

“Our army band plays *Hey Slovenes* at Kalemegdan. Their bandits play *Radetzky March* in Zemun. And there are maneuvers in Bosnia on top of all that? The Krauts, those saber-rattling bastards!” Stojan Stamenković, the captain of the mountain infantry division mumbles under his breath. His face is frowning despite the bluebottle sky, despite the Sava, despite the Danube, despite river gulls and despite the smiling Kalemegdan lasses. Despite, at least for him, the greatest Serbian holiday – St. Vitus Day. Despite the peaceful 1914. Thick drops of sweat drip slowly down his meaty face like hundreds of slimy snails, but he never removes his officer’s hat. And he’d like to undo the last button of his starched collar that’s pressing his Adam’s apple. He should’ve gone to the steam bath to sweat it all out. That helps after a rough night out. His laziness is unpardonable: half of Belgrade still bathes in the trough, and although he can hit the window of the steam bath with a slingshot, he still is lazy to do so. He puts his hands on his back, just above the baggy behind, and, his eyes narrow, gazes across the river. Where are the Kraut spotters hiding? Where are their batteries? Where is that miracle of the Krupp cannon? Will Kaiser Wilhelm, his Prussian blood brother, send it to Franz Joseph? Had they waded the river when the peace with the Bulgarians was signed, they would have had a strategic advantage. The Austrians would not expect it. From one war into another, no one wants that, as Apis, Stojan’s real commander-in-chief, said. And why wage war with the Austrians? They made the whole world banish us from Albania. They took Bosnia from us. They oppress the Serbs in Vojvodina and Croatia. They are a backward country that just must go down. Is that not enough?

He’s been long waiting for the Krauts. He’s been watching their every move ever since the May Coup. They hit the Serbs in all newspapers, from the official imperial papers to those provincial gazettes that are no good even for the squat toilet. “A Lice Infested Nation”, *Düngerfolk*, “Murderers of Kings”, *Serbien muss sterbien*. Their insults never stop. Then the First and

the Second Moroccan Crisis of 1905 and 1911. He hoped the French would declare war on the Germans and it would be of some use to Serbia, but nothing. In his eyes, the French presented themselves as a race of patsies. His heart raced about the Customs War of 1906. He thought that was an introduction to war, but again nothing happened. Only the trade with Belgium increased. At the time of the Annexation Crisis of 1908, he thought it was the right moment. Franz Joseph and his Habsburgs formally laid their paws on Bosnia. It was the right time to strike. Russia allied with England and France. The Germans would not get in the way, and the Austrians would be easily dealt with. The Slavs made half of their army anyhow, and the Hungarians did not give a damn about Bosnia. But the Russians said no. It is not the time. When is the time, if not now? And what turned out of that entire charade? Nothing. The stands decorated in flowers, colorful Serbian rugs and tricolor standards. The crazy Nušić, out of his mind on a white steed, waved his sabre in front of the National Theatre. For nights he dreamed of him, that big-nosed scribbler, as he chased him, naked and unarmed, with his gigantic saber through the thick lines of Hungarian uhlans. He showed no fear in that nightmare and single-handedly charged the Hungarians. And then, two steps away from the first lines, a humiliating laughter stopped him dead in his tracks. The black-and-yellow cavalry mocked him, bare-assed and helpless. On October 28, 1911, he sent a plan to the Ministry of Defense, a plan according to which Serbia would enter the war against Turkey on the side of Italy that had moved its forces against the Ottoman Empire a month earlier. Or, if they could not do that, they should at least send a battalion of volunteers over Montenegrin ports to the far-away Libya. It will improve our relations with Italy, and the soldiers will learn how to fight the Turks, it said in the accompanying letter. Why should only comitadjis have the privilege of fighting against the archenemy? He never received the answer, but his long-expected promotion into colonel was postponed indefinitely. The Kraut is volens-nolens here – that crazy consul

Prohaska shot at the Serbian Army in Prizren. And yet nothing! Again! But, it'll come, it'll come...

The bandits are now playing the medley: Oh, God of Brotherhood, The Call of the Eagle, and The Lads Were Playing. There will be war – that's for sure. The people will embrace it the same way they played the Boers and the English a long time ago. Stojan knows many will drop to the ground from fear before the first shot is fired, but he won't blink an eye because he's already there, in the future. He lives in that war which has yet to come and in which, he can feel it, he has already been. He is ready to fight, in his immaculate uniform and polished black boots. This is not just some walk in the city park pressed by summer heat. Does anyone really think that he abandoned his little room – it is, truth be told, grey, lice-ridden, with a squeaky Czech bed and rotten little chair – only to enjoy the weather? He took his gun, *Nagan M. 1891*, a spitting image of him – large, perhaps not in its prime, yet reliable. A modest piece of weapon, save for the fitting decoration – a red ruby in an engraved handle. He also took his parade sabre in a shiny silver sheath. Ever since he'd returned from Albania, his whole world, made of orders and executions, built upon a mere one-direction logic, was shaken to its very core. He doesn't know what today is, what yesterday was, and what tomorrow will be, yet he sees it, he feels it. This phenomenon is difficult to explain, yet it happens that he walks out into the streets, his mind clear, not a drop of alcohol in his body, and then something inexplicable falls upon him.

The same thing happened last Sunday. Stepping lightly he descended the crumbling wooden stairs of Master Mata's boarding house and went straight to Emperor Dušan's Street. Behind his back the poverty of Dorčol, and here, right in front of his nose, on the other side of the street, the riches of the city center. That's what it was like until a moment ago, and now? The world has changed, for the worse. Where is that old, quiet Belgradian who sat in his day in and day out chair in front of a worn-down house and despaired as he watched the disappearance of his own world

whose stench still smacked of "Turkish wastelands"? He's gone without a trace. In the streets, in the shade of tall buildings, alien to him, both worlds wait for him, mixed, without a clear border. Hundreds of workers, beggars, officers, citizens with faces of bureaucrats, all with mourning bands on their sleeves. Fast, black cars speeding up and down the street. Not even remotely like the ones reminding him more of engine-run horse buggies. He asks two of his veterans, brawny heroes whose faces tell him they fought at the Bregalnica, who has died, and they look at each other, and then the one with a pale pink scare zigzagging from a lock of his dark hair to the hook of his nose: "Haven't you heard? They assassinated the king in Marseille. We're going to his funeral."

"A great evil," adds the other one, a dark veteran that's gone grey too soon. "And why don't we slaughter the bastards, avenge our king? The guards are taking their own lives in desperation."

"Which king?" he asks and instead of an answer he's back in 1914 again. He's here, alone in the street. Just a miserable yellow mutt with its tail chopped off barking at him.

Or, the other day, he collides with a dwarfish newsboy, a swarthy little snot hawking as loud as his little throat lets him: "Croats killed in the Parliament! Read it all now, folks! Croats killed in the Parliament!" A propos the Croats – last night, on the rotten floor, right next to the door, he found a telegram which said he was to report urgently to his headquarters because of the military exercise in Čakovec. In Croatia?! A bad joke, an apparition, what was that? Only events, unconnected, without order or sense. And they never offer an explanation, nor can he put them together.

No, he is not losing his mind. It's a passing thing. He drinks a lot and he sees things that are not there, even when he's sober. It's time he stopped. All he needs is a new war and things will once again be as they were. The war is the whore he loves. The war is uncertain.