

VLADO BULIĆ: A JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF CROATIAN DREAM – Excerpt

A high frequent sound from the radio, marking the top of the hour, woke me up. Another one followed.

It's twelve o'clock. You're listening to Croatian Radio One. Here is the News.

The room was in total darkness, only the red dot on the radio pulsated to the rhythm of the speaker's voice.

Mister President, Dr. Franjo Tuđman, is still being treated at the Dubrava Clinical Hospital.

I turned on the lamp and sat at the table. It was filled with seeds, filters from torn out cigarettes, pieces of rizla, crumbs of tobacco and grass...

The doctor's council reported that the President's condition is stable.

I turned off the radio and looked through the window. What day is it? I looked at the pot. My stash was usually good for two days and there was enough of it on the table to roll one more joint.

There was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" I yelled.

"Miha!"

"Aha, Friday."

I staggered to the door and unlocked it. A short blonde guy, with crooked nose and googly eyes stood next to Miha. He reminded me of a cartoon character who goes flat and then needs to be pumped up again into a normal condition.

"You were sleeping again!" Miha began without introduction and darted into the room. "This is Martin."

I shook hands with the guy. He put his sleeping bag on the bed, sat next to it, and stared at us as if waiting for instructions.

"There, I gotta split now," Miha said and started toward the door as if he was scared of something. This surprised me. I went after him and caught him in the hall.

"Wait, you bring this fucking guy in and then you disappear as if he's an orphan. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Bah, the guy is ok, you'll see."

"Ok, fuck, but you could've stayed at least five minutes until we get it going and so."

"Dena, I'm in a hurry. I really gotta go. Take care."

I watched him disappear, and then, feeling the flash of my hangover, I turned toward the door. "Miha, you motherfucker," I mumbled and entered the room. The guy was still waiting for instructions.

"So, ahem, how was the trip?" I tried to start the conversation.

He looked at me with a question mark, "Trip?"

"Yeah, you know, from Romania and so?"

He was still confused. "I didn't come from Romania, I live here for two years now."

Now I looked at him with a question mark.

"Miha didn't tell you anything?" he said.

"No."

"I've been in Zagreb for two years now."

"You're a student, or?"

"Well... yes."

"What do you study?"

He mumbled something.

"Come again."

"I'm in the seminary," he said louder.

"Miha, you motherfucker!" I thought, trying to keep my composure. I glanced toward the table. The pot usually resolved such situations. Whenever I met somebody new, the awkwardness lasted until the sentence "Wanna smoke" was uttered. If the guy said "Yes", the atmosphere would loosen up on its own. But this was a fucking priest and the only thing coming to my mind was to show him the door.

The priest broke the silence. "Wanna smoke?" he said and took a bag of grass from his backpack.

"You're shitting me!" It just popped out of my mouth.

"Why does everybody go nuts when they see a priest smoking a joint? I'm just a human being like everyone else."

He said it in a voice of a film Jesus with a blessed expression on his face and then sat at the table and took the pot out of his bag. The atmosphere loosened up immediately.

"You're nuts... Why aren't you there now? They figured you out, huh?" I threw my question marks at him.

"Something like that. Now I'm going through the self-reflection stage."

"What?"

"Well, when they figure out that you're not exactly sure about some things, they send you to self-reflect on it for a year. So, here I am, self-reflecting." He was crumbling the grass.

"So what did you do?"

"I got home drunk one evening and vomited all over the restroom."

We laughed. I watched the guy as he crumbled the grass. I could tell this was routine for him.

"I was an altar boy, back then," I said.

"Good for you. Now hand some rolling paper to Don Marin."

I passed him the roll. He pulled some three centimeters out. It didn't go further.

"Fuck it, Father." I looked through the drawers for the reserve. "Shit... Is the kiosk still open?"

"That's ok. And... don't call me Father. I'm a Don. Everybody calls me so."

He extended his arm toward the shelf and took the pocket edition of the Bible. Each room got a copy when the students moved in. Together with the linens.

"The paper's really thin," he said and opened the book. "I see you're not exactly a model Christian, you don't open it often, all pages are still here. Let's see, New Testament, the Gospel According to John." He ripped the page out.

"This is crazy! Out of a million people in Zagreb, I get a fucking Romanian priest who's rolling in the Holy Book."

"Dena, God works in mysterious ways," he said ceremoniously and read from our rolling paper.

*In the beginning was the Word,
And the Word was with God.*

Five minutes later, he proudly displayed the joint with the text on it.

"And in the beginning there was only the word," he said, grinning.

He drew two puffs and passed it to me. I took one. And another. With every drag a couple of letters burned out. I tried to read it. It didn't burn evenly.

"Don, your God's all burned out, the Word's almost gone too, 'D' is catching on fire," I said, laughing.

"What 'D'?"

I showed him the joint. The text looked like this:

*In the beginning was the Word,
And the Word*

We began laughing hysterically.

"D is the beginning and end of all things!" He tried to make a serious face. He couldn't.

"It's good, fuck, it's really good!" I said and almost started crying from laughter.

"We revel in its goodness," he said laughingly, ripped another page from the Gospel According to John, and began crumbling the pot.

* * *

When I woke up, Don was already sitting at the table, flipping through the Holy Scripture while one of its pages was slowly burning in his hand.

"You're fucking crazy!" I said.

He passed me the joint.

"And now so are you. What are you doing today?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said and put out my joint.

"And what about the classes and those things."

"I haven't been on campus in a month."

"So what do you do in life?"

"Nothing. Smoke pot and stare into the ceiling,"

Suddenly he leaned in on his elbows, crossed his legs, and stared into my eyes. "Dena." His face resembled the face of a psychiatrist from American movies and announced a dead serious conversation.

"Yes."

"Would you like to be confessed?" he said and burst into laughter.

"Fuck off, you idiot!"

"I'm serious."

"Don, c'mon. Stop screwing around with me! You've lost it, man!"

"I've got to stay in shape while I'm in the self-reflection stage. You seem like an ideal candidate. Here, I'll roll us another one and we can begin." He said this and began rolling a new joint although we still had a half of the one we were smoking. The guy simply couldn't take no for an answer. He lit the joint.

"Do you remember how it goes?"

"I do," I said. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been ten years since my last confession."

"Ten years?! You're good," he grinned. "So, my child, confess your sins."

The whole thing was becoming more and more amusing. I took another puff of the joint. "Father, I think I lost my faith," I said laughingly.

"In God, world or yourself?"

"All three."

He looked at me seriously and then went off. He came up with such a speech that in my village they would make him the priest of the century. "Dear child, you need a plan. In these most important years of your young life you abandoned yourself to darkness and you need light. You need light, my child, to take you out of your dark tunnel and lead you to the fullness of life, just as the shooting star led the Magi to the infant Christ. And on this journey you mustn't give up!" he let his voice boom and then raised the Bible. "Here! Here you should find your inspiration!" he concluded and ripped another page from the source of inspiration.

"You're really good at it!"

"That's my job, man!" he said, crumbling the pot.

"What, to look into people's eyes and bullshit them?"

"I'm not bullshitting," he said seriously.

"No, you have a plan, right?"

"Of course, I have a plan."

"So, what plan could you possibly have? Even if you end up a priest, you'll screw yourself up because you're going to fuck the first horny believer that comes your way."

"Germany, my friend, Germany is where salvation is." He lit another page from the Holy Scripture. "When I get ordained here, I'll try to go there and sell my bullshit to our Gast Arbeiters. It's tricky, but if you have good connections, it can work out."

"OK, but you still can't fuck legally," I was persistent.

"Wait, I haven't finished yet. They are very generous when Church is in questions so I expect I'll get something as well. Then I'm transferring to Protestants, they can fuck."

"So you can do that?"

"They all need workforce; no one sane wants to do this anymore. You come up with some idiotic reasons and no problem," he concluded proudly and passed me the joint. "But, I forgot to give you your penance."

"Go ahead!"

"You'll buy me a cup of coffee and a shot of Pelinkovac in Smeš."

* * *

We were sitting at the bar, flipping newspapers and drinking coffee and Pelinkovac. It was two in the afternoon, and our eyes were already red and shiny.

"Wanna get wasted?" he asked, sipping his coffee.

"But you're already drinking."

"No, for real. Let's get wasted."

"OK."

The waiter brought us two double shots of Pelinkovac and turned up the volume on the TV. The news was just beginning:

The President of the Republic of Croatia, Dr. Franjo Tuđman, is still being treated at the Dubrava Clinical Hospital...

We were almost the only customers. The morning coffee crew had already left, and it was too early for those who usually got wasted in Smeš. Outside it seemed the day couldn't go past the dawn and it all looked like one long sunset—an atmosphere in which you could do nothing but get wasted, get stoned, or get some sleep. Or it just seemed like that to me. Because of the pot.

"Don, I don't get one thing."

"Go ahead."

"How the fuck did you end up in the seminary? You don't look the type."

"Because of the cow," he said as if this was something completely obvious.

"What fucking cow?"

"Long story."

"It's not like we're in a hurry," I kept insisting. And the thing sounded promising.

"Well, in that village of mine, we're all poor. We don't even have paved roads there. Now you can imagine what the situation was in the 1980s when Ceausescu was in power."

"Ok, but what about the cow?"

"Wait a second! Anyhow, my father, being a true Croat and a Catholic, couldn't find a job, and my mother was pregnant with me and all

of it didn't look very promising, and then, on top of all that, their cow, the only thing they owned, got sick. It got swollen as if from clover."

"Serious shit!"

"Gigantic! And then, since they didn't have money for the vet, they called in the priest, Don Martin. The guy blessed the cow, and told my father to go to the butcher's and get the stomach contents of a freshly slaughtered calf, mix it with water, and pour it down the cow's throat."

"And?"

"He did it, poured it down the cow's throat and then they waited until the next morning, but my mother couldn't remove herself from the Blessed Virgin's picture. She vowed that, if the cow got well and she had a son, the son would become a priest."

I was staring at him as if I were a calf.

"And the fucking cow pulled through!" He downed the rest of his Pelinkovac.

I was still staring at him as if I were a calf, trying to stay serious. But I couldn't. Suddenly I caved and began convulsing with laughter.

"I know, everybody finds this funny, except for me and my parents," he said.

We got a couple more rounds of Pelinkovac, but after this story no other topic would catch on so at one moment I said, "Let's get out of here."

"Where?"

"Let's get some food and a bottle of Pelinkovac and let's get wasted."

"Ok."

* * *

We got back to the dorm with the food and a bottle of Badel's Pelinkovac. We had already opened it along the way and begun drinking. The temperature was around zero degrees Centigrade and already around four the dorm was empty and quiet. Only here and there a pile of clothes appeared in the distance, making its way through the snowflakes that were just beginning to flutter. We ate bologna sandwiches and drank Pelinkovac, and when we finished chewing, he began rolling. It was five in the afternoon and we had already fucked ourselves up thoroughly. But the day called for it—it was cold and cloudy and the only thing you could do was crawl back into your room and wait... For a new day, better tomorrow, brighter future.

"Let's do something, I'll go nuts!" he said after two hours of being half-awake in a state of complete dullness.

"What?" I asked, holding god knows which joint in my hand and looking at the snow through the window. A couple centimeters of it had already caught on the ground.

"I don't know, anything, I'll start banging my head against the wall." He was pissed off and nervous. I kept on staring at the snow.

"Let's go build a snowman," I said.

"What?"

"I mean, back home, in Dalmatia, we never get enough snow to build one. I'm almost twenty and never in my life have I built a decent snowman."

It didn't take long to talk him into it. Half an hour later, we were swaying in place in front of the pavilion, watching the snow.

"What are we going to build?" I asked.

"A snowman."

"C'mon man, I know that, but what shape. I don't want that idiotic snowman with a carrot and that shit. It needs to have something... you know what I mean... something."

We were thinking. Like those two morons from *Home Development*.

"We can smoke another one to get our creative side going," he suggested. He'd taken three joints and what had been left of Pelinkovac with him.

"C'mon Don, fuck, we smoked so much since this morning that we should be the most creative couple on the planet."

"Doesn't matter, it's nice to smoke in the fresh air," he said. He wanted to light it right in front of the pavilion.

"Wait, you idiot!" I said.

"What?"

"I'll go ask if the guard's passed. He does rounds every three hours."

Mislav was still working at the reception at the first pavilion. And ever since that mess he behaved as if he owed me one so I asked him to warn us when the guard showed up.

"What do you worry about?" Don asked when I got back and nodded him to light the joint.

"Bah, the guy behaves as if he owns the dorm, and on top of that he's got his eye on me for the past couple of months. He's like threatening to kick me out of the dorm if I screw something up again."

"What happened?"

"I kicked some guy's ass here in front of the reception."

He looked at me with a question mark in his eyes.

"You?"

"Ah, fuck it!" I puffed on the joint. "Fuck that, what are we building?"

"No clue!"

We kept on staring at the snow, smoking the joint. It didn't burn evenly.

"Got it!" I said. "The letter D."

"Fuck, for real! D is the beginning and end of all things!" He grinned.

We threw away the joint and began.

We were building our snowy D in absolute silence. We were completely focused, as if our future depended on this project. Actually, this was the only meaningful thing Don and I had attempted to do in the past month or so. This was definitely true, at least for me. And I was completely stoned. So much so that neither the cold air nor the frozen fingers on my hand could sober me up.

For starters we gathered the snow in a pile, then we smashed it together trying to build a vertical post—the base of our letter D. After half an hour without taking a break, our base was almost a meter tall, but we weren't giving up yet. We agreed that our D needed to be recognizable from a hundred-meter distance and at least a meter and a half tall, if not taller. It was a symbol, after all. The beginning and end of all things and the only real project in our lives.

Whenever someone passed by, they'd stop, look at what we were doing, and when they wouldn't get it, they'd start with their questions. When Don told them that we were building a letter D and began explaining its symbolism, they'd look at us as if we were morons and leave. But that didn't discourage us one bit. After some fifteen more minutes, the base of the letter D was almost a meter and a half tall. Now it was the time for a break. I waved in Mislav's direction, he signaled back to me that there was no danger so we sat down in front of the pavilion door, lit another joint and looked at our project, which for now looked like a big I.

"Let's leave it like this," he said and took another sip from the bottle without taking his eyes from the snowman.

"Why? D is the beginning and end of all things, not I, fuck!"

He slid his hand into his shirt and took out a chain. On it, next to the cross, was a round gold charm with letter I in the circle.

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Ivanka," he answered and took another sip. "She's why I came to Zagreb in the first place."

"Wait a minute, you came to the seminary so that you could be with your girlfriend! You're a fucking legend, man!"

"I had no choice. She left first, and the only way to talk my parents into letting me go was to enroll in this shit." He took another sip. "I was pressing them for two months because they thought I was bullshitting. Every fucking day I went to two masses until they finally bought it that I heard the call from God."

"And where is she now?"

"Who the fuck cares! She told me to fuck off when I got here."

"What, she didn't like your plan about Germany?"

"Not one bit," he said and downed the rest of Pelinkovac. "We're young, we have a life ahead of us ...," he parroted her words.

We continued smoking our joint and looking at the snowy I.

"So what are we gonna do?" I interrupted the dullness. "You wanna leave the I?"

"Who gives a fuck about her! Bitch!" he answered. "Let's build the rest of it."

We continued building our D in silence. Now we had to make the lower part of the arc and attach it to the I. We were building it on its side.

We piled up the snow and smashed it together just like we'd done with the base. Fifteen minutes later it was done. We separated it from the ground, shaved off the extra snow, and leaned it against the I. The whole thing now looked like a J in the mirror. We stopped to rest.

"How are we going to install the other half of the arc?" I asked, walking around the half-built letter.

"I haven't got a clue."

"If we build it on a side like this lower half, there's not a chance we'll attach it. It'll collapse for sure."

"We should put some rod into it to hold it in place," he said.

"Where are we gonna find the rod?"

"Here's what we'll do," he took over. "I'll find some dried up cypress branch, and you go ahead and build the arc."

"Ok."

Half an hour later, the upper half of the D's arc was lying on the ground, waiting for Don and the branch. He showed up with some big ass branch some meter and a half in length. We scraped the dried up needles from it, broke it in several places and inserted it into the arc. But it didn't work. We fixed the sticking part of the branch into the I and placed it on the lower part of the arc, but it managed to stand like that for ten full seconds. Then the upper arc collapsed and broke into pieces, leaving a hole in the I.

"Fuck!" I said. "Not a chance."

Don stared at the pile, thinking.

"You wanna leave the I? Fuck, what else can we do?" I suggested.

"I'd rather knock it all down."

We kept on staring at the J, then Miha appeared with a sack in his hand. He had some kind of box in it.

"What are you up to?" Don asked.

"I was at the sex shop," he said and grinned.

"Why?" I asked.

"I bought Belinda." He grinned again and took the box from the sack. The box contained an inflatable doll. A blonde with her mouth wide open.

Don began coughing with laughter.

"What the fuck is that for?"

"I'm organizing a Viagra party tonight," he said proudly. "I couldn't dump those pills on anyone so I bought the doll. So tonight there's a party. In one room we're gonna watch the porn and pop Viagras, and in the other room a little gangbang on Belinda. You coming?"

"Sure thing! I have to see this," I said. "We've just got to finish the snowman."

"What snowman?"

We pointed at the snow J.

"Fuck, it looks like a dick with an arc," Miha said.

We looked at each other again. "Miha, you're a fucking genius!" we said almost simultaneously.

He didn't understand what was going on. He just said, "See you later," and got lost.

We got back to our snowman. The plan was simple: detach the lower part of the arc, put in on top of the I and turn the I into a dick. A two-meter-tall dick. When we finished, the future dick looked like it had been broken at the top, but that didn't bother us. I kept on hauling the snow and putting it on the top, while Don smoothened the sharp edges of the former I with his gloves. He looked like he was jacking off that huge snow dick. Then reinforcements started coming in. Two guys from Rijeka showed up first—they'd realized that we were building a dick—then five guys from Šibenik, and finally two from Osijek. In the end, the ten of us ran around that giant snow dick like ants, hauling more snow, while Don kept on jacking off, trying to give recognizable shape to the whole thing. We didn't even notice a guy and his girlfriend who walked around us like two inspectors and examined the thing. Then the guy said, drawling like a true Dubrovnik native, "It looks like it got broken on the top. I can fix that for you."

"And what the fuck are you, a sculptor or something?"

"Not yet. When I graduate," he said.

"Get in!"

The guy said goodbye to his girlfriend, told her not to wait for him, and got down to business. First he brought a chair from the reception, took a piece of bark from Don's cypress branch, stood on the chair and began straightening the hump. When he was done with the hump, he moved on to the head. We just watched him from below and laughed, and then the guy saw that we weren't doing anything so he started giving orders. First he told the guys from Osijek to pick up the scattered cypress needles and put them around the dick like pubic hair, he ordered the Šibenik guys to make two big snowballs for the nuts, and then he sent the two of them from Rijeka to the canteen to get some yogurt. Everyone obeyed without complaint. When the Dubrovnik sculptor finished with the head, he moved on to the vein. He shaved the extra snow with the cypress bark and the thing began taking its recognizable form. So much so that the guys from Rijeka, when they came back with the yogurt, claimed that it was clear what it was from a hundred meter distance. When he finished the balls, everything was ready for the grand opening. In the manner of a future priest Don climbed the chair and said, "Živko, I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." And spilled the yogurt on the snowy head.

Everyone was in delirium. Twenty-some people gathered around the dick, laughing hysterically, tossing in comments, and the peak were some guys from Trogir who'd seen it from their window. They ran down in their swimming trunks and started taking photos with the two-meter-tall dick. Then Mislav suddenly showed up. He was in a panic, but he didn't cause a general fuss. He just came up to Don and me and said, "The guard's coming." We made ourselves scarce immediately.

* * *

We walked into Smeš and sat at the only open table. Just under the TV. It was Saturday and the bar was full; the people were warming up for

the parties at the Best and Jarun. The eleven o'clock news was just beginning:

President Tuđman's condition has abruptly deteriorated..

We ordered double shots of Pelinkovac. I was becoming more and more aware of my wet shoes and frozen hands. I couldn't bend my fingers, and my sneakers, the only winter shoes I had, were completely wet.

"Let's go to Miha's?" Don yelled, trying to make himself louder than the music, and downed his Pelinkovac.

"Let's go by the reception first to see what's happened with Živko."

Živko was knocked down. Broken in half. The upper half lay on the needles like a fallen hero and the two snowballs, the nuts, were completely destroyed.

"Motherfucker!" That really pissed me off. "What a dick! What has he got against our dick?"

Don just stood there, staring at the pile. It seemed he was praying or getting ready to hold Živko's funeral. "Fuck it, Živko," he said and headed toward the reception.

Mislav was all wound up. "Guys, what a mess we almost had. When he saw the dick, he went completely nuts. He almost got into a fight with those guys who were taking photos."

"He must've been drunk,"

"Totally. He chased them all away and then he knocked it down and started kicking the balls like mad."

"Has anyone ratted on us?"

"No, as far as I've seen. They all just ran away. Then he came after me, but I told him that there were fifteen-some people here and that I hadn't recognized anyone."

"That's my man!"

"Yeah, and he even made a note." He opened the notebook.

We read it. There was the date, the time, and a lot of mistakes:

IN THIS MOST DIFFICULT OF MOMENTS SOME IRESPONSIBLE, ILL-MANNERED STUDENTS WHICH WE WERE INABLE TO IDENTIFY BUILD A SNOWMAN OF A VULGAR SHAPE IN FRONT OF THE FIRST PAVILLION. IT WAS REMOVED ON TIME THANKS TO OUR TIMLY ACTION.

Don read the note and with every sentence the expression on his face became more and more serious, more and more angry. In the end he went totally nuts; he looked like a priest getting ready to say the curse. "You know what! Tomorrow... tomorrow, the students from all over Croatia will come together again," he was almost screaming, "Tomorrow is a new day! Tomorrow, the young from all over the country will build a bigger, nicer, and even better dick!"

"Amen!" I said.