

GORAN SEGEDINAC

THREE.



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Аннотация

Collection of short horror and sci-fi stories

This collection of short horror and sci-fi stories is divided in three parts. Most of the stories were published in collections, magazines and as online editions and some of them were very well received by the Serbian public (Major, Farm, In the depths...).

I **MAN Major** - Horrors of war become even greater when our main heroes get a company from those not living in our world. **Mandate** - When people loose their mind in the night of elections, mandate gets overtaken by those from the other side of the law, but also from the other side of the reality.

II **TREE Farm** - Farms are usually perceived as quiet and idyllic places to live in. However, many people don't know that it sometimes requires sacrifices that we cannot even imagine. **Root** – a short sci-fi story about post-apocalyptic world in which surface becomes a home to alien species... **Under the tree top** – If the mankind would get chance for the new beginnings, how would it look like?

III **VALLEY In the depths** – A young married couple moved to the little idyllic town, determined to start a peaceful family life. And while everything seemed perfect, they had no idea their new neighbors had

been waiting for them for a long time. Holiday – Is the mother’s love strong enough even in the afterlife? Dinner - When all hopes are gone, one ray of light always appears. All problems of our main character of this story will disappear if only she agrees to one dinner...

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THREE

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I - MAN

MAJOR

The Blues could no longer deceive him, to convince him that he has a choice. The magic inside him was pushing further into his soul, dragging the last remnants of good to the surface - only it wasn't enough anymore. He has become completely empty, and will need to try some different treatments for his troubles.

There was only one way left.

Until tonight, he hoped he wouldn't have to search for Sandra. The reason for this was as practical as it was selfish: if he fails, he will be left with absolutely nothing. If only he had another option — just a hint of an alternative — that will give him purpose if he fails, it would stop him from waiting.

Luckily, he had nightmares.

The drugs did not remain in his body after he woke up, trembling, from the afternoon nap. Perhaps the holiday spirit reacted badly with him; perhaps it would become easier if he could resist until February. He had a thousand maybes swarming in his head. Finally, he made a decision: give up and run away. There was no escape.

He will go mad.

If he has not already.

"Would you like another drink?" shouted the bartender.

He has known the bartender since coming to 'Krigla'. He always worked the late shift, always wearing the same shirt. He

never asked for his name, yet they still became friends.

He was thinking about whiskey. How it would go well with the song that was playing. But it was too expensive. He liked to drink the same booze, nothing else. His wallet could survive two or three glasses, but he still needed more. Much, much more.

"Give me the homemade one!"

"Plum? Or pear?"

"Pear."

Brandy is better than whiskey, in every way but one: it was not whiskey. It doesn't sit well with the Blues, and he can't live without it. Good thing he stopped believing in perfect moments.

It was going down his throat like fire. It was gross. Only once did he drink one worse. It was among the snow covered hills. He remembers the winter sun, and the frost in his nostrils, and the light that was reflecting on the bottle. The memories were returning, as he was wandering...

"Man, who can drink this shit?"

Oh, come on, Major, don't be so harsh. It's good, it's better than nothing."

He was looking at this kid, and he suddenly felt sorry for him. His uniform was big, and he was bent to one side from the weight of the rifle on his shoulder. The others were also mainly kids, but this one was the smallest.

"What do you know about brandy, kid? You haven't even tasted life yet," he asked out loud, but later regretted it. He was tired, and he had had enough of everything, so he started making

mistakes. One should teach morals to soldiers, and he was doing the exact opposite.

"He has no clue — same as us. But, who cares about it, Major?" Dugi said. Dugi was almost seven feet tall; it would always get them into trouble when they were sneaking up on enemies. Branko died yesterday and everyone was upset about it. That is why he allowed them to stay one more day in the village. That is why he allowed them to drink that brandy. They were so honest to report it to him, so he did not have the heart to forbid it.

"Where did you find this bottle?" he asked them.

"The third house from the top. It was the last one left. They left it to us when they were running away, so we can have it for the New Year!"

He was looking at Darko Bogović and he was wondering what he was made of. He was giving him a hard time, more than anyone else. He was a young man without any emotions, a man of war. He was aware of men like him. There are plenty of them in the Balkans, more than enough. Some people are simply born with that killing instinct inside of them. And they just wait for the opportunity so that it reaches its maximum. He felt that Darko still hasn't reached his maximum, and he was hoping that God will take him before he will have a chance to live up to see it.

"Are you sure the village is empty?"

"We checked everything, Major, every single house. There aren't even corpses left."

Where could all these people be? He knows this environment

well: there is no cave capable of hiding hundreds of souls. They would freeze in the woods after a couple of days. This village had been empty for a lot longer. There were no signs of fights, no traces of missing people. They must have been taken away and buried somewhere.

Now, we are doing it, too, he thought.

Last month, he spoke to Potonjac — a good friend; a big, old soldier — through a safe connection. A grenade blew off his foot. They exchanged only a couple of words, but the things that the old soldier didn't say were more important. It wasn't going well, no.

"Don't get drunk, we must go before it gets dark. Is that clear?"

"Clear!"

He left 'Krigla', because he would have thrown up for sure. Not from alcohol, but from the nerves. He's always had a sensitive stomach. The brandy brings back the bad memories. It's best to think of Sandra.

Sandra. The rocker girl. A shame to his father, the General Marko Babović. He remembers all the times his friends described her to him while they were in the barracks. The way she dresses, the way she puts on makeup, her ass, tits, behavior and everything else. He admired the General. But also felt sorry for him. The military is like a family: when people start saying bad things about you, it travels far. It was difficult to blame him. It's the worst when you get backstabbed by your own child.

Then, all of a sudden, he met her. And his opinion of her

changed completely.

She stopped him in the corridor.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for my father. General Babović"

"I think he left for Kragujevac this morning."

She had a sad look in her eyes. She looked differently; not how his friends described her. She was an angel.

He started the conversation, as if in a delirious state, aware only of his need to stay in her presence as long as possible. Luckily, she didn't stop him from being around her. They saw each other the next day, and many times after that. Then one rainy evening, while wandering around the city, looking for another drink, destiny had them kiss their first kiss.

A metal voice brought him back to the unpleasant street reality.

"Hey, dude. Sorry, I just want to ask you something."

He was staring at the worn out junkie. There have been more and more of them these days.

"Do you have 500 dinars? I'm in a lot of trouble..."

The distance between them started to shrink quickly, but he didn't want to avoid him, move aside, or be hostile in any way. He'd rather just give him the money and save himself the trouble, but he wasn't in the position to give up money anymore.

"I don't have anything. Go away."

It was too late. The bum already grabbed his sleeve and got in his face. He was searching his pocket, obviously trying to frighten him, but he didn't exclude the possibility that he actually had a

knife, or some other weapon.

"Don't lie to me, understand?" he hissed quietly. He could smell the stink. His eyes locked with the other's glazed ones. Then he realized that the young man, under the mask of sickness, which he chose by himself, was actually beautiful.

The distance was perfect. Instead of responding, he smashed his forehead into the bum's face, cracking some bone. He was sure of that; it's enough to hear this sound once and remember it forever. He will never forget entering what was left out of the house and...

He saw chaos.

This place wasn't on the map.

Wherever they came from, it didn't matter, they hid themselves well, and started shooting. He couldn't count all the casualties, he only knows that they are storming like crazy and destroying everything in front of them. When they finally tore through their defense, they found only three houses; probably a small village with some summer houses, existing in a better time, and now the last stronghold before the inevitable defeat. He hears his men shouting; something exploded, but he has no time to think. There could be a sniper in one of those houses, and these boys are not trained for that situation. He orders them to check the bunker, while he goes to look around.

The first house is empty. Only some food supplies that can be useful later. They haven't had any food in two days, and they were running out of water. He made a mistake with the directions,

but he couldn't admit it to them. Doesn't matter. As soon as they finish here, he'll try to find the right direction. He went below the fence to the neighbors. The window is opened. He can hear the battle; he takes position and aims his gun directly toward the chaos—something he's been so afraid of for a long time.

Darko's pants were around his knees. A rifle next to him, and a gun in his hand. A woman is on the floor while he's holding her hair and hitting her. He's completely delirious. The puddle of blood is huge; teeth remain in her every time he lifts her head, so he'd put it down again with a sound of triumph. He's kept his eyes fixed at the little girl with an animal look—the girl is curled up besides the oven, her eyes are wide open, watching this scene, terrified.

"Look, look!" he was shouting joyfully. "Look at your mom, motherfucker!"

"Stop! Darko, stop!"

"Look at your mom! Look!"

"Darko!"

He stops the entertainment, and their eyes meet. He only needed a second to know what he must do. The bullet misses his forehead, but hits his shoulder. There was no reaction on Darko's face, as if he wasn't surprised. Instead of firing at him, he fires at the little girl.

"Wait!"

He killed him with the next shot, but it was too late for the little girl. She remained sitting, quiet as she was. How did this monster

manage to get to the house before him?

"Major..." A broken voice behind his back. "Major..."

Dugi was looking at him, with tears in his eyes.

"Darko snapped. I had to kill him."

"Major." The soldier was crying. He was looking at him incredulously. That was too much for him, just as long as others will keep up. Just a bit more, until he gets them to some place safe. After that, he will take care of bringing them back home safe and sound. They've seen too much war.

"Dugi, calm down. Darko went mad."

"Major."

"Tell me, Dugi"

"I'm the only one left."

The attacker fainted, quietly. The blood was leaking from his broken nose and it was dripping down his cheeks. It was fortunate that he didn't have to punch him anymore.

Sandra, for God's sake, where are you?

They only met once after he came back from the army. It was enough for her to realize how different he's become from the man she followed to the convoy, which will separate them forever. He took a lot of stuff with him, and she was standing in front of his door, not as happy as she was before. Besides that, she was also faithful, and that is what hurt her the most.

"What did you expect? That I would die from happiness?" he asked her.

He was still young then. He couldn't predict how much he

would need her. During that time, he still believed everything could be forgotten.

Why did he kill their love?

He asked himself this many times, but could never find the answer to ease his mind. His head was full of old memories, threatening with severe pain, but he almost smiled, finally able to see the firm decision to end this misery.

He knows he must find Sandra tonight.

Why doesn't she have a cell phone?

She knows her own soul, knows her teenage temperament. Even though she wasn't in her twenties anymore, there wasn't a chance she'd miss Friday night. He just had to calmly think where he might find her for sure. He just has to think hard, and he'll find her. When he turned the corner, he almost fell off the sidewalk, like in his previous interaction. A box full of flowers. An old woman got scared at first, and she started to scream.

"Flowers! Son, here's a bouquet for one hundred dinars! This old woman doesn't have much left."

Why is she selling at this time? Poverty was breaking all limits. He didn't know how much longer he could wander, so it was better to leave the bouquet for some other time. She was squinting her small eyes beneath her scarf, and while he was looking at them disgusted, he let the memories take over one more time...

"I will not take it!"

"Come on, you have to. You haven't eaten for days. You'll get

your strength back.“

She reached out her scabby hand for him. She was so ugly that he felt his guts turning, making him want to throw up. He didn't have anything to throw up though; he was completely empty. The old woman was holding a piece of meat. She cooked it yesterday, but he could still smell the burnt meat in the room. He was tied, and he couldn't defend himself.

“Come on! Open your mouth! “

“Get away from me, you whore! I'll kill you! “

She was giggling. Like in the horror movies, her mouth was full of rotten teeth, and he was trying to understand what happened.

He was wandering around with Dugi for days, until they buried all the dead soldiers. First they were thrilled for finding all the supplies, but all the food was rotten. Cans and packs without expiration date were full of rotten, disgusting things. They couldn't find fresh water anywhere, but they didn't worry about it much, since they could just gather some snow.

Knowing that he had no idea where they were was making it even worse. His mind, and everything that he learned during school were telling him one thing, but the reality was completely different. They were lost.

They were getting tired, especially Dugi. He started hallucinating that he was being haunted by those killed. The water they had gathered had a strange taste, as if the land were poisoned. After what seemed like an eternity of walking

aimlessly around the circles, he finally woke up in a new place. He feared that they got trapped, and hoped that they were saved. But, that was quickly changed by one awful thought.

He was tied to the wooden table by dirty sheets. Dugi was on the table, and the oven was beside him. The old woman was at the oven. She laughed when she saw him wake, so she approached him and shoved a glass in his face, making him drink. He couldn't stop looking at the soldier who had been ripped apart. He recognized his hand, his tattoo on his upper arm, and his uniform. She puts the pieces in a cauldron and laughs, satisfied.

“Eat, so I won't have to kill you too. “

To show him she was serious, she broke his little finger. His circulation was weak because of the sheets he was tied with, but the pain ran through his whole body. He felt his heart beating like crazy; all he ever wanted was to make it stop. There was only one way. He chewed, then spit it out. More pain. He turned his head. Pain. In the end, he swallowed it.

“That's it, my darling. Just keep on eating.“

Streets are full of young people: couples, singles, mostly drunk, who want to have a really good time, and be happy. If he manages to find her, maybe his mood would get better, too. The pub in front of him was famous, and brought even more beautiful memories.

“Kiss me again,“ Sandra said, looking at him with half-opened eyes. He laughs, and moves his lips closer to hers before blowing

into the mug, sprinkling her with froth.

“Get away, asshole!”

She was laughing and hitting him. Then she put her hand in his and got closer quickly. He kissed her for a long time. His Sandra. He was aware of his happiness, and he hoped he would never get to know the things that might ruin it.

There were two guys standing at their familiar place. They are making a toast. No trace of her. He searched the semi-dark privé, bar, chairs; peeked into the women’s bathroom. A crying teenage girl looked at him angrily.

“Get away, this is for women!”

“Excuse me.”

He stepped onto the street. He must search for her. It would be easier if he knew where she lived now. She was never keen on technology. She left the letter in the mailbox, after he would hang up on her for the hundredth time, or he would spy on her through the door hole, every time she would try to sort things out between them. Every time she would even try to make conversation with him.

Her scent was inside the pink envelope. The ring falls out on the floor, and the sound of paper unwrapping, revealing what’s inside.

Egg.

Dugi was partially eaten. She was grinding what was left of him and putting it in jars. He helped her. She had dozens of it.

He has no strength to oppose her. She has complete control

over him. He doesn't know how, but he feels it. She untied him a long time ago. She lets him take a walk. The village was peaceful and untouched, a curtain moving here and now, but no signs of people. He doesn't think about running away. If he walks away more than he can, he feels her claws on his neck and returns back. Then he eats, and he falls asleep, in case he doesn't have to help in the kitchen.

Egg.

That night she woke him up, and gave him a roll of paper. He unwrapped it and looked at her, surprised.

"If you break it you, I will kill you," she told him. "When you get out of here, just go straight, until you reach the first crossroad. You'll then know where to go next. You'll recognize the house. Go inside the courtyard and bury him at the doorstep. Don't worry, there's no one there now, but the housekeeper will return soon. You will use this black magic on them."

He reached his goal without problems, exactly the way the old woman said. It was a big house, obvious that it used to be a rich house. He dug a hole with his own hands, and buried him carefully. He seemed to hear some voices, just as Dugi used to hear them. But there was nothing around him.

The old woman was satisfied. She caressed him.

"Bravo, my son. Bravo, my dear."

He was shaking his head, a bit angry for the fact that he cannot forget her. His memories had many layers, and were profound; he would be the happiest if those war memories ceased. Then

he could think about her without any trouble. It was too difficult this way.

There was no egg in Sandra's paper, only words. Difficult words that he had read so many times before. They were putting him in too much pain, but he was unable to cry.

"My love,

I hope you will be decent enough to read these lines. I don't know what happened. I can understand the war, I can try to imagine the horror it brings. I also understand that you don't want me anymore, but I don't understand how you can't look at me or speak to me.

I waited for you, patiently and with pride. I was jealousy saving every emotion, imagining the moment you will come back into my life. However, it never happened. Not the way I wanted it, but the way it should have been.

I can write to you about what I have went through, about terrible things such as the war itself, which were happening here. I will not do it, I don't feel like doing it anymore.

I am writing this to you, since I can't leave you alone, in silence. I am giving you back the ring, hoping that one day you will have strength to give it to someone else. I wish this for you, from the bottom of my heart, with the same passion I had when I wanted to carry it on my hand forever.

I sold the apartment yesterday. There were too many things that reminded me of you. I fantasized about us in every corner of it; waiting for you to come to my door, getting ready for our

dates in the city. It was full of our past. My dad died, you have probably heard about it, so the apartment was, anyway, too big for me. The way things are now, we will never be in it together.

I won't be giving you my new address. I'm not angry. I just don't want to hope anymore. It's over.

I wish you a lot of luck in your life.

S. “

He didn't even think about blaming her for what he made her do. He used to comfort himself for a while, while the magic of the blues still worked — that that was the best for her. Yet, he knew deep in his soul that the day when he will have to find her will come.

Where could she possibly go?

Somewhere around two in the morning, he became aware of the unpleasant possibility of failure. Only strong military will was making him continue with his chase. Cafes, clubs, he was going to them regularly to scan the guests. He wasn't afraid of rushing, it wasn't hard to spot Sandra. Especially not to him.

Just look and you will find, he told himself. This is a small city; concentrate, and look.

“Look.”

The old woman grabbed his head and pulled him out of bed. Lately, he had problems distinguishing his dreams from reality, and he needed more time to wake up. As if it were taking the life out of him.

“What am I looking at?” he replied frightened.

“Look! Through the window!”

Moonlight illuminated the courtyard, it was clear as day. It was quiet as a cemetery, except for the wheezy breathing of the old woman, and his heart beating in his throat. There was a stunted pear tree in the courtyard, and in the treetop there was Darko. He could see him well, as if it were that day. He had his rifle in his lap, and was watching him quietly.

“He is dead,” he said to the old woman. “I killed him.”

She laughed, and then spit into her fingers and waved her hands.

“Come here, soldier, come here!”

Darko jumped to the ground, light as a feather, and then directly to the window. He just went through the wall, and then he was beside the bed. His uniform was tight, his hair coiffed, eyes glazed and set deep in his head. You could barely see them.

He stood still, looking at him.

“That’s your soldier. Look at how he’s watching you,” the old woman said.

“He’s no longer my soldier. He’s dead.”

“Nothing is dead, so neither is him. Come on, give him an order.”

He kept quiet. He’d rather close his eyes and wait for this nightmare to pass, but he was afraid of the old woman.

“Give him an order!”

“Back off, soldier!” he said quietly, and Darko went to the corner immediately.

Before the war, he believed only in service. After the war, he didn't doubt the existence of a higher power, but now, he was cursing it. Seeing Anna, he wanted to thank her for the first time. They were acquaintances, once upon a time. And if things haven't changed, she would still be Sandra's best friend. She was standing with two other girls in front of the food stand.

“Anna.”

A blatant look, and then a smile of recognition.

“Hey. Hello”

She gave him her hand, she held a purse in the other. Her friends were looking at her suspiciously. They felt her unpleasantness.

“How are you?”

“I'm fine. How are you?” he replied to her.

“Here I am, went out a little...”

“You went out. That's nice.”

“And you?”

“Me, too. I am going to bed, you know how it is, when you're old.”

Anna laughs and waves her head. A tormenting moment of silence.

“How's Sandra doing? Have you seen each other?” he was determined to try, no matter what.

“We're seeing each other. She's fine.”

“We haven't spoken in a while.”

“I know.”

“I would like to see her.”

Anna kept quiet. They're definitely still in a good relationship; he feels that she would tell him a lot of bad things to his face, but good manners are keeping her from doing it.

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