. I whistled for the dogs to return to me and at the sound she straightened and raised one hand to shield her eyes from the sun. She looked directly at me and gave me so welcoming a smile that for a moment I thought she'd mistaken me for somebody else. I saw that she'd been looking into the depths of a drain. 'Hello,' she said.

I replied.

She pushed her hair back and dropped her hand. The dogs ran forward. I whistled, but she said, 'It's OK,' and held out her hand to let them smell her and when they were satisfied she patted each dog on the head and fondled its muzzle. 'They're lovely,' she said. 'What are their names?'

'Kos. Zeka.'

She repeated the words as she petted the dogs. 'Which is which?' 'Zeka.' I pointed. 'He is younger. She is Kos.' I indicated the bitch on whose head the woman's hand rested.

'Zeka,' she repeated. 'Does it mean anything?' She was older than she appeared from a distance. Attractive.

'It means rabbit.'

'And Kos?'

'Blackbird.'

The woman laughed. Because I didn't know what was so funny I looked away from her and towards the open drain. Her eyes followed mine and she laughed again (she had a sense of humour, this one) and shrugged. 'I'm looking for the water mains.'

'This is a drain,' I told her. 'For rainwater.'

‘Yes. I mean I realise that now. I thought it might be a manhole. In England you often find the stopcock under the pavement in front of the house.’ I should mention that she’d greeted me in English and now we spoke in English. My English is imperfect, it had been a long time. I wondered what kind of assurance she possessed to speak to a stranger in a foreign land in her own tongue and expect to be understood. Clearly she enjoyed the luck of the innocent.

‘Here,’ I said. I walked to the back of the blue house. We reached the well and I pointed. She looked at it and then at me, she frowned.

‘No mains water?’

I shook my head. ‘We are a little far from town here.’ I showed her how the pump worked and it did, still, after so long. I levered it a good few times.

‘You mean I’m going to have to do that every day?’

I pointed to the roof of the house. ‘There’s a tank. And soon you will get an electric pump fitted. After that – easy.’ I walked to the back door and was about to step inside when I remembered myself. ‘OK?’ The woman nodded. I told Kos and Zeka to wait. Inside I went to the kitchen sink and turned on the tap. ‘See?’ I held my fingers under the water, which was clear and good. The woman did the same and seemed excited by the water. She shook the drops from her hand and stuck it out at me.

‘Laura.’

‘Duro,’ I said and took her hand. Slim fingers. A wedding band.

‘I can’t thank you enough. We had to use the water in the rain barrel yesterday and this morning. Thank goodness you were passing by at just the right time. You must have thought me very silly. Would you like a cup of coffee? I’m about to make some. You can tell me about the place.’

‘What place?’

Laura laughed. She said, ‘Here of course. I mean Gost, the town, the area.’

‘Gost?’

‘Yes.’

‘There’s nothing to tell.’

She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head on one side. Still smiling she said, ‘You’ve lived here all your life?’

‘Yes.’ Almost.

‘So you take it all for granted.’ She went to the window where the breeze had blown the shutter closed and pushed it open. ‘Well this is one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been. You don’t notice it any more, but you don’t know how lucky you are.’

I crossed the room to the window, leaned past her and fixed the shutter to the latch on the outside wall. A row of flycatchers balanced on a high wire. The field that had lain fallow for some time was full of long grass and purple aster as well as some kind of yellow flower, fleabane, I think it’s called. My father was generally good at the names of plants and flowers. Fleabane is a weed and grows just about everywhere, especially rubbish dumps and at the side of the road. It meant the soil in the field was probably not so good.

Laura started making coffee and I looked about the room. I’d been mistaken in thinking nobody had been here: the whole place had been swept out, the walls had a new coat of paint. I wondered when the work had been done. I’d always kept an eye on the house, I don’t mean doing repairs, for as the house didn’t belong to me that was not my place, but rather I’d kept watch over its decline. The changes come slowly, like watching a woman age: another line, the spread of crow’s feet, age spots rising slowly to the surface. One day the face you knew is ravaged.

A stain in the top corner of the room spoke of a leak in the roof. Some of the plaster had broken away and a patch of lath showed. By the door, a box of junk ready to be taken out: some crockery, an old plate rack, empty bottles. The grate in the hearth carried the cinders of a long-ago fire, hardened and splashed with bird droppings from the chimney. Though the walls had been done, the blue paintwork of the windows was crazed and flaking. The tendril of a vine crept over the boundary of the frame. I brushed the surface of the table in front of me with fingertips feeling for the grooves of the grain, the dip and incline of the warp. Laura came with the coffee and cups. A young girl appeared at the back door. 'There's a pair of dogs out there.'

'They belong to Duro here,' said Laura. 'Come and say hello. Duro, this is my daughter, Grace.'

'Hello, Grace.'

The girl's eyes ranged over me and saw nothing of interest. 'Hi,' she said.

'Come and join us.'

'No thanks.'

'Duro helped me with the water.'

'Awesome. Does that mean I can have a bath?'

'You'll need to wait for it to heat up. What are you doing?'

'I want to go for a walk. Are those OK? They look kind of wild.'

I told her they were good dogs. Grace was fifteen, plump and plain; a dusting of pale hairs across her upper lip made it look as though she had a permanent milk moustache. She wasn't nervous of the dogs, just attracting and deflecting interest the way teenage girls somehow learn to do.

The daughter gone, Laura poured the coffee.

'You have a leak,' I said.

'I know. I spotted that. I'll have to find somebody to fix it.'

'You can let me take a look. Maybe it's a roof tile or maybe the gutter needs clearing.'

'Really? That would be a big help.'

'No trouble.'

She twisted her wedding ring. 'My husband's stayed behind to work, he'll be coming out later. My son's asleep. Can you imagine? I expect you're an early riser.'

I nodded. Her eyes were narrow, slanted slightly upward, more so when she smiled. A broad forehead: a mole above her left eyebrow.

'London?' I asked.

She blinked before she cottoned on. 'No.' She shook her head.

'Manchester?'

'No, not Manchester either. What makes you ask that?'

'Manchester is the most important city in England.'

'Is it?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Man U. Manchester United. The world's greatest team.'

She laughed and when she stopped laughing and closed her mouth her lip caught on an eye tooth in a way that made me want to look at her more.

'No, we live near Bristol. A place called Bath. Have you heard of it?'

'*Pride and Prejudice. Sense and Sensibility,*' I said, so that she would laugh again.

'Exactly!'

I watched her and then I said, 'Let me check your roof and then tomorrow I'll know which tools to bring. Do you have a ladder?'

She looked around the room as though in search of a ladder she might somehow have overlooked.

‘Perhaps in the outbuildings?’ I said.

‘I haven’t dared look in them yet.’

Pigeons had done their dirty work from the rafters and the first thing I did was tread on a dead bird, the bones crunching underfoot. I kicked the carcass aside. Rolls of rusted wire, a wheelbarrow, an apple press, brittle and broken, stacks of paint cans. In the corner the shape of a car hidden under a plastic cover. ‘I wonder what that is,’ said Laura, pointing at a row of dust-covered bottles on a shelf.

‘*Rakija*,’ I replied.

‘What’s that?’

‘Like brandy, home-made.’

A shopping bag stuffed full of papers. Two boxes of paperbacks, their spines broken and their pages splayed or else stuck together in a stiff wave. Cassettes. A box full of household ornaments and an old kitchen clock. A blue-glazed bowl. I picked it up and it fell in two. ‘What a shame,’ said Laura. ‘It’s rather pretty.’ She held out her hand for the pieces but I tossed them aside. I lifted the corner of the car cover. Laura came over. ‘It’s an old Cinquecento,’ she said. ‘I had one once, a long time ago. I had to sell it. I still miss it. How amazing to find one here. Mine was white, but I always really wanted a red one like this.’

‘This is like the Cinquecento, but different,’ I told her. ‘Smaller car, bigger engine. More like the Fiat 600, but this one has a 750 engine. Made here under licence. For a long time it was the only car people could buy. We called it a Fíco, because there was a cartoon and the character drove this car.’ Every year you’d see families going on holiday with them, suitcases strapped to the roof, driving over the mountains on their way to the coast. They could pull a caravan, I told Laura, if it was a small one. Hereabouts people often used them to tow farm equipment; more than once I’d seen two of them driving side by side along the road, pulling a potato

digger or something else, like a pair of harnessed horses. Then the factory stopped making them and for a long time nobody wanted the cars; they carried too much of the shame of the past, the smell of poverty. Everybody wanted a Golf or a BMW. Now though I'd heard the young people in the cities were crazy for Fícos, young people with money and no memories. I said to Laura, 'I read in the newspaper people want them again.' I pulled the cover away entirely. The car was intact, the tyres flat, naturally; the rubber cracked. I opened the boot to look at the engine.

'I'd forgotten the engine was in the back,' said Laura.

I unscrewed the radiator cap. There was liquid still inside.

'I wonder if we could get it working,' Laura peered over my shoulder.

'Maybe,' I said. I replaced the cap and the cover. 'There's no ladder here,' I said. I pushed the heavy wooden doors back into place and slid the metal bolt. We walked around the house back towards the road and the front door. As we passed the ladder I said, 'Ah,' and lifted it off the hooks by which it hung on the wall.

The gutters were thick with composted leaves in which the buddleia had rooted. Some tiles had worked their way loose or were broken, twelve by my count. A simple job. After the building boom a decade ago there hadn't been too much work around. Some houses had been fixed up fast, but others, abandoned and left to the elements, were in a much worse state than this. People stole the roof tiles. I climbed down the ladder and told Laura I'd be back the next day. She was so grateful she didn't even bring up the question of the price. At the door I picked up the cardboard box of junk. 'Shall I get rid of this for you?'

'Thank you. You'll have to show me where the dump is.'

'No problem.'

'See you tomorrow,' she said.

‘Yes, tomorrow.’ I whistled for Kos and Zeka and we walked down the road. Laura stood at the door of the blue house and watched us. I knew this without looking round, just as I knew the exact moment she ducked back inside.

At home I reviewed the contents of the box: most of it was indeed junk. Bottles and jars were always useful, I rinsed them and set them aside. At the bottom of the box I found a small number of blue and green mosaic tiles. I turned each one over in my fingers, relishing the contrasting textures: the rough edges of the clay, the slippery glass. I placed them in a line on my windowsill.

That evening I went into town for a drink, now with the prospect of several weeks of paid work to look forward to. The air was dense with the heat of unbroken storms. Zeka and Kos accompanied me. I bought a glass of wine at the bar and took a seat outside. Though it was Sunday the streets were more or less empty. People had lost the habit of walking at that hour, to exchange gossip, the men to covet the pretty wives of their neighbours, their wives to cold-shoulder those same women. People stay home, they say it’s the same everywhere. The sky was full of starlings, carving their speckled shapes in the sky. There must have been a hawk or a kestrel about and sure enough as I watched I caught a glimpse of her sweeping into the flock. It seemed impossible for her to miss and yet the starlings, thousands of them, seemed effortlessly to reshape around her.

I watched the birds for a minute or two and when I looked back at the street – there was Krešimir. Mostly he keeps himself to himself and so do I, so it had been some months since I’d seen him. Gost is neither so large nor so small that his being there was anything more than an ordinary occurrence, I mean you might see

the same person twice in one day or hardly lay eyes on them in a year. It is the way of things. This is not the metropolis, but a small country town. All the same it was a coincidence, on this of all days. He'd begun to walk with a stoop, I noticed. It made him look like he was searching for coins on the ground. We'd both held onto our hair, though Krešimir wears his swept back; it reaches his collar and is run through with streaks of grey. Mine is short and black. He wore his shirt tightly buttoned to the neck and at the cuffs. He always dressed carefully, for example he'd never wear anything the least bit scuffed, stained or frayed. Krešimir was especially particular about his clothes and his family were a good bit wealthier than mine. He looked neither left nor right, but walked deliberately along the street, more slowly now than he used to. He didn't see me. As I watched him I had a sense of *déjà vu*, of having been in this exact place before, starlings in the sky and Krešimir, my old adversary, in my sights.

We used to hunt for birds together, Krešimir and I: many, many years ago.

Krešimir, Anka and I: out shooting pigeons before school. Walking home once, Krešimir inexplicably furious as he so often was. It is raining and only just light. We are coming from the back fields where there wasn't a bird in sight. After forty minutes we have returned home.

Krešimir doesn't like it when things go badly. He has a temper, and when he has a temper on he walks very fast and his arse sticks out and sometimes I laugh, which only makes him angrier. This time Anka and I are not laughing; though we are walking at our own pace, we've stopped trying to keep up with him, which is not what Krešimir wants. Walking fast is his way of humiliating us because I am so much smaller than he and Anka is a girl and younger. Krešimir's walk and his swift, unexpected movements are

some of the ways he demonstrates his physical superiority. I don't know what's making him so angry this morning, because it's not as though we haven't come home empty-handed before. We've always enjoyed the hunts for their own sake, but not today. Something about the whole enterprise has served to enrage Krešimir.

At the corner by the bakery I peel off to go home and change my soaked clothes before school. At the corner I turn to wave, but no one is looking. Anka is running to catch up with Krešimir, wiping rain and hair from her face and calling his name. Her voice is high and bright, it carries on the wind, but her brother acts as though he is deaf.

The memory came to me with the wine and the starlings, the sight of Krešimir who can no longer walk as fast and the darkening sky and the chill of unfinished business. On a sudden whim I stood up and called his name and watched him turn unhurriedly, with a deliberate lack of surprise. Krešimir never likes to be caught out and has trained his responses accordingly. I called for him to join me for a drink, though the truth is I didn't think for a moment he would say yes, and yet he came over, marking a semicircle around the dogs. Kos caught a scent of him and lifted a lip. 'She's just smiling at you,' I told Krešimir. Krešimir had a dislike of dogs, of all animals actually – it was one of the reasons he hunted.

Krešimir accepted a glass of wine without thanking me and sat behind his glass, his eyes roaming the street. He picked up the glass, drained half the contents and set it back on the table. He said nothing. Krešimir never bought a round of drinks himself and was disdainful of other people's hospitality. He acted as though it was *he* doing *me* the favour. I had the desire to tease him, all the more for knowing how much he disliked it. 'So what's new?' I asked.

Krešimir did not look at me. 'Same, same.'

'You think it will rain?'

Krešimir looked in the direction of the ravine, where a mass of cloud welled behind the hills. 'Maybe,' he said. 'Maybe tonight. Maybe tomorrow.'

I indicated to the waitress to bring two more glasses of wine. A drop of rain fell onto the table in front of me.

'I need to go,' said Krešimir.

'It's nothing.' I told the waitress to set the wine upon the table. Unlike, say Fabjan, or even myself – Krešimir didn't hold his drink so well. 'So the old house is sold.'

'Who told you?'

I told him I'd overheard it at the Zodijak.

He snorted faintly. 'People talk too much.'

'Then it's true?'

Krešimir waved a hand. 'It was going to ruin.' Then he smiled nastily and asked me about work. He did it to switch the subject, not knowing my luck had just changed. Krešimir's job at the fertiliser factory here in Gost is considered a good job for these parts because he works in the offices as a salesman. I am a builder, I work with my hands and find work where I can and not always easily. Krešimir went to college, whereas I never finished technical school. He enjoyed the advantage this gave him over me.

I told him work was fine. It rained faster, still I made no move, watching the drops land on Krešimir's head. As I said, he has quite luxurious hair but which, as well as greying, has receded quite considerably above the temples. By way of compensation he seemed to be wearing it longer, as though nobody would notice the front for being so astonished by the miracle that was the back of his head. I said, 'What will you do now?'

‘About what?’

‘After you sell the house.’

‘Must I do something?’

‘People generally do – something, that is.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘They do.’

‘Well since you ask, I am thinking of going away.’

‘Away from Gost?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where would you go?’

‘The coast, perhaps. The islands. I’ve heard the living there is good. People have moved on, Duro. Maybe you should, too. The tourists are back. And now I must go home, I have things to do.’ Krešimir stood up and drained his glass.

‘Good luck,’ I said.

‘Good luck with what?’

‘With the move.’

‘Thank you.’ Krešimir gathered up his bags of groceries. Krešimir married later in life. His wife, who started out as a pretty blonde thing, full of ideas, even if they were not particularly good ones, now rarely left the house except when she went to visit her relatives, which she did for months at a time, lacking the nerve either to confront her husband or leave him. Maybe she was away visiting now, or equally likely Krešimir had decided to do the grocery shopping himself. Perhaps she had bought the wrong item once too often, or gone over budget. Krešimir was something of a miser, did I mention that? He circled the dogs – and was gone.

I stayed for a few minutes more to finish my wine, called to Kos and Zeka and started home. It was raining hard: a summer shower. It would be over by the time I reached the edge of town. I thought about the blue house and the new people there. I thought about

the leak in the roof. Tomorrow was Monday, a working day. I would go round there first thing in the morning and get started. I looked at the sky, the starlings were gone.

I walked, I thought: So Krešimir is leaving Gost.